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POLICY BRIEF

Reframing the Nation: Army Media, Memory, and Militarised Legitimacy in Sudan's War

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Executive Summary

Since the start of the war in Sudan in 2023, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) has used Arabic-language media to portray itself as Sudan's only legitimate national institution—non-Islamist, inclusive, and the last safeguard against fragmentation. This policy brief explores how that projection is constructed, and how it draws on selective historical memory and co-opted revolutionary rhetoric to consolidate military legitimacy. This brief assesses the contribution of the SAF's Facebook pages – including its official page, and the specific page for the affiliated *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* newspaper – to its propaganda campaign during its current conflict with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). It focuses in particular on the ways in which the military uses its social media presence to appeal to a broad range of social categories in Sudan, whether through its calls for mobilisation, its narrative of political developments, or its reports from the battlefield. It pays detailed attention to the way the army has sought to present itself as the guarantor of the Sudan's national interests, and the ways in which it has used history to legitimise itself. This brief shows that SAF propaganda rebrands the military not by abandoning the past, but by curating it – mobilising nostalgia, nationalism, and selective silence to present itself as Sudan's last remaining centre of gravity.

Key Findings

This policy brief advances three main findings:

1) The military has used its own social media outlets to downplay its ties to the Islamic Movement and emphasise its appeal to multiple communities in Sudan, including grassroots actors who supported the revolution.

2) Military propaganda seeks to appeal to conventional territorial nationalism rather than religious politics, locating its efforts to mobilise through neo-tribal structures in a broader 'national' context.

3) Historical reference points remain central to the military's efforts to legitimise itself and mobilise particular communities.

Recommendations

To government analysts and journalists:

- Conduct regular translation and monitoring of military social media, as well as specialist publications such as *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha*.

- Carry out in-depth analysis of military media rather than relying on English language coverage of Sudan, which is based on formal statements made by army leaders. This would allow for a better understanding of the ideology the SAF is attempting to project, and its views on both democracy and its role in Sudan society.

To UN and AU officials, international governments and peacemakers:

- Develop an appreciation of Sudanese history and the way it is used by the military to frame discussions around both the role of the army in society and during periods of transition.

- Build an understanding of how the military uses history to frame both its wartime role and institutional legitimacy. This can help international actors anticipate its future positioning – and tailor engagement accordingly. Rhetoric used in the context of the war to appeal to the revolutionary grassroots could be conveniently forgotten if the military regains power.

- Take into account the role of current narratives in any post-war reconstruction of the military, given the military's long-standing effort to invoke a broader national narrative while maintaining the particularism of its officer corps.

Introduction and Context

In April 2023, war broke out between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) under its Commander-in-Chief Abd al-Fattah Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as 'Himeidti', who sat as Vice President on the Sovereignty Council that governed Sudan's transition. The newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* labelled the conflict 'a violent end to an old friendship'[1] – Burhan had been one of the generals who oversaw the Janjaweed militias that were formed by the Salvation Regime (1989-2019) to fight the post-2003 rebellion in Darfur, and then oversaw them again when they were reformed as the RSF and were deployed by the SAF to fight alongside the Saudi-Emirati coalition in Yemen in the 2010s. The Janjaweed and later RSF were central to the counter-insurgency strategy of the SAF and regime leadership in Darfur, just as other militias were in Sudan's previous civil wars. However, the officer class of the army were unhappy about having to rely on such irregular forces to fight their wars. The situation in 2023 became explosive because the RSF, feeding off mercenary revenues and the boom in Darfuri gold, had grown a commercial and military empire to rival that of the SAF in a way that 'peripheral' actors of the past, whether militias or rebel movements, could not.[2]

When the Salvation Regime was toppled by a civilian uprising in 2019, Burhan and Himeidti were the principal military actors to benefit from its downfall, first of all forming a Transitional Military Council to mirror that of the 1985-1986 transition, then agreeing to merge it into a joint military-civilian Sovereignty Council under public pressure. When the transitional civilian leaders later sought to rein in the military's business enterprises, Himeidti supported the October 2021 coup through which Burhan effectively removed them from the interim regime. However, in 2022 Himeidti distanced himself from the coup, and attempted to co-opt the dominant faction of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) coalition that had supported the revolution into his campaign against Burhan. Himeidti's rapprochement with the democrats forced Burhan to reluctantly accept the December 2022 Framework Agreement,[3] which should in theory have re-energised the democratic transition while setting out a schedule for the integration of the RSF into the SAF. However, the SAF and RSF were unable to agree on the terms of the integration. At a fateful workshop in Khartoum in late March 2023, the army rejected the RSF's demands to expel Islamist elements of the former regime and prioritise recruitment to the Military College—historically dominated by officers from the riverain centre—from all parts of Sudan.[4] As the failure to agree on integration delayed plans to form a new government, conflict broke out the next month.

The post-2023 conflict divided the pro-democracy movement, and saw different political parties, coalitions, rebel actors and 'tribal' leaders either formally or informally align themselves with different sides. The RSF quickly took over the majority of Khartoum as well as large swathes of Western Sudan, and seized Wad Madani, Sudan's largest city on the Blue Nile, in early 2024. Meanwhile the army continued to hold sway in the North and East, and began to fight back in early 2025, having recaptured Wad Madani and large parts of Khartoum at the time of writing, whilst launching new offensives in the West. Fears of a partition of Sudan nevertheless grew after the RSF declared the formation of a parallel government within the areas they controlled in February 2025. An incongruous coalition of forces backed the army, including former regime Islamists in both the army and broader militia movement; some of the grassroots Resistance Committees from the 2018-2019 revolution who were mortified at the destruction the RSF had wrought in riverain towns; as well as the FFC-Democratic Bloc, which included a mix of non-Islamist parties co-opted by the old regime as well as some of the Darfuri rebel movements against which Himeidti had originally been deployed to fight after 2003. Meanwhile, the mainstream Forces of Freedom and Change: Central Council (FFC-CC), which became the major player in the nominally anti-war Tagadom coalition, was somewhat ambiguously aligned with Himeidti – the formalisation of the relationship through the formation of a parallel government in February 2025 split both Tagadom and the FFC-CC in two.[5] Meanwhile, both of the belligerents mobilised on an ethnic basis, using the structures of 'Native Administration' through which Sudanese society had been tribalised under successive regimes. Here lay the context for some of the key themes in the military's social media propaganda: fears of partition and the fragmentation of Sudanese society, as well as narratives about democracy and the relationship of the belligerents to the former regime.

As Hind notes, both the SAF and RSF have used social media to 'engage in targeted messaging campaigns to justify their actions and garner public sympathy', including by 'portraying themselves as protectors of national sovereignty'.[6] This brief is based on in depth analysis of two of the army's Facebook pages – Facebook was chosen rather than X because the lengthier posts permitted by the platform allow for more in-depth analysis of the army's political messaging. The first is the SAF's official Facebook page, which has 2.2 million followers.[7]

The second is the army newspaper's Facebook page, *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* – which in print form dates back to the 1970s, and has a history of providing political analysis at crucial junctures, extending its role beyond that of a professional military magazine.[8] The newspaper has a comparatively fewer followers – 129,000 – but is worth analysing due to its provision of in depth opinion pieces and commentaries that speak to the military's outlook on the current conflict.[9] The content is entirely in Arabic, and the translations here are those of the author, not Facebook's auto-translate function.

Mobilisation Strategies in Military Media

Attention has been paid to the RSF's use of the Native Administration—a political structure dating back to colonial times that sought to wed local government to neo-tribal authority—to mobilise Arab pastoralist communities in Western Sudan on an ethnic basis.[10] However, the Native Administration was also central to the military's mobilisation strategy. Military social media covered the mobilisation of pro-SAF processions by the Native Administrations administering specific ethnic communities in army controlled towns.[11] At one such procession, the Nazir (chief) of the Bani Amir appealed to members of his community to surrender themselves to the army.[12] A recurrent theme was re-integrating 'tribe' and 'nation' – for instance, a Birgid Nazir who met with army chiefs in Port Sudan announced, 'we urge that the Native Administration leaders should address sons of the "tribes" incorporated into the ranks of the rebel terrorist militia to bow to the voice of reason and judgement and return to the fold of the nation'.[13] Meanwhile, after the RSF's formation of a parallel government in Western Sudan reignited talks of the country's partition along an East-West axis,[14] *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* covered a visit by the Fur Sultan to Northern Province, where he explained that his visit was 'for the purpose of thwarting the plan which has been organised to break up the country'.[15]

The SAF's social media commentary has frequently sought to downplay its ties to the Islamic Movement and affiliated militias. Numerous Islamist armed groups, such as the Bira'a Bin Malik Brigade, have been fighting on the side of the SAF since the very beginning of the war. However, the army leadership has been uncomfortable with the attention the group's own social media activities draw.[16] There is a widely circulated narrative that the initial fighting in Khartoum broke out on 15 April 2023 because Islamist-affiliated forces within the army opened fire on the RSF to prevent a transition that would see them marginalised. The army has been keen to shut down this narrative.

On the anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict, *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* published an article directly challenging this argument. It included the somewhat surprising admission that for any faction in the army to deliberately provoke the conflict would have been irrational, since the military forces in Khartoum at that point were entirely unprepared to fight, especially given they had hardly any forces stationed in the army headquarters at the time.[17] Otherwise, military social media accounts have eschewed discussion, whether positive or negative, of the military's relationship with the Islamic Movement. One exception was when the army's official Facebook page reproduced statements made by Burhan warning the National Congress Party that 'if it wishes to rule again it will have to compete with the other political forces.'[18]

It is notable that the SAF's social media did little to reproduce Islamist slogans that were at the heart of the conflict propaganda during the al-Bashir regime. Although *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* had been happy to propagandise the role of the Islamist Popular Defence Forces militia at its peak in the 1990s,[19] the role of contemporary Islamists in the Bira'a Bin Malik Brigade and other such forces in supporting the army received little coverage, reflecting the fact that the SAF is still uncomfortable about its reliance on these groups.[20] Instead, military social media gave considerable attention to the militias it had itself raised directly, notably the 'Mobile Hunter' *(Mutaharrik al-Sayyad)* forces which were central to the military's campaign against the RSF in Kordofan.

According to the pro-army media, these forces were formed by retired officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and soldiers, and heavily incorporated the civilian recruits brought in through the army's mass mobilisation campaigns.[21] Their name spoke to the importance of the history of community mobilisations in Sudan conducted through institutions such as the faza'a, a local call to arms which historically sought to reclaim livestock or avenge killings, and was also central to the RSF's strategies.[22] The military propaganda sought to depict these militias less as a source of social fragmentation and more as a product of the diffusion of a military ideal throughout Sudanese society – the participation of senior retired officers from Kordofan in the Hunter Forces was taken as evidence of the fact that 'its people love soldiering'.[23] *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* described the forces as 'a sweet munificent raincloud upon the people of Kordofan'.[24]

Nationalism and Democracy in the SAF's Social Media Rhetoric

Rather than Islamist ideology, most of the army's social media output has spoken to classic themes associated with secular territorial nationalism, including odes of love to towns, mountains and lakes, as well as evocations of the historical importance of the various regions being fought over.[25] Indeed, the history of the Sudanese army well before the Salvation era has provided an important reference point for SAF propaganda.

Another individual reflecting on the outbreak of the conflict declared, 'those who wanted to rule the Sudanese people through the force of barbarity and rabble don't realise that Sudan has produced the likes of Abd al-Fadil Maz and Ali Abd al-Latif, Sultan Ajabana, Hamdan Abu Anja, Uthman Digna, Abd al-Qadir Wad Habuba'.[26] These figures include warriors from the Mahdist period (1885-1898) as well as rebels against British colonial rule, such as the Nuba mek Agabana, who resisted the British 'pacification' campaigns in southern Kordofan in the early 20th century.[27] The two army officers referenced—Abd al-Fadil Maz and Ali Abd al-Latif—were soldiers from non-Arab backgrounds in the Nuba Mountains and today's South Sudan. They led a military revolution against British colonial rule in 1924, before the British crushed this movement and restructured the army to ensure that the officer class remained dominated by Arab-identifying communities of the northern riverain region.[28]

In the 1990s and 2000s, the Islamist regime mobilised Arab-identifying communities in Western Sudan into the militias that perpetrated atrocities against non-Arab communities, including in the Nuba Mountains in the 1990s and Darfur after 2003. It simultaneously limited the role of the army in the counter-insurgency on the grounds that many within the army's rank and file heralded from the regions being targeted.

With the RSF now mobilising heavily among Arab-identifying pastoralists in Western Sudan,[29] these historical references to Abd al-Fadil Maz and Ali Abd al-Latif can be read as an attempt to consolidate the army's support among non-Arab communities, who constitute a large portion of the its rank-and-file. Ironically, since 1924 the army's leadership—and through it, much of the country's political leadership—has been dominated by figures from the riverain north, a pattern highlighted in the 'Black Book' published by the Darfur-based Justice and Equality Movement during the al-Bashir period.[30] However, with the Justice and Equality Movement now aligned with the army, it made sense for army propagandists to use a wider range of reference points.

Further evidence of the military's efforts to distance itself from the former regime's militia policy is the continuous usage of the term 'Janjaweed' by the army's social media outlets to refer to the RSF. This term was widely used in Sudan as a label for the militias that the regime recruited on an ethnic basis after 2003 as part of its counter-insurgency in Darfur. After the regime attempted to formalise the militia and partially incorporate them into the regular military as the RSF, Sudanese activists continued to refer to the RSF as the 'Janjaweed' to expose that fact that a militia with ties to mass atrocities in Darfur was playing a central role in the post-2019 transitional government. The use of the term in military propaganda showed the extent to which the military was willing to co-opt revolutionary rhetoric in the context of the outbreak of the post-2019 conflict. The RSF was frequently referred to as a 'terrorist militia', as well as a militia of '*Aal* Dagalo', or the 'Dagalo family' – all of this rhetoric served the army's purpose in presenting itself as the only genuinely national institution in Sudan, opposed to tribalism and chaos.

Whereas activist campaigns against the Janjaweed and other militias were intended to support a transition to civilian democracy, in the hands of the army the anti-tribalist rhetoric could serve to justify authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies. In a piece in late 2024, *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* characterised fighting between two different RSF-affiliated ethnic groups in Darfur – the Mahariyya and Misseriyya – as 'an extension of the bog of tribal militias', and warned 'these differences are the inevitable future of the democracy of the militia and its political arm.'[31] Having initially supported Burhan's 2021 coup against civilians, the RSF later supported the Forces of Freedom and Change-Central Council's calls to return to the democratic transition prior to the outbreak of the war. Outside the context of the contemporary power struggle, the perceived risks of a democracy dominated by 'tribal' forces in the rural regions has long been used to justify the military's hegemony in Sudan. There are still deep authoritarian instincts on display in many of the military's social media narratives. For instance, one piece published to mark a year since the outbreak of the conflict noted that 'media played a great role in stoking the fires of this war', blaming 'journalists inside and outside' for their role in 'deceiving public opinion'.[32] Such statements provide the context for the persecution and marginalisation of civilian journalists by both conflict parties since the outbreak of the war.[33]

At the same time, the military has also drawn on the history of Sudan's interim periods to argue that it is best placed to shepherd a transition to democracy. In a speech to troops in Omdurman, the SAF Assistant Commander-in-Chief, Yasir al-Atta, declared that the army did not want to rule and that before the war, 'The President [al-Burhan] was committed to stepping down in accordance with his pledge, as did Siwar al-Dahab'.[34] This was a reference to Siwar al-Dahab, the SAF Chief who stepped in as interim President during the 1985-1986 transition, and stayed true to his commitment to hold elections within a year.[35] In some ways this might represent an uncomfortable reference point for the SAF, since the 1986 elections resulted in a victory for the Umma Party, who by that point were somewhat ambiguously aligned with the RSF.[36] However, such references show how the ability to reference key moments in the military's political history is central to legitimising the SAF's actions in the present.

Conclusion

The military has consistently sought to use its social media propaganda to present itself as the only true guardian of the national interest, and as an institution that is both composed of—and committed to integrating—Sudan's multiple and diverse communities. The SAF's social media accounts have deliberately downplayed the institution's ongoing relationship with Islamist groups and Islamist ideology, stressing instead an expansive form of territorial nationalism that can appeal to multiple communities that supported the 2018-2019 revolution. Indeed, the SAF have co-opted some of the rhetoric of the revolutionaries in its attacks on the RSF. Unlike RSF propaganda, which claims to offer a radical break with the 'state of 1956'—the order established by Sudan's departing Anglo-Egyptian colonisers at independence—SAF messaging instead highlights the individuals and institutions that have historically sought to incorporate communities from across Sudan's diverse regions into the state project. Unsurprisingly, little attention is paid to the historic role of the army in exploiting, marginalising and perpetrating violence against those same communities. Understanding the SAF's media strategy is not merely a question of propaganda analysis – it is essential to anticipating how the military may seek to dominate future transition narratives under the guise of unity, nationalism, and historical legitimacy.

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