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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 weapons 207 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 Forces 227 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 force246 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 tactics254and 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'a, 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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