

Khartoum at War: A personal story



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Cover art by graphic artist Obada Gumaa Gabir

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This paper is a personal account of the author's multiple displacements during Sudan's ongoing war: from Gezira state to Khartoum in 2023, back to Khartoum again and then from Khartoum by road to Kampala in June 2024. The author, founder of the "The Democratic Thought Project", and its subsidized book series "Readings for Change" targeting the youth, offers candid observations of conditions he encountered throughout this journey. However, his narrative does not claim to be a comprehensive review of those conditions, it is simply a reflection of a singular, personal experience.

Setting out

It is early morning. I am on Police Bridge in Wad Madani where three 26-passenger buses are parked. From their appearance and location, it seems that they were originally local buses. The drivers must be adventurous men to continue traveling between cities during the war, even though they make more money. A few people are waiting near, or sitting inside of, one of the three buses. The other buses are parked, waiting for their turn to be loaded. Due to the lack of passengers, that might not be today. A middle-aged conductor shouts in a loud voice: "Khartoum Al-Salma, the grocery store station. If we don't get you there, we'll return your money to you. Al-Salma, the grocery store Al-Salma, or your money back!" The conductor, with a high tone that he tries to make sound confident, seeks to reassure travelers with a half-smile, pushing the reticent to board the bus.

Fear and apprehension are the masters of the situation. What could happen on the way? Or after arriving in Khartoum? Would it even be possible to reach Khartoum? Would the adventure end with an arrest? Robbery? Although Wad Medani was a relatively safe area at the time, the news of war and stories of looting and attacks in Khartoum and its environs, and older stories and reports about the "Janjaweed" violations in Darfur, were enough to spread terror in the hearts of the people. This was evident in the reluctance of many of the passengers to board even after arriving at the bus stop, the fact that their luggage consisted only of plastic bags with one change of clothes, that they carried small cheap phones instead of smartphones, the gloom, and the whispered questions about road safety, treatment at checkpoints, and travel times.

I took another look at the general condition of the bus, especially the tires, and looked for the driver, who was not there, in an attempt to assess at least the technical chances of the vehicle reaching Khartoum. I had noticed when I had last taken the Khartoum-Medani road, when we left Khartoum for Gezira five weeks after the outbreak of the war (that is, in the third week of May 2023), that most of the already few services on the eastern road between the two cities had disappeared. This was the road we would take due to the heavy armed presence and clashes on the western road from Al-Kamleen and onward.

I have an old habit of trying to get a general impression of the driver before traveling, especially when circumstances forced me to take buses outside their official stops and ticket offices. I would sometimes change vehicles based on this impression. The strange thing is that all vehicles about which I had an uneasy feeling, as far as I can remember, had some kind of traffic accident or mishap during the trip. This time I couldn't see the driver, but I had no other options anyway. As it turned out, wartime bus drivers were a different breed: they were adventurers looking for quick financial gain. Their assistants, on the other hand, have become real victims of this war, exposed to violence, blackmail, humiliation, detention, and beatings on

a regular basis. They are the ones who, on behalf of their passengers, face the meanness and violence of the armed men at the checkpoints and transit stations, and bear the brunt of the accusations against those passengers. The first thing that you notice about them is their silence, their tired faces devoid of any expression, and you are forced to reflect on the amount of patience and endurance required to complete any journey and return alive.

I put my trust in God and got on the bus, others were encouraged to get on, and the bus started at around 8 am towards Hantoub Bridge and then on to the eastern road to Khartoum. Most of those on the bus were middle-aged women who seemed to be from Mayo and southern belt areas of Khartoum. One was a young woman with two children, and another was carrying a large envelope for an X-ray. A few people came to say goodbye to these women. The farewells were quiet and short. Afterward, they put on that firm, stern look of grandmothers, as if to say "What do you want, boy?" They likely anticipated the interrogations and harassment from both sides of the war on the way. There were only three young men, and silence and cautious anticipation prevailed among all of them.

Checkpoints in army held areas

The checkpoints started shortly after Hantoub Bridge and thereafter were never more than ten kilometers apart. Each checkpoint was crowded with people, some in military uniforms and others in civilian clothes, standing in groups separated by a few meters: policemen, local authorities, security forces, and the military. Some were armed with Kalashnikovs, others with sticks and cartridges. The bus had to stop at each one, and the young assistant would get off with a melancholy face and go to a thatched shed far from the parking spot and stay inside for some time. Although the entrances had no doors, it was not possible to see what was happening inside due to the difference in light. When the assistant exited, he was usually more energized, as if he had just overcome a difficult obstacle. The vehicle then moved slowly towards the second group of people standing at the checkpoint. Some nodded that we should continue, while others asked the vehicle to pull over to the roadside and wait. If we were stopped a second time, the driver would take over, fishing papers out from overhead, and giving them to the policeman. The policeman puts something in his pocket, looks at the paper, then gives it back to the driver and signals him to move.

Each of the checkpoints was an example of chaos and lawlessness. Although the people present at these checkpoints, despite their large numbers, appeared to be affiliated with local or federal authorities, their behavior was uncontrolled. What most of them had in common was that they tried, using their powers of arrest and the state of fear and necessity bred by the war, to extort as much money as possible from passing cars. We stopped between 10 and 20 minutes at each checkpoint, depending on the demands of its staff and the progress of the negotiations—or, more accurately, the pleas—of the assistant or the driver to reduce the requested amount of money requested. At one checkpoint before Al Hilaliya, the three young men had to get off the bus after being asked about their tribes. All three were from Arab tribes from Kordofan or around Khartoum.

Reaching checkpoint No. 12: Al Hilaliya

It was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon. In normal times, the five hours we had spent getting to Al Hilaliya on the road would have been enough to get to Khartoum and back to Madani. But things were about to get worse.

The checkpoint in Al Hilaliya was more crowded, with more people in civilian clothes carrying personal firearms or the kind of solid batons used by security forces to disperse demonstrations and protests. There were also more buses heading to Khartoum stopped at the checkpoint - which often entered from Hasahisa and other places west of the Blue Nile, via the Rafea Bridge, to the eastern road - and many passengers got off, trying to find out the reason for the delay or to follow up on the efforts of the drivers and their assistants to secure passage. It turned out that the delay was that those manning this checkpoint were demanding large sums of money, crushing drivers to the point that there was little incentive to continue the trip.

The mixed crowd of travelers and regulars spread out over three hours of waiting on and around the asphalt road on a scorching hot day, despite the fact that it was December. The checkpoint personnel wore expressions of meanness, cruelty, and indifference as they raised their batons in the faces of those who were begging them to accept a smaller amount, turning them back, saying, "Hey man, get out of my sight... I don't have anything for you..!" Travelers showed signs of exhaustion from hunger, thirst, heat, suppressed anger, helplessness, and fear of what could happen, including returning the bus to where it came from. All these scenes seemed to me to sum up the epitome of the Sudanese state of '56 and its ghoulish descendant, the state of '89:¹ the use of brutal force to control the scene, the corruption and tyranny without limits and the in your face chaos caused by the behavior of government employees unconstrained by controls, regulations or laws. There was a complete absence of any institutional framework. Under the feet of these wild elephants, citizen rights were lost.

Some may say that the term "56" is a "*Janjaweed*" expression that the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are deploying for political gain, and that it is not permissible to accept or use it. Rather, they argue, civil society should use its own terms, instead of legitimizing those of armed groups or exposing themselves to accusations of being "covert *Janjaweed*." However, these scenes cannot be separated from the conditions created by the '56 state and escalated by the '89 state. Likewise, civil society's criticism of the predecessor of the '89 state did not begin with the RSF, but rather preceded it by decades, embodied in common expressions such as "returning to the founding platform," and "restructuring the institutions of the Sudanese state," which reflect the founding defects in the '56 state. Civil society is not borrowing the language of armed movements, but rather armed movements are adopting the language of civil society. Consider the expression "New Sudan," which was originally the name of a magazine and then a daily newspaper founded in Khartoum in the mid-1940s, before it came to be associated with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in the 1980s.

We stayed at the Al Hilaliya checkpoint until after 3:30 p.m. Those staffing the checkpoint, in an attempt to blackmail travelers, expelled all the vehicles from under the few trees that offered

¹ The "State of 1956" refers to the slogan of the RSF war propaganda, claiming that the RSF is waging the war to dismantle the governance system that has prevailed in Sudan following its independence in 1956. The "state of 1989" is a reference to the three-decade rule of deposed president Omer al-Bashir, who took power in a coup in 1989 and the Sudan Islamist Movement that held the real power in that regime.

shade in the area to an open space devoid of any shade. Once again, the pleas of the sick, children, and other passengers did not sway the authorities.

Finally, after the young assistant returned for the tenth time, his face almost brimming with tears, desperate to convince the armed men to accept less money, the driver told us that there was no way but to leave the paved road and head north through the Al-Butana plain. He taught us the names of towns that were difficult to pronounce and instructed us to say we were heading to them in case we were stopped. Indeed, the driver headed north first through fields, then rough dirt roads for about an hour, then west to an area barren except for a few *wadis*, until he met the asphalt road again. After we left the Al Hilaliya checkpoint, silence prevailed inside the bus, as we feared what might happen if a security patrol suddenly appeared. We had barely caught our breath when the driver stopped for a moment to tell us that the next checkpoint would be the first manned by the Rapid Support Forces. He said everyone should prepare their identification papers, and know what to say if asked about his profession and place of residence in Khartoum. Silence and fear returned, and our apprehension and anticipation rose once again.

Rapid Support Forces checkpoints

A young man with a long rifle, who looked to be in his early twenties, got on the bus and greeted us in the dialect of the Abbala people from western Sudan. Then he asked: "Where are you coming from?" A number of passengers answered in unison, encouraged by his welcoming tone: "From Madani." "Yes, where are you going?" "Khartoum." "Why are you so late?" It was sunset by then. Some answered in murmurs: "The army bases...they didn't leave us alone...they delayed us at Al Hilaliya...!" Women were the ones who usually answered the group questions. The young man, who wasn't wearing a military uniform, asked, smiling this time: "Is anyone carrying any weapons or contraband?" Some of the passengers responded with a similar smile, closer to laughter, while they responded in the negative.

Meanwhile, another person was walking around the vehicle, peering through the windows at the faces of the passengers and what was inside the bus. He asked for the documents of three middle-aged men, with African features. He checked their documents and asked them a few questions, then allowed the bus to continue. A little later, the driver asked the passengers if they preferred to continue traveling to Khartoum, with the possibility of the bus being prevented from entering at night, or to spend the night in Um Dawan Ban and enter Khartoum in the morning. Most preferred to spend the night in Um Dawan Ban. It was clear that the passengers, although they breathed a sigh of relief, because their first encounter with the RSF was the opposite of what they had expected, had no energy left to take risks that day.

In Um Dawan Ban, the effects of war were not visible that evening. A new economic activity that had only appeared with the war was revealed: boys and young men offered iron beds, often part of their home furnishings, for rent, along with pillows and blankets, for travelers like us to spend the night. Most trips that had taken only hours before the war now took days, creating a new demand.

We set out early in the morning from Um Dawan Ban, to begin another long journey between the RSF checkpoints. There were now no more than five hundred meters between each checkpoint, so that each vehicle was searched within sight of the next and the one after that,

and yet we had to stop and undergo the same search at each checkpoint. What was that? Did I say every vehicle? In fact, there were no other vehicles other than the one we were riding in. The roads were empty of people, animals, and any other normal activity.

As we advanced towards Khartoum, the traces of the battles that had taken place with the army began to appear: destroyed armored vehicles, troop carriers, and combat vehicles burned or overturned on both sides of the road, even close to the entrances to East Nile. In places where there were buildings, especially if they were shops, the RSF combat vehicles with their crews could be seen inside their open doors, their Dushka cannons pointing towards the street. All this amidst an uninterrupted series of RSF checkpoints, boarding the vehicle, asking the same questions, and requesting the documents of the same three men... until the bus entered East Nile and stopped in front of a large gas station, which turned out to be the main checkpoint for entering Khartoum.

At this checkpoint, all passengers were unloaded with their luggage. The women took their bags indoors, accompanied by a woman wearing an RSF uniform. The men were interrogated outside about their professions, reasons for coming to Khartoum, and where they lived. Their bags were searched and their documents were checked. The personnel working at this checkpoint immediately reminded me of security personnel of the National Congress Party: they were mean, and had that dry, mocking tone and appeared to enjoy oppressing people. When my turn came, I presented my driver's license as identification, and the officer took it as an opportunity to give several lessons. He was pedantic that the license was not an identity document, that it had no value outside of the driver's seat, and this and that, and that the only document acceptable to him was the national ID, despite the fact that a driver's license can be used as ID in all European countries. At the end of that long rant, I took the national ID out of my bag. The officer looked at it, turned it over, and looked at it for a long time. Then, he asked me to prove that the profession it listed, agricultural engineer, was actually my profession!

Entering Khartoum

The feelings were mixed as the bus took us, for the first time in months, onto the streets of Khartoum. This was the city that we had left in a hurry, fleeing fierce military battles and terrifying stories of a foreign military force that had invaded and now controlled it. An initial feeling of alienation, I think, overwhelms all those who return due to the military presence at every corner and bend while eyes scrutinize from the windows every vehicle or other thing straying down the street. Everyone wants to know the extent of what happened... compare it to what he has heard and assess the risks and chances of survival, and the possibilities of adaptation and survival, for himself and his family.

After leaving the checkpoint, we found ourselves on the main street of Haj Youssef. There were a significant number of RSF soldiers moving with their weapons, gathered around a car while a mechanic worked on it, or sitting on chairs near a tea woman or food vendor, in the middle of the street, amidst broken pieces of furniture or perhaps an electrical pole, or even a burnt rickshaw, spread across as a barrier from which they guarded their checkpoints, which were now separated by no more than 250 meters. Except for that, life seemed almost normal in Haj Youssef. Despite the early hour, citizens were moving around, shops, and even a succession of butcher shops, grocery stores, and vegetable kiosks, were open, features of a normal life.

Or maybe just normal in comparison to the destruction that we had expected.

We reached Manshiya Bridge. On the right was East Nile Hospital. The news reported that it had been bombed, and indeed, part of the facade overlooking the bridge was destroyed. Only one lane was open, with checkpoints in the lane coming from Khartoum. There was little traffic, mostly either combat vehicles with Dushka machine guns, or civilian vehicles driven by members of the RSF. Two or three armed vehicles parked at the entrance to the bridge. We crossed without any problems, only apprehension and anticipation.

We then arrived on the Khartoum side of Manshiya Bridge, and proceeded to the northern entrance to 60th Street. Once again, except for the absence of any pedestrians on the streets, or people in the shops and houses (which was expected because of the many videos of empty neighborhoods that had circulated on social media and the frequent talk about Khartoum as a ghost town), there were no other visible effects of the war: buildings and residential villas are still standing, not destroyed as we imagined from footage of other wars that have been shown on the news. Their paint is intact, there is no trace of cannon shells or machine gun pellets. The street itself was relatively clean, although devoid of cars. Up until that point, our bus was the only vehicle we saw on the street.

The treatment at the checkpoints was also striking. Usually, a young man would get on, greet the passengers in the distinctive Darfuri Arab dialect, ask where we were coming from, and wish us good health. He would look at the faces of the passengers and inside the carriage, then get off. Meanwhile, another person would examine the faces of the passengers from the windows. He would ask some for their documents, and others to get off. Oddly enough, it was always the same three people, with their African features, who were asked to get off. They would be taken to what appeared from the outside to be a checkpoint office, located inside a store or a garage overlooking the street, but from the outside, you could not see what was happening inside.

It seemed that there was consistency in the way the RSF dealt with us. At one of the bases on 60th Street, one member shouted after looking from outside and without getting into the vehicle: "Young men get off the bus!" They meant people in their forties, after all the true young men had been taken off by the army. I went with those getting off the bus. But a man who seemed to be the governor of the base asked me immediately, "Why are you getting off, uncle?" I answered, "Didn't you tell the young men to come down?" In general, there was a degree of special treatment for the elderly and women, and in any case, the treatment at the RSF checkpoints that we passed, despite their large number, was better than what we experienced at the army checkpoints.

In Khartoum

The bus continued its halting journey along 60th Street, then Africa Street, then the streets of Khartoum's Central Market, until we found ourselves at the Water Tower station, where some passengers got off, saying quick farewells to those with whom they had developed relationships on the journey and at Umm Dawan Ban. I got off at Mayo Market, where a friend who had helped me a lot on the trip took me to his home. Life seemed somewhat normal, as it had in Haj Youssef. The market was crowded with people. Goods, food, vegetables, and even some fruits were available in the market, and there was a reasonable movement of internal

buses, though of course, within the context of extreme poverty and neglect of services that characterized those neighborhoods south of Khartoum.

The next morning was a special day full of emotion because I would be returning to my home after about five months. I had left to spare my young son after the shelling and bullets flying overhead intensified and the battles reached our neighborhood. In those months, there was not much water flowing under the bridges, as they say, but waves of lava creeping over neighborhoods, with combat vehicles and artillery with their strange, terrifying sounds, and in the middle of it and during it - not caring about it - hordes of poor people, most of them women, roaming the streets back and forth, carrying from the richer central neighborhoods of Khartoum to its impoverished southern districts whatever valuable things they could carry. I had witnessed all of this in the first five weeks of the war, and all of it or a lot of it must have reached our house, located in the middle of the battlefield. Adding to that, the RSF had taken the house as their residence.

Several considerations prompted me to return to Khartoum. The first was my private library, with dozens of notebooks, quotations from readings, and their sources. Perhaps not many people know about people's connection to their libraries, except for those who, like me, experienced the confiscation of my library by the National Congress Party's Security Service in 1997. The second was that I felt deep down that some of us, those of us who had engaged in public work in various forms, had to remain with our people inside and share the pain and cruelty of the war. Certainly, many could not remain because of the danger, while others would be more useful abroad. But I had hope that those of us who remained inside and were engaged in public affairs could form some sort of platform through which we might be able to reflect the conditions of millions of miserable people trapped in the furnace of war in greater Khartoum. The third consideration related to the tens of thousands of books of the Democratic Thought Project, within the "Reading for Change" series, which were in a warehouse near the center of Khartoum. I wanted to explore the possibility of getting them out and making use of them in some way. Later, I decided to make them available in home libraries for young people who had been crushed by poverty due to the war and to start that project from my home.

Back home

I arrived with my friend at the RSF checkpoint next to my house, filled with anticipation about their reaction to my request to enter, and what I would find if they agreed. What would be the condition of the house, where I had lived for fourteen years



Looting in Khartoum (Ayin)

with my family? What about the library? my private room? the girls' rooms? our things? One of my daughters (whether out of faith or ignorance) had sent from outside Sudan a list of things she wanted me to take from her room and send to her. These were my first personal meetings and direct conversations with people from the RSF since the start of the war.

We found a man in military uniform carrying a long rifle, sitting as a guard in the base, while others milled around nearby. My attention was drawn to two chairs with a patterned cushions, part of our dining set. One of the chairs had only four legs and a faded patterned cushion, the backrest was missing.

We asked the man about the commander of the checkpoint. He got up after confirming our request with several questions, he took us to him, and then stood watching.

The commander was a man in his early forties, wearing shorts and a polo shirt. He greeted us calmly, and stood waiting. I pointed to my house, told him that I was the owner and said that I wanted to take some things from inside. Looking in that direction, he asked "which house?" I pointed to it again. He surprised me, asking "the one with the library?" I was relieved because if the commander of the base knew about it, it might still be intact.

The man was polite and even said that he did not need to see our IDs, as he could distinguish people well enough, and he asked the soldier who had taken us to him, who turned out to be one of the occupants of the house, to accompany us there.

The outer door was tied with a rope from the outside, it had obviously been opened violently, and its two ends were now far apart. From outside it was possible to see beds, tables, and cotton and foam mattresses, some on the floor... Almost half of the interior furniture of the house was in the outer courtyard: chairs and kitchen utensils, mosquito nets and shoes, and tables of different sizes.

I walked straight into the living room, where the library was, followed by the soldier with his rifle. Thankfully, the books were in their places on the six wooden shelves. Some of the shelves had been moved and taped together, apparently to make room for something in the living room, but the books were there. The library was covered in dust, but otherwise unaffected.

I entered my room, which was adjacent to the living room. Five months previously, I had left it with a comfortable chair and a medium-sized table for reading. There was a small cabinet of shelves for my writing, translations, and books that I edited or participated in preparing, and a chest of drawers for papers, files, reports, etc. Above it were many books that I was working on. Now, the room was empty, except for the large bed and wardrobe. The wardrobe was completely empty, its drawers scattered on the floor. The souvenirs and antiques on top of the wardrobe were missing, except for a framed picture of one of my sons. But the books in the small cabinet of shelves were intact.

In the inner hall, clothes, papers, sheets, and shoes were piled up everywhere amidst the remaining furniture. Some of the things on the floor and in the house were strange to me, that is, they were not our property. I went up to the upper floor, the soldier following behind me with his rifle. Everywhere I went in the house he followed, standing next to me and holding the rifle. The room of my daughter who had sent the list of things to be sent to her was empty. In my other daughter's room, so many things had been piled on the floor that it was hardly possible to push the door inward. The third room belonged to two relatives who lived with us, and their things too were piled on the floor.

I gathered whatever papers, notebooks, and books I could find. I wanted to have them with me in case I couldn't return, and I seized the brief opportunity offered when the soldier went out to smoke to retrieve a sum of money that I had hidden in the house, and left, rushing because the road becomes more dangerous starting at about three in the afternoon. We passed the

commander who was speaking with someone who seemed to be a Rapid Support Intelligence official in the area. He surprised me by suggesting that I return home, alone at first, and that in time my family could join me. When I said to him, “But you are living in the house,” he replied that they had no need for it..!

At that point, the idea of staying in Khartoum began.

Khartoum is in the middle of a gun fight

I spent the days following my return home in strenuous movement to collect some essentials: a clay water jar, solar panels, batteries, household utensils, a gas cylinder, a portable fan, door locks... This required roaming and moving along the only open transportation line from Kalakla Lafa, south of Khartoum, through Mayo to the intercity bus terminal (Al Mina Al Bari), to Abu Hamama in central Khartoum through Alsaafa Zalata street. Most days this movement took place amidst the whizzing of cannons and the crackle of bullets, or aerial bombardment and rising tongues of smoke in places not far from that line. Other times, the sounds of artillery and bombardment would start early in the morning so that people would prefer not to leave their homes at all. The new phenomenon compared to the first weeks of the war was the night battles pitting warplanes against the fiery lights of anti-aircraft guns.

As the days passed and the rounds between the south and north of the belt² continued, and with the process of gradual habituation and adaptation necessary to continue living in Khartoum in the shadow of the war, the image of the first impression of the relatively clean 60th Street with its cohesive buildings that retained the color of their paint, which seemed to be part of an attempt by the RSF at the time to attract citizens to return to Khartoum, disappeared completely. That image was replaced by the real images of Khartoum: continuous rows of houses and squares, complexes and residential neighborhoods devoid of people; previously crowded roads without cars or rickshaws; hundreds of cars destroyed on the edges of the streets, either upside down in the ditches parallel to the asphalt roads, or partially or completely burned, upside down or right side up, doors open or torn apart many dismantled or destroyed for parts, leaving only their iron frames.

Small businesses

All the well-known markets of Khartoum were destroyed by the war, and new markets have emerged in their place, mostly for stolen goods and materials. As for businesses outside the old markets, the signs of most of the shops are still in place: Al-Adnani Pharmacy, Tabash Fresh Sweets, Al-Sharjah Hairdressing Salon, Abu Mustafa Mechanical Services, Al-Khayari Bakery, Bank Bazaar, Al-Tanmiya Cooperative Grocery, Marouf Jewelry, Al-Kils Marketing, Al-Waleed Ready-Made Garments, Dahab Ice Cream... Shops lined up side by side along both sides of the street for several kilometers, but all that remains are these signs. Beneath the signs, broken doors hang wide open, shelves are empty, broken glass display cases and counters are shattered and burned, furniture or the remains of it are piled up inside and in front of the shops, a scene of destruction stretching for miles.

² This is a reference to the “Green Belt,” a stretch of planted trees separating northern and central Khartoum from the residential areas south of it.

According to some studies, the small and microservices sector contributed nearly 60 percent of the national GDP before the war.³ The war in Khartoum destroyed or severely damaged this sector, including wholesale and retail trade, transportation, hotels, food services, health, and education. It will be a major challenge to rebuild these sectors because their financing came either from banks that were also severely affected by the war or from the savings of citizens or expatriates in the Gulf countries, i.e., sources that cannot be restored except through a real and efficient compensation program.

Poverty belt or new center?

Those many hours of walking, especially in the alleys and markets of Mayo, were an opportunity to get to know the people of the Southern Belt of Khartoum and their lives. As mentioned earlier, life here seemed almost normal if measured by the number of people in the area, as it did not seem that many families had left. But what kind of life were they living? These neighborhoods were part of the belt of abject poverty that surrounded the tripartite capital almost from all sides: mud houses, bleak alleys, children in ragged clothes, women displaying food on the ground, and the war made it worse by eroding the few sanitation, health, and education services that had been available.

The National Congress regime didn't even deign to call these areas slums or shanty towns. These names carry economic or class connotations and imply a failure on the part of the government to care for its citizens, especially if they are only a few kilometers away from the Republican Palace and the General Command of the Armed Forces, the most important centers of government. Instead, the strategists of the Islamic movement called them the "Black Belt," attributing their poverty and social conditions to the skin color of their residents and thus exempting the ruling regime from any responsibility.



Looting in Khartoum (Ayin)

It was amazing to see the hordes, literally hordes, of poor people, carrying what they could in goods and food supplies from the markets and forcibly opened warehouses on their heads or backs, in rickshaws, carts, and wheelbarrows, in the early days of the war. This produced shock and anger among the residents of central

Khartoum, perhaps due to a general feeling that their homes would be next once the warehouses and markets were empty. In the first days of the war, very few thought that it would

³ IFPRI, "What Are the Economic and Poverty Implications for Sudan If the Conflict Continues through 2024?", August 2024, available at: <https://cqspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/caa843dc-b3cd-4c7c-9511-d0eeb3047a99/content>

open the door to a revolution of the hungry and the poor from the outskirts of the capital, despite the fact that warnings of such a revolution had been circulating unheeded for some time.

Many intellectuals and leaders considered to be progressive were nonetheless biased against the poor and workers, denying, due to their own privilege, ideological or regional biases, or a deficiency in thinking, the implicit protest in poor citizens' actions during the war. They tended to differentiate between organized urban protests, such as demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, and even armed action, which they support and see as the only "moral" and constructive form of protest, and the "violent expressions of anger" of the poverty belt - which they view as illegitimate.⁴ They refuse to see that these acts come from the prolonged deprivation of these poor people of the materials, goods, and merchandise that they had in their homes, and from the prolonged developmental and social injustices in the Sudanese countryside.

I do not see what our moral right is, we who were educated in schools and universities that provided us with five meals a day in the boarding schools (*yes five meals*), to preach what we learned in these schools to people who were deprived of education. Or how we, who received state services such as subsidized electricity, water, and health care, can judge Sudanese citizens like us who are deprived of these social goods. Or that how we, who enjoyed security and peace in our homes and neighborhoods, can condemn those who have lived their whole lives in the shadow of war for disturbing our security!

In the areas south of the belt, support for the RSF is clear, not only in the large numbers of armed local men who wear its uniform, but also in the slogans written in bold letters on the outer walls of houses and in the feelings of joy that among visitors to the tea women in the markets and the main streets when the RSF invade a new city or area. Often, the loudspeakers in the internal alleys and markets broadcast songs glorifying the militia and its leaders.

If we look at the volume of services, such as medical care, or effort made by RSF to restore electricity and water, we can see that the center of Khartoum has moved from north of this belt to its south.

North of the Belt

The part of Khartoum most often covered by the media, meaning the area north of Trucks Road (*Sahrei' El Shahinat*), which separates north from south Khartoum, has become a ghost town, devoid of people, where only stray cats and dogs roam. This also applies to some extent to the neighborhoods north of 61st Street, in the direction of the residential area of Amarat, and north of Ahmed Khair Street in the neighborhoods of Khartoum Two and Khartoum Three. As for the area north of Al-Tabiya Street, it is a military zone, completely inaccessible. Just leaving it took those who were stranded there during the first weeks of the war several days or weeks.

Wherever there were citizens between Ahmed Khair Street and Trucks Road, in the neighborhoods of Al-Imtidat, Al-Ushra, parts of Al-Sahafa Zalat, Al-Sahafa East, and Arkweit, they did not exceed 15 to 25% of their pre-war number. Most of those remaining in Khartoum were elderly, sick, or those whose financial situation would not allow them to travel and bear

⁴ Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Declaration*, translated by Ammar Jamal (Khartoum, Democratic Thought Project, 2020), pp. 24–25.

the high rents in the provinces. Some citizens preferred to stay in their homes to protect them from thieves. Their young sons and daughters were forced to stay with their families stuck in Khartoum.

The youth trapped in Khartoum can be considered one of the groups most affected by the ongoing war. All schools and universities were closed on the first day of the war, and all the private and public institutions and businesses they worked for ceased functioning. The same applies to shops, barbershops, cafes, and restaurants, which provided work for many young people. There are no opportunities to practice sports, as shells and shrapnel are falling all the time, and many squares have turned into graveyards, especially if they are close to the front lines. Even if the squares are open, there are usually not enough young people to make up a team. There is no entertainment, and of course, the situation only worsened since communications were cut off in February.

The biggest problem for the youth is the intense hostility they face from RSF fighters, themselves young people, whether those who roam the neighborhoods or those who are stationed in the streets and intersections. Whenever a young man passes by or encounters them, they harass him, detain him, or steal his phone and money. The RSF constantly accuse the youth of working for military intelligence or sending them information about RSF coordinates by phone. They are accused of sending information even when communications are completely cut off. The youth are unable to even achieve the goal for which they stayed in Khartoum, that is -- meeting their families' needs.

The stranded young men in a residential block, who don't usually number more than five to seven, gather inside or in front of one of the houses. The times I have been to such gatherings, the conversation was minimal. What conversation there was focused on the war and battle news, from oral sources or estimated based on the direction and volume of gunfire, depending on the speaker's stance towards the warring factions. There was also talk about where drinking water could be found, when it was available, when it was cut off, which bakeries are functioning, and other troubles of daily life during a war. When the conversation shifted to playful banter, it revolved around who failed to chop firewood for the charity pot of beans, or who gave up after just five swings of the axe before falling back into silence, enduring seemingly endless days.

Before sunset, everyone returned home, bracing for the new challenge of surviving a long night in pitch darkness, exposed to the dangers of thieves. Most of those young men I talked to said, "Well, as long as one doesn't lose their mind, the rest is bearable."

Therefore, the description "ghost town" is not limited to the neighborhoods devoid of inhabitants, but also applies to the residents themselves: to their atrophied bodies and their sad and deeply worried faces. They are harried by the constant terror of news of the deaths of acquaintances in shelling, bombing, or looting attacks; the sounds of cannons and bullets; and the clouds of smoke rising from the neighborhood or the adjacent street; the fragments of shells and empty ammunition cans falling from the sky (you never know when an exploding shell will hit you, your home, or someone from your family); the scenes of poor women from the areas south of the belt carrying whatever they were able to collect that day from the empty houses on their heads; and the groups of armed men roaming their neighborhoods, always ready to harass citizens.

Women carry the burden of the war

Because of the risks of harassment, detention, and robbery that men, especially young men, are exposed to outside their homes, middle-aged women take on additional responsibilities for providing their families' needs, from bread from the bakeries to items from the surrounding markets. Due to the vandalism and destruction of neighborhood and central markets, whether as a result of theft or aerial bombardment, mini-markets have emerged around bakeries. Street vendors, some of them Ethiopians, display vegetables, lentils, rice, sugar, powdered milk (often expired months ago), soap, sulfur, oils (some of which have also expired), and batteries in wheelbarrows and donkey carts.

Women, some of whom were teachers or civil servants before the war, are also often responsible for fetching water. It was common to find a woman pushing a wheelbarrow with water jerricans or carrying a bucket of water on her shoulder. Sometimes, women gathered with their pots around a place where water was available until late at night. In many cases, it was women who spoke to the soldiers and their commanders, to complain or ask for help, for example, in transferring a patient to a distant hospital or to release a detained son. Their experience as mothers of children the same age as the RSF personnel helped them do this.

Severe food shortages

The bleak days of war begin with women and elderly men carrying their pots early in the morning to get a place in the long lines for charity beans. In our neighborhood, there were about 120 to 140 people in the line. Some would stay in the nearby shade until about nine AM when the distribution would begin. Others would head out to look for a loaf at the bakery if it was still open that day. Problems at the bakeries, such as lack of flour, firewood, water for kneading dough, or diesel to power the mixer, were frequent. During the six months I was in Khartoum, the price of bread increased from ten decent-sized loaves for 1,000 pounds to just five smaller loaves for the same price. By August, news reports said it had become only four loaves for 1,000 pounds. The improvised markets around the bakeries offer very limited food options, with no meat, dairy or fruit at all. These are only available, and then at very high prices, at the central and Kalakla markets, which makes them unavailable to most citizens due to the high cost and difficulty of transportation.

Thus, the charitable "central kitchens" (*Qidrat al-Ful* and *Halat al-Adas* (the Lentils' Pot)), as they are called locally, which prepare and distribute food free through youth volunteers from Emergency Response Committees or other volunteer youth groups have increasingly become the main source of food for the majority of families in most neighborhoods. In the neighborhood where I live, the protracted war has depleted families' savings, reduced remittances from family members abroad, and interrupted telecommunications networks. Increasingly families complain that this food service is not available every day, only fifteen days a month, and that it does not come with bread or other food items.



Food distribution in Khartoum, Khartoum Aid Kitchen (social media)

In contrast, the youth committees supervising these kitchens suffer greatly to provide this service, including facing risks associated with purchasing materials from distant markets. Even when basic

materials are available, problems with firewood are frequent, and supervisors have resorted to cutting down neem trees in the neighborhoods to provide fuel, despite the dire environmental impacts. Sometimes they face water cuts, but the biggest problem is the decline in contributions from the neighborhood's residents abroad, as their responsibilities increase as the war drags on. Despite my attempts to contribute personally and to help find resources from others, the young men who took over the work in the kitchen told me in a call after I left that they were forced to stop after the crazy rise in the price of beans (from 200,000 pounds per sack to 350,000) and the significant decline in remittances from abroad.

Rapid Support Forces, the *de facto* authority

It is clear that the RSF do not have plans in place to deal with citizens in the areas they control. When RSF officers met with citizens in an attempt to win them over and invite them to help restore some services such as water and electricity, the citizens responded that their priority was security, which was not available. Looting of empty homes, mostly by armed individuals belonging to the RSF, did not stop. Other times, soldiers cause problems with the citizens, stealing their property. This happened in our neighborhood while I was there. When we protested to the commanders, they usually claimed that there were "unruly people" and that the RSF prohibited such practices. They then add that preoccupation with these matters will be at the expense of confronting the "enemy" on the front lines. As for the soldiers, if they are frank, they will say they haven't received salaries in months!

The RSF coming from the countryside and the desert vary in their dealings with citizens. Many of them, especially the officers, generally treat women and the elderly with respect, and a degree of integrity, but some others seek to show that they are the ones controlling the situation, sometimes in arbitrary and exaggerated ways.

The RSF use the Arabic word *Jahizia* "readiness" as a greeting, for example, when crossing the checkpoints, and refer to the army as "the enemy." What you sense when talking to the base about their motivations for joining the Rapid Support Forces, (the motivations of the leadership are well known, they are fighting for power) the clearest motivation that unites the soldiers is developmental injustice, whether expressed in these terms or through their actions, considering the rural and pastoral areas or outskirts of cities, from which they came. Some of them speak with sincere feeling, even though most have no education, about the neglect and poverty afflicting their areas, despite the resources and economic potential that they have.

Some of the other motives are related to local conflicts. They talk about the existential threat facing their tribal or ethnic groups from other groups, which they may feel are stronger. It seems that the motive of these people is to train and arm themselves, and perhaps attract the Rapid Support Forces to their cause when they need to defend their group.

Certainly, personal material motives are not absent. Although some of the Rapid Support Forces personnel I met were university graduates, and one was even a university professor, the majority of the soldiers whom I got to know had no education or only basic education. Some of them say that since they opened their eyes to life, they only had war raging above their heads. The common expression among the eloquent among them is that they learned in the school of life, and service in Yemen is considered a preferential advantage and a source of pride and importance. The backwardness of their home areas in terms of development and their poverty combined with the weakness or absence of personal qualifications other than carrying weapons to push them to the RSF. Therefore, the RSF represent, for many, perhaps the majority of the fighters, a job opportunity and a source of livelihood, whether through the salaries or the spoils they obtain in military operations.

Everyone I met or spoke to during my many trips during my stay, whether at the checkpoints, markets, or even in the hospitals to which the RSF transfer their wounded - were all Sudanese. In my opinion, the discourse that depicts the current war as being with an "invading force" from outside Sudan, based on the "Arab diaspora" narrative, which was promoted by members of the former National Salvation regime to absolve the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood of any responsibility for what happened and is happening in Sudan, only perpetuates societal divisions, as similar statements have done in similar situations in the past.

A night in Rapid Support Forces detention

For reasons unknown to me to this day, but reminiscent of the "salvation" regime, an armored RSF vehicle arrested me in late February, a month and a half after I returned home, and two and a half months after I arrived in Khartoum. It was sunset, and I was in the inner hall of the house reading when I heard a commotion in the street and went out to find out what it was. I found a combat vehicle armed with a Dushka machine gun, with men with bruises on it and around it armed with Kalashnikovs, outside the house. They surprised me with shouts asking me to get into the vehicle.

Of course, it was a shocking surprise, because I returned home with the knowledge and even encouragement of the neighborhood's security guards, who were next to the house, as I mentioned earlier. All the security guards must have known me from my daily walks through their areas to the neighborhood bakery. Anyway, I insisted on returning inside and putting on a *jalabiya* over my long pants. After repeating my request, amidst some of their refusals, one of them, a middle-aged man, who seemed to be their leader, allowed me to bring my phone with me. Then a number of them entered with me, some carrying their weapons, where I put on the *jalabiya* and took some medicine. They did not allow me to lock up the house. They blindfolded me and put me into the car, where I found the young man who was living with me in the house also blindfolded.

The car went at a crazy speed. When it stopped, they blindfolded us and pushed us into an unfurnished cell with two other people. It was so small that it was hardly possible for us to all

stretch out our legs at the same time. After about two hours, the door opened, and an armed guard called us out, and led us to a place in front of a multi-story building under construction, where several people were sitting in a circle with chairs and beds with mosquito nets on them. They made the young man who had been with me sit on the ground and brought me a chair. Soon, someone who appeared to be the commander arrived and began interrogating the young man, asking him, among other things, why he had been staying with me.

After he finished interrogating the young man, the man turned to me and asked me if I had known this young man before. I replied that I had only met him in person in Khartoum a short time ago, but that we had been corresponding for years because he was part of a reading group within a program we ran in the Democratic Thought Project, which has many other groups across Sudan. Here, two others whose faces I could not see in the dark place, interrupted, telling the interrogator that what I was saying was true and that they were also members of reading groups in their area. The interrogation stopped there, but while I was given a bed to spend the night, the young man was returned to the cell. The next morning, the two young men took me home, without telling me the reason for my arrest. The young man who was staying with me was released three days later.

Wishing the war would stop

During the first days of the war, residents of our neighborhood expected it to end quickly, mostly because they recalled previous experiences: the coup of July 19, 1971, the movement of Mohamed Nour Saad in 1976, and the crash of Dr. John Garang's plane in 2005. Some of them believed what the leaders of the Sudanese army said in the first days of the war and expected that the armed forces would quickly resolve the situation and eliminate the RSF. I only met one person, who had a military background, who disagreed saying that the air force alone cannot resolve a military battle, and there must be infantry, which the army didn't have.

During the second stay, it was clear that those who remained in Khartoum or returned to it were exhausted by the prolonged war. Although the communications network was cut off, information about the progress of military operations was monopolized by army radio stations: Sudanese Radio, My Country Radio, and Armed Forces Radio, which some people listened to on their phones if they were able to find a neighbor with a solar-powered device from which they could charge it. Despite this, confidence in the army's ability to win greatly had diminished, and even became a source of mockery. Most people's hopes were pinned on the negotiations in Jeddah. But many doubted the army's ability to stop the war through negotiations and believed that the Muslim Brotherhood, or "the Islamists," would not allow it.

Aborted plans and leaving Khartoum

The first month after I arrived in Khartoum was spent trying to get the house ready. In the second month, I managed to get some of the project books and the Reading for Change series out of the office. Both floors of the office were destroyed, and those books and some large furniture were all that remained. It was not possible to reach all areas in which the books were store, as the building outside was teeming with dozens of armed men, and it was not wise to go through them.

By the end of the second month, the telecommunications network had been cut off, as had traffic across the bridges to Omdurman. As a result, there was no longer a means of communication through which to establish the “Stuck in Khartoum Platform,” which we were thinking of as a forum to reflect the conditions of citizens there. The effort was limited to trying to help the young people supervising the neighborhood kitchens, and in some cases elderly patients, as much as possible. Meanwhile, I tried to prepare my living room as a public library for the youth and explore the possibility of generalizing the idea to create other libraries in other neighborhoods.

As the days passed, especially with the onset of the scorching hot months of April and May, the stress increased day after day. There was a lack of water for days. Nighttime burglaries increased, targeting the few solar panels on roofs. At the end of April, around 7 am, I noticed that the small fan stopped rotating, which was unusual at this time because the solar batteries usually recharged before they ran out.

The young electrician who was supervising the installation of the power system came and thought that the wind might have moved the panels and severed the connections, so he went up to the roof where the solar panels were, only to find that they had all disappeared.

I remained in Khartoum for the whole of May, with a completely different daily schedule. It was no longer possible to stay in the inner part of the house, day or night, because of the intense heat. The hours of reading and writing during the day were reduced, and at night they disappeared. Of course, the plans for home libraries also collapsed.

In late May, a passenger bus similar to the one that carried me from the Police Bridge in Medani about six months earlier took us on a multi-day journey from Mayo neighborhood, south of Khartoum, but this time heading south towards Rabak, Al-Gebelain, Joda, and Renk. Scenes almost identical to those on the first trip from Medani were repeated, but in reverse: from the RSF checkpoints to army ones, with one difference: after more than a year since the outbreak of the war, the road was more miserable, desolate, and dangerous.