

Sudan Situation Report Analysis

Conflict Parties in the Current Crisis

August 2023

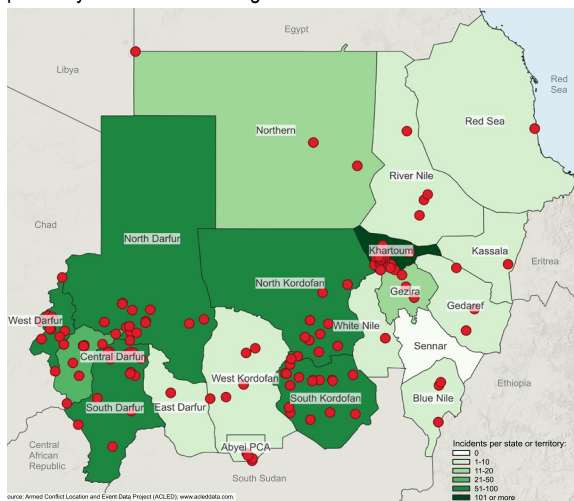
International attempts to broker a ceasefire to end the Sudan conflict will continue to see only temporary success at best, with both sides likely to keep fighting for the next six months, while further collaboration between tribal entities and the two main conflict parties could see cross-border tribal conflicts ignite. This document provides background information on the conflict parties involved in the Sudan fighting and violence attributed to them.

Summary

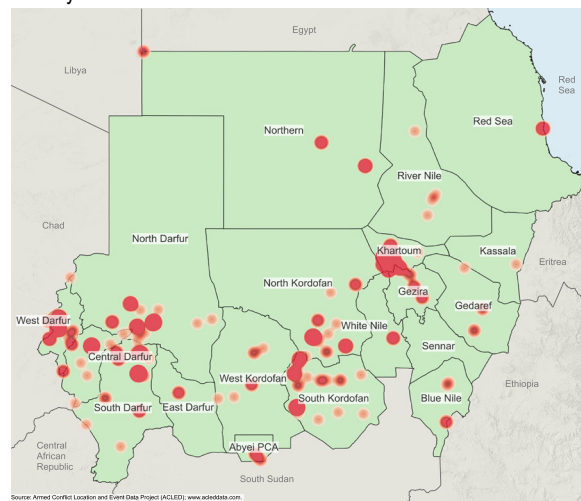
- The main fighting in Sudan has been in Khartoum state, which has seen over 60% of all reported conflict violence reported by ACLED as of 7 August 2023 since fighting began in mid-April. The Darfur region and North and South Kordofan states have also seen extensive clashes.
- Concerns were **reported** on 7 August that the urban conflict in Khartoum has intensified with massive aerial bombing and heavy fighting.
- Tribal and ethno-religious loyalties are fuelling recruitment and support for both sides, and this is only likely to increase if – as seems likely – the conflict continues. This in turn risks sparking a more general tribal/ethnic conflict, particularly in the Darfur region.
- The conflict between the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudan Armed Forces, which started on 15 April, could see cross-border tribal conflict reignite, especially because the two main advocates who had previously moderated tribal clashes are now fighting each other.
- In the past six weeks, the SAF has experienced considerable setbacks, losing control of strategically important areas in Blue Nile state, the Darfur region, Khartoum and South Kordofan.

Figure 1: 1,349 reported incidents of political violence and protest in Sudan by state, 15 April-04 August 2023

Map A shows the states where the highest number of incidents were reported, using varying shades of green. Events in close proximity are shown in a single red dot.



Map B represents the frequency of reported events in the same location in the varying size of the event dots across the whole country.



Note: Due to multiple incidents being recorded in the same location (and symbols therefore overlapping), the number of symbols that can be seen in Map A (on the left) does not always correspond with the overall number of incidents in each state or territory as represented by the colour shading. Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acledata.com, accessed 07/08/2023

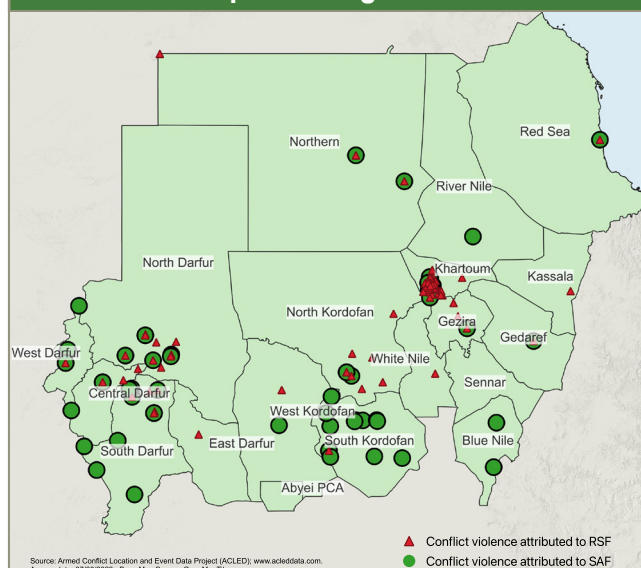
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Overview: conflict parties

The fighting between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) that erupted on 15 April 2023 has largely been concentrated in Khartoum state, which **accounts for over 60% of all reported violent incidents**. However, there has also been fighting for control of several other urban areas along major roads, especially along the east-west corridor from Kassala, on the border with Eritrea, to West Darfur, with a particular focus on North Kordofan state and the Darfur region. Following the October 2021 military coup that ousted President Omar al-Bashir, it was agreed that the RSF would be integrated into the SAF. However, there were significant tensions between the coup leader, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as “Hemedti”), over the integration process. The SAF wanted this process to take two years, while the RSF’s leaders insisted on a ten-year timetable, fearing a loss of power and influence.

Despite over two months of clashes, international pressure for talks and at least 17 associated short-lived ceasefires, Khartoum is still contested, with artillery duels and occasional air strikes continuing unabated. Fighting also persists elsewhere, particularly in Darfur, where on 14 June West Darfur governor Khamis Abakar was abducted and later killed by fighters in RSF uniforms. Abakar had previously accused the RSF of “genocide”. Indeed, the UN raised the alarm on 24 June over the ethnic targeting and killing of members of the Masalit community in El Geneina, West Darfur. The **reported** systematic killings of civilians, burning of homes and large-scale destruction of Sirba, West Darfur, at the end of July 2023, suggests such alarm raising is warranted. The SAF, meanwhile, have recently focused on the regional hub of El Obeid in North Kordofan state, between Khartoum and Darfur, which it is trying to take back from the RSF. Residents of El Obeid have lived under an RSF **siege** since May with power outages, strikes by medical staff and shortages of drinking water **reported** on 08 August.

Figure 2: Reported conflict violence attributed to the RSF and SAF in Sudan, 15 April-04 August 2023



- **Rapid Support Forces (Janjaweed)**

The RSF originated from the Janjaweed militias, which the government of former president Omar al-Bashir used to suppress a rebellion in the Darfur region that started in 2003. Over time, the militia evolved and was officially established as the RSF in 2013. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as “Hemedti” or “Little Mohamed”, commands the RSF. He is currently the deputy head of Sudan’s ruling Sovereign Council. Hemedti’s rise to power coincided with the growth and influence of the RSF, which benefitted his family’s business interests in various sectors. The RSF was officially incorporated into the state’s coercive apparatus under Hemedti’s command in 2015. In 2017 it gained the status of a “regular force” and was legitimised as an independent security force by law the same year.

**Read Sudan’s Doctors Falsely Accused of Siding with the RSF
Social Media Monitoring Report**

Hemedti, who recruited members of the RSF from Arab tribes in Darfur, has made the militia culturally, ethnically and religiously more cohesive than the conscripted forces of the SAF. Initially its role mainly focused on operations that the SAF did not want to undertake, carrying out tasks such as clandestine and often dubious actions and hand-to-hand combat. The RSF has its own revenue streams through private companies owned by Hemedti and his family, including investments in gold mining, livestock, and infrastructure. The unit has also retained the Janjaweed's tactical setup as a mobile guerrilla and counterinsurgency force engaging in domestic conflicts in the Kordofan region, Blue Nile state, and Khartoum state, as well as participating in fighting against Houthi rebels in Yemen. The RSF primarily uses vehicles such as Toyota Land Cruisers equipped with 50-calibre machine guns, at times using confiscated weaponry and vehicles from other militias.

- **Sudan Armed Forces**

The SAF is the military organisation responsible for the defence of Sudan and is composed of the army, air force and navy. Its origins can be traced back to the Sudan Defence Force, established during the colonial era under British rule. After Sudan's independence in 1956 the SDF was reorganised into the SAF and has played a significant role in internal and regional conflicts, including the Sudanese civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) and the conflict in Darfur (2003-2020). The SAF has traditionally been the dominant military force in Sudan and has played a central role in Sudanese politics, with military leaders often assuming key positions of power in the government, such as former president Omar al-Bashir and the current de facto ruler and chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council of Sudan, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who is also the head of the SAF.

- **Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N)**

The SPLM-N is a political and military organisation that was formed in 2011 when a faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which was originally a political party founded in 1983 and currently the ruling party in South Sudan, decided to continue the armed struggle against the government of Sudan primarily in the Sudanese states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The group in Sudan therefore has strong links to the ruling SPLM movement in South Sudan. The SPLM-N advocates for political, economic, and social reforms in Sudan, with a focus on issues affecting marginalised regions especially in South Kordofan, where the majority of the current clashes in which they have been involved have occurred (see Figure 6). The anti-government movement was fuelled by dissatisfaction with where the border between Sudan and South Sudan was agreed, which basically followed the lines of the established states (e.g. South Kordofan), but with a cut-out for the (still) disputed area of Abyei, where some communities had hoped to be integrated into South Sudan. The movement's primary demands include the right to self-determination, equality, and the end of discrimination against non-Arab and non-Muslim populations. This has often led to armed conflict with the SAF, resulting in significant humanitarian crises, including the displacement of populations and limited access to essential services. For instance, conflict in South Kordofan in 2011 led to the displacement of nearly 400,000 residents of the Nuba mountains and surrounding areas.

Read Conflict Developments and Implications for Aid Agencies

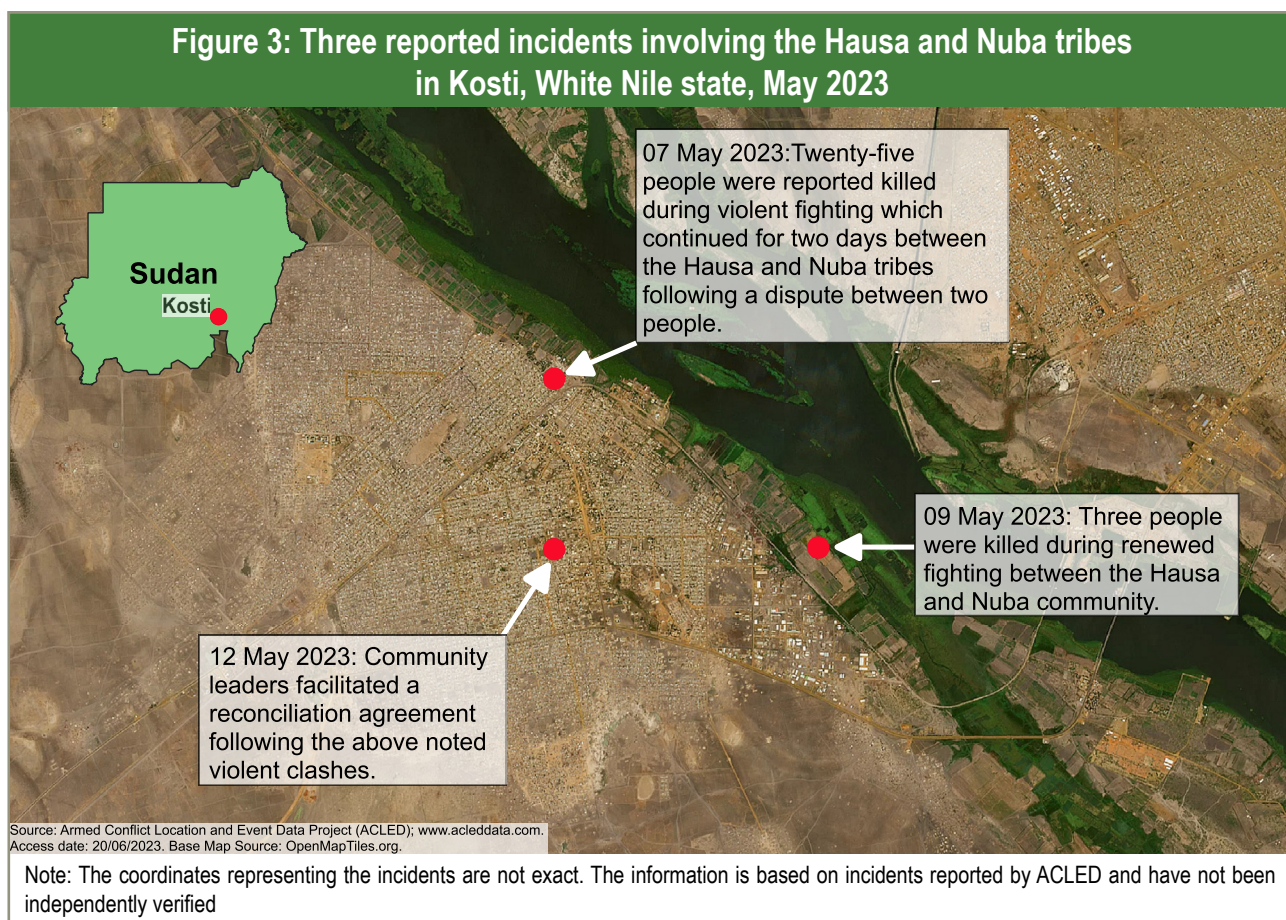
Sudan Situation Report Analysis

Over the years, the SPLM-N has undergone internal divisions and factionalism, including one notable split that occurred in 2017, when a faction led by **Malik Agar** (whom al-Burhan recently appointed deputy chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council in Hemedti's place) broke away from the main faction led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu. This division has complicated the political landscape and peace negotiations with the Sudanese government, and also the current conflict. Different **fractions of the SPLM-N** also supported the Hausa and Berta groups in confrontations in Blue Nile state that occurred in 2022.

Ethnic and tribal violence

Tribal clashes between the Hausa and Nuba tribes in the city of Kosti, White Nile state, occurred separately from the fighting between the SAF and RSF and resulted in the reported deaths of at least 25 people (see Figure 3).

The cross-border dynamics and communal affiliations of tribes and ethnic groups involved in the Sudanese conflict could affect the stability and security of neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). These countries are already receiving refugees and returnees, necessitating measures to contain possible spillovers and engage with transborder community leaders. Moreover, Chad, the CAR and Sudan have in common a group of communities whose movement has never been stopped by administrative boundaries, including the Rounga, Zaghawa, Massalit and various Arab tribes.



Read Violence Against Health Care in Sudan in 2022
Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) Factsheet

Indeed, in August 2022 a cross-border incursion from Chad saw 18 “nomads” killed by “assailants” from Chad, with livestock taken. Retaliatory tribal warfare was halted by the then-deputy head of the Transitional Sovereign Council, Hemedti, who was in Chad at the time for a meeting, and flew to Darfur to defuse tribal tensions. With Hemedti now leading the RSF against the SAF, this could therefore see cross-border tribal conflict reignite, especially with the two main advocates who had previously moderated tribal clashes now fighting each other. Indeed, on 3 July seven tribal leaders in South Darfur pledged their allegiance to the RSF. The leaders from the Beni Halba, Tarjam, Habaniya, Fallata, Misseriya, Taaisha and Rizeigat tribes published their support in a video statement saying they saw the war as a battle between “right and wrong”. These are mainly cattle-herding tribes of Arab origin, which echoes the current profile of the RSF (see explanation below).

Important ethnic and tribal groups in Sudan

Sudan is home to numerous ethnic groups and tribes, each with its own distinct cultural and linguistic characteristics.

The Arab population is estimated to form 70% of the country’s total population. They are almost entirely Muslims and speak predominantly Sudanese Arabic. Arab tribes began to arrive in Sudan in the 12th century. However, the vast majority of Arabs in Sudan are Arabised indigenous people rather than direct descendants of Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula.

Pastoralists/herders and farmers

Originally, the Janjaweed consisted of Arabic-speaking nomadic and semi-settled pastoralists known as the Baggara, who herded cattle and camels in the Sahel grasslands south of the Sahara. They migrated to the region in the 18th century, spanning Chad, Libya, and Sudan, and intermingled with non-Arab communities living there. Despite the increasing agricultural settlement in Darfur during the early 20th century, the Arabic-speaking nomads and non-Arab Fur-speaking farmers largely co-operated successfully.

However, the situation changed in the 1970s with the onset of a new drought cycle in the Sahel, causing disruptions across northern Africa, which led to tensions and often clashes between the two communities. During the 1980s civil war in Chad, Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi played a role in organising Sudanese Arabs to fight against the government forces of Chad. Following their defeat, an influx of weapons flowed back across the border into Sudan, exacerbating conflicts between Arab pastoralists and Fur farmers over control of land and water resources. In 2003, under al-Bashir’s rule, the military armed and recruited Arab nomads and pastoralists to fight mostly non-Arab armed groups that were rebelling against the state, and these groups included other pastoralist groups such as the Beja, Zaghawa and Nuer.

- **Baggara:** The Baggara tribe is composed of various Arabic-speaking pastoralist groups, such as the Misseriya, Hawazma and Rizeigat. They primarily reside in western Sudan, particularly in the regions of Darfur and Kordofan, and parts of River Nile state.
- **Beja:** The Beja tribe is primarily found in eastern Sudan, along the Red Sea coast and in the eastern desert regions. They are traditionally nomadic herders and traders, and have their own unique language and cultural traditions.
- **Berta (or Funj):** The Berta ethnic group live along the border of Sudan and Ethiopia. Most Berta are farmers involved in raising livestock, trading, beekeeping and coffee cultivation.
- **Fur:** The Fur tribe is indigenous to Darfur in western Sudan and are known for their agricultural practices. The Fur people have been significantly affected by the conflicts in the region.

- **Hausa:** Hausa communities tend to live and work in central Sudan along the country's rivers, and most cities have Hausa communities. Originally from West Africa, they have lived in Sudan for centuries, often settling there along the long land journey to and from Mecca for the Hajj. The Hausa people were long denied Sudanese citizenship and many continue to face discrimination. In June 2022 the Hausa community in Blue Nile state was granted its own emirate in the state, which was opposed by the Berta ethnic group.
- **Masalit:** The non-Arab Masalit ethnic group are found across western Sudan (primarily in Geneina, the capital of West Darfur), eastern Sudan and eastern Chad. The group speaks Masalit as a language, although there are different dialects, and are mainly subsistence farmers.
- **Nuba:** The Nuba people are a diverse group inhabiting the Nuba mountains region in central Sudan, and there are a variety of subgroups within the Nuba people each with its own language and customs. The Nuba are primarily farmers, but also herd cattle and raise domestic animals. The Nuba have faced marginalisation and conflict, particularly during Sudan's civil war.
- **Nuer:** The Nuer people are semi-nomadic pastoralists who herd cattle for a living. Although they are mainly concentrated in the Greater Upper Nile region of South Sudan and the Gambella region of Ethiopia, instances have been recorded of clashes along the Sudan-South Sudan border areas between the Nuer and South Sudanese Sholuk tribes. Such clashes occurred in August 2021, and led to a number of IDPs being displaced in South Kordofan and White Nile states.
- **Rizeigat** (also, Rezeigat, Rizigat or Rizayqat) are a tribe of the Bedouin Baggara. The Abbala Rizeigat live in North Darfur and eastern Chad, and herd camels. The Baggara Rizeigat live in South Darfur and herd cattle. During the Darfur conflict that started in 2003 the Abbala Rizeigat were instrumental to the Sudanese government's counterinsurgency campaign and gained notoriety as part of the Janjaweed militia. RSF leader Hemedti comes from the Abbala Mahriya clan and Musa Hilal from the Abbala Mahamid clan.
- **Runga:** The Runga live in the north and north-west of Chad and in the Central African Republic. Some are Arabic-speaking, while others are Aiki-speaking.
- **Taisha:** The Taisha are a cattle-herding Baggara tribe from south-west Darfur who live in South Kordofan, the Darfur region and Chad.
- **Zaghawa:** The Zaghawa tribe resides primarily in western Sudan near the border with Chad. They are known for their cattle herding and agriculture. The Zaghawa people have also been affected by the conflicts in Darfur.

Conflict parties: areas of operations

• Khartoum

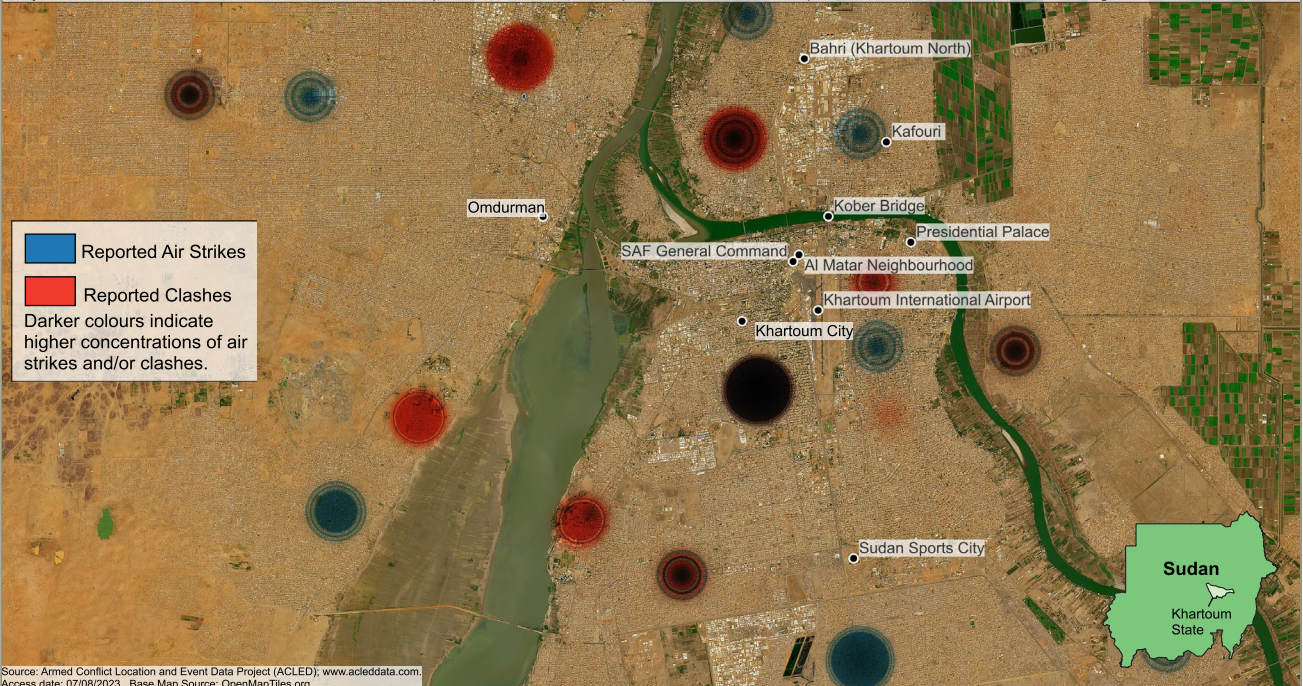
The conflict has been most intense in Khartoum state, centring on Khartoum city. The violence spread from the south of the city into the state's three urban areas: Khartoum city, Khartoum North (Bahri) and Omdurman. As outlined in Figure 4 below, conflict violence has been persistent since mid-April despite ceasefires. In the past two months, the RSF has made several strategic gains. At the end of June, it **captured** the headquarters of the Central Reserve Police and claimed to have taken considerable numbers of tanks and armoured personnel carriers. As of 8 August, it was **reported** that fighting was especially intense in Omdurman whilst the SAF sought to retake a key bridge across the River Nile linking Omdurman with Khartoum North and Khartoum city.

Read The Sudan Crisis, Conflict and Food Insecurity

Conflict and Hunger Analysis

Figure 4: Reported location of air strikes and clashes in Khartoum state, 15 April-04 August 2023

Command headquarters and Al Matar neighbourhood, where al-Burhan and Hemedti had residences. Since this period, the main operations of both the SAF and RSF in Sudan have been concentrated in Khartoum state. Between 15 April and 04 August 2023, 658 clashes – violence between two armed actors at a particular time and location – were reported in the state by ACLED. All such incidents involved the RSF and/or SAF. Two incidents also involved a communal militia which is reported to have clashed with the RSF in Al Kalakla, Jebel Awlia, on 21 and 22 July. Additionally, at least 42 air strikes were reported in the Khartoum state between 15 April and 04 August 2023, all of which were attributed to the SAF except for one on 19 July attributed to the RSF. The violence has been persistent since mid-April with 15 clashes reported in Khartoum state on 03 August alone.

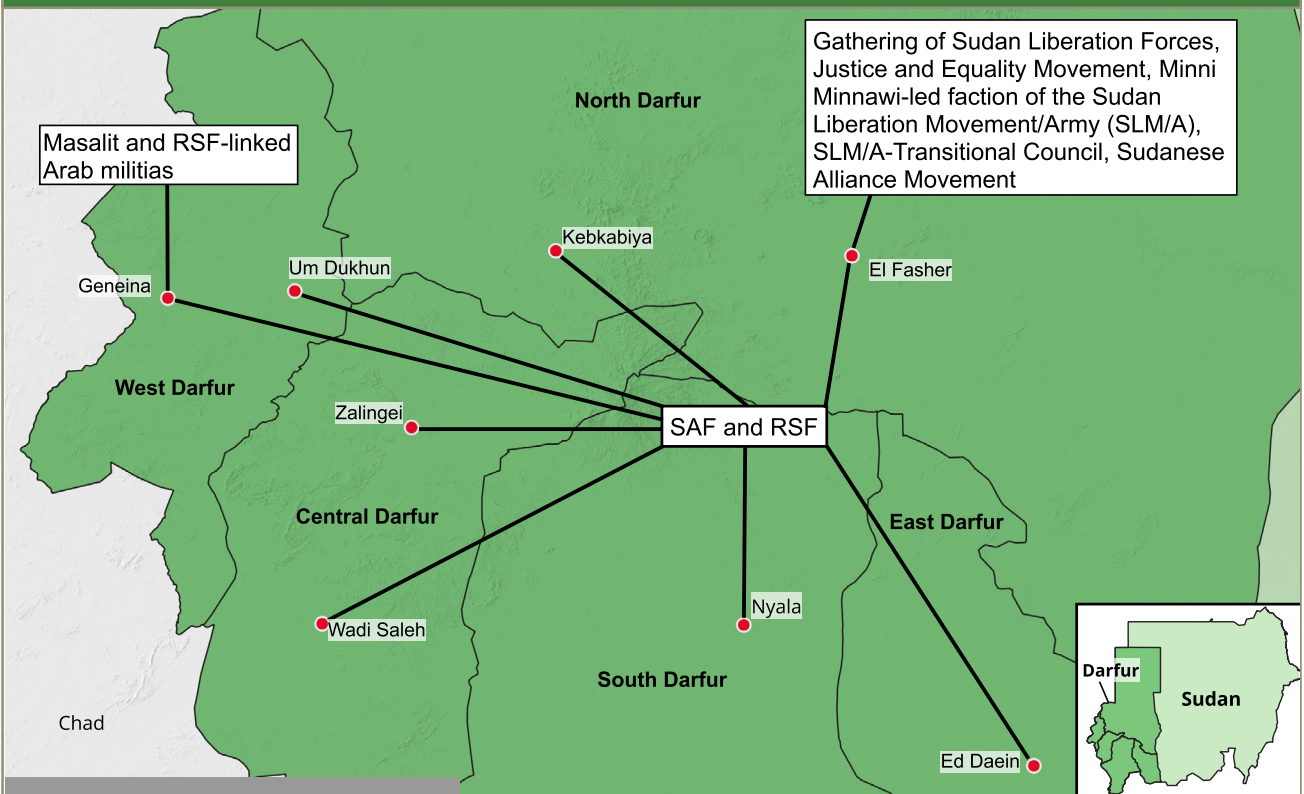


Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acledata.com. Access date: 07/08/2023. Base Map Source: OpenMapTiles.org.

Notes: The term “clash” is used here to refer to what ACLED defines as “battle”. It should not be confused with the category of “armed clash” as defined by ACLED. The coordinates of the reported incidents are not precise. Weapons delivered by aircraft, drones and helicopters are included in the ACLED category of “air strikes”, as well as air-to-ground attacks that do not involve any exchange of fire with forces on the ground.

- **Darfur**

Figure 5: The reported locations of conflict parties’ operations in Darfur, 01 June - 04 August 2023



The Darfur region (comprising the five Darfur states) has also seen wide-ranging political and conflict violence. Several local militias have been involved on both sides of the SAF-RSF conflict. Rival tribes have also attacked the RSF and SAF, and conflict over land between herders and pastoralists has continued in the region. The area was previously highly militarised, and is strategically significant for both sides in the current conflict due to the number of military bases in the region. Large scale destruction and burning of villages has been reported in multiple locations across Darfur. As of 04 August 2023, it was **reported** that seven villages or towns had been “nearly destroyed or burned completely” in West Darfur alone since mid-April.

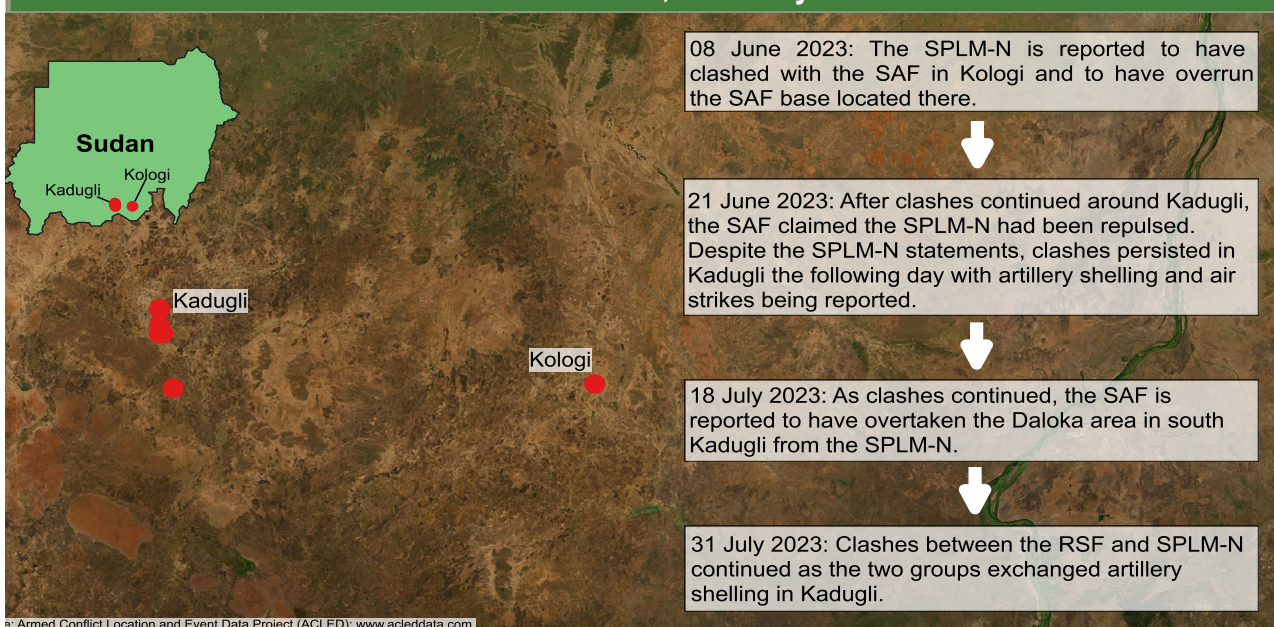
North Kordofan

In North Kordofan state violence has mainly centred on the town of El Obeid, which the RSF has sought to capture due to its strategic value as a central transition point that links routes to both Darfur and Khartoum. The town is **reported** to have been under siege by the RSF since May with severe negative consequences for civilians. El Obeid also has an airport and is the central commercial district for the western states of Sudan. Fighting has also occurred in areas near to the South Sudanese border – but this has seen limited conflict, with the main effort of both sides concentrated in urban areas, around military bases, in strategic areas such as El Obeid and at airports to ensure the movement of logistical supplies.

South Kordofan

Since mid-April, violence in South Kordofan state has centred on clashes between the SPLM-N (Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction) and the SAF. Such violence has been especially intense in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan, but is also reported to have occurred in Dilling and several other locations, including in Kologi to the east of Kadugli. Following several weeks of violent clashes, it was reported that the SPLM-N had “gained control” over multiple SAF garrisons in South Kordofan on 9 July, while also closing the road between Karkal and Kadugli, for reasons that are unclear. This occurred two days after reports that South Sudan’s president, Salva Kiir, had persuaded the commander of the SPLM-N (Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction) not to attack the SAF in the Nuba mountains in South Kordofan or Blue Nile states. In addition to violence between the SPLM-N and RSF, violent clashes were also reported in June between the SAF and RSF in Kadugli, as well as close to Jabal Abyad mountain in the Rashad district of South Kordofan. It is **reported** that the SAF withdrew from Mardis, South Kordofan, on 4 August without engaging with the SPLM-N.

Figure 6: Examples of reported incidents involving the SPLM-N (Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction) in South Kordofan, June-July 2023



Note: The map coordinates representing the incidents are not exact. The information is based on incidents reported by ACLED that have not been independently verified.

Conflict objectives and strategies

- Understanding the objective of specific parties in a conflict can be important for aid agencies in order to maintain their neutrality. Below are key known objectives of the various Sudanese conflict parties and the way in which they hope to achieve them.
- The leadership of both the RSF and SAF appear to want to take/secure control of the apparatus of national governance and/or force their opponents to cede some – or ideally all – control over these levers of power. This is particularly relevant in Khartoum city and state, which they believe they must control in order to be able to control the rest of the country. This also applies to the apparatus of governance at the more local/state levels.
- In doing this, they want to present themselves as the protectors of their own ethnic and political supporters, and their opponents as an existential threat to them. As an example, the SAF, backed by Abdelaziz al-Hilu's SPLM-N faction, has sought to force the RSF out of Kadugli in South Kordofan.
- The SPLM-N has acted as a blocking force attempting to prevent any RSF reinforcements from reaching areas of conflict (and possibly also escaping from these areas), claiming that they are seeking to protect local civilians from “armed militias”. However, they also appear to be acting independently of both main conflict parties, with heavy clashes occurring on 21-22 June in which the group attacked the SAF in the South Kordofan city of El Dalanj. South Kordofan contains the majority of Sudan’s oil fields, but is also an essential logistics route to West Darfur and South Sudan. Therefore, the SPLM-N seeks to portray itself as a third major force in the ongoing conflict.
- In Khartoum’s tri-city area (comprising Khartoum city, Khartoum North (Bahri) and Omdurman), the SAF has relied on air strikes to both defend its own areas of control and undermine RSF defences. Indeed, almost all reported air strikes have been observed in Khartoum state (see Figure 4, above). Conversely, the RSF has mounted an effective ground campaign backed by artillery, rocket and mortar fire – for example making the airport unusable in the initial days of the current conflict
- Both sides have generally relied on small arms (rifles and machine guns) and, to a lesser extent, crew-served weapons such as mortars and smaller artillery pieces.
- The ready availability of explosive weapons such as grenades and rocket-propelled grenades suggest that they too have been widely used, although evidence for this is more anecdotal than for small arms, artillery and air strikes. The SAF appears to have some international weapons supplied by the United Arab Emirates, while the United States has accused the Russian mercenary Wagner Group of supplying the RSF with missiles.
- Fighters from both sides have been accused of looting and sexual violence, although it is currently far from clear that this is actually a tactic directed/ordered by senior commanders or merely a side effect of the lack of discipline and effective command-and-control mechanisms.

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