

# The Sudan Revolutionary Front: Its Formation and Development

*By Andrew McCutchen*



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# List of abbreviations

<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>DDPD</b>	Doha Document for Peace in Darfur
<b>DPA</b>	Darfur Peace Agreement
<b>DUP</b>	Democratic Unionist Party
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>JEM</b>	Justice and Equality Movement
<b>JIU</b>	Joint Integrated Unit
<b>LJM</b>	Liberation and Justice Movement
<b>NCF</b>	National Consensus Forces
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>NUP</b>	National Umma Party
<b>PDF</b>	Popular Defence Forces
<b>RRF</b>	Rapid Response Forces
<b>SAF</b>	Sudan Armed Forces
<b>SDBZ</b>	Safe demilitarized border zone
<b>SLA</b>	Sudan Liberation Army
<b>SLA-AW</b>	Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid
<b>SLA-MM</b>	Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi
<b>SPLM/A</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
<b>SRF</b>	Sudan Revolutionary Front
<b>UPFLJ</b>	United People's Front for Liberation and Justice

# I. Introduction and key findings

South Sudan's secession from Sudan in July 2011 did not end Sudan's internal conflicts. By the time South Sudan became independent Khartoum had been fighting rebels in Darfur for nearly a decade; and in the months just before and just after South Sudan's independence new wars broke out in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Then on 11 November 2011 the four strongest Sudanese rebel groups, from Darfur and South Kordofan/Blue Nile, agreed to form the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF). The armed opposition groups in the SRF were now committed to a common objective: overthrowing President Omar al-Bashir and creating what they considered to be a more equitable Sudan. Throughout Sudan's history rebel groups have mutated and splintered, with some factions returning to the government side. A genuine alliance of powerful rebels was a new and frightening prospect for Bashir and his ruling National Congress Party (NCP).

The rebels fought battles in Darfur and South Kordofan in 2012 and 2013 involving coordination between some but not all of the SRF's member groups. Then in April 2013 the four components of the SRF fought together for the first time, launching a surprise attack on Um Ruwaba and Abu Kershola.<sup>1</sup> The rebels were able to hold Abu Kershola for a month, proving their military mettle, but the SRF also has deeply political objectives, including the desire to 'restructure the Sudanese state'. Since it is unlikely to be able to defeat Bashir militarily, it will need to forge an alliance with the unarmed opposition to achieve this goal. The SRF's political vision and capacities are therefore almost as significant as its prowess on the battlefield.

This *Working Paper* examines the SRF, its major military campaigns and core political beliefs, and the local and international consequences of the new rebel alliance. The paper is based on interviews with SRF leaders, NCP officials, diplomats, and security sources conducted in Juba, Kampala, Khartoum, and London in 2013. Follow-up interviews were conducted with key SRF personnel in early 2014, following the outbreak of widespread armed violence in South

Sudan in December 2013. Given its focus on the political and strategic developments, the paper does not attempt to provide a definitive picture of the SRF's arsenal and source of weapons, although this aspect of the conflicts has been covered in recent HSBA publications (Gramizzi, 2013; Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013; Leff and LeBrun, 2014).

Key findings include the following:

- The creation of the SRF was a significant achievement for the rebels, going against the historical trend of splintering rebel movements in Sudan. But the inability of the Darfur groups to choose an SRF leader—indicative of ongoing tensions and rivalries between them—led to their loss of the key SRF post of chairman.
- The SRF's joint force, consisting of troops and vehicles from all of the four major member groups under the command of a Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)-North brigadier general, is probably an ad hoc rather than a permanent force.
- The Um Ruwaba raid was a symbolically significant thrust towards the centre of Sudan. The alliance's ability to retain control of Abu Kershola for a month, despite several attempts by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) to retake it, announced the SRF as a viable military entity and a real threat to the government. But the SRF does not appear to have the capacity to overthrow the government militarily.
- The Abu Kershola raid also revealed the military tensions in the alliance, especially between the Darfurians' fast-moving hit-and-run tactics and the SPLM-North's focus on taking and holding territory. The SRF has not fully overcome these differences and did not attempt a major combined offensive in the year after Abu Kershola.
- The creation of the SRF and the increased involvement of Darfur groups in the South Kordofan conflict have relocated the epicentre of Sudan's rebellions to South Kordofan. As a result, the government has concentrated its military response there. The SRF has not become a collective player in either the Darfur or Blue Nile conflicts.
- Political and religious disagreements threaten the SRF's internal coherence. In particular, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), with its Islamist

background, is still distrusted by the three other, more secular rebel groups. There are also personality clashes among the SRF's leaders.

- The SRF's strategy for overthrowing the government and restructuring Sudan requires an alliance with the unarmed opposition that has not materialized. Despite talks in Kampala and the New Dawn Charter, and the Paris Declaration signed with the National Umma Party, many opposition leaders are nervous about signing an agreement with a rebel group and have doubts about the SRF's position on the state's relationship with religion, the powers of the regions, and the role of the army, among other issues. They are also under intense pressure from the government not to sign a pact with the rebels.
- The NCP's concerns about South Sudanese and Ugandan support for the rebels have affected Khartoum's relationship with Juba, contributing to the 2012–13 oil shutdown and the brief April 2012 Sudan–South Sudan border war. During this conflict the SPLM-North and JEM played key roles in South Sudan's capture of the Hejlij oilfields. Suspicions persist despite the subsequent improvement in relations between Juba and Khartoum.
- The SRF's insistence on new collective negotiations on a national scale—rather than separate, local discussions on Darfur and South Kordofan/Blue Nile, as Khartoum insists—is unlikely to be adopted without the support of Western countries, the African Union (AU), and the Sudanese unarmed opposition—most of whom have not rallied to the SRF's position on this question. 🗨️

## II. Historical background

Sudan has been at war for most of its modern history. Even before independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956, conflict had started in southern Sudan. The first north–south civil war lasted until 1972, when the Addis Ababa Agreement ushered in more than a decade of uneasy peace. However, in 1983 dissenting members of the army in southern Sudan formed the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and began armed opposition to the government. They were soon joined by ethnically distinct northern peoples from South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

While the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 ended Africa’s longest-running civil war and paved the way for South Sudan’s eventual independence, South Kordofan and Blue Nile remained part of Sudan. In the eyes of the former northern SPLA members in these states the CPA failed to address their grievances. CPA-mandated ‘popular consultations’ began in Blue Nile, but were not completed, and never began in South Kordofan. In 2011 conflicts broke out again in South Kordofan and Blue Nile (Gramizzi, 2013; Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013).

Both the Darfur rebellion and the government’s massive counterinsurgency operation were getting under way in 2003, just as negotiations were beginning in earnest between the SPLA and the Government of Sudan that would lead to the CPA. To their dismay, the Darfur rebel groups were denied access to the negotiations. The conflict would evolve considerably over the following decade, with rebel groups breaking up into factions and with some returning to the government. At one point the situation in Darfur was considered the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis, and even in 2013 there were more than two million displaced persons (IDPs) in the region (UN OCHA, 2014b). The primary rebel groups did not sign two peace agreements—the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) of 2006 and the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) of 2011.

The common denominator in all these conflicts was that the rebels came from peripheral, underdeveloped areas of Sudan. In many cases the rebels were politically and economically marginalized 'African' groups. Since the country's beginnings, power in Sudan has been concentrated in the hands of 'Arab' groups (in reality, often Afro-Arab), and in particular the *awlad al bahr* or 'children of the river', i.e. ethnic groups from the Nile Valley to the north of the capital, Khartoum. The Shaigiyya, Ja'aliyin, and Danagla have had a preponderant role in Sudanese politics and the economy ever since the time of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Non-Arab groups, who are mainly found in the peripheries, have often felt discriminated against. Cultural marginalization, in part through Arabization and Islamization campaigns, and the increased competition for resources, in which non-Arab groups have often suffered, have exacerbated this feeling. At times these factors, combined with economic marginalization and underdevelopment, have led them to take up arms against the state. South Sudan's secession did not change this dynamic.

One feature of the many rebellions against Khartoum has been the divided nature of the anti-government forces. The southern Sudanese rebels in the first north-south war were notoriously fractious. Their position improved dramatically when Joseph Lagu was able to form a united military command that integrated most of the southern Sudanese forces and subordinated the politicians to the military (Johnson, 2003). By some accounts more people were killed in inter-southern Sudanese fighting in the second north-south civil war than in confrontations with northern troops (Akol, 2011). In 1991 the SPLM/A split, leading to inter-rebel fighting. As well as disputes arising from personal ambition and ethnic tensions, there were ideological disagreements about whether the rebels should seek an independent state or more autonomy in a reconceptualized federal system. Although several movements formed the Eastern Front in the war in the east of the country, the 'fighters' integration was [only] theoretical' (ICG, 2013a). The rebels in Darfur were even more fragmented and at one point there were over forty Darfur rebel groups (Tanner and Tubiana, 2007). The power of all the Sudanese rebellions was diluted by the lack of unity among the various rebel movements.

The following sections provide further detail on the historical background of the Darfur and Two Areas conflicts.

## Darfur

The civil war in Darfur<sup>2</sup> is commonly understood to have broken out in early 2003, but in fact several rebel groups had been fighting before that on a very small scale.<sup>3</sup> The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) announced its existence in February 2003, followed one month later by JEM. Most of their members came from the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit groups, who felt that local Arab groups and the Khartoum government were conspiring against them. The world first really paid attention to the growing fighting in Darfur when a combined force of SLA and JEM groups attacked Al Fasher airport in April 2003, destroying seven aircraft and capturing the head of the Sudanese air force (Flint and de Waal, 2008). But rebel cohesion did not last. The SLA soon splintered into several factions, the most significant being SLA-Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW), led by Abdul Wahid Mohamed al Nur, a Fur lawyer, and SLA-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM), under Minni Arku Minawi, a Zaghawa former trader. Minawi signed the DPA in 2006, but SLA-AW and JEM did not. By this point the Darfur civil war had led to the deaths of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, although the exact numbers are disputed.<sup>4</sup>

The DPA did not stop fighting between the other rebel groups and the government, and after an unproductive period in Khartoum Minni Minawi also returned to rebellion in December 2010. Over the years the conflict in Darfur evolved considerably, with Arab groups fighting among themselves and even against the government, and smaller African groups supporting government troops (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2012). Non-political criminality also increased. However, the main threat to the government was still the rebel movements, and in particular JEM, which undertook a brazen but unsuccessful raid on Omdurman in May 2008, far to the east of Darfur. International engagement, including from Ethiopia, Libya, and the United States, as well as other regional and international actors, persuaded several smaller rebel groups to merge, forming the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), whose leader, Tijani al-Sisi, signed the DDPD on 14 July 2011. The agreement contained provisions for power and wealth sharing, and Sisi became the head of the new Darfur Regional Authority. But he soon complained that he was not receiving the funds he needed to do the job,<sup>5</sup> and fault lines in the LJM—already present prior to the agreement—increased (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2012, p. 15).

The DDPD, like the DPA before it, did not bring peace to Darfur, in large part because the major rebel groups—in this case JEM, SLA-AW, and SLA-MM—did not sign it (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2012; ICG, 2014). But these rebel movements remained divided and unable to take and hold new territory, although their ability to launch guerrilla raids on government forces remained a serious security threat.

## South Kordofan and Blue Nile

Thousands of residents of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, mainly Africans in the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile, joined the SPLM/A during the second civil war. The Nuba in particular gained respect as some of the SPLA's toughest fighters, although their area suffered some of the heaviest fighting of the war. Under the CPA, the SPLM/A in South Kordofan and Blue Nile obtained a share of political power, including as members of the state parliament and executive. By the time of southern Sudan's referendum in January 2011 the SPLM's Abdelaziz al Hilu was deputy governor of South Kordofan and had established a relatively productive working relationship with the NCP governor, Ahmed Haroun (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013; ICG, 2013b). In Blue Nile SPLM member Malik Agar was governor, having been appointed in 2007. He then won general elections in 2010. While some observers found the election process deeply flawed, others found that it broadly reflected the will of the people (Young, 2012; Gramizzi, 2013; ICG, 2013c).

By the time of the elections, however, the provisions of the CPA calling for popular consultations on the future of South Kordofan and Blue Nile had not been completed. The consultations were intended to give the citizens of those states their say on how their region should be governed, including its relationship with Khartoum, but there were no votes on whether the two states should remain part of Sudan, as the southern SPLM had obtained for the southern region. The popular consultations began in Blue Nile, but were never finished. The hearings were manipulated by both the NCP and SPLM and contributed to entrenching divisions rather than overcoming them.<sup>6</sup> The popular consultation hearings in South Kordofan had not even started by late 2010, in part because state elections were delayed.

The status of the SPLA's Nuba soldiers caused even more concern. There are different estimates of how many men from South Kordofan were in the SPLA, but most suggest at least 10,000 and some more than double this figure (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). The SPLA had a similar sized force from Blue Nile. Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir refused to reintegrate these northern former rebels into SAF. He wanted all of them to withdraw into southern Sudan before South Sudan's independence or for them to be disarmed if they chose to stay in Sudan. The SPLM refused to accept this arrangement, fearing the consequences if its members gave up their weapons. It insisted their place was north of the border.

On 23 May 2011 SAF major general Izmat Abdel Rahim Zain al-Abdin ordered all SPLA units to withdraw south of the 1 January 1956 boundary line into what was shortly to become the new state of South Sudan. The letter he sent also announced that the mandate of the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs), i.e. the joint SAF-SPLA units established by the CPA for the six-year interim period, would expire at the end of May.<sup>7</sup> The northern section of the SPLM had by this point split away from the main party in southern Sudan, although it kept the name SPLM-North. It refused to withdraw all its troops south of the border or disarm them. On 5 June there were clashes between SAF and SPLM-North members of the JIUs in Um Durein and Tolodi (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). On 6 June large-scale fighting broke out in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan. The war had begun.

The SPLM-North was rapidly forced to withdraw from Kadugli. However, under Abdelaziz's control the rebels were able to hold onto large parts of the central Nuba Mountains, around Kauda and Heiban, as well as enclaves in the north-west of the state, near Julu; in the north-east, near Rashad; and in the south-east, near Liri. Successive SAF bombing campaigns have not managed to dislodge the SPLM-North soldiers from their hills. A cessation of hostilities was signed on 28 July 2011, less than two months into the war. However, it never entered into force.

The SPLM-North's overall leader, the Blue Nile governor Malik Agar, initially managed to keep Blue Nile out of the fighting. The area faced many of the same underlying problems as South Kordofan, including the incomplete popular consultations process, discrimination against non-Arab groups, tensions

over land, and underdevelopment. Khartoum was also concerned about the large number of SPLM-North soldiers in the state and those stationed across the border in Upper Nile, South Sudan. The government's disavowal of the 28 July agreement made it clear it intended to deal with SPLM-North by force. Tensions mounted and on 1 September clashes in the capital, Ed Damazin, announced the start of a new conflict. Just as in South Kordofan, SPLM-North forces were quickly pushed out of the state capital. Two months later the rebels withdrew from the remaining large town under their control, Kurmuk. SPLM-North soldiers were able to keep control only over the southern part of Blue Nile, keeping open supply lines to the South Sudanese border.

The clashes in South Kordofan and Blue Nile forced around a quarter of a million people to flee into South Sudan, Ethiopia, and even Kenya.<sup>8</sup> In January 2014 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 1.2 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, although very few were receiving it. The figures were even higher in Darfur: 3.5 million required assistance, including nearly 2 million IDPs, and a further 349,000 Darfurians were living in refugee camps over the border in Chad. In South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur SAF aircraft bombed indiscriminately, killing non-combatants and making it hard to farm. Rebel military activity also resulted in civilian deaths. 📄

### III. Formation of the SRF

On 11 November 2011 the major Sudanese rebel groups signed an alliance with the objective of working together to remove President Bashir, through either violent regime change or negotiations achieved through political and military pressure. The four movements (SPLM-North, SLA-AW, SLA-MM, and JEM) called their new alliance the Sudan Revolutionary Front. Publicly, representatives from the four groups said they had met in Kauda, one of the main SPLM-North towns in South Kordofan, although the Sudanese government believes they actually gathered in South Sudan. The formation of the SRF had, at least on paper, brought together the greatest internal military threats to President Bashir. If the alliance held, overcoming the divisions between rebel forces that had been a feature of almost every Sudanese rebellion, it would present a serious challenge to Bashir's regime.

#### Objectives

In its initial communiqué on 11 November 2011 the SRF announced that a 'Joint High-Level Military Committee has been established to conduct the armed struggle for liberation' (SRF, 2011a). For the first time the rebels in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile had committed to work together militarily against SAF and the NCP regime. A coordinated rebellion in these peripheral areas substantially increased SAF's concerns (many resources were already tied up in the ongoing tensions with South Sudan). The fact that the Darfur movements in particular had been able to put aside their differences was particularly significant. Several previous attempts, including by international players, the Government of South Sudan, and the movements themselves, had failed to achieve this.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the two SLA factions and the SPLM-North had first agreed to form an alliance several months previously, but JEM hesitated, in part due to the differences in ideology between the movements.<sup>10</sup> In the end JEM added its signature to the Kauda Declaration in November (SRF,

## Box 1 **SRF alliance groups**

The SRF was initially composed of three Darfur groups—SLA-AW, SLA-MM, and JEM—and the SPLM-North, which was active against government forces in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The background, leadership, and areas of activity of each are discussed briefly here.

**SLA-AW** is led by Fur lawyer Abdul Wahid al Nur, a secularist, albeit one without a particularly well-defined political vision. He has lived outside Darfur for many years, initially in Asmara, then Paris and Kampala. In the first years of the Darfur conflict he was very popular among the Fur, and among non-Fur in the IDP and refugee camps. However, this support has declined over the years.

SLA-AW controls large parts of the Jebel Marra mountain range, the historical Fur heartland in the centre of Darfur, but its influence outside this area is minimal. Sudanese security agencies downplay SLA-AW's resources, suggesting the movement has only around 20–30 vehicles.<sup>11</sup> A more realistic estimate is around 40–50. Because it mainly fights in the mountains, SLA-AW does not need vehicles as much as the other Darfur movements. Most of its fighters are Fur.

**SLA-MM** is led by Minni Minawi, a Zaghawa trader and teacher who worked in northern Nigeria before the war. He broke away from the SLA to form his own Zaghawa-dominated faction at the October–November 2005 Haskanita conference (Tanner and Tubiana, 2007). Minawi's political vision is not dissimilar to Abdul Wahid's, and the split was driven by personal ambition and ethnic tensions between the Fur and Zaghawa. Unlike the other Darfur leaders, Minawi signed the 2006 DPA. He was made a senior presidential assistant, but achieved little in that position. In late 2010 he returned to rebellion. SLA-MM is mainly based in South and East Darfur around the railway line between Al Fula and Nyala. It also operates in eastern Jebel Marra and the Shangal Tobay area in North Darfur, as well as occasionally in South Kordofan in SRF operations. One senior Sudanese official claims SLA-MM has 'tens of vehicles, not hundreds',<sup>12</sup> but the real figure is likely to be between 150 and 200.

**JEM's** first leader, Khalil Ibrahim, had been an Islamist and an organizer of the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF). Like most of the initial leaders and soldiers in his movement, he was from the Zaghawa Kobe sub-group. Khalil was killed in December 2011 by an airstrike while travelling in Kordofan. He was replaced by his brother, Gibril. Like Abdul Wahid and Minawi, Gibril Ibrahim lives in Kampala.<sup>13</sup> A large part of JEM's leadership comes from an Islamist background, which is a major ideological difference with the two SLA factions and the SPLM-North. Since its 2008 attack on Omdurman JEM has been seen as the most powerful Darfur rebel group. Many of its operations have shifted to the Kordofan region and it has been able to recruit troops there too. JEM has some 200–250 vehicles. Until 2010 it received backing from Chad, and from then until his fall, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi provided bases and weapons.

The **SPLM-North** is led by Malik Agar, an Ingessana from Blue Nile state. Abdelaziz al-Hilu, a Masalit from the Nuba Mountains, is in charge of SPLM-North in South Kordofan. The third major figure in the movement is Yassir Arman, a riverine Arab who is responsible for much of the movement's political work. All are strong believers in John Garang's 'New

- Sudan' vision, which attempted to remove religious, ethnic, and regional discrimination. The SPLM-North was the northern wing of Garang's movement, but was left north of the border when South Sudan became independent. At this point it had anywhere between 20,000 and 40,000 men in uniform, divided into the 9<sup>th</sup> Division (South Kordofan) and the 10<sup>th</sup> Division (Blue Nile), although they were subsequently renamed the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions of the SPLM-North, respectively. At South Sudan's independence each division had an armoured battalion, an artillery company, and a company of vehicle-mounted rocket launchers.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the Darfur movements, the SPLM-North uses more conventional military tactics, and prefers to hold territory and establish administrations there. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division controls four large pockets of territory in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division holds the southern extremity of Blue Nile state. The organization maintains good relations with the SPLM/A in South Sudan.

These four founding movements were joined in March 2012 by two others, both given some weight by a well-known leader from the riverine political elite, but with little or no military strength:

- **Nasreldin al-Hadi al-Mahdi** is a descendent of the Mahdi and the son of the late Imam al-Hadi al-Mahdi. For years he was the political deputy of Sadig al-Mahdi in the National Umma Party (NUP). He still has some support among the Ansar,<sup>15</sup> who form the backbone of the Umma constituency.
- **Al Tom Hajo** was a prominent figure in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which has been in power in Sudan on several occasions (usually as part of a coalition) and is now a minor part of the government. Hajo is said to have brought with him a small military force of about 200 men, largely 'Sinnar Arabs and White Nile Hassaniya' (Arabs), who reportedly fight alongside the SPLM-North in Blue Nile.<sup>16</sup>

Hajo's and Hadi's participation in the SRF is more important politically than militarily. It was intended to reassure the riverine elite, which has governed Sudan since independence,<sup>17</sup> that the SRF was not an army from the periphery that threatened their interests, but a national opposition movement that would pursue both political and military means to overthrow Bashir.

In October 2013 a seventh movement joined the SRF. The **United People's Front for Liberation and Justice (UPFLJ)**, led by Zeinab Kabbashi, is a coalition of 17 small movements from eastern Sudan, largely based outside the country (ICG, 2013a). There has been speculation that Kabbashi has been removed as UPFLJ leader, but the SRF still considers her to be its head.<sup>18</sup> SRF leaders have been trying to bring in eastern Sudanese movements since the movement's founding in an effort to spread the conflict. However, the UPFLJ has no military capacity.

The SRF, and in particular Yassir Arman, have been in contact with other eastern Sudanese movements, with the ultimate objective of opening a new front in the east. So far this has not been possible, in part because of Sudan's close ties with Eritrea. In the past, Eritrea supported eastern Sudanese rebel groups, and it would be difficult for new rebel groups to operate without Eritrean approval.

2011b). The SRF said that the first responsibility of its troops was ‘to repel the NCP’s vengeful, dry season offensive, which is targeting civilians in war zones, in all the theatres of conflict, including Khartoum, the capital’ (SRF, 2011a). In late 2011, however, the targeting of the capital and areas outside the traditional war zones was more a statement of ambition than a reflection of the military situation.

At its foundation, the SRF claimed its main objective was ‘to overthrow the National Congress Party . . . regime using all available means, above all, the convergence of civil political action and armed struggle’ (SRF, 2011a). In itself, this was recognition of the fact that the rebels, even after combining their forces, were unlikely to be able to depose Bashir militarily.<sup>19</sup> The communiqué went on to state that the

*High-Level Political Committee has been charged with making contact with all the forces of change working for the overthrow of the regime—political parties and civic organizations—to agree a joint platform and a national consensus for the post-NCP governance arrangements (SRF, 2011a).*

Links with the unarmed opposition would therefore be a key part of the SRF’s approach, which would become even more apparent over time.

## Structure

With the establishment of the Joint Military Command structure, the SPLM-North’s Abdelaziz was named permanent chief of staff, because he had the largest area under his control and the most troops. The choice was a ‘consensus’, according to JEM leader Gibril Ibrahim, because Abdelaziz was ‘a very experienced general, who could do the job easily’.<sup>20</sup> Abdelaziz also comes from a Darfur ethnic group, the Masalit, although he grew up in South Kordofan. This helps his relationship with the Darfurians (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013, p. 58, n. 8). He is widely respected in the SRF.

Abdelaziz’s three deputies come from the other military movements and are subject to change. Around the time of the Abu Kershola attack in 2013 SLA-MM’s Juma Haggar was the deputy chief of staff in charge of administration;

JEM's Al Tahir Hamad Adam was the deputy chief of staff in charge of operations, based in Kordofan; and SLA-AW's Abdu Haran was the deputy chief of staff in charge of logistics.<sup>21</sup> Initially they were not all in the same area and communications were difficult, so in practice most of the work was done by Abdelaziz and those with him, irrespective of which movement they came from or their precise role in the command structure.<sup>22</sup>

Because an SPLM-North leader had been named chief of staff, the Darfur leaders had the privilege of naming one of their own as overall SRF leader. However, the heads of the three Darfur movements could not agree on which of them would take the role. In interviews conducted in Juba in July 2013, for example, Abdellatif Ismail, one of Abdul Wahid's officials, said Minni Minawi did not believe that Abdul Wahid would be a good leader, and disagreed so strongly with Gibril Ibrahim's ideas that he could not countenance him in charge either.<sup>23</sup> After nearly three weeks of debates it was decided that Malik Agar, the SPLM-North leader, was the only possible consensus candidate. The SPLM-North therefore holds the SRF's two most important posts of chairman and chief of staff.

In January 2012 the SRF declared that Malik would be in charge for a year, with the three Darfur leaders, Abdul Wahid, Minnawi, and Ibrahim, as well as Nasreldin al-Hadi al-Mahdi and Al Tom Hajo, as deputy chairmen in a rotational system. However, Malik remains chairman more than two years after his appointment because the Darfurians cannot agree on which one of them should replace him.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the full political leadership does not meet regularly and the post of chairman is not the SRF's main priority.

Another key part of the SRF's structure is the Leadership Council. In theory, this is the alliance's most important political body, which debates the direction and objectives of the movement. However, different leaders give different responses to the question of who exactly is a member of the council. In July 2013 the number of members was variously put at between 19 and 24.<sup>25</sup> In practice, the logistical and financial difficulties in getting all the members in one place at the same time mean that the Leadership Council can go for months without meeting. The leaders of the movements, who are mainly based in Kampala, take most of the decisions without calling a full council meeting.

## The first battles

In late February 2012 the SRF announced it had won its first victories, in Jaw (on the disputed Sudan–South Sudan border) and Troji. Troji is on the road from Unity state in South Sudan to the main SPLM-North-controlled areas of the Nuba Mountains. The two areas are of vital strategic importance, because controlling them allows the SRF to bring in supplies from South Sudan. The SRF said its victorious troops came from the SPLM-North and JEM,<sup>26</sup> but South Sudan’s SPLA also took part in the battle, intervening north of the border. Although this was hailed as the first combined SRF operation, in reality only the SPLM-North and JEM participated (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013; ICG, 2013a).

The creation of the SRF allowed JEM in particular to benefit from safe havens in parts of South Kordofan controlled by the SRF, principally in the central Nuba Mountains to the east of the state capital, Kadugli, as well as to the north-west, not far from the border with Darfur. By mid-2013 most of JEM’s troops appeared to have left Darfur entirely.<sup>27</sup> Some were in Kordofan, while others were based in South Sudan, both in Western Bahr al-Ghazal and in the Unity state capital, Bentiu (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013; UNSC, 2013). JEM benefitted from this South Sudanese support, in part because of the SPLM-North’s close ties with the SPLA in South Sudan.

In March and April 2012 SRF forces fought SAF in South Kordofan, at Hejlj and Kharasana. On 26 March SPLA soldiers took control of Hejlj before withdrawing. They were supported by JEM fighters who struck north from their base in Unity state in South Sudan. The SPLM-North launched a failed attempt to take the town of Tolodi on the same day, tying up SAF’s resources there. On 10 April JEM helped South Sudanese forces to take control of Hejlj again and pushed even further north, reaching as far as Kharasana, around 25 km from the oil fields. Meanwhile, SPLM-North fighters engaged SAF elsewhere in South Kordofan (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). This operation and others showed a degree of coordination, but the SRF’s forces were still fighting under separate commands and often in different locations. The organization’s first major combined operation would not take place until the following year. 📌

## IV. The joint force and Abu Kershola

On 27 April 2013 a new joint force of SRF troops launched its first operation in South and North Kordofan. The SRF's leader, Malik Agar, said the attack was deliberately conceived as a 'test of coherency' for the joint force, which had been in training for months.<sup>28</sup> For the first time the four major rebel groups were fighting under one command. Estimates of the size of the force range from 1,500 to 3,000 men under the command of the SPLM-North's Brigadier General Kuku Idriss, with deputies from the three Darfur groups. The SPLM-North—by far the largest of the four movements—provided the largest troop component: around two-thirds of the overall strength, according to Malik; a bit more than half, according to Gibril Ibrahim. JEM provided around 500 soldiers, SLA-AW contributed around 200–270 men, and SLA-MM probably fewer than 200.<sup>29</sup> JEM provided the largest number of vehicles and weapons delivery systems. The SPLM-North supplied some tanks, some of which it says it captured from SAF during fighting in the Nuba Mountains (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). The joint force had a particular objective: to take the war to SAF outside the rebels' home areas of Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. 'We need to take the fight closer to Khartoum', said Ibrahim. 'If you fight in the desert, jungles or mountains [of the peripheries], they don't care.'<sup>30</sup> JEM attacked Omdurman in 2008 and the SRF wanted to conduct a similar assault on the NCP's heartland.

### The Abu Kershola attack

On 26 April 2013 talks in Addis Ababa between the SPLM-North and the NCP broke down. The next day the SRF's joint force attacked Um Ruwaba in North Kordofan. The town is on the tarmac road that leads to Kosti and onward to Khartoum. Rebels say that because many people from the Shaigiyya ethnic group—one of the dominant central groups—live there, the attack resonated with people of the centre in the way that other battles had not. This was the SRF's first foray outside South Kordofan, although JEM had often fought in

North Kordofan previously. The joint force stayed in Um Ruwaba for only a few hours before withdrawing. The rebels then took control of Abu Kershola, South Kordofan, defeating the government troops there. The town, home to around 45,000 people, is around 90 km south of Um Ruwaba.

According to Malik Agar, although a reserve force had been left behind, the SRF committed sizeable resources to its first major combined operation. According to a submission to the UN Security Council in June 2013, the Sudanese government believes that the SRF's attacking force comprised:

- 400 JEM soldiers in 55 'heavily military equipped Toyota 4WD land cruisers'<sup>31</sup> (Technicals);
- 200 SLA-AW soldiers with 22 Technicals;
- 200 SLA-MM soldiers with 22 Technicals; and
- an SPLM-North battalion (750–1,000 soldiers) with 25 Technicals.

The attack took SAF by surprise. Only a few policemen were on duty to defend Um Ruwaba, and Abu Kershola was also easily taken. The SRF was able to hold onto the town for a month, despite five major attempts to retake it using air power and ground attacks (Enough Project, 2013). The NCP's Amin Hassan Omar, who was in charge of the Darfur file and well briefed on the rebels, says the SPLM-North brought in around 20 tanks to Abu Kershola and the surrounding area, although other sources believe the number to be lower. Eventually SAF regained control of the town on 27 May, but the SRF had struck a major blow by holding off the government troops for so long. The rebels also claimed to have captured more than 60 vehicles, as well as small arms, ammunition, and fuel.<sup>32</sup>

Abu Kershola is the SRF's greatest success in the first two-and-a-half years of its existence, but in fact the rebels did not achieve their likely main objectives. The NCP believes the joint forces were trying to advance on El Obeid.<sup>33</sup> The town is considerably more strategically important than Abu Kershola or Um Ruwaba, because it is the capital of North Kordofan state and a major crossroads. SAF also uses the airfield in El Obeid as a base from which to bomb areas throughout the Nuba Mountains. In the early days of the Darfur war the rebels had drawn attention to themselves by attacking the airport in Al Fasher. For Sudanese, an attack on El Obeid would also have had historical

resonance. When Mohamed Ahmed al-Mahdi conquered most of modern-day Sudan in the 1880s, his army, composed mainly of Darfurians and Nuba, won one of its first great victories at El Obeid before eventually capturing Khartoum. SRF leaders often apply this apparent historical parallel to their own rebellion, in which Darfurians and Nuba fight side by side. Yassir Arman of the SPLM-North says the SRF's attack had two initial objectives: first, El Obeid (as well as Abu Kershola and Um Ruwaba) and, second, if the first goal was achieved, to carry on to Khartoum.<sup>34</sup> Malik, the SRF's overall leader, would not confirm that El Obeid was the initial target. But he says that the attack had two branches, one of which 'failed' because of 'ignorance of the terrain, and the route of advance'.<sup>35</sup> The Sudanese government says there is a much simpler explanation: the rebels realized they did not have the strength to proceed to El Obeid.<sup>36</sup>

## Consequences

Although the SRF might not have achieved its initial objective, the attack succeeded in a number of ways. The four rebel movements had shown their ability to work together; the initial raid on Um Ruwaba hinted at the possibility of further strikes towards the capital and the richer centre of the country; and holding onto Abu Kershola for so long undermined confidence in SAF and boosted the SRF's military credibility. Gibril Ibrahim admits that Abu Kershola and Um Ruwaba were not that significant in strictly military terms, but says the SRF's ability to move into position and strike by surprise was a huge shock to Bashir's regime. Bashir was so angry that he announced an end to any negotiations with the rebels, saying 'we would neither recognize nor negotiate with the traitors, infiltrators, mercenaries, and terrorists [of the SRF]' (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013a). Negotiations did not resume until January 2014, when the AU mediator, Thabo Mbeki, was able to persuade both sides to begin talking again.

State media and Khartoum-based newspapers also focused on Abu Kershola for weeks after the attack. In response to fears that Khartoum could also be targeted, the governor of Khartoum state opened registration for a new PDF force. There were limited calls in parliament for the defence minister, Abdel Rahim Hussein, to resign, although his close ties to Bashir meant he was not forced to step down. In June 2013 the army chief of staff and other high-ranking

officers were removed, officially because they had reached retirement age (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013b).

Most of the anger, however, was directed at the rebels. The SRF was accused of carrying out atrocities, including extra-judicial killings, particularly among the Hawazma Arabs who live in Abu Kershola together with the Tagali Nuba. NCP officials in Abu Kershola were also reportedly targeted. The SRF says that this is NCP propaganda, although one official does accept that some looting took place.<sup>37</sup> Diplomatic sources believe the SRF did carry out some abuses.<sup>38</sup>

The operation also revealed several of the SRF's weaknesses. The rebels are unable to take and hold major towns because of SAF's air superiority and more sophisticated materiel. In addition, the SRF's members have serious differences over the military tactics they wish to employ.

## Military differences

The three Darfur movements and the SPLM-North have very different fighting styles. The Darfurians use hit-and-run guerrilla tactics, travelling great distances through the Darfur desert on Technicals, and their battles do not usually last long. For the Darfurians, JEM leader Gibril Ibrahim says fighting

*usually lasts ten or fifteen minutes. Either you run or your enemy looks for cover. The main thing in our style of war is firepower. You use as much firepower as you can to cover yourself. We use more ammunition than SPLM-North does.*<sup>39</sup>

The Darfurians need fuel for their vehicles and ammunition for their weapons, but do not expect to stay for long in one place.

In contrast, the SPLM-North is more of a conventional army, in line with its historical roots as part of the SPLA. At South Sudan's independence it was already well equipped (see Box 2). The SPLM-North 1<sup>st</sup> Division, at least, has also been able to capture significant quantities of weapons in battle (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). The SPLM-North 'advances, occupies territory, defends, then advances again', according to Malik Agar.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the Darfur movements, it controls large amounts of territory in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, as it did during the second civil war of 1983–2005.<sup>41</sup>

The SRF presents the marriage of these two styles as an advantage: the Darfurians can act as a kind of mobile strike force, while the SPLM-North has heavier weapons and greater ability to hold onto areas that have been captured. Nevertheless, historically it has often proved difficult to combine these two very different tactical approaches effectively, as rebel movements in Ethiopia and what is now Eritrea discovered. Abu Kershola showed that tensions in the SRF over these different military tactical beliefs and capabilities had not been completely resolved.

### **Box 2 The SPLM-North at South Sudan's independence: a South Sudanese account**

Ever since renewed fighting broke out in South Kordofan and Blue Nile in 2011, Khartoum has accused South Sudan of supporting the rebels militarily. The SPLM-North was the northern wing of the movement that took South Sudan to independence, and there are still very close ties between the SPLM/A and SPLM-North leaders. Until the government was reshuffled in July 2013 Majak D'Agoot was South Sudan's deputy defence minister. He had instructed the SPLM-North's three most senior officials—Malik, Yassir Arman, and Abdelaziz—at the SPLA officers' college and still communicated regularly with them after independence. Like other South Sudanese officials, he denied that his country was supplying arms to the SPLM-North. The Small Arms Survey has not found any evidence to contradict this, but has concluded that 'some political and logistical support is evident' (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013, p. 9). This is partly because, when the war started, the SPLM-North was well equipped: Juba made sure that its two divisions had been allowed to keep all their equipment. This is Majak's assessment of the SPLM-North's strength when South Sudan became independent:

- Both divisions had 18,000–20,000 men.
- Each division had an armour battalion equipped with about 30 tanks. South Sudan had T-55s and T-72s, but the SPLM-North divisions had only received T-55s.
- Each division had an artillery company of howitzers, with 12 guns per division.
- Each division had a company of truck-mounted rocket launchers—three BM 21s.
- Each division had two companies of 'what we call Baby Katyushas',<sup>42</sup> i.e. 107 mm multiple rocket launchers, about eight in each division.
- In addition, each division had mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, and 12.7 ZSU anti-aircraft guns.
- The SPLM-North's forces had hundreds of 'Technicals: Malik was buying Technicals, Toyotas, Abdelaziz was buying Technicals when they were governor [and deputy governor respectively]' before the wars began.<sup>43</sup>

Majak's contention is that the SPLM-North was able to replenish its stocks largely from what it captured from SAF. He said that 'maybe they are getting some limited supplies from their friends',<sup>44</sup> which would not necessarily include South Sudan. There have been allegations that Uganda has also supplied weapons to the SPLM-North, but both the rebels and the Ugandans have denied this.<sup>45</sup>

The SPLM-North is unlikely to have ventured to Um Ruwaba in North Kordofan—far away from its mountain bases—without the quick strike capability and guerrilla mentality of the Darfurians, and JEM in particular. Equally, the Darfurians would not have considered trying to hold onto Abu Kershola for so long without the SPLM-North’s defensive capabilities. Although the SRF was able to capture fuel, vehicles, and some weapons in the campaign, Ibrahim felt the joint force made a mistake in staying so long in Abu Kershola: ‘we should have pulled out earlier’, he said, because the town was not important enough to justify the losses the rebel alliance eventually suffered or the expenditure of ammunition.<sup>46</sup> The Darfurians in particular rely on their military raids to restock with fuel and ammunition. Its long period in Abu Kershola depleted the SRF’s supplies, because it had to fight off repeated SAF attacks. ‘Unless you get regular supplies, you run short of ammunition. That’s what happened [at Abu Kershola]’, Ibrahim said. ‘We are learning from each other. Keeping liberated land is important. Talking the war to the enemy’s back yard is important.’<sup>47</sup> It is precisely this clash of styles and objectives that is difficult to overcome. In the year after Abu Kershola the SRF joint force did not carry out a single operation involving the four major movements, suggesting its level of coordination is not nearly as advanced as it would like to claim, and its ability to carry out large-scale operations remains weak.

## **Military operations outside the joint force**

Although all four founding rebel movements committed troops and resources to the joint force, the bulk of their forces continue to operate independently. SLA-AW, which is probably the weakest of the four, has almost all of its men and vehicles in Jebel Marra. SLA-MM is more active and present in Darfur than it is in the Nuba Mountains, where the SRF’s joint force is based or convenes. Three weeks before the SRF attack on Abu Kershola SLA-MM, acting alone, took control of two small towns—Muhajiriya in South Darfur and Labado in East Darfur—and held them for ten days. Minni Minawi claims that these attacks were considerably more significant than the Abu Kershola operation, which is perhaps a sign of his priorities. Sudanese intelligence believes Minawi does not always see eye to eye with Abdelaziz and may have withdrawn some

of his men from the SRF joint force in mid- 2013, although this could not be independently confirmed.<sup>48</sup> Minawi is also one of the most vocal supporters of the SRF and the benefits it can bring to the various rebel groups.

Of the three Darfur movements, JEM has contributed the most to the SRF militarily in terms of both vehicles and men. It is also seen as the most effective of the three Darfur forces. However, many of JEM's operations are outside the SRF's direct command, even when they share the same military objective. In one example, JEM sent a large military convoy, probably from somewhere close to Julud in the north-west of South Kordofan, towards Abu Kershola. It was estimated by SRF sources, including from JEM, to be composed of 140–150 vehicles. Its mission, according to JEM leader Gibril Ibrahim, was to support the SRF combined forces who were coming under increasing pressure in Abu Kershola. The JEM convoy clashed with government troops on the road between Dilling and El Obeid. By the time the convoy arrived in the vicinity of Abu Kershola in early June the SRF had either withdrawn or been forced out of the town. This was a JEM mission and not an SRF one.

The vast majority of the SPLM-North's troops are not part of the joint forces but still declare themselves part of the SRF alliance. The SPLM-North continues to dedicate most of its fighting forces to its campaign against government forces in the Nuba Mountains. The rainy season began soon after the Abu Kershola campaign, slowing down the tempo of the fighting. However, SPLM-North troops bore the brunt of the government's dry season offensive in the last two months of 2013 and at the beginning of 2014. SPLM-North positions within 20 km of the movement's main stronghold, Kauda, came under attack, reportedly at Ungartu, just to the south of Kauda, on 20 December, and Timbera, just to the west, on 28 December (Nuba Reports, 2013, p. 3). Both attacks were successfully repelled. The rebels also attacked SAF further north in Delami in early January 2014. This was announced as a SRF operation, but according to SPLM-North leader Malik Agar only SPLM-North troops were involved. In Blue Nile, the SPLM-North's other area of operations, the SRF is not present at all. Here the SPLM-North is fighting SAF without any support from the Darfur movements.<sup>49</sup> In part, this is due to the logistical difficulties involved in getting there: Blue Nile does not share a border with South Kordofan and the route through South Sudan crosses some of the most impenetrable parts of the Sudd swamp.

This is also because of the SPLM-North's greater successes in South Kordofan, which have provided more territory to use as a secure base. Another factor is South Kordofan's proximity to both Darfur and JEM's bases in South Sudan.

Rebel leaders regularly claim any military action they take as the SRF's in order to increase the alliance's standing. The SRF's objective is not to merge all the movements into a single one, but rather to create a coalition platform and to fine-tune agendas to push for regime change. The clear strategy is to fight against Khartoum in Darfur, South Kordofan (and sometimes North and West Kordofan), and Blue Nile, keeping all the fronts active to stretch SAF. Yet the fact that combined operations are rare shows the difficulty the rebel groups have in coordinating their activities effectively.

Despite what it regarded as a military success in Abu Kershola, the SRF's joint force has not yet tried to repeat the experience. It seems to be constructed more as an ad hoc force rather than a permanent standing army. When the 2013 rainy season ended the government went on the offensive. Most of the fighting involved one rebel movement (usually the SPLM-North) against SAF, although combined rebel troops were involved in only one major battle, in Troji on 4 January 2014. Troji is situated on the main road from South Sudan to Kauda in the Nuba Mountains. Civilians flee along this corridor into the refugee camps over the border. The SPLM-North and JEM use it to travel to South Sudan and bring supplies from there. On this occasion, as in February 2012, the rebel forces were able to push SAF away from the town. However, other than this, the SRF's joint force did not take part in a major battle in the ten months after the end of its occupation of Abu Karshola, according to Malik, although in late February 2014 he claimed the SRF was planning a major new offensive.<sup>50</sup> 📄

## V. Politics

As its founding charter makes clear, the SRF is a military alliance with political ambitions. In the first year of its existence SRF politicians, with the SPLM-North's Yassir Arman figuring prominently, but by no means alone, worked to draft a document outlining their vision for 'Restructuring the Sudanese State' (SRF, 2012). This document argued that the NCP regime had to be overthrown and replaced by a transitional government drawn 'from the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, the other political forces, civil society organizations, women and youth movements and other professional, independent personalities, where participation of women shall be not less than 30%'. This transitional government would start the process of restoring the balance among Sudan's regions, oversee the drafting of a new constitution, and take Sudan to democratic elections within six years. The document argued for the separation of religion and the state 'to ensure elimination of exploitation of religion in politics'. It also said the principle of 'voluntary unity' should be adopted for all the regions of Sudan: in short, if a part of the country wished to secede, it could (SRF, 2012).

The NCP's Islamists object to anything that challenges Islam's role as the foundation of the country's legal system; its pragmatists also know that because of this the SRF can be portrayed as anti-Islamic. The intention to give all regions equal power and rectify old wrongs through affirmative action is also a source of considerable concern among the riverine elite who make up the NCP's core, as well as among many of the leading figures in the main opposition parties, who come from the same elite. The NCP and other mainline Sudanese parties also find the concept of Sudan's regions being given the right of 'voluntary unity' to be troubling, so soon after the secession of South Sudan. The SRF's intention to bring all those who committed genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and 'crimes against the country and its citizens' (SRF, 2012) to international and local trials is also a direct threat to President Bashir, defence minister Abdel Rahim Hussein, and South Kordofan (and then North Kordofan)

governor Ahmed Haroun, all of whom are under indictment by the International Criminal Court. Above all, the NCP has no intention of handing over power.

## Internal divisions

Serious political differences—some ideological, some personal—exist among the SRF's leadership. Broadly speaking, the SPLM-North and the SLA factions are secularists, inspired by John Garang's 'New Sudan' vision, and from the start were in favour of separating religion and the state. Many of JEM's leaders, and in particular the movement's first leader, Khalil Ibrahim, and his brother and successor, Gibril, come from an Islamist background, and many were disciples of the veteran Islamist Hassan al-Turabi.<sup>51</sup> While cautious about voicing their Islamist roots for fear of alienating their strategic partnerships in the SRF, their outlook remains very different from that of the three other military movements. For example, it took JEM three months to agree to the terms of the Kauda Declaration. According to Gibril Ibrahim, the delay was 'not because JEM is an Islamist organization that adopts a theocratic state, but because the majority of Sudanese are Muslims; for them secularism means anti-Islam. Using such a language will scare them away.'<sup>52</sup> JEM was concerned that the others, and in particular Abdul Wahid, were the more 'radical' voices in their promotion of secularism.

JEM's background and history also have little in common with those of the other movements. The two SLA factions already had longstanding ties with the SPLA and SPLM-North, in part because of their common ideological ground. But, while JEM sent a delegation to meet Garang in 2001, even before the official start of its rebellion in Darfur, the contact did not lead to close relations. As Ibrahim puts it: 'when we came to meet, it felt as if we were guests and the other side [the other three movements] were family members.'<sup>53</sup> He also believes some of the SLA leaders did not want JEM in the SRF, perhaps because they hoped to gain a more prominent status in Darfur in JEM's absence, which was another reason it took JEM some time to agree to join.

Despite JEM's vigorous and important role in some of the SRF's military operations, SLA and SPLM-North leaders continue to worry about the group's background and its views. 'JEM could be the number one obstacle in future

problems of SRF', is how one senior SRF figure puts it.<sup>54</sup> Another SRF leader was dismayed about the position that the JEM leaders took over the fall of Mohammed Morsi, an Islamist, in Egypt. This source was delighted at Morsi's removal, as were most of the SRF leadership, while JEM's leaders were distraught.<sup>55</sup> These ideological differences underline the political tensions that exist in the SRF.

Of all the allegations of rape, theft, and harassment against the SRF, one senior SRF figure says that more than 90 per cent were made against JEM forces.<sup>56</sup> JEM denies this, putting the accusation down to the distrust some other SRF members feel for it.<sup>57</sup>

Abdul Wahid is also regarded with suspicion in the SRF. Although he was the most prominent Darfur rebel at the beginning of the rebellion, his movement's military strength has waned over the years, in part because of the resignation of Minni Minawi to start his own faction. One SRF leader from a different group says Abdul Wahid is only part of the SRF because 'we need him for the name. He has three Thurayas [satellite phones], that is the whole movement for him.'<sup>58</sup>

Even some in Abdul Wahid's own movement have become frustrated with their leader, who is rarely in the field in Darfur. SLA-AW's Abu al-Gassim al-Imam, who was personally present at Abu Kershola together with Abdelaziz, is more highly regarded by the SRF leadership. In June 2014 he announced he was splitting away from SLA-AW to form his own movement.<sup>59</sup> As a result he was excluded from the SRF.<sup>60</sup> Some of the Darfurians are also not completely convinced that the SPLM-North will continue to work with them, despite the rhetoric of a united struggle against Khartoum. Yet the longer the SRF's leaders work together, the more familiarity grows.

These differences and Sudan's long history of rebel movements splitting into different factions mean that there are permanent doubts about the long-term political cohesion of the SRF. Sudden regime change in Khartoum would almost certainly test the strength of the current bonds. However, all the groups adhere to the idea—most forcibly expressed by the SPLM-North—that change in Sudan must come from the centre and that region-specific solutions are insufficient. Solutions for Darfur alone, for example, will not help the rest of the country. (Yet, although they talk of a national agenda, all the rebel movements tend to

recruit along ethnic lines in their areas of operation.) However, all the SRF groups are aware that they are strongest as a united movement and most likely to achieve the change they want if they stay in the SRF's ranks. There is a strong desire to avoid repeating the experience of the CPA, in which Darfur and the east were deliberately excluded from the negotiations and subsequent deal, with long-term consequences for all parties when the north-south and Darfur civil wars were treated separately, and the attention of the international community kept switching between the two. Rebel unity is also seen as a precondition for support from elsewhere in the region.

## Links with the unarmed opposition

The SRF has been determined from its conception to forge a durable link with Sudan's unarmed opposition parties for at least three reasons. First, there is the matter of simple arithmetic: the combined weight of the armed and unarmed opposition, if they did come together, would make it clear to the Sudanese people and the world that the NCP was in a minority in Sudan. Second, the rebels know that there is little chance of them being able to defeat the government militarily; 'the convergence of civil political action and armed struggle' would be necessary (SRF, 2011). Thirdly, an alliance with the Khartoum-based riverine political opposition would be a potent way to bring on board those in the centre who dislike the NCP, but distrust the rebels.

As the Darfur rebels were building bridges with the SPLM-North, the political opposition in Khartoum was going through significant realignments. In July 2012, after months of turmoil and the government's suppression of political and popular dissent over the partial withdrawal of fuel subsidies, the main political opposition parties, grouped together as the National Consensus Forces (NCF), published the Democratic Alternative Charter. This statement called for a national project to topple the NCP regime by 'peaceful mass struggle'. According to Mubarek al-Fadil, the SRF had been consulted closely on the development of the charter and was expected to 'support and sign' the document very soon (Sudaneseonline.org, 2012). This did not happen, although efforts to bring the armed and unarmed opposition together intensified.

In late December 2012, a few months after the SRF had shown its teeth in Abu Kershola, the rebel leaders and several senior Sudanese opposition politicians met in Kampala. In general the representatives of the political opposition were not party leaders. On 5 January 2013 the SRF and several of the politicians signed the New Dawn Charter (SRF, 2013). Malik Agar, Abdul Wahid, Minni Minawi, and Gibril Ibrahim all signed. Hadi, once a very senior figure in the NUP, and Haju, known for his role in the DUP, both signed too, although by this point they were members of the SRF and did not represent political parties. Other politicians put their name to the document, including former presidential candidate Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi, Siddig Yousif from the communists, and Hala Abdel Halim of Haq, a small opposition party. Representatives of youth opposition movements (Girifna and Sudan Change Now) and human rights and women's rights groups also signed. The text of the New Dawn Charter was in essence a slightly watered down version of the SRF's Document of Restructuring the Sudanese State (SRF, 2012), although the length of the desired proposed transitional period was reduced from six to four years. After intense debate the language on the separation of religion and the state was cosmetically changed to 'religious institutions must be separate from state institutions'. In practice this meant little and allowed the NCP to criticize the charter as the work of secularists and atheists.<sup>61</sup>

Some politicians involved in the New Dawn Charter and signing ceremony, including the Islamist Yousif Kauda<sup>62</sup> and the retired general and former rebel Abdelaziz Khalid,<sup>63</sup> were arrested when they returned to Khartoum.<sup>64</sup> Some were held for almost three months before they were released. Eventually, government pressure and the representatives' own worries about the text led most of the parties who had sent representatives to Kampala to repudiate the charter. The NUP had concerns about the issue of religion and the state, as well as the concept of 'voluntary unity'. It also felt that it was a mistake to put armed rebellion and unarmed political opposition on the same level.<sup>65</sup> Other opposition concerns included the weight that would be given to South Kordofan and Blue Nile in the proposed transitional government and the role of the rebel groups in a new national army the rebels hoped to create after Bashir was removed.<sup>66</sup> There was also unease, including from the NUP, about the SRF's insistence that Sudan should not define itself as an Arab and Islamic nation, but instead as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country.

The NCF had intended to meet the SRF again in Geneva in July 2013. It would have been the second in a series of meetings organized by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue; the first, four months previously, had taken place between the NCP and NCF. However, Sudanese security forces prevented most of the NCF politicians from leaving Khartoum.<sup>67</sup>

In August 2014 the SRF and NUP met in France. After several days of talks NUP leader Sadig al-Mahdi and Malik signed the Paris Declaration (SRF, 2014). The agreement called for national dialogue to begin after the end of the wars in Sudan and stressed a commitment to the unity of Sudan ‘on the basis of justice and equal citizenship’.<sup>68</sup> The SRF offered a unilateral cessation of hostilities, although the government showed no sign of doing the same. The SRF and NUP also said they would boycott future general elections unless they were ‘held under a transitional government that end the wars and provide public freedoms and supported by a national consensus as a result of an inclusive dialogue involving all’. Both parties agreed that they would try to persuade other opposition groups and civil society organizations to sign the agreement too.

When Mariam al-Mahdi, Sadig al-Mahdi’s daughter and a senior NUP politician in her own right, returned to Khartoum, she was arrested. The NCP’s Ibrahim Ghandour, who was made a presidential advisor in the December 2013 reshuffle, had said this would happen to anyone who signed a deal with the rebels.<sup>69</sup> For the moment this threat and the continuing differences between the SRF and many opposition parties reduce the chances of a broader deal. Nevertheless, some of the senior opposition figures, including the Communist Party’s Siddig Yousif, believe an anti-NCP alliance is inevitable. However, some of the strongest reservations about a rebel–political alliance come from the rebel side: the SRF leaders have particular doubts about the intentions of Hassan al-Turabi, who agreed to meet with Bashir in late February 2014.

## Khartoum’s responses

The creation of the SRF changed the dynamic of rebel–SAF conflict in Sudan, shifting the epicentre of rebel activity from Darfur to South Kordofan. At the same time a partial improvement in relations between Sudan and South Sudan allowed Khartoum to assign more resources to fighting the rebels. Tensions

between the two countries were high following independence, the outbreak of conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and border skirmishes and bombings. Relations improved following the Addis Ababa Agreements of 27 September 2012, and above all President Salva Kiir's visit to Khartoum in September 2013.

Once the dry season began in late 2013 SAF launched a series of ground attacks in South Kordofan, accompanied by aerial bombardments. In the most significant battle of the campaign in early January 2014, SAF tried to overrun the SRF units controlling the narrow strip of land used as a supply route into SRF-controlled territory in the Nuba Mountains. The SRF were able to repel SAF forces at Troji, not far from the border with South Sudan. There has been fighting in Darfur and Blue Nile too, but it is clear that SAF concentrated its efforts on South Kordofan.

During the campaign Khartoum used young Darfur Arabs reportedly recruited by the Border Guards commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo 'Hemeti' and known as the Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). Like their leader, most of the RRF are believed to be Rizeigat—and share a background and tactics with the so-called 'Janjaweed' of the 2003–04 phase of the conflict.<sup>70</sup>

They were redeployed from Darfur to South Kordofan although, according to a defector interviewed by Radio Dabanga (2014a), some of them had expected to be sent to Darfur instead and eventually defected from the force.

After suffering casualties in the Nuba Mountains and the consequences of a strategic decision by the army to pull back from a ground campaign in South Kordofan, many of the RRF were pulled out and redeployed to the outskirts of El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan. After several incidents in which they killed or harassed locals they were moved back to Darfur in early February 2014. This was also probably an indication that Khartoum's dry season campaign had not made much headway; equally, the rebels had not managed to gain much territory.

In Blue Nile a stalemate continues. The rebels have retained control of a strip of territory in the south of the state, but are unable to win any more ground. SAF appears to have switched much of its resources to South Kordofan and is increasingly using militias and the PDF to fight the SPLM-North in Blue Nile (Gramizzi, 2013). SPLM-North troops here receive little practical benefit from being part of the SRF.

In Darfur there were more deaths in inter-Arab clashes in 2013 than there were in fighting between the rebels and the government. Once the rainy season ended, however, there was a slight escalation in rebel–SAF fighting, in particular in an arc of territory running from Mellit in North Darfur, through Tawilla (50 km west of Al Fasher), to Khor Abeche in South Darfur (UNSC, 2014, p. 3). The LJM—the Darfur coalition that signed the DDPD—believes that the reduction in the rebel presence in Darfur may make it easier to persuade the government to disarm the Janjaweed and thus increase stability in Darfur (ICG, 2014). But the government does not appear to be willing or even have the ability to do this. Meanwhile, former North Darfur Janjaweed commander Musa Hilel signed a memorandum of understanding with the SPLM-North in July 2014 to ‘bring down the totalitarian regime’. Hilel had already turned against the government once and had been particularly angry over the governorship of Osman Kibir (Radio Dabanga, 2014b).

Khartoum’s main political strategies for dealing with the SRF are to deny it any legitimacy and to block its presumed unity by maintaining separate negotiation tracks for Darfur and South Kordofan. Both strategies have run into problems.

The president and other senior NCP politicians have often suggested that the SRF leaders are dangerous men from the peripheries who threaten the good citizens of the centre. This argument lost some of its force when the security forces—reportedly including some RRF troops—brutally put down peaceful demonstrations in Khartoum and other cities over fuel price increases<sup>71</sup> in September 2013, killing over 200 people.<sup>72</sup> Many hundreds more were arrested. The repression was deeply disturbing to many citizens—even to NCP supporters—and further undermined the government’s credibility. This caused some to re-evaluate the government’s claims to be acting in their interests, both in the centre and elsewhere.

There was also unrest within the party over the crackdown. Ghazi Salaheddin Atabani and thirty other senior NCP members issued a memorandum of protest over the killings. Then in October Atabani, Hassan Osman Riziq, and Fadlallah Ahmed Abdalla took steps to organize their own party, the Reform Now Movement. In the following month Bashir expelled them from the NCP (Al Jazeera, 2013). NCP hardliners encouraged the party to clamp down further,

and it announced in April 2014 that it would be illegal for political parties to convene any kind of meeting without first obtaining a permit (Al Jazeera, 2014). Meanwhile, the detention of opposition and student leaders continued. All of these events have deepened popular criticism of the government and undermined its criticism of the SRF.

On other occasions NCP officials have also used rhetoric denying that there is any coalition of rebels, but rather only separate armed opposition campaigns in Darfur and South Kordofan, thus all but denying the existence of the SRF. By insisting on separate negotiations with the Darfur groups and the SPLM-North, Khartoum is attempting to divide and weaken the rebels. This keeps any talks focused on local issues rather than the SRF's desire for a national agenda.

On 27 January 2014 President Bashir made a major speech at the Friendship Hall in Khartoum. All the major opposition leaders had been invited, and for once Sadig al-Mahdi, Hassan al-Turabi, Ghazi Salaheddin, and others accepted. Although the speech was widely regarded as a disappointment, Bashir did announce the creation of a national dialogue to address Sudan's many problems. The conciliatory tone came about because of the impact of years of war and the prevailing economic crisis that led to the demonstrations in September 2013. The NCP is weaker than it has been for years and also has an eye on the 2015 elections.

The National Dialogue did not get off to a good start. Sadig al-Mahdi was arrested for more than a month for criticizing the RRF, which is one of the reasons he subsequently signed the Paris Declaration. A minor opposition party leader, Ibrahim al-Sheikh of the Sudanese Congress Party, was also detained for three months, and the loosening of press restrictions announced by the president never materialized. The Islamist parties, and in particular Hassan al-Turabi's Popular Congress Party, are still open to the idea of the National Dialogue. However, Atabani said it was 'dead'.<sup>73</sup> Mahdi's detention ensured that the NUP pulled out of the dialogue too.

Bashir's speech did not herald any change in the government's attitude towards the SRF. It would only accept the rebels as part of a putative national dialogue if they laid down their arms, which they are not prepared to do. At the talks with the SPLM-North in Addis Ababa the government's team, headed by Ibrahim Ghandour, made it clear it would only discuss South Kordofan/

Blue Nile and not wider or national issues. The official position is that the few thousand people who have taken up arms in South Kordofan and Blue Nile have no mandate to discuss national issues, only those relating directly to their area;<sup>74</sup> the same logic is applied to Darfur. The government has encouraged JEM and the two SLA factions to join the Doha process and sign the DDPD, although this is unlikely. The head of the AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Mohammed Ibn Chambas, is also acting as a mediator and met the Darfur rebels in 2013 and again in early 2014. The NCP considers Minawi the most likely to come back into the fold,<sup>75</sup> but his experience of coming over to the government following the DPA will likely give him deep reservations.

In September 2014, the SRF and the NUP, on one hand, and representatives of the National Dialogue Committee of 7 + 7, on the other, signed identical agreements laying out the guiding principles for a 'National Dialogue and Constitutional Process'. The documents specified that a 'Comprehensive political settlement is the ideal option to resolve the Sudanese problems', and stressed the need for stopping the war and ensuring freedoms to create a conducive environment for the dialogue and the constitutional process (AUHIP, 2014). However, neither of the committee representatives, Ahmed Saad Omar (DUP) and Ghazi Salaheddin Atabani (Reform Now), were from the NCP. The agreements represent a possible stepping stone towards a genuine national dialogue, but they would be easy to ignore if that was considered politically expedient. 🗨️

## VI. The SRF's external relations

Since the creation of the SRF Khartoum has claimed the rebel movement has received support from neighbouring countries and even further afield. This section briefly reviews what is known about the SRF's relations with other states.

### South Sudan

Sudanese officials insist that the SRF's founding meetings took place in South Sudan. One of the SRF leaders admits that the initial meeting to agree on what became the Kauda Declaration 'wasn't in Kauda', which at that period was difficult to travel to and under SAF aerial attack. He refused to give the actual location of the meeting, saying only that it was not in Juba.<sup>76</sup> Even if the meeting did not take place in South Sudan, Juba encouraged the Darfur movements to come together before the creation of the SRF.<sup>77</sup> Since the formation of the SRF Juba has tried to persuade small Darfur factions, several of which are based in the South Sudanese capital, to join the movement (ICG, 2014).

Khartoum also frequently accuses South Sudan of providing weapons, ammunition, and logistical support to the SRF. In particular, it made a number of claims of South Sudanese support for the Abu Kershola campaign (see Box 3). Several Western diplomats in both Sudan and South Sudan believe that the SPLA has helped the Sudanese rebels with logistics and military equipment, in particular the SPLM-North and JEM, although they are unsure about the extent of this support.<sup>78</sup> If nothing else, Juba realizes that the SRF rebels provide a buffer between SAF and South Sudan.<sup>79</sup>

The Small Arms Survey has seen no evidence of the SPLA supplying weapons and ammunition to the SRF, although the South Sudanese army has likely provided logistical and other support. For example, the SPLM-North uses refugee camps in Unity and Upper Nile states as rear bases to procure food and allow its troops to rest.<sup>80</sup> It also sometimes recruits in the camps, occasionally by force.<sup>81</sup> In 2012 JEM had a base in Rubkona, Unity state, near the local SPLA

headquarters (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013, p. 49; UNSC, 2013, p. 18). The base reportedly housed 800 fighters and 60–80 vehicles. Juba denies providing any help to the SRF.

Khartoum's belief that Juba has supported the rebels poisoned the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan after partition, and probably was a factor in Khartoum's documented support to South Sudanese rebels, including Bapiny Monytil and David Yau Yau, in 2012–13 (Small Arms Survey, 2013). The issue of proxy arming became a factor in South Sudan's decision to close down oil production in January 2012, depriving Sudan of income from exporting oil through the pipelines that run through its territory, and explained the border skirmishes between the SPLA and SAF and associated militia forces in April of the same year.

### Box 3 **Sudan's accusations about South Sudan's role in the attack on Abu Kershola**

In a letter sent to the UN Security Council on 13 June 2013 (and previously presented to the AU), Sudan accused South Sudan of 'supplying and harbouring' the SRF, and in particular of 'mobilizing, organizing, and supporting militarily and logistically of [sic] the SRF forces that attacked Abu Karshula and other surrounding villages in Southern Kordofan state, and Um Rowaba in northern Kordofan state'.<sup>82</sup>

Sudan accused the Government of South Sudan of providing the SRF with the following equipment and supplies:

- 2 fuel tankers.
- 27 trucks loaded with food stuff.
- 2 rocket launchers (20 barrels).
- 2 rocket launchers (107mm).
- 2 aircraft dual machine guns [*sic.*; presumably anti-aircraft dual machine guns] 14.5mm.<sup>83</sup>

Other alleged violations enumerated include:

- hosting JEM in Juba, Bentiu, Rubkona, Ayda, Fangak, and Renk, and providing military intelligence, security, and medical care for injured soldiers;
- harbouring SLA-MM in Raja, and providing cars, fuel, and military equipment;
- training SLA-AW fighters in Aweil and Juba, and part financing the movement;
- continuing to pay the salaries of SPLM-North soldiers after South Sudan's independence;
- providing continuous logistical support, including 53 4x4s, and money; and
- supporting Abdelaziz with artillery munitions, anti-tank weapons, and missiles.

All the SRF factions and South Sudanese leaders have rejected the accusations. Sudan has not publicly provided evidence to support its claims.

UN Security Council Resolution 2046 (UNSC, 2012), which threatened both countries with sanctions, helped bring about a partial reconciliation, and under mediation by the AU High-Level Implementation Panel on Sudan, Kiir and Bashir signed nine separate agreements in September 2012, known collectively as the Addis Ababa Agreements (or the ‘September Agreements’). Oil began to flow again several months later. The two governments agreed to a safe demilitarized border zone (SDBZ), a buffer zone to run 10 km on either side of a centre line, until a permanent deal on the disputed border could be reached. In principle, the SDBZ is supposed to make it harder for armed forces to support rebel groups on either side. However, it has not been implemented and the joint verification mechanism was abandoned only two months after it began (Small Arms Survey, 2014).

The Addis Ababa Agreements were a positive step forward in the relationship between the Sudans. Nevertheless, after the SRF attack on Abu Kershola, Bashir threatened to shut down the oil pipeline again over Juba’s alleged support for the rebels. Sudan wrote a letter of complaint to the UN and reportedly presented the South Sudanese president with further ‘evidence’ of South Sudan’s complicity, including recorded telephone conversations.<sup>84</sup> Eventually Bashir came under pressure, including from AU mediator Thabo Mbeki, to withdraw his threat to stop the oil flowing, which he did in August 2013.

Another important point of reference in discussing relations between Juba and the SRF is the role SRF member groups have played in the 2014 crisis in South Sudan. The bulk of the research for this *Working Paper* was carried out before the civil war in South Sudan broke out on 15 December 2013. Nevertheless, some trends suggest that some tentative conclusions can be drawn. Accounts given to the Small Arms Survey by residents of Unity state, security sources, and UN staff members suggest that JEM supported the SPLA as it retook Bentiu from Riek Machar’s rebels on 10 January 2014.<sup>85</sup> There are also claims that JEM took part in the sacking of Leer, Machar’s home town, at the end of January. Darfur rebels seized vehicles and burnt huts, according to one interviewee.<sup>86</sup> These independent sources match some of the claims made by the South Sudanese rebels. JEM denies fighting in Bentiu or south of it. Riek’s leading commander in Upper Nile, Gathoth Gatkouth, also says SPLM-North troops ‘from Kurmuk’ in Blue Nile formed part of the Salva Kiir loyalists who tried and

failed to defend Malakal in January, and then again in February.<sup>87</sup> This, however, has not been independently verified. Malik Agar refused to discuss events in South Sudan and the accusations against his forces.

The Sudanese rebels' involvement in the South Sudanese civil war would serve two potential ends. Firstly, it would repay a debt to both Kiir and Uganda, which is fighting on the side of the South Sudanese president. Secondly, the Sudanese armed groups would obtain vehicles and weapons that could then be used in their conflict over the border in Sudan. The rebels largely deny any involvement; nevertheless, Khartoum is anxious about the presence of Ugandan and Ugandan-backed troops so near to its border, and angry at what it sees as the provision of more equipment to SRF members. This has the potential to make Khartoum rethink its previously rapidly improving relationship with Juba.

## Uganda

Most of the SRF leaders, including Malik Agar, Gibril Ibrahim, Minni Minawi, and Abdul Wahid, are either based in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, or spend considerable time there. Ibrahim has apparently been issued with a Ugandan passport (UNSC, 2013), and Sudanese security agencies believe many SRF leaders have used Ugandan and South Sudanese diplomatic passports. The NCP believes that Kampala has provided the SRF with military training in camps in northern Uganda and military hardware.<sup>88</sup> The Small Arms Survey has observed boxes of ammunition marked with Uganda as a co-signee in SPLM-North possession in both South Kordofan and Blue Nile. However it is not clear whether this ammunition was obtained before or after South Sudan's independence (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013, p. 67). Sudanese officials think that, if nothing else, foreign aid to the SRF has been channelled through Uganda.<sup>89</sup> At several points Khartoum and Uganda have traded public insults over the latter's alleged ties to the SRF, while the AU has also raised the matter with Kampala. Both Uganda and South Sudan have asked the rebels to keep a low profile after Abu Kershola, after which it became difficult for the SRF to hold large meetings, including of the Leadership Council, because the Ugandans did not want a high-profile event in Kampala.<sup>90</sup>

## Western countries

Some NCP leaders are convinced that Western countries, particularly the United States, support the SRF, and the SPLM-North in particular. The NCP claims that money intended for aid organizations is channelled to the rebels<sup>91</sup> and food aid intended to help civilians in rebel-controlled parts of South Kordofan is diverted to SRF soldiers. This alleged diversion would not necessarily be deliberate Western policy. For example, the United States funds a programme to supply food to some of the worst-hit areas of the Nuba Mountains. It sends food, seeds, and other supplies up to the border in Unity state in South Sudan, from where Nuba relief organizations take the supplies into South Kordofan for distribution. However, Khartoum suspects a lot of these supplies end up with SPLM-North soldiers. Such claims are difficult to verify. Irrespective of whether or not this is true, this perception of Western support for the rebels adds to the NCP's feeling that Western countries, and in particular the United States, wish to see it overthrown. Denunciations of aerial bombardments are seen as an attempt to remove SAF's great military advantage over the rebels. In public, the United States and other Western countries have actually taken a somewhat ambivalent position on the SRF.

The rebels reportedly received some outside international guidance in channelling their ideas into the development of the Document of Restructuring the Sudanese State (SRF, 2012) and in giving the rebel alliance a political dimension.<sup>92</sup> Western donor-supported mediators, such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, have provided forums for rebel leaders and members of the opposition to meet and iron out their agendas, which the NCP understands as a form of practical support that indicates a Western desire for a unified opposition movement against President Bashir.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, there has been no concerted Western pressure for Khartoum to negotiate with the SRF as one entity. Instead, Western governments tend to focus on encouraging the Darfur groups to join the DDPD, and talks between the government and the SPLM-North take place in Addis Ababa (ICG, 2014, pp. 23–33). This weakens the SRF's position. 📌

## VII. Conclusion

The creation of the SRF, which involved bringing together three fractious Darfur movements and rebels fighting in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, marks a significant milestone in the long history of rebellion in Sudan. The alliance has so far been able to overcome—or set aside—differences in ideology to develop a vision for restructuring the Sudanese state. The rebels have also managed to recruit two well-known figures from the political elite to try to reassure the riverine areas that their target is Bashir’s regime, not the entire elite clique.

Militarily, the alliance has demonstrated its prowess. The attack on Um Ruwaba and Abu Kershola in April 2013 was a major operation by a joint force of all four major rebel movements in the SRF. The move towards the NCP’s heartland and the SRF’s subsequent ability to hold on to Abu Kershola for a month highlighted the alliance’s potential on the battlefield. That the joint force has been more or less dormant since mid-2013 is perhaps an indication that the SRF is not increasing in number or access to materiel.

Fundamentally, unless the rebels can secure new streams of foreign support, they are unlikely to come much closer to their stated objective of overthrowing the Bashir regime militarily. Only a combination of SRF military gains, domestic political pressure, and an uprising in the centre is likely to achieve regime change. Foreign backers are not stepping forward. South Sudan must walk a fine line with Khartoum, while Uganda’s assistance has been mainly logistical. Beyond this, other regional states and the West are reluctant to get involved.

The SRF’s integration with the unarmed political opposition remains a work in progress. The January 2013 New Dawn Charter was a false start, but the rebels have built bridges between the NUP, through the Paris Declaration, and the DUP. The NCP is deeply concerned about these ties, and has made it increasingly difficult for the armed and unarmed opposition to meet. The role of religion in the state, especially, but also the principle of the voluntary unity of Sudan and the role of the army, among other issues, remain dividing lines between the parties. 🗨️

# Endnotes

- 1 The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North and the Justice and Equality Movement (the SRF's two strongest military components) had operated in coordination in South Kordofan, most notably in the battles of Jaw and Hejlj, and the Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid and the Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi had engaged in several joint operations in Darfur in the name of the SRF. But until the Um Ruwaba/ Abu Kershola campaign, all four had not cooperated militarily in a single operation.
- 2 For much of the rebellion the Darfur region consisted of three states. The region was repartitioned into five states in January 2012.
- 3 Sometimes these early Darfur rebels, and in particular those from the SLA, had been SPLA members or sympathizers. There was also some limited contact between the SPLA and the Darfur rebels pre-2005, even if it never developed into real military operational coordination.
- 4 In 2008 the UN suggested that the death toll in Darfur was 300,000 (CBC News, 2008).
- 5 Author interview with Tijani al-Sisi, Khartoum, 2012. He has since repeated this claim at several points.
- 6 According to Young (2012), the hearings were little more than long sloganeering sessions. See also Gramizzi (2013) and ICG (2013c).
- 7 A copy of the letter is in the author's possession.
- 8 All figures in this paragraph are from drawn from UN OCHA (2014a).
- 9 Since 2010 the two SLA factions had been discussing reconciliation, and it is possible they might have achieved this. But without the SPLM-North it is unlikely they would have entered into an alliance with JEM.
- 10 See the section below on political differences. Broadly speaking, JEM comes from an Islamist background, while the other three movements have secular leanings.
- 11 In Darfur, military strength is best expressed in terms of numbers of vehicles. Combat usually takes places in quick guerrilla raids across the desert, so the ability to travel far and use hit-and-run tactics is vital. Each vehicle can carry up to a dozen or more fighters.
- 12 Author interview with the NCP's Amin Hassan Omar, head of the Darfur file, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 13 He also reportedly spends considerable time in London.
- 14 This information was provided to the author in July 2013 by Majak D'Agoot, South Sudan's deputy defence minister at the time. He had worked closely with Malik Agar and Abdelaziz al-Hilu during the two north-south civil wars.
- 15 The Ansar ('Followers') are members of a sect that reveres the descendants of the Mahdi. Sadig al-Mahdi, the current imam, is also the leader of the NUP.
- 16 Malik Agar gave this estimate of the strength and composition of Haju's forces. In broad terms it was confirmed by Nasreldin al-Hadi al-Mahdi (author interviews with Malik Agar and Nasreldin al-Hadi al-Mahdi , Kampala, July 2013).
- 17 This includes the unarmed opposition, most of whose leaders come from the same riverine elite.

- 18 Author interview with Yassir Arman, London, August 2014.
- 19 Many of the rebels are more ambitious in their public statements. It is possible that the relative caution of the text reflects some of the foreign guidance the rebels have received.
- 20 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2014.
- 21 Author interviews with SLA-AW's Abu al-Gassim al-Imam and JEM's Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.
- 22 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.
- 23 Senior SRF leaders from both Darfur and the SPLM-North described the general inability of the Darfurians to agree on a candidate, without explaining the reasons why (author interviews with senior SRF figures, Kampala, July 2013).
- 24 Author interviews with Gibril Ibrahim and Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013.
- 25 Author interviews with senior SRF officials, London and Kampala, July 2013.
- 26 Malik Agar said this on the Sudan Radio Service, 29 February 2013.
- 27 Another SRF leader, SLA-AW's Abu al-Gassim al-Imam, made this point.
- 28 Author interview with Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013.
- 29 Author interviews with several SRF leaders, Kampala, July 2013.
- 30 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013. Malik Agar made a similar point to the author in Kampala in July 2013.
- 31 These figures come from Sudan's letter to the UN Security Council dated 13 June 2013. It was first sent to the AU in the context of the AU Investigative Mechanism looking into the accusations that the two Sudans were breaking the September 2012 agreements. For slightly different estimates, see ICG (2013a).
- 32 Malik Agar put the total at 61 vehicles captured (author interview with Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013); Gibril Ibrahim said it was 62, made up of 50 Land Cruisers and 12 trucks (author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013).
- 33 Author interview with Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 34 Author interview with Yassir Arman, London, July 2013.
- 35 Author interview with Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013.
- 36 Author interview with Ibrahim Ghandour, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 37 Author interview with SRF official, Kampala, July 2013. Nasreldin al-Hadi al-Mahdi has good contacts in this area, which traditionally is an NUP stronghold.
- 38 Author confidential interviews with diplomatic sources, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 39 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013. In fact, most battles in Darfur last from 30 minutes to several hours.
- 40 Author interview with Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013.
- 41 In South Kordofan in particular the SPLM-North controls more territory than it ever did in the 1983–2005 civil war, including in the eastern Nuba Mountains around Abbasiya.
- 42 Author interview with Majak D'Agoot, Juba, July 2013.
- 43 Author interview with Majak D'Agoot, Juba, July 2013.
- 44 Author interview with Majak D'Agoot, Juba, July 2013.
- 45 See, for example, *Sudan Tribune* (2014).
- 46 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.
- 47 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.

48 Amin Hassan Omar of the NCP made this point. He is particularly well informed on the Darfur movements, or at least Sudanese intelligence's perception of them, being in charge of the government's Darfur file (author interview with Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, July 2013).

49 Author interview with Malik Agar, Kampala, July 2013.

50 Author telephone interview with Malik Agar, 24 February 2014. However, rebels always claim that they are about to launch a major new offensive.

51 Turabi was behind the 1989 coup that brought Bashir to power and was in de facto control of the state until he lost a power struggle with Bashir in 1999.

52 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.

53 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.

54 Author confidential interview with senior SRF figure, Kampala, July 2013.

55 Author confidential interview with senior SRF figure, Kampala, July 2013.

56 Author interview with senior SRF figure, Kampala, July 2013. He also believes that JEM considers its real strength to be soldiers still in SAF and the security forces, but loyal to Turabi. The interviewee says that JEM does not bother to discipline its soldiers in Darfur and South Kordofan, since its real objective is to launch a coup in Khartoum with elements still in SAF. However, given that JEM has not attempted such a coup, it appears likely that many of those loyal to Turabi may also have left the military and security forces—some to join JEM.

57 Author interview with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013.

58 Author interview with senior SRF figure, Kampala, July 2013.

59 Confirmed in an electronic communication with the author in June 2014.

60 Author interview with Yassir Arman, London, August 2014.

61 Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi says that those with a long experience of opposition politics, including in the National Democratic Alliance, knew they were falling into a trap. He says Abdul Wahid insisted on the public separation of religion and the state, and the group eventually settled on the separation of institutions, which JEM had proposed. Mahdi and others favoured resolving the issue by insisting on following international human rights law, which would have made parts of the Sudanese version of sharia unconstitutional (author interview with Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi, London, May 2013).

62 Kauda, the leader of the Moderate Islamic Party, had signed a separate document with the rebels.

63 Abdelaziz Khalid was once the leader of the Sudan Allied Forces, which was a major northern rebel movement before South Sudan's independence, and a member of the National Democratic Alliance opposition group.

64 The others were Mohamed Zain al-Alabidein, Hisham al-Mufti, and Abdulrahim Abdallah from the DUP, and Jamal Idris and Entesar Alagali from the Socialist Unionist Nasserist Party.

65 Author interview with Mariam al-Sadig al-Mahdi, Khartoum, July 2013.

66 Siddig Yousif, who signed the document on behalf of the Communist Party, was then told by the party leadership to admit that he did not have the authorization to do so (author interview with Siddig Yousif, Khartoum, July 2013).

67 Siddig Yousif was one of those stopped from leaving (author interview with Siddig Yousif, Khartoum, July 2013).

68 All the quotations in this paragraph are from SRF (2014).

69 Author interview with Ibrahim Ghandour, Khartoum, July 2013.

70 'Hemeti' has a long background in the Darfur conflict as an early paramilitary leader and then as a commander in a deadly inter-Arab conflict in South Darfur in 2007. See Flint (2009; 2010).

- 71 More specifically, the government removed fuel subsidies, which affected the prices of a wide range of services, including public transport. The government took this drastic step in response to the loss of oil revenues following South Sudan's secession.
- 72 Despite its rhetoric of support for the protesters, the SRF was unable to launch military operations to take advantage of the situation.
- 73 Author telephone interview with Ghazi Salaheddin Atabani, July 2014.
- 74 Author interview with Ibrahim Ghandour, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 75 Author interview with Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 76 Author confidential interview with senior SRF official, Kampala, July 2013.
- 77 Gibril Ibrahim made this point, with particular reference to the Darfur movements. Several minor Darfur leaders live in Juba, as do some SPLM-North officials, including those in charge of humanitarian aid for South Kordofan and Blue Nile (author interviews with Gibril Ibrahim, Kampala, July 2013, and with SPLM-North officials and minor Darfur rebel figures, Juba, July 2013).
- 78 Author interviews with Western diplomats, Juba and Khartoum, July 2013.
- 79 Both Majak D'Agoot (author interview, Juba, July 2013) and Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi (author interview, London, May 2013) made this point.
- 80 Author confidential interviews, Juba, July 2013.
- 81 Author confidential interviews, Juba, July 2013.
- 82 Letter; Sudanese reference no. SUN/174/13.
- 83 Letter; Sudanese reference no. SUN/174/13.
- 84 Author interview with Ibrahim Ghandour, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 85 Author confidential phone interviews with several sources, February 2014.
- 86 Author confidential interviews with a church source and a UN source, February 2014.
- 87 Author telephone interview with Gathoth Gatkout, February 2013.
- 88 Author interview with the NCP's Ibrahim Ghandour, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 89 Author interview with the NCP's Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 90 Author interviews with several SRF leaders, Kampala, July 2013.
- 91 Author interview with the NCP's Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, July 2013.
- 92 Yassir Arman said they received help from Canada, the United States, and 'Europeans' (author interview with Yassir Arman, London, July 2013).
- 93 Author interview with the Communist Party's Siddig Yousif, Khartoum, July 2013.

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The Small Arms Survey is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Established in 1999, the project is supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and current or recent contributions from the Governments of Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as from the European Union. The Survey is grateful for past support received from the Governments of Canada, France, Spain, and Sweden. The Survey also wishes to acknowledge the financial assistance it has received over the years from foundations and many bodies within the UN system.

The objectives of the Small Arms Survey are: to be the principal source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence; to serve as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists; to monitor national and international initiatives (governmental and non-governmental) on small arms; to support efforts to address the effects of small arms proliferation and misuse; and to act as a clearinghouse for the sharing of information and the dissemination of best practices. The Survey also sponsors field research and information-gathering efforts, especially in affected states and regions. The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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The Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan is a multi-year research project administered by the Small Arms Survey, an independent research project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. The HSBA has been developed in cooperation with the Canadian government, the United Nations Mission in the Sudan, the United Nations Development Programme, and non-governmental partners. Through the active generation and dissemination of timely empirical research, the project supports violence reduction initiatives, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes, incentive schemes for civilian arms collections, and security sector reform and arms control interventions across Sudan. The HSBA also offers policy-relevant guidance on redressing insecurity.

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