

## Mass Mobilization in North Darfur: A Shift in the Military Balance?



The ground beneath the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is shifting rapidly in North Darfur, as the Sudanese army and its allies amass military forces in the desert stretching across northern Sudan and bordering regions with Chad setting the stage for potentially decisive battles that could break the backbone of the militia.

This vast desert is a lifeline for the RSF, serving as a conduit for most of its supply lines from the UAE via Libya and Chad, including four-wheel-drive vehicles. These routes have become especially critical after the RSF seized control of areas like Malha, Al-Rahib, and the Chevrolet base in Karb Al-Toum, extending to the border triangle.

North Darfur holds strategic significance it spans 296,000 square kilometers, accounting for 12% of Sudan's landmass and 57% of the Greater Darfur region. It is a vital crossroads connecting the rest of Darfur with northern Sudan, Greater Kordofan, Libya, Egypt, and parts of Chad.

### Military Movements

On September 21, Darfur24 reported troop mobilizations in the towns of Karnoi, Tina, and Umm Baru, as well as Wadi Hawar areas considered strongholds of the Zaghawa tribe, from which most fighters in the Joint Forces of the armed movements originate. These forces are fighting alongside the army against the RSF.

According to the report, army and joint forces, backed by military hardware, advanced into the Sahara Desert, aiming to reach El Fasher which has been under RSF siege since April 2024 and to seize the Zurug base, effectively severing supply lines between the border triangle and the rest of Darfur.

A military source told Noon Post that additional forces have been stationed in the Kababish region following the army's capture of Bara in North Kordofan. The next objective is advancing through Hamrat Al-Sheikh to Al-Kuma in North Darfur, in parallel with the desert push.

In response, the RSF withdrew troops from North Kordofan to Malha after the army's presence expanded into Takro a gold mining area on the border between Northern State and North Darfur. The militia also repositioned its fighters in Burairiq and Inka near the town of Arouri, currently held by the army and joint forces, according to the same military source.

The source explained that the army and its allies are targeting the Zurug base, a critical RSF stronghold. The joint forces have bolstered their presence in Wadi Hawar, approximately 100 km from Zurug, with plans for a multi-pronged offensive.

### The Tribal Leverage Card

This military buildup coincides with a significant political shift: a new agreement between Musa Hilal the leader of the Revolutionary Awakening Council and head of the Mahameed clan (a sub-tribe of the Rizeigat, from which many RSF leaders and fighters hail) and the Joint Forces to form a unified military unit.

Council spokesperson Ahmed Abkar said the new joint force aims to reopen markets and roads, protect the agricultural season, and combat theft and criminal activity. Both the Awakening Council and the Joint Forces emphasized the importance of enhancing military coordination and addressing social grievances.

Although military alliances are typically not announced before completing internal arrangements such as establishing leadership, control mechanisms, and conflict resolution protocols Hilal appears poised to join the fight against the RSF, seizing an opportunity to settle his longstanding feud with RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti.

Hilal previously commanded Janjaweed militias that fought on behalf of the ousted regime against Darfuri rebel movements, committing widespread atrocities. However, he later fell out with the regime over a weapons collection initiative that favored the RSF.

He was eventually arrested in a humiliating operation at his stronghold in the Mistiryha region and transferred to Khartoum, only to be released following the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir.

Hilal declared his support for the army, providing financial and logistical backing via airdrops. Some of his forces even participated in the battles for Khartoum, though he avoided direct engagement in Darfur possibly due to the RSF's dominance and its widespread support among Arab tribes in the region.

Most of Hilal's forces remain in Mistiryha, within Kabkabiya locality, not far from areas under army and Joint Force control in the far north of Darfur bordering Chad, particularly around Umm Baru and Karnoi. This proximity facilitates military coordination.

Hilal's participation in upcoming battles in the North Darfur desert could severely rattle Arab tribal communities aligned with the RSF, given his enduring tribal influence. It could also prompt defections among RSF leaders who remain loyal to Hilal, such as Ali Rizgallah (Savana).

### Who Will Win the Battle for Darfur?

It is notable that recent army and allied movements are focused on areas whose local tribal leadership does not support the RSF—depriving the militia of its critical social base, which supplies fighters, intelligence, and food.

Since the Darfur conflict is deeply embedded in tribal structures, the alliance between Hilal and the Joint Forces is a blow to the RSF. Hilal is not just a military leader but a tribal figure who has spent years consolidating his influence in the region. This alliance could reshape tribal dynamics in western Sudan, though not overnight.

The ongoing military mobilization and troop movements signal a likely turning point in the balance of power in North Darfur, including in El Fasher the political and administrative hub of the region. If the army and its allies succeed in lifting the siege, they could reclaim the strategic initiative.

On the other hand, if the RSF manages to capture El Fasher in the coming days, it will emerge exhausted after a battle that has dragged on since May 11, 2024. This would weaken its ability to sustain a prolonged war of attrition in the harsh North Darfur desert terrain that the Joint Forces and Awakening Council have known and navigated for over two decades.

The RSF is ill-equipped for a drawn-out war. It is used to swift, high-impact raids—an approach that has already failed to secure El Fasher or hold gains in central Sudan and parts of Kordofan. Moreover, it lacks a defensive doctrine, unlike the army, which is fundamentally structured around defense.

A protracted desert conflict appears increasingly likely. The RSF is unlikely to stand idle—it may reinforce its positions at the border triangle. However, defections among its tribal allies could occur if Musa Hilal persuades tribes to shift their allegiance to the army or declare neutrality.

Ultimately, developments in North Darfur go beyond military buildup or battlefield clashes—they signal a reshaping of tribal alliances and power dynamics. This could lead to the fragmentation of the RSF's combat structure, which is built on loosely connected tribal networks rather than a cohesive command.

In the end, whoever manages to tip the balance in North Darfur by forging tribal alliances and leveraging the desert's geography could quickly extend their control across the broader Darfur region, should no comprehensive political resolution emerge.