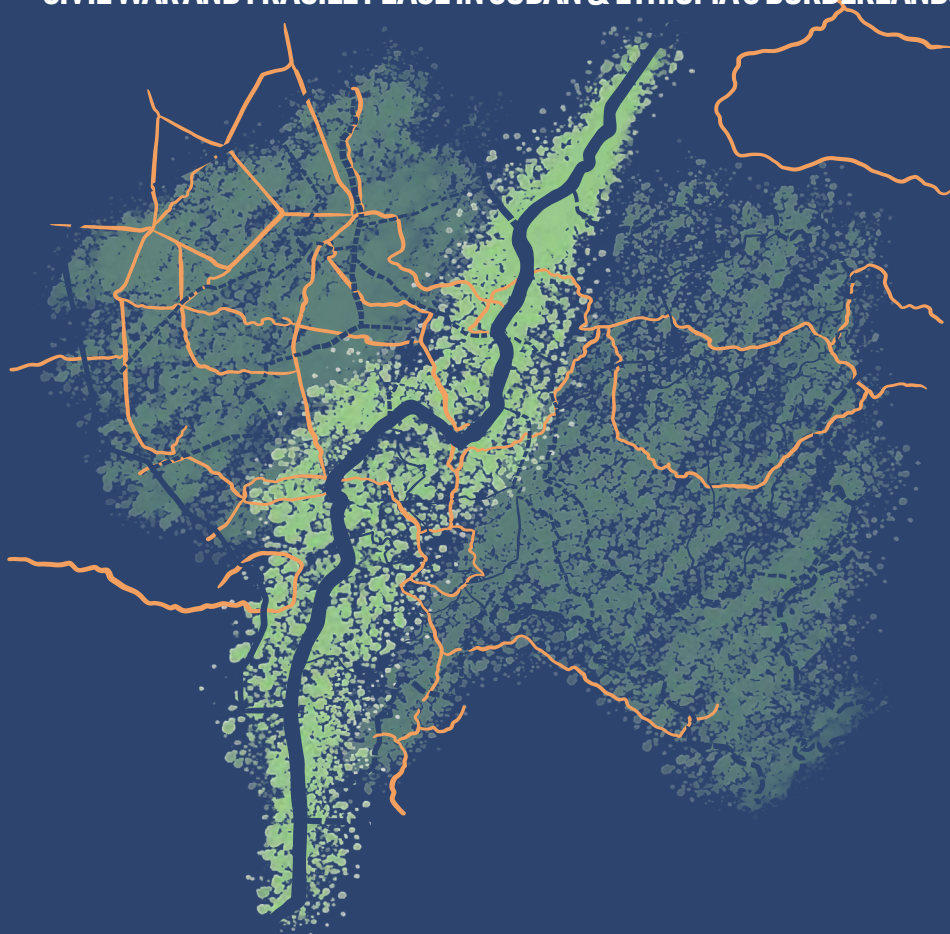


# RESISTANCE IN THE PERIPHERIES

CIVIL WAR AND FRAGILE PEACE IN SUDAN & ETHIOPIA'S BORDERLANDS



**Rift Valley Institute**  
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

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## **Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil war and fragile peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's borderlands**

This report was written through a combination of open-source research and utilizing a team of researchers to carry out field research in Blue Nile, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Gedaref, Sudan. Interviews conducted are attributed to the researchers as one in the footnotes. For reasons of security the identity of the research team and those interviewed has been kept confidential.

Cover image: Designed by Maggie Dougherty.

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# MAP: BLUE NILE STATE & BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGION



# SUMMARY

- Historically, the people living along the Blue Nile – Benishangul-Gumuz borderlands in what is now Sudan and Ethiopia have been politically and socially marginalized within their respective political entities. As such they have sought ways to address this marginalization by undertaking a number of strategies. They have sought to mobilize and increase their communal solidarity and then lobby their respective political leaders, as well as use resistance as a means of self-protection and to force political concessions.
- A key aspect of these strategies has been to look to kin across the borderlands for political and military support and at the same time to seek this type of support from neighbouring governments. These dynamics have increased in intensity in recent decades as local communities have increasingly sought regional political and military support as they played off of regional inter-state tensions.
- In the 1980s and 1990s, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) acquired support from successive Ethiopian governments who were at times at odds with successive Sudanese regimes. In Ethiopia, the Gumuz and Benishangul communities have looked to allies in subsequent Sudanese regimes since the 1980s for support to their Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM) as a means to reverse their political marginalization in Ethiopia.
- Regional support has continued to be a key strategic aspect of local strategies to address issues related to their marginalization. However, since the degree of potential support is directly related to the relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia, local communities are subject to, and constrained by, these geopolitical realities. In light of this, communities have also sought to engage directly with local government and to mobilize increased support from local communities.
- In the case of Sudan, a faction of the SPLM/A-N, led by Malik Agar, carried out a peace process with the Sudanese government in 2020-21 and then entered into government thereafter. The other SPLM/A-N faction, led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, while still seeing strategic value in a relationship with the Ethiopian government, also sees a need to increase its political support locally in Blue Nile and is thus less beholden to the whims of the Ethiopian government. As such there is not currently a military relationship between the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) and the Ethiopian government.

- The BPLM, on the other hand, since 2020 has acquired increased military support from the Sudanese government, and especially its military, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This support, however, has been limited and is more likely an attempt by the SAF to extract concessions from the Ethiopian government and not solely a means to support their BPLM allies to achieve their political goals.
- By the end of 2022 the relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia was showing small signs of improvement. While this may change depending on the outcome of negotiations over contentious issues like land in the Fashaga area (Gedaref state) or the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), or a formation of a new transitional government in Sudan, communities in the borderlands will have to adjust to this new reality.
- Going forward, these communities are likely to receive less military support from regional countries and thus are likely to engage in local political negotiations with their own governments, while trying to maintain strategic relationships with regional countries.

# INTRODUCTION

Blue Nile state in Sudan and the Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia are home to dozens of communities, many of which have long been marginalized by their respective governments, processes that started well before these two countries were even formed. In many cases, the processes of state consolidation in both countries have often been carried out by outsiders from the respective political and military elites of each country. This historical pattern, as well as newer political competitions, has created a high level of resentment among the local indigenous communities. It has also given an acute ethnic overtone to any political or economic competition.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, communities on both sides of the border in Blue Nile and Benishangul-Gumuz have adopted various strategies to defend their interests and have often looked to the other side of the border for support. There is a local logic to this. Although separated by an international border, communities located in geographical proximity retain similar linguistic and cultural practices, and frequently enjoy strong political, social and economic ties.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these communities have sought support from the neighbouring government, which has often been provided (depending on the relationship between Khartoum and Addis Ababa at the time).

Since 2018, there have been profound political changes in both Sudan and Ethiopia. Consequently, many borderland communities have adapted their own political strategies, with some choosing to engage more with their own government and others seeking support from across the border for their own agendas, whether political, economic or security related. These choices are also influenced by the broader bilateral relationship between Khartoum and Addis Ababa, which in turn is influenced by considerations moving far beyond the comparatively narrow interests of specific borderland communities.

## Evolution of the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland

The lives of people living in Blue Nile state and Benishangul-Gumuz region have changed irrevocably in the last two centuries. From the early nineteenth century, the abundant natural wealth in the borderland area began to attract the interests of outsiders, particularly from neighbouring empires and, later on, from governments. These interests profoundly impacted

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1 Typically, such competitions are usually about land in both areas.

2 Wendy James, *War and survival in Sudan's frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 2–3.



the lives of those who lived in this borderland area, which still remains of intense geopolitical importance.<sup>3</sup>

Starting with the collapse of the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821) and its Ottoman conquest in 1821, a process of encroachment, occupation and domination of the area began and was pursued by a long continuum of empires and political elites from what are now Sudan and Ethiopia. Under the Turco–Egyptian rule (1821–1885) of the Ottoman empire, slave-raiding practices in present-day Blue Nile and Benishangul-Gumuz intensified, with devastating consequences for the indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Turco–Egyptian rule opened up the borderlands to trade, with traders from northern riverine communities travelling to the area to trade goods for locally mined gold.<sup>5</sup> Over time, these traders and their descendants rose to political prominence in the borderlands, and continue to have political relevance on both sides of the border in the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup>

During the Mahdist period in Sudan (1885–1898), Mahdist rulers sought to expand their control eastward into what is now Ethiopia. As a result, they clashed with the Ethiopian Empire (Abyssinia) as it expanded political control westward. Despite initial Mahdist victories and influence in the borderlands,<sup>7</sup> the collapse of the Mahdist state following the British conquest of Sudan in 1898 provided an opportunity for the Ethiopian Empire, rejuvenated under the rule of Emperor Menelik II, to begin exerting influence in the borderlands.<sup>8</sup> In 1902, the United Kingdom and the Ethiopian Empire signed a treaty to demarcate the boundary between their empires. As part of the treaty, the area now known as Benishangul-Gumuz formally became part of the Ethiopian Empire.<sup>9</sup>

Since Sudanese independence in 1956, relations in the borderlands have been determined by relations between the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments, along with broader geopolitical

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- 3 Khalid Ammar Hassan, ‘Spilling Over: Conflict Dynamics in and around Sudan’s Blue Nile State 2015–19’, Human Security Baseline Assessment, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2020, 12.
  - 4 Akira Okazaki, ‘Open shadows: dreams, histories and selves in a borderland village in Sudan’, PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 1997, 54.
  - 5 Alessandro Triulzi, ‘Trade, Islam, and the Mahdia in Northwestern Wallaggā Ethiopia’, *The Journal of African History* 16/1 (1975): 58; Enrico Ille, Mohamed Salah and Tsegaye Birhanu, ‘From Dust to Dollar: Gold mining and trade in the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland’, London/Juba: Rift Valley Institute, April 2021.
  - 6 Triulzi, ‘Trade, Islam, and the Mahdia’, 59
  - 7 The most famous clash was the Battle of Gallabat in 1889 (now Gedaref state), when the Mahdist army defeated the army of the Abyssinia and killed its emperor, Yohannes IV.
  - 8 John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The last two frontiers*, Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2011, 105–106.
  - 9 Wendy James, ‘Whatever Happened to the “Safe Havens”? Imposing State Boundaries between the Sudanese Plains and the Ethiopian Highlands’, in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and identity in contemporary and historical perspectives*, eds. Christopher Vaughan, Mareike Schomerus and Lotje Vries, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 117.

dynamics across the region. In the 1960s, for instance, successive Sudanese governments gave tacit and sometimes explicit support to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which used rear bases in Sudan (mainly in Kassala) to attack Ethiopian positions.<sup>10</sup> Under Emperor Haile-Selassie, the Ethiopian Empire responded by giving military protection to Ethiopian farmers operating in and near the disputed Fashaga area, which consists of fertile agricultural land located on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> Tensions between the two countries escalated again in the 1980s when the Derg regime in Ethiopia supported the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and its allied militias in Southern Sudan in war against the Khartoum government. Sudanese governments supported several anti-Derg elements, including the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM). All these organizations partly operated from within the borderland areas between the two countries.

The 1989 coup that brought the National Islamic Front (NIF) into power in Sudan and the 1991 revolution that brought the TPLF-led EPRDF into power in Ethiopia created a new chapter in Sudan-Ethiopia relations. During its rebellion, the TPLF received support from the NIF dominated government in Sudan, but relations soured between the two governments in the mid-1990s. As part of efforts to spread its ideology in the Horn, NIF hardliners in the government renewed support for the BPLM and other anti-Addis forces. The EPRDF responded by occupying the Fashaga area and supporting anti-Khartoum forces. In the case of the latter, the most significant was the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)<sup>12</sup> and the SPLM/A. During this time, the SPLM/A relied on cross-border support from Ethiopia to sustain its rebellion, making substantial gains in Blue Nile while operating from bases in what are now the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions in Ethiopia.

Following the outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, which had previously been united against Sudan, it was in Ethiopian interests not to have an openly antagonistic relationship with Khartoum for fear that it would support Eritrea. By this time, then President Omar al-Bashir realized that aggressive Sudanese foreign policy (designed by Hassan al-Turabi's NIF) had upset many of its neighbours, and that only by curtailling Turabi's powers could Sudan rehabilitate relations with them.<sup>13</sup> Bashir took steps to isolate Turabi, who he ousted from

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10 Luca Puddu, 'Border diplomacy and state-building in north-western Ethiopia, c. 1965-1977', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11/2 (2017): 236.

11 Puddu, 'Border diplomacy', 236-237.

12 International Crisis Group, 'Sudan: Preserving Peace in the East', *Africa Report*, No. 209, Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 26 November 2013, 9. NDA headquarters was in Asmara but they also had a main operational base near Bahir Dar (Amhara region), from which they carried out military actions in Blue Nile.

13 The failed assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995 in Addis Ababa, during an Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting, by Sudanese intelligence officials (who were NIF hardliners), was a key event in convincing al-Bashir he had to limit Turabi's power.

the government in 1999 and then arrested in 2001.<sup>14</sup> This created conditions for a thawing of relations between Sudan and its neighbours, especially Ethiopia.

In addition to reaching geopolitical agreements after 2000<sup>15</sup> that reduced the support of each country for rebel movements in the other, then Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi (president from 1991 to 1995; and prime minister from 1995 until he died in 2012) also promised that Ethiopia would not enforce the International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment issued against al-Bashir in 2009, following the Sudanese government's counterinsurgency in Darfur.<sup>16</sup> Later, after 2011, al-Bashir and Meles agreed that in return for Sudanese support for the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a project staunchly opposed by Egypt (the most powerful neighbour of Sudan), Addis would not allow the newly created SPLM/A-North (SPLM/A-N) to operate from rear bases in Ethiopia following the resumption of hostilities in 2011.<sup>17</sup> The failure of Sudanese rebel groups in the post-secession era (after 2011) to secure significant backing from regional states, including Ethiopia, is a key reason for their inability to achieve major successes in their war with the Khartoum government, which was at a stalemate by 2016.

The good relations between Sudan and Ethiopia remained until the end of the National Congress Party (NCP) regime in 2019, with both sides honouring their agreements. Since Abiy Ahmed became prime minister of Ethiopia in 2018 and the 2019 Sudanese revolution that ousted al-Bashir, however, this relationship has begun to feel strain. Recent Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) involvement with the post-2019 armed groups in Ethiopia—namely, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the dissident Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM)—threatens a return to previous patterns of cross-border interference.<sup>18</sup> So far, Ethiopia has not reciprocated but as current events in Blue Nile state indicate, the stage is set for potentially greater involvement of Addis Ababa in Blue Nile state affairs once again.

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14 After 1998, the Sudanese government was referred to as the NCP regime (National Congress Party regime).

15 John Young, 'Conflict and Cooperation: Transitions in Modern Ethiopian-Sudanese Relations', Human Security Baseline Assessment, Briefing paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2020, 4.

16 Confidential interview with two high-ranking NCP members.

17 The SPLM/A-North was founded by SPLM/A members who remained in Sudan after the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The organization is based in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states in Sudan.

18 To date, however, Khartoum support for such groups has been moderate.

# BLUE NILE STATE: FROM CIVIL WAR TO FRAGILE PEACE

Blue Nile lies in the extreme south-east of Sudan, bordering Ethiopia and South Sudan. The Blue Nile River crosses through the northern third of the state as it travels from the Ethiopian highlands to Khartoum. Despite its status as being one of the peripheries of Sudan, the state is geopolitically important for two main reasons: it hosts the Roseires Dam and borders the strategic Benishangul-Gumuz region in Ethiopia. The state is also rich in natural resources, particularly gold and chromite, and has extensive swathes of fertile agricultural land. The historical home of one part of Sudan's most significant rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-(North) (SPLM-N), anti-government movements in Blue Nile have traditionally sought refuge in, and support from, Ethiopia. However, despite the continued salience of the SPLM-N to the political future of the state, and the violence that continues to affect this borderland region, Ethiopia has become a less important fixture in Blue Nile in the last decade. Amidst the rebellions in Ethiopia's north and western regions, as well as matters of significant bilateral and geopolitical significance in the area, it remains to be seen how long this current strategic disengagement will continue for.

## Government control of Blue Nile

The history of resource extraction is long and divisive, and is often at the centre of local complaints about marginalization. The Roseires Dam, constructed in 1965 and then heightened in 2013, provides a significant source of electricity.<sup>19</sup> Blue Nile is also a good source of grazing and agricultural land. Both the resources in and the location of Blue Nile have attracted significant attention from various Sudanese rulers over time. While less exploited under the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821), exploitation increased dramatically under Turco-Egyptian (1821–1885) and Mahdist rule (1885–1898). Slave raiding was a major factor in this exploitation, with both this and resource extraction contributing to the impoverishment of Blue Nile.<sup>20</sup>

Since Sudanese independence in 1956, subsequent central governments have established tight control over economic and political activity in Blue Nile, including resource extraction, which became particularly significant due to the growth of industrial scale gold and chrome mining

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19 See chart in Harry Verhoeven, *Water, civilisation and power in Sudan: The political economy of military-Islamist state building*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 131.

20 Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 14.

from the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> The government also took close control over the occupation of land for mechanized farming. This was facilitated by the Unregistered Lands Act (1970) that abolished communal land rights utilized by indigenous communities to manage farm land, granting central government the ability to lease this land to private commercial interests.<sup>22</sup> One year later, the Nimeiry regime (1969–1986) abolished the Native Administration, a flawed structure that nonetheless offered local communities a means to seek redress for their grievances with the government. This set the stage for increased communal tensions and violence across Sudan, including in Blue Nile.<sup>23</sup> The long-term marginalization of indigenous communities in particular has given rise to numerous attempts to reverse this, with the SPLM/A (and after 2011 the SPLM/A-N) serving as the primary vehicle for change since 1983.

### The people of Blue Nile

The people of Blue Nile are broadly classified as belonging to three different groups: non-Arab indigenous communities; newcomers consisting of both Arab and non-Arab tribes; and a combination of the two resulting from their intermarriage. Social and political relations between Blue Nile communities, which have long been influenced and manipulated by outsiders, have historically had a strong impact on political and conflict dynamics in the borderlands, which continues to be the case in 2022.

The *indigenous communities* are those considered to have lived in Blue Nile for hundreds of years, and their home areas are locally well known. These include: the Gumuz, Hamaj and Kadalo in Wad al-Mahi and Roseires localities; the Ingessana in Tadamon and Bau localities; the Berta in Qeissan and Kurmuk localities; and the Uduk, Jumjum, Komo and Ganza in southern Kurmuk locality. Some of these communities (the Gumuz, Berta and Komo) also live across the border in Benishangul-Gumuz in Ethiopia. According to the Native Administration – a system created under the British that empowered some local leaders to administer areas as a form of indirect rule – these communities were under the authority of the Funj *Mek*, the highest traditional leader in Blue Nile. Under the *Mek* there are four geographic sub-leaders, also referred to as *Mek*, and then each community has a paramount *Omda* (a mid-level administrator in the Native Administration system) that falls under one sub-leader and ultimately the Funj *Mek*.

The newcomers (Arab and non-Arab) started arriving in Blue Nile during the Turco–Egyptian rule (1821–1885). They initially came as traders from northern Sudanese communities, such as the

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- 21 See Ille, Salah and Birhanu, 'From Dust to Dollar'; Claudio Gramizzi, 'At an Impasse: The Conflict in Blue Nile', Human Security Baseline Assessment, Working Paper No. 31, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2013, 13.
  - 22 Gunnar M Sørnbø and Abdel Ghaffar M Ahmed, *Sudan Divided. Continuing Conflict in a Contested State*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 4. For a map of land concessions, see: Douglas H Johnson, 'When Boundaries Become Borders. The impact of boundary-making in Southern Sudan's frontier zones', *Contested Borderlands*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010, 64.
  - 23 Abdel Ghaffar M Ahmed, 'Transforming pastoralism: a case study of the Rufa'a Al-Hoi ethnic group in the Blue Nile State of Sudan', Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2008, 3.

Jaaliyin, Shaigiya and Danagla, and later as part of the administrative elite. The 1920s saw larger waves of arrivals. Some came from Arab pastoralist communities, such as the Kenana, and Rufaa al-Hoy, which migrated from White Nile and Sennar states. Non-Arab communities originally from West Africa, such as the Fellata and Hausa also settled in Sudan. Western Sudanese, including Masalit and Zaghawa, came in search of work on the mechanized farms, which had started in the 1960s. After Sudanese independence in 1956, members of the northern riverine communities formed much of the administrative and economic elite. Over time, these newcomers competed with indigenous communities over land, which became part of the broader political struggle in the state.

A third group developed from the descendants of the northern Arabized traders who arrived in the 1800s and married indigenous people, usually from Berta-speaking communities. Their descendants established fiefdoms in what is now Blue Nile and Benishangul-Gumuz. From the mid-1800s, this community became the political elite in southern Blue Nile and eastern Benishangul-Gumuz until they were supplanted by the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and the Ethiopian Empire. Despite being ousted from power, descendants of this community have nonetheless gone on to occupy prominent political and security roles under the NCP and remain among the contemporary political elite. Locally, many people refer to them as ‘Watawit’ but they prefer to use either their Berta subsection name or refer to themselves as descendants from the northern Nile Valley.

## The Second Sudanese Civil War in Blue Nile

In the 1980s, communities across Sudan were increasingly vocal about their feelings of political and economic marginalization. In Blue Nile, indigenous communities in particular were aggrieved by their loss of access to grazing or farming land to the mechanized farms and their lack of political representation in both Damazin (the state capital) and Khartoum. In addition, the central government, especially under the NCP regime, encouraged newcomer groups to settle on land claimed by indigenous communities. The NCP regime also concentrated political power in non-indigenous communities, especially among the Watawit after the mid-1990s, with which the NCP regime had developed a close working relationship.<sup>24</sup> This further frustrated indigenous communities.<sup>25</sup>

When the SPLM/A rebellion, led by Southern Sudanese, broke out in 1983, some communities in Blue Nile joined the war against the central government in Khartoum as a means to address their many political, social and economic grievances. In Blue Nile, SPLM/A recruits were initially from the Uduk, Ingessana and other indigenous communities. In the 1990s, they were joined by large numbers of Berta, Hamaj and Kadalo.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Hassan, ‘Spilling Over’, 15.

25 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

26 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

Against this, the NCP regime mobilized large numbers of fighters mainly from newcomer communities, especially the Fellata, but also from Berta and other indigenous communities.<sup>27</sup> In the case of the Berta, those who supported the NCP were led by the traditional leader of the Jabalween, a Berta community living in and around Fazughli (Qeissan county).<sup>28</sup> Members of the Watawit supported both parties to the conflict but were more represented on the NCP side. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, heavy fighting caused the displacement of Uduk communities, and to a lesser extent Ingessana and Berta.<sup>29</sup> The inter-communal violence in Blue Nile caused great suffering and created numerous grievances, leaving behind a social fabric that was badly torn apart.

### **Independence and a new conflict**

In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended more than 20 years of civil war and the SPLM (Sudanese People's Liberation Movement) entered into a power-sharing arrangement with the ruling NCP (National Congress Party) regime, led by then President al-Bashir. The CPA failed to address the key conflict drivers in Blue Nile, however. In particular, while the CPA included a provision allowing Southern Sudan to vote on whether to secede, Blue Nile was only granted popular consultations. This was a process designed to allow people in Blue Nile to voice grievances and have a say in how they would be governed in the future but did not allow for self-determination. In the end, however, the NCP regime simultaneously stifled the grievances voiced during the consultations and hampered a process of political consensus building.<sup>30</sup>

After the Southern Sudanese population chose independence from Sudan, political tensions between the NCP and SPLM/A came to a head due to disagreements over the implementation of the CPA, local elections and the future of SPLM/A soldiers in South Kordofan and Blue

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27 Gramizzi, 'At an Impasse', 35.

28 The Jabalween's support to the NCP led to clashes between them and the SPLM/A. During these clashes, their traditional leader was killed, with his nephew, Zaidan Yassin (one of their militia leaders), ultimately blaming Malik for the death. The NCP would later exploit this and support Zaidan to form an anti-SPLM/A-N militia drawn from the Berta and Hamaj communities. See Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 29–30.

29 Notably, by the late 1980s, most Uduk had fled Blue Nile for refugee camps in Ethiopia, only to be displaced from there to Sudan and then back again to Ethiopia in 1993. See: James, 'Whatever Happened to the "Safe Havens"?', 106. Uduk fled Blue Nile for Ethiopia but then had to leave Ethiopia when the Mengistu regime fell in 1991 only to return to Ethiopia after the SPLM/A split and they were no longer welcome among Riek Machar's movement.

30 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

Nile (sometimes referred to as the ‘Two Areas’).<sup>31</sup> Six years later, the prevailing perception was that little had changed in the way that the NCP regime governed.<sup>32</sup> Tensions led to an outbreak of violence and reignited the war, first in South Kordofan (June 2011) and then Blue Nile (September 2011). In response, the newly established SPLM/A-N, along with the three strongest Darfuri rebel groups, formed the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) with the aim of overthrowing al-Bashir and creating a Sudan without marginalization.<sup>33</sup>

Heavy fighting continued in the Two Areas until mid-2016. During this time, the SPLM/A-N were primarily contained to the southern part of Blue Nile and in pockets they controlled in the Ingessana Hills (Bau), Zosak (Kurmuk) and Amora (Qeissan) in northern Blue Nile. In June 2016, the SPLM/A-N and the NCP regime agreed to a cessation of hostilities, having arrived at a stalemate in the fighting. As yet, there is no formal resolution of the conflict.

### **Divisions within Blue Nile rebel factions**

As hostilities between the SPLM/A-N and the NCP regime were coming to an end, political divisions between the former and the SRF and within the SPLM/A-N surfaced. In 2015, mistrust within the SRF coalition led the SPLM/A-N to split with the main Darfuri movements. That same year, divisions within the SPLM/A-N became apparent in Blue Nile between supporters and detractors of Malik Agar, the chair and commander-in-chief of the SPLM/A-N. Largely, these were due to long-standing disagreements between Malik, who hails from the Ingessana community, and several leading military and political figures from other Blue Nile communities. As the tensions increased, a rift formed within the SPLM/A-N leadership, with Malik and Secretary General Yasir Arman on the one side, and the deputy chair, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, on the other.<sup>34</sup> As these divisions became more public, those in Blue Nile who disagreed with Malik publicly gave their support al-Hilu.<sup>35</sup>

Malik sought to maintain control of the situation by arresting Blue Nile SPLM/A-N members who

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- 31 The Sudanese government sought to expel SPLM/A soldiers from the Two Areas into what was to become South Sudan. The SPLM/A and the communities they represented strongly opposed this as they viewed these soldiers as necessary for their protection. As tensions rose, clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and SPLM/A-N soldiers broke out and violence quickly spread, reigniting the civil war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.
  - 32 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
  - 33 Andrew McCutchen, ‘The Sudan Revolutionary Front: Its Formation and Development’, Human Security Baseline Assessment, Working Paper 33, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2014, 5.
  - 34 Hassan, ‘Spilling Over’, 34–38.
  - 35 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.



supported al-Hilu, which only increased opposition to his rule.<sup>36</sup> In May 2017, skirmishes broke out as resistance to these arrest attempts quickly spiralled into large-scale violence between the communities supporting Malik and those supporting al-Hilu, which eventually led to the SPLM/A-N split. Because the initial divisions were largely between people of different ethnic groups, the fighting took on an ethnic dimension and spread across their areas of control in southern Blue Nile, leading to many casualties on both sides. By the end of June 2017, Malik and his mainly Ingessana supporters were driven out of Blue Nile and into Maban county in South Sudan. Despite repeated attempts to regain territory in Blue Nile, Malik and his supporters were contained along the border with South Sudan and in a pocket in the Ingessana Hills. The latter position then came under repeated attacks by the NCP regime, which sought to capitalize on any weaknesses resulting from the SPLMA/A-N split.

In October 2017, the SPLM/A-N held an extraordinary general convention, boycotted by Malik, Yasir and their supporters, at which al-Hilu was chosen as the chair and commander-in-chief of what is now referred to in this report as the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).<sup>37</sup> In Blue Nile, SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) territory covers area in the southern part of the state that is inhabited by the communities of Uduk, Koma, Jumjum and Berta, as well as the areas of Zosak and Amora inhabited by Berta.<sup>38</sup> Since the extraordinary general convention, the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) in Blue Nile has been led by General Joseph Tuka, an Uduk, and his deputy, al-Jundi Suleiman, who is a Berta. Over the next two years until the NCP regime's collapse, the situation in the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu)'s territory in Blue Nile was relatively calm with no significant instances of violence between the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) and government security forces.

### **A flawed peace process**

While the transitional government peace process included genuine attempts to address local grievances, along with real efforts to begin creating a governance system that reduced peripheral marginalization, it had two main shortcomings.

First, although the peace process sought to create a new governance system, it only included some Blue Nile communities. Given that a significant number of communities were left out, the new governance system consequently did not take into account the grievances and desires of all people living in Blue Nile. It is not clear if this was an intentional oversight on the part of the transitional government. Regardless, it created anger and resentment among some communities because they felt left out. While this flaw in the peace process is not as apparent in Blue Nile as it is in Darfur and South Kordofan, it still has an impact in the state.

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36 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

37 Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 37.

38 The SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) also continues to govern significant territory in the Nuba mountains region of South Kordofan state and has seen its local popularity increase since 2021, largely at the expense of the Malik faction.

Second, by agreeing to negotiate issues pertaining to governance in two separate tracks but covering the same political and geographic area, the peace process created competition between the two processes, as well as between the communities aligned to each SPLM/A-N faction. This meant that building consensus between the two factions on how they should both be part of the future governance of Blue Nile has proven elusive. Furthermore, there are serious unresolved grievances between the communities that support one faction or the other. This impacts both their relationship and the political interests of their leaders. It has also directly contributed to the outbreak of violence.

### The SPLM/A-N and the Juba Peace Agreement

In 2019, the collapse of the NCP regime and the ouster of al-Bashir precipitated significant political change in Blue Nile, opening up new political arrangements and involving different actors.<sup>39</sup> In particular, the new transitional government initiated a two-track peace process, with one track for the SRF, which included a Two Areas track for the SPLM/A-N (SRF),<sup>40</sup> and another track for the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). This two-track approach would prove to be a problematic (also see text box).

Since the final signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) on 3 October 2020, concerns have emerged that Malik and the SPLM/A-N (SRF) might be less inclined to support a peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), as this would grant the latter political power at their expense. Moreover, the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) has not signed the JPA. In the years after the 2017 split and prior to the Juba peace process, the support and political legitimacy of Malik and the SPLM/A-N (SRF) had waned, with their support base diminished and the faction controlling only limited territory inside Sudan.<sup>41</sup> It was only after receiving their own track in the peace process that SPLM/A-N (SRF) legitimacy increased. In contrast, the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) is gaining in popularity.<sup>42</sup>

Despite previously waning political prospects, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) is granted a significant amount of political representation in Blue Nile through the JPA. Specifically, it designates 30 per cent of state-level government positions (both executive and legislative) to the faction,

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39 While much happened at the national level during 2019 and 2020, not much actually changed in terms of governance in Blue Nile. The transitional government appointed a governor in July 2020 but he made few changes. The two SPLM/A-N factions maintained their spheres of influence, and mostly avoided confrontation with one another, as well as with the state government in Damazin. The Juba peace process changed this: Governance issues became much more dynamic.

40 This is the name the SPLM/A-N faction aligned with Malik adopted after merging with the Darfuri SRF movements in 2017, following the split in the SPLM/A-N.

41 Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 42.

42 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

along with the right to appoint the governor and cabinet.<sup>43</sup> This brings Malik and his supporters back to the forefront of political power in Blue Nile. In June 2021, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) began to implement the JPA by creating a governance structure in Blue Nile and starting a security sector reform programme.<sup>44</sup> In forming the new governance structure, however, Malik has relied on close political allies from the Ingessana<sup>45</sup> and only a few other communities.

In addition to the Ingessana, a second key support base is the Fellata community, with which Malik developed a stronger relationship in the years after the SPLM/A-N split and during the peace process.<sup>46</sup> The circumstances surrounding their alignment are unclear, especially as the Fellata had long been the backbone of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF)<sup>47</sup> under the NCP regime.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, during and after NCP rule, the Fellata maintained a limited relationship with the SPLM/A-N in order to balance their support somewhere between the two sides.<sup>49</sup> This

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- 43 Additionally, the JPA grants the SPLM/A-N (SRF) the deputy governors in West and South Kordofan, along with 30 per cent of state-level government positions in those two states. See: 'Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan between the Transitional Government of Sudan and the Parties to Peace Process', Official English Translation, 3 October 2020. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Juba%20Agreement%20for%20Peace%20in%20Sudan%20-%20Official%20ENGLISH.PDF>
- 44 Begun in September 2021, the security sector reform process was implemented with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) instead of with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), thus highlighting the closer relationship the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has with the SAF. According to eyewitnesses to these events, the process quickly became chaotic. Once SAF officers arrived to verify the process, for example, it became clear that a significant proportion of those claiming to be SPLM/A-N (SRF) soldiers were in fact already SAF soldiers. How many SPLM/A-N (SRF) soldiers actually integrated into the SAF is unknown. While it is not clear which SPLM/A-N (SRF) members knew this was the case, situations such as this often arise during security sector reform processes in Sudan as members of the SAF try to use it as a way to increase their personal position and rank. Since June 2021, it appears that new flows of weapons to militias aligned with the SPLM/A-N (SRF) have also been occurring. This has raised questions about the security sector reform process and whether it has effectively reduced the number of soldiers in Blue Nile who are part of the SAF.
- 45 Key Ingessana individuals include General Ahmed al-Umda, previously the military head of SPLM/A-N forces in Blue Nile prior to the 2017 split. Along with most other Ingessana soldiers, he is part of the leadership of the SPLM/A-N (SRF) forces.
- 46 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 47 The NCP regime created the PDF in November 1989 as an Islamist security force to operate in conjunction with the military but beholden to the civilian Islamist security elites in the regime. In rural areas, the PDF often recruited on an ethnic basis as part of the divide-and-rule tactics of the NCP regime, focusing on those ethnic communities in conflict with communities supporting armed rebellion. See: Jago Salmon, 'A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces', Human Security Baseline Assessment Working Paper 10, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2007.
- 48 Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 29.
- 49 Sørbrø and Ahmed, *Sudan Divided*, 230.

existing relationship and the loss of their NCP patrons likely compelled the Fellata to seek alignment with the SPLM/A-N (SRF) in Blue Nile. Lack of support from other communities across Blue Nile probably also encouraged the SPLM/A-N (SRF) to seek alignment with the Fellata. Regardless of how this alliance formed, the relationship grew steadily and there are now several Fellata ministers in Damazin, including the finance minister.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond political alignment, the relationship between the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and the Fellata community has resulted in the increased militarization of the latter, with several eyewitnesses observing a training centre for Fellata militia just north of Damazin during the latter half of 2021.<sup>51</sup> Following this, armed Fellata were regularly observed in some Damazin markets. In the Roseires and Wad al-Mahi localities, tensions also increased when the Fellata sought to expand into grazing areas that Arab pastoralists consider to be theirs. This has complicated SPLM/A-N (SRF) relations with these Arab pastoralist communities (and others): The latter have grown closer to the indigenous communities in these areas, which are aligned with SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), in part over shared enmity against the Fellata and increased displeasure with the SPLM/A-N (SRF).<sup>52</sup> Taking the blame for these increased tensions, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) is driving indigenous communities further away and simultaneously maintaining a communal wedge between the two SPLM/A-N factions.<sup>53</sup>

Around the same time that the SPLM/A-N (SRF) courted the Fellata on a large scale, they also began courting the Hausa community. Although Malik's links to this community were much less well developed, the demise of the NCP regime also sent the Hausa in search of new political allies, and an alignment with the SPLM/A-N (SRF) suited both parties.<sup>54</sup> At this time, the Hausa community also began receiving arms, which was first evident in clashes with members of the Berta community in May 2021. Prior to this, the Hausa had far fewer armaments compared to

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50 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

51 While militarization has increased, it should be noted that the Fellata have long been militarized. In addition to a large presence in the PDF, there are also multiple community-based militias, some with ties to SAF military intelligence. In addition to the training centre north of Damazin, a significant portion of those at the SPLM/A-N (SRF) cantonment site during the security sector reform process were also Fellata. This information comes from several eyewitnesses to the events.

52 These indigenous communities, especially the Hamaj, have long clashed with the Fellata, with some Hamaj going as far as joining a SAF-aligned militia after 2010 with the primary objective of obtaining weapons to use against the Fellata during communal clashes. See Hassan, 'Spilling Over', 30.

53 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

54 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

other communities.<sup>55</sup> During the remainder of 2021, additional clashes occurred between the Hausa and Arab pastoralists and the Hamaj on the eastern side of the Nile. During this time (but first proposed in the early 1990s),<sup>56</sup> the Hausa also increased calls for their own *nazara* (territorial unit),<sup>57</sup> independent of the Funj. This further strained relations with neighbouring Funj communities fearful that land given to form a Hausa *nazara* would come from their own *nazara*.<sup>58</sup>

Along with the Ingessana, Fellata and Hausa, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) also initially had a support base among the communities living in the Tadamon locality in western Blue Nile. Communities living here include those originally from Darfur, such as the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa, those under the Funj sub-*Mek* of Saif Sheikh Adham, and a sub-section of the Ingessana. Many members of these communities rely on the work opportunities generated by the large numbers of mechanized farms in Tadamon and thus, by extension, the Blue Nile infrastructure more generally. In late March and April 2022, Malik and leaders from these communities had a public disagreement over the state of the roads in Tadamon, which local communities wanted rehabilitated in order to support the local economy. Malik stated his displeasure at what he felt was a lack of political support from these communities and appeared to link this with a rejection of their request to rehabilitate the roads. In response, a number of community leaders released a public statement indicating their intention to stop paying taxes to the state government in Damazin and instead send them to Khartoum. Since then, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has lost much of its support base in Tadamon.<sup>59</sup>

Across Blue Nile, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has alienated a range of other communities, thus hindering progress in creating inclusive governance.<sup>60</sup> The most acute challenges faced by the SPLM/A-N (SRF) have been with the communities of the Berta, Kadalo and Gumuz that live in the Qeissan, Roseires and Wad al-Mahi localities. The SPLM/A-N (SRF) had likewise sought to court the Hamaj and Kadalo during the Juba peace process and initially made some inroads. Since then, however, Malik and the SPLM/A-N (SRF) have fallen out with these communities

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55 Although they were NCP supporters, for example, they did not join the PDF to the same degree as the Fellata.

56 Sørbø and Ahmed, *Sudan Divided*, 228–229.

57 A *nazara* is a territorial unit in the Native Administration system. See: John Ryle, Justin Willis, Suliman Baldo and Jok Madut Jok, eds., 'The Sudan Handbook', London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012, 18. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/RVI%20The%20Sudan%20Handbook.pdf>

58 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

59 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

60 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

and their support has shifted towards the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).<sup>61</sup>

Failure to form close relationships with more than a few communities across the state means that so far the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has not been able to translate their new JPA-mandated political representation into political consolidation across Blue Nile. Some of this inability to create and solidify a broader base of relationships is due to residual grievances related to the violent split of the SPLM/A-N in 2017; some is due to the personal relationships between Malik and other key actors; and some appears due to the decision by some communities to wait and see how the balance of power between the two SPLM/A-N factions—SRF and al-Hilu—plays out before deciding whether to support either of them. In the end, SPLM/A-N (SRF) inability to overcome these challenges limits their political legitimacy across many areas of the state.<sup>62</sup>

### Blue Nile after the coup

The October 2021 coup further complicated Blue Nile political dynamics. Shortly before it occurred, Malik visited Blue Nile with the SAF, ostensibly to finish the security sector reform process. When the coup took place, Malik decided to stay in a remote part of Blue Nile, where he remained for more than a week before publicly stating he intended to keep his seat on the sovereign council.<sup>63</sup> Since then, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has continued to align with the military wing of the transitional government (Mil-TG), along with the other members of the SRF. This alignment has two main impacts in Blue Nile.

First, by joining with the Mil-TG and supporting the coup, SRF leaders were able to keep their political positions and benefits from the JPA. However, keeping these in place is contingent upon future support for the Mil-TG and thus the SRF is essentially beholden to the Mil-TG for its political legitimacy, and so unlikely to challenge Mil-TG actions. They are also unlikely to push for implementation of parts of the JPA that go against Mil-TG interests. For example, JPA provisions on revenue sharing that increase the state share of revenue generated by resource extraction are unlikely to be implemented due to the heavy control the Mil-TG has over the

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61 Malik has had a long and tense relationship with Hamaj leaders such as *Omda* Abu Shotal (their paramount leader) and Mohamed Yunis, a former Roseires commissioner from 2008–2010 and now a general and senior military figure in the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). The Kadalo and their paramount leader, Abdelaziz al-Amin, have recently felt let down by what they perceive as lack of SPLM/A-N (SRF) support to address their concerns about a planned expansion of Dinder National Park. They are worried that negotiations will affect access to traditional grazing and farming land.

62 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

63 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

resource sector.<sup>64</sup> Second, both the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and the Mil-TG have strong reservations about a peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) as they both feel some of the negotiating positions of the latter threaten their own interests.<sup>65</sup> With the Mil-TG and the SPLM/A-N (SRF) working together to set current government policies, both are likely happy with the status quo regarding the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) and thus it is unlikely they would want to restart the peace process with them.

Further complicating Blue Nile dynamics is the large-scale violence that broke out in July 2022 and continued throughout the rest of the year between the Hausa community and the Funj and Arab communities. Tensions between these communities increased in May 2022 as fears rose further that the Hausa would be granted a *nazara*.<sup>66</sup> Due to growing political alignment between the Hausa and the SPLM/A-N (SRF), many people assumed that the latter was supporting Hausa calls and had the political power necessary to grant this request.<sup>67</sup> In late May, leaders of several Funj communities, including the Berta and Hamaj, met in Damazin and released a statement in which they rejected Hausa demands for a *nazara*.<sup>68</sup> In June and early July there were several incidents of violence between Hausa and other communities, resulting in the deaths of more than several dozen individuals.<sup>69</sup> Then, starting on the night of 14 July 2022 and continuing for several days, wide-spread violence occurred in Qeissan, Roseires and Wad al-Mahi localities. Hundreds of people were killed and tens of thousands were displaced, largely from the Hausa community.<sup>70</sup>

There is also a political aspect to this conflict over land and identity. Since forming its Blue Nile

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- 64 Since 2019, the Mil-TG has maintained its significant vested interest in resource extraction in Blue Nile. In some places, this is done in conjunction with the SPLM/A-N (SRF), while in others it is through a direct relationship with local communities. The mining done in conjunction between the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and the Mil-TG helps bring them together; however, it also makes them less likely to challenge Mil-TG hegemony. This also highlights the continued central government practice of controlling periphery politics and seeing them as a source of revenue, instead of providing development and economic support and investing in much-needed infrastructure, such as in the health and education sectors.
- 65 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 66 The actual mechanism through which communities receive their own *nazara* is not clear. This is especially the case in recent years, as the Native Administration has been changed and manipulated, in particular by the NCP regime.
- 67 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 68 Letter on file with the report researchers. It is signed by Funj *Mek* al-Fatih al-Mek Yusif Hassan Adlan.
- 69 Interviews with several eyewitnesses to the violence.
- 70 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

government, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has struggled to create a broad and inclusive base of political support. The recent fighting highlights the gulf between the SPLM/A-N (SRF) and many Funj communities.<sup>71</sup> Immediately after the fighting, leaders from Funj communities (including the Berta, Hamaj and Kadalo) released statements blaming the SPLM/A-N (SRF) for what they felt was its unilateral support to Hausa demands for a *nazara*. They further stated that the situation could not be resolved without the removal of Governor Ahmed al-Umda and the freezing of the JPA to prevent continued SPLM/A-N (SRF) rule. Because these Funj communities have moved closer to the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) in recent months, their statements have a political undertone that threatens to escalate tensions into a conflict between the two SPLM/A-N parties. In apparent recognition of its weakened political position, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) appointed new ministers and locality commissioners from the Berta, Kadalo and Arab communities in mid-August 2022.<sup>72</sup> Despite these attempts to reach out, the situation remains very tense, with several eyewitnesses stating that all communities are expecting further violence, especially if the situation continues to evolve politically.

### Cross-border relations

In many ways, the border has had less impact on the political, cultural and economic dynamics in Blue Nile in recent decades than it has on those in Benishangul-Gumuz.<sup>73</sup> During the 1990s, communities along the border and the SPLM/A looked to Ethiopia for military and political support in their struggles against the NCP regime. Since 2011, however, Ethiopian support has been limited to political negotiations. In large part, this is due to the changing relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia, with the latter agreeing to not provide military support to the SPLM/A-N in exchange for Sudanese support for the GERD. This changing relationship is also informed by broader understanding that antagonism between the two countries has helped neither one.

At present, however, the relationship between the two is again deteriorating, as seen in SAF support for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the dissident Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM). Recent violence in Blue Nile thus provides an opening to the Ethiopian government to resume support to dissident groups in Sudan. As Funj communities in north-eastern Blue Nile, which are aligned with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), look to arm themselves because of concerns about future violence with the SPLM/A-N (SRF) state government,<sup>74</sup> they

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71 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

72 For instance, Kadalo *Omda* Abdelaziz al-Amin was appointed commissioner for Wad al-Mahi, and a representative of the Kenana (Arab pastoralist community) as the commissioner for Roseires.

73 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

74 Eyewitness accounts to attempt to acquire weapons.



could turn to old friends in Ethiopia for support.<sup>75</sup> It is not clear how receptive SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) leadership is to this, however. Regardless, local community leaders in Blue Nile could bypass SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) leadership and instead work directly through their own contacts in Ethiopia to receive support.<sup>76</sup> How the Ethiopian government responds will go a long way towards determining whether violence in Blue Nile escalates to a broader political-military struggle between the two SPLM/A-N factions. This violence would likely benefit the Mil-TG's ability to continue dominating Sudan's politics, while compounding efforts by a new civilian wing of a transitional government to govern Sudan and bring peace to its peripheries.

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75 For instance, *Omda* Obeid Abu Shotal of the Hamaj was part of the NDA-backed forces in Ethiopia, which fought the NCP regime in the 1990s. Abu Shotal and other Hamaj joined the NDA following political disputes with the Hausa. See: Sørbø and Ahmed, *Sudan Divided*, 229.

76 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

# BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ AND THE BATTLE FOR ETHNIC FEDERALISM

The regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz lies on the western border of Ethiopia with Sudan. It first came into existence in 1995, during the Ethiopian decentralization process that followed the removal of the Derg in 1991. The Benishangul-Gumuz territory was incorporated from the old provinces of Gojjam and Wellega. Gojjam was heavily influenced by Amhara culture and the Ethiopian Orthodox religion, while Wellega was more culturally linked to the protestant Oromo culture.<sup>77</sup> The state has three zones—Metekel, Kamashi and Assosa—along with the special *woreda* (district) of Mao-Komo. The capital of Benishangul-Gumuz is in the town of Assosa in Assosa zone.

The state was created in part to protect and empower minority indigenous communities living in this part of Ethiopia.<sup>78</sup> Specifically, these communities are the Berta (locally referred to as ‘Benishangul’), Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. Initially forming a majority, this was no longer the case after 2007 census due to continued inward migration from neighbouring states.<sup>79</sup> These indigenous communities have special political rights in Benishangul-Gumuz to ensure their continued majority political representation at the state level. The largest of these ethnic minorities are the Berta, which live mostly in Assosa zone. In the past, some Berta were referred to as ‘Watawit’, as they were the political elite in the latter half of the 1800s. During this time, the distinction between Watawit and non-Watawit Berta speakers was clearer whereas at present it is less clear.<sup>80</sup>

The Gumuz (slightly fewer in number) live mostly in Metekel and Kamashi zones. The Mao

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77 Sarah Vaughan and Mesfin Gebremichael, ‘Resettlement of Gumuz communities around Ethiopia’s Blue Nile dam’, FutureDAMS working paper 10, Manchester: University of Manchester, July 2020, 9.

78 Vaughan and Gebremichael, ‘Resettlement of Gumuz communities’, 8–9.

79 Vaughan and Gebremichael, ‘Resettlement of Gumuz communities’, 8.

80 A K Adegehe, ‘Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions’, PhD dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, the Netherlands, 2009, 118–119. Also, researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

and Komo live in their own special *woreda* in the extreme south-west of the state, along the border with Sudan and South Sudan. The Shinasha live throughout Metekel zone. Collectively, these five communities are referred to as the ‘titular communities’, or those granted the rights of self-administration, while other communities, such as Amhara or Oromo, are referred to as ‘non-titular communities’.<sup>81</sup>

### Cross-border rebels in Benishangul-Gumuz

The political history of the area is one in which local indigenous elites have sought to increase their political representation. To do so, they have often allied themselves with more powerful outsiders, especially in Sudan, against the government in Addis. In what is now Benishangul-Gumuz, the indigenous communities have long experienced marginalization, especially after the beginning of Turco–Egyptian rule. This marginalization was both political and economic, and lasted long after the Ethiopian state was formed in after the Derg’s removal in 1991.

In the 1970s, during the Derg regime, these indigenous communities began to organize themselves politically and formed an armed opposition group that was mostly led by Berta speakers.<sup>82</sup> Not long after its formation, however, the Derg easily defeated it and its members took refuge across the border in Sudan. Later, in the 1980s while in exile in Sudan, many of these same individuals formed the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM), with some BPLM leaders having strong links to the Sudanese National Islamic Front (NIF).<sup>83</sup> They first looked to support from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This did not work, however, as the OLF wanted the BPLM to declare themselves black Oromos<sup>84</sup> and rejected BPLM calls for self-determination.<sup>85</sup> Toward the end of the 1980s, the BPLM then sought support from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which they received in 1988.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the Berta political elite running the BPLM also maintained a connection with the NIF in Sudan,<sup>87</sup> which came to power in a coup in 1989.

In Ethiopia, the period after the overthrow of the Derg in 1991 until 1995 was marked by increasing communal violence and political competition in Benishangul-Gumuz, and increased tensions

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81 Adegehe, ‘Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia’, 22.

82 Mesfin Gebremichael, ‘Federalism and Conflict Management in Ethiopia. Case Study of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State’, PhD thesis, University of Bradford, Bradford, 2012, 231.

83 John Young, ‘Along Ethiopia’s western frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in transition’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37/2 (1999): 327.

84 John Young, ‘Along Ethiopia’s western frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in transition’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37/2 (1999): 327.

85 Mesfin Gebremichael, ‘Federalism and Conflict Management in Ethiopia. Case Study of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State’, PhD thesis, University of Bradford, Bradford, 2012, 232.

86 Young, ‘Along Ethiopia’s western frontier’, 327.

87 Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 349.

between Sudan and Ethiopia. It was not until 1993 that the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state formally came into being due to infighting in the BPLM and tensions between the BPLM and the OLF, as well as tensions between the OLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).<sup>88</sup> The BPLM initially dominated the umbrella party that ruled Benishangul-Gumuz until 1995, before the party was disbanded by EPRDF officials from Addis due to their claim that the umbrella party elites were too fractious to rule.<sup>89</sup> At this point, some BPLM elites sought exile in Sudan.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, some in the NIF were increasing their support to anti-Addis groups as part of a broader plan to destabilize Ethiopia as a precursor to spreading their version of political Islam in the country. These BPLM leaders have maintained links to Sudan up to 2022, including during periods of reconciliation with the Assosa and Addis governments.<sup>91</sup> They are referred to in this paper as the 'dissident BPLM'.

Dissident BPLM political interests developed during the mid-1990s and have since centred on three themes: increasing indigenous political representation in Benishangul-Gumuz; support for the Ethiopian system of ethnic federalism; and the restoring land ownership to indigenous communities in Benishangul-Gumuz. Most dissident BPLM leaders view the Benishangul-Gumuz attachment to the Ethiopian Empire after 1902 as a mistake, instead asserting that from a cultural perspective it made sense for the region to be a part of Sudan. In addition to the cultural connections between Benishangul-Gumuz and Sudan, NIF influence in the borderlands also helped boost such sentiments. These feelings have led some BPLM leaders to support calls for self-determination, secession and joining Sudan, although these calls have recently diminished.<sup>92</sup>

Finally, since the mid-1990s there has been an increase in communal violence, especially in Metekel zone. This violence has been and continues to be between Gumuz community members and Amhara settlers, many of whom had arrived as part of previous government-sponsored resettlement programmes.<sup>93</sup> For the Gumuz, the change in political direction towards ethnic federalism since 1993 had given them a chance to redress the balance of land ownership following the arrivals of settlers and decades of government-sponsored displacement.<sup>94</sup> This violence was also political in nature as both the Gumuz and Amhara relied on support from the

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88 Adegehe, 'Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia', 160.

89 Adegehe, 'Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia', 160–162.

90 'Horn of Africa – Alliances', *Africa Confidential* 38/4 (1997), 8.

91 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders in Blue Nile and Benishangul-Gumuz, local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

92 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

93 Gebremichael, 'Federalism and Conflict Management in Ethiopia', 296–298.

94 Vaughan and Gebremichael, 'Resettlement of Gumuz communities', 11.

BPLM and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), respectively, for support.<sup>95</sup> The politicized nature of land conflicts featured throughout the following decades and still plays a role in 2022.

### **From exile to return**

The dissident BPLM tried to return to political relevance in Benishangul-Gumuz but largely remained in exile across the border in Sudan for much of the next decade—the 2000s. During this time, the relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia improved. Turabi's ouster and war with Eritrea led to a reduction of destabilizing Sudanese foreign policy towards Ethiopia, which allowed President al-Bashir and Prime Minister Meles to develop a working relationship. This meant that Sudanese support to the dissident BPLM was limited, with some BPLM members turning to Eritrea for external support as their attempts to increase political power from inside Benishangul-Gumuz failed.<sup>96</sup> Support from Eritrea, however, was never enough to allow the BPLM to pressure Addis into granting them increased political power in Benishangul-Gumuz. In addition, the National Congress Party (NCP) regime in Khartoum was resistant to Eritrean support because they did not want it to negatively impact their relationship with Ethiopia and this therefore limited the scope and scale of their support for the BPLM. Despite this, the NCP regime was not willing to make a clean break with the dissident BPLM, which they saw as an asset enabling them to influence events in the borderlands, even if their relationship with Ethiopia had improved. Between 2007 and 2011, some dissident BPLM leaders were given positions in the civil service of Blue Nile state in Sudan where they joined their Gumuz and Berta kin, thus strengthening this relationship.

The desire of the NCP regime to maintain a relationship with the dissident BPLM became clearer after 2011, when war broke out in Blue Nile with the SPLM/A-N. Subsequent to this, the NCP regime developed interest in having close allies in the Benishangul-Gumuz government. This desire stemmed from the NCP regime's objective to deny the SPLM/A-N a safe haven in Benishangul-Gumuz, from whence they could launch attacks against Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) positions in Blue Nile, as they had done during the previous civil war. While the federal government in Addis had promised not to give the SPLM/A-N military support, the NCP regime nonetheless wanted people they thought they could trust in the capital of Benishangul-Gumuz, Assosa.<sup>97</sup> The NCP regime encouraged and supported the dissident BPLM to seek political accommodation with Addis. The dissident BPLM also felt that it was in their interests to pursue

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95 Gebremichael, 'Federalism and Conflict Management in Ethiopia', 297–298. The ANDM was a member of the ruling EPRDF.

96 Adegehe, 'Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia', 167.

97 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

this, as Sudan was unlikely to provide them military support any time soon.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, the federal government in Addis was keen to keep Sudan on their side of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) debate. Addis thus appears to have been willing to grant some political concessions to the dissident BPLM, along with some local administrative positions in Benishangul-Gumuz, in exchange for continued Sudanese support for the GERD.

In 2013, the dissident BPLM and the ruling EPRDF agreed to preliminary conditions and the former travelled back to Ethiopia to finish the arrangements that would bring them back into political power in Assosa.<sup>99</sup> Shortly after they returned, however, most of these leaders were arrested in what were unclear circumstances. While not confirmed, it appears most of these arrests were due to competition between Berta and Gumuz elites, including other former BPLM leaders, who did not want to share power with their former comrades in exile.<sup>100</sup> Most of these arrested were released after several years, with some travelling back to Sudan; however, several other exiled BPLM leaders remained in jail for longer periods. Eventually, some of the exiled BPLM leaders did become a part of state-level government in Assosa. For their part, in the end, the NCP regime managed to install some allies in state government, even if others never became a part of it.

### **Benishangul after Abiy**

Politics in Benishangul-Gumuz remained static after the aborted 2013 attempt at political arrangement between the dissident BPLM and the EPRDF until Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in April 2018—the first Oromo to hold this position. While some dissident BPLM were involved in state government in Benishangul-Gumuz, they were never able to address their grievances or satisfy their own interests.<sup>101</sup> Prime Minister Abiy's efforts to change the Ethiopian governance model from ethnic federalism to a more centralized state system has caused significant changes in Benishangul-Gumuz. The deteriorating relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia after the NCP regime collapse has also impacted political and conflict dynamics in the borderlands region.

By the time Abiy came to power, social relations in Benishangul-Gumuz were at a low point, with long running tensions over land, especially between the indigenous titular communities

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98 As with most policy decisions during the NCP regime, different parts of the regime acted in different ways. For instance, the Islamists in the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and SAF military intelligence encouraged the dissident BPLM to return to Assosa with the hope that they could be their proxies in Benishangul-Gumuz, while President al-Bashir and those around him were more interested in the broader geopolitical relationship with Ethiopia.

99 'Ethiopian rebel group ends arms struggle, returns home', *Sudan Tribune*, 8 June 2013. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://sudantribune.com/article45983/>

100 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

101 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

and members of the non-titular communities, in particular the Amhara and Oromo, a key flash point.<sup>102</sup> When Abiy became prime minister, this ignited Oromo and Amhara feelings of political ascendancy, which they felt should translate to changes in how political representation was apportioned where they were living in Benishangul-Gumuz.<sup>103</sup> In a sense, this was their attempt to redress what they felt was political marginalization enshrined in the Benishangul-Gumuz constitution, which only granted the ‘right to elect and to be elected for the members of the titular ethnic groups’.<sup>104</sup>

As prime minister, Abiy’s stated goal of reforming or removing ethnic federalism had essentially re-opened the question of how Ethiopian people would be governed. This caused significant consternation among the Benishangul-Gumuz indigenous communities, which felt that ethnic federalism was the only way they could ensure their ability to control their own governance and protect their land interests.<sup>105</sup> This was especially concerning as by 2020, they were dangerously close to being minorities in their home state.<sup>106</sup> Thus, they were afraid of being outvoted if the non-titular communities were allowed to vote in local elections.<sup>107</sup>

Consequently, the situation was primed for violence that would be expressed at the communal level but with a broader underlying politicized aspect to it. Violence first erupted in Assosa town in June 2018 when those from the non-titular community clashed with Berta youth, who were conducting a protest, with both groups killing and looting.<sup>108</sup> Fighting then spread to Kamashi zone as tit-for-tat clashes between members of the Gumuz and Oromo communities escalated and more than 150,000 people were displaced by September 2018.<sup>109</sup> Clashes in Kamashi continued throughout 2018 and into 2019. In June 2019, large-scale violence broke out between members of the Gumuz and Amhara communities in Metekel zone. Following the attempted coup in the Amhara region on 22 June 2019, supporters of the coup killed at least 37 Gumuz in

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102 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

103 Vaughan and Gebremichael, ‘Resettlement of Gumuz communities’, 9.

104 Adegehe, ‘Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia’, 169.

105 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

106 Vaughan and Gebremichael, ‘Resettlement of Gumuz communities’, 8.

107 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

108 William Davison and Mistir Shew, ‘Turmoil blocks aid as communal conflict rages in gold-seamed Benishangul-Gumuz’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 16 November 2018. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/16/turmoil-blocks-aid-as-communal-conflict-rages-in-gold-seamed-benishangul-gumuz/>

109 Davison and Shew, ‘Turmoil blocks aid’.

Metekel along the border with the Amhara region.<sup>110</sup> In 2019 and 2020, violence between the Gumuz and Amhara communities escalated, especially as the size of Gumuz militias grew, and by the end of 2020, hundreds of civilians had been killed.<sup>111</sup>

Towards the end of 2019, the violence in Benishangul-Gumuz was starting to appear more and more political in nature. The last remaining dissident BPLM member still left in Ethiopia had gone to Blue Nile state in Sudan. By 2020, the increasingly well-organized Gumuz militias were linked to the dissident BPLM operating from Damazin, the capital of Blue Nile.<sup>112</sup> At present, BPLM leadership is from both the Berta and Gumuz communities, with perhaps a small Berta majority. Initially most soldiers on the ground were Gumuz, reflecting the fact that the level of anger over land grievances is higher in the Gumuz community, which creates a fertile breeding ground for mobilization. Since then BPLM leaders, with SAF support, have marginalized additional forces from among the Berta-speaking population.<sup>113</sup> The current BPLM objective is to increase their political and military organization in order to pressure the governments in both Assosa and Addis to take their political demands seriously. Most BPLM leaders have moved away from demands for self-determination and secession, recognizing that the reality of the GERD makes external support (namely, from Sudan) extremely unlikely. Instead, as a first step, BPLM leaders want to increase their own representation in Benishangul-Gumuz and preserve the ethnic federal status of the region. Then, they want to use their increased political power to roll back what they feel are the excessive land grabs by corporations and new settlements by outsiders in recent years, as well as ensure adequate compensation for the continued displacement related to the GERD.

## Links with Sudan

By early 2020, the dissident BPLM-aligned Gumuz militias had established rear bases inside Sudan, in Blue Nile and Sennar. Sudan also began to facilitate links between the TPLF, and

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- 110 Elias Mereset, 'Ethiopia: 37 killed in another region after coup attempt', AP News, 26 June 2019. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/36d94532c21045e3a050d67470d07a43>. In June 2019 followers of Asaminew Tsige, who at the time was the head of the Amhara region's Peace and Security Bureau assassinated the Amhara regional president and the ENDF's Chief of General Staff, in what the Ethiopian government called a coup. Asaminew Tsige's followers were largely Amhara hardliners who, among other things, believe that Metekel belongs to the Amhara region. In the days following the alleged coup attempt, tensions rose in Metekel between members of the Gumuz and Amhara communities and turned to violence.
- 111 Tsegaye Birhanu, 'The spiraling situation in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region', Ethiopia Insight, 18 June 2021. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/18/the-spiraling-situation-in-ethiopias-benishangul-gumuz-region/>
- 112 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 113 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, reliable SPLM/A-N leaders, interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.



later the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), and the dissident BPLM. For the TPLF–TDF,<sup>114</sup> links with the dissident BPLM became important as they tried to build a multi-ethnic front against the federal government from among communities interested in preserving the ethnic-federalist system of government. The actual scope and scale of the links between the TPLF–TDF and the dissident BPLM are not clear. In the first week of November 2021, however, a large meeting between the three groups was held in Damazin in Blue Nile.<sup>115</sup> It was almost certainly facilitated by SAF military intelligence.<sup>116</sup> Reliable eyewitness accounts also state that TPLF–TDF and dissident BPLM soldiers have been co-located at training camps in Sudan along the Sennar–Gedaref border, near the border with Ethiopia. This support facilitated BPLM-aligned militias to conduct cross-border hit-and-run attacks on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) outposts in Metekel and local police posts in Benishangul-Gumuz. While the SAF provided some military supplies, light arms and ammunition, support has always been rather limited: Several eyewitnesses state that a significant proportion of the dissident BPLM-aligned militias lack rifles and instead use traditional weapons such as bows and arrows. Despite the limited military support, by April 2021, the dissident BPLM-aligned militias had taken a degree of control over some areas of southern Kamashi zone in Benishangul-Gumuz,<sup>117</sup> as well as other areas in Ethiopia along the border with Qeissan locality in Sudan in 2022. Individuals associated with these militias still claim control over this area, with eyewitness corroborations, although the degree of control is difficult to confirm.

As links between the TPLF–TDF and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) became clearer during their joint assault on Addis in November 2021, the OLA and the dissident BPLM also established links. As with other linkages, the exact nature of the relationship between the BPLM and OLA is not well understood but reliable eyewitness accounts state that soldiers from both sides (in the case of the dissident BPLM, these were mostly Berta soldiers) fought together in the Mao-Komo special woreda in December 2021 and in January 2022, driving the ENDF and allied regional

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- 114 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 115 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 116 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 117 Confirming the exact location is difficult, although media reports point to the woredas of Agalo, Yaso and Sedal (sometimes called Sirba Abay). See: William Davison, Tweet, 1 May 2021. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/wdavison10/status/1388566271114063877>

security forces out of the area.<sup>118</sup> Since then, the ENDF has retaken some locations, although dissident BPLM and the OLA continue to carry out operations in the area.

In November 2021, the BPLM and the OLA became part of a coalition with the TPLF-TDF called the ‘United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces’ (UFEFCF), along with six other parties.<sup>119</sup> The stated objective of the UFEFCF is to replace the Abiy government (with force if necessary) with a transitional authority in order to protect the ethnic-federalist system of government in Ethiopia.<sup>120</sup> Created as the TPLF-TDF and the OLA were approaching Addis, the cohesiveness of the UFEFCF is less clear now that the federal government turned the tide of war, with both the TPLF-TDF and OLA losing territory close to Addis. Cohesiveness is especially at issue between the dissident BPLM and the OLA as some of their members have a long history of antagonism.<sup>121</sup> Consequently, it is unclear whether, or for how long, their shared enmity for the Abiy government will translate into coordination and support in Benishangul-Gumuz.

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- 118 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders. At this time, the OLA also controlled much of the Gidami *woreda* in the Oromiya region, although the ENDF has since retaken some of this area, including Gidami town. Assistance to two refugee camps hosting Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees ceased and most of the refugees fled north to the Tsore camp. See: ‘UNHCR, partners rush to aid thousands of refugees in Benishangul Gumuz region of Ethiopia’, Press release summary, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 4 February 2022. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/2/61fcf1fo4/unhcr-partners-rush-aid-thousands-refugees-benishangul-gumuz-region-ethiopia.html>
- 119 In addition to the TPLF, BPLM and OLA, the UFEFCF includes: Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front, Agaw Democratic Movement, Gambella Peoples Liberation Army, Global Kimant People Rights and Justice Movement/Kimant Democratic Party, Sidama National Liberation Front and Somali State Resistance.
- 120 See Humeyra Pamuk and Maggie Flick, ‘New alliance wants to oust Ethiopia’s PM by talks or force’, Reuters, 5 November 2021. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nine-ethiopian-groups-form-anti-government-alliance-2021-11-05/>
- 121 Researchers’ observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

# THE EFFECT OF BILATERAL RELATIONS ON BORDERLAND DYNAMICS

The bilateral relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia remained on fairly good terms from 2013 until 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy came to power in Ethiopia. Initially, Abiy becoming prime minister did not upset relations between Ethiopia and Sudan, even though the latter (including its security and military) had long grown accustomed to interacting with and trusting the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government.<sup>122</sup> Two specific recent events, however, have changed the nature of the relationship between these two countries.

The first is the peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which Sudanese security hardliners view as a potential threat. Sudanese security hardliners felt more comfortable when Ethiopia and Eritrea were at odds since they could not unite against Sudan as they had from 1995 to 1998.<sup>123</sup> Second, the collapse of the NCP regime also had a significant impact on the relationship between both countries, with two different factors at play in relation to President al-Bashir's political exit. On the one hand, this created space for the rise of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) into politics on a greater level than before. On the other, it opened up technocratic questions and concerns about the impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Sudanese dam system, its economy and its environment.

## Sudan after al-Bashir

Although it had been an influential player during the NCP era, the SAF and its worldview was elevated to the forefront of government policymaking by the Sudanese transitional government from 2019. In 2019, the SAF took the view that a hegemonic Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa, with its relationship with Eritrea and the impact of the GERD on Nile politics, was a threat to Sudanese interests. SAF leadership, including those on the sovereign council, has long had

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122 John Young, 'Conflict and Cooperation: Transitions in Modern Ethiopian-Sudanese Relations', Human Security Baseline Assessment, briefing paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2020, 4.

123 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.

concerns about a hegemonic Ethiopia in the Horn.<sup>124</sup> They consider a strong Ethiopia, both politically and militarily, as a potential threat to their internal security.<sup>125</sup> Perceived dominance over the Nile plays a role in these concerns, which align with Egyptian concerns. Moreover, SAF relationships with dominant political and security elites in Ethiopia were mainly with members of the TPLF, which was out of power by 2019.

At the same time, the civilian wing of the new transitional government (Civ-TG) began to express technical concerns—long suppressed by al-Bashir—about the GERD. While there is likely to be some benefit to Sudan as a result of the construction of the GERD, especially in terms of cheaper energy costs, there are genuine concerns related to the irrigated farms in Sudan,<sup>126</sup> water pumping stations in heavily populated areas and its impact on water flow to the Roseires Dam. Since a formal environmental review was never done, it is difficult to predict what other impacts there might be. While the Sudanese transitional government felt that these effects could be mitigated, this could only be done by having an agreement on the rate at which the GERD would be filled, and sharing information on water flow, especially during times of drought. Sudan would need to be able run the Roseires Dam efficiently, so some in the Civ-TG viewed the lack of agreement as a threat to Sudanese national security.<sup>127</sup>

The new prime minister of Sudan, Abdalla Hamdok, tried to walk the line between Sudanese political and military concerns, on one side, and his desire to have a positive relationship with Ethiopia, on the other. In doing so, Prime Minister Hamdok sought to adopt a neutral stance on the GERD, in contrast to al-Bashir's more pro-Ethiopia position. SAF geopolitical views and Civ-TG technical concerns, however, brought them much closer towards alignment with the Egyptian viewpoint. This also appears to reflect how Prime Minister Abiy in Addis interpreted changing views in Sudan.

## War in Ethiopia

In November 2020, the outbreak of hostilities between the TPLF and the federal government brought the changed relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan into the open. Initially, Abiy asked Sudan and the SAF for help in containing the TPLF inside the Tigray region; however, the SAF instead moved forces into the disputed Fashaga region, along the border with Tigray,

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124 See: 'What's Driving Sudan and Ethiopia Apart?', *The Horn* podcast, International Crisis Group, 18 May 2021. Accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/whats-driving-sudan-and-ethiopia-apart>.

125 Regional politics in the Horn have long seen dominant states impact the internal political and security environments of neighbouring states. This was one of the causes of the internal NCP regime split: al-Bashir's wing viewed Turabi's aggressive foreign policy as turning more powerful neighbouring states against them, including some that would be damaging to their own internal security and survival.

126 Osman El-Tom Hamad and Atta El-Battahani, 'Sudan and the Nile Basin', *Aquatic Science* 67 (2005).

127 'Filling of Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam in July Called Threat to Sudan's Security', *VOA News*, 6 February 2021. Accessed 1 November 2022, [https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east\\_filling-ethiopias-renaissance-dam-july-called-threat-sudans-security/6201718.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_filling-ethiopias-renaissance-dam-july-called-threat-sudans-security/6201718.html)

expelling the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and its Amhara allies.<sup>128</sup> The SAF also allowed Tigrayan members of the ENDF safe passage to enter Sudan.<sup>129</sup> These SAF actions greatly increased tensions with Ethiopia, resulting in clashes between the SAF and ENDF on a regular basis throughout 2021 and into 2022. By early 2021, SAF support for the TPLF, which then entered into an alliance with other Tigray-based groups to become the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF),<sup>130</sup> had become obvious on the ground in Gedaref–Sennar border area in Sudan, with numerous eyewitness accounts of TDF officers based in SAF barracks and the establishment of multiple TDF training centres. SAF military intelligence also reconstituted old links with dissident BPLM leaders, most of whom were living in Damazin, the capital of Blue Nile state, in order to exploit rising tensions in Benishangul–Gumuz. After this, dissident BPLM-aligned militia members were also seen in TDF training centres in or near the Gedaref–Sennar border.<sup>131</sup>

From 2020 to 2022, SAF decisions appear to be a combination of a desire to weaken what they saw as a hegemonic Ethiopia, to maintain their link to their preferred political and military elites (especially in the TPLF and the dissident BPLM) and to influence Ethiopian decisions about operating the GERD. Military support to the both the TDF and the dissident BPLM has not been enough to allow them to make significant gains on the ground,<sup>132</sup> and thus appears more related to a process of trying to influence Ethiopian decision-making. As viewed in October and November 2021 in combination with the TDF approach to Addis, the SAF was likely hoping that their allies would be part of any new transitional political arrangement in Ethiopia—allies who could then try to ensure SAF geopolitical interests were met. The ENDF counterattack and the subsequent withdrawal of the TDF in late November 2021 changed the nature of the war.

In late 2022, it now appears much less likely that the TDF and its allies will be able to topple the Abiy government. As a result, this has begun to force a change, once again, in the Sudanese relationship to Ethiopia.

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128 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and local security force leaders in Gedaref.

129 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and local security force leaders in Gedaref. Reliable eyewitness accounts have consistently described SAF facilitation of TPLF/TDF movements and later training centers.

130 International Crisis Group, 'Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate', Brussels: International Crisis Group, Briefing No. 171, 2 April 2021, 1–2.

131 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and local security force leaders in Blue Nile, Sennar, and Gedaref.

132 Since the TDF area of control in the Tigray region does not border Sudan, deliveries of large amounts of military material was impractical, even if the SAF wanted to make these deliveries (and it is not clear that they wanted to do so). Thus, TDF military gains in Ethiopia in late 2021 were not as a result of SAF military support.

# CONCLUSION

Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has often competed with Ethiopia for regional dominance in the Horn of Africa. In this competition, both sides sought allies along both sides of the border. This provided communities living in the borderlands with opportunities to seek support for their (local or national) agendas. This support sustained political and military movements by giving them money, military equipment and safe haven. It also arguably prolonged the existence of these movements.<sup>133</sup> In the case of Blue Nile, Ethiopian support to the SPLM/A in the 1990s made the rebel movement a real threat to the regime in Khartoum. The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia that broke out in 1998, however, contributed to the ending of large-scale military support to the SPLM/A from Addis Ababa. Consequently, the SPLA was no longer able to control the large areas where they had previously been active, a development that contributed significantly to the survival of the NCP regime.<sup>134</sup>

Fast forward to 2019 and large-scale changes have once again altered relations between Sudan and Ethiopia. The NCP regime's demise in 2019 led to one SPLM/A-N faction, that of Malik Agar, to negotiate with the transitional government that followed while the other faction has not engaged in a peace process with the transitional government since the Mil-TG's coup in October 2021. At the same time, the deteriorating relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia created the space for the BPLM to resume political and military support from Sudan. However, support remained limited and the BPLM has not been able to translate this into increased political power in Benishangul-Gumuz. Furthermore, as this report was being drafted in the second half of 2022, the balance of power between Sudan and Ethiopia has shifted towards Ethiopia. The military wing of the transition government (Mil-TG) coup in October 2021 has not yet played out to Mil-TG political advantage as the Sudanese economy has worsened, civilian anger against the Mil-TG remains high and tensions between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) threaten to lead to violence. This has left the Mil-TG in a weakened state, and coupled with the inability of the TPLF/TDF to threaten the Ethiopian government militarily, the Mil-TG has softened its stance towards the Ethiopian government.

In light of the changing balance of power between Sudan and Ethiopia, local communities will

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133 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, reliable SPLM/A-N leaders, interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

134 Alex de Waal, *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015, 54, 84.

likely have to pursue different strategies to meet their political objectives. In Blue Nile recent violence between communities has seen reduced support for the SPLM/A-N (SRF)'s government, who many people blame for instigating the violence, and has seen increased political support for the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).<sup>135</sup> Going forward, especially if a new transitional government is formed in Sudan with significant civilian political power, the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) will likely increasingly engage with Blue Nile communities to build a political power base without seeking military support from Ethiopia (but seek to build political support from Addis).<sup>136</sup> The BPLM's position and choices are less clear. The death of popular Gumuz militia leader al-Tahir Tigre in April 2022 has contributed to the current disarray among the Gumuz forces, and they have not yet appointed a new ground commander.<sup>137</sup> At the same time, a large number of Gumuz civilians were caught up in the communal violence in Wad al-Mahi in October, with scores killed—which has led to a reorienting of Gumuz militia priorities away from Ethiopia and towards local dynamics inside Blue Nile.<sup>138</sup> The Assosa government did recently sign a peace agreement with the Gumuz People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), though its relative support inside Benishangul-Gumuz appears limited and it is unclear if this agreement will have a positive reduction in conflict dynamics in the region.<sup>139</sup> So while there is a possibility that Blue Nile's internal dynamics can be negotiated locally, there is less of a political path forward in Benishangul-Gumuz and chances are that communal tensions and violence will remain high in the near future.

As this report was being finalized, some members of the dissident Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) signed an agreement with Ethiopian authorities in late 2022 and in early 2023 began negotiating political and security arrangements with Assosa. The peace occurred in a context of public attempts by Addis and the (Mil-TG dominated) Khartoum government to demonstrate progress on rehabilitating their relationship. However, SAF Military Intelligence maintains their links to those dissident BPLM members who returned to Assosa, and it is too early to tell if this fragile peace will lead to long-term stability and create

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- 135 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, and reliable SPLM/A-N leaders.
- 136 In late December 2022, civilian forces were negotiating final arrangements with the Mil-TG on forming a new transitional government. The degree of political power for civilian forces in this new transitional government is not yet known.
- 137 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, reliable SPLM/A-N leaders, interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.
- 138 Many of the Gumuz killed had recently fled Ethiopia to Sudan seeking refuge from violence in Benishangul-Gumuz and were then accused by Hausa militias of being Funj, and thus legitimate targets. Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members, local government officials, reliable SPLM/A-N leaders, interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.
- 139 Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members/leaders and local government officials in Benishangul-Gumuz.

the conditions for non-violent redressing of grievances—or if their agreement will fall apart like it did in 2013 when the dissident BPLM returned to Sudan.

Complicating the fragile peace is the fact that those who signed this agreement primarily hail from the Benishangul (Berta speaking) community, while those from the Gumuz community did not. The two groups had drifted apart somewhat by late 2022 as differences between the Gumuz and Benishangul members over political objectives emerged: with the Gumuz concerned with political representation in Assosa and issues of land ownership (especially in Metekel), while the Benishangul members remained mostly concerned with political representation. Thus, it was easier for the Benishangul members to come to an arrangement with Assosa. By February 2023 the Gumuz had selected new political and military leaders to replace the loss of al-Tahir Tigre and were in the process of reorganizing themselves and preparing for future conflict—either in Blue Nile against the Hausa or with Ethiopian security forces. As part of the agreement between Assosa and the Benishangul dissident BPLM members is that they will help Assosa contain the Gumuz militia based in the borderlands, the stage is set for continued local conflict.



# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<b>ANDM</b>	Amhara National Democratic Movement
<b>BPLM</b>	Benishangul People's Liberation Movement
<b>Civ-TG</b>	Civilian wing of the transitional government (Sudan)
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>ENDF</b>	Ethiopian National Defense Force
<b>EPRDF</b>	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
<b>GERD</b>	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
<b>JPA</b>	Juba Peace Agreement
<b>Mek</b>	<i>(Arabic)</i> highest traditional leader in Blue Nile state
<b>Mil-TG</b>	Military wing of the transitional government (Sudan)
<i>nazara</i>	<i>(Arabic)</i> territorial unit in the Native Administration system of Sudan
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>NDA</b>	National Democratic Alliance
<b>NIF</b>	National Islamic Front
<b>OLA</b>	Oromo Liberation Army
<b>OLF</b>	Oromo Liberation Front
<b>Omda</b>	<i>(Arabic)</i> A mid-level administrator in the Native Administration system

<b>PDF</b>	Popular Defence Forces
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces
<b>SAF</b>	Sudanese Armed Forces
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Army
<b>SPLM</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement
<b>SPLM/A</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army
<b>SPLM/A-N</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North
<b>SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu)</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North (al-Hilu faction)
<b>SPLM/A-N (SRF)</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North (Sudan Revolutionary Front; Malik faction)
<b>SRF</b>	Sudan Revolutionary Front
<b>TDF</b>	Tigray Defence Forces
<b>TPLF</b>	Tigray People’s Liberation Front
<b>UFEFCF</b>	United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces
<b>woreda</b>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) district

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