

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 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 Darfur Peace Agreement 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 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 grandiosely named 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. Meidop support is divided among SLA-AW, the Justice and Equality Movement

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(JEM), and the Liberation and Justice Movement. Marajan has in the past been a strong critic of Abdul Wahid, but acknowledges his continuing support among Fur and in the camps for the displaced.

In February 2011, a JEM delegation led by Bechara Suliman travelled to Nairobi to attempt to meet Abdul Wahid and urge cooperation. The SLA leader, who is notorious for his broken promises and abrupt reversals of position, agreed to engage in talks with JEM on future cooperation, possibly as early as March. JEM remains skeptical.

Areas of control/activity

SLA-AW's control of the periphery of its Jebel Marra stronghold has been weakening ever since factional fighting erupted within SLA-AW 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 Abdul Wahid paid the militia of the Nuwaiba tribe more than USD 1.5 million.)

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 Abdul Wahid's most important remaining commander, 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 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.

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 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 no foreign backer. 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 Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006. On 8 July, however, as the government offensive against Jebel Marra gained momentum, Abdul Wahid met for the first time with the

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Qatari State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Ahmed bin Abdalla al Mahmoud, the Qatari official responsible for the Doha peace talks. After the meeting Abdul Wahid said he had agreed to continue ‘consultations’ with mediators, but not yet to participate in the talks.

In March 2011, after a meeting in Kampala between Abdul Wahid and UNAMID boss Ibrahim Gambari, UNAMID officials, speaking privately, expressed hope that Abdul Wahid might ‘soon’ arrive in Doha. Delegates of the armed movements already in Doha were more skeptical, recalling his unpredictability and unreliability. A senior JEM official said Abdul Wahid had attempted to return to France, but had been refused entry at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. As of 30 March, the report was not independently confirmed.

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. Observers believe the government is now set on defeating SLA-AW militarily, along with any other armed movement that refuses to negotiate an end to the conflict.

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