

Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF)

Origins/composition

On 13 November 2011, following lengthy negotiations, three Darfur rebel groups—the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and the Sudan Liberation Army factions of Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) and Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW)—joined together in an alliance with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) to form the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF).

Leadership

The Leadership Council of the SRF as announced on 20 February 2012 consists of:

- Malik Agar, chairman
- Abdel-Aziz al Hilu, commander in chief of the joint military forces

The three Darfur rebel groups share vice-chairman positions with separate portfolios:

- Abdel Wahid al Nur, vice-chairmen of political affairs
- Minni Minawi, vice-chairman of finance
- Jibril Ibrahim, vice-chairman of external affairs

In addition:

- Buthaina Ibrahim Dinar (SPLM-N), Elryaih Mahmoud (SLM-MM), Ahmed Adam Bakheit (JEM), and Mustafa Sharif Mohamed (SLM-AW) serve in the political affairs office under Abdel Wahid.
- Three members from JEM, SLM-AW, and SLM-MM serve in the finance office under Minni Minawi.
- Yasir Arman (SPLM-N) is secretary for external affairs under Jibril Ibrahim.
- Trayo Ahmed Ali (SLA-MM) is secretary for humanitarian affairs.
- Tahir Faki (JEM) is secretary without portfolio.
- Abdul Gassim Imam al Haj, a senior SLA-AW figure, serves as SRF spokesman.

JEM’s general secretary for presidential affairs, Suleiman Sendel, is deputy in charge of operations. The SLA-MM and SLA-AW fill the deputy positions of administration and logistics, respectively.

Dynamics

Formation of the SRF was made possible in large part by the dominant position of the SPLM-N in the coalition and its better access to support from South Sudan and elsewhere. However, power struggles and philosophical differences between the Darfur factions persist, and military cooperation is challenging.

The coalition unites the Darfur rebel groups and creates a wider geographic and ethnic coalition. The participation of the SPLM-N is important to the SRF’s national agenda, and counters the government’s strategy of isolation.

While the SRF's diverse membership dampens criticism of its members holding narrow ethnic interests and lack of political vision, the perception that South Sudan backs the coalition has prevented it from attracting additional Sudanese supporters. The SRF also lacks significant popular roots beyond Darfur and the Two Areas.

Militarily, the alliance provides Darfur groups with access to the Nuba Mountains as rear bases and potentially as staging areas for attacks on Khartoum. While SRF's structure delineates a formal division of responsibilities, day-to-day interactions do not adhere strictly to this format. For example Yasser Arman is the predominant interlocutor for political issues involving the entire SRF rather than JEM's leader Jibril Ibrahim, who is formally charged with the portfolio.

The durability of the SRF's alliance has been in question since its creation. The diplomatic community views the SRF's shelf life as extremely limited, a marriage of convenience that will cease whenever one partner receives a better offer. Yet other options have not emerged. The alliance also seems to be highly resistant to traditional cooption tactics.

Areas of control/activity

Corresponding to the SPLM-N's dominant role, the SRF's locus of control resides in its bastion in Kaoda, and the Nuba Mountains, South Kordofan. Military activity is most prevalent in South Kordofan but extends to Blue Nile and into South Sudan's border states.

The SRF's Darfurian members remain militarily active in Darfur but, reflecting their proximity to Kaoda and the South Sudan border, attacks in 2012 occurred more often near the South Darfur–South Sudan border.

Darfurian members have participated in SRF attacks outside of Darfur, most notably in the capture of the Hejlij oil fields in March to April 2012. But they have tried to keep a low profile. Seemingly in keeping with the low-profile strategy, SLA-MM and SLA-AW have communicated that they do not to participate in military operations outside Darfur. For SLA-AW, in any case, this would be beyond their military means. SLA-MM has a greater capacity for operating beyond Darfur, and thus its lack of visibility outside of Darfur throughout 2013 may be by choice or reflective of a generally lull in the fighting season.

SLA-MM is now the predominant military force among the Darfur-based rebel groups, having recently taken near total control of Labado and Muhajaria, East Darfur, in early April 2013. They now liaise with UNAMID there and operate almost like a formal local authority. In a further sign of SLA-MM's influence, a prominent local MP made a statement highlighting the risk of Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, falling to SLA-MM without serious government response. Currently all the trade routes linking Nyala with the outside are blocked by the threat of attack.

SLA-AW retains its traditional position in Jebel Marra from where cooperation with SLA-MM has increased; a result of improved relations the SRF alliance created between the two movements.

Following the splintering of JEM and JEM-Basher, the two movements have repeatedly clashed along the North Darfur–Chad border. For the most part, this development and resultant fighting has occupied JEM's focus.

Like the capture of Hejlij, the attack on Um Ruwaba, North Kordofan, on 26–27 April 2013 was a major military action that rallied the joint forces to strike outside their traditional areas of operation. Timed to coincide with end of the first round of GoS/SPLM-N negotiations on the Two Areas in Addis Ababa, the attack carries multiple political messages. First, it demonstrates the SRF's continuing military relevance and ability to expand military operations outside the traditional areas of Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan. Second, it shows that the SRF is unwilling to be constrained to regional negotiations, but rather seeks to be treated as a national actor. Finally, the attack reflects that the SRF can sustain itself without the support of South Sudan; the SRF seized fuel, supplies, and cash following the attack (and also destroyed telecommunications towers, an electricity power plant, and a fuel station during the attack).

Status

Negotiations over the formation of the SRF were extended; the greatest and final barrier being JEM's concerns about the SRF's insistence on a secular state. To this day, JEM remains the most ideologically incongruent member of the wider alliance.

The SRF has called for regime change by any means, political or military, but has also publicly stated its readiness for peaceful political transformation and dialogue. The SRF maintains that advancing their struggle on both the political and military front is reasonable and is not contradictory as detractors claim. Challenged on the lack of national political vision, the SRF have prepared two political manifestos; the second being a more detailed elaboration of the first.

The government is publicly hostile towards negotiations with the SRF, condemning it a proxy of the SPLA/GoSS and thus a matter best dealt with by reaching accord with the GoSS over the outstanding Sudan-South Sudan secession issues. The GoS maintains that recognized negotiation forums for the Darfuri movements and the SPLM-N already exist.

Alliances

The SRF continues to expand. Some new members come from other Darfur armed movements, others from within the (Northern) Sudan political opposition. On the Darfur front, JEM has incorporated SLA-Justice (now known as the Democratic Sudan Liberation Movement), led by Ali Carabino, and SLA-Unity, led by Abdallah Yaya, has participated in some of SRF's military operations. Ahmed Abdul Shafie (recently defected from LJM), and Mohamed Bahr Hamedein (a JEM splinter group) have both signaled their interest in joining the alliance. Hamedein's decision will rest on the prospects for a Darfur peace agreement for his movement in Doha. Should progress continue to be elusive, the SRF will grow more appealing, though Hamedein's quarrel with JEM remains an obstacle to his joining.



Alliances with the Sudanese political opposition are occurring piecemeal and with fluid loyalties. On 7 May 2012 in a London meeting with SRF Chairman Malik Agar, Ali al Haj of the Popular Congress Party (PCP), Al Tom Haju of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and Nasr al Din al Hadi, a member of the National Umma Party (NUP), joined SRF (the latter two split from their parties, who are currently cooperating with the GoS).

The other major opposition umbrella, the National Consensus Forces, including the NUP-led by former Prime Minister Al Sadiq al Mahdi, the PCP of Hassan al Turabi, and the Sudanese Communist Party, as well as other smaller parties, has not called for military regime change but keeps channels to the SRF open.

On 6 August in Kampala the SLA-MM and Mariam Mahdi, representing a division of the NUP, signed an agreement that outlined shared principles for inclusion in a future constitutional process. The NCP strongly criticized the move and both the SRF and other Umma party groups distanced themselves from the action.

The SRF's last major push to widen the alliance and assume leadership of the overall Sudanese political opposition centered on the creation of its New Dawn Charter in Kampala, Uganda on 5 January 2013. The SRF invited representatives of the Khartoum-based political opposition (the National Consensus Forces, or NCF, coalition), to Kampala, Uganda, in a bid to bind them into a new overarching alliance to be consecrated by the signing of the charter. But the move ultimately backfired, opening a wider gulf between the SRF and the NCF. NCF representatives who signed the New Dawn Charter were disowned by their movement's leadership and were arrested upon return to Khartoum (most were released in April 2013). The NCF complained that the SRF had attempted to force their hand and that no permission had been given for the representatives to sign.

While the SRF has achieved the unification of the Darfur non-signatory groups, negotiations on the Two Areas under the auspices of the African Union's High Level Implementation Panel in Addis Ababa recognize only the SPLM-N as interlocutor. Concerns that the SPLM-N will conclude a bilateral agreement excluding the Darfurian groups threatens the SRF's cohesion and creates further tension in the SRF-NCF relationship. The SPLM-N is attempting to strike a balance between calling for a national process for all of Sudan (Darfur included) and adhering to immediate negotiations on humanitarian access, ceasefire, and political resolution of the Two Areas conflict.

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