

1.2.1. Major state and non-state armed groups

(a) Brief description and capacity

During the reference period, the SAF and the RSF remained the primary opposing parties to the conflict.¹⁵³ Both sides relied on military and paramilitary forces, auxiliary and allied militias, as well as security and intelligence agencies.¹⁵⁴ See section [2. Security situation and conflict impact on civilians by region](#) for more information on the presence of armed groups at regional level.

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) are comprised of the Land Force, the Sudanese Navy, the Sudanese Air Force,¹⁵⁵ the SAF Military Intelligence¹⁵⁶ and the Border Guards¹⁵⁷. Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan remained Commander-in-Chief of the SAF.¹⁵⁸ While its corps of officers viewed the SAF as a pan-Sudanese institution, it was dominated by members of Arab tribes of central Sudan.¹⁵⁹ Estimates of the strength of the SAF, which included both conventional units and special forces,¹⁶⁰ ranged from 120 000¹⁶¹ up to 200 000 personnel around the outbreak of the conflict in April 2023.¹⁶²

The SAF's arms inventory consisted of weapons systems of mostly Soviet/ Russian,¹⁶³ Chinese¹⁶⁴ and domestic origin¹⁶⁵ and included military aircraft,¹⁶⁶ heavy weaponry,¹⁶⁷ combat drones,¹⁶⁸ tanks¹⁶⁹ and other armoured fighting vehicles¹⁷⁰. Air superiority has been a key element of advantage for the SAF.¹⁷¹

Since the outbreak of the conflict, the SAF heavily relied on its air force while seeking to strengthen its ground forces, which before the conflict had also included the RSF.¹⁷² Since late 2023/early 2024, the capabilities of the air force improved after acquiring combat drones from Türkiye¹⁷³ (Bayraktar drones)¹⁷⁴ and Iran,¹⁷⁵ (Mohajer-6,¹⁷⁶ Shahid and Ababil drones).¹⁷⁷ The SAF reportedly also received arms shipments from Egypt.¹⁷⁸ During the reference period, the SAF consolidated its overall operational capabilities, including in terms of personnel numbers,¹⁷⁹ aviation systems and defence industries.¹⁸⁰ At the same time, the SAF was faced with an array of structural issues, including lack of discipline, political infighting and rivalling personal interests and loyalties. Moreover, it has been subject to sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 1591 since 2005, which included an embargo on arms due to the SAF's involvement in the Darfur conflict.¹⁸¹

A number of Darfuri militias were backing the SAF, including the three Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) signatories¹⁸² JEM, SPLM-N-Agar and SLM-MM, as well as the groups SLM-Tambour,¹⁸³ the predominantly Massalit¹⁸⁴ SLM-Sudanese Alliance and some eastern Sudanese factions¹⁸⁵ such as the Eastern Battalion (led by Mousa Mohamed).¹⁸⁶ Further forces supporting the SAF included the 80 000-strong¹⁸⁷ paramilitary Central Reserve Force,¹⁸⁸ the Popular Resistance battalions,¹⁸⁹ as well as the Popular Mobilization ('mustanfareen') battalions¹⁹⁰ (consisting of newly recruited former civilians) and militias like the Islamist Al-Bara bin Malik Brigade.¹⁹¹ There were signs that the Islamist fighters were playing a prominent role in the SAF's offensives launched in 2024.¹⁹² For further background information on the SAF, see section 1.1.3 Security situation of the [EUAA report Sudan - Country Focus \(April 2024\)](#).

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are a highly mobile ground-based combat force consisting of regular RSF units, an intelligence service of its own and allied militias.¹⁹³ The RSF is led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ('Hemedti').¹⁹⁴ The RSF has been less institutionalised than the SAF, with much of its commanders stemming from the Dagalo family.¹⁹⁵ Its traditional stronghold has been in the Darfur region.¹⁹⁶ The RSF has been aiming to gain control over the security sector and establish a new army replacing the traditional

SAF structures.¹⁹⁷ The RSF's corps of officers has been historically dominated by ethnic Arabs from Darfur, especially the Rizeigat¹⁹⁸ and Misseriya tribes.¹⁹⁹ But more recently, the RSF has sought to diversify its corps of officers and allied commanders by bringing in individuals from other peripheral regions of the country, including some who were ethnically non-Arab.²⁰⁰

Estimates of the RSF's size varied between 70 000 and up to 100 000 fighters around the onset of the current conflict.²⁰¹ Being a light infantry force, the RSF has lacked airpower.²⁰² It mainly relied on vehicles with mounted large-calibre weapons,²⁰³ UAE-manufactured²⁰⁴ armoured personnel carriers (APCs)²⁰⁵ and reportedly a very limited number of tanks.²⁰⁶ Moreover, RSF fighters were using portable anti-aircraft weapons²⁰⁷ and also had access to anti-tank guided missiles²⁰⁸ (including Russian-made Kornet missiles)²⁰⁹ and, likely, Turkish-made Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS).²¹⁰

Although denied by the UAE government,²¹¹ multiple sources noted that RSF has been benefitting from arms support from the UAE²¹² as the Gulf state pursued a 'militarized strategy for influence' in Sudan,²¹³ seeking to uphold the institutional presence of the RSF in Sudan as a means of protecting its investments and influence on politics in the country.²¹⁴ The RSF's arsenal of weapons reportedly obtained through the UAE included advanced long-range drones equipped with guided missiles,²¹⁵ attack drones (including one-way attack drones and drones using Serbian-made thermobaric munitions)²¹⁶ and a sophisticated French-manufactured defence system installed on UAE-made APCs to counter close-range threats.²¹⁷

The RSF has also received weapons supplies from Russia's former Wagner Group,²¹⁸ in addition to armaments provided by the Sudanese authorities prior to the outbreak of the conflict.²¹⁹ As the RSF captured SAF bases, it gained access to additional heavy weaponry²²⁰ and deployed artillery²²¹ and long-range missiles²²² in attacks on civilian areas.

During the reference period, the RSF was backed by ethnic Arab militia groups,²²³ popularly referred to 'Janjaweed',²²⁴ who appeared to have provided most of the manpower within the RSF alliance. The RSF was also supported by fighters from other non-Masalit ethnicities such as Bargo, Borno and Fallata from Darfur,²²⁵ Hawazma and Misseriya from South Kordofan,²²⁶ fighters from the militia groups Sudan Shield Forces²²⁷ and Tamazuj, as well as foreign combatants from Chad²²⁸ (a country also accused by the SAF of 'supplying arms to rebel militias'),²²⁹ the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya,²³⁰ and Colombia.²³¹ While the group recently witnessed defections in Al Jazirah, Khartoum and West Kordofan, ACLED noted that the RSF's horizontal structure enabled it to 'absorb their impact', allowing troops to reorganise in accordance to needs on the ground, instead of being dependent on a hierarchical chain of command.²³² For further background information on the RSF, see section 1.1.3 Security situation of the [EUAA report Sudan - Country Focus \(April 2024\)](#).

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North-al-Hilu (SPLM-N-al-Hilu) faction controlled parts of South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.²³³ The SPLM-N-Hilu faction, a group which has rejected the negotiations that led to the conclusion of the JPA²³⁴ and expanded its areas of control in South Kordofan since April 2023, maintained a non-aligned position in the conflict,²³⁵ although there were reports of its involvement in clashes with both the SAF²³⁶ and the RSF.²³⁷ Other non-aligned armed groups included Darfur's SLM-Transitional Council (led by El Hadi Idriss) and SLM-Al-Nur (led by Abdul Wahid Mohammed al-Nur),²³⁸ a signatory and non-signatory of the JPA, respectively.²³⁹

(b) Nature of methods and tactics used

Since the eruption of the conflict in April 2023, the SAF has been responsible for carrying out all airstrikes as the RSF has been lacking fighter planes.²⁴⁰ The SAF deployed its air force, heavy artillery and tanks²⁴¹ to defend fixed locations.²⁴²

While trained in defending positions, holding territory and carrying out sustained attacks,[243](#) the SAF troops lacked forces fighting on the ground,[244](#) as well as mobility and the ability to pursue RSF fighters in urban terrain.[245](#) While in the initial stages of the conflict the SAF relied on its air force[246](#) to break the RSF's sieges of its garrisons,[247](#) it obtained and deployed new combat drones as the conflict progressed.[248](#) As ACLED reported, the SAF had conducted hundreds of drone strikes as of August 2024, the vast majority in Khartoum state, using drones as a supplement to its ground-based offensives.[249](#)

Meanwhile, the RSF employed hit-and-run tactics targeting SAF positions with the aim of depleting their munitions and supplies, forcing them to retreat from their positions and taking over their territory, notably in Darfur and Al Jazirah state.[250](#) Its lack of a hierarchical chain of command has allowed the RSF to regroup its forces based on the necessities on the ground, amassing fighters in significant locations while withdrawing them from less relevant ones.[251](#)

Due to the nature of the RSF's combat experience in Yemen (supporting Saudi and Emirati troops against Houthi rebels) and Libya (supporting General Khalifa Haftar), the RSF was deemed to be mainly effective in rural combat.[252](#) While initially unaccustomed to Khartoum's urban operational environment,[253](#) the RSF adopted street warfare tactics[254](#) and techniques of evading SAF aerial strikes by swiftly dispersing in urban terrain and occupying residential buildings.[255](#) Its fighters have also infiltrated urban neighbourhoods wearing civilian attire to set up sleeper cells there.[256](#)

At the same time, the RSF continued to employ tactics known from the *Janjaweed* era, including pillaging and marauding,[257](#) as well as deliberate killings to intimidate residents. With logistical support from regional powers such as Russia's Wagner Group, the RSF notably acquired more sophisticated intelligence capabilities, including the use of satellite imagery and advanced technology allowing it to spy on movements of army units.[258](#)

As the conflict progressed, the RSF, which runs a Special Task Battalion capable of operating drones,[259](#) also began to deploy combat drones. Unlike the SAF's mass drone attacks, the RSF's drone attacks followed a more strategic approach, targeting SAF-controlled areas far away from the frontlines that had previously been viewed as 'safe', including in River Nile, White Nile, Gedaref, Red Sea states.[260](#) They aimed 'to create a sense of constant threat, forcing the SAF to stretch its defenses, thereby weakening its overall capacity to sustain prolonged engagements'.[261](#) This use of drones has contributed to a marked expansion of the conflict's geographic reach.[262](#)

Moreover, sources pointed to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.[263](#) Rape and gang-rape, overwhelmingly targeting women and girls, continued to occur 'on a large scale', especially during invasions of cities, attacks on IDPs and IDP sites, as well as during the occupation of urban residential areas by armed fighters.[264](#) Mostly attributed to the RSF,[265](#) these acts have been a 'defining' characteristic of the current conflict.[266](#) Several UN special rapporteurs further noted in late June 2024 that 'both the SAF and the RSF are using food as a weapon and starving civilians,' as aid deliveries were being blocked and agricultural activities disrupted due to the ongoing armed conflict, heightening the risk of imminent wide-spread famine.[267](#)

(c) Recruitment

In June 2023, the Commander-in-Chief of the SAF, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, called on all ‘young and capable’ civilians to join the SAF in its fight against the RSF.²⁶⁸ The SAF set up a National Committee for Mobilization and Popular Resistance to coordinate the recruitment, arming and financing of newly formed units.²⁶⁹ The SAF used social media messaging to mobilise fighters and direct them to register at the nearest military command or unit.²⁷⁰ Recruitment centres were set up across the areas controlled by the SAF.²⁷¹ In October 2024, it was reported that the SAF had trained thousands of recruits during the previous months and opened new camps for the SAF-aligned Darfur Joint Forces.²⁷² Many of the SAF’s newly recruited fighters were from River Nile State,²⁷³ a region known for producing many of the country’s military leaders.²⁷⁴ Darfuri former rebel groups aligned with the SAF also engaged in training thousands of new recruits in Gedaref and Kassala states²⁷⁵ in eastern Sudan²⁷⁶.

The RSF has largely recruited from among Arab communities in Darfur.²⁷⁷ Some elements within the RSF continued to pursue an ideology of ‘Arab supremacy’ once upheld by the ‘Janjaweed’ militias in the 2000s. A large number of men have joined the RSF ranks mainly for financial reasons, attracted by their comparatively higher pay.²⁷⁸ New recruitment by the RSF was notably reported in the Darfur²⁷⁹ and Kordofan regions²⁸⁰ as well as among armed militias in the Central African Republic (CAR).²⁸¹ In Darfur, the RSF recruited fighters using the tribal networks of its officers and by providing rewards, including money, cars and military ranks, to ethnic Arab tribal leaders who enlisted members of their own tribes.²⁸² As well as invoking the ancient pre-Islamic Sudanese tradition of Faza’ā, which allows tribes to call upon their kinsmen and allies for support against attacks by other tribal groups or to avenge killings,²⁸³ the RSF coerced civilians into joining their ranks by withholding food.²⁸⁴ In autumn 2024, the RSF launched a large-scale recruitment campaign in the Darfur and Kordofan regions along tribal affiliations.²⁸⁵

Both the SAF and the RSF enlisted or employed child soldiers, including minors who had been forcibly recruited.²⁸⁶ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) noted that the recruitment of children was a widespread phenomenon, especially in Darfur and eastern Sudan.²⁸⁷ However, recruitment of children was reportedly occurring across the country and was carried out by all belligerents, including those who had signed the JPA. Coercive methods of recruitment like intimidation, torture, summary execution and denial of food and medical care were reportedly being widely used.²⁸⁸ According to the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, unaccompanied and separated street children were particularly at risk of being recruited by armed groups.²⁸⁹

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