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Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW)

Origins/composition

The SLA was formed in 2001 by an alliance of Fur and Zaghawa. From the start, the two had markedly different agendas. The Fur leaders of the SLA supported the democratic, decentralized ‘New Sudan’ advocated by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and envisaged their rebellion as being essentially anti-government. Most Zaghawa wanted to organize not against the government, but against the Arab militias with whom they were in competition in North Darfur, including over the lucrative camel trade.

By the end of 2002 tensions were running deep. In mid-2004 the Zaghawa attacked the Fur heartland, Jebel Marra. Since then, and especially since the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in 2006, the movement has split into a dozen factions, largely along tribal lines. All attempts to reunite it have failed.

Leadership

Abdul Wahid Mohamed al Nur, the original chairman of the SLA, is a Khartoum-educated law graduate who since the beginning of the insurgency has spent more time outside Darfur than inside. Increasingly contested by his own commanders because of his self-exile from Darfur and erratic, micromanaging style of leadership, Abdul Wahid settled in Paris when the Abuja peace talks that produced the DPA ended in 2006. His refusal to join post-Abuja peace talks in Qatar slowly eroded his French support. His failure to support his commanders in the field and his refusal to meet several high-level Sudanese visitors—including prominent members of his own tribe—damaged his reputation and credibility among many of his early supporters.

Abdul Wahid remained in Paris until the end of 2010, when he moved to Nairobi and began shuttling between there and Kampala. Although his departure from Paris was depicted as a move to engage SLA commanders in consultations to reorganize the movement, it was in reality a move designed to pre-empt the humiliation of expulsion. The French government had decided it would not renew his residency and officials said privately he would not be permitted back into the country if he attempted to return.

Abdul Wahid’s poor leadership and long absence from the field encouraged splits and desertions, even among his closest collaborators, and led to factional fighting in and around Jebel Marra early in 2010. He has denied the claims of Fur elders and formerly loyal commanders that he ordered not only the killing of dissidents, but also attacks in July 2010 against a rival faction that supported the Doha peace process in two camps for the displaced in South Darfur—Kalma and Hamidiya.

In February 2011 Abdul Wahid announced seven new appointments to the new Supreme Leadership Council and Revolutionary Leadership Council, the last in a line of appointments to bodies that have never been empowered. The only appointment with any weight in Darfur was that of the Meidop commander Suleiman Marajan, named chairman of the Revolutionary Leadership Council.

Sudan Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA)

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In February 2011 a JEM delegation led by Bechara Suliman travelled to Nairobi to attempt to meet Abdul Wahid and urge cooperation. Dissent among SLA-AW senior members is persistent, as is discussion about modifying the leadership and structure of the movement. But dissenters have been unable to rally sufficient support from within the movement; the absence of a viable alternative figure to Abdul Wahid has also hampered the movement's ability to change.

Areas of control/activity

SLA-AW's military presence centres on Jebel Marra, the massif straddling North, West, and South Darfur. His control of Jebel Marra has been weakening, however, since factional fighting erupted within the movement in January 2010. In defeating breakaway commanders, Abdul Wahid loyalists enlisted the support of government-backed Arab militias with which they had already negotiated local non-aggression agreements. (One source claims that Abdul Wahid paid the militia of the Nuwaiba tribe more than USD 1.5 million.) The ability of SLA-AW to mount a military offensive is limited by its isolation in Jebel Marra, its deep divisions, and its lack of leadership and logistical capacity. Its divisions have damaged its ability even to defend Jebel Marra.

The inter-factional fighting was followed by a government offensive against Jebel Marra that continues, with different degrees of intensity, to this day, targeting most recently the forces of SLA-AW's Mohamed Abdel Salam 'Terrada'. In March 2010 an attack on the western side of the mountain was contained only thanks to support from JEM. In October 2010 the offensive shifted to the eastern side of the mountain, targeting Abdul Wahid's longtime headquarters in Suni under the guise of opening roads closed by rebel activity. Fur civilians claimed that air attacks destroyed villages in the area. A government denial of access to rebel-controlled areas made it impossible both to verify the extent of the deaths and displacement in Jebel Marra and to aid the victims of the offensive.

Today, control of the area of eastern Jebel Marra has slipped from Abdul Wahid's hands, but the upper reaches of the Jebel in West Darfur remains with SLA-AW overall military leader, Abdelgadir Abdelrahman Ibrahim 'Gaddura'. SLA-Mother, led by Abu al Gasim Imam al Haj, a DPA signatory, has entered into coordination with SLA-AW.

Although SLA-AW has little armed presence outside Jebel Marra and Abdul Wahid is losing support among the masses of displaced Fur—his key constituency—he is still an iconic figure for many of the displaced in camps in Darfur and Chad.

Sources of financing/support

The SLA was initially supported by the SPLA and Eritrea. Today, however, SLA-AW has little foreign backing outside of Uganda and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. It solicits contributions from Fur in the diaspora and the displaced camps (through a tireless stream of videos, tapes, and telephone calls from Abdul Wahid in Paris) and obtains ammunition from two main sources—government soldiers and

‘janjaweed’—and, more recently, JEM. There are persistent reports that Abdul Wahid, who opened an office in Tel Aviv in 2008, receives a monthly stipend from Israel.

Status

SLA-AW has refused to participate in any peace talks, anywhere, since rejecting the DPA in 2006. However, African Union (AU)/UN mediator Djibril Bassolé managed to build a close relationship with Abdul Wahid. As a result, Abdul Wahid has been far less publicly critical of the Doha peace process’s latest outcomes.

In March 2011, after a meeting in Kampala between Abdul Wahid and AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) boss Ibrahim Gambari, UNAMID officials, speaking privately, expressed the hope that Abdul Wahid might ‘soon’ arrive in Doha. Discussions on Abdul Wahid’s joining some form of peace process continue with the Qataris, Bassolé, and Gambari. Abdul Wahid has recently said that he agrees in principle with the framework document issued by the All Darfur Stakeholders’ Conference in Doha on 31 May.

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