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One Year of War in Sudan

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Sudan at a Glance: 15 April 2023-5 April 2024

VITAL TRENDS

- Since fighting first broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April, ACLED records 5,550 events of political violence and more than 15,550 reported fatalities in Sudan.
- Between 15 April 2023 and 5 April 2024, the most political violence was recorded in Khartoum state, with over 3,660 events and over 7,050 reported fatalities.¹
- In all of Sudan, ACLED records over 1,400 violent events targeting civilians since the war began. Civilians in Khartoum state faced the most targeted violence, with more than 650 incidents and at least 1,470 reported fatalities.
- Targeted violence in Darfur was twice as likely to be deadly for civilians than targeted violence in other states in Sudan, with 32% of all reported civilian fatalities in the country being recorded in Darfur.

One Year of War in Sudan

The war in Sudan is, above all, a conflict over power. In the latter years of his rule, former President Omar al-Bashir attempted to coup-proof his regime by elevating the Janjaweed — his long-time henchmen in Darfur — into the RSF, a paramilitary force capable of protecting the president from his closest rivals. The RSF's sudden rise to power came when its leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti, turned on his former patron, conspiring with Army Chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan to oust Bashir and establish a military junta in 2019. Competition between the SAF and the RSF eventually shattered hopes of an orderly, democratic transition and instead sowed the seeds of a new war.

What initially started as a power struggle between the SAF and the RSF turned into a civil war that has drawn several militia and rebel groups, along with their foreign backers, into the conflict. While neither the SAF nor the RSF appears capable of restoring control over the entire territory of Sudan, other actors have capitalized on this competition to establish themselves as local security providers, from Khartoum to Darfur and Kordofan. Understanding how these actors have either aligned with each of the main conflict parties or decided to remain equidistant is crucial to identifying the trajectory of the conflict and Sudan's politics.

The War in Khartoum

Over the past year, the Khartoum tri-city area has been one of the most fiercely contested battlegrounds. The [outbreak of the conflict](#) on 15 April 2023 resembled a traditional coup attempt. Members of the paramilitary group seized the Presidential Palace and other key transport and communication infrastructure across the city. The SAF fiercely defended the General Command

Headquarters and used its air superiority to bomb RSF positions, forcing its elements into using civilian positions as hideouts and beginning a protracted conflict in the city's streets.

When the SAF Strategic Corps base in downtown Khartoum fell to the RSF on 30 May, Hemedti's forces were eventually able to strangle the SAF's supply routes. Ousted from most military positions in Khartoum, including the [Yarmouk military complex](#) and the [Central Reserve Police headquarters](#) in June, the SAF found itself relying primarily on air warfare and grappling with a series of setbacks. By contrast, the RSF — which under Bashir had grown to function as Sudan's infantry² — was able to advance in Khartoum's neighboring cities of Omdurman and Bahri. Overall, the RSF demonstrated higher mobility using their pickup trucks and anti-aircraft machine guns, proving that the SAF's supply of heavy military equipment is ineffective in urban warfare.

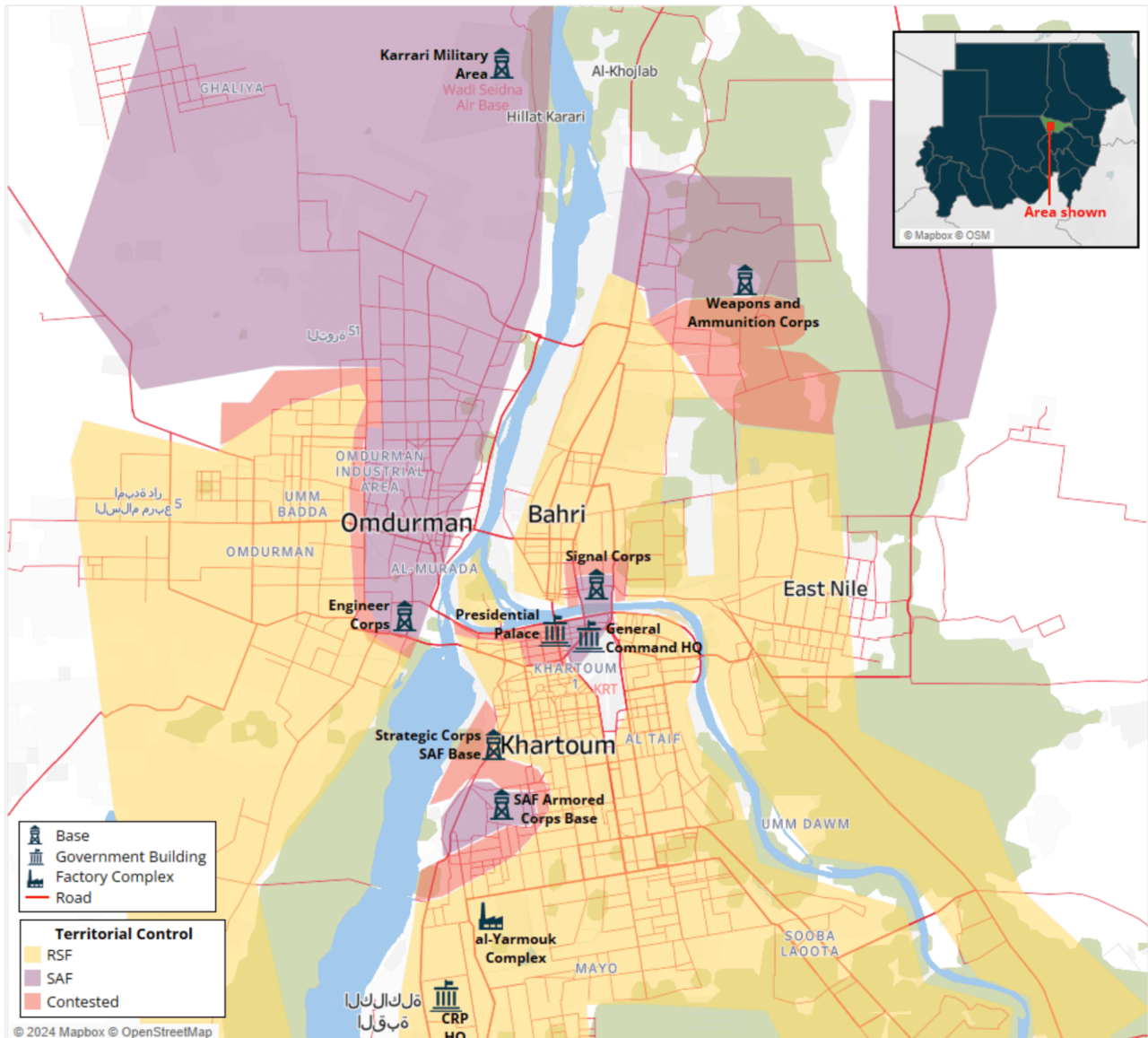
After the RSF closed in on the Armored Corps base in south Khartoum — from which [officers spearheaded Sudan's military coups](#) — the SAF issued a call for general mobilization. At first, only members of the dismantled Popular Defense Forces, Sudan Entity Force, and a newly formed pro-government Islamist militia, al-Baraa Ibn Malik, backed the SAF. Other political actors and rebel groups were instead cautious about allying with the SAF as the RSF gained the upper hand. As a result, the RSF started to receive support from the Sudan Shield Forces, the Tamazuj armed group, and several ethnic militias,³ although the RSF's reliance on these groups [gradually turned into infighting toward the latter part of the year](#).

By the end of 2023, the RSF expanded its control in localities near al-Jazirah state in Khartoum, [which it captured in mid-December](#). The fall of al-Jazirah and the retaliatory violence unleashed by the RSF against the population spread fear across the remaining SAF-controlled states and communities. In response to the RSF advances, ethnic and communal militias mobilized against the RSF, which prompted a renewed general mobilization call from the SAF. The SAF armed and trained these newly aligned militias by integrating them into the SAF's alliance, called collectively the Popular Resistance.⁴

This strategic move helped the SAF make considerable territorial gains in Khartoum (*see map below*). The SAF [broke the siege](#) on its forces and seized [Old Omdurman](#) from the RSF. Most recently, on 7 April, fighting further intensified in al-Jazirah as SAF troops advanced in the state to reach Umm al-Qura locality, about 30 kilometers east of the state capital, Wad Madani.⁵

Territorial Control in Khartoum

as of 5 April 2024



Note: The territorial control illustrated on this map was assessed by the ACLED researchers who authored this report, using their expertise and research on the conflict.

The SAF's recent victories in Omdurman attracted support from various rebel groups and ethnic militias. Dozens of new volunteers graduated from military training camps that opened in SAF-controlled areas since the mobilization call, while rebel groups that took up arms against the RSF — like Minnawi's faction of Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A-MM) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led by Gibril Ibrahim — deployed troops against the RSF, as the tide turned in the SAF's favor.

These same groups have previously fought the SAF in the Darfur conflict in the early 2000s, but their signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in 2020 allowed them to access political positions and power. This period saw a shift toward including more armed groups in the contested government, sidelining civilians, and elevating former rebel groups as new political allies for military elites — particularly the SAF. Consequently, new rebel groups emerged in the central regions to counterbalance the former rebel groups representing the south and west Sudan regions that were gaining political power. For example, the Sudan Shield Forces, established in late 2022, opposed the JPA and aimed to safeguard the interests of the central and northern regions' people. Despite its initial purpose, however, Sudan Shield Forces allied with the RSF, led by Abu Aqlah Kikel, who spearheaded RSF offensives in al-Jazirah and later took command of the seized 1st Infantry Division in Wad Madani, while RSF forces continued their unprovoked violations against civilians in Al-Jazirah.

This extensive mobilization of militias, rebel factions, and paramilitary groups in support of the SAF underscores the shifting dynamics in central Sudan, where each faction seeks to position itself in the new political and military order. The political developments that emerged from the power-sharing agreements and the JPA signed in 2020 set the stage for the April 2023 war and emboldened the armed groups that now play a central role.

The War in Darfur

Outside of Khartoum, the RSF directed its attention to Darfur, the cradle of the Janjaweed militias, early on in the conflict. In Darfur, the national conflict between the RSF and the SAF became enmeshed in the region's ethnic mosaic. Historical grievances between the Masalit and Arab militias in West Darfur had manifested even before the conflict broke out, prompting the declaration of a state of emergency and the deployment of government troops.⁶ Soon after clashes erupted between the SAF and the RSF, the conflict in West Darfur quickly turned into a confrontation between RSF-backed Arab militias and Masalit ethnic militias backed by the Sudanese Alliance Forces.⁷ These clashes persisted from April to June 2023, culminating in the assassination of Khamis Abakar, the leader of the predominantly Masalit Sudanese Alliance Forces who had been the governor of West Darfur since 2020.⁸ The RSF then appointed an alternative government in West Darfur, led by their local allies.⁹ Abakar's killing — allegedly at the hands of the RSF — was part of a concerted targeting against the Masalit population in West Darfur that led to the mass displacement of Masalit and Erenga people to Chad.¹⁰ United Nations experts have described the actions of the RSF and allied militias as possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹¹

Darfur's Arab ethnic militias, however, are not only committing ethnically motivated killings. The prospect of making considerable gains from the conflict has also prompted internecine fighting within the RSF camp. On several occasions, violent clashes broke out between Arab ethnic militias, such as [the clashes between the Salamat and Beni Halba in South Darfur](#) that [persisted for months](#). Despite both being RSF allies, competition over access to land and resources has ignited conflict between them. Militarization in Darfur intertwines with the local governance structures, as tribal native administration systems have long had a strong influence in many parts of the region.¹² The RSF has usually relied on this tribal loyalty for recruitment, but its higher-ranking commanders were evidently unable to mediate or control their allied militias at the local level.

South Darfur also turned into a hotbed of conflict between the SAF and the RSF. South Darfur's capital, Nyala, is Sudan's most populated city outside of Khartoum and the region's economic center, thus making it a high-value location for both parties. After wearing the SAF out with almost daily assaults, the RSF captured [the 16th Infantry Division](#) on 26 October, which was the tipping point for the SAF's collapse in the region. Within less than a month, the RSF seized the [SAF Infantry Divisions](#) in the remaining major cities. This leaves El Fasher — the capital of North Darfur where many displaced people sought refuge — as the only remaining state capital in Darfur not to have fallen to the RSF (*see map below*).

Since February 2024, the SAF has intensified its offensives and airstrikes in El Fasher, and the RSF appears to be avoiding engaging with other actors due to the delicate order that reigns in the city.¹³ Former rebel groups, as well as Zaghawa ethnic militias, have announced a general mobilization in anticipation of a possible RSF offensive on El Fasher. Competition between these groups, however, undermines the stability of the coalition. During the initial stages of the conflict, JPA signatories formed the neutral Darfur Joint Protection Force, which aimed to protect civilians and properties. This [force is now split](#), with some groups supporting the SAF and others choosing to remain neutral. Neutral groups have broken away and formed their own protection force, but some of their military leaders are joining the mobilization in El Fasher despite their political leadership's stance.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the SLM/A faction led by Abdul Wahid al-Nur — a holdout rebel group that did not sign the JPA — has expanded control across Jabal Marrah, a mountainous area stretching across the border between North, Central, and South Darfur. Unlike other groups, al-Nur's SLM/A faction has not signed any agreement with the transitional government, and continues to remain neutral despite deploying forces to El Fasher and warning against RSF attacks.¹⁵

In Darfur, violence has historically served as a pathway to power, and the conflict that erupted in April 2023 has ignited fierce political rivalry among various armed factions. Leaders of former rebel groups are vying for influence while undergoing fragmentation, and ethnic militias are motivated by prospects of local control while capitalizing on their current allegiances, further complicating the landscape of conflict in Darfur.

The War in Kordofan

The Kordofan region's strategic location between Darfur and the central region — including Khartoum — has made it a focal point for warring parties seeking control over vital resources and supply routes and, thus, a crucial battleground. Armed groups have often attracted recruits from Kordofan's diverse communities, sparking inter-ethnic rivalries and local conflicts (*see map below*).

On 15 April 2023, clashes between the SAF and the RSF erupted in North Kordofan, South Kordofan, and West Kordofan. In El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan, the presence of SAF troops threatens the RSF's core supply route from Darfur to Khartoum. Unlike in Darfur, some Arab communities in North Kordofan, such as the Beni Jarar and Hamar, opted to align with the SAF rather than the RSF. Other Arab communities, like the Dar Hamid, Kababish, and Jawmaa, have not sided with either party but decided to take up arms to protect themselves from RSF attacks. Recognizing the strategic importance of these territories and their possession of heavy military equipment, the RSF has chosen not to escalate conflict with these militias.

West Kordofan state connects Darfur and other Kordofan states and borders South Sudan. It remained relatively calm throughout the conflict, owing to the fact that the pipeline carrying South Sudan's crude oil crosses the state. Although intermittent clashes between the SAF and the RSF occurred in cities like El Fula, al-Khiwi, and al-Nuhud, the Arab Misseriya native administration successfully mediated to de-escalate the tensions and preserve peace for the whole of 2023. This changed in January when the city of Babanusa, which houses the SAF 22nd Infantry Division, was the site of [heavy clashes between the two warring parties](#). In fact, the Misseriya native administration [is itself suffering from factionalism](#), with community leaders and members joining either side.

The Misseriya community has also had tensions with the Hamar ethnic group throughout 2022, and the SAF has undertaken the Hamar as an ally and supplied them with weapons in the ongoing fight against the RSF.¹⁶ The Hamar and Misseriya native administrations, supported by their respective local militias, assumed de facto authority of West Kordofan. Misseriya militia members took on the responsibility of providing security in El Fula and established a security committee to maintain order in Babanusa. In al-Nuhud, the emir (chief) of the Hamar native administration revoked the convoy guarding conducted by Hamar militias in order to restore security in the absence of state institutions. This emphasizes the tendency of the SAF, and now also the RSF, to benefit from local tribal tensions for recruitment and counter-insurgency — a strategy inherited from the former regime of Bashir.

In South Kordofan, clashes between the SAF and the RSF were primarily concentrated in Dilling and Kadugli. However, at the beginning of June, Abdelaziz al-Hilu's faction of the SPLM-N, an influential rebel group that is not part of the JPA, [began expanding northward from its territories in the southern parts of South Kordofan](#). This expansion prompted the RSF to withdraw from the area around Kadugli city, limiting their presence to the northern locality of al-Qouz, from which they attempted to take control of Dilling. The al-Hilu faction then laid siege to SAF troops in Kadugli, aiming to gain control over the city. Ethnic-based violence in South Kordofan intensified after the RSF took control of Habila in late December, sparking [clashes between the SAF and the al-Hilu's faction against the RSF](#). The SAF and the SPLM-N have historically been rivals, and their alignment against the RSF during these clashes was not a political or strategic choice, but rather it was fueled by ethnic affiliations as the Arab Hawazamah militia aligned with the RSF against the non-Arab Nuba, who are recruited in both the SAF and the al-Hilu faction of SPLM-N.

Similar to Darfur, rebel groups and ethnic militias in Kordofan are gaining access to weapons and, therefore, power. How these groups align themselves, however, differs from the dynamics in Darfur. In some areas like North Kordofan, Arab groups — typically ethnically affiliated with the RSF — have unexpectedly aligned with the SAF or remained neutral. These militias are cautious about engaging in violence within an unforeseeable trajectory, but they hold significant sway over their respective regions, and winning them over allows the belligerents to tip the balance of the conflict in their favor.

Decoding the Puzzle: Identifying Shifting Allegiances

After a year of war, Sudan finds itself deeply entrenched in the militarization of local communities — a dynamic that is unlikely to be reversed in the short term. Communities that were once living in peace have now taken up arms to defend themselves from the RSF, marking a significant departure from the past. For decades, Sudanese politics revolved around the conflict between the center (embodied by the army) and the rebel groups in the periphery, which served as proxy structures capable of monopolizing violence and securing political agendas. In today's Sudan, however, violence is far more decentralized, with self-arming communities and national actors heavily dependent on their local proxies to achieve military victory.

As the fight between the SAF and the RSF continues, the RSF is embedding its authority by replacing previous authorities with the RSF-aligned local elites. The RSF's vision for governance might be more attainable in the home territory of Darfur, where its alliances are largely ethnic-based, but it may need to rely on other methods elsewhere in Sudan. For example, on 26 March the RSF appointed a civilian administration government in al-Jazirah led by a local member of the National Umma Party, which is a part of the anti-war civilian coalition Taqadam. The appointment sparked internal splits in the party, with some members of the National Umma Party criticizing Taqadam's perceived bias toward the RSF and increasing fragmentation within the civilian coalition.¹⁷ While national and international mediators are struggling to find common ground for peace talks, the gap between civilians and the SAF is widening.¹⁸ Accusing the civilian coalition of siding with the RSF, the military announced on 25 March it would refuse to participate in any power-sharing agreement with civilian political parties and would instead establish a technocratic transitional government.¹⁹

In the meantime, the SAF has intensified its recruitment drives in areas under its control, but disagreements have emerged within the SAF leadership regarding the potent force mobilized by the Popular Resistance. The conflict's trajectory suggests that controlling and integrating this formidable entity will prove to be a challenging task. The Popular Resistance poses significant obstacles to its assimilation into the SAF's structure and strategy. Occasional clashes broke out between SAF allies, such as the SLM/A-Tambor and SLM/A-Minnawi, both former rebel factions currently allied with the SAF. While the SAF mobilization is growing, Shamseldin Kabbashi, the second deputy commander-in-chief of the SAF, has warned that the Popular Resistance groups would pose a new danger unless they are better controlled.²⁰

The conflict has exceeded the initial realm of fighting between the SAF and the RSF as armed groups across Sudan are challenging existing governance structures. Confounding political relationships are forming between elites and their communities, and historical allegiances are shifting and affecting the current conflict landscape. The recent ethnic targeting of some communities in Darfur and Kordofan resulted in significant shifts in demography and governance at the local level that will likely be difficult to reverse. As ethnic-based alliances are forming, other armed groups — mostly JPA signatories — are undergoing fragmentation and further disconnection from their political leadership, and emerging militias are motivated by new opportunities as well as historical grievances.

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