

# **Weapons Proliferation in Eastern Sudan: Harbinger of a Coming War**



*Cover photo by Hussein Salih Ary*

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# Acknowledgements

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# Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the masses of the Sudanese people who continue to bear the burden of the lack of a comprehensive national project; to the souls of the martyrs of the Sudanese revolution; to the women of Sudan whose bodies were forcibly made into instruments of humiliation to their communities; and to the children of Sudan who deserve a healthy future.

# Introduction

## Eastern Sudan: a troubled area in a region in turmoil

For decades, Sudan has been paying the price for its geographical location in a troubled region where some of its neighbors' concerns extend deep into its territory, affecting its security, economy, and sovereignty. All states of Sudan have become either transit points, sources or destinations of arms. Eastern Sudan is all three. Sudan now faces a great challenge to restore stability as its very existence as a country is threatened. The ongoing war demonstrates Sudan's fragility and has been characterized by the complete absence of law enforcement and security agencies. The war also destroyed the country's infrastructure, causing internal displacement and economic deterioration. Security and the protection of families and property



Sudan state boundaries.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.



The Horn of Africa.

Source: Last, Geoffrey Charles and Markakis, John. "Eritrea". Encyclopedia Britannica, April 11, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Eritrea>. Accessed June 15, 2024.

framework of a comprehensive solution for both Sudan and its neighbors, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Addressing these problems, which have a significant impact on the future, requires mobilizing the necessary political will and resources.

Eastern Sudan is located at the frontiers of the Middle East, and the Central, North and Horn of Africa regions, which are inflamed by a series of interregional and internal conflicts. The states of eastern Sudan overlook open land borders with three countries: Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, and a Red Sea coastline of 853 km, in addition to about 36 islands. The region includes diverse communities, ethnicities, and cultures many of whom are also present across international borders in Egypt and Eritrea. It also borders the states of River Nile, Khartoum, Gezira, and Sennar in Sudan, which together constitute the central Sudan, and control the roads to west, north, and South Sudan. Until recently, this central area of the country was relatively stable.

The Horn of Africa region suffers from poverty, unrest, chronic war, and famine, which have created hundreds of thousands of refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia from the early 1960s to 2023. Ethiopian and Eritrean armed factions, liberation movements and political actors have had a presence in eastern Sudan for about 60 years, causing security problems. In addition, numerous refugees have been hosted and voluntary return

have become primary concerns of all citizens, increasing the proliferation of arms proliferation.<sup>1</sup> While a solution in the short term, it represents a challenge for the future. Arms proliferation, the excessive stockpiling of conventional weapons, and the illicit trade in small and light weapons,<sup>2</sup> poses a direct threat to the civilian populations in Kassala, Gedaref, and Red Sea states, including large numbers who have been displaced from elsewhere in Sudan, which are referred to in this report as the "eastern Sudan." The region has experienced conflict due to political unrest, economic marginalization, and inter-communal violence.

Weapons proliferation threatens peace and security and impedes sustainable development not only in eastern Sudan, but across the country and region. Therefore, it can only be solved through joint local, regional, and international efforts within the

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<sup>1</sup> Arms proliferation refers to the excessive accumulation of conventional weapons and the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons among the public, especially young people. Currently, this proliferation exposes the civilian population to great dangers, threatens peace and security at the local, regional, and international levels, and hinders sustainable development.

<sup>2</sup> The conventional small and light weapons referred to in this paper include any firearm, air, sound, light arms, or any of their parts, components or spare parts, that can be used to wage wars or conflicts or commit crimes, and which are governed by international instruments to limit their spread.

has failed. Chronic border disputes have festered in Al Fashaga<sup>3</sup>, the Halayeb Triangle<sup>4</sup> and Shalatin, and Dinder,<sup>5</sup> as have disputes with Egypt over Nile waters have affected the region.

The conflicts in the Horn of Africa are complex and the ability to maintain security and order is limited. Many conflicts between countries are due to border issues, and there are numerous national, ethnic, religious, economic, and political conflicts. The emergence of terrorist organizations and cross-border movements have added salt to the wound. These have thrived in war zones and mobilized youth. These facts factors suggest a worrying outcome in eastern Sudan unless the danger is contained by proactive action. The region previously hosted factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) after their 1982 evacuation from Beirut, and in later years it became a crossing point for arms transfers to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup>

Since the current war began, the region has turned into an important market and crossing point for arms trade. It receives arms shipments from abroad, and war zones in central Sudan. Officials are increasingly arming the “**Popular Resistance**” and *Instifar (Mobilization)*.<sup>7</sup> Eastern Sudan has turned into a weapons depot. It appears that the government's weak control of the land borders and coast before the war limited its ability to contain or even obtain information about the arms trade. Information gathering requires extensive fieldwork and the development of a map of the social and commercial networks that facilitate arms transfers. At present, it can be said that all rural areas in eastern Sudan are outside government control, and this increases the demand for weapons. Despite this high demand, weapons are widely and cheaply available which indicates the abundance of the supply.

## Objectives, research problem, and methodology

The paper reviews arms proliferation in eastern Sudan, its dynamics, and its possible implications given the reality role that weapons play in turning conflicts violent. It explores the impact of the war on the spread of weapons, and national security in Sudan and neighboring countries. It also investigates social cohesion based on pre-war conditions in the region.

It calls for efforts to limit the proliferation of weapons and preemptive action to prevent armed clashes and mitigate the risks of growing terrorist movements. These problems represent the greatest threats to international peace and security and development in the region and proactive action is safer than firefighting.

The ongoing war in Sudan is expected to continue and spread, including to eastern Sudan, even if the current warring parties reach an agreement. Understanding the extent of the spread of weapons and their impact is crucial to developing the necessary conflict prevention strategies. The paper follows an inductive approach based on the statements of relevant informants and employs a descriptive-analytical approach. The paper

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<sup>3</sup> Alliance of Demand-based Bodies (TAM), “The issue of Al Fashaga land: Reality and demands,” March 2020, available at: <https://shorturl.at/KWEIN>.

<sup>4</sup> Mohyeldeen, Sherif, “The Egypt-Sudan Border: A Story of Unfulfilled Promise,” Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, June 11, 2020, available at: <https://shorturl.at/hhUwC>.

<sup>5</sup> Al Wi'aam electronic newspaper, “SAF repels an Ethiopian militia attempting to conceal the boundary markers between the two countries,” March 30, 2021, available at: <https://shorturl.at/EKkDf>.

<sup>6</sup> You can watch a video, apparently published by AP in 1982 that depicts the reception of the PLO fighters by Sudanese after they were evacuated from Lebanon to several countries in the region after the 1982 war. See <https://shorturl.at/IC41S>.

<sup>7</sup> Popular Resistance is a campaign launched by the SAF Commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan with the aim of recruiting support for the army in the face of the RSF. Some Sudanese states have issued decisions regulating this resistance and appointed leaders and higher committees for it. The mobilization program launched by the SAF leadership calls on fighters to join the popular resistance. So far, mobilized individuals mostly belong to Islamic movement organizations – a translator's footnote.

illuminates these through the testimonies and perspectives of citizens and community leaders in the region and the adjacent Nile River state. Due to the war, it was not possible to conduct interviews in other border states, namely Khartoum, Gezira and Sinnar. A total of 25 people, including leaders of armed movements in Eastern Front 1995 - 2007, ex-combatants, employees of the “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (DDR) - Eastern Sudan”, civil society activists, former legislators, members of demand-based and feminist groups and workers in the traditional mining sector already linked to local conflicts. As the topic is sensitive, we allowed informants who preferred to remain anonymous to do so.

Respondents were asked about the spread of weapons and their impact, militias in eastern Sudan; sources, transit points, and markets of arms in the region; and the actors active in this regard; their impact on the local balance of power; the political landscape; and cross border impacts across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. The questionnaire also sought respondents' suggestions regarding policies and recommendations.

## Weapons in eastern Sudan

### A companionship throughout history

Acquisition, possession, and use of local traditional weapons is part of the living heritage of most communities in eastern Sudan, as in other parts of Sudan. Weapons, such as swords, daggers, knives, *sotal* or *shotal* (shaped throwing sticks), spears, shields, and sticks, are linked to the arts and culture of the region, including tales, poetry, dance, popular sayings and handicrafts. Weapons have both cultural significance and practical uses related to *Istinfar* (mobilization) and the call to war. Although some of these weapons are classified as antiques, their use in mobilization is crucial because they instigate tribalism and recall histories of hostility. For example, certain traditional musical and percussion instruments, or playing specific melodies that recall past bloody confrontations, are still used to incite communities.

The use of traditional bladed weapons has greatly decreased and is largely limited to rural areas. Some of them are used as decoration, often associated with traditional dress and social occasions. However, it is difficult to ignore the danger of such weapons, despite their short range as they can be used as tools for killing.



A traditional Sudanese sword dance. Photo by Nory Taha under Creative Commons.

### Historical demand for weapons and their sources

The sources of arms in eastern Sudan were previously limited to illicit trade and smuggling activities through the Red Sea and neighboring countries (Eritrea and Ethiopia), a legacy of the wars against the former Ethiopian regimes.<sup>8</sup> However, the Eritrean and Ethiopian armed movements involved maintained strict discipline which limited the flow of weapons, due to the need to secure their rear and supply lines. Sudanese authorities also maintained strict control.

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<sup>8</sup> The regimes led by the former emperor Haile Selassie, General Aman Andom, Brigadier Tafari Banti and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam.



In addition to the active military presence of Ethiopian and Eritrean organizations on the border, some of them, such as the “Eritrean Liberation Front - United Organization (ELF)” had camps within Sudan. For about ten years, no leaks, trade, or use of arms from this camp were recorded fueling local conflicts. After some of these opposition groups became ruling parties, they began to arm Sudanese opposition groups, particularly in 1994. Training camps for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were opened in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, in response to the Sudan government’s plans to export their “**civilizational project**” by supporting Islamic and *jihadi* organizations in the Horn of Africa. The Sudanese government responded with chaotic distribution of weapons to recently established tribal militias in eastern Sudan.

Emerging tribal militias aligned with SAF and the Popular Defense Forces (PDF) to fight the NDA. This was followed by reciprocal arms transfers by Eritrea and Sudan to carry out special operations, which would have been sufficient to change the political landscape in both countries radically, had most of them not been seized before use. Both governments supported armed movements through air bridges and land crossings in neighboring countries such as Uganda, Ethiopia, and Chad, while devoting attention to eastern Sudan politically and militarily. The strategic importance of the region increased massive arms transfers through it to the Gaza Strip began, similar transfers now focus on Yemen and south Red Sea.

**In summary, the change in the mentality of the ruling elites, relations based on common ideological backgrounds, and weak border controls contributed to the spread of the arms trade in Sudan, turning the country into a market for weapons rather than a transit point for limited quantities and specific types of weapons.**

## The spread of firearms in eastern Sudan: legalizing illicit flows

Our field observations and witness testimonies point out that eastern Sudan has become an active hotspot for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons of all kinds. This is increasing and likely to increase further as the war continues. Rural arms markets have emerged, including in areas not previously known for armed conflicts. This has caused controversy as some stress the necessity of firearms for self-defense due to the absence of security forces and police, while others argue that the spread of weapons will lead to more insecurity.

Lieutenant General Abdulhadi Abdallah, a member of the Supreme Committee for Arms Collection, estimated on February 13, 2023, two months before the eruption of the war said that **8 million** small arms and light weapons were in the hands of Sudanese civilians. In the workshop “National Efforts to Collect Unregulated Weapons and Vehicles and Combat Negative Phenomena”<sup>9</sup> he pointed out that “**every tribal group has its own weapons.**” He confirmed that the committee had been able to collect about **300,000 weapons** between

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<sup>9</sup> SUNA, “Sudan is No. 1 internationally in arms collection, 300,000 weapons were destroyed,” February 23, 2023, available at: <https://shorturl.at/EPmZJ>.

*The impoverishment of the Sudanese and the spectre of famine looming coupled with the spread of weapons may make the latter a tool for obtaining or preserving food and money or become an incentive for engaging in local or cross-border terrorist formations.*

2016 and 2020. But in the context of war, it has become very difficult to collect any weapons or even new statistics.

The government's call to arm civilians and lifting restrictions on the arms trade was a turning point. For example, Mohammed Al-Badawi Abdelmajid, the governor of the River Nile State, said in the context of the general mobilization

program, "We spoke to Al-Ababda [a community in River Nile and Red Sea states that extends into Egypt], to bring weapons, and people can buy." This was the first green light for the trade in, and possession of, arms by a state official. Since then, buying and selling have flourished, and advertisements appeared on social media, without fear of accountability.

Now arms transfers and sales take place under the auspices of the official committee of the *Istinfar*, which both distributes weapons to the *mustanfareen* (the mobilized) in accordance with SAF controls, but also facilitates the transfer of unauthorized weapons. The committee issues permits confirming that shipments fall within the *Istinfar* armament campaign. Permission to carry arms has been extended to those involved in smuggling and drug trades, and some workers in the artisanal mining sector, which includes a very large number of school dropouts, who lack awareness of how to prevent conflicts, the severity of which has increased due to the availability of firearms, the absence of state authority, and the association of mining activity with high financial returns.<sup>10</sup>

Arms are brought to the River Nile and Northern states through the eastern states, by well-known arms dealers from *Bedouin* communities who live in River Nile State and have relatives in Kassala and Red Sea states. Some of these merchants spoke in public meetings sponsored by official bodies responsible for *Istinfar*, announcing their willingness to transport, and sometimes donate, weapons. A merchant from the Rashayda community donated 1,500 Kalashnikov rifles to the *Istinfar* campaign in River Nile State. This is another indication of the authorities' approval, knowledge, and connection with some arms smugglers. Thus, the illicit arms trade has been legalized.

Ammunition and bullets are sold through direct personal contacts by those responsible for "in-kind support," i.e., the forcible and voluntary collection of food supplies and other in-kind donations from citizens and miners in Northern and River Nile states to send them to "**Karari Military Base**" in Omdurman. The members of the "in-kind support" campaign are affiliated with the Islamic organizations that support SAF and actively in import



*Mustanfareen (mobilized civilians) celebrate their graduation from military training (social media)*

<sup>10</sup> Audio and written statements on the situation in the River Nile State, March 23, 2024 (names are withheld upon the request of the informants due to security considerations).

ammunition to arm the *mustanfareen*. Some sources say that ammunition is diverted from SAF warehouses to be sold to the new recruits, and the financial benefit from the sales goes to the managers of SAF support convoys. No entity monitors, regulates, or determines the quantity and type of weapons and ammunition in circulation. There is no monitoring or forecasting of how these weapons, which have spread in the areas of Atbara River, Abu Hamad, Al-Manasir, and down to the Butana plains, may be utilized.

This situation increases the possibility that firearms will be used to settle disputes, carry out armed robbery, aggravate conflicts over land and resources, contribute to the emergence of criminal organizations, or lead to accidents due to a lack of training in handling and storing weapons and ammunition. In addition, there are tensions between agricultural communities who live along the Nile and pastoralists who migrated from the Red Sea about three decades ago. At the time, the region's economy was based on agriculture and grazing, although mining is now becoming increasingly important. The newcomers became part of the region's population, but problems over land ownership and use remained. With the transformation of large parts of the state into an open gold mine, clashes over mines or mining markets may occur and become increasingly violent due to the proliferation of weapons.

Some *omdas* and *sheikhs* (local chiefs), in the border area between Red Sea and River Nile states, have imposed a local tax on miners for their own benefit. However, communities residing in mining areas are not benefitting from these revenues, which could also cause tensions.

## Community perspectives on arms proliferation during the ongoing war

Respondents from local communities expressed a profound understanding of the issues related to arms proliferation in the region. They also proposed solutions. The key points articulated by community leaders and activists can be summarized as follows:

1. Approximately 14 months of war in Sudan has increased arms proliferation through official distribution, open sales in rural markets, diversion from military operations, and cross-border importation. Most informants concurred that curbing arms proliferation was one of the most pressing challenges facing Sudan.
2. Significant errors have been made in mobilization, notably the official authorization of trade in, and possession of, arms without restrictions (such as requiring checks for criminal records and/or mental fitness). All legal constraints established by the Arms, Ammunition, and Explosives Act<sup>11</sup> of April 29, 1986,<sup>12</sup> have been disregarded.
3. Arms proliferation in eastern Sudan is not new. Arms have been present for many years, to varying degrees and in varying forms, fluctuating according to the levels of conflict between communities and between Sudan and its neighbors. The eastern region has served as a conduit for arms exported to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict zone, which has resulted in aerial attacks and bombings in eastern

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<sup>11</sup> Republic of Sudan, "Arms, Ammunition, and Explosives Act of 1986," available at: <https://shorturl.at/m50Mp>

<sup>12</sup> It is notable that points 6 and 7 below have influenced the quantity and content of the statements in this report, leading some individuals to request anonymity or to withhold complete statements, because "the alignment map has not yet become clear" at the popular level in eastern Sudan, despite the existence of top-level agreements between some local administrations that arose under the current war and were influenced by it. This is also evidence of some reasons for the need to strengthen and build trust among these communities.



and northern Sudan. Most of these operations were executed along the northern part of the Red Sea coast and in the desert but also in major cities such as Khartoum and Port Sudan.

4. The ambiguity surrounding the mechanisms of small arms proliferation complicates the compilation of accurate statistics. However, the volume of arms traded suggests a significant danger of unrest. Such conflicts could spill over into neighboring countries due to tribal connections, the absence of security and law enforcement agencies, and the overall fragility of the Horn of Africa region.
5. The events of April 15, 2023, revealed the extent of professional decline within SAF, both at operational and intelligence levels. They also highlighted the collapse of the security apparatus, rendering it incapable of performing its established roles. This underscores the need for a complete overhaul of state security institutions.
6. All informants emphasized that the conflict in Sudan is becoming more complex, devolving into multiple local disputes beyond the control of the main warring factions (SAF and RSF), as neither side can effectively control its forces and/or allied militias. These local disputes have been fueled by ethnically charged rhetoric from both sides, which has become a key driver of armament.
7. Cross-border actors play an important role socially, economically, and in terms of security. While country borders theoretically separate ethnic groups, in practice, they maintain cultural and economic ties across borders.

Al Amin Ali Shangrai, an academic, politician, community leader, and former secretary-general of the Beja Congress Forces (BCF), stated that eastern Sudan has been an area of insecurity since 1985. Central authorities have repeatedly tried but failed to strongly control the region. The three states of eastern Sudan have open borders with Egypt, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, and coastlines along the Red Sea, which serve as transit points for arms, drugs, and human trafficking. Arms shipments organized by criminal groups have been intercepted. But criminal transfers appear to have increased in the absence of central state authority, especially after many dangerous criminals escaped prison during the war.<sup>13</sup>

Respondents also noted the impact of ongoing unrest in neighboring countries. In Ethiopia, this includes the Amhara-Tigray and Amhara-Oromo conflicts, those between these groups and the federal government of Ethiopia, and between Tigray and Eritrea. There are also conflicts in Yemen and Israel and tension between Somalia and Ethiopia over Ethiopia's efforts to secure port access in Somaliland. These disputes have had a significant impact on eastern Sudan, leading to refugee inflows, economic decline, shortages and high prices of essential goods, arms proliferation, associated security breaches, and cross-border social conflicts. The region, in general, is experiencing insecurity, the extent and outcomes of which are difficult to determine.

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<sup>13</sup> Al Amin Ali Shangrai, audio recording, May 8, 2024.

# The impact of the war between SAF and RSF on arms proliferation in eastern Sudan

## The war as the primary driver of current arms proliferation

Self-defense tops the list of reasons for acquiring arms amidst the ongoing war and the heinous crimes committed against unarmed civilians. Often, these arms are not owned by the carriers themselves; they are communal property of the tribe, state, one of the warring factions, or a neighboring country. Both warring parties have failed to protect civilians and instead have armed specific ethnic groups, conflicts between which have further undermined security and prompted other groups to arm themselves. The proliferation of arms empowered armed individuals to conduct searches and arrests, raids on homes, confiscate property, and verify identities, leading to overreach and related human rights violations. This in turn further drives demand.

## Armed groups as sources of arms and security threats

### *Al-Fazaa* and popular resistance

The implementation of *Al-Fazaa*<sup>14</sup> (allies reinforcement) operations and "popular resistance," known as the *Istinfar*, has driven arms proliferation in eastern Sudan and other states not directly affected by the war but severely impacted by it. These operations have fostered the illegal arms trade, making it possible to acquire arms for future conflicts unrelated to the current war and against enemies not involved in it.

*The conflict in Sudan is becoming more complex, with the conflict devolving into multiple local disputes beyond the control of the main warring factions (SAF and RSF), as neither side can effectively control its forces and/or allied militias. These local disputes have been fueled by ethnically charged rhetoric from both sides, which has become a key driver of armament.*

In eastern Sudan, the spread of arms now poses a greater threat than the war itself. For instance, in Al-Butana, arms are used for armed robbery and other crimes against war-displaced individuals from Khartoum and Gezira states. In Gezira state, arms have been used to loot crops and other property. On the borders of Red Sea and Nile River states, arms proliferation could lead to clashes over mining resources.

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Fazaa is an ancient local tradition that calls for the support of tribe members and/or allied tribes when facing an attack or other threats such as cattle theft, etc.- a translator's footnote.

## 4.2.2 Al-Mustanfarat (mobilized civilian women)

Numerous women and girls have participated in the current war as *mustanfarat* (mobilized civilians) within the ranks of SAF, and as "fighters" within the RSF and other armed movements. Although this is not a new phenomenon in modern Sudanese history, it has elicited divergent opinions ranging from rejection to approval—considering the extent to which violations such as enslavement, rape, sexual slavery, and enforced disappearances have affected women and girls. Gender-based violence in Sudan,



*Mustanfarat (mobilized women)*

Source: SUNA

including sexual violence, has been a tool of war<sup>15</sup> and a means of ethnic punishment. A report by the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women and Children,<sup>16</sup> a governmental body established to coordinate between local institutions and international organizations on women's and children's issues, documented 136 cases of rape and sexual violence since the war began in mid-April 2023.

The opposition to the militarization of women is based on the belief that providing protection is not the responsibility of civilians, whether men or women, but rather that of the belligerents. Concerns were also expressed that this would increase the exploitation of these women, and opposition was expressed to war as a whole. On the other hand, the justification for accepting women's participation in combat is grounded in the right of women to fight and the argument that the violations they have faced could have been avoided if they had been given opportunities to arm themselves for self-defense. However, the women, especially in areas close to the war zone, are influenced by mobilizing rhetoric and/or personal grievances.

The SAF opened training camps for women and girls in Kassala, Red Sea, River Nile, Blue Nile, and Northern states after the SAF Chief, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, issued a mobilization call in June 2023. On February 20, 2024, the Sudan News Agency (SUNA) reported that the SAF had trained 830 mobilized women in marksmanship in Port Sudan.<sup>17</sup> This training was part of the shooting course organized by the SAF at Flamingo military base in the Red Sea State, as part of the second phase of popular mobilization in Port Sudan. According to the SUNA News Agency, the mobilization commander in the state promised to provide advanced and specialized courses to mobilized women, enabling them to support SAF in various capacities. Women's rights advocates argue that this news could expose many women and girls to significant risk.

Amira Osman Hamid, the head of the "No to Women's Oppression Initiative," stated that "the idea of recruiting women to play any role in this war is fundamentally unacceptable. Women's duty is to work towards stopping the war and ending conflicts, not to become part of its fuel and tools. They should reject fighting and be

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<sup>15</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Experts: Sexual violence is widespread in Sudan and used as a 'weapon of war'," November 30, 2023, available at: <https://shorturl.at/PtB4f>

<sup>16</sup> Sudan Tribune, "Government body criticizes international community's neglect in providing protection for women during the war in Sudan," November 26, 2023, available at: <https://shorturl.at/RoLXJ>

<sup>17</sup> UNA, "830 Mobilized in the Red Sea Raise the Salute," February 20, 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/9U07U>

peacemakers, especially since the current war in Sudan is a war for power and resource control, hindering the realization of the Sudanese people's will."<sup>18</sup>

No mobilized women have yet been deployed to the front lines, and their number is not large compared to the mobilized men. However, the rapid training sessions they received did not provide the necessary professional combat skills, which increases their risk.

Regrettably, some women have become victims of misinformation, as the current mobilization presents the conflict in terms of defense of honor and land, but these are not the fundamental causes of the war, which is rather about the division of wealth and power between two factions that previously controlled the state together. If the war ends on their terms, they will just redivide this power and wealth. The mobilization of women as fighters will only lead to further conflicts and increased losses.

Sudanese women assert, "We are capable of carrying weapons if our villages face danger."<sup>19</sup> They are prepared to fight on the front lines to protect themselves and Sudan, drawing on their experiences and global liberation movements. However, those calling for mobilization and insisting on training civilians—who are outside the military system—must do this professionally. Anyone observing mobilized women will notice they wear *abayas* (long wide dresses) which are unsuitable for carrying weapons or taking cover in trenches and shelters when necessary, providing first aid or evacuating the wounded. Rather it would turn them into visible and distinguishable targets from long distances.

If the stated objective of mobilization is to protect women and girls from violence, rape, and other violations, but the reality suggests it is merely a recruitment strategy. Mobilization does not guarantee protection, and bearing arms is not a shield against violations either from one's own group or the enemy, especially in the absence of law and order. Rather the regular armed forces are responsible for protection and security, particularly during times of war. The military, which allocated itself the highest percentage of the state budget for many years, now appears unable to fulfill its role. Why is arming civilians and proliferating weapons now considered to be the solution? What guarantees are there to prevent the misuse of weapons by the mobilized individuals, thus threatening the safety and security of other civilians?

## Resurgence of armed factions

One of the direct consequences of the war in Sudan is the resurgence of preexisting armed factions and the emergence of new ones. This has turned eastern Sudan into a significant repository for arms. The region, which is one of the last safe havens for IDPs, has also become a rear base and launch point for participants in the conflict, while the other party views it as a target for future attack. Some armed groups in eastern Sudan have trained or are training their members in Eritrea. In testimony collected for this report, a leader of one of

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<sup>18</sup> Amira Osman Hamid, Audio and Written Testimony, May 19, 2024

<sup>19</sup> A line from a popular chant during December 2018 revolution – a translator's footnote.



*A group of civilians mobilized by M Al-Amin Tirik, Nazir of Beja in the Red Sea State in response to Al Burhan call, A screenshot from a video by Al-Alam TV*

these factions stated: "The training outside Sudan is conducted with the knowledge of, and in coordination with, SAF command. The purpose is to receive training in high combat skills and specialized operations in a safe location close to eastern Sudan. The primary purpose of the training and mobilization is to protect civilians." However, the speaker's arguments do not justify conducting training operations outside Sudan. In addition to SAF, the armed groups that have made Eastern Sudan a base or target for their military operations include:

1. **The RSF** who are deployed across Gezira and Sennar states bordering Gedaref. There are also RSF militants who dispersed in the early days of the war, whose locations and armaments are not known.
2. **The *mustanfaren*** (mobilized supporters) of SAF in the three eastern states.
3. **Al Butana Lions** led by Abu Aqla Muhammad Ahmad Keikel, who was part of a SAF-aligned formation called "Sudan Shield," which split, with most members joining the RSF. However, divides in this armed faction may result in the emergence of other armed groups from the same social base, i.e., Al-Shukriya tribe in Gedaref and Gezira States.
4. **Sudan Liberation Movement/ Sudanese Alliance Army** whose forces were airlifted from the Chadian border to the Red Sea State after Chadian authorities refused to receive them. These forces have the potential for growth due to the presence of large numbers of Masalit in southern Gedaref, along with groups of fighters from Darfurian armed movements who have been in Eritrea for years.
5. **Free Lions** led by Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, from the Rashayda tribe, suffers from internal divisions between SAF and RSF supporters. The tribe has fighters on both sides of the conflict, with some groups active in smuggling and arms trading. The tribe has a social presence in River Nile State.
6. **Beja Congress Forces** led by Musa Muhammad Ahmad has mobilized and armed border area residents, calling up old combatants and graduating a new batch at "Gargar" camp on the border with Eritrea. Most of the faction's fighters belong to the Hadendoa tribe in Red Sea and Kassala states.
7. **Beja Congress Forces** under Sheikh Omar Muhammad Tahir. Sheikh Omar didn't return to Sudan under the arrangements of the East Sudan Peace Agreement signed in 2006 in Asmara. The main camp of these forces is in Awghameit on the border with Eritrea, and most of its fighters belong to the Jemilab tribe.
8. **Beja Congress/Armed Struggle**, led by Shaiba Dirar, trains in Red Sea State.



9. **National Movement for Justice and Development Forces**, led by Mohammed Tahir Suliman Bitai recruits mostly from the Jemilab tribe. It was established as a local militia within the PDF loyal to the Al Bashir regime.
10. **Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces** is led by Ibrahim Abdullah Ibrahim (Dunia) from the Bani Amer tribe.
11. **Popular Front for Liberation and Justice/Eastern Arab Battalion Forces**, led by Al-Amin Daoud, was part of the Eastern Sudan Track in the Juba Agreement 2020, and their soldiers largely belong to the Bani Amer tribe.
12. **Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)**, led by Dr. Jibril Ibrahim recruits predominantly from the Zaghawa tribe (Kobe subgroup) of Darfur.
13. **Sudan Liberation Armed Movement (SLA)**, led by Minni Arko Minnawi, is also predominantly Zaghawa.
14. **Sudan Liberation Armed Movement**, led by Mustafa Nasruddin Tambour, now has a base in Gedaref and recruits mainly from the Masalit community of Darfur.
15. **Popular Defense Forces (PDF)** in Al Fashaga is an old militia that was exempted from the decision to dissolve the PDF after the December 2018 revolution.
16. **Hausa Youth** is another armed group.
17. **Militia of the Bawdara Tribe in Gedaref** graduated its first fighters on Friday, June 7, 2024.

All these armed groups are tribal formations aligned with SAF. They operate within the *Istinfar*, as evidenced by their offices in the capitals of the three eastern states. However, it has been suggested that they are driven more by the anticipation of future ethnically-motivated clashes rather than the current conflict. The presence of 18 armed groups, along with others that have not yet announced themselves, is dangerous for eastern Sudan. Particularly if current militarization brings benefits in terms of political representation, influence, and control over resources.

In addition to these Sudanese armed groups, there are also Ethiopian groups, such as the *Shifita* gangs in Al-Fashaga and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in Al-Faw. They have camps in the Harira area, in the villages of Heraiz and Buqasa in Gedaref. Reports of these forces robbing travelers between Al Faw and Al Gedaref on Saturday, May 4, 2024, were recorded.

## Arms trade

As in many regions plagued by armed conflicts, violence, and organized crime, the demand for illicit weapons has surged in Sudan. This trade contributes to the spread of violence, fuels and perpetuates civil war, ethnic and regional conflicts, and strengthens the armament of terrorist organizations, drug gangs, and other criminal groups. However, the legalization of these arms and the redistribution of illicit weapons present a new model.

The international trade in licensed weapons is opaque, making it exceedingly difficult to monitor transfer operations or determine the extent of weapons stockpiling. Uncovering the intricacies of the illicit trade in

small and light weapons, their parts, accessories, and ammunition, is even more challenging. There is always an overlap between the legal and illicit trades, despite strict controls over the transfer and retransfer chain from the origin/multiplier to the end user (whether these are sales or leases, and arming governments or peacekeeping forces, or shipments for repair, returns after the lease period, or disposal of surplus or old stock, or temporary exports for sports and hunting purposes).<sup>20</sup>



A rally of Al-Bawadra tribe few weeks before they declare their own militia. Source: SUNA

The flow of illicit arms can be curtailed through the implementation of regional and global instruments into local laws and regulations, the activation of the International Tracing Instrument (United Nations General Assembly 2005), and the enforcement of International Small Arms Control Standards and mandatory marking and record-keeping of weapons. Ensuring international cooperation and allowing law enforcement officials to trace firearms at all stages of transfer, retransfer, or route change—is crucial. Weapons can be lost, stolen, or deliberately retransferred. The latter two scenarios have recently occurred in Sudan: deliberate transfer during the *Istifan* campaigns and arming of *Fazaa* militias, and the loss and theft at the ammunition and weapons depots of the Third Infantry Division in Shendi on May 29, 2024.



Arms transfers between Sudan states.

Source: Sudan Doctors' Central Committee FB page

Even before the war, there were instances of weapon diversions from military and regular force depots in Sudan due to weak monitoring and poor stock management. This included theft by individuals within these official institutions and external elements. The same applies to the claiming of weapons and ammunition by opposing forces or individuals from the losing side during battles.<sup>21</sup> The lack of scrutiny in weapons collection post-battle is alarming, as weapons are treated as spoils for those who find them. The lack of accountability and weak state structures exacerbate looting. The research confirmed the presence of all forms of diversion practices.

One of the direct outcomes of the war in Sudan is the diversion and illegal use of "civilian stocks" of licensed weapons from gun shops, ammunition

<sup>20</sup> In the context of diversion operations and smuggling of arms, spoils, and loot from military areas using various methods and camouflage tools, on Wednesday, May 15, 2024, an ambulance loaded with weapons and money was seized on the Gedaref-Kassala road (see photos in the report).

<sup>21</sup> Allowing combat soldiers to seize weapons and other materials after battles is an old practice in the SAF. The late Al-Zubair Mohammed al-Hassan, the leader of the Islamic Movement, urged the Al Bashir government to encourage this practice as compensation for soldiers due to low salaries and to motivate youth to enlist. He reiterated this in a later television interview, see: <https://www.alniliin.com/599111.htm>

dealers, traders, herders, agricultural project owners, goldsmiths, tribal leaders, and others. A significant portion of these weapons were taken from authorized individuals<sup>22</sup> and used in armed criminal activities or by organized criminal networks.

## Types of weapons available and in demand in rural weapon markets in eastern Sudan and River Nile

Our sources indicated that Turkish pistols of various sizes and Kalashnikov rifles with metal stocks manufactured in Russia, China, Ukraine, and Egypt have been long sought after. Recently, all models of G3 rifles, RPG launchers, DShK heavy machine guns of various sizes and ranges, PKM machine guns, and various sizes of hand grenades have become available.

Notably, all the most in-demand weapons are not defensive and are quite expensive. For instance, a DShK costs US \$15,000. These are not personal armaments and are needed primarily by infantry units. Interviewees also revealed the emergence "*Tafashjiya*" involved in producing and manufacturing improvised weapons and repairing malfunctioning weapons to be sold at lower prices in eastern Sudan. The increased availability of these weapons is a serious threat that must be addressed.

## Regional dimensions of arms proliferation in eastern and northern Sudan

The findings of this research revealed that open borders and historical conflicts have created a conducive environment for the proliferation of arms in the region generally and in eastern Sudan specifically. This is facilitated by increased demand, weak state control, rampant corruption, and armed conflict. Consequently, neighboring countries have sought to enhance their security through both military force or national or international arrangements in ways that could later affect Sudan's security.

Al-Tijani Al-Hajj Abdulrahman, a researcher and politician with extensive experience working with civil society organizations in peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa, notes that the conflict between SAF and the RSF represents merely the visible aspect of a deeper issue. "Behind the scenes, vested interests in Sudan and the broader region are supporting both sides of the conflict. If this war persists without a peaceful resolution, it could result in a severe outcome, undermining all prospects for a democratic transition."



Halayeb and Shalatin Triangle.

Source: Wikimedia, Faris Knight, various political entities and regional countries, Creative Commons

<sup>22</sup> See: N.R. Jenzen-Jones, Jonathan Ferguson, and Anthony G. Williams, previously cited, p. 53.

Al-Haj also underscores that Sudan's neighbors have direct stakes in the stability or instability of eastern Sudan. For instance, Eritrea, which shares a 600-kilometer border with eastern Sudan and is populated by linked communities, is likely to adopt preventive measures to avert the crisis from crossing into its territory.

The situation in Ethiopia mirrors this pattern, albeit without the demographic overlap. However, a significant factor here is the substantial presence of Ethiopian refugees affiliated with the Tigray People's Liberation Front and other armed groups from Amhara and Oromia regions, opposed to the federal government in Addis Ababa in eastern Sudan. Chronic border issues, such as the Al Fashaga conflict, have brought Sudan and Ethiopia to the brink of armed confrontation. Criminal groups like the *Shifita* also operate in the area, prompting Ethiopia to prepare should the security situation in Sudan deteriorate further.

Egypt may appear superficially insulated from the security implications of conflict in eastern Sudan but it is also vulnerable to multiple tensions. The border is a focus of disputes between the two countries and has served as a transit and smuggling route for weapons to Israel. The current influx of refugees could facilitate the spread of small arms and light weapons into Egyptian territory. Reports of arms smuggling from Sudan to Egypt<sup>23</sup> date back to the 1990s. Even after the Egyptian revolution removed President Hosni Mubarak, the old foe of the Sudanese Islamists, Sudan continued to be cited as a source of arms smuggling into Upper Egypt<sup>24</sup> and Islamist groups opposing the Egyptian regime.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the Egyptian government may view the resurgence of Iranian influence<sup>26</sup> as a direct threat to its interests and those of its allies in the Red Sea.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusion

This research has shown that weapons proliferation is increasing in eastern Sudan, linked to both government-sponsored mobilization and illicit arms trafficking. It is complex, multifaceted, and difficult to trace. It can result from the diversion or repurposing of weapons from armed groups that have operated inside or outside Sudan for years. The forms of illicit arms flow have varied significantly over time and from one area to another. They also vary depending on the types of weapons and ammunition involved, and the resources and objectives of the end users. However, in Sudan, weapons manufactured in the former Soviet countries have become common. This reflects the lack of internationally regulated trade. This identification is important to understand the beginning of the arms transfer chain and to establish international controls.

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<sup>23</sup> Kamil Al-Tawil, "Al-Qaeda in Sudan Became 'Global'... Its Farms are Split for Agriculture and Training. Bin Laden: We Are Not in Sudan to Trade... We Support the Government So It Supports Our Group," Al-Hayat Newspaper, October 6, 2001, available at: <https://shorturl.at/oE28G1>(<https://shorturl.at/oE28G>)

<sup>24</sup> Yassin Gabir, "Tea and Guns in Upper Egypt," Slate, May 9, 2014, available at: <https://shorturl.at/XMGnO1>(<https://shorturl.at/XMGnO>)

<sup>25</sup> Sky News Arabia, "Concerns Over Sudan Supporting Armed Groups in Sinai," September 7, 2014, available at: <https://shorturl.at/mGzu91>(<https://shorturl.at/mGzu9>)

<sup>26</sup> Eric Lob, "Iran's intervention in Sudan's civil war advances its geopolitical goals – but not without risks," The Conversation, May 28, 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/UhMJw>

Whatever its source, weapons proliferation is increasing the risk of human rights violations in Sudan. It is imperative for arms manufacturing and supplying countries to adopt restrictions and controls over arms transfers, and to enhance international capacity for transparency in the conventional arms trade, under the direct auspices and supervision of the United Nations. Curbing illicit trade and weapons proliferation requires extensive awareness campaigns about the risks, enhancing the capacity for research, monitoring, and reporting and enabling a precise understanding of the sources of data related to the flows and uses of both licensed and illicit arms, including permits regarding the acquisition and possession of weapons.

The warring parties in Sudan have initiated a dangerous arms race that has made the war more destructive and will complicate post-war recovery. The unrestricted proliferation of weapons in neighboring communities with a history of conflicts can undermine stability. These races are based on action and reaction, of social groups continuously striving to enhance their capabilities in response to perceived competition by rivals. Armament can be taken as evidence of aggressive intentions, and lead to preemptive strikes, especially during crises or in the event of political miscalculations.

The way out may lie in emphasizing that civilian and democratic governance as the key to preventing conflict. This necessitates urgent improvements in governance and state administration, requiring a consensus between military and civilian entities rather than mere symbolic civilian representation. A new political approach is essential to address accumulated grievances by prioritizing long-standing issues and demands, primarily concerning human rights, environmental safety, and services. In eastern Sudan, these include concerns and issues pertaining to land ownership, coastal management, and resource governance, all contribute to the risk of conflict.

## Recommendations

### To the parties to the conflict

- Adhere strictly to international humanitarian law and human rights law, which entails ceasing indiscriminate shelling, targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, sexual violence, and the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid for military purposes. Immediately cease unlawful detentions, extrajudicial killings, assaults on all civilians, especially women and children, and any action that creates fear in the population and drives it to seek weapons.
- Ensure the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly to expand civic society space and bolster the efficacy of civilian efforts to end the conflict and facilitate humanitarian assistance.
- Engage in good faith in negotiations to agree on strategies for delivering humanitarian aid to those affected by the war in Sudan, and proactively mitigate potential humanitarian disasters in the event that the conflict spreads to Eastern Sudan.



*An ambulance caught on Kassala-Gadaref highway transferring weapons. A photo circulated on social media.*



- Establish a comprehensive security system for land and maritime borders until hostilities cease, through practical and scientifically sound methods, with coordination between relevant authorities and civil society organizations, and robust accountability mechanisms for those who violate these regulations.

## **To the international community**

- Exert pressure on the warring factions and their backers to end the conflict or at least prevent its escalation into eastern Sudan, neighboring countries, and the Red Sea.
- Operationalize the responsibility to protect the population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing by implementing proactive measures to deliver humanitarian aid to those affected by conflict, while also mitigating the potential humanitarian disasters that could ensue should the conflict spread into eastern Sudan.
- Collaborate closely with Sudan's neighbors to mitigate the war's impact on local communities in adjacent states. Ensure that neighbors' interests and considerations do not overshadow comprehensive solutions or efforts to prevent the flow of weapons to or from these countries.
- Ensure prioritization of arms control and foster mutual trust-building among all stakeholders on the international agenda.
- Convene negotiations involving all regional states to issue a declaration on "Good Neighborly Relations" in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa under the supervision of the United Nations Security Council, alongside efforts to end the conflict in Sudan. This declaration should pave the way for confidence-building measures and prevention of negative interventions. Subsequently, work towards establishing a binding international treaty to halt arms proliferation, ensuring a weapons-free zone in east Sudan as one of the last safe havens for IDPs in Sudan. Extend the scope of this treaty to include other parts of Sudan, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa.
- Activate and expand the mandate of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and its regional center in Africa to curb arms proliferation in Sudan. Launch awareness campaigns on disarmament, cease the spread of arms, and fulfill its core objectives of upholding global peace and security.

## **To Sudanese political forces**

- Prevent the outbreak of a widespread civil war in Sudan and lessen the impact of arms proliferation.
- Formulate a robust peace coalition that prioritizes eastern Sudan to prevent the conflict from spreading to this region.

## **To Sudanese civil society**

- Implement immediate public awareness campaigns aimed at enhancing public, particularly youth, understanding and awareness of disarmament issues.
- Establish effective channels of communication with local community leaders and develop intervention strategies tailored to address specific needs in targeted areas, aimed at containing and preventing potential local conflicts.

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