

Roots of the War: Who Is Fighting in Sudan?



The history of armed movements in Sudan shows that their aim has been to seize wealth and share power, believing that the gun is the most effective means to achieve that without hesitation to resort to criminal methods, up to mercenary behavior, to obtain what they seek.

The rebellion in Sudan began in Torit in 1955 a few months before independence

from British colonial rule and was confined to the South. It gained international resonance after the founding of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 1983 under the former army officer John Garang de Mabior, who later became a symbol of liberation. Despite the secession of the South in 2011, Garang remains widely respected in Sudan.

While the Sudanese government negotiated with the SPLM to end the protracted 22-year civil war, a rebellion erupted in the western region of Darfur. In 2003, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) launched an attack on the city of El Fasher a turning point in Sudan's history.

This report traces the emergence of armed groups and their evolution up to their participation in the current conflict, with a focus on Darfur, as the region most affected by militant activity from early rebellions and disputed areas, through the peace phase and the dominance of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in much of the region.

For editorial clarity, we divide the report into three parts. The first covers how the armed groups were formed and financed. The second delves into their mercenary activities in Libya, their reorganization, the peace agreements, and their return from neighboring countries into Sudan. The third part focuses exclusively on the current war.

How Were Darfur's Armed Groups Founded?

Khalil Ibrahim born in 1958 in Al-Tina in North Darfur founded JEM in 2001, just two years after the infamous split between the historic Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi and the ousted president Omar al-Bashir. Most of JEM's initial leaders belonged to the Zaghawa tribe, to which Khalil belonged, with additional representation from the Masalit.

Khalil had previously been a prominent field commander in the Popular Defence Forces, created by the Bashir regime to fight the SPLM along religious lines. He held several government positions but sided with al-Turabi during the split, prompting accusations that JEM was the military wing of the Popular Congress Party founded by al-Turabi.

Khalil insisted that JEM fought for the equitable distribution of power and wealth. He led numerous battles against the government, most notably the 2008 attack on Omdurman known as the "Long Arm" operation, before he was killed on December 23, 2011. His brother Jibril Ibrahim later assumed leadership of JEM and currently serves as Sudan's Minister of Finance.

One of the first ironies in Darfur's rebel history is that Khalil Ibrahim played a role

in the arrest of Yahya Bolad the man regarded as the architect of militarized resistance after defecting from Bashir's regime in 1992 and joining the SPLM, eventually entrenching himself in Mount Marā in central Darfur. Bolad with others helped found the original SLM/A.

At first, the movement was limited to fighters from the Fur tribe, to which Bolad belonged. It quickly expanded to include other tribes such as the Zaghawa and Masalit and was renamed SLM/A.

Its leadership was drawn from various tribal backgrounds: the Fur-belonging Abdel Wahid Mohamed Nour as leader; the Masalit-belonging Khamis Abkar as vice-president; and the Zaghawa-belonging Minni Minnawi as secretary general.

In August 2001, the SLM/A attacked army and police positions in Qolo in Mount Marā. The attacks soon expanded to the Fur strongholds in central Darfur and to Zaghawa areas in the north, before the movement allied with JEM to attack El Fasher.

The Fragmentation Phase

After the El Fasher attack, the Sudanese government launched a broad crackdown using tribal Arab militia later known as the Janjaweed under the protection of airpower. They carried out horrific attacks on villages populated by the Zaghawa, Masalit and Fur, displacing millions toward Chad or into camps near major cities.

By 2003–2004, under intense pressure, the government expressed willingness to negotiate with the rebel movements. Minni Minnawi accepted such talks, while Abdel Wahid rejected them.

This split triggered intra-movement divisions culminating in a one-sided conference in Haskanita in South Darfur, which deposed Abdel Wahid and installed Minnawi. Abdel Wahid rejected the outcome, leading to a schism along tribal lines.

Fierce clashes erupted between Abdel Wahid's and Minnawi's factions especially in areas like Bir Maza, Kalkal and Kurma in northern Darfur desert after they relocated near the town of Tawila, close to El Fasher.

This fragmentation marked the first of many splits within the SLM/A. In subsequent years, dozens of splinter groups emerged; by 2008, Darfur was home to over 20 factions. According to UN experts, many of these factions were driven by opportunistic, profit-seeking motives rather than coherent political programs; they lacked formal leadership structures and had only a small number of vehicles.

Splinters multiplied following successive peace deals with the government deals

that rebel leaders signed but seldom implemented beyond securing senior government posts. For example, Minnawi was appointed assistant to the president before rebelling once again.

Weapons and Recruitment

At the outset of the conflict, JEM and SLM/A secured weapons and ammunition from looted military barracks, seized police depots, spoils from battles, and supplies from the SPLM.

In a UN report released on January 30, 2006, experts stated that Eritrea which has long had hostile ties with Sudan provided arms, ammunition, communication equipment, logistical and political support, and military training to JEM and SLM/A. Eritrea now appears to support the army in its war against the RSF since April 2023, even allowing allied forces to train on its soil a paradox that underscores the fluidity of Sudan's external relationships and the lack of stable alliances with either civilian opposition or rebel groups.

The report also states that the two rebel groups received financial aid from Libya, and that weapons and military supplies reached them through Libya in addition to backing from Chad.

Although Chad and Sudan share over a thousand kilometers of border and have a fraught political history, support for rebel groups has flowed through overlapping tribal affiliations rather than state allegiance. Many Chadian officers some from the Zaghawa tribe, like the former president Idriss Déby reportedly joined the factions led by Minnawi and Khalil Ibrahim, motivated more by tribal loyalty than national loyalty.

Though many fighters joined voluntarily, most movements engaged heavily in child recruitment forcibly enlisting children from refugee and displacement camps. Tribal leaders from the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa communities used children to swell their ranks.

Payment Through Crime and Mercenary Activity

Beyond state sponsorship, Darfur's armed groups increasingly turned to criminal activities to fund their operations. These included highway robbery of traders' vehicles in Darfur and eastern Chad, imposing "taxes" on local communities under their control, and after state support lightened engaging in smuggling networks across borders.

They also ran trade and business operations within Sudan and other African countries, such as South Sudan, Chad, and Uganda, according to UN reports.

In May 2013, during a clash with a breakaway faction led by Mohamed Bashar, the Justice and Equality Movement is said to have captured around US\$500,000

and communications equipment.

With the formation of the RSF from the Janjaweed militias, many armed groups suffered severe defeats, being expelled from Darfur except for some remnant forces entrenched in the rugged terrain of Mount Marā.

Consequently, factions under Minnawi and Jibril Ibrahim turned to Libya and South Sudan for regrouping. They engaged in mercenary and criminal activity including looting and kidnapping for ransom, as documented in a UN report submitted to the Security Council in January 2017.

According to the same report, as of mid-2015, Minnawi's faction had established a significant presence in Libya, fighting alongside the Libyan National Army in Kufra. Later, they set up illegal checkpoints, carried out kidnappings and human trafficking. Meanwhile, JEM elements found refuge in South Sudan, receiving military support in exchange for participating in a crackdown on groups hostile to them.

Their attempted incursion into South Darfur by 2015 ended in a decisive defeat at the battle of Goz Dango in April that year.

Part Two: Reorganization

The 2015 defeat of JEM's Goz Dango offensive significantly enhanced the influence both military and political of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"), the head of the RSF. He exploited that influence to push Darfur's rebel factions out of most of the region though Mount Marā remained out of reach due to its inaccessible terrain.

The rebel groups found in Libya fertile ground for reorganization, bolstered by financial backing and acquisition of military hardware, especially for Minnawi's faction Darfur's largest. Its political leadership relocated primarily to Europe, leveraging the refugee spread and connections across East Africa.

Commanded by Jumaa Haqqar (with deputy Jaber Ishaq, plus associates such as Faisal Saleh, Mokhtar Shomo and Abbas Ahmed Asil "Jabal Mun"), the faction managed to assemble nearly a thousand fighters stationed in Al-Jufrah.

Another major faction, Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army – Second Revolution (SPLM/SR) founded in 2017 based much of its Libyan presence under the leadership of its deputy, Abdullah Yahya (now a member of the Sovereignty Council), and its chief of staff Abdullah Bashar "Jana".

These forces, like Minnawi's and JEM's factions, were composed largely of Zaghawa fighters. Meanwhile, the faction loyal to Abdel Wahid maintained a presence through its chief-of-staff Yusuf Ahmed Yusuf "Karkouka".

A separate splinter group from JEM led by Al-Hadi Idris and known as the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army Transitional Council (SLM–TC), was founded in 2015.

Its Libyan branch was headed by Commander Saleh Jabal Si.

The mercenary cycle in Libya was not limited to these groups alone. The government’s weapons-collection campaign, followed by the arrest of the former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal, facilitated the escape of many militia commanders to neighboring countries.

Using funds, vehicles and weapons looted from Libya, Darfur’s factions began smuggling thousands of vehicles (especially four-wheel drives) back into Sudan and selling them exploiting porous borders where formal forces were absent.

Eventually, the RSF deployed to these border areas.

These factions profited immensely from car and fuel smuggling from Libya into Sudan and Chad, along with heavy-weapon trafficking and gold mining especially in Mount-Mara.

The RSF itself was formed from the Janjaweed militias, whose main leaders such as Ali Kushayb and Musa Hilal were initially integrated into government reserve police or border guard commands. As their influence grew especially that of Hilal the government launched a weapons-collection campaign, merging militia fighters with border guards and formally placing everything under the RSF in 2017.

The RSF was given special privileges under the former regime: access to gold mining in Mount Ameer, military training from army and security officers, autonomy to continue guerrilla-style tactics (mobility, speed, heavy firepower), a separate government budget, and commercial enterprises.

As a result, its commander Hemedti became one of Sudan’s wealthiest figures, recruiting thousands annually, chiefly from Arab tribes in Darfur and Chad, while also co-opting former Zaghawa field commanders.

After the ousting of Bashir in April 2019 amid nationwide protests known as the “December Revolution” that began in December 2018 Hemedti became deputy head of the Transitional Military Council.

Fragmentation Didn’t Spare the SPLM

On February 15, 2011, the SPLM–North announced its political, organizational, and military separation from the SPLM. Months later, fighting erupted between SPLM–North and government forces, leaving it with control over vast swathes of South Kordofan including its main stronghold in Kauda and parts of the Blue Nile.

For years the SPLM–North was led by a troika Abdelaziz al-Hilu (South Kordofan), Malik Agar (Blue Nile) and Yasser Arman (representative of supporters outside

those regions). In 2017, deep disagreements over peace led to a split: one faction under Agar, another under al-Hilu.

Although each SPLM–North faction maintained localized roots, both adopted a national political discourse stressing secularism, self-determination, and the elevation of local languages especially in primary schools alongside demands for just distribution of power and resources.

South Sudan has been accused of funding SPLM–North. Income from gold mines in territories under its control also reportedly contributes. The Blue Nile faction's fighters are largely drawn from the Nubian tribe — known for a strong martial tradition — shared with ethnic African tribes in the Blue Nile, who form the bulk of Agar's fighters.

The Peace Era

The removal of Bashir created a significant opportunity for peace in Sudan. The transitional authorities began negotiating with the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF) a coalition formed under political pressure on Bashir's regime. The SRF included the major Darfur factions and the SPLM–North under Malik Agar.

On October 3, 2020, the Sudanese government signed a peace agreement with five of the most influential Darfur movements and Agar's SPLM–North faction.

Under the agreement, rebel leaders were granted prominent posts in government.

Thus, Malik Agar, Al-Hadi Idris, and Taher Hajar became members of the Sovereignty Council; Minnawi became governor of Darfur region; Jibril Ibrahim was appointed Minister of Finance; others secured senior positions in regional and state governments especially in Blue Nile, and in North, West, and South Darfur.

Ahmad Al-Umda related by kinship to Malik Agar became governor of Blue Nile.

Khamis Abdullah Abkar later killed by the RSF was named governor of West Darfur after signing under the banner of the Sudanese Alliance, a coalition comprising Masalit and some Arab tribes.

The Abdel Wahid faction refused to participate in the peace talks. And the SPLM–North under al-Hilu set many obstacles to signing, including ironically objections to Hemedti heading the government's negotiation delegation. Despite that, SPLM–North eventually allied with RSF after the outbreak of war.

While the peace agreement achieved virtually no implemented provisions, it did pave the way for a major return: in November 2020, many fighters returned from Libya to Sudan, equipped with significant weapons including armored vehicles and heavy machine guns.

Minnawi's faction returned with about 250 armored vehicles, settling in areas such as Um Baro, Abu Jamra, El Fasher, Wadi Hour, Donki Shatta, and Karnou in North Darfur and in Jabal Mun and Al-Sirba in West Darfur.

The Taher Hajar faction reentered with about 200 military vehicles, stationed in Jabal Siro, Al-Tina, Kurma, Fetaberno, Kalkal all in North Darfur and Fasha in South Darfur. Among them was Abdullah Bashar "Jana", now a field commander fighting on behalf of the army against RSF.

Al-Hadi Idris's faction returned with roughly 40 combat vehicles, settling in Sara Fay, A'in Siro, Darnaki (Ashum), and in Jabal Mun of West Darfur and Nertiti in central Darfur.

Meanwhile, JEM's returning forces (about 50 combat vehicles) spread across Al-Tina, El Fasher, Karnou and Sarf Amra in North Darfur; in Sirba (West Darfur); and in Tulus and Bilel in South Darfur.

By early 2023, many of these same zones particularly in North Darfur, which had seen heavy fighting during the rebellions became the epicenters of the current war, which erupted on April 15, 2023, between the army and RSF.

Before the war, rebel leaders who signed the peace agreement participated in the military coup carried out by the army and RSF on October 25, 2021 except for Yasser Arman, who broke away from his SPLM-North faction and founded a purely political party, abandoning its armed wing.

Although the armed groups consistently claimed their fight was motivated by the just distribution of power and wealth what they called "armed struggle" they quickly revealed opportunistic aims in almost all their activities, including supporting a coup against civilian rule to preserve their grip on power.

Part Three: Neutrality and Entry into the War

RSF Supporters

At the start of the war, the army succeeded in neutralizing much of RSF's hard military power, especially in Khartoum. But RSF rapidly found reinforcement from Arab tribal fighters who had been in Libya including former members of the Revolutionary Awakening Council (RAC) under former leader Musa Hilal.

Among them were factions led by Qurashi Mohamed Ali, Ahmed Adam Qajja, and others. Some of those forces died in clashes, others joined various RSF-aligned groups.

These forces participated in fighting in Khartoum. In Darfur, RSF relied on Arab tribal fighters mobilized under tribal leaders to attack the army base in Nyala (South Darfur) in October 2023 which they successfully seized.

In West Darfur, RSF recruited Tijani Kershum head of a militant faction within the Sudanese Alliance, which signed the 2020 peace agreement under Khamis Abkar. After Abkar's killing by RSF fighters, Kershum was installed as governor of the state.

This triumph, along with financial resources from looted assets, gold, and gumarabic production, enabled RSF to wage large-scale offensives in West, Central, and Eastern Darfur. With backing from the United Arab Emirates, RSF developed new supply lines.

Later, RSF attracted the loyalty of Sudan Shield Forces under its commander Abu Aqla Kikil who had previously led operations that captured Al-Jazirah state. Although Kikil later split and launched a counter-offensive under a different command, RSF remained a central actor.

After the signing of the founding charter of a new alliance, fighters from SPLM-North under Abdelaziz al-Hilu also joined RSF and partook in operations from May 11, 2024, in El-Fasher. However, many withdrew soon after likely because the SPLM's doctrine emphasizes offensive warfare rather than defense.

El Fasher – The City That Broke the Camel's Back

At the outbreak of war, almost all armed groups whether signatories to the peace agreement or not declared neutrality. But neutrality did not last long.

Peace-agreement Darfur factions sought to form a joint force to protect civilians, trade convoys, and humanitarian activities. However, they soon came under intense pressure from the army, despite earning large profits from safeguarding commercial traffic.

This pressure culminated in the dismissal of Taher Hajar and Al-Hadi Idris from the Sovereignty Council after their refusal to abandon neutrality; both then joined RSF. A splinter group from JEM under Suleiman Sandal also aligned with RSF.

Taher Hajar and Al-Hadi Idris withdrew to Kurma and Abu Qamra in North Darfur, but their joining RSF had limited military impact aside from political support especially after key field commanders such as Abdullah Jana, Abboud Khater, and Othman Abdel Jabbar defected.

Meanwhile, RSF mobilized thousands of fighters around El-Fasher. Despite a previous agreement mediated by the former governor of North Darfur, Nimer Mohammed Abdul Rahman, himself from a military faction aligned with Al-Hadi Idris to divide the city into zones: the army would hold the center, RSF would hold the northern parts, with a buffer zone managed by the joint force pressure on field commanders pushed some, like Jumaa Haqqar and Abdullah Jana, to side with the army. They formed a unified command, seized the buffer zone, and

RSF began besieging the city.

Switching Sides to Fight with the State

On November 16, 2024, Minnawi, Jibril and another rebel leader, Mustafa Tambour who commands a JEM splinter faction from Abdel Wahid's group announced their neutrality was over and pledged to fight alongside the army against RSF.

Promptly, a splinter from the SPLM/SR under Abdullah Yahya (who had joined the Sovereignty Council) also aligned with the army. Most of this returning group led on the ground by Abdullah Jana established bases across Sudan and took part in fighting RSF.

Minnawi took up supervision of the so-called "Joint Force," which seized what many consider a strategic opportunity to recruit thousands nationwide making recruitment no longer limited to Darfur.

Tambour tapped mostly the Fur tribe in eastern Sudan; Minnawi and Jibril mobilized from the widespread Zaghawa community in the north. This tribal-based recruitment is a significant feature of the current war.

The "Joint Force" also includes former JEM commanders such as Bakhit Dabgo, whose previously signed 2013 peace deal led to his integration into the army at major-general rank. Dabgo continues to recruit thousands around El-Fasher and establishes new paramilitary groups, such as the "Qashn" self-defense forces and "Art-Art" battalions.

The force also includes Abdullah Benda a former JEM field commander indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) who disappeared along the border between Sudan, Chad, and Libya.

According to UN experts, Benda pivoted towards smuggling and gold mining along the Chadian border before forming his own faction in March 2020, known as Sudan Justice and Equality Movement Benda Faction.

In November 2024, Benda announced his forces would join the army. He, along with Mansour Arbabi (from southern Libya), moved into the North Darfur desert near Malha via Libya and Chad, where they began disrupting RSF supply lines.

Benda's forces are now active in Wadi Hour and Jabal Atron, while other members of the "Joint Force" are positioned in Al-Tina, Karnou, Aruri, and Um Baro. RSF-aligned militias under Musa Hilal are concentrated in Mount-Mara all within the bounds of North Darfur.

At the same time, the army reestablished contact with the most prominent tribal leader in Darfur, Musa Hilal, signaling a renewed alliance aimed at tightening

pressure on RSF.

SPLM–North under Malik Agar whose position replaced Hemedti as deputy head of the Sovereignty Council also joined army ranks, contributing significantly to repelling RSF’s advance in Blue Nile and expanding operations elsewhere.

In addition to these groups, dozens of other militias most of them created after the outbreak of war sided with the army. Among them was Sudan Shield Forces, founded in 2020 under Abu Aqla Kikil, along with Islamic battalions linked to Bashir’s former regime.

Despite the contribution of Sudan Shield Forces in recapturing Al-Jazirah and expanding into North Kordofan, the “Joint Force” remains the most consequential military and political support for the army.

Its impact became evident in the prolonged defense of El Fasher which held out for 18 months against RSF assaults and in preventing RSF from spreading to northern Sudan when Khartoum was under siege.

The events detailed in this report show that the current war is deeply rooted in ethnic tensions politically framed around disputes over power distribution, identity, state structure, and inclusion and that each armed group aligned with either side is striving to decisively eliminate the other despite the formidable complexity of achieving such a goal.