

SUDAN: TRUISMS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN A WAR IN SEARCH FOR MEANING, 2023–PRESENT

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Abstract

Since the war erupted (April 2023- present), Sudan has become a scene of gruesome killings, maiming, and wanton destruction of productive assets, infrastructure, and property on a colossal scale. While the visible consequences of the chaos are evident, the reasons behind the war remain shrouded in mystery, often shaped by wild assumptions and contested beliefs. In the case of Sudan's protracted conflict, there is a quest for understanding—not only to explain the origins of the war but, more critically, to comprehend why its leaders continue to pursue it with relentless brutality. Since gaining independence from British rule in 1956, Sudan has experienced only 17 years of peace, overshadowed by 60 years of conflict. One might assume that, given this history, war would have lost its significance. Yet, the reality suggests a deep struggle for a return to normalcy, where assumptions evolve into beliefs in the search for meaning behind Sudan's ongoing war. Five key truisms and assumptions shape the search for meaning in Sudan's ongoing civil war. These are: the war of the generals, the desperate attempts of the Islamists to regain power, the rise of the Baggara, a yearning for neo-Mahdism, the revenge of marginalized groups versus the notion of "cleansing a desecrated land and honor," the unfinished process of state formation and the quest for a new Sudan, and the idea that the civil war is externally orchestrated. None of these truisms or assumptions fully explains why war remains the method of choice for resolving disputes, with some protagonists fiercely advocating for the continuation of the chaos.

Keywords

SAF, RSF, civil war, neo-Mahdism, Tassis, state reformation

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1. Introduction

The idea that war has lost meaning in Sudan stems from the brutal reality that, since independence from British rule in 1956, Sudan has only experienced 17 years of peace, punctuated by civil wars and brutal military coups. The first civil war (1955-1972) claimed the lives of about 500,000 people, displaced millions internally, and forced many to seek refuge outside Sudan. The casualties of the second war (1985-2005) were estimated at over 2.5 million people¹ (Concern International), ending in 2005 with the Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement being signed by the Sudan government and South Sudan. The CPA ended with the independence of South Sudan in 2011. (CPA, 2005) In the 2003-2005 Darfur genocide, committed by the Sudan Armed Forces and the Janjaweed militia, it was estimated that over 200,000 people were killed. (USHMM, 2018)

Meanwhile, civil wars in the Nuba Mountains and Darfur erupted in 1988 and continue unabated to date, fought by dozens of armed groups, separately or in coalitions. For example, Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid (SLA-AW), SLA-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM), Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), Sudan Alliance (SA), and Sudan Liberation Army/Transitional Council (SLA/TC), among several other communal armed groups. Some of these armed liberation movements will be referred to later. (Hamza, 2024)

Since the onset of the conflict in 2023, nearly 8.5 million people have been classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs), 4,228,067 were forced into refuge, and an estimated 150,000 lost their lives. These combined figures show that the number of forcibly displaced people as a result of the 2013 war was 11,758,838. (UNHCR, 2025)

Five key truisms and assumptions shape the narratives and competing meanings surrounding Sudan's war: 1) the war of the "Generals," 2) the Islamists' desperate attempt to regain power and control, 3) the rise of the Baggara and craving for neo-Mahdism, 4) the desire for revenge of the marginalized versus the aim to cleanse a "desecrated land and honor," and 5) an unfinished process of state formation and the quest for a new Sudan and 6) the war is externally orchestrated. These narratives combine common beliefs and assumptions, each of which may hold some truth, yet they often depend on one another. However, some of these narratives contradict each other, making it impossible for them to coexist without confronting these internal contradictions. As a result, Sudan's ongoing conflict is a search for a lost unifying meaning, constantly longing for peaceful coexistence.

2. 'The War of the Generals'

Sudan's latest war has been dubbed 'the war of the Generals,' pitting Abdel-Fatah Al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, against General Mohamed Hamdan (Hemedti) Dagalo, Al Burhan's Deputy and Chair of the Rapid Support Force (RSF), during a short-lived military-civilian transitional Government (2019-2023). The background to their discord was the signing of the Framework Agreement (21 December 2021) to restore the transitional government after the military coup (October 2021), which ousted Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and led

to the arrest of a large number of anti-military-coup political activists. The Framework Agreement proposed a) ending the military’s involvement in the government and economy, b) a 2-year transition period governed by civilian-led administration before elections, c) adopting a new constitution, and d) transferring power to a civilian administration within a month after signing the agreement. (Sudan Tribune, 5 February 2025)

The signing of the Framework Agreement with the SAF leadership represented in the Sovereignty Council and Abdalla Hamdok, the civilian prime minister, was considered by the social forces (i.e., the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) civilian coalition and the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA)), a betrayal of the Sudanese people’s aspiration for establishing a civilian democratic government. (Adam et al., 2022)

The friction between the two Generals came to a head when General Abdel-Fatah Al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, proposed a two-year transition period to integrate the Rapid Support Force into the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). On his part, General Hemedti proposed a ten-year transition period, which General Al Burhan rejected.



▲ Political map of Sudan. Source: Nations Online Project, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/sudan_map.htm

The disagreement between the two generals intensified when Hemedti respected the Framework Agreement and endorsed Sudan's return to civilian governance within a two-year transitional period. It was also stipulated that RSF and SAF should withdraw entirely from politics. General Hemedti acted independently of any political organization, civilian or military, and accepted the proposed withdrawal of all armed forces from politics. On the other hand, General Al Burhan's affiliation with Al Bashir's defunct National Congress Party (NCP) and its Islamist military contingent within SAF, which formed the majority of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and SAF High Command, rejected the Framework Agreement and limited his ability to act independently. Under pressure from the Islamists, General Al-Burhan turned his back on the Framework Agreement and rejected General Hemedti's proposal to integrate RSF into SAF in ten, instead of two years. (Sudan Framework Agreement, 2022)

The assumption here is that had General Hemedti integrated RSF into SAF, he would have lost his bargaining power and leverage to remain politically influential in an army known for its strong affiliation with the Sudan Islamic movement, particularly the National Congress Party (NCP), which has long been considered a protégé of the militant Muslim Brotherhood. An allied assumption is that the 15 April 2023 war, which devastated Sudan, was a military coup gone wrong. According to this interpretation, the military coup orchestrated by General Al Burhan, in cooperation with the Broad Islamic Current, was established after the October 2021 coup to support the military contingent on the Transitional Sovereignty Council. (Middle East Monitor, 2022)

General Al Burhan and his Islamist backers claimed that General Hemedti overstepped his mandate by attacking the Egyptian Forces stationed in Meroe, Northern Sudan, in preparation for a military coup against the SAF. SAF early morning raids on RSF training camps in Omdurman and Khartoum Sports City were not a coup but a preemptive measure to thwart the RSF coup. (Amin, 2023) Both generals operate under assumptions so evident that they require no further proof. They understand that if they were to claim responsibility for a failed coup, it would also mean taking responsibility for the deaths and displacement of millions of Sudanese people, as well as the destruction of Sudan's infrastructure. Such an admission would endanger their chances of returning to power in any form.

The "war of the Generals" narrative captures what triggered the war. Still, it does not explain its structural social, political, and economic root causes, where the distribution of poverty and unequal development is geographically aligned with the stigma assigned to marginalized Sudan, particularly Eastern Sudan, Greater Kordofan, Greater Darfur, and the Southern Blue Nile.

3. The Islamists' Desperate Attempt to Regain Power

The Broad Islamic Current, formed in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, opposed the Framework Agreement, which called for a return to civilian rule but banned the defunct National Congress Party from participating in politics. It also opposed the United Nations' presence in Sudan.

The Broad Islamic Current comprises various Islamist groups, including the Islamic Movement, the Just Peace Forum, the Reform Now Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the State of Law and Development Party. (Arab Observer, 20 April 2022; Sudan Tribune, 2025) On 10 September 2024, the Broad Islamic Current elected Ali Karti, a former foreign minister during Al-Bashir's regime and secretary-general of the Islamic Movement, as its president. The National Justice Alliance, the Renaissance Current, and the Unity of the Ranks Initiative later joined the Broad Islamic Current. The coalition's spokesperson, Hassan Abdel Hamid, said their stance in the ongoing conflict is to support the army against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and ensure the Islamists return to power. (Sudan Tribune, 10 September 2024)

During the first three months of the war (around July 2024), SAF sustained heavy losses, including large swathes of Khartoum, Sudan's capital; SAF HQ in Omdurman; Khartoum North; Wad Medani, the A-Jazirah Regional State capital; and parts of the Blue Nile and Sennar Regional States. As SAF was near total collapse, Sudan's Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (SAF) and President of the Sovereignty Council, Lt. General Abdelfattah Al-Burhan, called for a 'general mobilization' of all young and capable civilians to join the SAF to fight against RSF. (ACCORD, 5 February 2025) It began with recalling the Popular Defence Force (PDF) and the National Intelligence Security Service (IISS), which were dissolved in 2020 to join the campaign against the RSF. Those mobilized were code-named Al-Mustanfiriyn, or the mobilized civilian forces. Al-Mustanfiriyn included armed Islamist militants who joined the battle under the banner of the Islamist movement in coordination with SAF leadership, enabling them to promote their ideologically driven Islamist agenda. Al-Bara bin Malik Brigade is considered one of the primary militias supporting SAF. (Arab Weekly, 7 July 2023)

The Al-Bara'a Ibn Malik Brigade, named after a historical fighter from the early Islamic conquests, was originally part of the Popular Defence Force (PDF), which dissolved in 2020. The brigade has since been reactivated to participate in the campaign against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Radical Islamic groups like the Al-Bara'a Ibn Malik Brigade, also referred to as the Shadow Battalion during Al-Bashir's regime, have been called upon to lead the fight against the RSF. It is claimed that SAF's retaking of Omdurman, Khartoum, large swathes of A-Jazirah, and Sennar State was attributed to the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, contributing significantly to the war effort. Similarly, it helped the army retain the armored corps south of Khartoum from falling to the RSF during the intensified attacks between June and August 2023.²

The only truth that challenges assumptions and widely held beliefs is the Islamist anti-peace narrative. It is important to recognize that if the war ends in a victory for the RSF or if Sudan returns to civilian rule, the Islamists would likely face humiliation similar to what they experienced after their rule ended in 2019. During the transition period between 2019 and the October 2021 military coup, senior leaders of the National Congress Party (NCP) were detained, and their properties and wealth were confiscated. Some of these leaders were released after the coup they had

orchestrated in October 2021, while others escaped from prison when war broke out on 15 April 2023. (Kurtz, 2024)

It is not surprising that General Al Burhan, whose rule is supported and directed by Islamists, stated that they are ready to fight until victory, even if it takes the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) 100 years to win the war (Hendawi and Ahmed, 2024). However, it can be argued that the Islamists were among the last groups to support the establishment of a democratic system that would protect them from prosecution for past and current human rights abuses and corruption. In this context, their call to continue the war is a desperate attempt to regain power and control over Sudan's natural resources. This position would not be acceptable to RSF and their militarized armed groups (Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army-North led by Al Hilu and Sudan Liberation Movement/Army-Abdel Wahidnor), nor are the civilian opposition prepared to negotiate terms other than ousting SAF, the National Congress Party, and their militarized Islamist Jihadist groups and liberation movements (Jibril Ibrahim-led Justice and Equity Movement, Minni Arko Minnawi-led Sudan Liberation Movement-Minnawi).

4. The Rise of the Baggara: A Craving Towards Neo-Mahdism

The RSF is similar to the Mahdia army (1881-1898), as both are predominantly composed of the Baggara ethnic group, along with other groups from Western Sudan, Darfur, and Kordofan. The RSF is commanded by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti. At the same time, the Mahdia army was led by Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi, who became the Khalifa (or successor) of the Mahdi. Both Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi, hailing from the Taa'aiysha Baggara, and General Hemedti, from the Rizeigat ethnic group of Darfur, western Sudan, highlight this connection. This analogy suggests that the RSF may symbolize the Baggara's resurgence under General Hemedti, aiming to reclaim the lost glory of the Mahdia era, when they ruled Sudan, only to be displaced from power by the reoccupation of Sudan by Anglo-Egyptian rule, as explained below.

Before his death in June 1885, the Mahdi (Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdalla, a Dunglawi from northern Sudan), who defeated the Turko-Egyptian occupiers of Sudan (1820-1881), conferred on Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi the title Al-Khalifa al-Siddiq, resembling Abu Bakr Al Sidig, the second and closest Khalifa to Prophet Muhammad. Al-Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi is not from the Ashraf (the Mahdi's family) or northern Sudan (known as Awlad Al-Balad (sons of the soil)). This rivalry continued until the defeat of the Mahdist army led by Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi and the retreat of the remnants of the Baggara, who formed the backbone of the Mahdia in western Sudan. The Baggara lost political dominance in Sudan's rulership, but their representation in Sudan's civilian politics through the Umma Party, led mainly by the Mahdi's children and grandchildren, has continued. (Holt and Daly, 1993: 99-101)

Similar to the situation in Mahdia during the reign of Al Khalifa Abdullahi, the Baggara of western Sudan comprised the largest number of Rapid Support Forces

(RSF) fighting forces. They officially became part of the Sudan Armed Forces through an act of parliament in 2014. By March 2025, the RSF had lost most of the areas it had captured between 2023 and 2025. This decline was anticipated due to the RSF's lack of social and political support in northern, central, eastern, and riverine Sudan. The belief that the RSF symbolizes the rise of the Baggara and the promise of neo-Mahdism has created rifts within the Mahdi family and among the remnants of the Ashraf.

Those following social media would have noticed statements by RSF fighters describing SAF and its allied forces as remnants of "1956 Sudan." In their view, the 1956 Sudan is an extension of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan against whom their grandparents fought and lost the battle of Karari (also known as the 1898 battle of Omdurman), accusing the north and central Sudan elite of siding with the Anglo-Egyptian occupation force and having remained so through facilitating Egypt's continuing influence in independent Sudan.

The credibility of RSF's claim that the north and central Sudan elite dominated Sudan economically and politically lies in the historical asymmetry of power relations between the Baggara, on the one hand, and the Ashraf and Awlad Al Balad, on the other. The Mahdi family dominated the Umma National Party, led by the Mahdi descendants, who combined the Imamate of the Ansar (the Mahdi's disciples) with the Umma Party. The second truism assumes that Western Sudan (encompassing Greater Darfur and Greater Kordofan) has historically supported the Mahdist-based Umma National Party; however, this assumption has proven untenable during the war. Fadlalla Burma Nasir (2023 to present) was the first non-Mahdi descendant to assume the Umma Party (Deputy) Chairmanship after the death of Al Sadig Al-Mahi, former Sudan Prime Minister and leader of the Umma Party.

RSF, whose leadership belongs to the Janjawid, stands accused of committing the 2003 Darfur genocide. It estranged the Darfur Muslim African ethnic groups,

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who feared being dominated by the Baggara, should they emerge victorious from the war. As will be explained later, the friction between RSF and the other parts of marginalized Sudan could be attributed to their fear of the rise of the Baggara and the emergence of RSF-led neo-Mahdism.

The neo-Mahdism discursive narrative has also been rendered futile by internal divisions and the emergence of pro-SAF allies from within. For example, the Mis-siriya have been divided between those supporting RSF and those who sided with SAF but did not necessarily support the Broad Islamic Movement (Nashed, 2023; Middle East Monitor, 2022). The Hawazma Baggara's loyalty remains divided. For example, they were sometimes attacked by SAF and other times by the RSF. (Sudan Tribune, 8 January 2024) However, the situation changed after SPLM-North (led by Abdel Aziz Al Hilu) joined the Sudan Founding Alliance (SFA). (UNOCHA, 2023) The reality on the ground does not support such a crude (Abbas, 2024) view that presents the Baggara as a unified ethnic military force, nor the contention that General Hemedti and his Deputy and brother (Abdelrahim Dagalo) mimic Abdullahi Ibn Mohammed Al-Taa'ishi's choice of his son as commander of his personal guard.

Concomitantly, the Baggara are far less united under Hemedti than during the Mahdia under Al Khalifa Abdullahi Al Taa'ishi, who used brute force to quell rebellion from within the Baggara ruling elite and northern and central Sudanese protagonists. (Green, 2007) Under the reign of Al-Khalifa, Abdullahi was treated as a defender against foreign invaders (i.e., the Anglo-Egyptian occupation forces). The narrative put forth by the neo-Mahdis lacks reliable evidence. It is loosely tied to assumptions and truisms that have not gained credibility among their supporters, and even less so among their critics. However, while it may be tempting to dismiss the assumptions and truisms regarding the rise of the Baggara and the exaltations of neo-Mahdism as irrelevant, such a dismissal is not warranted.

5. The War of the Marginalized versus the Islamist's "Land and Honor"

The RSF claims that it is fighting for redeeming marginalized Sudan from the central and northern Sudan political establishment (also referred to as the 1956 state), which is responded to by SAF and its Islamist allies, claiming that they are fighting for cleansing the land of honour of Sudan, which is desecrated by the RSF. This section explores the efficacy of narratives that bolster these two truisms.

In 2015, the Sudanese government established the RSF as a paramilitary group. Its purpose was to fight alongside the SAF against the Darfur Liberation Movements, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/North (SPLM/SPLA-N), and to control illegal migration from Europe along Sudan's northwestern borders with Libya and Egypt. In 2017, pursuant to the provisions of Article 54(7) of the Regulation for the Affairs of the National Assembly 2015, the "Rapid Support Forces Act 2017" was decreed into law. The decree positioned RSF as part of SAF, the historical oppressor of the Sudanese peoples, claiming that it is fighting for impoverished, marginalized Sudan (referring mainly to Greater Darfur, Greater Kordofan, and Southern Blue Nile), but this claim does not hold sway.³

In the first three months of the war, there was a significant increase in atrocities committed by the RFS in Khartoum, Omdurman, and Khartoum North. These included the vacating and occupancy of civilians' homes, along with reports of rape by rogue soldiers. Two main narratives have emerged: the SAF, which also committed acts of violence, framed the conflict against the RSF as a battle to reclaim land – meaning civilian homes and territory – and to protect the honor of women and girls who were victims of rape by RSF soldiers. This description is a powerful graphic representation of RSF as an undisciplined, barbaric “militia.”⁴ SAF lacks the moral authority to impose such harsh charges against RSF. At the same time, it is known for committing a genocidal war in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and South Sudan before its independence from Sudan in June 2011.

The RSF claims it is fighting for the marginalized people in Sudan, while the SAF asserts it is working to restore the land and protect properties occupied by the RSF, as well as to safeguard the honor of women and girls affected by the violence. However, this narrative is flawed. Ultimately, the RSF's primary goal is to gain power. The SAF, along with its Islamist political backers, is not fundamentally different in this respect. The main distinction is that the SAF is fighting for the National Congress Party (NCP) and, more broadly, for the ambitions of the Islamic Current to regain power and control over the state, its resources, and its personnel.

The decision by the Darfur liberation movements, which were initially established to fight for the rights of marginalized Darfurians, to support the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) – an oppressor responsible for genocide against the Darfurians – in their conflict against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) cannot be taken seriously. This move highlights two important truths that are often misunderstood:

1. as of November 2023, four member groups of the Darfur Coalition announced their support for the SAF. These groups include the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), led by Jibril Ibrahim, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) faction led by Minni Minnawi, who is also the Governor of Darfur, the Mustafa Tambour faction of the SLM/A, and a faction of the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF). (Hamza, 2024) Their move from neutrality to supporting SAF was prompted by intense ethnic-based clashes in West Darfur in June 2023, the RSF's capture of four out of Darfur's five regional states in October and November 2023, and mobilization to control El Fasher, the only Darfurian capital still in the hands of SAF and its allies at the time of this expose. (Bader, 2025)
2. The loyalty of large swathes of marginalized Sudan, particularly North Darfur and North Kordofan, has been divided due to their proximity to North Sudan, Khartoum, and the White Nile States.

RSF's competing discursive narrative was portrayed as the revenge of marginalized Sudan against SAF, whose brutality misconfigured Sudan's civilian politics since independence in 1956. SAF and the Broad Islamists frame the conflict as a fight to protect their “land and honor.” However, these narratives are based on assumptions and self-serving statements, often resembling a propaganda stunt designed to

obscure the truth. In reality, both factions represent a blatant struggle for power and resources within a military establishment divided between SAF and the Islamists on one side, and the RSF on the other.

6. From the RSF to Tassis!

The war in Sudan that began on 15 April 2023 forces us to confront the painful reality that achieving liberation does not always lead to true liberty, especially in states shaped by authoritarianism and conflict. The Sudanese people's struggle to reestablish a competitive democratic government and free themselves from the oppressive rule of a militarized Islamist regime led to a brief transitional period. However, during this time, they experienced neither liberation nor genuine freedom. Although the brutal intelligence service and the Popular Defence Force were officially dissolved, systemic state violence persisted. The detention of vocal opposition figures was widespread, and the violent killing of peaceful protesters was both gruesome and tragic.

The Broad Islamic Current led a series of demonstrations and sit-ins, supported by the leaders of two Darfur liberation movements: the Justice and Equality Movement, led by Jibril Ibrahim, and the Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minnawi, led by Minni Arko Minnawi. Together with civilian government members, they called for a return to military rule. Their demands were met with the military coup in October 2021, which not only derailed the transition period but also effectively brought it to an end. As mentioned earlier, the Framework Agreement, which sought to give the transition period a second chance, was aborted by the civilian forces that opted for SAF and RSF to return to their pre-existing practices in two years, hold elections, and transfer power to a civilian government. By rejecting the Framework Agreement, the civilian political forces fell prey to the Islamists, who followed suit and dismissed it, allegedly to prepare for reclaiming control of the Sudanese State. The military and the Islamists helped create the image that the civilian political elite was too divided and undisciplined. They could not agree to any political settlement that did not guarantee them leading positions in any government entrusted with overseeing the transition to democracy.

The 15 April 2023 war ensured Sudan's return to one of its predictable political diehard habits: war and military rule. In October 2023, a civilian organization, the Sudanese Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Tagadum, Arabic acronym), was established and led by Sudan's former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Tagadum aimed to coordinate the civilian campaign for peace and return Sudan to a democratic path.⁵

In less than two years, internal bickering and disagreements arose over whether to establish a parallel government or remain neutral and continue their peaceful struggle to end the war and establish democracy. In February 2025, Tagadum split into two irreconcilable positions and was dissolved. One group, the Civil Democratic Alliance of the Forces of the Revolution (Sumoud, Arabic Acronym), was founded and headed by former Sudan Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. (Sudan Tribune, 10 February 2025)

In February 2025, the splinter group from Taqadam established the Sudan Founding Alliance (Tasees, Arabic Acronym), comprising 22 smaller rebel movements and political and civil society groups. Tasees declared itself an anti-military, Islamist government. It signed the founding Charter, which calls for the formation of a parallel Sudanese government to provide public services to populations in the liberated areas. SPLM-North, RSF, the National Umma Party, the Sudan Revolutionary Front, the United Civilian Forces Alliance, Trade Unions Coordination and Professionals Association, and various activists and civil society groups signed the Sudan Founding Alliance Charter.⁶

The objectives of the Sudan Founding Alliance (SFA, or Tasees in Arabic) are to build a secular, democratic, decentralized Sudanese state based on freedom, equality, and justice, and to be respectful of all Sudanese cultural, ethnic, religious, and regional identities. The Charter stresses the establishment of the Sudanese State on the principle of voluntary unity among its peoples and regions, ensuring just and peaceful coexistence, as well as freedom of choice.

The founding principles of Tasees have parted with any inclination to reconstitute along the values of old Sudan, described as a Sudan of war, destruction, oppression, and divisions. More revolutionary in Sudan's context is Tasees' stipulation that in the event of non-recognition or stipulation of secularism, which separates religion and state, in the transitional constitution and the future permanent constitution, or in case of a violation of any other supra-constitutional principle, all Sudanese peoples have the right to exercise the right to self-determination. One of the new provisions in Sudan's governance is the establishment of democratic self-governing subnational entities. This aims to create a democratic and pluralistic Sudan where the people have the power to choose their leaders through free and fair elections. The goal is to develop a truly decentralized system of governance that recognizes the inherent right of all regions to manage their political, economic, and cultural affairs, particularly at the local level. This approach seeks to ensure broad and equitable participation from local communities in all levels of government, promote balanced development, and ensure a fair distribution of power and resources, along with proper representation at the national level. Tasees began what John Garang, the founder of SPLA/SPLM, ended when he died in a helicopter crash under mysterious circumstances in July 2005. (Young, 2005) Establishing a new vision for Sudan marks a coming-of-age moment. Yet, the promise of the old Sudan remains unchanged: the ongoing war may continue for another 100 years, as General Al Burhan surmized (Hendawi and

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Ahmed, 2024) in an attempt to suppress the will of the Sudanese people. Proposing General Hemedti as Tassis's leader has shifted the RSF away from championing the rise of the Baggara and the neo-Mahdism narrative, moving instead toward the goal of building a new Sudan, as the following section explains.

7. Tassis Driving a Hardball: From State Formation to State Reformation.

The principles and assumptions outlined in the Sudan Founding Alliance Charter frame their struggle not as a continuation of the state formation project under a new guise, but as the initiation of a new reform movement for Sudan. This movement aims to turn the page on the year 1956. In essence, they seek to build a new Sudan from the remnants left by the state, which was formed under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule. This colonial legacy is often criticized for empowering the elite in North and Central Sudan, allowing them to dominate the country. They reject two definitions of state formation: 1) 'The moment of origin, the founding of states in time past, and 2) state as an object with a particular set of forms in terms of functions, institutional structures and capacities, boundaries, and how the state is justified' (Brooke et al., 2018: xvi).

Likewise, the Sudan Founding Alliance (SFA) charter emphasizes that state formation is not an ongoing process, referring to a moment of origin (i.e., 1956), but establishing a new state with new functions, institutions, structures, and capabilities, as discussed by Brookes et al. (2018, xvii). This concept views the state as continually being redefined through the constant reshaping of power dynamics within itself and not in relation to dominant social forces represented by parasitic political elites from all over Sudan that have benefited from the 1956 state, which served their political and economic interests.

In July 2025, the Sudan Founding Alliance (Tassis) formally inaugurated its civilian government in Nyala, South Darfur, the capital of the Peace and Unity Government. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) was sworn in as Chairman of the Presidential Council, alongside Vice President Abdelaziz Adam al-Hilu and Prime Minister Mohamed Hassan al-Ta'aishi, in accordance with Article 67(2) of the 2025 Transitional Constitution of the Republic of Sudan. The 15-member Presidential Council includes regional governors who, by virtue of their positions, serve as deputies to the President of the Council for their respective areas. The Peace and Unity Government is a parallel government to the Sudanese Government, led by General Al Burhan, the Commander of the Armed Forces and President of the Islamists-dominated Sovereign Council. The 15-member Peace and Unity Government and the Council of Ministers comprise political parties, civil society organizations, armed movements, and regional leaders not only from RSF but also from various political forces and regions of north and central Sudan.

The Sudan Government, headed by General Al Burhan and the Islamists, denounced the formation of the Tassis Government of Peace and Unity as a separatist government that aims at dismembering Sudan. Arguably, the present war has gone beyond state formation to state reformation, bringing the new Sudan debate to the

fore. Reformation implicitly means that Sudanese regions, which the military, militant Islamists, and xenophobic north and central Sudan elite consider ungovernable, could be forced to seek self-determination or allowed to form independent nation-states. This skewed logic reveals how far the ruling SAF military junta, jihadist, and Islamist political elite can go.

The Sudan Founding Alliance's proclamation of a de facto parallel state is based on a questionable assumption that the Sudanese people are united in its advocacy for peace and democracy, or in rejecting war as an extension of civil rule. The ongoing conflict has deepened both social and political divisions, not only between central and northern Sudan and the rest of the country but also among the so-called marginalized groups, some of whose political elite are fighting alongside the anti-democracy Muslim Brotherhood and SAF.

The Sudanese war teaches a costly lesson: state formation in Sudan is not yet complete, particularly if we take a cue from Tilly's (1985) contention that "war makes the state" or war unmakes the state to form a new one. That was the case of South Sudan, and history may repeat itself with the emergence of a new state under the influence of Tassis and the Islamic movement championed by the Muslim Brotherhood.

This time around, a xenophobic minority from the dominant northern and central Sudan seeks to dismember Sudanese regions, particularly Darfur, which is considered unruly and should be separated from the rest of Sudan. In other words, this time around, the dominant northern and central Sudan leads the charge for dismembering Darfur.

Arguably, the present war has gone beyond state formation to state reformation, bringing the new Sudan debate to the forefront. State Reformation in this new trajectory implicitly means that Sudanese regions, which the military and Islamists considered ungovernable, could be allowed to form independent nation-states, following the example of South Sudan. This skewed logic reveals how far the ruling military, Jihadist Islamists, and a dominant self-seeking Sudanese political elite can go.

8. Sudan civil war is an Externally Driven Narrative

All Sudan neighbours (Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Libya, and beyond (for example, Somalia, UAE, and many more) are directly or indirectly involved in the war. This real or perceived external involvement has contributed to truisms and assumptions portraying the Sudan war as an externally driven disaster. In this section, I explore SAF and RSF narratives on the role of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in supporting their protagonist. For example, in October 2024, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo accused Egypt of being involved in airstrikes on the RSF's troops. (Reuters, October 2024) Again, in October 2025, after the fall of Al-Fasher, General Dagalo (Hemedti) threatened to strike a neighbouring country, claiming that warplanes had taken off from its territory to attack RSF forces, and described those sites as legitimate targets. (MEM, October 2025) In both cases, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs denied that Egypt's air force is supporting SAF in the ongoing war in Sudan.

On the other hand, the Sudanese government accused the United Arab Emirates of supporting the RSF. In April 2025, the Sudanese government accused the United Arab Emirates of complicity in genocide. It raised the issue in the United Nations session, which was explicitly held to discuss the Darfur crisis at the International Court of Justice (ICC). (Wintour, 2025; Sayal, 2024)

SAF and RSF discursive narratives invite an understanding of the geopolitical interests that have influenced the external, involving Ethiopia through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and the quest for sovereign access to the Red Sea, which has infuriated Eritrea and Somalia. In this context, a brief mention will be made of the growing rapprochement between RSF and South Sudan. The focus of this section is intentionally narrow, as a comprehensive picture of the regional dynamics of the war cannot be fully depicted within the space allocated to a section of a journal article. It divides the externally driven war narrative into two parts: a) it commences with elucidating the political axis involving Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia vis-à-vis Ethiopia and its security ramifications, and b) the United Arab Emirates and the RSF axis based on gold-for-weapons arrangements.

First, the political alliance axis, involving the governments of Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan, and two rebel groups: the TPLF and Fanno, the armed rebel groups fighting against the Ethiopian Government. Each member of this Egypt-led Horn of Africa axis has its own grievances against Ethiopia. There are allegations that Egypt provides military support to Sudan for two main reasons: a) to gain assistance in its dispute with Ethiopia regarding the management of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and b) ‘With Egypt facing a raft of problems, including inflation, it is trying to leverage its burgeoning refugee community to secure financial support from the international community, especially Europe, which shudders at the prospect of millions of refugees crossing the Mediterranean’. (Emam, 2025)

Egypt’s pro-SAF stand was aggravated by the RSF’s attack on its forces in Marawi, Sudan, on the eve of the 15 April 2023 war in Sudan, as mentioned earlier. Another factor is that Egypt considers RSF’s control of Al Fasher, northern Darfur, since October 2025, a direct threat to its national security. (Ibid.)

Speaking to members of the House of People’s Representatives (HoPR) during the second regular session of the sixth parliamentary term on 28 October 2025, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed underscored that there exists “no official record or institutional decision” documenting how Ethiopia lost its access to the Red Sea. “Ethiopia’s loss of sea access was not decided by the cabinet, parliament, or the public through any legal or consultative process, calling attention to what he described as a “gap in the historical and legal record” surrounding the country’s maritime sovereignty”. (IFA, 28 October 2025)

Somalia needs Egypt’s support against Ethiopia’s quest for sovereign access to the Sea, following the signing in January 2024 of a Memorandum of Understanding with the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland, which is *de jure* part of Somalia. (Heritage Insititute, 2024) Somalia was quick to approach Egypt to deploy part of its Navy to Somalia in October 2024. Ethiopia considers the presence of the Egyptian

navy in neighbouring Somalia a national security threat, given the proximity of the Somali border to GERD. (Abera, 2025)

Eritrea responded to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's statement that Ethiopia cannot remain landlocked and expressed a commitment to gain access to the Red Sea, whether through peaceful means or, if necessary, by force. (Eritrea Red Sea Taskforce, 2025; Bereketab, 2024; Tekuya, 2024) Eritrea interpreted Ethiopia's stance as a direct threat to its sovereignty over the Assab port on the Red Sea, which is a point of contention since Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia. Similar to Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt, the three countries agreed in October 2025 to establish a strategic partnership with three priorities: the Horn of Africa, Sudan's crisis, and the security of the Red Sea. (Masrie, 2025)

Second, Minerals have increasingly become among Sudan's most lucrative sources of revenue. In February, the state-owned Sudan Mineral Resources Company said gold production in army-controlled areas reached 74 tonnes in 2024, up from 41.8 tonnes in 2022. The Central Bank of Sudan reported that in 2024, nearly 97% of official gold exports (from areas under army control) were sent to the UAE, earning \$1.52 billion. Official exports are a drop in the ocean, however. An estimated 90% of Sudan's gold production, amounting to approximately \$13.4bn in illicit trade, is smuggled out of the country, often passing through transit routes in Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan before reaching the UAE. (Wintour, 2025)

According to C4ADS (2025, 12), the RSF largely controls gold mines in southwestern Sudan and Darfur, in addition to pockets of control in Sudan's northwest and southeast. Darfur is home to extensive and growing artisanal mining operations, including the Sungo mining area, which the RSF-affiliated company Al Junaid exploits for conflict financing. SAF gold concessions include Alliance for Mining, Ariab Mining Company, Manub for Mining, and Orshab, which are located in the River Nile State, Northern State, and the Red Sea State (C4ADS, 2025: 13-14).

Sayal (2024) reported that 'the UAE's support of the RSF is motivated by a desire to extract raw materials, namely agricultural crops and precious metals, from the prosperous Sudanese land. The current Sudanese government, the primary opposition to the RSF, has rejected multiple agricultural and land agreements with the United Arab Emirates due to exploitative and unfair terms that yield substantial profits for the Emirati government while providing little protection for local workers and landowners. The Rapid Support Forces, thus, signify a new opportunity for Abu Dhabi to solidify its influence and extend its reach further into the region. (Sayal, 2024)

Somalia needs Egypt's support against Ethiopia's quest for sovereign access to the Sea, following the signing in 2024 of a Memorandum of Understanding with the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland, which is de jure part of Somalia.

However, between assumptions and truisms, the United Arab Emirates is not the only investor or beneficiary of Sudan's minerals, particularly gold. Shipments of Precursor chemicals, such as Sodium cyanide used in gold and chromite processing, are imported from China, the U.A.E., UK, Germany, and raw Carbon from India (C4ADS, 2025, 15-6). It also reported that there is further evidence, based on human-sourced reports, that Advanced Mining Works, the alleged owner of the mine, exports chromite to Russia and Turkey. As such, the SAF is likely deriving conflict funds from chromite exports to China, Russia, and Turkey (C4ADS, 2025, 24). The Sudanese government focuses its diplomatic campaign against the UAE, including accusing it of participating directly in the civil war because of the UAE's disdain for the Muslim Brotherhood, direct and indirect relations with RSF, and being the main importer of Sudanese gold.

9. Conclusions

The five truisms and assumptions presented here underscore my argument that none of them can stand on their own without referencing the others. However, when combined, they can create discursive narratives that address various audiences differentiated by ethnic and regional interests, as well as historical and post-independence divides. Firstly, the "war of the Generals" metaphor illustrates the beginning of the conflict, but does not delve into the historical depth of the structural social, political, and economic root causes of the war. Tensions between the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) intensified as the deadline for establishing a civilian government approached, with a focus on how the RSF should be integrated into the regular armed forces. The plausibility of the counter-narrative cannot be affirmed or denied, as most assumptions and truisms would suggest. It pertains to General Al-Burhan's anger about RSF's assassination attempt on his life and besieging him and the SAF General Command in a bunker for five grueling months. (Amin, 2023)

The belief that 15 April 2023 marks a final attempt by Islamists to regain their lost influence following the December 2019 uprising is an assumption worth examining. It can be argued that this narrative is mainly embraced by the more radical factions of the Broad Islamic Current, rather than by the lower ranks of the Islamic movement. Those low-ranking Islamists have far less to fear, therefore opting for a political settlement that safeguards Islam's presence in the political and public space but with limited influence. The assumption and truisms that RSF is the incarnation of the Mahdia and General Hemedti, and that Al-Khalifa Abdullahi resembles them, cannot be completely dismissed or affirmed in totality. Still, the current context of Sudan's political development defies established historical facts and affirms others. What can be affirmed is that the Baggara formed the majority of the Mahdia army. Similarly, the Baggara comprise the majority of the RSF fighting force under the leadership of General Hemedti. However, these parallels of path dependency are misleading. Today, the Baggara comprise diverse, internally divided interest groups and loyalties, not only to RSF or the Umma Party, but also to the Islamic movement, which is fighting against RSF.

The competing narratives surrounding the issues of vengeance in marginalized Sudan, the restoration of the homes occupied by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to their rightful owners, and the honor of women raped by RSF fighters are oversimplifications lacking sufficient evidence. Neither the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) nor the RSF can be considered innocent. Both groups contain renegade and criminal elements. The war that began on April 15 has further confused and divided marginalized Sudanese communities. Some have aligned themselves with the SAF and Islamists due to local grievances. In contrast, others have taken up arms against the injustices inflicted upon them by the RSF, which is implicated in genocide in Darfur and ethnocide in Southern Kordofan.

The principles and assumptions outlined in the Sudan Founding Alliance Charter advocate for dismantling the political framework established in 1956. However, this commendable initiative will only achieve its goals if it is supported by a broad base of Sudanese citizens who can rise above the four other principles discussed here. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that Sudan's latest war is in search of meaning to be distilled from the many truisms and assumptions that feed it, and only a few of these are lamented in this expose. However, the lack of a central argument in the truisms and assumptions about the Sudan war does not negate the fact that they have a unifying implication for completing Sudan's state formation through state reformation. ✨

Notes

- 1 The USHMM Report (2018), reads: 'Brutal violence between the country's north and south persisted from 1955 to 2005. While the number of civilian deaths has never officially been calculated, more than 2.5 million people are estimated to have been killed or to have died of conflict-related starvation and disease. The north-south conflict ended in 2005 and eventually led to South Sudan independence in 2011 with the creation of the world's newest country, South Sudan'.
- 2 Ayin Network, Sudan's army, Islamists, and the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, <https://3ayin.com/en/bin-malik/>, 25 March 2025.
- 3 Sudan Government, Rapid Support Forces Act 2017
- 4 Human Rights Watch, 2025 Report
- 5 Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Taqaddum), 2024, Political Vision Stopping and Ending the War
- 6 The following three paragraphs are translated excerpts from the Sudan Founding Alliance (SFA). Charter, 23 February 2025.

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