

Please cite as: EUAA, '1.2. Actors in conflict' in *Sudan: Security Situation*, October 2026.

1.2. Actors in conflict

1.2.1. Major state and non-state armed groups

○ a) Brief description and capacity

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and allied forces

The SAF is the regular military forces of Sudan[169] and comprises the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy[170] as well as the Military Intelligence, the Central Reserve Police, and the Border Guards.[171] According to Global Firepower, as of January 2026, the SAF had a total strength of 517 500, including 300 000 active personnel, 200 000 reservists, and 17 500 members of paramilitary forces. Among its main forces, the Army accounted for 485 500 and the Air Force for 13 000 personnel.[172] As of mid-2026, the SAF remained under the command of Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan,[173] the country's de facto head of state.[174] As commander-in-chief, he has principal oversight of the SAF's operations.[175] The SAF, whose officer corps has traditionally been dominated by Arab elites from the Nile Valley,[176] have maintained some measure of a centralised command chain,[177] along with staff procedures and a traditional military doctrine centred on territorial defence.[178] The headquarters of the SAF are located in Khartoum and operational commands oversee their forces across different regions.[179]

The SAF have regained control throughout central Sudan,[180] recapturing Wad Madani in Al Jazirah state in January 2025 and Khartoum state in May 2025.[181] SAF troops and allied Darfur Joint Forces maintained control of their stronghold in El Fasher until the city was overrun by the RSF in late October 2025.[182] As of mid-2026, the SAF maintained control of most of the country's northern, eastern and central regions.[183]

The SAF has made increasing use of drones (now a dominant feature of the overall conflict),[184] including Turkish-manufactured drones and missiles (Bayraktar systems [185] such as Bayraktar TB2 and Bayraktar Akinci drones[186]), Turkish-Pakistani made

drones (YHIA-III), Iranian-made military drones (Mohajer-6 and Ababil-3),[187] Pakistani Shapar drones,[188] alongside commercially purchasable Chinese-made devices.[189] This has allowed the SAF to project aerial power across several fronts at the same time.[190] Reports from US officials alleged that the SAF had used chemical weapons on at least two occasions in 2024.[191] A 2025 investigation by France 24 provided findings that appeared to corroborate the allegations in relation to two incidents in September 2024.[192] Externally, the SAF are reportedly supported by Egypt[193] and Türkiye, both providing diplomatic backing along with material assistance,[194] as well as by Russia and Iran.[195]

The SAF are backed by dozens of militia groups within the country. With the expansion of the war in scale and scope, the SAF have shown a growing reliance on militias to pursue their military goals,[196] including a number of Islamist armed groups.[197] The most prominent Islamist militia is the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade,[198] a Muslim Brotherhood-linked militia[199] whose leaders were linked to Omar al-Bashir's long-term regime[200] (1989–2019).[201] As of August 2026, the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade was commanded by Al-Misbah Abu Zaid[202] (Mubashir Abu Zaid[203]). The brigade is known for its use of advanced weaponry.[204] Its strength is unknown, with estimates ranging widely from around 1 500 fighters[205] to between 20 000[206] and 45 000 fighters. While its strongholds lie in eastern Sudan, the brigade is actively involved in combat in the three Kordofan states. The Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade has resisted attempts to fully integrate under the SAF's structures of command[207] and has been accused by critics of independent conduct.[208] In September 2025, the US government sanctioned the brigade due to its Islamist orientation and alleged links to Iran.[209] In January 2026, the EU sanctioned seven individuals, 'in view of the continued grave situation in Sudan' including Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade commander Al-Misbah Abu Zaid.[210]

The Joint Forces, formed in April 2023,[211] comprise Darfuri armed groups that had signed the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) of 2020.[212] While initially taking a stance of non-alignment, some of these groups aligned with the SAF[213] in November 2023[214] and declared war on the RSF in early 2024.[215] This formation included the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minni Minnawi (SLM-MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM),[216] each comprising around 35 000 fighters,[217] as well as the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) and groups linked to the Sudan Liberation Movement – Transitional Council (SLM-TC). Factions of the SLM-TC and the GSLF later split from the SAF alliance, initially adopting a neutral stance before aligning with the RSF.[218] After the fall of El Fasher, Darfuri armed groups that had remained aligned with the SAF were deployed to other areas of Sudan.[219] Most fighters composing the Joint Forces are ethnic Zaghawa.[220]

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North faction led by Malik Agar (SPLM-N-Agar), known for its experienced battle-hardened forces, has operated alongside the

SAF across several fronts, including in Blue Nile and Khartoum states.[221] Its second-in-command general, Hassan Adam al-Hassan, defected to the RSF-aligned Sudan Founding Alliance (Taasis) in April 2026.[222]

The Sudan Shield Forces (SSF), operating in North Kordofan[223] and Al Jazirah state with an estimated strength between 35 000 and 75 000 fighters, played a key role in the SAF's recapture of areas in eastern Sudan,[224] including Al Jazirah state (January/February 2025)[225] and eventually Khartoum (March 2025).[226] The SSF, formed in 2022 by former SAF officer Abu Aqla Keikel[227] and drawing most of its fighters from Arab communities of Al Jazirah state,[228] has, under Keikel's leadership, changed allegiances at different stages of the war. The group defected to the RSF in August 2023 before re-aligning with the SAF in October 2024.[229] Keikel has been placed under sanctions by the EU[230] and the UK for violence against civilians.[231]

The Popular Resistance (*Mustanfareen*) is a more than 70 000-strong national militia constituting a substantial component of the SAF-aligned coalition. Its members are recruited from tribal communities and local militias in the country's east and south[232] and its cadres include individuals from various parts of Sudanese society, including activists who previously opposed Al-Burhan's military rule.[233] The Popular Resistance was formed following the SAF leader's call for general mobilisation in June 2023.[234] Their purpose lies in defending communities and key strategic areas. In El Fasher, they were actively involved in fighting alongside the SAF and the Joint Forces until the city's defences collapsed.[235] Its members have limited training, and their adherence to military orders has been inconsistent, with reports of armed intimidation of civilians at checkpoints, alongside criminal activity.[236]

The SAF alliance further encompasses armed tribal groups operating as community militias defending their own communities while also assisting the SAF. Notable examples are the Zaghawa Council, which contributed to the SAF's defence of its former stronghold in North Darfur state, and the Dar al-Hamar militia from the Kordofan region, which also includes elements opposed to the SAF.[237]

Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The paramilitary[238] RSF, formally established in 2013, are a decentralised[239] highly mobile force led by Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.[240] Their ranks are dominated by ethnic Arabs chiefly stemming from the semi-nomadic Rizeigat tribe. The RSF are further supported by a non-Rizeigat[241] core alliance of Arab tribal militias from Darfur and the Kordofans,[242] as well as by formerly SAF-aligned Darfuri splinter groups [243] (GSLF and SLM-TC).[244] Other RSF-aligned non-Arab groups, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North faction led by Abdelaziz Al-Hilu (SPLM-N-Al-Hilu), operate in Blue Nile and South Kordofan as part of the RSF's Sudan Founding Alliance (Taasis).[245] Moreover, the RSF draw on significant numbers of foreign combatants,[246]

including Colombian mercenaries[247] and fighters from South Sudan, Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya.[248]

Since the start of the war, the RSF has operated across multiple regions, including Darfur, Khartoum, Al Jazirah state, and Kordofan.[249] As of beginning of August 2026, the RSF controlled most of the Darfur region,[250] where it has consolidated control following its capture of El Fasher,[251] and parts of the Kordofan region (West Kordofan and parts of North and South Kordofan).[252]

The RSF have used small and light arms along with heavy weaponry, armoured vehicles, artillery (including rockets, mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles),[253] as well as Chinese-manufactured GB50A guided bombs and 155mm AH-4 howitzers.[254] While lacking an air force,[255] the group has made extensive use of drones,[256] including surveillance drones, large-scale armed fixed-wing drones, suicide drones, and drones for dropping explosives. These have included Chinese-made CH-95 long-range drones supplied by the UAE,[257] Chinese FH-95 drones and Wing Loong II drones, Serbian-made Yugoimport VTOL drones,[258] and domestically produced Safrouq drones.[259]

The RSF further operate equipment for electronic warfare such as jamming systems and Starlink-based command terminals.[260] It reportedly receive substantial funding and arms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[261] Apart from the UAE, countries like Ethiopia, Chad, Kenya, and Uganda have been involved to various degrees in facilitating supplies for the RSF, providing diplomatic cover,[262] and, in the case of Ethiopia, hosting a camp for the training of RSF fighters.[263] In July 2026, a Sudanese court convicted Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo and 15 senior RSF members *in absentia* of having committed genocide and crimes against humanity in El Geneina (West Darfur), including for the June 2023 killing of a regional governor.[264]

As of June 2026, there were signs of fracture and infighting both within the RSF's core [265] (including defections of several senior commanders[266] and a senior RSF political figure)[267] and within the RSF's Taasis alliance with non-Arab groups in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.[268]

○ b) Nature of methods and tactics used

Since the start of the current conflict in April 2023, the tactics of warfare have shifted significantly. The initial stages were marked by artillery and infantry operations[269] and the SAF's reliance on its air power.[270] However, as the war progressed, drones came to play an increasingly crucial role in operations of both the SAF and RSF, expanding

conventional battlefields[271] as they allowed strikes on targets located far from the base. By late 2025, an airfield in Nyala (South Darfur) served as the RSF's main launch site for UAE-supplied long-range drones.[272]

Apart from drone strikes, the RSF have conducted large-scale ground offensives in North Darfur[273] and used civilian housing to shield from SAF attacks and launch their own attacks.[274] Since April 2023, RSF operations across the Darfur region have been reportedly marked by 'pervasive' and 'consistent' patterns of violence against civilians, ethnic targeting of non-Arab communities, such as ethnic Masalit in West Darfur's El Geneina area, and tactics of siege in and around the city of El Fasher. Acts of violence attributed to the RSF include indiscriminate killing, torture, sexual violence, looting, and the destruction of civilian housing and infrastructure.[275] Indiscriminate attacks in densely populated zones were also attributed to the SAF and aligned forces.[276] The SAF and its aligned forces have also carried out reprisal killings of people suspected of having sided with the RSF in areas formerly held by the paramilitary group,[277] including members of the Kanabi community[278] and South Sudanese nationals.[279]

Both sides of the conflict have conducted systematic attacks on civilians.[280] During their over 500-day siege of El Fasher,[281] RSF elements burned nearby villages, towns and IDP camps, bombed populated areas on a near-daily basis[282] using drones and heavy weaponry, and employed tactics of starvation and physical elimination of the city's population, attacking IDP camps, medical facilities, food distribution systems, and water and electricity infrastructure.[283] By maintaining its prolonged siege of El Fasher, the RSF and their allies used starvation as a means of war that led to multiple reports of civilian deaths.[284] As the siege tightened, there were reports of widespread killings, including through indiscriminate gunfire and executions of civilians in homes and public areas,[285] among them civilians who attempted to escape from the city.[286] The conflict also saw the RSF employing long-term siege tactics around the Kordofan towns of Dilling,[287] Kadugli,[288] and imposing prolonged siege-like conditions on El Obeid, [289] creating critical shortages in food[290] and water.[291]

The war has seen sexual violence – including rape, gang rape and attempted rape, forced nudity, forced prostitution, sexual slavery and sexualised torture – used in a coordinated, recurrent, and systematic manner as a means of war.[292] The RSF deliberately used sexual violence to subjugate women, girls, and communities[293] as a tactic aimed at weakening anti-RSF forces, especially the Joint Forces.[294] Such acts mostly targeted non-Arab women and girls and were reported across all zones that have been affected by the current conflict, including the Khartoum area, Al Jazirah, Kordofan, Zamzam, and El Fasher.[295] While the RSF were identified as the main perpetrator of sexual violence, acts like rape and sexualised torture of female and male detainees were also attributed to members of the SAF, including in Blue Nile, White Nile, Khartoum, and Northern states.[296]

In July 2026, following the SAF's advances in North Kordofan, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo reportedly ordered a shift in military tactics, urging his fighters to adhere to rules of combat and protect civilians.297 No information could be found on whether and to what degree these changes have been implemented.

○ c) Recruitment

After Al-Burhan's call for general mobilisation in June 2023,298 the SAF used a variety of mobilisation techniques. According to confidential sources cited by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in certain areas, these included instilling fear in civilians by telling them that they would be killed by the RSF if they chose to not take up arms. In other cases, authorities used explicit coercion to recruit civilians, at times ordering community leaders and clan chiefs to supply a certain number of recruits.299 The Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade continued to recruit minors, taking children from schools and transporting them to military training facilities.300

Though their ranks are dominated by ethnic Arab combatants, as the conflict progressed, the RSF came to recruit growing numbers of fighters from non-Arab militias in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in Kordofan.301 The UN noted eyewitness reports that the RSF and aligned groups recruited significant numbers of children in the El Fasher area, deploying them as fighters, guards and for the purpose of intelligence gathering.302 The RSF have further recruited mercenaries from abroad.303

At the same time, the reference period saw increased mobilisation of civilians along tribal lines.304 Following losses resulting from military defeats in North Kordofan in mid-2026, RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, in what seemed a shift away from foreign mercenary recruitment, turned to calling for direct mobilisation of tribes in Darfur. A number of tribes heeded his call, including a Fur tribe pledging four combat brigades and a group of Arab tribes committing an 11-battalion force. The administration of Central Darfur state also announced a mobilisation, pledging 10 000 fighters to the RSF leadership.305

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