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Navigating a Fragmented War Alliance

Assessing the Sudanese Armed Forces' Role in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

This paper assesses the role of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in the conflict resolution process in Sudan. It focuses on the SAF's various domestic military partners, including the Islamic Movement led by Ali Karti, as well as peripheral rebel groups such as the Joint Darfur Forces, which emerged from a decades-long uprising against the regimes in Khartoum. The objective of this paper is to elaborate how the fragmented and fragile nature of the SAF war alliance complicates conflict resolution efforts. To what extent has the SAF's fractured coalition contributed to its leadership's reluctance to engage in peace negotiations? How stable can the SAF alliance remain in the long term, particularly in a post-conflict scenario?

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1 Introduction

The war in Sudan stands as one of the most devastating conflicts of this century. Since its outbreak in April 2023, relentless fighting between the country's two primary armed forces has persisted without resolution. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Sudan's institutionally legitimised national army, led by Commander-in-Chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, battles the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. The RSF was initially an independent security force under Sudan's government, established by former president Omar al-Bashir. In October 2021, the SAF and RSF jointly seized power from the civilian-military government led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. The civilian-military rule had been established following the ousting of Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Since the military coup, General al-Burhan has served as the president of Sudan's Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC), claiming to represent the country's legitimate government. Hemedti served as the deputy head of the TSC until the war broke out between the two armed forces.

In the conflict, the SAF seeks to present itself as the representative of the Sudanese people, fighting for the nation's sovereignty and security. This narrative aligns with the SAF's historical self-perception as the backbone of the nation and the country's primary legitimate and institutionalised security force.¹ However, in its fight against the RSF, the SAF has increasingly relied on military support from various armed militias and rebel groups within Sudan, many of which are affiliated with Islamist groups and are loyalists of Bashir's ousted National Congress Party (NCP).² Others are rebels from the periphery who fought against the SAF for decades before Bashir's removal and the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in October 2020.

The paper focuses on the role of the SAF and its domestic allies in the conflict. It

assesses how the increasing fragmentation of the SAF war alliance—comprising the army, various peripheral rebels, resurgent Islamist groups and Popular Resistance Forces—is complicating conflict resolution efforts. It argues that the SAF war alliance is primarily sustained by the ongoing state of war, lacking mutual trust and a shared post-conflict vision. While the SAF's military allies have strengthened over the war, they all fear losing power in a post-conflict agreement. Particularly, the Islamist sections within the SAF put pressure on the SAF leaders regarding a peace agreement. This has resulted in a weakened SAF leadership, which is reluctant to seriously engage in conflict resolution efforts. The SAF has found itself in a strategic deadlock: dependent on their military support, the SAF leadership has become reliant on the political interests of its allies. As a result,

the SAF fails to present itself as a strong and unifying force for Sudan, exacerbating the risk of further fragmentation within Sudan's conflict framework.

The following analysis aims to explore this issue by first tracing the historical path that led to the outbreak of the current war in Sudan. It focuses on the proliferation of multiple armed actors within Sudan's political landscape, the SAF's role among them, and the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. After a brief overview of the current state of the conflict, the paper aims to highlight the increasing fragmentation of the SAF's military war alliance. Therefore, the SAF's main national allies will be introduced, along with their historical and ideological roots, war objectives, and current state of influence. It will then be demonstrated how the SAF leadership has become weakened, by becoming increasingly dependent on Islamist leaders of the old Bashir regime. Taking all these factors into account, the analysis examines how these dynamics affect conflict resolution efforts. A blockade within the SAF alliance will be indicated that has paved the way for the SAF's hesitant engagement in

peace negotiations. Furthermore, a lack of broad domestic and international legitimacy for the SAF in a post-conflict agreement will be highlighted. The paper concludes by providing an outlook on possible ruptures within the SAF war alliance, which might emerge due to its fragmented composition.

There is not yet much academic coverage of the current war in Sudan, given its recent history and the fast-evolving conflict landscape. Therefore, this article primarily draws its findings from English-language Sudanese media outlets—such as Sudan War Monitor, Sudan Tribune, and Dabanga—as well as reports and analyses from international think tanks and research institutes, along with the author's interviews with regional security experts. For the historical perspectives on the emergence of the war and the characterisation of Sudan's security landscape, the article "Sudan's Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator", by Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda and "Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir" by Gerrit Kurtz have been of major relevance to this paper.

2 Sudan's Path to War — A Country Destabilised by Competing Armed Actors

2.1 Centre-Periphery Conflicts in a Multi-Ethnic Country

Sudan is Africa's third-largest country. Before the secession of South Sudan in 2011, it was even the largest on the continent. The country is endowed with geostrategic advantages, including wealth of natural resources and a geostrategic location. It has the largest irrigated area in Africa, is the third-biggest producer of gold on the continent, and is situated between North Africa and the Horn of Africa along the Red Sea, forming the eastern gateway to the Sahel.³ Before the outbreak of the war in 2023, the population of Sudan reached approximately 50 million people⁴, comprised of 19 major ethnic groups and about 597 ethnic sub-groups. The Sudanese are often categorised as "Arabs", who make up about 70 per cent of the population, and "non-Arabs", who constitute about 30 per cent.⁵ Although both groups are Muslim and have intermarried for centuries, this differentiation still influences political formations and conflict lines.⁶

Sudan's political history since gaining independence from the United Kingdom and Egypt in 1956 has been marked by autocratic rule, political instability, and civil wars. The governments in Khartoum have implemented a centralised strategy based on an Arab and Islamic identity, albeit the country's ethnic diversity. Since independence, Sudan has

primarily been ruled by ethnic Arabs from the central north.⁷ In 1989, Omar al-Bashir, then a brigadier general of the SAF, seized power in an alliance with Hassan al-Turabi and the National Islamic Front (NIF). Together they initiated the country's transition to Islamist religious law.⁸ Bashir's regime concentrated resources on the security sector while continuing to neglect Sudan's peripheral regions, notably Darfur, eastern Sudan, the Two Areas (South Kordofan and Blue Nile) and the territories that are now part of South Sudan.⁹ The economic, cultural, and political marginalisation of these regions provoked various rebellions, including the Darfurian uprising led by the Sudanese Liberation Movement (SLM) starting in 2003, the decades-long rebellion of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) that led to South Sudan's independence in 2011, the ongoing resistance of the SPLM remnant Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North (SPLM-N) in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and the comparatively lower-scale Eastern uprisings in the early 1990s and in 2005 by the Eastern Front and the Beja Congress.¹⁰

2.2 Armed Forces Shaping Sudan during the Bashir Regime

Dedicated to staying in power, Omar al-Bashir needed a response to the emergence of various armed rebel groups in the periphery of his country. He required a strong security

sector to fight the various uprisings on different regional fronts. At the same time, Bashir, who himself came to power through a coup d'état, feared being overthrown by his own national military once it became too powerful. Throughout Sudan's post-independence history, the SAF has held a central role in protecting, but also toppling, Sudan's rulers.¹¹ Since its independence, Sudan has witnessed at least 16 failed and successful coup attempts, whereby the SAF has overthrown three civilian governments before its latest coup in 2021.¹² Therefore, Bashir built a security sector that did not depend on the SAF, designed to secure his power. Trying to counterbalance the SAF, he installed additional armed actors under his personal rule.¹³

The formation of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), established in 1989 to mobilise tribal and Islamist militias, was the first step in this "paramilitary revolution"¹⁴. Furthermore, the mandate of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) was heavily extended under Bashir, serving from 2008 onwards also as a fighting force overseeing multiple militias.¹⁵ Particularly consequential was the armament of the Janjaweed in 2003, an Arab tribal militia from Darfur, which was formed to suppress the rebellions of the predominantly non-Arab tribes in the region. In 2013, they were designated as the RSF and eventually became an independent armed force within the government's security apparatus, operating under the direct command of Bashir in 2017.¹⁶ In this position, Hemedti and the RSF were able to disproportionately expand and consolidate their military and political power in Sudan, which has gradually disrupted Bashir's carefully constructed security

system. Towards the end of the Bashir regime, the country's security landscape became increasingly fragmented. Sudan was flooded with various armed forces, divided by their alignment or opposition to the government but united in their demand for more power.

2.3 Steps of Political and Civilian Unification (2019 to 2021)

While Bashir's regime invested decisively in securing its power against various armed actors both outside and within its system, it was ultimately the masses on the streets and civilian pressure that led to the regime's downfall. Initially driven by frustrations over rising bread prices, a broad mobilisation against Bashir and his leadership began in December 2018.¹⁷ The protests, led by the newly founded civilian coalition known as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), culminated in April 2019 when the main actors of Sudan's security sector decided to side with the protestors. On 11 April the SAF, NISS, and RSF jointly removed Bashir from office.¹⁸ Later, the actors agreed with the FFC on a two-year transition period to civilian rule, adopting Abdalla Hamdok as the Prime Minister and forming a hybrid civilian-military government.¹⁹ In response to the public demands, the new government distanced itself from the members of the old regime and dissolved Bashir's NCP in August of that year.²⁰ Nevertheless, many of the NCP's supporters still retained significant influence within the SAF.²¹

The various rebel groups that had fought Bashir's regime for years largely stood aside when the civilian-military coalition brought the autocrat down.²² However, the beginnings

of the unification process also involved the security and rebel actors in the country. In October 2020, the JPA was signed between the transitional government and the main rebel leaders from Darfur, the Two Areas, and the East. The signatories agreed on greater autonomy and improved national representation for the rebel groups.²³ The most prominent Darfuran leaders even gained a seat at the table of power, with Jibril Ibrahim, leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), becoming Sudan's Minister of Finance, and Minni Minnawi, leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minnawi (SLM-MM), installed as Darfur's regional governor. Other leaders secured seats on the TSC, such as Malik Agar, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N Agar).²⁴ Even though they strengthened their former rivals, the agreement was an important success for the SAF and RSF, who brought most of the opposing armed movements to their side through the JPA.²⁵

While the rebel groups came from the opposition and were programmatically and historically closer to the civilian part of the transitional government, the agreement was interpreted as a strengthening of Sudan's military and security apparatus, indicating a political alliance between the rebels and the governmental armed forces RSF and SAF.²⁶ Hemedti took a leading role in the negotiations with the rebel leaders, despite their year-long fighting in Darfur. He focused on their shared origins in the periphery; furthermore, both groups had good relations with Chad, Libya, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which encouraged their cooperation.²⁷ However, the Sudan Liberation Movement Abdul Wahid al-Nur (SLM-AW), and

the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North Abdel Aziz al-Hilu (SPLM-N al Hilu), two powerful armed movements that even hold own territory, declined to sign the JPA, citing mistrust regarding the dominance of the security sectors in the current transitional government.²⁸

2.4 Military Coup 2021 and Outbreak of the War

Based on their newfound strength and united by the will to power, the SAF and RSF leadership jointly arrested Prime Minister Hamdok and removed the civilian component of the transitional government in October 2021, backed by most of the JPA signatories. The civilians in Sudan reacted with enduring and widespread protests across the country, which even surpassed those from 2019.²⁹ The AU, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the UN condemned the military coup. The AU even reacted by suspending Sudan's membership, requesting the reinstallation of a civilian-led transitional authority.³⁰ Sudan's exclusion from the AU remains in effect to this day.

Even though Burhan became head of the new governing council, the SAF were not powerful enough to represent the supreme authority in Sudan and the coup fuelled the power struggle between Burhan and Hemedti. By eliminating their shared civilian opponents, the competition refocused on the SAF and RSF as they vied for primary control of the state.³¹ Hemedti had expanded his power not just politically, by becoming deputy president of the transitional government in 2019, but had also exercised large recruitment campaigns, almost tripling the

RSF's personnel within four years.³² The RSF also increasingly competed with the SAF in the economic sector by controlling almost half of the country's economy, including the lucrative gold mining.³³ The conception of the ideal state differs significantly between the two military forces. The RSF advocates for a weak state with minimal regulation, while the SAF seeks a strong state under authoritarian control.³⁴ When Hemedti's power ambitions grew, mistrust within the SAF towards the paramilitary forces from Darfur increased. In search of allies to counter the RSF's influence, Burhan began to re-engage with Islamist members of the old Bashir regime, who slowly returned to the state apparatus after the coup and despised not only civilian rule for Sudan but also the new power of the former Janjaweed militia.³⁵

After international pressure and diplomatic consultations, the RSF and SAF agreed on a Framework Agreement in December 2022 that provided a pathway to a purely civilian government for Sudan.³⁶ However, the implementation of the agreement failed due

to differences over security sector reform and the question of how quickly the RSF should be integrated into the SAF.³⁷ Additionally, supporters of the Bashir regime from the Islamist network are said to have pushed for an escalation of the conflict, viewing it as an opportunity to regain their former power.³⁸ The rebel leaders who still supported Hemedti and Burhan in their military coup in 2021 tried to negotiate between the two generals to prevent the outbreak of open armed conflict, but they did not have enough power and influence over their coup partners.³⁹ Instead, open fighting broke out in Khartoum on 15 April 2023 between the SAF and the RSF. It remains unclear who fired the first shot.⁴⁰

3 Sudan in State of War

3.1 Humanitarian Tragedy

The outbreak of the war had horrific consequences on the people in Sudan. By October 2024 almost three million people fled outside of the country and over eight million people are displaced internally since the beginning of the current war.⁴¹ Ten-thousands of people died in the conflict, with over 61,000 deaths estimated in Khartoum State alone.⁴² Both parties have since then perpetrated various atrocities against civilians, including targeting civilian infrastructure, the killing of civilians and using hunger and gender-based violence as weapon of war.⁴³ The RSF whose soldiers are particularly responsible for committing sexual violence on a large scale are accused by international human rights organisations for possibly committing a genocide on the Massalit and other non-Arab communities in West Darfur.⁴⁴ Both groups have lost much of legitimacy among the Sudanese people, due to their widespread atrocities and committed war crimes.

3.2 Military Stalemate Characterised by Shifts in Momentum

The war is characterised by regular shifts in momentum for one of the warring parties, resulting in an overall military stalemate, with no party being able to achieve a decisive victory. Currently, the SAF is militarily on the

rise and has achieved a huge success with the recapture of Khartoum by the end of March 2025.⁴⁵ The takeover of the capital followed a series of military wins, during which the SAF recaptured large parts of Sennar, Gezira, and Khartoum states.⁴⁶ Nationwide recruitment campaigns, Iranian and Turkish drone deliveries, and large shipments of advanced Russian military equipment have paved the way for the military gains by the SAF.⁴⁷

The tide of the war shifted towards the SAF in autumn 2024. Before that, in the first year and a half of the conflict, the RSF was on the rise, quickly capturing Khartoum, holding large parts of Darfur and Kordofan, and even temporarily advancing into Sennar and Gezira states.⁴⁸ The SAF, forced out of Khartoum, had to move to Port Sudan, where its military government is currently based. After losing Khartoum and having lost ground in the eastern and central parts of Sudan, the RSF is focusing on seizing El-Fasher, the only capital in Darfur that is not under its control.⁴⁹ Even though the SAF is now gaining momentum, the RSF is meanwhile preparing a massive counteroffensive.⁵⁰ Therefore, the likelihood remains high that the conflict will not be resolved militarily, and fighting will persist unless the involved actors reach a negotiated peace agreement.



3.3 Sudan's Political Landscape Divided Along Conflict Lines

During the war, most of Sudan's armed movements have chosen a side in the conflict, aligning either with the SAF or the RSF. The SAF has joined forces with various Islamist militias, but also many rebel groups sided with the SAF, including the Joint Darfur Forces (JDF), SPLM-N Agar from Kordofan and Eastern rebels.

The RSF is traditionally affiliated with Arab militias from Darfur; however, some non-Arab rebels from Darfur and Kordofan also chose to side with Hemedti. At the beginning of 2025, an alliance of various armed and civil groups that had previously remained neutral aligned with the RSF, including the SPLM-N Abdel Aziz, the Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF), and the Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council (SLM-TC).⁵¹ The leaders of the GSLF and SLM-TC had previously

held seats in the transitional government in Khartoum after 2019 but lost those after refraining from siding with the SAF. On 4 March 2025, the groups signed, together with the RSF and some civilian actors, a transitional charter in Nairobi to pave the way for a parallel government in RSF-controlled areas.⁵²

Not many neutral actors are yet to be found in the conflict. The most significant armed movement that has largely remained neutral is the SLM-AW, even though it is occasionally involved in defending civilians from RSF assaults⁵³. The group controls its own territory around the Jebel Marra massif in Darfur and is connected to the most prominent civilian anti-war alliance, Tagadom.⁵⁴ However, Tagadom's power decreased when it split over the question of whether to support the RSF-affiliated parallel government in February 2025.⁵⁵

4 SAF's Fragmented War Alliance

With the outbreak of the war, the SAF and their allies have portrayed the conflict as an effort to secure the unity and sovereignty of Sudan against RSF control and brutality throughout the country. Leaders of the SAF described the RSF as a rebellious actor influenced by foreign powers and primarily composed of mercenaries from other countries.⁵⁶ In contrast, the SAF claims to be a "non-politicised"⁵⁷ actor that defends the nation and its citizens. Their fight against the RSF is rooted in the desire to re-establish the SAF as the pre-eminent security organisation of Sudan.⁵⁸ On 26 September 2024, SAF leader al-Burhan addressed the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, asserting that the SAF, as one of Sudan's oldest state institutions, is committed to peace and in favour of a democratic transition.⁵⁹

However, the SAF is very dependent on various other armed actors in the country to re-establish their envisioned (security) hegemony. Considering the rapid changes in Sudan's political landscape in recent years between friends and foes, involving a variety of armed forces with different ideological and ethnic roots but shared opportunistic tendencies, the stability and consistency of the SAF war alliance

will be reviewed in the following chapter. The SAF leadership must manage a portfolio of various war partners, coming from diverse backgrounds and pursuing different, and sometimes even divergent, interests. After all, many SAF war allies currently find themselves in a political and military cooperation with the very forces they once relentlessly opposed.

Overview of SAF's Key Military Allies

Islamist Armed Actors	Joint Darfur Forces	Islamist Armed Actors
Bara'a Ibn Malik Brigade Popular Defence Forces Shadow Brigades Central Reserve Police	Justice and Equality Movement Sudan Liberation Movement - Minni Minnawi	Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces Beja National Congress United Popular Front for Liberation and Justice

Popular Resistance Forces

SPLM-N Agar

4.1 Sudanese Islamic Movement & Islamist Militias

The alliance between Burhan and prominent figures of the old Bashir regime from the NCP and NISS, began with the coup in 2021. After the coup, the ruling military junta has lacked a civilian support sector. In compensation, Burhan reinstated parts of Bashir's civilian wing, which was deeply interconnected with Sudan's Islamic Movement. He allowed the Islamic Movement to reopen their associations and semi-public organisations and reestablished public relations with Ali Karti, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and leader of the Islamic Movement.⁶⁰ In 2022 several senior NCP members were released from prison and provided with positions within the security sector.⁶¹ With the outbreak of the war, this dynamic intensified even further. Already a couple of weeks before the outbreak of fighting, over 6,000 former members of the disbanded NISS joined the SAF.⁶² This was followed by the prison breakout of around 15 prominent members of the NCP, including International Criminal Court suspects and former ministers, who have been working to re-establish their power and networks.⁶³

The political reconsolidation of the Islamists and the supporters of the Bashir regime comes with a military comeback. To regain the upper hand after RSF's rapid military advances in the first months, various dissolved security forces from the Bashir era were reactivated. Alliances with well-trained and equipped Islamist militias were formed. Islamist fighters tend to be better organised, more passionate, and more cohesive in their fighting compared to other, more secular groups, because of the ideological dimension of their cause.⁶⁴ A

particularly active paramilitary group that maintains an extensive media presence supporting Islamist visions is the Bara'a Ibn Malik Brigade. The brigade was in the past deployed by Bashir to fight in South Sudan and Darfur and is associated with the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁵ The Shadow Brigades and the Central Reserve Police are two other infamous paramilitary remnants from the Bashir regime, which were reportedly brought back by the SAF.⁶⁶ The reinstalled PDF, which is led by members of the Sudanese Islamic Movement and former ministers under Bashir, was put in charge of leading a wide mobilisation and recruitment campaign for civilians, from which the Popular Resistance Forces emerged.⁶⁷

From backing Burhan militarily and politically, the Islamic Movement began to switch its position to that of an internal rival to the SAF leadership under Burhan.⁶⁸ The Broad Islamic Current, a coalition of various Sudanese Islamist groups, including hardliners and moderates, elected Ali Karti as their new president in September 2024. The choice of Karti, the leader of the pro-war wing, demonstrates their ambitions to once again seize power.⁶⁹ Maintaining the war is the key precondition for this project.

Ongoing fighting ensures SAF's dependency on the Islamists' military network. Moreover, the Islamists and Bashir regime leaders fear that a peace agreement would push them out of their newly gained political and military power positions due to both domestic and international pressure.⁷⁰ To counter international and domestic opposition, they claim primary responsibility for SAF's military uprising, which began in mid-2024, presenting themselves as the irreplaceable defenders

of Sudan's sovereignty against rebels.⁷¹ To maintain independence, they have also established militias outside SAF's control.⁷² A major victory was their takeover of the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁷³ The Sudanese Islamist network has a number of reliable international partners and enjoys credibility in several countries with Islamist tendencies.⁷⁴ Throughout the course of the war, SAF has increasingly aligned itself with former allies of the Bashir regime for military and financial cooperation, including Turkey, Russia, Iran, and Qatar.⁷⁵

4.2 The Joint Darfur Forces

The JDF is a coalition of Darfurian rebel groups that aligned with the SAF in November 2023, with SLM-MM and JEM, who provide most of the troops, being its most significant members.⁷⁶ The JDF supply the main forces defending El-Fasher, SAF's last stronghold in Darfur, against an RSF siege that has lasted nearly a year.⁷⁷ The Darfurian forces also played a crucial role in the SAF's military gains in central and eastern Sudan starting in late 2024, by forcing the RSF to divert resources and manpower from central Sudan to Darfur.⁷⁸

The entry of the Darfurian rebel groups has added new layers of complexity to the conflict, expanding it beyond the RSF-SAF rivalry. This dynamic is reinforced by increasing divisions within the rebel groups themselves, some aligning with SAF, others remaining neutral, and some siding with the RSF. The JDF was initially established as a neutral force to protect civilians in Darfur. Shortly after the war broke out on 20 April 2023 the JDF together with local community representatives

brokered a ceasefire between the SAF and RSF in El-Fasher.⁷⁹ This arrangement kept the city largely free from major battles for six months.⁸⁰ This changed in November 2023 when a faction of JDF rebel leaders, including Minnawi and Ibrahim, abandoned neutrality following escalating clashes around El-Fasher, as RSF forces massed outside the city for a potential full-scale assault.⁸¹ At that time, JDF emissaries were still negotiating with the RSF to restore the El-Fasher truce under the conditions that JDF would remain neutral and in control of the city while RSF withdrew its troops. By siding with the SAF, this deal was taken off the table.⁸² While still defending El-Fasher, JDF forces have also joined SAF's war efforts in eastern and central Sudan, receiving intensive military training and advanced equipment from SAF.⁸³

The reasons for the Darfurian rebel groups joining SAF are multifaceted. Firstly, the RSF and allied Arab militias have carried out large-scale ethnically motivated massacres and ethnic cleansing in West Darfur, particularly targeting the Massalit, a non-Arab tribe native to the region.⁸⁴ For many years, El-Fasher has been a major destination for internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the brutal fighting in Darfur. This is exemplified by Zamzam Camp, which currently shelters around half a million IDPs.⁸⁵ Community leaders in Darfur grew fearful when the RSF prepared to invade the city, worrying that El-Fasher's civilians, primarily from the non-Arab Zaghawa and Fur tribes, would suffer the same fate as those in West Darfur.⁸⁶ Secondly, the rebel leaders' decision was driven by opportunistic considerations and personal power ambitions. JEM and SLM-MM heavily benefited from the JPA, which facilitated their

political comeback. They feared that if the RSF gained complete control over Darfur, they would lose their stronghold and fall under RSF rule.⁸⁷ Their alignment with Burhan in the war secured them continued influence in the SAF-led government and military support by Port Sudan. In contrast, rebel leaders who refused to align with Burhan in November 2023 were removed from their positions.⁸⁸ Referring to their growing military role in the SAF war alliance, the rebel leaders have demanded direct inclusion in peace negotiations.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the JDF's position within the SAF war alliance raises some questions. While the 2019 revolution was once marked by the nationwide chant "We are all Darfurians"⁹⁰, the former leading representatives of the Darfuran opposition are now aligning with the old Bashir establishment. For many Darfuran rebels, establishing a secular government in Sudan has been a key demand.⁹¹ An objective that appears increasingly difficult to achieve within the current SAF alliance, given the influence of the old Islamist regime. This contradiction does not apply to JEM, which has its own Islamist background.⁹² The lack of ideological coherence among Darfur's armed groups is evident in their growing fragmentation. Both SLM-MM and JEM have experienced internal splits since siding with SAF, with some members choosing to join neutral or pro-RSF forces.⁹³ The recent alignment of previously neutral rebel groups with the RSF further heightens the risk of intra-communal violence among Darfuran tribes.

4.3 Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North

The positioning of the various SPLM-N factions in the war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile mirrors the dynamics in Darfur, with different factions taking different standpoints. Generally, the SPLM-N has advocated for a secular and diverse Sudan, inspired by the vision of John Garang, the longtime leader of the SPLM. In 2017, the Sudanese successor movement of the SPLM split into two factions due to disagreements over the issue of self-determination: the al-Hilu faction, based in South Kordofan, and the Malik Agar faction, based in Blue Nile.⁹⁴

The faction led by Malik Agar has sided with the SAF from the beginning of the war, with Agar taking over Hemedti's position as deputy chairman of the TSC in Port Sudan after the war broke out.⁹⁵ Agar's alliance with the SAF already began with the signing of the JPA and his support for the 2021 coup. While he has personally secured a powerful position in Port Sudan, significant figures in both the political and military wings of his group have distanced themselves from him. In August 2023, 163 officers and 2,500 enlisted soldiers from Agar's faction announced their defection to the RSF.⁹⁶ Even before the war broke out, in August 2022, Agar's deputy, Yasir Arman, leader of the faction's political wing and former advisor to Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok, announced his departure from Agar's faction. Following the split, Arman founded the SPLM-Democratic Revolutionary Movement (SPLM-N DRM). As part of Tagadom, the group remains neutral in the war and focuses on political engagement rather than military operations.⁹⁷

The strongest and most significant SPLM-N faction, led by al-Hilu, remained neutral in the conflict for a long time before aligning with the RSF in February 2025. Prior to that, al-Hilu also held talks with the SAF in May 2024, but these ended without significant outcomes. Al-Hilu, who had already declined to sign the JPA, advocates for a secular Sudan and greater autonomy for his region.⁹⁸ The armed movement possesses significant military capabilities and controls its own territory in the Nuba Mountains, home to a substantial Christian minority.

4.4 Eastern Rebel Groups

Sudan's eastern states, Gedaref, Kassala, and Red Sea, have been comparatively less affected by the fighting. However, the establishment of military training camps by the SAF for allied rebel groups in eastern Sudan and Eritrea has encouraged various eastern rebel groups to join the SAF's war efforts. Armed movements, including the Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces, the United Popular Front for Liberation and Justice (UPFLJ), and the Beja National Congress, have launched recruitment campaigns on social media to register new fighters for training in these camps.⁹⁹ Many eastern rebel groups had been weakened or forced into exile in Eritrea in recent years after signing a peace agreement with Bashir in 2006.¹⁰⁰ The war has presented

a lucrative opportunity for the rebel leaders to regain military and political influence, particularly as many felt neglected in the JPA.¹⁰¹ Given the RSF's struggles to gain support outside of Darfur¹⁰², divisions among eastern rebels over whether to support the SAF or RSF are not as prevalent as they are among the SPLM-N or Darfurian groups. However, the rearming and resurgence of eastern rebel groups increase the risk of intercommunal violence, tribal tensions, and growing Eritrean influence.¹⁰³

4.5 Popular Resistance Forces

The Popular Resistance Forces (PRF) are armed militias composed of civilians that have emerged in various parts of the country. They began forming in December 2023 following RSF advances to the east and calls from the SAF leadership to arm civilians.¹⁰⁴ The PRF operate under the umbrella of the SAF and receive training and equipment from them.¹⁰⁵ The civilian forces bring together a diverse range of actors, including resistance and youth committees, who were key drivers of the 2019 revolution, as well as local militias affiliated with Sudan's Islamic Movement.¹⁰⁶ According to a leaked internal report, the PRF have become deeply infiltrated by the Islamic Movement over the course of the conflict, which has reportedly also been supplying them with weapons.¹⁰⁷

5 Divide and Competition within the SAF Leadership

The partnered movements, militias, and rebel groups of the SAF all pursue their own interests in the war, and most of them have significantly strengthened over it. Regarding the question of how to balance their war partners' increasing influence and divergent interests while also retaining their support and maintaining leadership, the SAF command is divided.

5.1 The Contested Role of the Islamists within SAF Structures

The rise of the old Bashir regime leaders and Islamist groups within the SAF alliance is a central issue that the SAF leadership must balance in relation to both the Sudanese and international public, as well as its other allied partners. After all, the ousting of the Sudanese Islamic Movement and the ban on Bashir's pillar organisations, including the NCP, the NISS, and the Central Police, was a decision that was at least publicly supported by the SAF and the rebels. However, it is almost impossible to sharply distinguish the SAF from the old Bashir regime. Supporters and members of the Bashir regime are deeply rooted within the SAF's ranks. Not least, almost all high-ranking SAF leaders were already senior officers during the Bashir regime.¹⁰⁸ Even though many SAF generals are not themselves Islamists, they find utility in deploying Islamism as an effective way to mobilise fighters and resources with little money.¹⁰⁹

Despite their military contributions, there is also a significant number of SAF officers who distrust the resurgent influence of

the Islamists. They complain that Burhan's alliance with the Islamists following the coup in 2021 took away support from the civilian sector for the SAF's predictable confrontation with the RSF — a lack that has now become prevalent.¹¹⁰ The significant divisions on that subject within the SAF-aligned troops are illustrated by a dubious drone attack on 4 April 2024, targeting soldiers of the SAF-aligned al-Bara bin Malik Brigade. Reportedly, the attack on the Islamist militia may not have come from the RSF but from another SAF faction.¹¹¹

Two camps have formed over the strategic question of how much public and internal power should be granted to the supporters of the old Bashir regime. The SAF camp in favour of the resurgence of the Islamist regime, the "hardliners", overlaps with the faction that rejects peace negotiations due to the fear that the Islamic Movement will be squeezed out in a post-conflict agreement. At the same time, the group suspicious of the Islamists is more amenable to a peace process and is often described as the "institutionalists" within the SAF.¹¹² The divide within the SAF leadership is well reflected by Yasser al-Atta, Assistant Commander-in-Chief, a self-described Islamist

who is reportedly dedicated to continuing the war¹¹³, and Shams al-Din Kabbashi, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and a prominent figure of the institutionalist faction.

Kabbashi was the main public SAF representative during the negotiations following the 2019 revolution and represented the SAF in the Manama negotiations in January 2024. In these talks, he agreed to arrest high-profile Islamists from exchanged lists with the RSF to reconstitute a unified army between the respective forces, before he was later called back by Burhan.¹¹⁴ Kabbashi has also publicly warned about the instrumentalization of the war for propaganda purposes by SAF-aligned militias. While he did not call out Islamist groups directly, his comments can be interpreted as a reference to them, since his warning came amid the circulation of videos of Islamist fighters chanting militant slogans inside SAF training camps.¹¹⁵ Four days after Kabbashi's statement, al-Atta, when asked about the videos, reemphasised that the SAF welcomes "all actors"¹¹⁶ in the fight against the RSF. He further urged replacing the 2019 constitution with a constitution based on the constitutional document from 2005 under Burhan's regime.¹¹⁷

5.2 Burhan's Limited Position within the SAF

While the contradictory behaviour of the two leading generals reveals some of their personal attitudes, it should also be linked to the two-pronged strategy that Burhan increasingly pursued to satisfy the various demands of his partners and the public. Burhan is militarily dependent on the Islamist

military capabilities; on the other hand, he knows that they are widely distrusted among some of his partners and among the Sudanese people. His attempts to balance this conflict are exemplified in a speech he delivered at a gathering of pro-SAF political groups in Port Sudan in February 2025. Burhan declared that he would not bring the NCP back to power and called on leading Islamists to step away from politics. Nevertheless, in the same speech, he left a backdoor open for the Bashir regime's party by stating that they could compete in elections once the war is over.¹¹⁸

Burhan is considered to have a rather weak position within the SAF command, and he fears a coup against him from within the SAF ranks. Even though Burhan entered a coalition with Karti and the Islamic Movement, both are known to reciprocally distrust each other.¹¹⁹ If he fails to keep the Islamists' power ambitions at a manageable level, there is a significant risk that the Islamists will attempt to seize full power within the SAF again.¹²⁰ Burhan's war partners, especially the Islamists but also the rebel leaders, are keenly observing his actions regarding possible peace negotiations. They all expect their share of influence in a post-conflict agreement and want to prevent an outcome where they will be sidelined. The new military momentum of the SAF has reduced the movement against Burhan within his military alliance and the SAF ranks. Furthermore, he is the most internationally known and connected leader.¹²¹ However, if Burhan were to sign a peace agreement but lacked the backing of his various partners, the possibility of a simple continuation of fighting is high.¹²²

6 SAF Blockade Complicating Conflict Resolution

The fragmentation within its internal ranks, as well as within their war alliance, complicates the SAF's efforts to seriously engage in a peace process. Firstly, satisfying or at least considering all partners' needs in a post-conflict agreement seems almost impossible, with the role of the members of the Bashir regime and the Islamic Movement being a key issue. Therefore, the SAF leadership acts very hesitantly regarding peace negotiations to prevent a disintegration of its war alliance. This would weaken the SAF overall in the fight against the RSF, but particularly SAF chief Burhan. Secondly, the SAF lacks broad domestic and international legitimacy outside of its current war alliance, mainly due to its strong entanglement with the old Bashir regime. This severely weakens the SAF's envisioned role as Sudan's main state institution in a post-conflict agreement. Thirdly, the absence of a shared ideology and the prevalence of opportunism among the SAF's armed allies boosts the risk of future fractures within the SAF war alliance. This would fragment the conflict framework further and increase the likelihood of a long-term division of Sudan.

6.1 SAF's Reluctance in Peace Efforts

The SAF met the previous internationally brokered ceasefire attempts with striking reluctance. The US-Saudi-led Jeddah talks in April and June 2023, their successor format in Geneva in August 2024, and the less public Manama talks in January 2024 all failed to achieve significant breakthroughs, primarily due to the unwillingness of both warring parties to compromise. The same applies to the mediation mechanisms established by the AU and IGAD. The achievements made focused mainly on the establishment of humanitarian corridors and the coordination of humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, even those agreements were regularly broken by both sides.¹²³

A major complaint of the SAF leadership regarding the internationally brokered peace negotiations is that the settings would imply an unjustified equality between the RSF and the SAF and failed to acknowledge Burhan as the institutionally legitimate representative of the Sudanese state. This attribution is integral to Burhan's self-conception and the SAF's war narrative.¹²⁴ The SAF has also excluded the inclusion of the UAE in peace talks¹²⁵, referring to their widely reported position as the RSF's main international economic and military supporter.¹²⁶ The SAF's objections to peace negotiation formats culminated in the SAF leadership refusing direct participation for the US-backed Geneva talks in August 2024, choosing instead to be represented by mediators from Saudi Arabia and Egypt.¹²⁷

The SAF's war partners also played a role in the SAF stepping out of the Geneva talks. The SAF-aligned Darfuran rebel leaders, who were not invited to the talks, have lobbied heavily against the SAF's engagement in the Geneva negotiations, claiming that their inclusion in negotiations is a prerequisite for any discussions.¹²⁸ The Darfuran protest was joined by a failed assassination attempt on Burhan at the end of July 2024, after he had indicated his willingness to negotiate in Geneva. Some have interpreted this attempt as a possible warning shot coming from hardliners within the SAF, who oppose peace talks.¹²⁹ The Islamists are aware that many relevant national and international actors are advocating for their exclusion from post-conflict negotiations and are keenly observing every SAF move towards peace negotiations that could push them out of the political arena once again. With every step towards a peace agreement that does not ensure their survival, Burhan risks being quickly removed as SAF leader and replaced by someone who stands more firmly on the side of the Islamists and the Bashir regime network.¹³⁰

So far, the SAF has not indicated a shift in their position on negotiations, and given their current military upper hand, the probability of a sudden shift is limited. In February 2025, the government in Port Sudan set the withdrawal of the RSF from all territories under their control as a precondition for accepting a ceasefire.¹³¹ The continued military support from foreign actors, especially Russia, Iran, and Egypt, currently enables the SAF to carry on with this strategy. Morale and motivation among SAF-aligned troops are currently boosted by military successes. Now holding the whole of Khartoum, the SAF will

probably try to reconsolidate their strengths by building on the logistical and economic advantages that come with the capital. SAF representatives have signalled that even after retaking the capital, they plan to continue the war and reject negotiations.¹³² Whereas, the full recapture of Khartoum fulfils one of the SAF's central war aims and could open space for new rounds of negotiations.

6.2 Legitimacy Deficit of the SAF War Alliance

The strategy of creating a war coalition as broad and large as possible has enabled the SAF to achieve a military comeback. If the SAF desires to fulfil their envisioned role as the nation's defender of sovereignty and the backbone of society in the long term, the alliance needs international and civilian legitimacy. However, at the moment, the SAF alliance lacks not only a civilian support apparatus but also political legitimacy.¹³³ In particular, the rise of the Islamist faction within the SAF, which rejects the democratic aspirations of the transitional period, has restricted the SAF's range of civilian and international partners, many of whom consider the civilian-military government before the 2021 coup as Sudan's legitimate representation.

The Sudanese civil society is divided on the war. The deepening ties between the SAF and the old Islamist regime have provoked sharp criticism from the civilian revolutionary forces. Many people fear that once the SAF wins the war, the remnants of the Bashir regime will seize power in Sudan again.¹³⁴ Several of the civilian actors who remained neutral or even aligned with the RSF blame the members of the Bashir regime for the

outbreak and continuation of the war.¹³⁵ The rift between Sudan's civilian groups and the SAF, which started with the coup in 2021, has grown even stronger during the course of the war. The SAF has increasingly turned against civil society groups that refused to side with them, passing laws that have banned civil society groups established during the 2019 revolution or later and restricted media reporting.¹³⁶ The SAF leadership has also repeatedly distanced itself from the civilian anti-war coalition Tagadom, led by former Prime Minister Hamdok, and ruled out any cooperation with them.¹³⁷

The RSF exploits the weakness of SAF's limited legitimacy and Islamist reputation. So far, the RSF has faced difficulties gaining support outside of its stronghold in Darfur. But, while the SAF war alliance achieved significant military gains in recent months, the RSF has been able to enhance its democratic branding project and gain significant regional support. The abandonment of the old Bashir regime members, leading figures of the Islamic Movement, and Islamist militias is among the RSF's central demands for ceasefire and post-conflict negotiations. These claims are an integral part of the RSF's war campaign. By presenting itself as the democratic alternative to the SAF, the RSF tries to legitimise its war efforts and seek public support.¹³⁸ The RSF is widely known for the numerous atrocities committed by its fighters throughout the war. Nevertheless, it was, to an extent, able to civilianise itself and present itself as a fighter for the Sudanese people.¹³⁹ The founding of its own government, backed by significant actors from Sudanese civil society and powerful regional players like Kenya and Ethiopia, was a major political success for the RSF.¹⁴⁰ Notably,

the longstanding neutral and powerful secular-oriented SPLM-N rebel leader, al-Hilu, has openly aligned with the RSF. The RSF's new political alliances indicate that many civilian actors no longer see political opportunities or a democratic future with the government in Port Sudan.

The contested legitimacy of the TSC, led by Burhan, is also evident in the international community. While the UN and the Arab League recognise the ruling junta in Port Sudan as Sudan's official representation¹⁴¹, the AU has still suspended Sudan from its membership. IGAD is divided on the legitimacy of the Port Sudan government, with Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia increasingly aligning with Hemedti.¹⁴² The EU and the US are hesitant to take a clear stance in the conflict but maintain their distance from the SAF and have condemned the growing influence of Islamist leaders of the former Bashir regime.¹⁴³ The resurgence of Islamist factions has even raised suspicions among traditionally SAF-aligned nations like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the SAF has shifted its orientation towards the east, enhancing cooperation with countries that were traditionally aligned with the Bashir regime, including Iran, Russia, Qatar, and Turkey.¹⁴⁵

6.3 Outlook: Possible Ruptures within the SAF War Alliance

The SAF leadership finds itself in a strategic blockade. All along fearing the offense of one of their partners and the potential loss of military support, the SAF has been reluctant to engage in peace negotiations, prolonging the war and losing significant domestic and

international appeal. Consequently, the risk is increasing that some of the SAF's partners will begin to feel dissatisfied with the current strategy, which is built on compromise and an ever-growing acceptance of the resurgent Bashir regime members. Based on the claim of a lack of political perspective, some allies may start to seek for a new, more promising alliance — for instance, with the newly formed RSF-backed government.

The most likely rupture of the current SAF war coalition lies within its internal structures. The faction of hardliners around the Bashir regime and the Islamic Movement seems strong enough that the removal of Burhan is very possible if he puts the resurgent Islamist power in danger. However, an increase in the public visibility of the members of the Bashir regime might simultaneously provoke opposition from other partners. For example, those groups within the Popular Resistance Forces, which emerged from revolutionary groups and oppose Islamist rule over the country. For the various rebel groups aligned with the SAF, the outlook of the alliance differs. The Two Areas of Kordofan and Blue Nile are still contested both militarily and politically.¹⁴⁶ While the different SPLM-N factions all have varying positions on the war, the alignment of SPLM-N leader al-Hilu with the RSF might ignite further debates on support for the SAF. The eastern rebels largely stand unquestioned behind the SAF government in Port Sudan, even though the risks of ruptures due to local intracommunity and ethnic conflicts have risen since their renewed armament during the war.

The SAF-aligned Darfurian rebels particularly fear that they will lose their influence in a post-conflict agreement, especially when Bashir regime hardliners take over the leadership of the SAF.¹⁴⁷ After losing Khartoum, the RSF will make significant efforts to finally take over the long-besieged El-Fasher to gain full control of the Darfur region. A loss of El-Fasher would place the highly populated city at grave risk of the horrendous atrocities for which RSF soldiers are notorious. This situation might compel the rebels to reconsider their stance in the conflict. In particular, the likelihood of losing their territory might push the Darfurian leaders to enter into an agreement with Hemedti. Otherwise, the JDF commanders would risk being abandoned by the SAF as soon as they no longer provide significant military advantages.¹⁴⁸

An agreement between the JDF and the RSF, similar to the negotiated regional truce in 2023, might provide the rebel leaders with a way to avoid being neglected by the SAF leadership and to prevent their full-blown defeat. Longstanding ethnic conflict and rivalry stand in the way of such an agreement. However, in recent years, Sudan's rebel leaders have been rather known for opportunistic choices than for ideological or ethnic-based guidance. Ultimately, the mostly secular rebel movements in Darfur also share a violent and antagonistic past with their current partners in the rising Bashir regime network in Port Sudan.

7 Conclusion

The recent military successes of the SAF war alliance overshadow the eminent underlying instability of the SAF coalition. The fragmentation becomes apparent when looking at post conflict scenarios, where the various interests of the actors are difficult to reconcile. To avoid addressing this problem, the SAF has declined to seriously engage in peace negotiations. By rejecting negotiations, the SAF has not only prolonged the devastating war but also facilitated the return to power of the Islamist leaders and supporters of the ousted Bashir regime. Furthermore, the SAF contributed to the significant military revival of their aligned rebel groups throughout the country.

The SAF lacks the creation of a coherent post-conflict vision, that includes also the civilian organisations and people of Sudan. The SAF's deep entanglement with the Islamists is thereby a key issue. Without their support the SAF is dependent on armed allies, which primarily follow their own interests. Currently, the SAF still enjoys the support of its armed allies. However, on the long-term the risk of rupture within the SAF alliances is imminent, further fragmentating Sudan's landscape of highly militarised armed actors.

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