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SPILLING OVER

Conflict Dynamics in and around Sudan's Blue Nile State, 2015–19

Khalid Ammar Hassan

HSBA

small arms survey

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Cover photo: Sudanese dancers welcome a delegation of UN representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats. Agadi area, Blue Nile state, 2013. Source: Ian Timberlake/AFP Photos

The HSBA project

The Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan is a multi-year project administered by the Small Arms Survey. It was developed in cooperation with the Canadian government, the United Nations Mission in Sudan, the United Nations Development Programme, and a wide array of international and Sudanese partners. Through the active generation and dissemination of timely, empirical research, the project supports violence reduction initiatives, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes and incentive schemes for civilian arms collection, as well as security sector reform and arms control interventions across Sudan and South Sudan. The HSBA also offers policy-relevant advice on redressing insecurity.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

AUHIP	African Union High-level Implementation Panel
BNLC	Blue Nile Liberation Council
COH	Cessation of hostilities (agreement)
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
D/COGS	Director of the chief of operations in the general staff
EU	European Union
GoS	Government of Sudan
GRSS	Government of the Republic of South Sudan
JIU	Joined Integrated Unit
MDF	Maban Defence Forces
MDF-Johnson Khalifa	Maban Defence Forces led by Johnson Khalifa
NCP	National Congress Party
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NLC	National Liberation Council
NMLC	Nuba Mountains Liberation Council
PDF	Popular Defence Forces
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition

SPLM/A-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North
SPLM/A-N-Agar	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North led by Malik Agar
SPLM/A-N-al-Hilu	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
SRRA	Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency
SRRA-Agar	Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency controlled by SPLM/A-N-Agar
US	United States

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Executive summary

In September 2011 in Sudan's Blue Nile state, war broke out between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N). This was an extension of the fighting that had started in June the same year in South Kordofan—together the conflicts in these Sudanese states would be known as the 'Two Areas' conflict. The Two Areas conflict led to widespread insecurity and the large-scale civilian displacement. Building on previous HSBA studies documenting the Two Areas conflict between 2011 and 2015, this report analyses the dynamics that followed in Blue Nile between 2015 and 2019. It finds that, while armed conflict between the GoS and SPLM/A-N paused in 2016, violent incidents affecting civilians continued—and even increased—in and around Blue Nile into 2019 due to the civil war in South Sudan and the SPLM/A-N's split into two competing factions.

Though often overlooked, the conflict in Blue Nile plays a key role in both national and regional stability due to the presence of multiple armed groups with varied and often short-term interests operating in the state and across the borders with South Sudan and Ethiopia. For those on the ground, the conflict and subsequent tensions have resulted in a deep division of Blue Nile communities, often along ethnic lines, and the humanitarian situation remains at a critical level, with approximately one-fifth of the population living in refugee camps.

Key findings

- Fighting between the GoS and the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) in Sudan's Blue Nile state lasted from September 2011 until June 2016. A new front opened in the Ingessana Mountains in early 2015 which changed the conflict dynamics in Blue Nile, threatening the centres of power in the state. Both sides declared unilateral cessations of hostilities (COHs) in 2016, and no serious episode of violence between the two sides or their proxies has been reported since that date.
- Despite formal cessations of hostilities, regional insecurity has increased due to instability in neighbouring South Sudan as well as the proliferation of armed proxy groups in Maban county on the Sudanese–South Sudanese border. The years 2015 and 2016 saw an increase of violent clashes between Mabanese militias, on the one hand, and the SPLA-N and Blue Nile refugees, on the other. These events turned both the wider Maban community and the county's refugee camps into active conflict areas.
- The SPLM/A-N split into two competing factions in March 2017, and the resulting violence between these factions in Blue Nile from May 2017 until February 2018, deeply divided the population along ethnic lines and increased the vulnerability of local communities—particularly those living in SPLM/A-N-controlled areas and refugee camps.
- The SPLM/A-N split also delayed and potentially complicated a full resolution of the conflict with the GoS. Efforts to reconcile the two SPLM/A-N factions have failed; the two groups have formed separate political organizations and pursued different political paths. This further complicates stability in the region, which depends on the peaceful co-existence of these opposing groups.
- Political developments in Sudan since December 2018—which saw the removal of long-term president Omar al-Bashir from power in April 2019 and a new civilian–military transitional government formed in August—provide an opportunity to finally address the Blue Nile conflict. The new government, together with other international, regional, and local stakeholders, should facilitate the involvement of all Blue Nile constituencies and their leaders in a peace process, or they risk further polarizing them and triggering more violence.

“Blue Nile is currently highly militarized and impoverished.”

Introduction

The area known as Blue Nile state in south-eastern Sudan has been embroiled in conflict since before the country's independence in 1956. The state's natural wealth—grazing and agricultural land, Nile River water, and mineral resources—together with its strategic location at the intersection of Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, make it vulnerable to outside interference. Over the last decade, internal governance issues have intertwined with broader regional power struggles for control of Blue Nile's population and resources. As a result, the state's diverse social fabric has become deeply divided, and Blue Nile is currently highly militarized and impoverished. In areas affected by conflict, food insecurity is endemic, access to water and sanitation services is low, educational infrastructure is lacking, and medical and healthcare resources are scarce.

The conflict between the GoS and SPLM/A-N began in South Kordofan in June 2011 and expanded into Blue Nile that September, thus becoming known as the 'Two Areas' conflict. Since then there have been long seasons of ground fighting, raiding, shelling, and Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) aerial bombings that only ceased in mid-2016 after both parties declared COHs, partly as a result of pressure from the United States. By then the clashes had forced more than one-fifth of Blue Nile's population to flee to refugee camps in Ethiopia and South Sudan, and to other parts of Sudan, while causing extensive internal displacements.

This report examines the conflict dynamics and military and political developments in Blue Nile between 2015 and 2019. It assesses not only the evolution of previous trends such as the SPLM/A-N's war with the GoS and the attacks made on the Blue Nile refugee population by GoS-sponsored Mabanese militias in neighbouring South Sudan, but also the abrupt split within the SPLM/A-N itself that resulted in new dimensions of inter-communal conflict. The dire humanitarian situation and failed peace talks—of which there have been more than 15 separate sessions since 2011—are also discussed.

Overall, the report finds that due to the proliferation of armed actors, the spillover of the GoS–SPLA-N conflict across international borders into South Sudan and Ethiopia, the effect of the South Sudanese civil war on the Blue Nile population, and the failure of attempts at reconciliation between competing SPLM/A-N factions, the conflict in Blue Nile remains serious, even if it is currently 'non-active'. The 'forgotten front' (Sperber et al., 2016) continues to represent a major threat to local and regional stability, and provides further uncertainty to prospects for sustainable and effective conflict resolution and peaceful political transformation in Sudan after the April 2019 overthrow of the Bashir regime.

“The SPLM-N took shape as an armed rebel movement to fight for the rectification of grievances that the CPA had failed to resolve.”

Background to the conflict up to 2011

Once part of the prosperous Funj Kingdom (1504–1821), the area that today constitutes Blue Nile state became extremely insecure during the Turco-Egyptian occupation of Sudan (1821–85). It was further impoverished by slave raids, which continued throughout the Mahdist period (1885–98) until the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1898–1956) attempted to stop them in 1904. The establishment of the colonial government exacerbated existing social divisions and created new power dynamics (James, 1988, pp. 253–64; Okazaki, 1997, pp. 53–54, 62–68).[4] Like the situation of the Nuba (in what is now South Kordofan) and Southern Sudanese,[5] the Closed District Order of 1922 turned Blue Nile into a peripheral zone, isolated some local groups from Sudan's educational system, and cut the area off from centres of economic and political power (Okazaki, 1997, p. 66).

Structural inequalities and the top-down exploitation of Blue Nile's rich agricultural land and grazing fields, mineral resources (gold, chrome), gum Arabic crops, and Nile water have been at the heart of the historical conflict between the people of Blue Nile and the central government since before Sudan's independence in 1956.[6] Due to rapid population growth and new mechanized farming schemes, groups originally from the area have been largely deprived of their land, while competition over access to grazing land has increased. This 'land-grabbing' policy was protected by the 1970 Unregistered Land Act and 1971 Abolition of the Native Administration Act (Dabanga, 2016a; Ahmed, 2008, p. 3). Investment projects such as the Roseires Dam on the Blue Nile in 1966—which was expanded in 1971 and more recently in 2013—and the expansion of Dinder National Park in 2010 gave few benefits to the local population, but brought foreign investors into the state and led to the environmental degradation of the area and the displacement of the population (UNEP, 2007, pp. 266–68). Over the last 30 years the National Congress Party (NCP) government has been increasingly granting licences for the extraction of gold and chrome to Sudanese from outside the state and to foreign investors, including more recently Chinese companies. This not only prevented local people from benefitting from livelihood opportunities, but also displaced them from traditional mining areas in the Ingessana Mountains, Geissan, and Kurmuk localities (Reuters, 2012).

Overall, the exploitation of local resources by domestic and foreign investors that were (and are) tied to political elites in Khartoum has been of little benefit to the indigenous population, which includes more than a dozen ethnic groups.[7] These groups include the Ingessana (the biggest tribe, which consists of four groups from areas in the Ingessana Mountains[8]); the Kadalo (from Roseires);[9] the Gumuz (in Roseires and Ethiopia); the Hamaj and Ragarig (in the east near the Ethiopian border); the Funj and Keili (both in northern Kurmuk); the Berta (of Geissan, eastern Kurmuk, and Ethiopia); the JumJum (living around Wadaka); the Uduk (a Christian group from the Chali area in the southern Kurmuk locality);[10] the Burun (in hills to the south); and the Koma and Ganza (in the forests along the southern edge of the state).[11] These groups

are mostly agro-pastoralists and Muslim, although the majority maintain traditional beliefs and practices, too (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 11–12).

Over the course of the 20th century the government encouraged new groups to settle in Blue Nile, such as the pastoralist Fulani (the 'Fellata') and the sedentary farming Hausa (both from West Africa); the Arab nomads such as the Kenanna and Rufa'a al Hoi (from central and eastern Sudan); and Arab Muslim groups of mixed origin, including from Ethiopia—internally referred to as 'Watawit' or 'border sheikhs'—who are mostly associated with the NCP (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 12; James, 2007; Ahmed, 2008; 2012). With the government's backing these groups occupied fertile land, exploited mineral resources, and took positions of power, putting further pressure on the indigenous population.

For these reasons, soon after the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was formed in 1983, people from Blue Nile joined Southern Sudan's struggle against the political, social, and economic marginalization of Sudan's peripheries.[12] John Garang's accession to the role of SPLM/A party leader contributed effectively to the expansion of the movement into the northern parts of the country, resulting in its control of areas in southern Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains (parts of today's South and West Kordofan), and later in eastern Sudan. The SPLA's 10th Division operated in southern Blue Nile during the two decades of the Second Civil War (1983–2005)[13] and was made up of an estimated 7,500–17,000 fighters who were mostly from Blue Nile (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 41). The Uduk in particular provided major local military support.

While over time the SPLA was able to establish associated armed units in Blue Nile, the SPLM never managed to create a viable civil administration in the area (unlike in the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan, which the Nuba resistance leader Yusif Kuwa oversaw), not least because the SPLA could not hold the movement's stronghold of Kurmuk in southern Blue Nile for any length of time. (As a major outpost on the route linking Southern Sudan to Ethiopia, Kurmuk was fought over several times during the Second Civil War.[14])

During this turbulent period the people of the war-affected areas were forced to flee en masse to neighbouring Ethiopia and Southern Sudan, or live in isolation in the mountains and southern forests and along the rivers. Non-indigenous groups, especially the Fellata, were incorporated into SAF-affiliated paramilitary units such as the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) that were used against the SPLM/A from 1989 (see Box 1), and which contributed to the growing tribal divide and the sense of marginalization and victimization among Blue Nile's indigenous population.

As a war-affected area together with South Kordofan, Blue Nile later received special consideration during the negotiations that led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (see Sudan, 2005) that ended the Second Civil War between the GoS

and SPLM/A. The CPA granted Blue Nile and South Kordofan a special protocol and power-sharing, wealth-sharing, and security arrangements.

Despite their contributions to the SPLM/A struggle, however, the gains from the peace process obtained by the people of Blue Nile and the Nuba in South Kordofan were significantly lower than those of Southern Sudan: it was agreed that the two states would remain within Sudan as part of the sovereign territory governed by the GoS, with no option for self-determination. The leaders of Blue Nile and South Kordofan were thus left to negotiate with the GoS delegation alone. They felt that the SPLM/A leadership had traded their areas off in return for the smooth signing and implementation of the CPA, under pressure primarily from the United States and the other members of the Troika (the United Kingdom and Norway). The international diplomatic community made commitments of support to the leaders of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, so these leaders agreed—not without pressure from the SPLM/A—to hold a popular consultation on the constitutional basis of the Sudanese state and how the Two Areas would relate to the rest of the country.

During the CPA's interim period (2005–11) little changed in the war-torn areas. Political positioning at the national level seemed to be going well, however: in 2005 the then-SPLM/A third deputy-chairman, Malik Agar, an Ingessana, was made minister of investment in the new Government of National Unity (ICG, 2013, p. 9). He then became governor of Blue Nile state in 2007 (in line with a CPA power-sharing provision) (*Sudan Tribune*, 2007) and was reconfirmed in this position in the April 2010 elections, when he became the only non-NCP elected governor in Sudan, to the annoyance of many.[15] The NCP maintained its majority in the local assembly with 23 seats, while SPLM candidates won 19 seats, indicating how popular the SPLM was in Blue Nile, although the NCP's majority in the assembly was critical for the way in which the provisions of the CPA would be implemented.

The popular consultation process started in late 2010[16] with local elites and communities rallying together against Khartoum to demand more control over state resources and greater socioeconomic development.[17] As a result, obstructions by the federal government increased. This, combined with subsequent events surrounding gubernatorial elections in South Kordofan, and their spillover into Blue Nile, inevitably stopped the consultation process in its tracks.

Gubernatorial elections in South Kordofan began in April 2011. The incumbent NCP governor (and International Criminal Court-indicted) Ahmed Haroun was pitted against the SPLM deputy governor, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, for control of the state.[18] Amid major controversy Haroun won, and on 23 May the GoS demanded that all SPLA units in the Two Areas that were co-located with SAF forces in the Joined Integrated Units (JIUs)[19] should disarm themselves by 1 June.[20] This deadline was well ahead of the official CPA deadline, which set disarmament for January 2012.[21]

This violation of the CPA's terms, coupled with mounting political tension, therefore sparked a fight on 5 June 2011 between soldiers of the SPLA's 9th Division in the Nuba Mountains and SAF soldiers in Kadugli that soon spread throughout South Kordofan. (South Kordofan later became known as the SPLA-N's '1st Front'.[22]) On 28 June NCP co-deputy chairman Nafie Ali Nafie and Blue Nile governor Malik Agar signed a peace agreement in Addis Ababa, but Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir immediately rejected it.

Fighting in South Kordofan thus continued throughout the secession of South Sudan in July 2011 until, on 1 September, a skirmish between SAF and SPLA units in the JIUs outside the Blue Nile capital Damazin (the SPLA troops had once been part of the SPLA 10th Division) quickly ignited a large-scale conflict throughout the state (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 7, 18). Blue Nile would become known as the SPLA-N's 2nd Front (see endnote 22). Bashir's rejection of peace-making efforts and the rapid spread of violence in both states demonstrated the GoS's desire to eliminate local resistance in the Two Areas.

Meanwhile, SPLM members in Blue Nile and South Kordofan had been loosely constituted as an SPLM Political Bureau in February 2011 and became the SPLM-N (de Alessi, 2012). Following the line of seniority, Malik Agar became the SPLM-N chairman and commander-in-chief of the SPLA-N (the armed wing of the SPLM-N), with Abdelaziz al-Hilu as SPLM-N deputy chairman and SPLA-N chief of staff. The SPLM secretary in the area, Yasir Arman, became the new SPLM-N secretary-general (de Alessi, 2015, p. 15).

In the context of the fighting, however, Khartoum banned the SPLM-N as a political party (*Sudan Tribune*, 2011b), and many of its members in the Two Areas and in other parts of Sudan were arrested, assaulted, or killed (HRW, 2011). Soon the SPLM-N took shape as an armed rebel movement to fight for the rectification of grievances that the CPA had failed to resolve, including self-determination, thus continuing the periphery's struggle against the centre in Sudan that had begun in 1983.

“Regular SAF aerial bombing and shelling of SPLA-N positions and civilian villages became a key aspect of the conflict.”

Three years of fighting, 2011–14

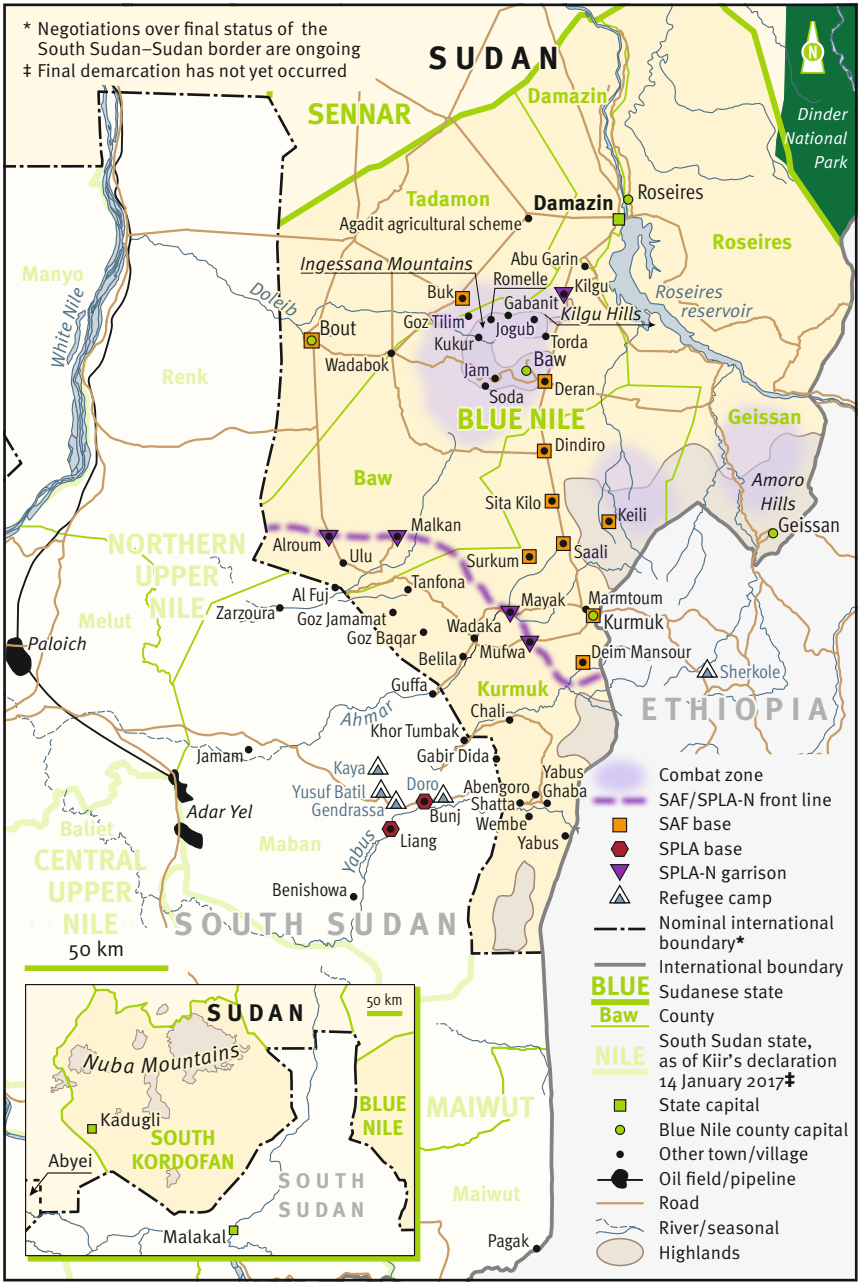
On 2 September 2011, the day after fighting broke out in Blue Nile, the GoS reinstated the emergency law in the state and replaced Malik Agar with a SAF military governor, Maj. Gen. Yahya Mohamed Khair, who had been the commander of Sudan's 4th Division (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 19). Agar's house was attacked and SAF aerial bombing began in Kurmuk, to where the SPLM/A-N had started to withdraw after the fighting started. SPLA and SAF troops in JIUs also started to fight each other in Dindiro, Kurmuk, Geissan, Roseires, Ulu, and Wadabok.

During almost two months of confrontations the SPLA-N troops from the JIUs in the state—approximately 3,000 fighters—were progressively pushed southwards. The SPLA-N tactically withdrew from Kurmuk to preserve its limited equipment and personnel, and on 3 November SAF entered the town. The loss of Kurmuk—the historical capital of SPLA resistance in southern Blue Nile—'was a major blow for the SPLM/A-N both logistically and psychologically, and led to significant defections at the beginning of the conflict' (de Alessi, 2015, p. 16).

By late 2011 a southern front line stretching from Deim Mansour through Malkan to Alroum had been established (see Map 1), and it would remain mostly unchanged during the years of active armed conflict between government forces and the SPLA-N from 2011 to 2016. While a small SPLA-N contingent of two battalions remained near Gabanit in the Ingessana Mountains, the majority of the SPLA-N troops regrouped south of Kurmuk, where they were joined by soldiers from the former SPLA 10th Division that had assembled in Guffa in Upper Nile, South Sudan, during the CPA interim period. While some 10th Division troops had started moving into the area in May 2011, 'it took several weeks for SPLA-N troops in Guffa to be fully operational, revealing a low level of alert among the SPLA-N ranks before the war started' (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 24). Moreover, while Southerners in the SPLA ranks were moved to South Sudan, Blue Nile fighters were only redeployed back to their home state in early 2012. In short, the SPLM/A-N in Blue Nile was unprepared for conflict.

In contrast, the GoS had the military advantage from the beginning of the conflict in Blue Nile and was able to rely on the weight of the forces it had covertly built up throughout the Two Areas ahead of the 2010 elections. Indeed, as the fighting continued the high degree to which the GoS had militarized Blue Nile during the interim period—in violation of the CPA's security arrangements—soon became apparent. According to research conducted in 2013, the SAF presence in the state exceeded the contingent in the JIUs allowed by the CPA, while additional GoS paramilitary troops were brought into Blue Nile and given police uniforms to avoid attracting suspicion from the SPLA and international observers (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 33). In fact, the fighting in Kadugli and Blue Nile that sparked the war in the first place (see above) seemed to have been triggered by the continued presence of non-JIU forces in the Two Areas and the build-up of GoS forces. The GoS's recruitment of local militias was particularly significant, and the national security forces were never reduced to pre-war levels as

Map 1 The conflict in Blue Nile State, 2015–19



Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

they should have been in line with the CPA's terms, and instead increased threefold in numbers (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 18).

In the first months of the war, and then sporadically over the succeeding years, both sides tried to gain control of more territory, but were unable to do so. From their positions north of the front line government forces[23] launched repeated attacks on SPLA-N-controlled areas, especially around Deim Mansour and Alroum, while the SPLA-N tried to capture Surkum and Keili on several occasions, but without success. The SPLA-N contingent that had remained in the Ingessana Mountains near Gabanit also launched guerrilla operations against government forces in northern Blue Nile and ambushed them in and around the Amoro Hills in the Geissan locality, but could not establish a regular presence there.

By early 2012 an estimated 7,000–15,000 SPLA-N troops were active in Blue Nile, but their numbers fluctuated as fighters either deserted or were only mobilized to fight as needed—including the so-called 'reserves' from the local population and from people in the refugee camps in South Sudan.[24] Since then the SPLA-N in Blue Nile has been mainly composed of members of local indigenous tribes, with a very limited presence of Nuba from South Kordofan. These forces were originally under the command of an Ingessana, Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Umda, but he left for Kampala in 2012 and was replaced by his deputy, Maj. Gen. Joseph Tuka, an Uduk.

Regular SAF aerial bombing and shelling of SPLA-N positions and civilian villages became a key aspect of the conflict, and caused the massive displacement of civilians and the disruption of markets, education, health services, and agricultural activities for the small populations that remained in the southern Kurmuk locality such as those in the Yabus, Chali, and Wadaka *payams* (districts).[25] Tens of thousands of people also started to leave the conflict-affected areas in the Geissan and Baw localities and fled towards South Sudan and Ethiopia. Many of these civilians had already been displaced during the Second Civil War and had only recently returned to Blue Nile.

Fighting continued in 2012 along the southern front line. Both SAF and the paramilitary PDF attacked SPLA-N positions south-west of Kurmuk, with an increasing use of aerial bombing and shelling against both military and civilian targets. The aerial attacks seemed to have been focused on demoralizing civilian populations and hindering their farming activities, in order to reduce what the GoS saw as ongoing civilian support for the SPLA-N.

From April 2012 fighting was concentrated in the Ingessana Mountains, where government forces successfully weakened the SPLA-N contingent. After losing control of Gabanit in May, this contingent became more vulnerable to attacks and further isolated from the rest of the front. By the end of 2012 these SPLA-N forces were losing their grip on the area, and soldiers and civilians started fleeing through the SPLA-N

garrison at Malkan into areas behind the southern front line for safety, or northwards towards the state's capital, Damazin (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 24–26).

Having weakened the SPLA-N contingent in the Ingessana Mountains, SAF concentrated its attacks on the southern front line. During the first months of 2013 military confrontations were intense, especially around Kurmuk, Deim Mansour, and Mufu. Occasionally SPLA-N troops were able to score some victories over government forces: during major battles around Mufu in February and Surkum in March the SPLA-N was able to capture military equipment, although by that time most of the arms and ammunition that were seized were more than ten years old (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 8, 27).

Overall, however, the SPLA-N forces in Blue Nile on the 2nd Front were not adequately equipped to sustain long-term military operations and, in most cases, adopted conservative tactics. Their capacity was also weaker than the SPLA-N division in South Kordofan on the 1st Front, and the morale of the troops dropped over time due to the lack of victories, a weak chain of command, lack of resources and equipment, and the lack of a common identity among the rank and file (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 28–29). Also in contrast to South Kordofan, and despite Malik Agar's being chairman of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF),[26] the SPLA-N in Blue Nile received no support from Darfuri SRF troops, who were only deployed in South Kordofan. This, together with limited international support, contributed to the SPLA-N's poor performance in 2012–13 and to the growing internal discontent among both the troops and the population. This discontent would increase over the coming years and have catastrophic consequences for the SPLM/A-N in 2017.

By the end of the second dry season in mid-2013 the military balance of the conflict in Blue Nile appeared to be largely in favour of the GoS, with the SPLA-N mostly confined to the southern part of the state (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 8).

'During the 2013–14 dry season offensive, the SPLA-N and the GoS engaged in key battles along the front line' at Deim Mansour, Mufu, Mayak, Malkan, Alroum, and Surkum, but neither side achieved significant military successes (de Alessi, 2015, pp. 19–20). In late 2013 the SPLA-N started to reinforce its presence in the Ingessana Mountains, a year after its previous losses. On 27 October 2013 the SPLA-N captured Sita Kilo, Kukur, Goz Tilim, and Romelle, which had been lost in February 2012, as well as Gabanit, which had been lost in May of that year. SAF remained in control of Baw town and its other garrisons at Buk and Deran, however. The arid area of the southern Baw locality to the west and south of the Ingessana Mountains, which lay between the SPLA-N bases at Al Fuj and Ulu and the SAF garrison at Bout, became a no-man's land that was heavily patrolled by both sides and mostly deserted after the civilian population had fled. The terrain was not conducive to SPLA-N tactics, and it used the area mainly to defend the southern front line and to send supplies to its contingent in the Ingessana Mountains (de Alessi, 2015, pp. 19–20).

From the start of the rainy season in mid-2014 the SPLA-N increased its guerrilla operations outside the territories that it occupied, with the aim of disrupting the April 2015 elections and undermining NCP power in Blue Nile; it also used this tactic in South Kordofan. Its attack on the Agadit agricultural scheme (30 km south-west of Damazin) in August 2015 forced farming companies to leave the area and threatened the GoS's economic interests in the state.[27] The SPLA-N also increased ambush operations in Geissan, around the Amoro Hills, which caused the population to flee into Ethiopia.

“The COHs remain extremely fragile. They have not wholly stemmed the violence, either.”

Conflict dynamics, 2015–19

The fourth and fifth fighting seasons, the 4th Front, and the COH agreements, February 2015–June 2016

During the first three fighting seasons (mid-2011 to mid-2014), GoS forces had been able to push the SPLA-N out of much of Blue Nile and contain its forces in the southern parts of the state; however, they had never quite managed to eject the SPLA-N contingent from the Ingessana Mountains. In February 2015, therefore, during the fourth fighting season the SPLA-N sent approximately 2,000 soldiers back into the Ingessana Mountains and, under the command of Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Umda (who had returned from Kampala), took control of a large part of the area. This included the SPLA-N garrison at Kilgu, which is located approximately 35 km from Damazin, and the mountainous area between Gabanit, Jam, and Baw town. From these positions the SPLA-N actively attacked SAF garrisons during 2015 and early 2016 in both Tadamon and Baw counties, and also ambushed SAF convoys moving between Damazin and Kurmuk (see Map 1).

This new, more northerly front constituted the 4th Front, which mostly operated independently of Maj. Gen. Tuka's SPLA-N forces in southern Blue Nile, which constituted the 2nd Front. The 4th Front was the result of both military and political considerations designed to threaten government power and economic interests in the north, and to appease Ingessana constituencies by giving Maj. Gen. al-Umda his own front. There is no doubt that the opening of the 4th Front changed the conflict dynamics in Blue Nile, albeit briefly. No longer were SPLA-N forces contained in the southern areas of the state, but were positioned in large numbers close to the state capital and to important large-scale agricultural centres in the Tadamon area. Due to the area's proximity to key centres of economic and political power, both local and international analysts widely believe that SPLA-N control of these areas was more concerning to the GoS than the SPLA-N presence in southern Kurmuk county.

This change in dynamics was reflected in the GoS's military decisions, and for four months government forces concentrated on attacking SPLA-N positions in the Ingessana Mountains, while there was no significant fighting on the southern front line. At the same time government forces also increased their attacks on Ingessana civilians living in the northern and eastern parts of the Ingessana Mountains, accusing them of supporting the SPLM/A-N, and forcibly displaced more than 6,000 families (ACJPS, 2015).

As the fifth fighting season in Blue Nile began in October 2015, government forces again concentrated their efforts on the SPLA-N positions in the Ingessana Mountains. They attacked Kilgu twice in October, but did not gain control of it, while the SPLA-N continued to ambush government convoys moving through the Tadamon and Baw localities. In early December government forces attacked the SPLA-N in Torda village, on the eastern flank of the Ingessana Mountains and close to the Damazin–Kurmuk road, but again failed to take control of the area. Despite this strong show of SPLA-N

resistance, it was at this time that Malik Agar dissolved the 4th Front and put Maj. Gen. al-Umda back in control of the SPLA-N's 2nd Front in Blue Nile, with Maj. Gen. Tuka as his deputy.

While pushing the SPLA-N out of the area was likely still the main goal for the GoS in Blue Nile at this time, its inability to do so by directly attacking SPLA-N forces appears to have pushed government forces to change tactics. Thus, later in December the GoS began to mobilize troops in southern Blue Nile, around Kurmuk town. The government's rationale seems to have been that if its forces could successfully push the SPLA-N further south, especially in areas around Alroum, Malkan, and Tanfona, then the SPLA-N would be unable to resupply its positions in the Ingessana Mountains. This would in turn weaken the SPLA-N forces in the Ingessana Mountains and make SAF's efforts to displace them easier.

On 22–24 January 2016 a combined force of SAF and the so-called 'Maban Heroes' militia (see Box 1) attacked the SPLA-N garrison near Alroum. After several days of fighting government forces were repulsed and forced to return to the SAF garrison at Bout, in the Tadamon locality. They then attacked Kilgu at the end of February and again in the middle of March, but both attempts failed to dislodge the SPLA-N forces from the Ingessana Mountains.

By early April government forces—especially SAF and the Kobaji militia (see Box 1)—had mobilized large numbers of troops, well over 200 Land Cruiser technicals, and numerous large lorries near Mufu to the south-west of Kurmuk town. As they were preparing to attack, however, SPLA-N forces ambushed them. During the ambush the SPLA-N claimed to have captured more than 100 of the Land Cruiser technicals and 40 large lorries loaded with weapons and other materiel. In mid-April 2016 SAF and the Maban Heroes attacked Alroum again, this time with a substantially larger force; however, the SPLA-N again ambushed these government forces and claimed to have captured two dozen Land Cruiser technicals and large lorries, as well as heavy earth-moving equipment and one T-55 tank.

During May 2016, in apparent response to SAF and its allied militias' inability to dislodge the SPLA-N from the Ingessana Mountains or push SPLA-N forces further south to their Alroum and Malkan garrisons, the GoS began to deploy large numbers of its Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—comprising mostly fighters from Darfur—into Blue Nile. Instead of fighting the SPLA-N, however, at the end of May these RSF forces attacked and looted villages in GoS-held areas—including villages near Damazin. The RSF national commander, Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ('Hemedti'), visited the state in mid-May and publicly criticized SAF for its failure to defeat the SPLA-N and questioned its integrity, suggesting that the only explanation for SAF's failure and loss of vehicles and ammunition to the SPLA-N was because it was secretly working for the SPLA-N.[28]

Finally, at the beginning of June 2016 a large convoy of government forces consisting mostly of the RSF managed to dislodge the SPLA-N from the eastern edge of its garrison at Kilgu, although SPLA-N forces managed to retain their positions on the western side of Kilgu. The RSF forces showed little interest in either holding territory, remaining in the Ingessana Mountains, or continuing to fight the SPLA-N.[29] By the end of June the bulk of RSF forces had left Blue Nile. Some were redeployed along the Sudanese–Libyan border, allegedly as part of Sudan's efforts to reduce irregular migration in terms of an agreement with the European Union (EU),[30] but the RSF may also have been ordered to leave because its fighters' abuses against civilians had made it unpopular in Blue Nile—even among NCP members (Tubiana, 2017, pp. 10–11).[31] Since the RSF had pushed the SPLA-N away from the eastern side of Kilgu, the GoS likely thought that the threat to Damazin had been sufficiently reduced, so the RSF was no longer required. Also, the GoS had begun serious talks with the US government about the lifting of economic sanctions as a step towards removing Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, and ultimately providing it with debt relief. A ceasefire in the Two Areas was part of these negotiations.[32]

It was in this context that on 18 June 2016 the GoS declared a unilateral four-month COH in the Two Areas (UNHRC, 2016, para. 61).[33] The SPLA-N reciprocated with a six-month unilateral COH in July 2016. Scepticism was high among the SPLM/A-N ranks, however, because the initial GoS COH period coincided with the rainy season, which is when fighting in the Two Areas naturally pauses. Nevertheless, aerial bombing and shelling seemed to come to an end after the GoS COH was declared.

As of mid-2016, then, GoS troops controlled the towns of (from north to south) Abu Garin, Buk, Gabanit, Baw, Deran, Dindiro, Saali, Kurmuk, and Deim Mansour, as well as the strategic Damazin–Kurmuk road that runs through all of these towns (except for Deim Mansour, which is south of Kurmuk). For its part, while the SPLM/A-N lost territory around Kilgu, it has retained other gains in the Ingessana Mountains and maintained control of most of the Kurmuk locality in southern Blue Nile. As such, despite the conflicting parties' COH declarations and the Blue Nile conflict changing from 'active' to 'non-active', the SPLA-N continues to pose a threat to GoS control of the state. Because the opposing troops are located near to one another, government-controlled territories between the various SPLA-N fronts remain highly militarized and the presence of arms is widespread. The underlying motives that ignited the conflict in 2011 have not been addressed, so the COHs remain extremely fragile. They have not wholly stemmed the violence, either, because various conflict dynamics have continued to emerge both within and around Blue Nile since they were declared.

Box 1 The main GoS proxy forces in and around Blue Nile

The GoS's counter-insurgency strategy has mostly made use of locally recruited militias and paramilitary forces from Blue Nile, other parts of Sudan, and South Sudan that were sometimes recruited only a few months ahead of an offensive to support the regular armed forces defending garrisons or to act alone as local proxies and agitators. Total numbers are therefore difficult to estimate and changed over time, but it seems that, at the very least, 17,000 men were involved in GoS-directed operations in and around Blue Nile.[34] By relying on several militias the GoS was likely attempting to sow discord and increase local violence between pro-GoS tribes and the SPLM/A-N in southern Blue Nile and neighbouring Maban county in Upper Nile, South Sudan (see Map 1) as a way of distracting the SPLM/A-N from its fight with the government.[35] In fact, using local militias appeared to become the GoS's main policy as the war progressed, so that by early 2016 militias of this type from Sudan and South Sudan made up the bulk of the government's fighting forces before the GoS deployed the RSF in May of that year (see above).

Each of the GoS's proxy forces is organized and supported for specific purposes. The following is a breakdown of the main GoS proxy forces in and around Blue Nile and the role they play in fulfilling government aims.

GoS proxy forces in Sudan

Popular Defence Forces (PDF) (established 1989)

The PDF was created in the aftermath of the 1989 coup to serve as an instrument of the new Islamist regime (Salmon, 2007, p. 8; HSBA, 2011). The PDF in Blue Nile has historically drawn the bulk of its forces from the non-indigenous Fellata and Hausa communities, but also includes fighters from some indigenous groups such as the Berta (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 35). Mobilizing the PDF serves GoS interests by popularizing the war among traditionally pro-GoS communities in northern Blue Nile. The two main PDF mobilizers in Blue Nile are Governor Hussein Yasin and the Funj paramount chief, Mek al-Fatih al-Mek Yusif Hassan Adlan, although all of the various NCP-affiliated Blue Nile governors retained this function. The PDF coordinator is Atif Yousif al-Bashir, a Berta from Geissan, who liaises between the PDF and SAF—especially in terms of salaries and arms distribution. The PDF was very active in fighting the SPLA-N during the early years of the war, but this decreased over time, and the GoS now appears to rely more on the Maban Heroes and the Kobaji militia (both described below), as well as pro-GoS militias from other parts of Sudan and South Sudan.

Kobaji militia (established 2010)

In the run-up to the April 2010 elections in Blue Nile the GoS attempted to mobilize parts of tribes that made up the SPLM's traditional support base. The GoS thus exploited a rift between the Jabalaween (part of the Berta tribe) and Malik Agar, which

involved an SPLA officer named Zaidan Yassin accusing Agar of organizing the killing of his uncle, the chief of the Jabalaween, in 1998. In early 2010 the GoS supported Yassin with funding and small arms to create a militia with the goal of organizing pro-NCP votes during the election. After the war in Blue Nile broke out in September 2011 the GoS continued to support the militia and Yassin continued to recruit disgruntled SPLA-N officers and soldiers—many of whom held personal grudges against Agar, who was by then the SPLM-N's chairman. The GoS's original mobilization tactic that relied on resentment towards Agar became less effective, however, after the SPLM/A-N split (see below), because Kobaji militia leaders did not have the same hostility towards Joseph Tuka and his senior command.

Since 2011 the Kobaji militia has fought alongside SAF against the SPLA-N in most of the main battles in the Kurmuk area. It was especially active in the 2015 and 2016 fighting seasons. The militia has a standing force of fewer than 500 men, but can raise as many as 1,500 for specific battles. In 2015 Brig. Gen. Mohamed Yunus from the Hamaj tribe in the Roseires locality defected from the SPLA-N and is now one of the Kobaji militia's main leaders. It is unclear, however, just how strongly this militia really supports the GoS, but rather uses its relationship with the government to obtain small arms as a means of defending its members against Arab and Fellata pastoralists in Geissan and Roseires.

GoS proxy forces in South Sudan

'Maban Heroes' (established 2009)

This militia is based in Bout in Tadamon county, Blue Nile, and comprises mostly ethnic Mabanese, but also includes some Nuer and Fellata (who rarely take part in battles, however). Since its formation it has had a standing force of around 200 men—which can increase to 1,500 during the fighting seasons—all of whom are recruited from Maban county. Recruitment periods are often short term and occur on a seasonal basis (Gramizzi, 2013, p. 40).

The militia's political leader is Abdallah Monti, a long-time member of the NCP and former NCP Maban county commissioner (2005–10), when Upper Nile was an NCP-controlled Sudanese state. After Upper Nile's transition from NCP to SPLM rule in 2010, Monti based himself in northern Blue Nile. Kamal Loma, a Mabanese, is the military leader of this militia and a former SAF sergeant major during the Second Civil War. During the CPA period Loma maintained his SAF links and was appointed the militia's leader in late 2009 or early 2010 when SAF created the Maban Heroes in preparation for the April 2010 elections. Mabanese elites such as Monti and Loma—especially those from the Bunj area—have strong ties to the NCP, because they were recruited into the National Islamic Front party (the NCP's predecessor) in the early and mid-1990s.[36] Elites loyal to Khartoum are more evident in Maban than in other parts of South Sudan, in part because of their long-term commitment to a shared Islamist ideology.[37]

The Maban Heroes' objective, as stated in the group's semi-public recruiting efforts in Maban county since the war started in 2011, is to return the county to Sudan for both political and economic reasons. Monti and Loma feel that when Maban county became part of South Sudan the Mabanese lost national-level political support for their attempts to address their political, social, and economic grievances—especially the Mabanese' lack of access to the revenues from the Adar Yel oil fields. The GoS has capitalized on Mabanese grievances against the SPLM by attempting to direct Mabanese anger against the SPLM/A-N in support of GoS efforts to defeat the SPLM-N in Blue Nile.

Between 2011 and 2016 Loma's troops fought against the SPLA-N mostly around Alroum in support of SAF's fruitless efforts to breach the SPLA-N southern front line. Yet Loma's recruitment campaign during the 2016 fighting season was more successful than in previous years, perhaps reflecting increased Mabanese grievances and better organized GoS efforts to defeat the SPLA-N. Further clashes occurred in Alroum in January 2017 (Sudan Democracy First Group, n.d.); since then, however, no clashes have been reported between Loma's troops and the SPLA-N.[38]

Maban Defence Forces (MDF) (established 2014–16)

The Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) created the MDF in 2014 after the eruption of the conflict in South Sudan in December 2013 (see below, p. 32). In 2016, however, many MDF commanders either defected to the SPLA in Opposition (SPLA-IO) or were co-opted by the GoS, who exploited local and personal grievances against the Dinka-dominated GRSS over power and resources. Although the pro-GoS MDF groups had limited military power (fighters were mainly recruited just before a battle) and short-term goals, they created significant havoc among the population.

The most important groups of pro-GoS MDF were led by Johnson Khalifa, who formed an MDF splinter group in early 2016 (see below, p. 33), and by the ex-Maban county commissioner, Langan Baggari. Baggari, who had been nominally allied to the GRSS, sought and received SAF support from Khartoum to fight against what he considered to be Dinka land expansion in the area.[39] While Khalifa died in a battle in Doro refugee camp on 24 December 2016, Baggari is believed to be still active and likely based around the forest area of Zarzoura in northern Maban county.

Currently the MDF is partially disarmed, but its numbers are unclear. Some Mabanese elites remain loyal to the SPLM government in Juba, but they are difficult to identify because their allegiances are interest-based and contingent on obtaining support. Other MDF members are scattered.

The MDF sees the SPLM—in all its forms, including the SPLA[40] or SPLM/A-N and Blue Nile refugees—as part of the same occupying force that is preventing the Mabanese from truly controlling their own land and profiting from the oil fields on that land. Its interests thus converge with those of the GoS, since Khartoum sees the Blue Nile refugees in Maban as constituting a form of rear base for the SPLA-N and resents their presence in the county.

MDF clashes with the SPLA-N and refugees

Background, 2009–14

Maban county lies in northern Upper Nile state along South Sudan's north-east periphery with Sudan, just across the border from southern Blue Nile.[41] Ethnic Mabanese people make up a significant majority of Maban's population, with a Dinka population in western and northern Maban and a Nuer population in the southern part of the county. The majority of the Mabanese population identify as Muslim; this, and their close proximity to Sudan, means that Maban county is culturally and religiously linked more to Sudan than to South Sudan. Furthermore, over the past decades the Mabanese have felt politically and economically marginalized within South Sudan, with only limited control over their political environment and security.[42] Compounding this disconnect is the fact that fewer Mabanese fought in the SPLA during the Second Civil War than other neighbouring Dinka and Nuer tribes, and currently there are no Mabanese members of South Sudan's top political and military structures.[43]

Khartoum has capitalized on local grievances against the SPLM and used Maban militias to fight against the SPLA-N in Blue Nile since 2009 (see Box 1). With the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013, however, Sudanese interests and the GoS's exploitation of local dynamics became entangled with the interests of the warring parties in South Sudan. In 2014 the GRSS increased its mobilization of Mabanese and created the MDF to compete with the community-based Nuer militias (often referred to as the 'White Army') allied to Riek Machar's SPLA/M-IO.[44]

In order to mobilize these community-based militias both in Maban and in other parts of the country, the GRSS turned to local political and military elites. Alliances were fluid and often opportunistic, and were linked to the local elites who mobilized them, and who handed out cash and small arms to new recruits. These militias' adherence to any of the GRSS's goals in Upper Nile was weak. Elites moved between groups depending on whose support was more likely to enable them to achieve their goals.[45] Inevitably, militias such as the MDF fragmented and alliances shifted over time. For example, Khartoum co-opted some MDF leaders to fight against the SPLA-N and Blue Nile refugees (see Box 1). These Khartoum-aligned elites were able to use Mabanese grievances to mobilize the MDF and the broader Mabanese community and use their anger to achieve goals sympathetic to Khartoum. Allegiances shifted in particular during times of conflict over issues of land and resources between the Mabanese and their South Sudanese neighbours, especially the Dinka, since many in the Mabanese community consider the SPLM to be pro-Dinka.

Since 2014 other Mabanese elites, especially from southern Maban county, joined Riek Machar's SPLA-IO, often due to personal ties. These elites seem the least-coherent group because their allegiance is not ideological, but is based on kinship connections

with the Nuer of Longochuk, whom the Mabanese exploited to access the SPLA-IO's guns and settle their own Maban-based grievances locally. Since 2016 those groups have been led by former Maban county commissioners John Ivo and John Jumma, who are both originally from the SPLA-IO stronghold of Benishowa in southern Maban.[46]

From 2011 Mabanese grievances increased against the large number of Blue Nile refugees who were occupying their land and taking their local resources (trees, grazing land), while also receiving more humanitarian assistance than the Mabanese were (DDG, 2013, p. 2). The MDF attacked refugee camps on several occasions in 2014: 'The largest … attacks … took place in Yusuf Batil Camp in March and August 2014' (Sudan Democracy First Group, n.d.).

Underlying South Sudanese grievances also motivated some of these attacks. In August 2014 Mabanese forces under local member of parliament Mun Fan, who was one of the creators of the MDF and was allied with the GRSS, attacked Nuer people living in Maban. The killings happened in retaliation for the actions of some Nuer who defected from the Bunj SPLA barracks to join the SPLA-IO in Benishowa. On their way out of Bunj they fought with and killed some Mabanese. In retaliation, and solely for ethnic reasons, the Mabanese brutally killed Nuer they found working for NGOs.[47]

Clashes, 2015–16

In February 2015 the MDF made another attack on Blue Nile refugees in Maban county, this time those living in Gendrassa camp (Sudan Democracy First Group, n.d.). From late 2015 until the end of 2016 the GoS increased its co-option of local elites, and as a result, violence became more coordinated and widespread.[48] The GoS seemed to increase its efforts to trigger local violence and undermine the SPLA-N's rear recruitment base. Eventually, the GoS hoped to use Mabanese to fight the SPLA-N inside Blue Nile by attacking the refugee camps. In early 2016 a group of Mabanese elites based mostly around Bunj town began a process of co-opting a large segment of the MDF. These elites wanted their recruits to harass and antagonize Blue Nile refugees with the goal of forcing them to return to Blue Nile.[49]

In mid-2016 Johnson Khalifa, an MDF commander, emerged as the military leader of this group with the self-appointed rank of major general, and by October had mobilized perhaps as many as 200 militia members. On 15 October this force, known as the MDF-Johnson Khalifa, launched an attack on an SPLA-N checkpoint in Blue Nile near Shatta village near the Maban county–Blue Nile border, which the SPLA-N repulsed. On 17 October the group then attacked the SPLA-N deeper inside SPLA-N-controlled Blue Nile near Wembe village. Finally, on 3 November, it attacked an SPLA-N outpost near Gabir Dida village, which was also located on the border between Maban county and Blue Nile.[50] Eyewitness interviewees said that there was no clear reason for these attacks because no recent local community issues had arisen between the

Blue Nile and Mabanese communities such as cattle raids or marriage problems.[51] The GoS probably hoped that the SPLA-N would retaliate and kill Mabanese, thereby sparking a larger tribal war. The communities involved, however, did not respond to this provocation.

In December 2016 the MDF-Johnson Khalifa changed tactics and began to focus more on Blue Nile refugees, as opposed to the SPLA-N. On 24 December the group attacked the Doro refugee camp and fought with refugees and nearby SPLA-N units. The attack on the camp was repulsed, but 70 people were killed (Dabanga, 2017a; Sudan Democracy First Group, n.d.), most of whom were refugees; however, Khalifa himself was among them. On the morning of 25 December the MDF staged a retaliatory attack against Blue Nile refugees in Bunj town market, where another 70 people, including children, were killed.

While tensions between the Mabanese and Blue Nile communities decreased in early 2017 due largely to interventions by community leaders from both sides, as well as some support from the GRSS,[52] the underlying grievances were never addressed. When infighting between the SPLA-N and local communities began in May 2017 (see below), Mabanese elites' alliances shifted once again and tension remained palpable. In July 2018 refugee operations were undermined by attacks perpetrated by Mabanese youths who were angry over their lack of opportunities and support. Local groups had allegedly co-opted these youths.

The risk that open violence between Mabanese and refugees and within these groups could break out again is high, particularly in light of the fluid political dynamics in Sudan, the failure to implement the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and the differing political interests of the two SPLA-N groups that emerged after the SPLM/A-N internal split that started in March 2017.

The SPLM/A-N internal split

The split, March 2017–ongoing

In 2017 long-simmering ethnic and political–military tensions within the SPLA-N in Blue Nile and the SPLM/A-N's leadership began to rise to the surface. These tensions contributed to the movement's splitting into two factions and led to intra-SPLA-N fighting in Blue Nile. The history of these tensions is as follows.

Members of southern Blue Nile tribal groups, especially the Uduk, Berta, and Burun (collectively referred to in the discussion that follows as 'non-Ingessana'), had made up the bulk of both the foot soldiers and top leadership positions in the SPLA's 10th Division during the Second Civil War. Many of them expected their leadership roles

to continue after the formation of the SPLM/A-N in 2011. Indeed, for a while they did: in 2011–12, although Malik Agar (an Ingessana) was both SPLM/A-N chairman and commander-in-chief of the SPLA-N, and Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Umda (an Ingessana and relative of Agar's) was the overall SPLA-N commander in Blue Nile, non-Ingessana held most of the other leadership positions, including that of deputy commander; heads of operations, intelligence, finance, and logistics; and head of the Blue Nile Liberation Council (BNLC). In 2012, when Maj. Gen. al-Umda left Blue Nile, his deputy, Maj. Gen. Joseph Tuka, an Uduk, took over as commander of the 2nd Front. Non-Ingessana political and military leaders welcomed his appointment.

This uneasy détente began to deteriorate, however, after five major political and military changes:

- In 2014 Agar created a civil administration in Blue Nile, but he did not appoint an Uduk to be either governor or deputy governor. The highest political position held by an Uduk was given to Sila Musa, who became commissioner of the Kurmuk locality. The Uduk—the largest non-Ingessana tribe in Blue Nile—protested, claiming that they should have been granted one of these positions due to the large sacrifices they had made for the SPLM cause since 1985.
- In February 2015 Agar removed Brig. al-Jundi Suleiman, a non-Ingessana from the Dawala tribe, as head of operations and replaced him with Brig. Stephen Ahmed, an Uduk. Although Suleiman was replaced by an Uduk, the way in which this occurred contributed to growing tensions within the SPLA-N among some officers, including Suleiman and Agar.
- At the same time, the non-Ingessana head of the BNLC, a Berta, was replaced by an Ingessana, which contributed to growing tensions within the BNLC and the SPLM-N in Blue Nile.
- In April 2015 Maj. Gen. al-Umda returned to Blue Nile and Agar made him the head of the newly constituted 4th Front in the Ingessana Mountains. For approximately six months he operated independently of Maj. Gen. Tuka's 2nd Front on the southern front line, which initially helped to keep tensions between the two groups to a minimum. The two fronts did not share weapons or other assets, however, including the tanks and heavy artillery under the 2nd Front's command.
- In October 2015 Agar dissolved the 4th Front and integrated it into the 2nd Front. He gave overall command back to Maj. Gen. al-Umda, and demoted Maj. Gen. Tuka to become al-Umda's deputy. Tuka, a loyal commander who grew up within the ranks of the SPLA, accepted his new situation, but Agar's decision fostered the perception of increasing Ingessana domination.

Non-Ingessana in the military were even more agitated when Maj. Gen. al-Umda promoted more than 15 Ingessana officers to high ranks immediately after assuming his position as 2nd Front commander.

As fighting between the SPLA-N and the GoS and its proxies intensified in 2015–16 (see above), growing tensions within the SPLA-N itself were temporarily put on hold; however, as the GoS–SPLA-N COH stayed in place, the SPLA-N's intra-party tensions began to boil over. In early 2017 Agar dismissed the SPLA-N's non-Ingessana heads of finance and logistics and replaced them with Ingessana generals. This brought matters to a head, and in March SPLM/A-N deputy chairman Abdelaziz al-Hilu publicly released a resignation letter (Dabanga, 2017b). Al-Hilu, of mixed Darfuri and Nuba descent and most closely associated with the SPLM/A-N's 1st Front in South Kordofan, openly criticized Agar and secretary-general Yasir Arman, and accused them of delaying the development of the SPLM-N's institutional structures. More specifically, he complained about the lack of an SPLM-N manifesto, a constitution, and a National Liberation Council (NLC), all of which prevented the Two Areas' residents from having a say in the movement's policies and leadership. Al-Hilu also disapproved of the SPLM-N's official negotiating position that Arman had presented to the African Union High-level Implementation Panel (AUHIP), and compromises made on the secular option and security arrangements. He wanted the SPLM-N to include a demand for the right to self-determination in the event that the GoS refused the movement's demand for a secular state, and for the SPLA-N to be kept separate from SAF for at least 20 years after the signing of an agreement with the GoS (Oodua Pathfinder, 2017; Nuba Reports, 2017b).

A number of analysts have suggested that al-Hilu's resignation letter was more about asking SPLM-N members, especially the Nuba, to make a choice in leadership between himself, on the one hand, and Agar and Arman, on the other, than it was about his actually resigning (for example, see el Gizouli, 2017). Indeed, this scenario certainly seemed to play out. Almost immediately the Nuba Mountains Liberation Council (NMLC) claimed legitimacy over the Two Areas, citing the absence of an NLC and the inadequacy of the BNLC. The NMLC then passed resolutions removing Arman as the SPLM-N's lead negotiator with AUHIP while calling for the inclusion of self-determination as part of the SPLM-N's negotiating position (*Sudan Tribune*, 2017a).

In Blue Nile many senior non-Ingessana leaders began to publicly voice support for al-Hilu and the NMLC and to criticize Agar and Arman. In late April 2017 almost all of the non-Ingessana BNLC members declared their support for the NMLC decision to dismiss Arman as the SPLM-N AUHIP lead negotiator, leading Agar to accuse al-Hilu of staging a coup. Although they did not fully agree with the position of the Nuba constituencies, the non-Ingessana Blue Nile leaders joined al-Hilu against Agar and the perceived Ingessana domination of the movement. By the end of April the tensions in Blue Nile took on a national dimension as the non-Ingessana's criticism turned on Agar's and Arman's handling of *all* the SPLM/A-N's functions—not just its functions and structures in Blue Nile (see *Sudan Tribune*, 2017b).

On 7 June 2017 the NMLC passed resolutions removing Agar and appointing al-Hilu as interim SPLM/A-N chairman and commander-in-chief, while also removing Arman

as SPLM-N secretary-general. This was followed shortly by the SPLA-N chief of general staff officially supporting the NMLC resolutions and welcoming al-Hilu to his new positions. With little territory under his control and few SPLA-N supporters outside of his Ingessana tribe, Agar was unable to effectively resist these new developments. Attempts at reconciliation between the SPLM-N-al-Hilu and the SPLM-N-Agar that began fairly promptly with the support of internal and external facilitators[53] have not borne fruit.

Meanwhile, al-Hilu initiated an internal reform of the SPLM-N, which had been one of the NMLC's demands that triggered the split. A committee began drafting internal SPLM-N documents such as a manifesto and constitution, as well as new laws for the areas liberated from GoS control. These reforms were endorsed at the first Extraordinary General Convention of the SPLM-N held in South Kordofan in October 2017 (the first one since the SPLM/A-N's formation in 2011). Members from Blue Nile attended, but Arman and Agar refused to participate. According to the final statement issued on 14 October the convention also confirmed the new SPLM/A-N-al-Hilu political and military leadership, and endorsed the Blue Nile regional conference that had taken place in the last week of September 2017 and had produced new executive and legislative bodies to which the members of the BNLC were elected. Members belong to various tribes that make up the social base of the SPLM-N-al-Hilu in the area, namely the Uduk, Dawala, Berta, Jabalaween, and Burun, and other minorities such as the Nuba and Darfuri.

Unsurprisingly, at the convention al-Hilu was elected chairman of the SPLM-N; Maj. Gen. Tuka (from Blue Nile) was elected deputy chairman and promoted to SPLA-N lieutenant general; Jagood Mekwar was elected second deputy chairman; and Ammar Amun was elected national secretary-general of the movement. Hassan Abbas Abu-Ras was appointed governor of Blue Nile, while NLC members were also elected from the Two Areas.

Together with Tuka, a number of senior officers from Blue Nile loyal to al-Hilu were promoted to leading military positions. For example, Brig. al-Jundi Suleiman, a Dawala, was promoted to the rank of major general and became director of the chief of operations in the general staff (D/COGS) and Brig. Gen. Abdul-Qadir Shaban from the Jabalaween was promoted to major general and appointed commander of the SPLA-N's 2nd Front (see Radio Tamazuj, n.d.). Brig. Stephen Ahmed from the Uduk was promoted to major general and assigned as D/COGS for administration. Tuka also promoted many officers from other tribes to higher ranks in the SPLA-N in Blue Nile and appointed them to positions that were formerly occupied by members of the Ingessana. The majority of the SPLA-N-al-Hilu forces in Blue Nile belong to the Uduk tribe.[54]

The highest political position in the national structures held by a Blue Nile representative went to Sila Musa, who became SPLM-N political secretary, although he was

granted limited decision-making power. Indeed, Blue Nile members of the al-Hilu faction remained unable to influence the SPLM-N's political positions; most notably they did not endorse the position of their Nuba colleagues on self-determination. Overall, Blue Nile representatives felt that their representation in the new SPLM/A-N-al-Hilu national structures was inadequate compared to that of the Nuba, but the Uduk were generally satisfied with their expanded powers in Blue Nile.[55]

No Ingessana received appointments in the new SPLM/A-al-Hilu structures. The new leadership configurations therefore made it difficult to accommodate Agar and his followers into the SPLM/A-N's military, civil administration, and political sectors, especially in Blue Nile. The convention and previous AUHIP meetings[56] therefore seemed to legitimize the al-Hilu faction in the international arena, all of which consolidated the gravity of the split and continued to foster tribal divisions in Blue Nile state.

For its part, the SPLM-N-Agar reorganized itself with a broader national outlook and promoted Ingessana into its new structures. The SPLM-N-Agar includes most members of the Ingessana tribe in Blue Nile, as well as former SPLM-N secretary-general Yasir Arman, who became the SPLM-N-Agar deputy chairman; Isamel Khamis Galab, a Nuba SPLM/A member and former governor of South Kordofan during the CPA era, who became the SPLM-N-Agar general secretary; Siddig al-Mensi, the acting governor of Blue Nile and a former adviser of Salva Kiir on Blue Nile during the CPA era; and Sifa Matar, the BNLC chairman.

The SPLA-N-Agar is led by Ahmed al-Umda from the Ingessana, who was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and chairman of the chief of operations in the general staff in 2017. Most of the SPLA-N-Agar's military leaders had been promoted to their ranks in 2016, and Agar simply kept them in place following the split. Brig. al-Hassan Adam al-Hassan from the Jabalaween was the only high-ranking non-Ingessana officer to join the SPLA-N-Agar. The SPLA-N-Agar's forces are mainly Ingessana. Many of these forces are reserves and recruitment campaigns regularly occur in the refugee camps.

Clashes, May 2017 to February 2018

Meanwhile, in early May 2017 political tensions among the leaders of Blue Nile spilled over onto the civilians living in the SPLM/A-N areas of Blue Nile and the refugee camps in Maban county. On 6 May a group of mainly Ingessana SPLA-N soldiers, almost certainly on orders from Lt. Gen. al-Umda, attempted to arrest four non-Ingessana political leaders who had recently been speaking to the press in support of al-Hilu and the NMLC.[57] These soldiers first attempted to make an arrest in the Doro refugee camp market around lunch time, but were intercepted by non-Ingessana youths who clashed with the mainly Ingessana soldiers. The arrest attempt failed.[58] On the following day at least one clash between Ingessana supporters of al-Umda and non-Ingessana soldiers occurred inside Blue Nile. Tensions between Ingessana

and non-Ingessana civilians and soldiers increased significantly after these events, and on 11 May the mainly non-Ingessana wing of the BNLC issued a resolution removing al-Umda as Blue Nile commander and replacing him with Tuka.

On 22–23 May heavy fighting between these two sides erupted in and around Doro refugee camp and then spread in Blue Nile near the SPLA-N's headquarters in the southern Kurmuk locality, close to the border with South Sudan.[59] This round of fighting, which included the use of Land Cruiser technicals and resulted in dozens of casualties, essentially cemented the polarization of the community into two competing groups: the SPLM/A-N-al-Hilu (non-Ingessana) and SPLM/A-N-Agar (Ingessana). Most civilians, their leaders, and SPLA-N members chose sides based on their ethnicity.

According to accusations they levelled at their opponents, the SPLA-N-al-Hilu and SPLA-N-Agar both committed serious crimes against civilians during this period. For example, on 25 May 2017 the SPLA-N-al-Hilu claimed that the SPLA-N-Agar had killed 270 non-Ingessana individuals who lived in Gendrassa refugee camp. In turn, the SPLM-N-Agar said that SPLA-N-al-Hilu had killed more than 50 Ingessana individuals, most of whom were animal herders, in the Yabus area on 9 June. Ingessana civilians in areas under Lt. Gen. Tuka's control were forced to go to the refugee camps in South Sudan and Ethiopia (which are themselves organized along tribal lines), and they have claimed that major human rights violations were committed against them at that time.[60] On 13 June 542 individuals belonging to the Ingessana tribe were evacuated from the villages of Mayak and Belila (which are located in the area controlled by al-Hilu) to Yusuf Batil refugee camp in Maban county. The civil administration of the SPLA-N-al-Hilu organized this evacuation, which happened peacefully. On 15 June the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (SRRA) under SPLA-N-Agar (known as the SRRA-Agar) released audio testimonies of groups of Ingessana who were evacuated from Mayak before it was taken over by the SPLA-N-al-Agar saying that before the evacuation SPLA-N-al-Hilu soldiers had killed individuals, looted their property, and raped women.

In late June Lt. Gen. Tuka's mainly non-Ingessana forces consolidated their control over large parts of the SPLA-N's territory in Blue Nile. Lt. Gen. al-Umda's mainly Ingessana forces were mostly restricted to areas along the Blue Nile–Maban county border, with some forces still in the Ingessana Mountains (possibly around 500–1,500 men). In the following months al-Umda's forces tried on several occasions to establish control over areas in Blue Nile, but were always defeated. As of December 2019 SPLA-N-al-Hilu controls most of the non-government-held territories in Blue Nile state (and the 'liberated' areas in South Kordofan),[61] which had originally been held under the unified SPLA-N.

Non-Ingessana members have long since commanded the SPLA-N's armoured and heavy weapons unit composed of tanks and long-range artillery. During the split in March 2017 al-Hilu supporter Col. Suleiman Ali therefore simply refused to hand the

unit over to Agar, giving the SPLA-N-al-Hilu a considerable military advantage over the SPLA-N-Agar. Agar's forces have tried to attack the warehouses under Lt. Gen. Tuka's control on many occasions, but in vain. The SPLA-N-al-Hilu claims that the SPLA-N-Agar attacked its forces 12 times between May 2017 and February 2018 in attempts to capture its weapons.[62] Reports from the SPLA-N-Agar emphasize the faction's potential ability to destroy its opponent's weapons, which does not, however, imply that it actually has the necessary military strength to do so.[63]

Because Lt. Gen. Tuka's forces control most of the SPLA-N's weapons in Blue Nile, the SPLA-N-Agar has remained in a defensive mode. Therefore, while this grouping represents the largest Ingessana constituency and other marginalized groups in Sudan that mostly live outside Blue Nile, its ability to attack its opponents or hold territory has been significantly reduced. According to various stakeholders, Blue Nile troops that support Agar are mostly confined to areas along the border between Sudan and South Sudan, and from the base at Al Fuj they can move into Blue Nile as far as Ulu. A few hundred Ingessana fighters are believed to remain in the Ingessana Mountains who are loosely under Lt. Gen. al-Umda's control, although most likely they have no reliable supply chains.

Cementing the reality of the split, on 31 December 2017 Agar called for a unilateral six-month COH in response to the GoS's unilateral declaration (Dabanga, 2017c), to which the SPLA-N-al-Hilu had already responded. Things seemed to be looking up, yet in early February 2018, when AUHIP invited the GoS and SPLM-N-al-Hilu to resume the Two Areas peace talks, the SPLM-N-Agar was not invited—thereby apparently recognizing al-Hilu as the official representative of the movement, as AUHIP had done in 2017. AUHIP, however, maintained its engagement with the SPLM/A-N-Agar as part of the Sudan Call grouping[64] and the discussion on the democratic transformation of Sudan through the Roadmap Agreement,[65] but recognized it only as a political group. The continued sidelining of the SPLM/A-Agar in peace talks quickly reduced the chances for reconciliation between the two groups even further. Indeed, on 17 February 2018 a new round of fighting broke out in Goz Jamamat, Goz Baqar, Marmtoun, and Tanfona villages in Blue Nile and caused the displacement of 500 families. It is not known why or how the fighting began; the SPLA-N-Agar and SPLA-N-al-Hilu accuse each other of starting it.[66]

Since May 2017 the internal SPLA-N fighting has resulted in the deaths of several hundred civilians, although exact numbers are unclear. These deaths have hardened the attitudes of both soldiers and civilians. Civilians remain clearly divided along tribal lines and many have been forced to move from one refugee camp to another after episodes of ethnically targeted violence. Some Ingessana civilians have recently moved into areas around the border town of Al Fuj, in northern Maban county, as well as into Blue Nile in the Ulu area, which is where the SPLA-N-Agar is operating. It is unclear if Ingessana SPLA-N soldiers are among these civilians or will follow

them into Blue Nile, but this situation could easily lead to renewed conflict among communities—more so in the absence of reconciliation between the two groups and among the civilian population.

While tension between the two SPLM/A-N groups has remained high and the refugee population continues to live divided on ethnic lines in the camps in Maban county and Ethiopia, no clashes have occurred on the ground between the two groups since February 2018.

Prospects for peace and reconciliation

In May 2019, in the aftermath of the fall of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, it was announced that Salva Kiir's efforts to reunite the two SPLM/A-N factions had failed. Kiir's attempts to reconcile the two groups was prompted by the signing of the R-ARCSS in November 2018 (Dabanga, 2018b), which Khartoum mediated, and which called for an end to the proxy wars between Sudan and South Sudan (IGAD, 2018).[67]

Kiir saw the opportunity to facilitate a reunification of the SPLM-N, because a united SPLM-N was more likely to present itself as a credible interlocutor to Sudan in a future peace process. Some believe that Kiir's interest in reconciliation was also dictated by his keenness to protect former comrades in the SPLM/A-N from divisive Sudanese tactics.[68] By trying to reunite the movement Kiir was seemingly trying to contain Sudan's demands that he should end GRSS support for the SPLA-N, together with other SRF groups, and facilitate a resolution of the conflict in Sudan. With the inauguration of a new civilian–military government in Sudan, Kiir's interest in protecting the SPLM-N factions has possibly increased, especially with regard to the issue of controlling the strategic border areas.

In October 2019 Sudan's transitional government started a peace process with the armed groups, including the SPLM-N groups, mediated by South Sudan. The positions of the two factions, however, remain divergent.

The SPLM-N-Agar operates within the Sudan Call umbrella and SRF groups and has articulated a vision of increased autonomy for Darfur and the Two Areas that would include the sharing of power and wealth. The Sudan Call was one of the signatories of the Declaration of the Forces for Freedom and Change signed on 1 January 2019, which set the objectives for the opposition in Sudan that led to the fall of President Bashir. The SPLM/A-N-Agar called for expanded autonomy and self-government in Blue Nile under a unified Sudan.[69] The Agar faction has dropped its demands for secularism, which are considered to be unattainable through the peace process—a position that contributed to the SPLM/A split in 2017. The faction also opposes the idea of self-determination, a sentiment shared by most Blue Nile constituencies and other marginalized groups in Sudan. During recent political events the Agar group claimed to represent all the marginalized communities in Sudan.[70]

Having lost most military and territorial power in the Two Areas, Agar is likely to sign a political deal with Khartoum, together with the SRF, which South Sudan and the region have welcomed. This could lead to the return of his Ingessana constituencies from the refugee camps into their original areas in the Baw locality, posing enormous challenges for Sudan to provide services and support peaceful coexistence. Additionally, if Agar were able to secure a political return to Blue Nile prior to any deal with the al-Hilu faction, al-Hilu's negotiating power could be reduced.

The SPLM-N-al-Hilu is taking part in these talks as part of a separate individual track. In October al-Hilu and the Sudanese government delegation agreed to discuss political issues first, followed by humanitarian issues, and then security arrangements. On 9 January 2020, Sudan Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok visited al-Hilu in Kauda in the Nuba Mountains. While the meeting marked an important step towards achieving peace in the region, al-Hilu described the government as 'reluctant' to discuss his demands to end the region's conflict (Magdy, 2020). Those demands include calls for Sudan's constitution not to be based on Islamic law (sharia), increased local control over political and military power, and an increased say in the use of local resources. It is possible that al-Hilu will include the right to self-determination as part of his faction's negotiation demands. A demand for self-determination, however, needs to accommodate the milder demands of al-Hilu's support base in Blue Nile. Their demands are more likely to include calls for greater autonomy in the Two Areas, at least in the short term. The positions of the two SPLM/A-N factions align in terms of demands for greater autonomy for the Two Areas, and the mediators should support discussion of this shared objective.

Overall, the SPLM/A-N split has polarized those who used to rally to its cause and undermined the entire movement in the Two Areas. The new political dispensation in Sudan and changing regional dynamics are providing opportunities for both groups to bring the issue of the Two Areas and other marginalized conflict areas to the national level. As the situation in Sudan rapidly evolves the conflict in Blue Nile remains volatile, and will continue to be so if grievances remain unaddressed and available to be exploited by political elites.

Although the changes in Sudan have provided a great opportunity to restore peace in Blue Nile, it is important for the peace brokers to consider the differences between the SPLM/A-N factions. The roadmap for peace should include an arrangement to reconcile them, which is vital if sustainable peace is to be achieved. Talking to Agar's group through the SRF, for example, may not achieve this. If a shared vision cannot be reached, it is hoped that the SPLM-N leadership of both factions will find themselves able to move forward and win the legitimate right to represent Blue Nile without more internal violence.

“Many people have been displaced both by conflict and by the search for food and water.”

The humanitarian crisis in Blue Nile

The spiral of violence caused by the GoS's war with the SPLM/A-N, numerous SAF aerial bombing attacks between 2011 and mid-2016, and simultaneous ground fighting in multiple locations have resulted in thousands of displacements and deaths in and around Blue Nile.[71] The scale of the humanitarian crisis in the SPLM-N-held areas is particularly extreme, with reduced services also being due to the structural underdevelopment of the area. The population in GoS-controlled localities has also been severely affected, especially in Baw and Geissan. As of September 2019 around 150,000 people from Blue Nile have sought refuge in South Sudan, mainly in the refugee camps in Maban county (UNHCR, 2019a; Sperber, 2016), while around 40,000 people live in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and an unknown number have fled elsewhere in Sudan (UNCHR, 2019b).

Due to various waves of insecurity, coupled with erratic weather conditions in which farmers were unable to cultivate their crops, seasonal flooding, and the difficulty of transporting relief supplies during the rainy season (May to November), food insecurity remains pervasive. Humanitarian workers report that many people have been displaced both by conflict and by the search for food and water, and that some groups live on wild fruits and roots for many months of the year. The GoS's blockade of humanitarian aid has led to a severe shortage of health and educational services (de Alessi, 2015, p. 44).[72] Reports of sexual and gender-based violence are prominent (ARC, 2016), as well as trauma cases among children. Many families have been separated by the conflict.

The situation has been made worse by clashes between the SPLA-N factions and the proliferation of armed proxy groups in Maban county. Refugees in Maban who were already affected by local conflict in 2014 became victims of violence once again in 2015–16 and were forced to live in separate camps according to their ethnicity.[73] The resurgence of violence due to the internal SPLA-N conflict in May 2017 has also had humanitarian consequences. In 2017–18 a number of civilians and one NGO staff member were said to have been killed in the fighting between competing SPLA-N groups in the Yabus area of Blue Nile.[74] Attackers are said to have burned villagers' houses and looted the headquarters of humanitarian organizations operating in the area. Fighting between the SPLA-N factions in 2017–18 also resulted in 9,000 new internally displaced people being trapped in the Wadaka area of Blue Nile (Dabanga, 2018a) without access to the supplies needed to fulfil their basic human needs during the rainy season.

It is estimated that around 70,000 people are displaced in the part of the southern front line controlled by the SPLA-N-al-Hilu. Humanitarian access to the population was drastically reduced after the SPLM/A-N split, and was further complicated by poor roads and seasonal rains. Civil society organizations are not operating in the area or are poorly equipped. Increasingly, Ingessana from the refugee camps have been moved into contested areas closer to the southern front line under the

protection of the SPLA-N-Agar. People are moved without proper de-registration from the refugee camps and are left without assistance, while being exposed to local insecurity. These 'returnees' are not originally from the areas to where they have been moved, which belong to the JumJum, Burun, and Ragarig tribes, members of which have been displaced into areas controlled by the SPLA-N-al-Hilu.[75]

The dire humanitarian situation further complicates peace efforts, because it raises the complicated questions of what to do with refugee populations and how to rehabilitate society after the scorched-earth policies used during the conflict.[76]

“The interests of constituencies in Blue Nile are closer to others in Sudan than political elites tend to project.”

Conclusion

This report has charted the course of the conflict in Blue Nile from 2015 to 2018. It has shown that while the conflict between the SPLA-N and the GoS and its proxies has become 'inactive', it remains extremely serious. Sadly, international focus on the conflict has reduced steadily since the end of the CPA era. This has been paralleled by a reduced commitment to the SPLA-N-controlled portions of the Two Areas, which has resulted from a renewed interest in promoting the stability of Sudan and the wider region. After the signing of the R-ARCSS in late 2018 international interest in putting pressure on the NCP to resolve the Two Areas conflict was reduced, coupled with donor and AUHIP fatigue after years of unsuccessful engagement. This has left both factions of the SPLM/A-N with little room to compromise; hence they have been unwilling to use the peace process to advance their demands.

Since the SPLM/A-N's March 2017 split into two factions, the differences in the agendas these factions adopted to resolve the problem of the Two Areas and their attempts to fulfil these agendas have made it impossible for mediators to reunite them politically. The international community has increasingly come to regard al-Hilu as a hardliner (especially, for example, because of his group's quest for secularism and its demand for self-determination). Ultimately, the competing SPLM/A-N factions diverge on the fundamental issues of political vision and ethnic makeup, yet local stability depends on their peaceful coexistence. Competing demands for greater autonomy for the Two Areas should be reconciled if the peace process is to support Sudanese civilians' quest for the political transformation of the country.

While the COH between the GoS and SPLM/A-N has largely held in Blue Nile—mostly due to US pressure and reduced appetite for war on both sides—it has not prevented local violence from expanding. Episodes of violence between militias highlight the militarization of government-controlled areas of Blue Nile and the fragility of the Sudanese state. Various groups operate in Blue Nile that are motivated by allegiances that cross international borders and are largely driven by ethnically divided and short-term economic and power interests.

These divisions are likely to grow as the peace process takes off and the SPLM/A-N factions' demands continue to differ. This could lead to further factionalization in both Blue Nile and South Kordofan. As a result, the civilian population of Blue Nile continues to suffer, caught between violence perpetrated by the competing factions and manipulated by the interests of local, national, and regional elites. Any effort to achieve a peaceful transformation in Sudan must address the deep divisions among Blue Nile communities and their potential explosive effect on the stability of the area and the wider region. An elitist political deal will not serve the interests of the people of Blue Nile and could possibly lead to more violence.

Political developments in Sudan since December 2018—which saw the removal of Omar al-Bashir from power in April 2019 and the formation of a new civilian–military

transitional government in August—provide an opportunity to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Blue Nile and the Two Areas in general. The first protests of the 2018–19 revolution were sparked in Damazin by women and youths in December 2018, followed a few days later by the larger and more organized protests in Atbara. This shows that the interests of constituencies in Blue Nile are closer to others in Sudan than political elites tend to project, as was apparent during the 2010–11 popular consultation process.

With the reduction of the relevance of attempts to achieve high-level political reconciliation between the competing SPLM/A-N leaders, and Agar and al-Hilu publicly acknowledging their differences and incompatibilities, there may be more space for local reconciliation efforts that are important for the long-term stability of Blue Nile. The opportunities that these efforts might offer should not be overlooked, particularly that of ensuring the viability of local agreements that various groups could sign with the transitional government in Khartoum. Indeed, efforts to sustain the peace will do best if done in harmony with a broader political settlement that addresses the root causes of the conflict and the grievances of the various constituencies in Blue Nile and of the Two Areas in general.

The regional and international community should encourage all military factions in Sudan and South Sudan to maintain the declared COHs. At the same time, both the GRSS and GoS should continue to exert control over their local militias in and around Blue Nile and encourage the various groups to express their grievances through dialogue. In this way the interests of local communities could emerge. Due to Khartoum's conflict of interest, this is unlikely to happen without stronger regional and international collaboration. The GRSS could also be more assertive in maintaining the civilian character of the SPLM-N factions' presence in its territory, especially in the refugee camps.

Overall, with the changing political and conflict dynamics in Sudan, attempts to resolve the crisis in the Two Areas must adapt to the new circumstances. Ideally, the conflicting parties should prioritize efforts to stop acts of violence in Blue Nile and encourage local initiatives to resolve the conflict. Local stability depends on the political and military parties being more focused on the needs of civilians in both SPLM-N-controlled and GoS-controlled areas.

At the grassroots level, elders within the tribes of the various political and military leaders might attempt to influence the direction of the conflict and help to resolve ethnic tensions (although such elders also regularly compete for status and influence). In particular, it may be possible for community elders outside the refugee camps and the SPLM/A-N-controlled areas in Blue Nile to restore social peace because they are not part of the ongoing conflict.

It is important to acknowledge that the divisions among communities will take a long time to heal—possibly as long as the conflict itself has lasted. Local peacebuilding activities, livelihood opportunities, and psychosocial support are essential to ensure the sustainability of peace efforts in the years to come. Women's leaders and youth representatives could also be instrumental in local peacebuilding initiatives.

Endnotes

1 Sudan's Second Civil War significantly impacted Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and Abyei (the latter being an area south-west of South Kordofan), during which these areas contributed many fighters to the Southern Sudanese (see endnote 5) cause. They therefore received special consideration during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) negotiations in 2005, and were referred to as the 'Three Areas' or 'Transitional Areas'. Unlike Abyei, however, people from Blue Nile and South Kordofan were not granted the right to self-determination and were considered unequivocally part of Sudan (see the section below entitled 'Background to the conflict up to 2011'). With the secession of Southern Sudan in 2011 to form the new state of South Sudan and the uncertain future of Abyei, Sudan's Blue Nile and South Kordofan states became known as the 'Two Areas'. Of the two states, this report concentrates on Blue Nile. As mentioned in the executive summary, the HSBA project has published other papers about the conflict in Blue Nile (Gramizzi, 2013) and South Kordofan (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013), and the broader dynamics in the Two Areas, such as de Alessi (2015) and HSBA (2016). For more on Abyei up to July 2015, see HSBA (2015).

2 According to the Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2011 the population of Blue Nile was expected to number approximately 911,000 people (CBS, n.d.). Around 150,000 people from Blue Nile have sought refuge in South Sudan, where many live in the refugee camps in Maban county (UNHCR, 2019a), while approximately 40,000 people live in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and an unknown number have fled elsewhere in Sudan (UNHCR, 2019b).

3 As noted in the acknowledgements, this report is the work of various authors and contributors. Of this group, three researchers have taken on the bulk of the work, all of whom have spent at least ten years living and working in Blue Nile and conducting wide-ranging interviews with key actors, including civilians. In the endnotes interviews are attributed to the authors as one; analyses should also be attributed to all the authors.

4 In February 1903 the Anglo-Egyptian administration established the headquarters of the Dar Funj district at Soda in the Ingessana Mountains (it was moved to Baw in 1922). The Anglo-Egyptian government introduced a system of taxation, and since money was not widely available, cattle were confiscated instead. This caused friction among Ingessana subgroups.

5 The term 'Southern Sudan' is used to broadly indicate the pre-secession region of Sudan that would become South Sudan in 2011.

6 In 1917 the first documented revolt against the colonial government was led by a man simply known as 'Affendi', who remains a widely popular figure among the Ingessana; see Okazaki (1997, pp. 62–65).

7 For more information on land issues in Sudan, see Gertel, Rottenburg, and Calkins (2014).

8 The four Ingessana groups are the Gor, Tau, Kuule, and Buak, or in Arabic, the Kukuru, Soda, Fademy, and Gabanit. The Ingessana Mountains are also referred as 'Hills' in other publications, for example in Gramizzi (2013, p. 13). The term 'Mountains' is used here because it is a better translation of the Arabic word 'Jebels', which Sudanese use to describe this area.

9 From 1997 to 2001 the implementation of a government-led plan for the expansion of Dinder National Park that would forcibly displace half the Kadalo villages in the locality led to major resistance and violence. According to one local leader, 'By implementing this plan the Kadalo will be squeezed in a narrow strip, they are already affected by the existing mechanized agricultural schemes, the heavy presence of the nomads groups who are looking for grazing lands, moreover, the Rosieries [sic] Dam Heightening that [was] implemented recently has forced other communities who are dragged from their land and resettled in our lands' (Amar, 2017, p. 2).

10 In 1953, before Sudan's independence in 1956, the Uduk and Koma area south of the Yabus River was transferred from southern Upper Nile province to Blue Nile province so that it could be administered from Kurmuk. This was 'something of an anomaly', because the Uduk area had been developed in a way that was closer to the one pertaining in Southern Sudan than to that pertaining in the northern parts of pre-secession Sudan (see James, 1979, p. 45).

11 It is important to note that '"the Gumuz" do not call themselves Gumuz, "the Koma" do not call themselves Koma, "the Ingessana" do not call themselves Ingessana, and "the Uduk" do not call themselves Uduk. Those terms were imposed from outsiders [such as British colonizers]. In fact, Burun, Gumuz and Hamaj are rather derogatory Sudanese names' (James, 1979, pp. 7–8).

12 For more information on the SPLM's aims and aspirations, see the SPLM Manifesto written in 1983 (SPLM, 2008). The future SPLA commander in the area, Malik Agar, was among the first to join the SPLA in 1985, together with other members of the political group known as the Funj Union.

13 Several SPLA commanders served in Blue Nile during the Second Civil War. When the civil war started in South Sudan in late 2013, and subsequently the SPLA in Opposition (SPLA-IO) was formed, and supported by the GoS with training in the Bout area in northern Blue Nile, it was this old comradeship that contributed to preventing conflict between the SPLA-N and SPLA-IO.

14 Coming from their base in Ethiopia and led by Commander Salva Kiir, the SPLA captured Kurmuk (and Geissan) in 1987 during its first campaign in Blue Nile, but lost it a month later. In 1989, after Sudan's coalition government was overthrown by a military coup led by Omar al-Bashir and amid increasing military activity, the SPLA recaptured the town and other garrisons in southern Blue Nile, but lost Kurmuk again at the end of the year. The tide turned in 1997, when a reorganized and better-trained SPLA under the command of Malik Agar captured Kurmuk and held it until the CPA negotiations in 2005. For more details, see James (2007, pp. 52–61).

15 Despite his popularity in the state, Agar's election sparked friction both within the SPLM (which had withdrawn from elections in Sudan as a result of a political deal with the NCP in exchange for the peaceful implementation of the referendum on the possible secession of Southern Sudan) and within the NCP (whose hardliners were opposed to conceding any kind of 'victory' to the SPLM).

16 The international community had strongly supported the popular consultation process as a pillar of the CPA's implementation since before 2010. There had also been significant discussions and workshops on a stronger federal system as early as 2008, including one led by the SPLM Blue Nile minister of health.

17 Calls for state 'autonomy' were frequently made during the popular consultations, but the SPLM seem to have artificially contrived at least some of these calls, because there was no cohesion over the type of 'autonomy' that was sought (authors' interviews with Blue Nile citizens, Kurmuk locality, 2016). The authors were also eyewitnesses to these events.

18 In 2010 the SPLM in South Kordofan had disputed the population census figures for the region, so the state elections process there was postponed from April 2010 to April 2011 (*Sudan Tribune*, 2011a).

19 The JIUs were military units composed of SAF and SPLA members. The CPA mandated them to ensure security between 2005 and the 2011 referendum, and to serve as symbols of unity. Each JIU was composed of 1,500 men from each force (see HSBA, 2008).

20 It has been noted that the early request for disarmament was possibly linked to the assumption that Salva Kiir would not allow the SPLA in Southern Sudan to respond to SAF-initiated violence in the Three Areas (see endnote 1) when South Sudan's independence was so close (email exchange between the authors and an international observer, December 2018).

21 The CPA's security arrangements required that if the Southerners voted for independence from Sudan in the referendum, all SPLA members of the JIUs in Sudan would be relocated to South Sudan, while SAF JIU members in South Sudan would move to Sudan. The CPA allocated a six-month period after the declaration of South Sudan's independence (in July 2011) for the relocation of JIU members to be completed (see Sudan, 2005).

22 The SPLA-N designated four fronts to indicate their physical locations and the timing of their establishment: the 1st Front was in South Kordofan; the 2nd Front was in Blue Nile; the 3rd Front was in Darfur (although this never became operational; see de Alessi, 2015); and the 4th Front was established in the Ingessana Mountains in 2015 (see below).

23 The term 'government forces' refers to an amalgam of militias and paramilitaries that fight together with, or often instead of, SAF; see Box 1.

24 The estimate is based on authors' observations and interviews with various interlocutors in the SPLA-N's ranks between 2012 and 2016, but it remains difficult to verify. For de Alessi (2015) total troop numbers would be up to 15,000; for Gramizzi (2013, p. 41) they could be as high as 20,000.

25 The SPLM-N adopted the administrative system that the SPLM used in South Sudan of county (locality), *payam* (sub-county unit or district), and *boma* (village).

26 The SRF is a military coalition of rebel groups from Darfur and the Two Areas that was created in November 2011; see McCutcheon (2014).

27 The NCP government—and Sudanese governments that preceded it—had long-term economic links to mechanized farming schemes; see, for example, Assal (2012, p. 121).

28 Authors' observations and interviews with local communities, refugees, and reliable SPLM/A-N members, southern Blue Nile and Maban, 2016–18.

29 The RSF typically does not like fighting in mountainous terrain, preferring instead to fight in fast-moving columns on open plains (authors' observations and interviews with Sudanese and international observers, southern Blue Nile and Maban, 2016–18).

30 In 2014 the EU launched the Khartoum Process, which was conceived as a forum for political dialogue between the EU and Horn of Africa countries to address human trafficking and smuggling. The money from the Khartoum Process was to be used for training border security personnel and the creation of livelihood opportunities to encourage people to stay in Sudan and not travel to the EU, as well as to support the attempts of the International Organization for Migration and UN High Commissioner for Refugees to improve life in the refugee camps in eastern Sudan, which would also make staying in Sudan more attractive for potential migrants; see, for example, Chandler (2018) and Omer (2019). After the 2018–19 uprising in Sudan funds were suspended in 2019 (Lindsay, 2019).

31 Authors' observations and interviews with local communities, refugees, and reliable SPLM/A-N members, southern Blue Nile and Maban, 2018.

32 For more information about US engagement in Sudan, its so-called 'five track plan', and the imposition and removal of sanctions on the regime, see HSBA (2018).

33 This was not the first COH to have been called. Bashir had announced a similar COH in the Two Areas and Darfur in late 2015, and the SRF had declared a COH in the same areas on 28 April 2016 (Dabanga, 2016b); however, both of these COHs seemed to have been political moves linked to the peace process, with little resonance on the ground, which is why fighting in the Two Areas continued until June 2016.

34 Gramizzi (2013, p. 34) calculates that there were nearly 7,000 Central Reserve Police members serving in Blue Nile at the onset of the conflict in September 2011, of which around 3,000 were recruited locally and 4,000 from Darfur. He also estimates that the PDF in Blue Nile numbered around 10,000 men by 2013, but its personnel were also recruited from indigenous groups and operated under influential leaders whom Khartoum trusted (Gramizzi, 2013, pp. 35–38).

35 Authors' observations and interviews with local communities, refugees, and reliable SPLA-N members, southern Blue Nile and Maban, 2016–18.

36 This recruitment campaign was part of the GoS's 'Comprehensive Call' that sought to Arabize non-Arab groups by transforming their societies (de Waal and Abdel Salam, 2004, pp. 71–113, especially pp. 89–99).

37 Authors' observations and interviews with local and international observers, local communities, refugees, and reliable SPLM/A-N members, Maban and Juba, 2016–18.

38 As of December 2019 Loma is in Juba holding talks with the GRSS as part of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). As

part of his involvement in the R-ARCSS, Loma brought at least 500 soldiers to the Bunj area who are likely to be integrated into the new unified South Sudanese army that the R-ARCSS's security arrangements call for. It is currently unclear how the presence of these forces in Bunj might upset local political dynamics—especially since Loma himself was hostile to the SPLM/A-N and Blue Nile refugees in Maban. Due to Loma's loss of his Khartoum patron (Bashir), however, his position is weakened and he likely needs to cooperate with the GRSS if he is to finalize a peace deal with it.

39 For example, in August 2017 and March 2018 Baggari received SAF support to lead militia forces based in Blue Nile against Dinka communities in Melut, an area north-west of Maban around the oil fields.

40 On 2 September 2018 South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, issued a decree formally changing the name of the SPLA to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (*Sudan Tribune*, 2018). To avoid confusion 'SPLA' is used throughout this report.

41 President Kiir issued an executive order in October 2015 that turned South Sudan's ten states into 28 states. Later, in January 2017, he redrew state boundaries to create a total of 32 states (*Sudan Tribune*, 2015). These executive orders formally divided Maban county into two counties, with one centred around Bunj town and the other around Jamam town. For the purpose of simplicity, the area containing these two new counties is still referred to as Maban county in this report.

42 Authors' observations and interviews with local communities, refugees, and local tribal leaders, Maban, 2016–19.

43 This includes no Mabanese government ministers or deputy ministers and no Mabanese in the SPLA above the rank of brigadier general.

44 Many social and political leaders in Maban refer to the MDF as a 'White Army', based on the idea that because the Nuer have their White Army, the Mabanese should have theirs too (authors' observations and interviews with local Mabanese leaders, Maban, 2016–17).

45 Authors' observations and interviews with local and international observers, local communities, refugees, and reliable SPLM/A-N members, Maban and Juba, 2016–18. It should be noted that many elites in Sudan and South Sudan commonly change sides between competing power centres, and not just Mabanese.

46 Ivo (sometimes pronounced locally in Maban as 'Ibo' or 'Eba') defected from the government to the SPLA-IO in early 2016 after losing his executive position as a result of the creation of South Sudan's 28 states. Fighting that occurred in 2016 following Ivo's joining of the SPLA-IO appeared mainly to be a (failed) attempt to capture Bunj town, which is an unlikely SPLA-IO objective, but could have been used as a bargaining chip with Juba. In July and August 2016 a group of SPLA-IO fighters attacked the SPLA garrison near Liang village between Benishowa and Bunj on several occasions (Radio Tamazuj, 2016), and then attacked the SPLA near Liang again in October (PCSS, 2017, p. 6). After these attacks this SPLA-IO group was relatively quiet for the rest of 2016 and early 2017. Ivo's goal in joining the SPLA-IO seems to have been an attempt to pressure Juba into giving him his political positions back, and not to form an alliance based on ideology. Since Ivo's home is in an area where the Mabanese have kinship with the Nuer of Longochuk, it appears likely that joining the SPLA-IO was a natural choice based on this shared kinship, and constituted

Ivo's easiest option to obtain the weapons he wanted to pressure Juba. Ivo's recruitment of pro-GoS MDF members was effective, since he had helped create the MDF when he was Upper Nile security adviser and deputy governor. While Ivo is now abroad, Jumma is believed to be in the Benishowa area with the SPLA-IO.

47 Authors' interview with witnesses, Doro and Gendrassa refugee camps, August 2016.

48 According to information collected on the ground, support came in the form of security staff, assets, and cash. Allegedly, the GoS supported Khalifa's attack on Doro refugee camp on Christmas Day by providing him with ammunition (authors' interview with an SPLA-N officer, Doro refugee camp, 2 May 2017).

49 This section is based on discussions with Mabanese traditional leaders, Blue Nile community leaders, and SPLA-N officers, multiple locations, 2016.

50 Authors' interview with an SPLA-N officer, Doro refugee camp, 2 May 2017.

51 Authors' interview with an eyewitness, Bunj, 5 May 2017; see also Nuba Reports (2017a).

52 In 2017 the SPLA intervened and reorganized local Mabanese security structures to ensure that their personnel were loyal to the Dinka.

53 An early initiative was the letter sent to al-Hilu on 22 June 2017 by Maj. Gen. al-Umda (Baldo, 2017, p. 14) and signed by the opposition leaders of the SRF and Sudan Call, both of which the united SPLM-N had been a part and in which Agar had played a key role. After the split Agar remained in both groups in order to increase his political legitimacy, but al-Hilu had never fully participated in either, because he believed that they were controlled by senior politicians who were at the core of the problem against which the SPLA-N was fighting. The SPLA-N-al-Hilu therefore did not respond to the March 2017 reconciliation letter, and as of December 2019 has refused to join these coalitions.

54 Authors' interview with a high-ranking SPLA-N-al-Hilu military officer, Blue Nile, May 2017.

55 Authors' interviews with SPLM-N Blue Nile members, Blue Nile and region, November 2017.

56 AUHIP met with Agar in April and July 2017 (*Sudan Tribune*, 2017c), and then with al-Hilu delegations in two consultation meetings. The first of these meetings took place in Addis Ababa from 27 August to 5 September 2017, with a delegation led by the new SPLM-N-al-Hilu secretary-general, Ammar Amun. The meetings were designed to explain the SPLM-N's internal crisis to the mediation team and other international actors, and to discuss the arrangements for the holding of the SPLM-N-al-Hilu convention to elect a new leadership (*Sudan Tribune*, 2017d; Shiferaw, 2017). The second consultation meeting took place in Addis Ababa on 17 November 2017. The aim of the meeting was to brief the AUHIP delegates on the outcomes of the convention and discuss the future of the Two Areas peace process (*Sudan Tribune*, 2017e).

57 Authors' interview with several credible witnesses, Maban, May 2017.

58 Authors' interview with several credible witnesses, Maban, May 2017.

59 The authors have decided to withhold the name and precise location of the SPLA-N headquarters for security reasons.

60 When people began to flee intra-SPLA-N fighting, Ingessana in the Wadaka area were allegedly subject to abuse and women were reportedly raped by forces allied to Tuka's group.

Tuka soon put a stop to this and provided safe passage to the Ingessana to leave the area (authors' interviews with SPLM-N-al-Hilu leadership, Maban and the wider region, August 2017).

61 Authors' interview with a high-ranking SPLA-N-al-Hilu officer, Juba, May 2017.

62 SPLA-N-al-Hilu, 2nd Front military statement, 29 May 2017, seen by the authors.

63 On 18 February 2018 the SPLA-N-Agar announced that the SPLA-N-al-Hilu had attacked its positions in the area of Goz Baqar, but highlighted that it had destroyed a T-55 tank and two vehicles loaded with 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm cannon (statement signed by SPLM-N-Agar spokesperson Mubatak Ardol, 18 February 2018). The authors' observations suggest that weapons are even more frequently destroyed than the statement suggests, which means that the split in the SPLM-N has directly affected the weapons stockpiles of both groups, which ultimately undermines the ability of the SPLA-N as a whole to challenge GoS forces.

64 The Sudan Call is composed of political groups such as the Umma National Party, the Darfuri movements of the Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minawi and the Justice and Equality Movement, the SPLM-N-Agar, the Sudan Conference Party, and other Sudanese parties (Elhaj, 2014).

65 The Roadmap Agreement is a document that AUHIP produced in 2016 to facilitate the participation of Sudan Call members in its sponsored peace talk and to commit each side to ending the conflict and ensuring humanitarian access to all populations (AUHIP, 2016).

66 The SPLA-N-al-Hilu said in a statement on 18 February that it had repulsed the attack. On the same day the SPLA-N-Agar issued a statement accusing the SPLA-N-al-Hilu of attacking its positions in the Goz Baqar area (statement signed by SPLM-N-Agar spokesperson Mubarak Ardol, 18 February 2018, seen by the authors).

67 A mediation committee of SPLM generals and leaders was formed in South Sudan in 2018, which included Kuol Manyang, James Hoth Mai, and Rebecca Garang, and which was respected by the two factions. Several bilateral meetings and a first face-to-face discussion between Agar and al-Hilu occurred in February 2019 in Juba, followed by a meeting in May with Salva Kiir, after which the mediation efforts were called off.

68 The R-ARCSS was met with scepticism, especially from the competing SPLM/A-N factions, because they saw Bashir's increasing power over Kiir as a threat. In fact, the R-ARCSS and subsequent border security initiatives seemingly reduce the space for the SPLM/A-N to continue an effective armed resistance.

69 Undated statement signed by Lt. Gen. Ahmed al-Umda, commander of the 2nd Front; internal message labelled 'not for circulation' signed by Malik Agar, SPLM-N-Agar chairman, 23 July 2017; both seen by the authors.

70 In May 2019 the SPLM-N-Agar group sent a delegation to Khartoum to support the peaceful protests taking place there and the civilian opposition to the Bashir government. The deputy chairman of the SPLM-N-Agar, Yasir Arman, arrived in Khartoum on 26 May 2019, despite having previously been given a death sentence when Bashir was in power (*Sudan Tribune*, 2019). He was detained and forcibly deported in June.

71 For example, ACJPS (2011) and Amnesty International (2013) describe GoS policies to attack Blue Nile civilians in 2011.

72 A UN Children's Fund report shows that 'Sudan has one of the largest numbers of out-of-school children in the Middle East and North Africa region' (UNICEF Sudan, n.d.). It also shows that 'at 43 per cent, Blue Nile is the worst performing state for children out of primary school'. According to the UN Development Programme, Blue Nile's illiteracy rate was 74.2 per cent in 2010—even before war broke out—and the state also scored the worst among central Sudan states in health indicators, particularly in primary health care (UNDP, 2010).

73 As of December 2019 Ingessana groups are living in Kaya, Gendrassa, and Yusuf Batil camps, while most of the other groups live in Doro camp, closer to Bunj town.

74 Specifically, the villages of Abengoro, Yabus Bala, and Yabus Ghaba.

75 In addition to issues of sharing land and resources, tension between the Burun and Ingessana increased after the death of Brig. Gen. Ali Bender in May 2017. Bender, a former SAF-allied and NCP executive from the Burun tribe, who joined the SPLA after the CPA was signed, was in a prison in the SPLA headquarters in southern Blue Nile when fighting erupted within SPLA-N ranks, and he was killed during the clashes. The Burun community has accused Lt. Gen. al-Umda—and hence the Ingessana—of causing his death, an accusation that the Ingessana leaders have denied. Since 2017 the non-Ingessana groups have made an investigation into Bender's death a precondition for local reconciliation.

76 For more on the humanitarian impact of the conflict in Blue Nile, see, for example, HRW (2012); SKBN CU (2015; 2019); HART (2015); and HUDO Centre (2017).

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