



***Sudan in Perspective***

**Issue 3, Monday, April 22, 2024**

## ***Sudan's labyrinth of torture centres***

*Calm Al-Fashir explodes a year after war broke out in Sudan*

*Why mutual aid initiatives are the best approach of financing communal service provision in war and post war Sudan*

*Current status of initiatives to stop the war in Sudan*

# Editorial

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## *Welcome!*

This is the third issue of Atar English magazine from Sudan Facts Center for Journalism. It will be coming to you on Monday after every two weeks.

In this issue, we have chosen for you stories on Sudan a year after war that tore the country apart, killing thousands and displacing millions of Sudanese around the world.

In a careful take, Edward Thomas reads the war with insightful angle, as a torture labyrinth. He read it back to the dawn of torture in Sudan's colonial history, during successive governments, and until the present moment of war, when the torture system seized the state, including its ideological apparatus.

Amar Jamal and Nemat Al-Haj write about the developments in the capital of North Darfur, Al Fashir, which has become

the scene of terrifying events in the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, with the JPA signed armed movements entering the battle, which threatens to exacerbate an already collapsed humanitarian situation.

Muzan Alneel and Muez Ali strongly argue for the need to find an alternative to the current aid model that has proven to be a failure. They lay down preliminary rules for a people-centred democratic alternative, builds on already existing organised resistance structures, just as emergency response rooms did.

Why did efforts to stop the war in Sudan fail? Suliman Baldo writes about the iceberg of the Sudanese problem with the insight of someone who knows not only of the April 15war, but also its roots.

*Atar Team*

## In this issue:

- ◇ Long Read: **The labyrinth** 4 – 21  
Edward Thomas
- ◇ **Calm Al-Fashir explodes a year after war broke out in Sudan** 22 – 29  
Amar Jamal and Nemat AlHaj
- ◇ **Why mutual aid initiatives are the best approach of financing communal service provision in war and post war Sudan** 30 – 35  
Muzan Alneel and Muez Ali
- ◇ **Current status of initiatives to stop the war in Sudan** 36 – 42  
Suliman Baldo

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Editor in Chief:  
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**Muhammad Alsadiq**

Editors:  
**Mahmoud Dagash**  
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[atar@sudanfacts.org](mailto:atar@sudanfacts.org)  
+254115438212



# Atar

**Sudan in Perspective**

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Issue 3, Monday, April 22, 2024

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Long Read

## **The labyrinth**

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Edward Thomas<sup>1</sup>

### **Sudan's labyrinth of torture centres**

**R**evolutionary protestors ousted Sudan's former dictator, Omar al-Bashir, in April 2019. In many cities, crowds gathered around the facilities of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), the government's principal torture agency, to celebrate and protest. In Zalingei, the capital of Central Darfur, seven people were killed on 11 April, when panicked NISS personnel opened fire.<sup>2</sup>

NISS did not survive Sudan's revolution. In July 2019, the committee of generals which deposed Bashir gave NISS a new name: the General Intelligence Service.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the year, the government ended its powers of arrest, detention, and raiding; and disbanded its Operations Agency (*hay'at al-'amaliyat*), which ran the labyrinth of torture centres that stretched across Sudan.<sup>4</sup>

But the labyrinth survived the revolution. Many Operations Agency staff and premises were reassigned to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a huge militia which emerged in 2013 from Darfuran counter-insurgency militias.

Before the adoption of the Rapid Support Forces Act in 2017, the RSF had come under NISS authority.<sup>5</sup> During the 2019 revolution, the RSF's commander Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (universally known by his pet-name Himedti, 'Little Muhammad') deployed its snipers, torturers and rapists against the revolutionaries. Himedti became even more indispensable when he backed the Sudanese Armed Forces' decision to arrest Bashir. He became in effect the vice-president of the country, and he acquired a dozen former NISS torture centres across the capital.

Four years later, in 2023, the RSF launched its audacious campaign to seize the capital, using some of the bases it had inherited from NISS's Operations Agency. The torture system seized the state.

For over three decades, the state has been withering into the shape of its security organs. Over the past three decades, those security organs used the cruelty, secrecy, and impunity of the labyrinth to control much of the country's production and services through their network of companies. But during those decades, as the security organs seized natural resources and controlled labour supplies, the state abandoned responsibility for healthcare and education; and scrapped food, medicine and fuel subsidies.

In the run-up to the current conflict, the state offered little to the Sudanese people. Since the war began, it has not been able to offer anything, apart from coercive power, concentrated in the labyrinth.<sup>6</sup>

### **The growth of the labyrinth**

Torture dates back to the precolonial era. One of the first torture victims named in the historical record is the *faki* Hijazi ibn Abi Zayd. In 1797, during a military and looting campaign in al-Ja-

*In 2023, the RSF launched its audacious campaign to seize the capital, using some of the bases it had inherited from NISS's Operations Agency.*

zirah, the Funj regent Nasir detained him, and tortured him to death by thirst – an abuse reported from Khartoum detention centres last summer, when daytime temperatures averaged around 40°C.<sup>7</sup>

After the nineteenth-century advent of colonialism, a succession of regimes (Turco-Egyptian, Mahdist, British) all used capital and corporal punishment to communicate regime demands to Sudanese society: to pay taxes in coin, to accept monetization and markets, to accept centralised political and religious authority. Punishments were terse, cheap, unambiguous messages to society, and they were theatrically cruel: impalement, flaying, public hanging and flogging.<sup>8</sup>

Colonialists also established prisons which incarcerated runaway slaves, debtors and tax defaulters, as part of the punitive management of the new inequalities which colonialists brought. Ideals of rehabilitation also emerged. In Mahdist times, perhaps in reaction to the cruelty of colonial punishment, some officials saw prisons more as a remedy for social ills than a place of punishment.<sup>9</sup>

When Sudan became independent in 1956, rehabilitation became the aim of the prison services, which organised jazz and acting classes, and voting booths on election days.<sup>10</sup>

But just as the ideals of rehabilitation began to change the aims of prison, a new

torture system emerged. The archives of the Sudanese Communist Party, which spent most of its eight decades of existence in opposition or in hiding, date the practice of torture to Sudan's first dictatorship, under Ibrahim Abboud (1958-1964).<sup>11</sup> When his regime was collapsing, protestors stormed the central prison with the aim of freeing political prisoners inside. A few years later, Sudan's second dictatorship began (under Gaafar Nimeiry, 1969-1985). Nimeiri built up and periodically reorganised new security forces, which eventually came under the name of the State Security Organ (SSO).<sup>12</sup> Nimeiri's security agencies, architects of the labyrinth, set up new, secret detention centres.

In 1985, a popular uprising brought down Nimeiry. The SSO was dissolved, its operatives were dismissed, and they quietly sold their services to the new parliamentary government and to political parties, which were forming their own security personnel.<sup>13</sup> In 1989, a military coup ended the parliamentary regime, and brought to power a coalition of Islamists, security men, financiers and merchants, led by al-Bashir.

New security forces recruited SSO officers and were eventually organised into NISS. A system of secret torture centres, called ghost houses, spread across the country: in the 1990s, Khartoum had at least 20 such centres.<sup>14</sup> NISS provided

technical oversight to new security and police forces, which were answerable to the party.<sup>15</sup> The labyrinth of torture centres had its roots in past wars and dictatorships – but NISS oversaw an unprecedented expansion. This expansion had two main causes: Bashir’s project to remodel society around a divisive version of Islam; and war.

### War and torture

War played a central role in the establishment of the labyrinth. Sudan’s first dictatorship took power in 1958, two years after independence, when escalating instability in its southern periphery was morphing into Sudan’s first civil war. Sudan’s peripheries are vast, diverse, mostly rural, and colonialists recognized quickly that the peripheries, with their huge reserves of labour, and of natural resources, were too remote from markets to respond to the economic forces of supply and demand. Colonialists could not get people in the south to sell them food or work for wages, so they seized them.

In the 1950s, small groups of southern trade unionists and intellectuals began to resist. Harsh suppression of trade union protests led to a garrison mutiny, hangings, instability, and war, which began under Abboud’s dictatorship, and which recalled the horrors of colonial conquest. The dictatorship used the army

and recruited local militias to attack rural people suspected of supporting the insurgency. The security forces often did not have the transport and detention infrastructure to torture in secret, and fought a war of village burnings, public beatings and rapes, and field executions. Villagers were sometimes detained in army garrisons and tortured into confessions – but

torture was routinely conducted using spectacular methods in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to restrict torture to the warzone. In

1955, Aimé Césaire wrote his *Discourse on Colonialism*, which describes the way in which torture boomerangs back from the colony to the metropole, to appear as fascism.<sup>17</sup> About five years later, Abboud brought torture from the southern provinces to the capital.

When the military tortured Mustafa Hassanain, a young Communist, opposition parties denounced ‘government terror’ that was worse than ‘the most destructive era of colonialism.’<sup>18</sup> It was a turning point in Sudanese history. A dictatorship institutionalized two modes of repression: counter-insurgency warfare for the rural warzone, secret torture for the capital.

Each successive dictator refined the two-mode system. It was durable, be-

*War played a central role in the establishment of the labyrinth.*

cause it helped to set rural resistance forces – militias organising insurgencies – at odds with urban resistance forces – coalitions of civil actors organising street protests. It was flexible too. When it was invented, the peoples in the warzones contributed little to Sudan's gross domestic product and trade balance. It was only when they mi-

grated to the centre of the state that their labour could be turned into Sudanese pounds or US dollars.

But in the twenty-first century, the locus of production shifted to extractive enclaves in the south, the west, and the northern deserts, where oil and gold lay. War became the means for controlling those peripheral enclaves, and torture became a means for managing popula-

*Dictatorship institutionalized two modes of repression: counter-insurgency warfare for the rural warzone, secret torture for the capital.*

tions displaced from the warzones to the cities at the heartland of the state. War and torture became the health of the state.

Two factors have contributed to the ending of this two-mode system of repression. First, the revolutionary protests of the last five years: protestors linked their struggle to

those of rural warzones.

'You arrogant racist! We are all Darfur!' one slogan directed at Bashir said.

Second, the war which began in April 2023 has eroded the boundaries between these two modes of repression. Militias from Darfur have attacked the metropolis, using the rural counter-insurgency methods against a population that had grown used to secret torture.

### Torture in Sudanese law

Sudan's criminal law has always prohibited torture, narrowly defining it as an offence against accused persons in custody. Sudan's first penal code, adopted in 1899, prohibited the use of 'hurt' to extort confessions, and subsequent legislation also protected accused persons from torture in legal proceedings.<sup>19</sup> After the 2019 revolution, amendments to the 1991 Criminal Law Act increased the penalties for public officials using torture in legal proceedings. But se-

curity personnel have always enjoyed wide immunity from prosecution, effectively nullifying legal prohibitions on torture – even though constitutional law has included a general, broad prohibition of torture since 1998.<sup>20</sup>



## Torture in international law.

Sudan is a party to most key instruments of international law prohibiting torture.<sup>21</sup>

These instruments have different approaches to the definition of torture. Some broadly prohibit torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, regardless of the purpose or the perpetrator.<sup>22</sup> Others narrowly prohibit harmful acts committed for specific purposes (such as confession or pun-

ishment) or by specific perpetrators (such as people ‘acting in an official capacity’).<sup>23</sup>

International humanitarian law prohibits torture by actors participating in armed conflict.<sup>24</sup> International criminal law governs individual criminal responsibility for torture in specific contexts, such as armed conflict or situations of widespread and systematic abuse.<sup>25</sup>

## Torture in the labyrinth: political activists

Before al-Bashir’s regime, torture centres processed many political activists, mainly leftists and young people. In the 1980s, secondary school students made up the largest group in torture centres, according to Willow Berridge.<sup>26</sup> But when Bashir and the Islamists took power, thousands were detained: not just Communists, but bureaucrats, trade unionists, academics, journalists, or church leaders who resisted the imposition of Bashir’s divisive version of Islam. The personnel of the Islamist security organs had been collecting lists of enemies since their schooldays.<sup>27</sup>

As al-Bashir widened the scope of torture, new human rights movements began. Their documentation often focused on the experiences of political activists.<sup>28</sup> Some of the best reporting of the early 1990s, according to Suliman Baldo,

pioneer of human rights reporting in Sudan, came from within the prison service: prison governors and doctors carried out and leaked physical examinations of ghost house detainees after their transfer to prisons under control of the Interior Ministry: a sign that NISS torturers were transgressing pre-existing torture norms. Al-Bashir’s government, says Baldo, ‘democratized torture’ – using NISS’s labyrinth to carry out systematic ‘preventive’ torture aimed at groups which had not previously been viewed as liable to torture – such as union leaders, professors, and civil servants.<sup>29</sup>

In 2019, al-Bashir was deposed and NISS was dissolved. However, NISS’s torture system was quietly reorganized. The RSF took over detention locations and torture operations in the capital – and despite having no legal authority to arrest or detain people for their opinions or political activities, began arresting democracy activists and others.<sup>30</sup>

In October 2021, the SAF and the RSF, with the backing of smaller and less visible political forces, carried out a putsch against the civilian-led government. SAF Military Intelligence and the RSF immediately began detaining political opponents, and GIS – the successor to NISS – re-acquired its powers of arrest and detention.<sup>31</sup> Mass detentions resumed.<sup>32</sup>

Cabinet ministers were detained alongside activists from the youth-led Resistance Committees – democratic, decentralised neighbourhood associations, whose structure was designed to thwart the repressive capabilities of the labyrinth. The 2021 putsch restored the full powers of the torture system, and people participating in protests against military rule faced a harsh response. When a police brigadier was killed in a January 2022 protest, four teenagers – Mohamed Adam “Tupac”, Mohamed al-Fateh, Ahmed al-Fateh and Musab al-Sharif – were arrested. Over the course of that year, they appeared in court several times with visible marks of torture.<sup>33</sup>

### **Torture in the labyrinth: poor people**

Sudan has an unenviably large literature on the torture of political activists, much of it written during the Bashir regime, which widened the category of ‘torturability’ – the social groups that are liable to torture. But like everywhere else, the most torturable groups in Sudan

are poor people.<sup>34</sup> There are few human rights reports describing the torture the poor. But on the other hand, the poor have Sudanese works of art more truthful than a human rights report.

Salah El Mur painted a series of portraits of incarcerated people: each displaying a prison number, each entitled ‘Innocent Prisoner.’ Their faces are serene or dreamy or full of longing sadness: El Mur’s depiction of a carceral system set up to guard the state from the poor is full of humanity.<sup>35</sup>

Abdel Aziz Baraka Sakin’s novels and stories provide many patient and loving descriptions of the lives of migrant workers enduring the strangeness and cruelty of labour and incarceration. He uses the resources of magical realism to mix up the lives of drunks, lovers, jailers and refugees with the lives of merchants, bureaucrats, Islamist financiers and gender-fluid magi who shapeshift into hyenas or politicians.

Sakin’s characters frequently endure torture.

*The Woman from Kombo Kadis* tells the story of Kaltoum, a war widow who feeds her children by selling (illegal) arak, and is sentenced to be flogged by a judge newly arrived in town. She walks away from the judge, and the fat sergeant who lashed her, to find and breastfeed her infant son.<sup>36</sup>

Sakin's novel *The Jungo: Stakes of the Earth* opens with the prison life of Wad Amuna, a child incarcerated with his mother who gets beaten up. For hashish:

The unmistakable marks of the beating on her face. Wad Amuna had got used to the sight of them. They didn't even make him suffer that much. He often saw his mother with her face all swollen, with oozing wounds on her back. Once he saw Ghala-ba, the sergeant, perving on his mother. When she pushed him off her, he punched her in the face again and again.<sup>37</sup>

Poor people face torture because it is a way to expropriate natural resources from peripheral lands, to force people there to leave their farms and herds and go on hungry, violent migrations, to turn them into low-paid workers and control their labour as landless farmers or urban gig workers. Torture lies at the heart of the Sudanese system, which generates an endless supply of hungry labour by creating a permanent crisis in peripheral areas, where Sudan's reserves of labour and of land, water, forests, and minerals lie.

This system of multi-dimensional violent extraction began before the colonial era, and the first post-colonial government emphatically reiterated it. One month after Sudan's independence, in

*Poor people face torture because it is a way to expropriate natural resources from peripheral lands.*

February 1956, tenant workers in agricultural schemes along the White Nile went on strike. At Jouda, on the present-day border with South Sudan, the police broke the strike, killing 150 strikers. Another 281 strikers were taken to the provincial town of Kosti and held in the armoury of a garrison with no ventilation or water – the Black Hole, as some journalists said. Overnight, 189 were asphyxiated.<sup>38</sup>

The prisoners were mostly men from cattle-pastoralist groups who had made a perilous journey away from the self-sufficiency of their farms and herds to the life of wage labour. Since 1956, security forces have continued to target pastoralists and farmers making similar journeys. During Nimeiri's dictatorship, SSO even set up special facilities on the borders to hold migrant workers.<sup>39</sup> During al-Bashir's dictatorship, labour migration increased as a result of mass climate- and war- displacement. In migrant destinations such as the commercial farmlands of Gedaref and shanties of Khartoum, NISS set up multilingual teams of spies to monitor and intimidate the migrants.

Displacement expanded Sudan's informal rural and urban labour systems. Before al-Bashir, urban workers enjoyed free health and education as well as subsidised food: some enjoyed subsidised housing too.

In urban Sudan, al-Bashir used market ideology and the torture system to shatter the trade unions that had formalized labour rights, and expanded the informal labour force of tea-ladies, child porters, handcart hawkers, day-labourers and helpers. A whole apparatus of public order police and laws were created to sexually harass and torture these tea-ladies, most of whom who have been forced to take up harsh urban livelihoods to feed their families.<sup>40</sup>

The torture system financed security forces too. The state could not easily extract revenue from informal workers, but public order police targeted them for petty daily extortion, backed by the threat of detention and sexual abuse. The police-extortioners used these revenues to supplement salaries – but extortion was backed with the threat of sexual abuse and judicial torture, such as the flogging endured by Sakin's character Kaltoum. Extortion was nourished by the terror seeping out of the labyrinth, into everyday life.

### **Torture and racism**

In Sudan, poverty is often racialized. Poor people are mostly those who live in

or have migrated from the peripheries. Their societies are ecologically, linguistically, culturally, and spiritually diverse. They are also economically different from the commodified, marketized societies at the centre of the state: in the peripheries, most land and some labour is organised communally, and people can still live at the margins of the market.<sup>41</sup>

These differences between marketized and market-marginal Sudan have congealed with all the different expressions of diversity to produce a Sudanese version of racism, which puts merchants (*jallaba*) at the top of Sudan's racial-economic order, and peripheral workers at the bottom. Racism is coded into colourism, with racialized outsiders marked with complexions and features seen as African; and the racialized *jallaba* group marked with complexions and features seen as Arab.

The torture system has always been aimed at the poor – and it uses racism both for targeting and implementing torture. Under al-Bashir, NISS offered job opportunities for speakers of Darfurian languages, and pathways into state bureaucracy for Khartoumers with slavery-lineages, a marker of racialized otherness in Nile Valley villages and cities.

Several political activists – including whose lineages place them near the top of the racial-economic order – noted when they entered the labyrinth that their tor-

turers were racialized outsiders. After enduring torture, Abdel Monim El Gak wrote about the 'racialization of the politics of torture in Sudan' in an open letter to the NISS director:

There were seven individuals who participated in arresting, interrogating and torturing me, two of whom clearly gave the orders and provided the supervision of the others. There were the 'white-collar' officers and both were of Arab northern appearance. The rest of the group, to whom was delegated the sweaty work of beating, torture and terrorizing, carried the characteristics of those from what you would term the 'African' or non-northern parts of Sudan.<sup>42</sup>

The torturers inflicted racial discrimination as well as torture on detainees. Baldo says:

Countless testimonies of released detainees from NISS detention centres recount how the NISS subjected detained youth and students from marginalised areas, particularly Darfur and Nuba mountains, to much more cruel treatment than that they reserved for their peers from Northern Sudan. A standard question to the latter was 'what

makes you mix with these slaves?' The practice was clearly meant to divide the student and youth movement by pushing students and youth from Northern Central Sudan to dissociate themselves from the protests of their peers from marginalised areas.<sup>43</sup>

### The labyrinth and the current war

The war which began in April 2023 pitted the RSF against the SAF, and it has transformed the labyrinth. Shortly after the outbreak of war, most of the country's prisoners were released, as battles were fought around prison walls. Since then, detention became a practice largely confined to the labyrinth, now organized into opposed warring parties with separate torture systems. The warring parties often used the same personnel and locations.

In September 2023, a group called Emergency Lawyers documented the existence of 52 detention centres in Khartoum alone. One basement in a university premises held 700 prisoners, even more than the Black Hole of Kosti.<sup>44</sup> One interviewee requesting anonymity said:

The same people involved in new torture cases on behalf of the RSF are the same people who are now running the detention centres ... They inherit the torture locations and the techniques.

People tortured from both sides, either RSF or SAF, speak about the same experience, as if the torturers are the same people.<sup>45</sup>

The RSF recruited some torturers after the 2019 disbanding of NISS's Operations Agency. But other Operations Agency staff were laid off – some even engaged in street protests against their severance.<sup>46</sup> When the 2023 war began, Operations Agency staff were re-recruited to GIS – both as shock troops and as repression experts. NISS's former staff now work across the two labyrinths: the RSF's and SAF's.

In the RSF prisons, [detainees] get two meals and two or three cups of water. This is better than what is provided by SAF. Most detainees under SAF are allowed one piece of bread and one drink per day.<sup>47</sup>

Each of the two warring parties targeted military personnel affiliated with the opposing side. They also targeted politicians associated with the opposing side: the SAF's Military Intelligence targeted politicians associated with the Forces of Freedom and Change, a coalition of political parties and civil society groups that – despite several fractures –

had led the civilian government of 2019–2021. The RSF targeted Islamists, which it termed the remnants (*fulul*) of the Bashir government – as well as rich people, often assumed to have acquired their riches in the Bashir era.

People who spoke out against abuses were also detained – sometimes they were people with little prior experience of the labyrinth.

Shaykh al-Amin, a Sufi leader who had amassed a following among young, professionals who had tired of the official Islamism of Bashir's dictatorship, used his mosque in the old quarters of Omdurman to provide basic services to local people during the war: he was arrested when he spoke out against a group affiliated with the SAF who fired at his mosque during the battles for Omdurman in February 2024.<sup>48</sup>

*Both RSF and SAF targeted the young activists from the Resistance Committees.*

The torturers identified new victims, but some detainee profiles remained the same: both RSF and SAF targeted the young activists from the Resistance Committees. One lawyer interviewed for this article, who wished to remain anonymous, said that Resistance Committees members in detention were likely to be singled out for the worst treatment.<sup>49</sup>

High-ranking military officers also face the worst treatment. One interviewee said:

Those arrested at checkpoints, or for resisting, or because they are rich, or al-Bashir rich [enriched in the Bashir era], or from north – there is ill treatment, but not really torture. In the same place, [there is a place called] Guantanamo because it hosts the high-ranking staff soldiers captured during fighting, and high-profile members of the former regime. Screams can be heard at some distance.<sup>50</sup>

Targeting of Resistance Committees took place across the country. When RSF and allied groups seized al-Jazirah state, to the south of Khartoum, in December 2023, many people fled south towards Sinja, on the Blue Nile in Sinnar state, where the Emergency Rooms affiliated with the Resistance Committees organised services for displaced people.

On 23 December, Sinja Military Intelligence attacked the Emergency Room tent that was providing 700 meals daily to new arrivals. Volunteers were beaten and abused and arrested on charges of supporting the RSF.<sup>51</sup> Torturers in the labyrinth belong to intelligence services that are scarcely able to monitor the military plans of their enemies – and instead

torture young revolutionaries or qualified doctors trying to provide basic services.<sup>52</sup> Because these young revolutionaries are the alternative to the torture system, they are the real enemies of Sudan's self-delegitimizing armies.

### Torturing the poor

The labyrinth still holds political activists, and it still holds poor people. It may become an even more important place for managing poverty, debt, labour and migration, because of the collapse of the prison, prosecution, and court systems.

Poor people are still racialized. But racism is changing: around the capital, the RSF arrests people who come from northern states and are racialized as *jallaba*, and in Darfur, it arrests people racialized as Africans – the RSF was established to fight insurgencies and seize natural resources from such people. The SAF arrests people it links to the pastoralist groups of western Sudan – the original recruitment pool of the RSF. But it sometimes racializes all Darfurians as Westerners – which means that Darfurians who are racialized as Africans face jeopardy everywhere. The Emergency Lawyers reported that a Darfurian tea-lady was held for 36 days, accused of supporting the RSF.

The war is intensifying polarisation between Sudan's social groups. In January 2024, Muhammad al-Badawi Abu

Gurun, the governor of River Nile state, gave a speech in Shendi – the town nearest al-Bashir’s home village. River Nile state borders Khartoum, has over 700,000 displaced people, and is fully under SAF control.<sup>53</sup> Abu Gurun told the crowd that RSF snipers had entered the town. They were easily identifiable, he said: they were dressed as beggars, handcart hawkers, and women wearing veils in the market. That is to say, people engaged in desperation livelihoods, perhaps displaced from the warzone.

He called on local people and the local authorities to arrest them.

“Nab them, and sift them through a sieve,” he declared, in an unmistakable call to ill-treatment.<sup>54</sup>

A few weeks earlier, SAF Military Intelligence captured a minibus carrying seven RSF soldiers in River Nile state. They were held for six days and tortured.

One detainee said after his release that they were workers in the cattle pens at Hatab, north Khartoum, and they came from the Misseriya cattle-pastoralist group of Kordofan – whose livelihoods and dialects corresponded to the RSF stereotype.<sup>55</sup>

According to Amar Jamal, one of the journalists who reported the story, SAF Military Intelligence targets Darfurians displaced from Khartoum – even those from social groups like Masalit that the RSF is targeting in Darfur.

The governor of Kassala, Muhammad Musa Abd Al-Rahman, was reported in January to have said that he would arrest anyone who ‘looks different.’ In the markets of Port Sudan, displaced informal workers were attacked and arrested by SAF Military Intelligence in December.<sup>56</sup> The SAF’s string of military defeats may push them to look for softer targets. Fear of the RSF is merging with fear of the uprooted poor, and of the peoples of western Sudan. The multi-millionaire RSF commander plays on these class fears, using class-war rhetoric against people with air-conditioners or sports utility vehicles; and selling discounted, looted food in ‘Dagalo markets’ to ‘help the poor.’

### **Torture and sexual oppression**

Sexual violence – primarily directed at women and girls – helps make torture in Sudan a social force, aligning the torture system with misogynistic cultural practices which mar all the world’s societies. The current war is changing patterns of sexual violence, which is long established as a form of torture.

‘The first report of sexual violence came to us at 11am on 15 April 2023,’ said the director of a feminist organization, referring to the day the war broke out. ‘And 80 percent of reports are gang rape.’ The spread of the RSF’s counter-insurgency system across Khartoum means that the repertoire of rural, pub-



lic violence has come to the capital, and has upended the two-mode system of repression that has lasted since the dawn of independence. Many men and boys were killed while trying to resist attacks on female family members, an indication that sexual violence is no longer organized in the labyrinth, but in the public square.

### **They all need torturers now**

Sudan's civil war started as a mobster shoot-out: two ferociously armed groups seeking to destroy each other. In the first days of the war, many Sudanese people hoped that both would lose.

The RSF mobilised local militias in Darfur, often using militarised/criminalised young men from pastoralist groups to attack groups racialized as African in the Darfurian social order – but apart from that, the two sides appeared to maintain a unity of command in a country of a hundred militias.

The unity of command began to fragment as 2023 wore on. The SAF had for years outsourced violence to privatised militias like the Janjaweed, the forerunners of the RSF. Partisan and “tribal” militias were a cheap way of clearing gold and oil enclaves of their population: they stirred up hostility between groups with a claim to resource enclaves and their neighbours, and then manage a long war from the safety of a garrison.<sup>57</sup>

The RSF's April 2023 attack on the capital humiliatingly revealed the limitations of the SAF's privatised, outsourced militia system on which Sudan's extractive industries depended. The SAF was unable to repel the RSF, and was forced to revive the militia policy that had shattered them. Some of today's SAF militias, like the Bara' bin Malik Brigade, and the Popular Resistance (not to be confused with the Resistance Committees) are linked to the partisan militias of al-Bashir's regime. Some like the *mustanfiri*n ('the mobilised') are directly controlled by SAF military intelligence. Some are mobilised by the Native Administration, Sudan's durable but malleable “traditional” rural leaders. Some are little more than community self-defence groups, borrowing or stealing weapons, in order to fend off opportunistic attackers.

At the same time, the RSF's command is fragmenting. Its war in Darfur has been prosecuted by allied militias, drawn from young males from pastoralist constituencies, who have been militarised and criminalised by a lifetime of Darfurian wars. When the RSF attacked al-Jazirah state in December 2023, they relied on al-Kassiba – a force made up of looting groups whose origins lay in the banditry that accompanied Darfur's turn towards war in the 1990s.

This fragmentation is necessary for the continuation of the war. When the

two armies started shooting at each other, many Sudanese wished them both dead. The militias are a way of forcing local societies to engage in a war that culminates the torture system, and gives thousands of young men, and their family and kin, a stake in the victory or defeat of the two big parties. Fragmentation socialises the war.

This war also seems to be marking an end to the two-mode system of repression which for decades has thwarted the search for peace, freedom and justice for which Sudan's people have sacrificed so much.

The RSF's attacks on Khartoum and al-Jazirah are shocking because they have decisively changed two-mode repression.

Until last year, the torture labyrinth was the main mode of urban repression, and the militia raid was the main mode of rural repression.

The RSF has brought the militias' mode of repression into the capital: looting, arson, field executions and spectacularly cruel rape and torture.

As new militias extend their control over populations and territories, each will need their own local mechanisms of coercion – after all, they have almost no incentives to offer. They can use the

*The RSF's attacks on Khartoum and al-Jazirah are shocking because they have decisively changed two-mode repression.*

raiding systems of the RSF. But they are also likely to develop local, neighbourhood labyrinths of torture, and fill them with people profiled as torturable – racialized outsiders, poor people, women. Abu Gurn's January speech was prophetic.

A few days before he threatened to 'sieve' the hawkers and beggars on the streets of Shendi, he banned Resistance Committees and tried to replace them with 'service committees' made up of military veterans and mobilizers.<sup>58</sup>

The end of Sudan's resilient and resourceful dual-mode system of repression will be painful and cruel. But despite all the horror, Sudanese people have maintained the possibility of democratic politics, exemplified by the Resistance Committees. Their ability to resist Sudan's torture systems will play an important role in Sudan's path away from catastrophe. And they are resisting Sudan's torture systems. They still believe a better Sudan is possible. They are right.

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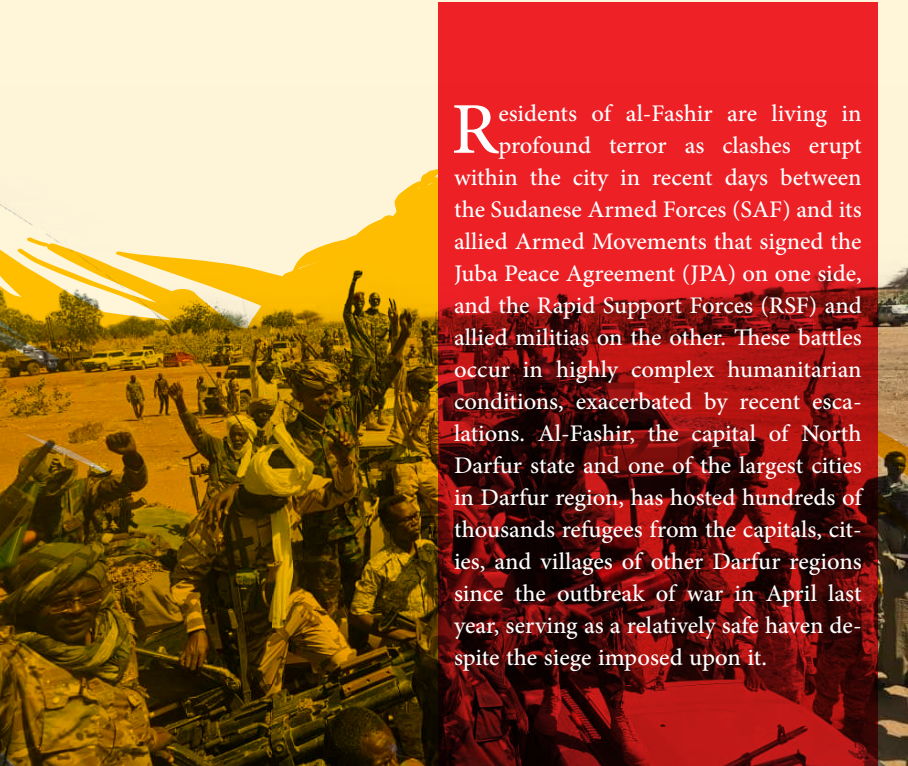
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# **Calm Al-Fashir explodes** *a year after war broke out* *in Sudan*

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**Amar Jamal and Nemat Al-Haj**

A photograph of a conflict zone in Sudan, showing people on a vehicle and in the background, with a red overlay on the right side. The scene is dusty and appears to be a checkpoint or a point of movement. Some individuals are holding rifles, and there are vehicles in the background. The red overlay on the right side of the image contains the main text of the article.

Residents of al-Fashir are living in profound terror as clashes erupt within the city in recent days between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and its allied Armed Movements that signed the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) on one side, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militias on the other. These battles occur in highly complex humanitarian conditions, exacerbated by recent escalations. Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur state and one of the largest cities in Darfur region, has hosted hundreds of thousands refugees from the capitals, cities, and villages of other Darfur regions since the outbreak of war in April last year, serving as a relatively safe haven despite the siege imposed upon it.

The months of October and November witnessed a transformation in the extent and nature of warfare, as the RSF seized control of military garrisons belonging to SAF in four out of five geographically-defined state's capital within the Darfur region: Nyala in South Darfur, Zalingei in Central Darfur, Al Junayna-ha in West Darfur, and Al-Daein in East Darfur. The states were captured either through small-scale skirmishes or swift withdrawals of SAF stationed in these outposts. Following this, RSF announced that their next target would be the regional capital, al-Fashir.

On Thursday, November 16, 2023, JPA's signed armed movements declared their departure from a neutral stance and alignment with the SAF in its war against the RSF. This declaration was made at a press conference held in the administrative capital, Port Sudan, which was attended by Minni Arko Minnawi, the leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement and governor of Darfur, Gebreil Ibrahim, the head of the Justice and

*Al-Fashir was not spared the war, even though the declared intention of the involved parties was to maintain its relative safety.*

Equality Movement (JEM) and Minister of Finance, Mustafa Tambour, the leader of one of the factions of the Sudan Liberation Movement, and Salah Al-Wali representing the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) led by Al-Tahir Hajar, a former member of the Sovereignty Council.

Al-Fashir was not spared the war, even though the declared intention of the involved parties was to maintain its relative safety. Shortly after the outbreak of fighting in Khartoum last year, the city's inhabitants were shaken by the sounds of gunfire and artillery in the middle of the first night of the war.

According to the JPA, a joint security force was to be established in Darfur comprising 12,000 individuals: 6,000 from the SAF, General Intelligence, and RSF, and 6,000 from the signatory factions of the JPA, including the JEM-Gebreil, the SLM-Minnawi, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Transitional Council (SLM/TC) led by Al-Hadi Idris, the Gathering of

Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) led by Tahir Hajar, and the Sudanese Alliance led by the late Khamis Abkar. Due to the hesitancy of SAF, joint training did not commence until January 2022 and was not sustained. In September 2022, Nyala saw the graduation of 2,000 members of the JPA signed movements as part of the joint forces.

## City division and escalation of conflict

The headquarters of the Sixth Infantry Division of SAF is located in the eastern part of al-Fashir, with gates opening towards the west and south leading to the presidential residence where the governor of the state is based, and to its east are the government secretariat and the branch of the Central Bank.

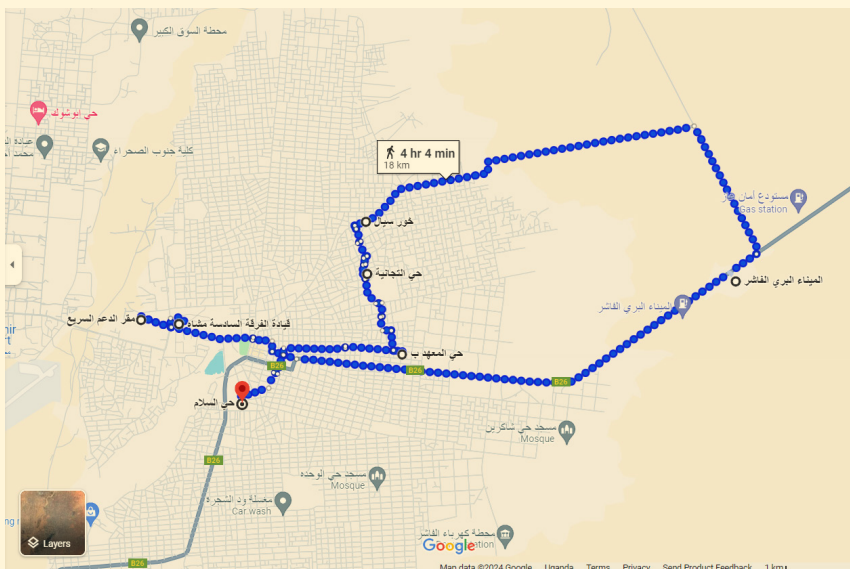
The RSF command is situated west of the SAF headquarters, separated by open sport squares. SAF managed to seize control of the RSF headquarters after two days of fighting last year, and the later settled in the eastern neighbourhoods of the city.

Following an intervention by a committee composed of city dignitaries and

mosque imams to halt the gunfire between the two sides, the committee divided the city into two parts, as follows:

The western part, which includes SAF outposts, all government institutions, the presidential residence, and the Central Bank of Sudan, under the command of SAF.

The eastern part of the city and its neighbourhoods, the city's stock exchange, the land port (central bus station), the main power station, and the city's gateway to the Western Salvation Road linking Darfur to the capital, passing through the territories of Greater Kordofan and the cities of White Nile, under the control of the RSF.





This distribution did not satisfy the city's inhabitants, especially those in the eastern and northeastern neighbourhoods including Al-Nakhil, Khour Sial, Al-Tadamun, Al-Ma'ahad, Al-Tijania, Al-Thawra North, and Al-Jabal, who were forced to leave their homes and mostly refugees to the southern part of the city, especially the Al-Salam neighbourhood.

The central part of the city, where the major market is located, remained under the protection of the police as stipulated in the reconciliation agreement, which has been absent since the beginning of the war in April 2023.

Following their declaration of non-neutrality, the Joint Forces of JPA signed movements became responsible for securing the market and the buildings of the UN, NGOs, banks, and government.

Al-Fashir has not been secure for the past few months due to small skirmishes and rumours, instilling fear and siege upon the city.

In early April of this year, dozens were killed in communal violence in villages west of al-Fashir, resulting in the burning of villages in Baraka, Al-Janjounat (three villages), Derma, Azabani, Karro, Tekila, Ammar Jadid, Donki Shata, and others, forcing their inhabitants to flee to villages such as Mogran, Um Hijeeleeg, and Shagra, located west of al-Fashir.

According to the Human Research [Laboratory](#) at Yale University's School of Public Health, analysis of remote sensing and open-source data revealed that at least nine communities were destroyed due to deliberate arson attacks between March 31 and April 15, 2024, in western al-Fashir.

On Thursday, April 11 this year, the Joint Forces accused the RSF of attacking villages and killing civilian inhabitants, declaring, in a press [statement](#) following their leadership meeting in al-Fashir that neutrality no longer existed, and they would fight alongside the SAF against the RSF militias, no longer assuming a defensive position. This was followed by the first direct clashes between the JPA-signed armed movements and the RSF, a full year after the outbreak of war. The RSF denied the accusations saying the attacking groups were rogue elements.

Following this, SAF aircraft began bombarding RSF positions in the eastern and northeastern neighbourhoods of the city, which had been vacant since November, last year following a call by former governor, Nimr Abdul-Rahman, for the SAF and RSF to cease fighting and allow civilians to evacuate to safe locations within the city.

Military operations expanded, and on April 14, the RSF managed to seize control of the city of Malleet, about 90

km north of al-Fashir. In a post on RSF [X](#) platform page, the commander of the RSF that attacked Malleet, Major General Ali Yagoub, said his forces inflicted losses on the Joint Forces in the city, under the command of Abdullah Jena, the supreme leader of GSLF, and seized control of the former UNAMID headquarters, SAF command, customs, and police.

On the same day, clashes erupted in al-Fashir between the RSF and SAF, accompanied by the joint forces consisting of the SLM- Minnawi, the JEM-Gebreil, and factions that defected from the SLM/TC and GSLF.

These battles resulted in six deaths and 61 injuries, including a doctor injured while performing her duties, according to a [statement](#) from the Preliminary Committee of the Sudan Doctors Union.

According to an eyewitness, “al-Fashir wakes up to the sounds of warplanes targeting RSF positions east of the city and goes to sleep to the sounds of artillery fire until the early hours of the last day, only for the bombing by warplanes to resume.”

According to a [statement](#) by the Emergency Lawyers on April 16 of this year, 25 civilians were killed while injuries exceeded a hundred due to clashes in villages west of al-Fashir and within the residential neighbourhoods of the city, as a result of indiscriminate shell exchange

*According to an eyewitness, «al-Fashir wakes up to the sounds of warplanes targeting RSF positions east of the city and goes to sleep to the sounds of artillery fire.*

es and random aerial bombardment, resulting in widespread displacement of residents from villages west of the city to safer places within the capital of North Darfur.

“The SAF’s shelling originates from its positions at the General Command inside the city, the Air Defense Headquarters, and the major market, while the RSF launch ground anti-aircraft missiles from their positions in the east of the city,” Taha told Atar.

The shelling led to the displacement of residents from neighbourhoods under fire from the SAF’s artillery and air force in the east and northeast of the city, which are under the control of the RSF. These neighbourhoods include Al-Masanea, Al-Tadamun, Al-Neel, Al-Thawra North, Al-Wihda East, Al-Jabal, Deim Silik, Al-Ma’ahad, and Al-Wifaq.

As for al-Tijania neighbourhood, it was invaded by the RSF on the morning of April 16, with their snipers targeting anyone passing by.

In mid-November, Minawi and Gebreil announced from Port Sudan the end of their neutral stance and their support for SAF in the war. Despite Salah Al-Wali's participation representing GSLF in the Port Sudan press release, the official spokesperson for the GSLF, Fahti Osman, said Al-Wali's participation was unauthorised and not mandated by the leadership. He declared that their position would remain committed to neutrality and seeking to stop the war through negotiation, the same stance announced by the SLM/TC. Three days later, Al-Burhan issued a constitutional decree dismissing Hajar from his position as a member of the Sovereignty Council, preceded by a similar decree about two weeks earlier to dismiss Idris. Both men rejected the move. Unlike Minawi and Gebreil, both men had declared their rejection of the military coup in October 2021 against Hamdok's transitional government and their alignment with the civilian faction of the Constitutional Document.

Hajar and Idris movements suffered divisions among their civilian and military leaderships due to disagreements over involvement in the war. On March 26 of last year, SLM/TC [announced](#) its withdrawal from the Joint Forces due to the failure to

return groups affiliated with it to the Joint Forces. These groups sought refuge with the Joint Force along with military and administrative vehicles sheltered with the Sixth Infantry Division as mobilised by Captain Abdeen Musa. The second reason cited was administrative procedures aimed at internal organisations within its forces. Later, Hajar, issued a [similar statement](#) withdrawing from the Joint Forces, assigning to the General Command of the GSLF to immediately commence the formation of a new joint force with all movements that adopt neutrality, with the same principles declared by the JPA.

According to Mohammed Taha, an academic familiar with Darfur affairs and former political secretary of the JEM in North Darfur, the splinter force from the SLM/TC is led by Salah Rassas and Osman Abdel Jabbar, while General Abdullah Jena, the overall commander of GSLF, leads his forces engaged in combat.

Taha, however, does not see either of the neutral forces, Idris and Hajar, capable of engaging in battles against the Joint Force and SAF due to the former's lack of military power and the military and civilian leadership's alignment of the latter to the Joint Force that present in al-Fashir.

Everyone headed south, where the southern neighbourhoods witnessed a population surge in homes and shelter centers. The latter suffers from a lack of water, the spread of summer diseases, a shortage of medication, and the closure of roads through which supplies and medicines are transported, coupled with a complete blackout that had not been experienced since the outbreak of the war last year.

### Siege and Economic Impact

According to Taha, al-Fashir is currently besieged from three directions, leaving its residents only the southern exit towards Dar Al-salam locality in North Darfur state. The recent events caused fuel prices to soar in al-Fashir and throughout North Darfur state after fuel trucks coming from Libya and Chad were halted, and the SAF and the Joint Force prevented the movement of trucks loaded with goods and fuel to al-Fashir from the border triangle connecting Sudan, Egypt, and Libya.

Fuel prices in the city doubled, along with an increase in internal transportation fares. The prices of goods also increased, evident in the weekly Salam market, which used to be bustling with sellers and merchandise coming from Libya and vegetables from

the recently burned farms of the villages west of al-Fashir, but turned into an empty market.

“If the situation continues for a week, the markets will be devoid of the goods from the isolated north and the burned and displaced west,” a resident told Atar last week.

“As for the main market, it has turned into a ghost town where shops open for only hours or minutes before the random gunshots signal closure. The livestock market located at the southernmost part of the city is crowded with people coming from other markets, turning into a congested area with an obvious economic downturn.

Meanwhile, residents of the northern part of the city in Naivasha and Abu Shouk camps have not been spared from random gunfire and shells that claimed the lives of innocent civilians, turning their market into a place oscillating between opening and closing.”

“There is currently only one functioning hospital in the city, which is the Southern al-Fashir Hospital,” said a volunteer in al-Fashir’s Emergency Rooms.

*“If the situation continues for a week, the markets will be devoid of the goods from the isolated north and the burned and displaced west,” a resident told Atar last week.*


“The Southern Hospital is the only referral hospital that has been operating since the outbreak of the war last year. With the outbreak of clashes earlier this week, the hospital received large numbers of injured citizens due to shelling. But the hospital lacks even basic medical supplies and other first aid kits after the departure of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) from the surgery department last week. All we can do is announce on our social media pages our need for volunteer staff and blood donations, and thankfully, we found goodness spread among the daughters and sons of al-Fashir,” the volunteer told Atar.

*«There is currently only one functioning hospital in the city, which is the Southern al-Fashir Hospital,» said a volunteer in al-Fashir's Emergency Rooms.*

*First published in Arabic, Atar weekly magazine, 26<sup>th</sup> issue, April 18, 2024.*

## *Why **mutual aid initiatives** are the best approach of financing communal service provision in war and post war Sudan*

Muzan Alneel and Muez Ali



**D**uring the first year of the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, most of the Sudanese population have survived and continue to survive on the support of mutual aid structures involved in operating community kitchens, health facilities, and shelters.

The two warring parties have relieved themselves of any responsibility towards providing social services, and international non-government organisations lost their access to conflict regions across the country.

Today, most services are provided under community organised structures, the product of Sudan's recent history of organised resistance.

Emergency rooms, community kitchens and other mutual aid initiatives are saving lives and ensuring basic service provision with limited and depleting resources. The success and prevalence of these initiatives, their dependence on a constant flow of aid and their role in sustaining livelihoods during the conflict, requires a rethink of dominant, mainstream aid structures.

Within hours from the start of hostilities between the RSF and the SAF in Khartoum, neighborhood WhatsApp groups were active in providing information on high-risk areas and updates on the status of the city. A number of these groups were previously utilised by Resistance Committees (RCs) or were built on their operating model.

New groups were created at the block level<sup>1</sup> to better direct efforts to provide assistance for basic needs. The new groups provided information on which

*Building on existing organised resistance structures, emergency rooms – a new operational structure – announced themselves within days as central neighbourhood units taking on the responsibility of operating health care facilities.*

pharmacy was open, who had the capacity to perform basic health care and nursing services, which house can provide water for those affected by water cuts and which routes were safer to move around and between neighbourhoods.

Building on existing organised resistance structures, emergency rooms – a new operational structure – announced themselves within days as central neighbourhood units taking on the responsibility of operating health care facilities. They soon broadened their focus to other infrastructural needs.

Umbada Alsabeel Emergency Room, for instance, announced itself on April 20 through the neighborhood's association Facebook page and called on the area's residents to donate medications and first aid requirements. The emergency room

later announced a joint effort with similar organisations within the larger Umbada area to operate the Umbada Hospital “after the withdrawal of the central state apparatus from public services and the use of its capabilities in the war of power and wealth.”

The Old Omdurman Emergency Room issued a call for all health workers in its area on April 22, and on the following day announced that the Wad-Nubawi health centre was open and ready to serve the neighborhood.

By May, the same emergency room was coordinating repair jobs with engineers to attend to “cables damaged by air strikes”.

These are a few examples of the agility and effectiveness shown by mutual aid structures during the war in Sudan. And as the conflict expanded to other regions and displacement spread across the country, so did the communal efforts to provide basic needs and social services. Community kitchens were created to address the growing food crisis and provide for tens of thousands of families within and outside conflict areas.

Community kitchens, like other communal service provision efforts, operate with limited resources and rely on various social media platforms to raise funds to cover urgent needs and deficits.

There is an increase in the frequency of Facebook posts by shelters, clinics and kitchens sounding the alarm about depleting resources.

The irregularity of funds poses serious challenges to the sustainability of these operational structures.

Indeed, it is an impressive achievement that communal aid structures have managed to sustain their operations for this long primarily relying on donations, mostly from Sudanese diaspora.

In the current situation, international NGOs are unable to provide services commensurate with their budgets where they are most needed.

At the same time, communally managed mutual aid structures are successfully servicing the public despite their limited resources.

*It is an impressive achievement that communal aid structures have managed to sustain their operations for this long primarily relying on donations, mostly from Sudanese diaspora.*



Clearly, a more efficient approach would be directing more international aid funding to successful communal structures.

However, redirection of funds alone, without a critical reassessment of current procedures and dynamics, can further weaken social service provision on the ground.

International funding has proven unreliable, as evident in the low percentage of funding for the humanitarian response in Sudan. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [reports](#) that in 2023, only 49.5 per cent of the \$2.57 billion requirements were met.

In [2024](#), only 6.2 per cent of total funding requirements has been met so far.

Aid budget allocations by governments and multilateral organisations are impacted by various geopolitical factors, which makes them an unreliable and unsustainable main source of funding. In addition, and even in the case of availability of funds, a lot of aid comes with well documented challenges.

For example, internationally funded projects and programmes require, and operate through, over-paid and inadequately staffed organisations, creating unnecessary overhead costs. This signifi-

*A more efficient approach would be directing more international aid funding to successful communal structures.*

cantly reduces the proportion of funds that effect change and improve the material conditions of beneficiaries.

In Sudan, this approach has created a strata of fund dependent employees with inflated influence in political and humanitarian decision making. The politicisation of aid by the warring parties and the incumbent government has also [hindered](#) the ability of international NGOs to deliver services efficiently to beneficiaries.

There is an urgent need to rethink and redesign funding structures within the humanitarian response system.

The response to the conflict in Sudan must aim to reverse the unsustainable and elitist nature of international funding. And robust monitoring tools must be deployed in parallel to ensure the damag-

*There is an urgent need to rethink and redesign funding structures within the humanitarian response system.*

es caused do not outweigh the benefits in the short and long term.

One alternative is a democratic, people-centered approach, which has thus far proved far more effective in service delivery. The success of communal service provision structures has already [convinced](#) some aid agencies of the need to rethink existing humanitarian system.

Models of financing communally operated service provision in Sudan must be designed to, first, leverage the positive aspects of efficient people-centred delivery and build on existing social structures and promote independent decision making by those most impacted, second, build deterrence mechanisms to minimise risks of corruption and co-optation by systems with divergent agendas, such as the international community and state governments, and, third, support parallel efforts that aim to establish democratic governance structures for sustainable service provision for local communities during and after war.

These new models, and their design and development process, should also adhere to a people-centred philosophy, already reflected in the operations of the communal aid structures. And must adopt scientific methods by which the theoretical foundations and research is informed, and takes place along efforts on the ground.

*The success of communal service provision structures has already convinced some aid agencies of the need to rethink existing humanitarian system.*

While a working model is a longer-term project that cannot be reflected in a single article, or by a narrow group of researchers and practitioners, some main principles can be adopted from the lessons learnt from our recent history.

These principles include:

- Democratisation and grass-rooting: The way in which RCs, ERs and neighbourhood groups were most aware of the social needs of their communities and were most capable of attending to them during a time of crisis shows that entrenching service provision in the community increases efficiency. This requires structures that involve communities in decision making, operating and monitoring service provision activities. Neighbourhood councils are good examples of such structures. Representative, democratic operations also ensure community ownership of services, which, in the long-run, minimises the risk of successful initiatives falling under the control of entities with divergent in-

terests, such as totalitarian authorities or external actors.

- Diversification and sustainability of funds: In the past couple of years, community-based organisations have relied on several sources to fund their activities, including the Sudanese diaspora, local fund-raising initiatives, associations (such as those of farmers and workers), and direct communication with donors. However, certain measures can be instituted to minimise the impact of the volatility of the philanthropic donation model. For example, establishing systems of small recurring fees from productive entities or providing opportunities of investment in local projects to fund service provision can smoothen funding flows.
- Leverage existing systems to build a new one: communal management of service provision during the conflict built on existing structures of organised resistance and the social values of collaboration. In addition, the current communal management model successfully utilised existing state systems. For example, a Joint Emergency Room coordinated with state-level governments to organise oxygen delivery to hospitals in Khartoum from neighbouring states and to transfer patients outside of Khartoum via innovative ambulance management

operations as early as June 2023. In fact, these services were limited, and in some areas almost non-existent, prior to the war, which proves the efficiency and potential of the communal model relative to ones that came before it. Therefore, it is important that such collaborations are well documented and assessed on their results to avoid contamination by the flaws of the old system and state capture by narrow interests, but to advance the creation of new ones.

A more detailed model with governance structures, operational guidelines and best practices requires close collaboration between practitioners and researchers, guided by the principles of sustainability and a people-centred philosophy. While we argue that the current aid dependency of the communal management model is financially unsustainable, within its operational structure, there are opportunities of a much more sustainable long-term vision that would benefit those affected by the conflict, during, and after the war.


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#### Note

- 1 Khartoum state is made up of different localities, each locality is made up of areas, and each area is further divided up into blocks. This is true for residential, commercial and industrial areas.

# **Current status of initiatives to stop the war in Sudan**

**Suliman Baldo**



**A**s regional and sub-regional initiatives to end the war in Sudan wobble, it is becoming clear that without urgent international intervention, Sudan's ongoing war is on a trajectory toward complete state collapse and the permanent displacement of an entire society.

**Suliman Baldo** examines the current initiatives to STOP THE WAR and volunteers what needs to be done.

Having entered its second year on April 15, 2024, the devastating war in Sudan has proven difficult to resolve despite multiple diplomatic initiatives. The lack of determined and forceful diplomatic efforts is bewildering.

The war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has created one of the largest humanitarian and human rights crises in the world, with thousands of civilians killed, nine million forced into displacement and exile, and nearly 25 million threatened by impending famine and starvation.

This calamity notwithstanding, the international and regional diplomatic community has failed to act with the required sense of urgency and determination to end this slow motion collapse of a nation and uprooting of its people.

A key challenge explaining, but not justifying, the world's inattention to the war in Sudan is its focus on crises in Ukraine and Gaza while neglecting protracted complex conflicts in Sudan, the Eastern Congo, and the Horn and Sahel regions of Africa.

The disparity reveals a lack of the international community's political will for a more just allocation of its investments in peacemaking. When that diplomatic lethargy extends to the dramatic dispar-

ity in contributions to humanitarian operations, the dual failures should shame the world.

The primary culprits in the lack of political will to end the conflict are, however, the SAF's and the RSF's commanders, because of their repeated failures to abide by several commitments they made to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access. Instead, the warring parties laid Sudan to waste by destroying its infrastructure, attacking civilians, and using denial of access to humanitarian aid as a weapon of war.

### **The Paris Conference**

The approach of the first anniversary of the conflict on April 15 infused a sense of urgency to push for an end to the war and the tackling of its humanitarian consequences.

Held symbolically on April 15, the Paris Ministerial Conference rode on this wave to raise more significant pledges from the donor community for the [Joint Appeal](#) for \$4.1 billion that the UN launched on February 7 and was funded at a meager 6 per cent of the funds two months later.

Governments and organisations attending the conference pledged another \$2 billion, significantly increasing the resources available for humanitarian operations to ward off famine and starvation.

Yet, the funds raised remain insufficient and more needs to be done to contain the impending humanitarian disaster.

At the political level, the outcomes of the ministerial meeting were, at best, ambiguous. The participating governments and agencies agreed only on the need to coordinate pre-existing mediation initiatives and condemned widespread violations committed by the belligerents. International humanitarian agencies were frustrated that the conference organisers did not invite representatives of the SAF and RSF and armed movements sharing territorial control on the ground to press them into concrete engagements for the cross-border and cross-line facilitation of humanitarian operations. This left participating international NGOs in the humanitarian track concerned that their participation would add to their difficulties when demanding to work on both sides of frontlines.

Recognising that lack of consensus among civilian stakeholders constituted a serious challenge to peacemaking efforts, the Paris conference provided a venue, parallel to the humanitarian conference, for some 50 Sudanese influencers representing a broad spectrum of the Sudanese political landscape to meet and discuss the situation in their beleaguered country. These included leaders of the Coordination of Civilian Democratic Forces (known by its Arabic acronym as Taqad-

dum), the most prominent pro-democracy and anti-war coalition, alongside participants linked to political groupings opposed to the group and independent Islamist thinkers and writers. The meeting represented the first in which such a diverse group could participate to iron out their differences and agree on a consensus to end the war. While the brevity of the event did not allow such a consensus to emerge, the event represented a breakthrough in the words of several participants.

### **Jeddah and Manama Talks**

As a result of the belligerents' repeated violations of the agreements they committed to, the ceasefire talks launched in May 2023 by the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Jeddah, with the narrow aim of achieving a sustainable humanitarian ceasefire, were adjourned indefinitely in early December. However, the appointment of US Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriolo reinvigorated US and KSA diplomatic efforts, leading to a call to reconvene the talks in May 2024.

Apparently, in preparation for the revival of the ceasefire talks, the US-KSA facilitators took part in three undisclosed meetings held in the capital of Bahrain, Manama, in January involving Gen. Shamseldin Kabbashi, the deputy SAF commander, and Gen. Abdelrahim Dagalo, deputy RSF commander. Repre-

representatives from Egypt and the UAE, supporters of SAF and RSF respectively, also attended. These discussions led to drafting of a document titled “Principles and Foundations For A Lasting Solution for the Sudanese Crisis,” which emphasised maintaining Sudan’s unity, modernising the military, transitioning to democratic civilian governance, promoting equal citizenship, and addressing longstanding conflicts post-independence.

Additionally, the declaration called for dismantling remnants of the Bashir regime and handing over three ICC indictees - Omer Al-Bashir, the former President, along with his Defense and Interior ministers, Generals Abdelrahim M. Hussein and Ahmed Haroun - who coordinated the genocidal campaign in Darfur from 2003 to 2005.

Another significant challenge for peacemaking efforts is the sheer complexity of Sudan’s multilayered conflict, with the SAF’s decisions beholden to its Islamist allies and the SAF and the RSF drawing on deep-rooted political and ethnic tensions to reinforce their military and political positions.

As a result, following the conclusion of the last encounter in Manama in late January, Gen. Kabashi reneged on the engagements he made there shortly after his return to Sudan, reportedly under the influence of Islamist hardliners and stal-

warts of the Bashir regime who used their influence within the SAF high command to push for the reversal of the agreements that Kabashi initialed on SAF’s behalf. The US and Saudi insistence on the SAF and RSF sending delegations mandated to sign on their behalf, requiring the same level of representation as in the Manama talks, delayed the resumption of the talks from April 18 to an unspecified date in May.

### **African and other mediation initiatives**

The principle of subsidiarity observed by the international community in addressing conflicts threatening regional and global peace and stability requires sub regional and regional organisations to step in first to resolve disputes in their backyards. In the case of Sudan, the responsibility falls on the sub-regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union. In the early phases of the conflict, the AU de facto curtailed the UN from intervening in the crisis in Sudan, claiming that it should be in the lead.

The AU and the IGAD issued separate roadmaps to resolve the conflict in May and June 2023, respectively, preparing themselves to lead the political phase of peacemaking. Conceived as an “emergency diplomacy” intervention to get the SAF and RSF to agree to a ceasefire and humanitarian access, the Jeddah process initially sidelined the AU and the IGAD.

By the end of 2023, the IGAD positioned itself to lead in achieving a ceasefire and guiding the civilian-led political transition.

However, several challenges threatened to undermine IGAD's efforts and the AU's role in facilitating and supporting it in these endeavours. SAF commander Lt.-Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan agreed, during an IGAD summit in December, to meet with RSF commander Lt.-Gen. Hemeti within two weeks, to negotiate an unconditional ceasefire and kickstart the political transition. Hemeti also agreed to the same terms.

However, Sudan's foreign ministry, in which Islamists hold a strong sway, criticised the final communique of the IGAD summit and rejected it. Another challenge for IGAD was the official reception extended to Hemeti by several IGAD's heads of state and government during a regional tour in mid-December. This implicit diplomatic recognition irked the SAF and made it less likely for Burhan to agree to meet with Hemeti under IGAD's auspices. Additionally, during a meeting with Djiboutian President Ismail Guelleh on January 4, the Taqaddum civilian pro-democracy faction sought inclusion in the Burhan-Hemeti meeting, aiming to establish legitimacy as the representative of the Sudanese people in the peace process. Islamist supporters of the SAF's war efforts would reject Taqaddum and other

anti-war forces in the representation of civilians in the political process.

Since then, Burhan and other SAF commanders repeatedly affirmed their rejection of any negotiations with the RSF until the latter surrenders territories under its control to the "legitimate" government authority. For its part, the RSF is unlikely to cede any control of territories it military gained without political concessions from the SAF.

Russia's and Turkey's offers of mediation and Egypt's Sudan Neighbours initiative, launched in July, failed to generate traction because the RSF declined to cooperate with any.

### **United Nations roles**

These developments reduced the UN to an observer's seat in ongoing peace efforts, a position into which the SAF authorities forced the UN when Sudan unilaterally terminated the UN political mission in December. The UN Secretary-General's appointment of a personal envoy, with a limited mandate of reporting to his office rather than to the UN Security Council, may, on the other hand, offer the Personal Envoy and his boss more freedom to interact with and officially play a role in coordinating ongoing peace efforts. Meanwhile, the UN and its humanitarian agencies continue to play leading roles in coordinating and implementing the large-scale humanitarian



interventions needed to provide a lifeline to the millions of war victims in Sudan.

### **Factors likely to reinvigorate peace efforts**

The ongoing conflict has been draining the considerable financial resources amassed by the warring factions over the decades, diminishing their capacity to sustain their military campaigns.

Adding to the economic pressures on the SAF and RSF is the growing set of international financial and individual sanctions that the US, the EU, and the UK have imposed on their largest corporations and their respective leaders for pushing forward with the war or overseeing egregious violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws.

This weakness could compel both sides to come to the negotiation table. Countering this logic, as the conflict persists, there's a growing likelihood that regional powers, such as the UAE's support for the RSF and suspected Egyptian air assistance to the SAF, will intensify the backing of their respective allies, offsetting the depletion of their resources. Only under significant and coordinated economic pressures targeting the wealth accumulated during the three decades of kleptocratic rule under ousted President Omer al-Bashir, would the parties consider relinquishing control of the post-war political landscape to civilians. The

international community should apply similar maximum pressures on regional powers already involved in supporting their preferred factions in Sudan's devastating conflict.

Without intervention, Sudan's ongoing war is on a trajectory toward complete state collapse and the permanent displacement of an entire society whose democratic aspirations were stifled by the ruthless military entities now vying for dominance over the nation's future. The RSF and the SAF have proven unfit for such a role. Instead, the international community should actively back the peaceful movement for democracy and a state governed by justice and the rule of law, led by civic forces, and ensure its success.

The pressing need for increased international intervention to halt the Sudanese conflict should stem from the evident reality that besides displacing millions of Sudanese into exile and famine-stricken conditions, the war also risks significantly jeopardising the stability and security of neighbouring nations.

War in Sudan recently led to the interruption of South Sudanese oil exports, the primary source of revenue for the impoverished and fragile state, risking to throw it into further turmoil and violence.

Fighters from Chad and Niger join the RSF ranks by ethnic solidarity and by making quick wealth from looted items from RSF-held areas. Their return could trigger serious destabilisation and conflicts in their original countries, similar to what happened when Tawareq fighters of the Ghadaffi Brigades returned to

Mali from Libya. Increasing incidents of cross-border violence are threatening the transition in Chad. We hope that acknowledging these regional risks will finally resonate within the international community, prompting more vigorous peacemaking efforts than we have seen.



***Sudan in Perspective***

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