



Sudan Developments in the 15 April War and Shifting Positions: Where is the Scene Heading?

Anyone observing the armed conflict in Sudan between the army, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and their allies must, in the interest of objectivity, exclude the category of volunteers or those who conscientiously reject violence but are forced to participate due to the nature of the conflict and the involuntary circumstances that compel them to take up arms in defense of their lives and families. This is a consequence of residential areas being transformed into battlefields, where civilians are subjected to violations in the absence of protection.

The Nature of the War: We can classify this war within the pattern of conflicts involving political Islam and its offshoots operating outside the constitutional framework, commonly referred to as proxies, auxiliaries, or militias. Recognition of these forces came within this context, and a law was enacted for them in 2017 to formalize their status and regulate their activities.¹ This facilitated their deployment in foreign engagements, including the war in Yemen. However, this necessitated their inclusion in the Constitutional Charter of 2019, pending a more comprehensive approach to security and military reform.²

This reform was intended to address the systematic political restructuring of national institutions and the ideological influence exerted over military doctrine under the policies of political Islam, which shifted loyalty from the state to the organization. These wars rely on planned violations of both international humanitarian law and human rights through the use of human shields and collective punishment of civilians. Furthermore, they leave the door open to alliances with virtually any actor. Consequently, they often encompass groups regardless of their legal record, moral standing, or political orientation.

The April 2023 war carries an important dimension in that the Rapid Support Forces represent an extension of the auxiliary forces or militias. Their military culture derives from the model created by the army, which, owing to Sudan's repeated internal conflicts, increasingly evolved into a force used to confront political and social demands in accordance with the interests of ruling authorities. The reference here is to military culture rather than military doctrine. Military doctrine within the army itself was transformed by ideological influences associated

¹ *Republic of Sudan, Rapid Support Forces Act, 2017.*

² *Republic of Sudan, Constitutional Charter for the Transitional Period, 2019 (as amended), arts. 34–36.*

with political Islam, as acknowledged by Hassan al-Turabi in public remarks delivered in Qatar.³

In contrast, ideological doctrine remained largely absent from the auxiliary forces because of the nature of their formation and the limited tasks originally assigned to them, including scorched-earth operations directed against specific communities. Their motivations often centered less on grievance and more on anticipated gains.

A notable distinction emerged with the RSF. Its evolution from the Border Guards was linked to political calculations within the ruling establishment and conflicts inside the Sudanese Islamic Movement and the National Congress Party. External factors including the global financial crisis of 2013, Sudan's participation in the Yemen war from 2015, and cooperation under the Khartoum Process concerning migration enhanced the RSF's international standing and fueled ambitions for political power.⁴

This nature of the conflict requires each actor to maintain both strategic and short-term objectives. The return of Islamists to power has remained a strategic objective for some actors involved in the conflict. Achieving this objective through either the army or the RSF appears, from this perspective, to be of secondary importance. Consequently, the continuation of hostilities itself becomes a strategic goal. This dynamic helps explain the failure of the Jeddah process in 2023 to secure even a temporary ceasefire.⁵

Collective Punishment and Human Shields: Examining the pattern of fighting during the April War reveals that hostilities began in urban centers before expanding into residential neighborhoods and civilian infrastructure. The conflict subsequently evolved into a pattern of withdrawal and territorial control while civilians remained exposed as both human shields and direct targets of violations.

This appears to be a deliberate and calculated tactic. As noted above, the auxiliary forces were not independent of the military culture from which they emerged. The army retained the capacity to influence them through relatively simple means. For example, rumors regarding the deaths of senior RSF leaders in May 2023 reportedly contributed to an escalation of violations, particularly those affecting economic and social rights.

A second pattern became evident as the conflict spread geographically. The RSF's expansion into Gezira and Sennar states was accompanied by a broader range of violations, intensifying its confrontation with the international community and stretching its military resources. This ultimately contributed to withdrawals from parts of Gezira, Sennar, and Khartoum. The conflict also extended to El Fasher, where the RSF became embroiled in fierce fighting that prompted broader tribal mobilization.

³ Hassan Al-Turabi, interview with Al Jazeera Arabic, discussing the relationship between the Sudanese Islamic Movement and the armed forces, Doha, Qatar.

⁴ International Crisis Group, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution* (Africa Report No. 281, 21 October 2019); and International Crisis Group, *The Chaos in Darfur* (Africa Briefing No. 110, 22 April 2015).

⁵ United States Department of State and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan* (11 May 2023)

On the other hand, the army succeeded in influencing the positions of several armed movements. Some groups limited themselves to either participation or neutrality, despite the possibility of maintaining an independent armed struggle position. This outcome was shaped by multiple factors, including the design, timing, and implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement of 2020.⁶ The agreement contained extensive provisions regarding political participation, yet insufficient attention was given to the possibility that movements would eventually face a choice between political power and the original objectives that had motivated decades of armed struggle.

Tribal Dynamics and the Exploitation of Contradictions: While the army expanded militarization through popular mobilization outside the traditional reserve force structure, the RSF relied heavily on tribal mobilization. This strategy ultimately increased its dependence on tribal networks. However, tribes are not always reliable units of political or military organization.

The experience of Sheikh Musa Hilal, leader of the Mahamid and a central figure in the formation of the Janjaweed militias, illustrates this reality.⁸ Many current leaders within the RSF have previously navigated similar trajectories marked by comparable ambitions for power.

The RSF's denial of Al-Nur Muhammad Adam Al-Qubba's access to gold mining activities in North Darfur has been cited as one factor contributing to his eventual departure from the organization. Similarly, the arrests of Musa Hilal and Al-Safna in 2017 deepened existing tensions. The attacks carried out against the Mahamid stronghold of Mustariha reflected patterns of violence similar to those previously associated with Janjaweed and Border Guard operations.

The RSF and the Question of Power: In 2020, the RSF began exploring the possibility of establishing a political party. However, a lack of strategic vision, organizational instability, and leadership challenges delayed this effort. Historically, armed forces seeking political power have generally done so through military coups. The very aspiration of an armed force to govern signals a transition from professional military functions to political ambitions.

Following the outbreak of war in April 2023, the RSF attempted to establish a broader political base. These efforts included the conference held in Togo, which ultimately fell short of expectations. According to reliable sources, attendance was significantly lower than anticipated, with fewer than fifty participants reportedly attending despite plans for a much larger gathering.⁷

The conflict has demonstrated the dangers of militarization, parallel armed structures, and the exploitation of social and political divisions, while civilians continue to bear the heaviest costs. Lasting peace will require not only an end to hostilities, but also meaningful security sector reform, accountability, and the restoration of civilian governance founded on the rule of law.

⁶ Republic of Sudan, *Juba Peace Agreement, signed 3 October 2020*.

⁷ Radio Dabanga, "RSF Political Charter Conference Opens in Nairobi" (February 2025); and Sudan Tribune, *reports on RSF political mobilization and the establishment of civilian political alliances during the Sudan conflict, 2024–2025*.

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