

Sudan's War: Mapping the Influential Military Forces



In the fading voice of civilians, and with both warring parties in Sudan (the army and the Rapid Support Forces) holding tight to the option of military resolution, questions emerge about each side's actual ability to realise this slogan on the ground. Equally significant are the pressing questions about the main political and military figures backing them, their primary strengths, the size of their armaments and their field manoeuvres, in addition to the allied forces aligned with their agendas and where their rifles are pointed.

The Sudanese Army and its Allies

The initial nucleus of the army was created in 1925, when the British colonial power appointed a unit of Sudanese soldiers under the name "Sudan Defence Force". After the country's independence in early 1956, the national army began to take shape through its various divisions.

Since independence, the army has controlled power via military coups, often supported by civilian forces: Ibrahim Abboud (1958–1964), Jaafar Nimeiri (1969–1985), Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019), and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan from 2021 to the present.

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) can fairly be described as the most important party in the current war, which has been ongoing since 14 April 2023. Their

leadership is headed by General Abdel Fattah el-Burhan, who has also held responsibility for governing the country, particularly since he ousted the civilian transitional government headed by Dr Abdullah Hamdok in October 2021.

This current war against the RSF is not the SAF's first. The civil war in what is now South Sudan began in 1955, and its guns were only silenced in limited periods between 1972-1983, and after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 (leading to South Sudan's secession in 2011).

In the west, the army fought wars in the Darfur region that led to the issuance of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court for its then-leader Omar al-Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity from 2003-2008.

Despite extended periods of dominating power and monopolising most of the national budget, the army suffered serious shake-ups following the outbreak of hostilities with the RSF on 15 April 2023. It lost control of many Sudanese provinces, foremost among them the capital Khartoum, Gezira, and the Darfur and Kordofan regions; it has also registered new losses in Sennar state and parts of White Nile. This means it now fully controls only the Nile, Northern, East and Blue Nile regions.

According to Global Firepower's 2023 listing, the SAF ranked 75th in the world among the strongest armies. The site estimated the army's personnel at around 150,000 soldiers, including roughly 50,000 reserves. From the same source, it was reported the army had 191 combat aircraft (of which 45 were fighters and 37 attack-specific), 72 helicopters (43 of them attack type, in addition to transport aircraft), approximately 170 tanks, about 7,000 armoured military vehicles, nearly 300 towed artillery pieces, 40 rocket artillery launchers, and a naval corps on the Red Sea of 18 units.

The army's strength in this war lies in the popular backing it enjoys among civilians, which has manifested in large numbers fleeing to zones under its control to escape RSF abuses as well as in the conviction of many population groups, especially in the central and northern and some western areas of the country, that the current war is existential.

They view it as directed against the RSF allegedly on behalf of "the Arab diaspora" a term used for the wandering Arab pastoral groups between Sudan and deep hinterland to the west (Chad, Libya, Central Africa and Niger). Yet the army has major weaknesses: its repeated inability to protect civilians in many provinces from RSF violations; its failure, at the time of writing, to register major victories comparable to the RSF's capture of large cities and territories; it has often been confined to a defensive posture.

Another key weakness lies in its structure during wartime: the infantry remains weak relative to the early dominance shown by its artillery and air arms. By assigning most infantry tasks to the RSF as rapid-intervention forces under SAF command (for example in the contested Al-Fashqa zone with Ethiopia), the army's troops have continued to absorb heavy blows in ongoing combat.

With the first shots fired the RSF elements, by virtue of their numbers and their training for urban warfare, gained the upper hand. The RSF have also been charged with securing many strategic sites including the presidential palace and Khartoum International Airport and besieging the army's general command; the SAF lost substantial strength due to its inability to deploy lethal force (air craft/artillery) in many operations because fighting erupted inside populated cities and provinces.

Allied Forces to the Army

The Joint Forces A force composed of armed movements party to the Juba Peace Agreement with the civilian transitional government in October 2020. The aim was to bring into the transition those military forces which waged wars against the erstwhile Bashir regime, in exchange for a re-division of wealth and power.

This Joint Force (SAF, RSF, peace forces) was created in 2021 by the civilian government with the goal of protecting civilians from tribal fighting and security breakdowns that surged after the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) left Darfur in December 2020.

After the April 2023 war began, the Juba signatories initially adopted neutrality, then Darfur's governor and the leader of the Sudan Liberation Movement (Minni Arkku Minawi), the finance minister and the leader of the Justice and Equality Movement Gibril Ibrahim, shifted their support to the SAF protesting RSF crimes and attempts to restrict humanitarian access.

Meanwhile two other signatories Hadi Idris and Taher Hajer remained neutral and joined the Coordination of Democratic Forces (TPD) calling to end the war. According to the pre-war plan, 1,500 fighters of the movements joined the Joint Force alongside equal numbers from the RSF, compared to 300 from the army.

The Joint Force last gained prominence in its ongoing role halting RSF attacks on the city of El-Fasher, host to the army's last garrison in Darfur. Real concerns exist that the RSF may declare a parallel government in Port Sudan similar to the Libyan model if it takes full control of Darfur.

Al-Bara' ibn Malik Battalion This is a military battalion made up of young members affiliated with the Islamic Movement and the dissolved National Congress Party following the 2019 popular uprising. No precise estimate exists

for its manpower, but unofficial statistics put it at around 1,500 fighters under the leadership of Mubashir Abu Zaid, who survived an assassination attempt via a suicide drone during a Ramadan iftar in the city of Atbarah, Nile State.

Most of its members received combat training during the Bashir era within SAF-supporting paramilitary forces (the Popular Defence Forces, viewed by opponents as a special force to enable Islamists to control power and suppress dissent).

The battalion declares it is under SAF command and its members trained by officers of the Sudanese War College, justifying its engagement in combat as a patriotic act to “protect the nation and shield civilians from RSF crimes”. Its strength lies in its highly educated membership, many of whom operate the battalion’s war-planning cells.

Critics accuse it of acting independently of the army and of linkages to terrorist practices such as beheading RSF fighters; the biggest criticism is that it seeks to leap into power after weakening both main warring parties by prolonging the war and rejecting all peaceful solutions. SAF General Yasser al-Atta earlier acknowledged Islamist participation in the war but insisted they had committed to relinquishing power and that the battalion would be disbanded once the dust of battle clears.

Popular Resistance Armed civilian mobilisation emerged following the army leader’s declaration of general mobilisation in late June 2023. In his Eid al-Adha speech, Burhan called on all able-bodied persons to join army camps to defend honour and nation.

In December 2023 the RSF captured Gezira state in central Sudan following a surprise SAF withdrawal, prompting large-scale fear in the central, northern and eastern regions fearing SAF abandonment, citizens in those zones pressured military garrisons to arm them in anticipation of RSF attacks.

SAF moved quickly to absorb these efforts, placing resistance training and arming under its supervision; tens of thousands of young Sudanese joined resistance camps, and it became common to see weapons openly displayed in states under army control. The army benefited from this influx of manpower, enabling partial shifts in strategy from absorbing shock to taking the initiative against RSF.

The key challenge for the resistance forces lies in their limited training and experience, inconsistent adherence to military orders, and the mounting concern that widely-distributed arms are being used to commit crimes or intimidate civilians, especially at checkpoints in army-held territories.

The most salient point in the mobilisation and popular resistance context is the RSF's frequent invocation of their deployment as a justification for their continuous attacks on civilians.

*Sudan People's Liberation Movement / North (SPLM-North) Agar Faction (headed by Malik Agar) Alongside his role as deputy presidential figure, General Malik Agar leads this movement, which boasts one of Sudan's most experienced and battle-hardened armed forces. Agar was a leading opponent of the central government and one of the senior commanders of the former SPLM during the civil war in the South before 2011.

Between 2005-2011, after the peace deal and South Sudan's secession, he served as governor of Blue Nile, before resuming rebellion alongside others demanding the fall of Bashir and the establishment of a democratic civilian state. After the removal of Bashir, he was one of the principal signatories of the 2020 principles agreement with the transitional government.

Although the movement fractured (in 2017 and again in 2022), Agar retained leadership over thousands of fighters, long holding control of parts of Blue Nile and maintaining the capacity to challenge the army.

He launched a security arrangements protocol under the Juba Agreement and succeeded in embedding some of his forces into SAF in October 2022. The movement's main strength lies in its highly experienced troops, accustomed to combat in harsh terrain.

Today it operates in several fronts alongside the army whether in Khartoum or securing other states, especially Blue Nile. As a result of his early decision on the war, Burhan named Agar his deputy in the Sovereignty Council, in place of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti").

Rapid Support Forces and Its Allies

The RSF may be described as the legitimate heir to the Janjaweed militia accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur. It is led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti).

Although he never attended the Sudanese War College, he managed to transform himself from a camel herder and a rebel under Bashir into one of the most important actors in the Sudanese scene.

The RSF were officially sanctioned by the regime in 2013, and by 2017 they were approved as an independent security force under SAF command. They took part in the "Khartoum Operation" to combat irregular migration with EU support, and their fighters served in the Yemen war; they then aligned with the 2019 uprising that deposed Bashir.

After Bashir's removal and the failure of the military-civilian transition, Hemedti and Burhan became central in a power-sharing agreement in 2019. Civilian forces sought to integrate the RSF into the SAF for fear that it might become parallel to the national army but the military leadership resisted, citing the dangers of civilian interference in army affairs.

During that period Burhan praised the RSF as "a force born of the army... part of the army and Hemedti's roles are undeniable", while Hemedti addressed his troops: "Army and RSF are like twin brothers who cannot be separated." Based on this alliance the RSF helped the military seize power in October 2021; Hemedti later dismissed the outcome as a coup.

After repeated civilian protests and Burhan's inability to form a government for nearly 18 months, pro-democracy forces forced the army to sign a framework agreement in December 2022 that was to return power to civilians and move the army back to its barracks. But Sudanese optimism for a return to transition was dashed when Hemedti supported the framework, the army rejected it as a civilian power grab, and resolutely refused RSF integration into the SAF.

As tensions escalated and the RSF amassed its forces in the capital and near Merowe airport (where Egyptian troops were participating in joint exercises with the SAF), the war broke out between the two sides in Khartoum and Merowe and soon spread to 12 of Sudan's 18 states.

The RSF's forces were estimated at 120,000 fighters at the outbreak of war. According to Global Firepower's 2023 listing, they possessed 10,000 armoured four-wheel-drive vehicles mounted with light and medium machine guns, and anti-aircraft weapons.

Despite resistance within the army, Burhan allowed the RSF to acquire light armoured personnel carriers (BTR-type) according to the same source. What increased the RSF's strength further was their responsibility for managing gold-mining areas in Darfur, especially the Jebel Amer zone in North Darfur. According to an investigative report by CNN in July 2022, Russia funded its Ukraine war by stealing Sudanese gold, using Wagner-linked mercenaries.

After the war began, the finance minister Gibri Ibrahim said the RSF stole 2.7 tonnes of gold, 2.7 tonnes of silver and \$350 million. Militarily, the militia increased its strength post-outbreak by capturing major weapons-manufacturing factories in Khartoum ("Military Industry Corporation" and "Yarmouk") and seizing weapons within military garrisons they overran.

Over time the RSF succeeded in converting looted civilian vehicles into fast-moving platforms and artillery carriages, including anti-aircraft weapons. Most recently they have begun using drones to strike military targets in areas still

outside the war zone (Gedaref, River Nile), signalling dangerous shifts in the war. Their principal strength lies in their vast recruitment capacity and near-bottomless manpower reservoir, allowing simultaneous combat on multiple fronts.

Army commanders frequently accuse the RSF of employing foreign mercenary armies, a charge reinforced by field commander Jelgha Mahdi's video admission that his forces included fighters from South Sudan, Chad, Niger, Central Africa and Libya. Also among their strengths: they are light infantry rapid response forces highly trained for urban and guerrilla warfare, commanded by field leaders unlike the heavier, slower-moving SAF with its tracked armour and complex bureaucracy that impedes rapid decision-making.

Another key strength lies in their sophisticated media platforms, continuously updated with a wide array of advisors and spokespeople feeding global media and social platforms: when the RSF face accusations of abuses, they quickly deny and shift blame to the army or the Bashir era, or justify them as combatting al-Mustanfarin (mobilised adversaries) and militants. The RSF in fighting the army raise the slogans of restoring democracy and ending marginalisation of the peripheries by the central state.

Their goal in the war's early phase was to capture Burhan and bring him to trial. But among their many weaknesses is the excessive use of weaponised abuses against unarmed civilians murder, rape, looting, forced displacement which has prompted international sanctions against several of their leaders, notably the RSF deputy and half-brother of Hemedti, General Abdel Rahim Dagalo, by the U.S. Treasury.

As for allied forces with the RSF: Sudan Shield Forces, led by General Abu Aqla Kikil (who announced his defection to the RSF in August 2023 under the banner of "supporting the marginalised and fighting the Kizan" – a term for Bashir's supporters) founded in 2022 as a response to imbalances arising from the 2020 peace deal.

The force, estimated at 35,000 fighters before the war, draws mostly from the Al-Butana region of Gezira state and its border areas with Gedaref and Kassala. Abu Aqla Kikil led RSF's assault on Gezira in December 2023 using unsurfaced side roads passing an oil pipeline to circumvent the air force's advantage; after success he was appointed RSF commander in the state.

Recently the Shield Forces have been heavily criticised for failing to protect their community in central Sudan from RSF attacks on Gezira villages, along with reports that his authority has been curtailed and his right-hand man Tahir Jahallah arrested by RSF intelligence. Among opposing RSF allied commanders:

General Abdel Rahman al Bishi, veteran RSF field leader in Blue Nile state, oversaw the RSF's takeover of Madani and the army garrison in Sennar state; and forces of Jelgha Mahdi of the "Shuja'an Kordofan" movement, joined the RSF in July 2023.

Meanwhile the forces of the SPLM North – Abdul Aziz Al Hilu faction, despite internal fracturing, participated in resisting RSF's advance into South Kordofan's capitals. Their base lies in the Nuba Mountains, inherited from the SPLM of South Sudan.

With thousands of fighters drawn from the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile region, they have fought since 1984 against marginalisation and use of Sharia law under Nimeiri in 1983. Their main strength is long-standing combat experience in the mountains, though their role in the current war remains limited.

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