

Blue Nile, its conflict dynamics, and the potential implications for the wider war in Sudan

2017 - 2024



Cover art by graphic artist Obada Gumaa Gabir

This paper is the second product of the cooperation between the Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker (STPT) and the Sudan Crisis Research Network (SCRN), an association formed by academics and researchers affiliated with the STPT who were displaced by the war. It is shortened from a longer version in Arabic, [available here](#).

Hanadi Alhour Adlan Almak

Researcher, Center for Peace and Development Studies, Blue Nile University

March 24, 2024

Executive Summary

As the war in Sudan continues, the positioning of regional leaders like Malik Agar in Blue Nile and Minni Minawi and Gibril Ibrahim in Darfur, plays an ever more critical role. Agar has sided with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the ongoing war and recently formed a new coalition, the National Forces Coordination, bringing together his faction of the SPLM-N, the Democratic Bloc, a splinter of the mainstream Forces of Freedom and Change-Central Committee, Darfur armed movements, a faction of the Democratic Unionist Party and some Beja nazirs to support the SAF. At the same time, his troops have engaged directly in fighting with the RSF and are among the troops SAF amassed ahead of its imminent offensive to retake Gezira State. These supports are critical to the army at a time when it is struggling to turn the tide of the war against the RSF.

These actions, however, overlay, and are informed by, a complex array of pre-existing conflict dynamics in Blue Nile. The latest conflict has created a framework within which local competitors seek national-level allies to strengthen their positions, and national actors seek to play the local dynamics to recruit allies into their national struggle for dominance. This paper offers an overview of some of those pre-existing conflict dynamics, intended to provide a clearer understanding of the hidden underpinnings of Sudan's ongoing war and the risks of its metastasizing into multiple intercommunal conflicts across the country.

Blue Nile is a diverse region with many ethnic groups represented, many of whose populations straddle international boundaries. There are tensions among these groups over resources and land distribution that can become interlinked in various ways with national level conflicts.

Of particular relevance is Blue Nile's recent history of conflict within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement–North (SPLM-N). The SPLM-N broke off from the larger SPLM that fought against the Khartoum government in the North-South civil war when South Sudan seceded, leaving those who hailed from areas north of the new border with a new set of challenges. In 2017, a struggle for leadership of the movement between Malik Agar and Abdelaziz Al Hilu emerged. Though based on differences related to the strategy for engaging the Khartoum government, the split soon took on ethnic overtones in the Blue Nile state. Accusing Agar of privileging the Ingassana in his regional administration of the region, the Funj, who had controlled pre-colonial Blue Nile tended to align behind the Al Hilu faction.

Related to this, there has been substantial immigration to the region over the last hundred years, contributing to increasing resentment among "indigenous" groups against those they see as "settlers." Fueled by such resentments is the conflict which pits the Funj against the Hausa propelled Abu Shotal, a self-styled Funj leader, to national prominence as an RSF ally.

Alliances such as those of Agar with the SAF and Abu Shotal with the RSF, not only have the potential to influence the course of the national war, but they are also increasing the militarization of the region, which could increase the violence of local conflicts even when the national conflict is eventually resolved.

Introduction

Blue Nile, like many of Sudan's peripheries, has experienced years of violence. It was a site of fighting during the North-South civil war. Violence erupted again in 2011 when the government demanded that all of those who fought with the Southern rebel Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement withdraw across the border to South Sudan around the time of the South's secession, sparking conflict with those who hailed from South Kordofan and Blue Nile, who formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) around the time of the secession of South Sudan. The region has also been the site of waves of ethnic violence, most recently in 2022.

This paper, STPT's fourth in our series of regional situation reports since the beginning of the war,¹ seeks to elucidate these dynamics by laying out the history of conflict in Blue Nile from 2017 to 2023 and then reflecting on how these dynamics have impacted the conflict since April 2023. It lays out how local dynamics impact the national conflict, how the national conflict is impacting Blue Nile, and what local dynamics will need to be addressed to bring peace to the region when the national conflict ends. The paper is informed by engagements with civil society leaders, customary chiefs, authorities, and other stakeholders from the region.

The conflict in Blue Nile can be seen as a microcosm of broader national and regional patterns of failure to manage diversity and intra-state violence. Blue Nile is extremely diverse and a number of interlocking conflict dynamics are at play. Thus, understanding and addressing its conflicts are critical not only to the state but also to understanding and resolving the conflicts both nationally and further afield in peripheral areas.

Blue Nile State

Blue Nile is located in Sudan's south-eastern corner, bordering Ethiopia to the east, South Sudan to the southwest and west, and Sennar State to the north. The region's proximity to international borders facilitates the movement of populations across these borders and transnational crimes, such as smuggling and human trafficking. As borders have divided some ethnic groups between more than one country, many groups have a presence or connections across borders.

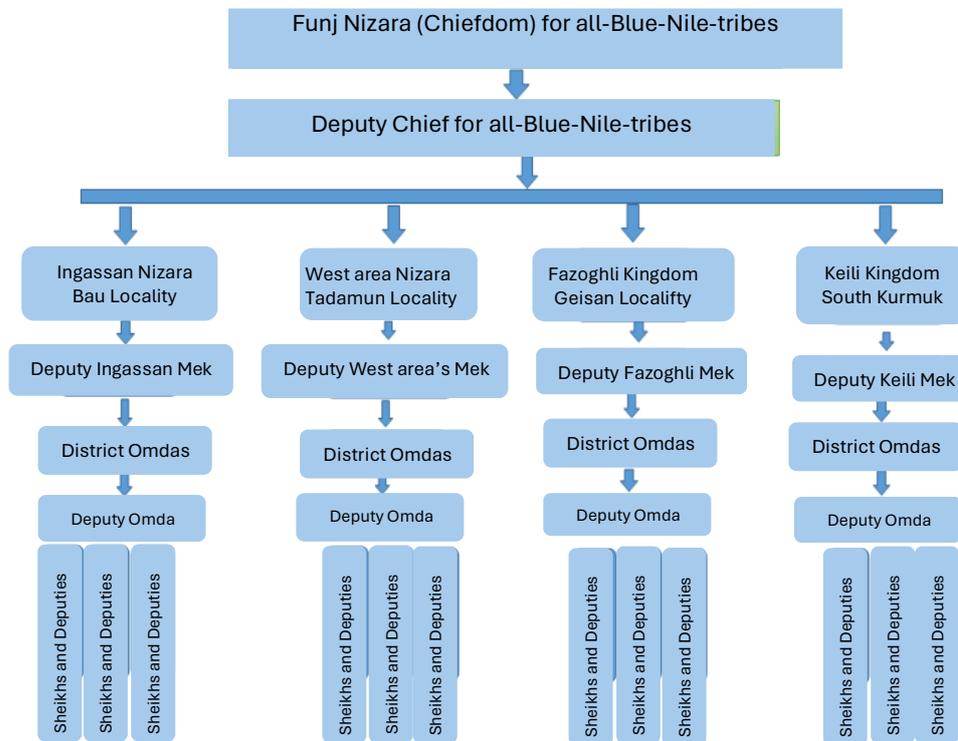
In addition, Blue Nile is rich in natural resources, including vast areas of fertile agricultural land, natural pastures, and green forests. It is also rich in mineral resources such as gold and chromium.

The state has a population of about 1.3 million, half of whom are young people.² It covers an area of 45,844 square kilometers, divided north-south by the Nile River. It is also home to the Roseires Dam, one of Sudan's most important sources of electricity.

¹ The previous publications are: "[Challenges and Opportunities for Local Mediation: The experience of the elders and mediation committee in El Fasher](#)," March 2024; "[Conflict Dynamics in South Darfur](#)," December 2023; and the "[Field Dispatch from El Fasher](#)," November 2023.

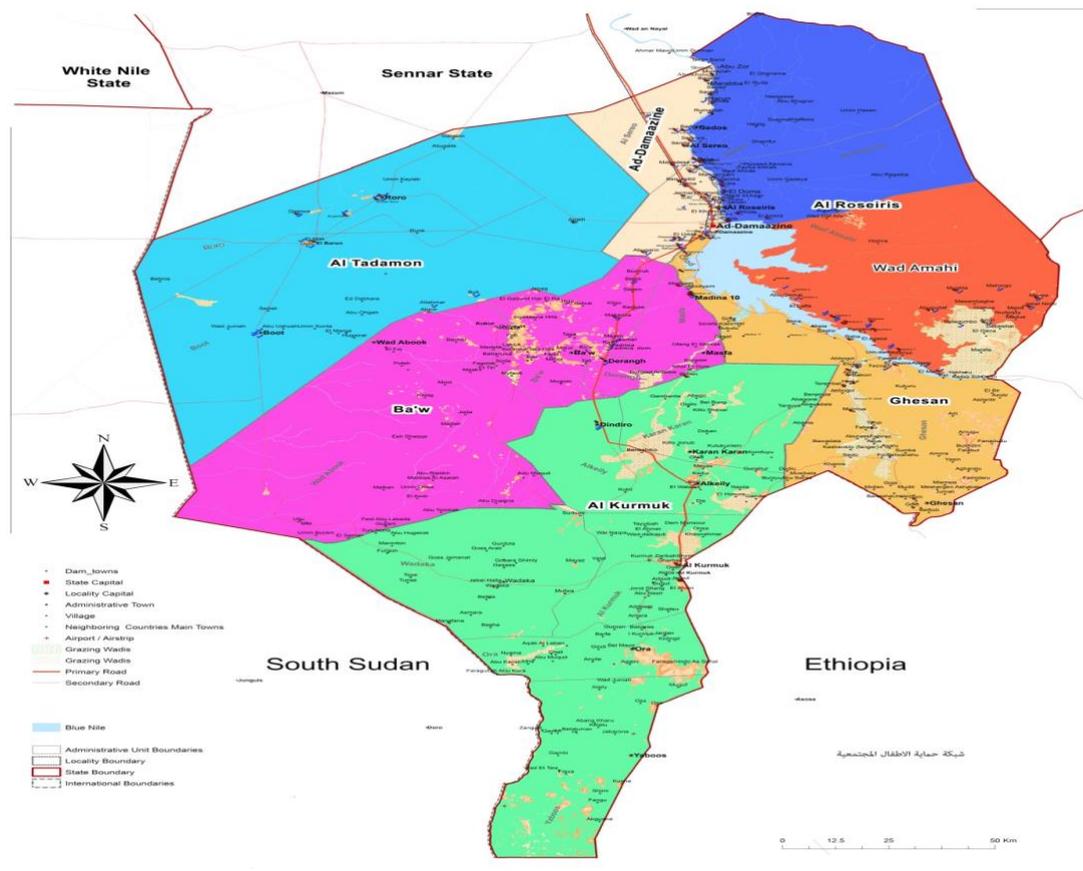
² UNICEF, Sudan State Profile, available at: <https://shorturl.at/ktJ78>.

Administrative structure of native administration in Blue Nile State



Blue Nile's diversity is rooted in part in its history as the cradle of the Funj Sultanate, which was an alliance of a number of tribal groups until the Turkish invasion in 1821. It is home to ethnic groups including the Funj, Berta, Gumuz, Jum Jum, Kadal, Hausa, Raqariq, Dawala, Ingassana, Uduk, Coma, Ganza, Surkum, and Jablaween. There are also the Kenana and Rufa'a Arab pastoralist tribes who migrate seasonally north to Sennar State. However, the 1983 drought saw the settlement of some pastoralist tribes.

Further, there has been significant migration to the region of tribal groups with distant West African distant origins and other parts of Sudan to work on agricultural projects in the region. This has led to a developing distinction between "settlers" and "indigenous" communities in the region, with "indigenous" groups asserting the right to rule and represent the region. This dynamic is also exacerbated by the native administration system, which has perpetuated the status quo of land and representation rights to "indigenous" ethnic groups, excluding newer groups from power and authority. It also emphasizes ethnicity as the basis of political authority. Nonetheless, tribal administration leaders have social, political, economic and cultural weight and play a strong political role.



Map showing the governorates of the Blue Nile Region

Recent conflict dynamics in Blue Nile

The split in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North

One particularly important event for understanding current conflict dynamics in Blue Nile was the split in the SPLM-N in 2017. Taking place during the war between the government of Sudan and the SPLM-N, conflict developed between two SPLM-N leaders, Abdelaziz Al Hilu and Malik Agar over the best response strategy. Al Hilu insisted on including **the right to self-determination** in any negotiations on the future of the region and argued that the **SPLM-N needed to maintain its armed presence for at least twenty years after the signing of any peace agreement** as a safety valve to ensure implementation. Agar, on the other hand, argued that **calling for the right to self-determination would prolong the war**, increasing the suffering and the isolation of the population of Blue Nile from the broader struggle for democracy in the country. He also argued that self-determination would be unacceptable to the immigrant groups in Blue Nile and would turn them against the SPLM-N. In this context, he argued that **advocating self-government** would be a more realistic and acceptable position.

Although it started as a political split between the two leaders, the division soon took on an ethnic cast, where the Ingassana and their allies, including Hausa, Kenana and Rufa'a Arabs,

coalesced around Agar's position and other ethnicities, including the Funj, Hamah, Dawala, Jum Jum, supported Al Hilu. Despite this ethnic cast, it was not absolute, some ethnicities were split evenly. Overall, Agar had the advantage in terms of soft political power, but Al Hilu had more military backing.

Soon, this led to open conflict between the Ingassana and their allies on one side and the Funj and their allies on the other. Malik Agar is a member of the Ingassana, and his opponents accused him of promoting his own ethnic group over others in the movement, giving family and ethnic brethren preference while talented members of other ethnic groups were ignored and marginalized. The conflict also inflamed historical grievances between the Ingassana on the one hand and the Berta, Hamaj, and Funj on the other. The latter feel that they should have a privileged position in the state on the basis of their historical leadership during the sultanate period. However, the Ingassana were never satisfied with the structure and rebelled even during the sultanate. More recently, Ingassana have argued that they should have preferential access to leadership based on their role in struggling against the marginalization of the state in the north-south civil war and the 2011 conflict, for which they paid a heavy price, being subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The conflict turned bloody, with several battles occurring over the course of the year. While Al Hilu is based in South Kordofan, the anti-Agar faction was led in Blue Nile by Joseph Toka, Al Hilu's ally. Toka's faction took control of many SPLM-N controlled areas, including Yabus, which hosts the SPLM political leadership, and Souda, the seat of SPLM-N military command. Agar's faction was left with only a small area in the northwest of the liberated areas, including Al-Foj on the border with South Sudan and Oulu in Bau locality.

These battles were accompanied by ethnically motivated violence and horrific violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the plundering of private property, extrajudicial killings, rape and sexual violence, torture, and arbitrary arrest. The violence left hundreds of civilian victims on both sides and deepened divisions. Failure to ensure a transparent investigation of, or accountability for, these violations has contributed to the failure of calls for peace and reunification of the movement. Ethnic polarization deepened and spread to refugee camps in Ethiopia and South Sudan and areas under government control, further complicating the possibility of reaching a comprehensive and just peace that will end the suffering of the region's population and put an end to the economic, social, cultural and political marginalization of the region as a whole.

This internal conflict affected the position of each party towards the 2020 Juba Peace talks. Agar participated in the process and signed the agreement. SPLM-N-Al Hilu initially engaged, but withdrew from the process accusing it of failing to address the root causes of Sudan's instability and seeking to buy off armed groups with offers of wealth and power sharing. This intensified tensions in Blue Nile, where Toka, leading the local Al Hilu faction, depicted the agreement as unjustifiably empowering a group with no presence on the ground. They further argued that the agreement did not address the roots of the conflict and did not meet the aspirations of the people of the region for freedom, justice, and equal citizenship. This set the stage for a new round of violence between the Hausa and other ethnic groups, with Agar accusing the Al Hilu faction of involvement.

How did the Funj-Hausa violence start and how it developed

As negotiations progressed in Juba in July and August 2020, a new round of violence between the Dawala and the Hausa erupted in towns no. 10 and 11 in Geisan Governorate and between the Hausa and Kamatir ethnic groups in the Tarfa area in Roseires Governorate. Violence erupted again in January 2022 when the Hausa declared an Emirate with Muhamma Nour al Din at its head in front of huge crowds in Wad Al Mahi. The declaration of the Hausa Emirate was met with anger and discontent from the Funj, who considered it a violation of the *hawakir*, or traditional land rights, of their group. The Funj turned to the governor to adjudicate the dispute, but he refused to take a position. They also complained to the commander of the 4th Infantry Division, in which the Emir served. The Hausa



This photo is a still taken from an Ayin video

responded by holding marches in the cities of Damazin and Roseires, increasing tensions. The Funj started to take a more extreme stance, demanding that the Hausa be stripped of their national ID cards and access to agricultural land in Funj regions. In July 2022, these tensions turned violent, with both sides taking up arms. Funj militants carried out ethnic cleansing campaigns against the Hausa, burning shops and homes, plundering property, and driving the Hausa out.

The parties entered into a short truce, negotiated under the auspices of the Rapid Support Forces in August 2022. The agreement was signed by Ibeidallah Mohammed Suliman Abu Shoutal, a former soldier and SPLM member who saw himself as a more legitimate leader than his senior SPLM colleagues Agar and Toka. When the split occurred in 2017, Abu Shoutal sided with Al Hilu. He rejected Juba Peace Agreement 2020 and began mobilizing communities against the native administration and seeking to broker alliances against the Hausa as a reaction to local conflicts. Under these circumstances, the truce did not last long and in September and October 2022 violence broke out again when some Hausa attempted to return to their homes. Funj soldiers stormed weapons stores in the 4th Division of the army in Damazin and used the spoils to attack Hausa in the city. The army sent soldiers from Khartoum to restore order.

Burhan called leaders of the native administration to Khartoum for negotiations, which after more than two months reached a ceasefire agreement. The agreement committed the sides to pursue their aims through peaceful, rather than violent, means and called for accountability for

the previous violence. It also created a committee for reconstruction and provided for the provision of humanitarian aid and rehabilitation of public facilities.

Political causes and consequences of the violence

There were both local and national dynamics behind the violence, which had profound causes and consequences:

- 1) The deepening of the split between the Malik Agar and Abdelaziz Al Hilu factions of the SPLM-N increased ethnic polarization in Blue Nile.
- 2) The exclusion of the Hausa from traditional native administration structures led to Hausa feelings of marginalization and calls to rectify the situation. However, other groups saw Hausa efforts to address and modify the system as a violation of traditional land rights.
- 3) The conflict also disrupted the ability of the native administration and other local mechanisms to allow for the management of conflict and resources in a cooperative way and the increase in competitive dynamics that can lead to violence.
- 4) The perceived high rate of Hausa population growth and preferential treatment that they received from the Bashir regime led to fears that the Hausa could dominate the region.
- 5) These tensions, and ensuing violence, led to the spread of hate speech against the Hausa, and drew together various components of the Funj community around more extreme demands such as stripping of national IDs from, and expulsion of, the Hausa.
- 6) Calls to remove the governor of the region, General Ahmed Al-Omda, Agar's second in command, who was blamed for failing to contain the violence and for bias in favor of the Ingassana tribe and their allies increased.
- 7) Abu Shoutal and other local leaders created "the Descendants of the Sultanate," an organization parallel to the native administration which included both members of the previous Bashir regime and the SPLM-N Al Hilu faction to mobilize the Funj against the Hausa.
- 8) A number of leaders of the former Bashir regime were very involved in manipulating tribal conflicts to weaken the democratic transition project and restore the political influence that they enjoyed prior to the 2018 December Revolution. They saw it as an opportunity to re-assert control and undermine the democratic transition.



Photo of children fleeing violence in Blue Nile, Ayin Network

- 9) Military and security organs in the state supported the violence, which they used as a pretext to justify their control and measures, such as states of emergency and martial law, that enhanced their power. They used this to exert control both over day-to-day life through states of emergency and crackdowns on civil society, and economically as these entities expanded their control over economic resources such as gold.
- 10) As the influence of security actors expands, war economies can easily take root with security actors having unparalleled access to, and control over, the region's resources. These run counter to local demands for transparency, accountability, and environmental safety.
- 11) The conflict and ethnic polarization in the region increased after the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement as signatories tried to use the agreement to bolster their position against the non-signatory SPLM-N Al Hilu faction and the Al Hilu supporters sought to obstruct the political empowerment of the Hausa.
- 12) The conflict deepened the humanitarian crisis in the region, increasing the number of displaced people and disrupting economic activities including agriculture on the banks of the Nile and fishing which constitute the main livelihoods of the Hausa people.
- 13) The conflict created a field for competition between the head of the Sovereignty Council, Burhan, and his then-deputy Hemedti. Both parties sought to sponsor the negotiation of a reconciliation agreement. Hemedti sent his brother Abdelrahim Dagalo with the help of Kenana Arabs, and Burhan was reportedly eager to personally oversee the arrangement, calling the parties to Khartoum to negotiate. These dynamics aligned Hemedti with Abu Shoutal and Burhan with Agar.
- 14) The conflict increased access to weapons across tribal groups in the region, which increased the risk of tensions turning violent.
- 15) The conflict also shrank civil society space making it harder to carry out work on the variety of issues that they would otherwise address, including peacebuilding, and initiatives to increase local participation in the management of local resources.

Militarization and its impact

Another aspect of the conflict that needs to be considered is how it has increased militarization. The dismal economic situation has left youth with few options other than military service to earn a living, facilitating the militarization of this group. Expanding military control over economic resources has only exacerbated this reality by starving civilians of ever more resources.

At the same time, the number of paramilitary actors operating in the region has increased. The Sudanese National Army ceded its monopoly on violence by creating a number of other armed groups, including the RSF that now constitutes its primary rival. The armed groups were further encouraged through a combination of unaddressed grievances and insufficient presence of government institutions. Some of the relevant groups include:

- the **Blue Nile Tiger Forces**, which are made up of about 10,000 soldiers led by General Gamar Hussein, a Fazoghli former army officer. This armed force is made up primarily of Fazoghli, Hamaj and Berta communities. They have coordinated with the

SAF military intelligence and have been allowed to open training camps in four localities and conduct training courses.

- the **Umda Salih militia**, which recruits from the nomadic Fellata, a generic name given by the Sudanese to people with West African roots, and is estimated to number about one thousand fighters. It operates under the supervision of the SAF Infantry Division 17 stationed at Singa. It is active north of Roseires where they have come into conflict with the population. The authorities have threatened to expel them, but so far have not done so.
- The **Blue Nile Brigade Forces**, also called Kobji and Balkulko Laik, are estimated to number about two thousand. They were created by Lieutenant General Yahya Muhammad Khair and were promised integration into the official army, a promise that was pursued after fighting with the national army in the battles of Kurmuk in July 2023 and more recently in Sennar.

Blue Nile in the April 2023 war

Since the start of the war, attention has focused on the ongoing battles in Khartoum and the atrocities that have occurred in Darfur. Little attention has been paid to the impact of the war on Blue Nile even though these impacts have been profound. In Blue Nile, the war has fueled ethnic polarization, drawn in its population as cannon fodder and intensified competition among the belligerents over the region's resources. It has also intensified the militarization and narrowing of civil society space mentioned above.

In neighboring South Kordofan, the SPLM-N Al Hilu faction has attacked SAF positions and taken territory, citing the need to protect people in areas it controls from the predations of the RSF. Similarly, in Blue Nile the Joseph Toka faction attacked government positions near Kurmuk, taking a few small positions. However, the army maintained its positions in Kurmuk itself and repulsed further attacks on the town in July. Government forces launched a counterattack and regained the positions that they had lost before the rainy season froze the fighting.

The Toka faction launched another attack on Kurmuk in December but were quickly repelled due to strong SAF intelligence and the use of heavy artillery and Antonov sorties. Cautious calm has prevailed since the start of 2024.

In addition to this fighting in Blue Nile, the region has had an impact through its role in fighting elsewhere in the country. The SAF has been relying on an alliance with the SPLM-N Agar faction. The SPLM-N's first battalion had been integrated into SAF under the terms of the Juba Peace Agreement and participated in fighting in Khartoum.

SAF is currently recruiting fighters in Blue Nile to enhance its combat capabilities and replace losses due to ongoing fighting. A **Popular Resistance** force was launched in January 2024, populated by new recruits known as *mustanfareen* (the mobilized). These new recruits are being trained alongside SPLM-N Agar fighters.

In a speech to the 4th Infantry Division on January 25, 2024, Agar underscored his support for the army, which he said would not be defeated. He also highlighted the role of Blue Nile as a front line for the support of the defense of Wad Medani, which had fallen to the RSF in mid-

December 2023. The next day, two SPLM Agar battalions arrived in Damazin and moved north to support SAF forces in Sennar and Omdurman. The *mustanfareen* received AK machine guns, and a few received more advanced traditional weapons, allegedly provided by Iran.

On the other side, the RSF has pursued an alliance with Abu Shoutal, who has appeared as a field commander and spokesman of the Rapid Support Forces. This relationship apparently builds on pre-war connections. Abu Shoutal had allegedly been offered money and positions for many of his family members in the RSF in exchange for his support. After the outbreak of the April 15 war, Abu Shoutal, alongside most of the RSF in Blue Nile, surrendered to the SAF, though they were later released. Abdelrahman Al Bishi, an ally, left for Khartoum where he participated in the battles for Khartoum from the beginning of May 2023. Abu Shoutal joined him at the end of that month with an estimated 1,000 fighters. Abu Shoutal had opposed the SPLM-N Agar and its monopolization of power in the state. He utilized the tribal conflict with the Hausa to settle these scores with Agar and his allies.

Although the army intelligence attempted to prevent young men and political actors from traveling from Blue Nile to Khartoum to join the ranks of the RSF, they were ultimately unsuccessful. RSF Blue Nile supporters have become known as the RSF Abu Shoutal group. Other prominent Blue Nile leaders who joined the RSF include one of the founders of Community Radio; an official of the governmental Supreme Council for Culture and Information; a prominent community activist; a civil society leader; and some resistance committee members.

The crackdown on civil society by the security and military intelligence has continued. A group of women who organized a protest against the war were arrested in September 2023. Communist party members have also been detained and a commemoration of the October Revolution was halted. The emergency law has also been used to arrest a large number of street vendors and others descended from the Arab tribes of Darfur and Kordofan as well as resistance committee members in Roseires and Damazin. Blue Nile is thoroughly caught up in the national conflict and must be understood and addressed in any resolution process.

Bibliography

Agreement on cessation of hostilities between the Hausa and the components of the Zarqa Sultanate, August, 2022.

The framework agreement between the Hausa tribe and the Funj components, January 2023.

Abdel Ghaffar, Mohammad Ahmed "Conflict Resolution in Western Thought and Practice, Preventive Diplomacy and Peacemaking, Part One," Houma Publishing House, Algeria.

Afronews, "Arrangements for signing the cessation of hostilities document in the Blue Nile State, in Arabic, August 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.afronews24.com/08/03/-السودان-ترتيبات-لتوقيع-وثيقة-وقف-العد>

Al-Karsani, Awad Assid, ed., "On Issues of Accommodation and Peace in Sudan," Political Science Department, University of Khartoum, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, University of Khartoum Press, 2002.

Al-Khudairi, Mohsen Ahmed, "Conflict Management," Etrak Printing, Cairo 2010.

Amar, Khalid, "Conflict Dynamics in and around Sudan's Blue Nile State, 2015–19," Small Arms Survey, March 2020, available at: https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-Report-Sudan-Blue-Nile_0.pdf.

Baldo, Suliman "Question of Leadership, Addressing a Dangerous Crisis in Sudan's SPLM-N," Enough Project, 20 July 2017, available at: https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/QuestionofLeadership_July2017_Enough_web.pdf

Lund, Michael S., "Preventing and Mitigating Violent Conflicts: A Revised Guide for Practitioners," Washington, DC, Creative Associates International, April 1997.

Taha, Mohyeldeen E., "Land use, ownership and allocation in Sudan" Sudan Democracy First Group, September 2016, available at: http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai_news_archive/2016/nov/att-0830/Land-Use-Ownership-and-Allocation-in-Sudan.....pdf