

# **Unpacking Ethnic Stacking: The Uses and Abuses of Security Force Ethnicity in Sudan**

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## **Abstract**

African elites commonly recruit co-ethnic soldiers into state security institutions, a practice known as ethnic stacking. Ethnic stacking has recently received considerable attention from scholars and been linked to an array of outcomes, including repression, high levels of political violence and poor democratization outcomes. This article employs evidence from Sudan under Omar Al Bashir to argue that ethnic stacking is not one coherent tactic but several, and that its effects are mediated by the processes through which security force institutions are ethnically stacked. Within the leadership of state security institutions, ethnic stacking in Sudan served as a coup-proofing measure to ensure that leaders bound by ties of kinship and trust maintain oversight over the most sensitive functions of the security apparatus. In Sudan's militia groups, ethnic stacking of militia groups and rank-and-file soldiers was used as a means of warfare and repression by altering overall composition of security forces with respect to the civilian population. The militia strategy itself was a product of the failure of the regime's traditional security forces to function as effective counterinsurgents, and, by keeping the periphery of the country in a near-constant state of conflict, prolonged Bashir's regime.

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## Introduction

For thirty years, Sudan was ruled by Al Bashir, an army officer who was the longest serving leader of the longest running regime in Sudanese history. Since coming to power in 1989, Bashir survived several coup attempts, popular protests, a confrontation with the Islamist party that brought him to power, international sanctions, cruise missile strikes by the United States, and two devastating civil wars, one of which led to the independence of South Sudan in a 2011 referendum.<sup>1</sup> Bashir's survival in office was due in no small part to his support within the Sudanese security apparatus.

Bashir's recruitment of co-ethnic Arabs to serve as officers and as soldiers in virtually all of Sudan's security institutions contributed to his personal survival as well as his regime's resilience. Prior to South Sudan's independence, around 40% of Sudan's population identified as Arab. Even so, Arab officers dominated the officer corps of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) as well as the leadership and rank-and-file of parallel military institutions such as the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) and other militia groups. Until the recent popular uprisings that ended his regime, the ties of co-ethnic patronage and loyalty between Bashir and Sudan's security institutions led to strong support of Bashir within the Sudanese security apparatus despite a near-constant state of political turmoil. And even in a post-Bashir era, these ties will likely prove challenging to unwind into a stable political settlement.

That Sudan's ethnically stacked security forces have been at once a source of resilience and instability should be of little surprise to scholars (see, for example, Enloe

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, demographic statistics cited in this chapter refer to the whole of Sudan prior to participation in 2011.

1980; Horowitz 1985; Bratton and van De Walle 1997; Quinlivan 1999; Roessler 2016). Scholars of African politics have long documented the widespread ways in which the continent's leaders have manipulated ethnic identities within their security force institutions in their pursuit of power (First 1970; Cox 1976; Decalo 1990). More recently, a robust scholarship on ethnic stacking – or tactics used by regime elites to construct or reshape security forces using co-ethnicity as a basis of recruitment – has emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Makara 2013a; Nassif 2015; Johnson and Thurber 2017; Hassan 2017; Morency-LaFlamme 2018; Harkness 2018; Allen 2018). These studies find both qualitative and quantitative evidence that ethnic stacking protects regimes against coups, increases the likelihood that security forces will side with the regime in the face of popular protest, and provokes political instability and violence.

Nevertheless, this scholarship has to date focused mostly on co-ethnic ties between regime elites and senior officers, and less on how ethnic stacking tactics may be used in lower ranks. Drawing on a detailed investigation of Sudan under Bashir's regime, the evidence presented in this article suggests ethnic stacking tactics have different consequences depending on which soldiers in the hierarchy are stacked. Specifically, the stacking of senior level officers appears to increase the loyalty of the security apparatus as a whole. At various critical junctures during his presidency, Bashir used his ties with the riverain Arabs to construct security institutions that were loyal and ensured his grip on power.

By contrast, the ethnic stacking of lower ranking officers and soldiers have been used by elites in Sudan as instruments in irregular warfare and repression. During Bashir's reign, Sudan's most prolific security forces have become tribal and ethnic militia

groups, most but not all of whom have been recruited based on Arab identity. These groups have been primarily used by the Sudanese regime to wage irregular warfare by targeting civilians of out-groups.

The insight that ethnic stacking has potentially distinct outcomes depending on where in the hierarchy stacking occurs has important consequences for the study of military ethnicity. Despite the advances in recent scholarship, the evidence presented here suggests that ethnic stacking constitutes a more diverse array of tactics, with more varied and interrelated outcomes, than is commonly assumed. The evidence from Sudan suggests that the ethnic stacking tactics used by Bashir contributed to his regime's resilience, but in different ways. Where ethnic stacking in the senior ranks of state security institutions that counterbalanced one another made it difficult to overthrow Bashir, Sudan's ethnically stacked militias were used as part of an irregular warfare strategy that used mass violence to divide the country. Though these tactics were intended to serve different functions, there were also linked: the militia strategy was adopted because of the failure of Sudan's more traditional institutions to act as counterinsurgents, and, by keeping Sudan's periphery perpetually in conflict, prevented them from contesting Bashir's rule.

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. The second section provides an overview of the literature on ethnic stacking and lays out the argument that ethnic stacking constitutes a varied series of tactics with varying consequences. The third section empirically investigates how Bashir's regime used ethnic stacking at both the top and bottom of the security force hierarchy in the SAF, the PDF, and the and in militia groups during Sudan's civil wars in the south and in Darfur. The fourth section conducts

a brief comparative analysis of ethnic stacking tactics and functions across all of Sudan's security force institutions. The analysis confirms the argument that Bashir's ethnic stacking tactics at higher and lower ranks in the security hierarchy served distinct, but also interrelated, regime security and warfighting functions. The final section offers concluding thoughts on the argument's broader implications.

### **Military Ethnicity and Ethnic Stacking in Sudan**

Scholars of African politics have long documented the importance of security force ethnicity. Dating back to colonial times, the British and French empires often recruited their security forces from one or several ethnic groups as means of internal control. Pioneered in India and implemented in Nigeria under the colonial rule of Frederic Lugard, the racist British 'martial race' doctrine held that certain races were brave, loyal but intellectually inferior, rendering them fit for service in the colonial army (Adekson 1979). As a result of this policy, the British recruited predominantly northerners into the Nigerian armed forces. The French, too, recruited groups they considered to be more warlike into their armies, such as Berbers in Morocco and the Kabye in Togo (Horowitz 1985, pp. 447-81).

The colonial policies of using ethnicity as an instrument of divide and rule led to persistent post-colonial patterns of uneven ethnic recruitment, coups, and purges. In the immediate post-colonial period, military seizures of power in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, and Uganda led to massive purges of officers that, due to their ethnicity, political leaders feared would not remain loyal (Luckham 1971, Cox 1976, Decalo 1990, Horowitz 1985). In the cases where the predominant ethnicity of the ruling class did not

match the ethnicity of the military officer corps, these fears generally proved to be well founded (Harkness 2016, 2018).

Military ethnicity continues to play a significant role in the politics of security force institutions in Africa to this day. In a majority of African countries, leaders have at one point or another attempted to construct security forces of co-ethnics (Allen 2018). From Rwanda's Tutsi in Rwanda to the Kabye who still dominate the security forces of Togo, practices of manipulating the ethnic loyalties of security forces to serve political ends remains alive and well.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, there has been a renewed interest in military ethnicity by scholars of Africa and non-African politics alike. Continuing to rely on the close analysis of cases but also adopting quantitative methods, an emerging consensus among scholars is that military ethnicity matters, and it is linked to an array of mostly negative outcomes. A number of scholars find that regimes that recruit their security forces on the basis of ethnicity are more likely to repress popular uprisings (Belin 2011; Gause 2012; Koren 2014; Morency –Laflamme 2018). Others find that attempts to construct security forces along ethnic lines result in coups (Horowitz 1985; Decalo 1990; Harkness 2016, 2018) or civil war (Roessler 2016; McLauchlin 2010). Finally, scholars of African politics have linked ethnic patronage between regime elites and security forces to low levels of democratization and poor democratic survival outcomes (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Harkness 2017, 2018; Allen 2018).

Drawing on insight from Sudan, this article provides two central insights into ongoing debates about the nature and consequences of military ethnicity in security force

institutions. First, scholars have used a range of approaches to defining military ethnicity. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) define it as “ethnic patronage” between the regime leadership and the military. Koren (2014), by contrast, defines it simply in terms of discriminatory recruitment patterns. Perhaps the most well-developed definition of the concept is that of Kristen Harkness, who, drawing on the earlier work of Cynthia Enloe, has proposed the concept of “ethnic stacking” as a tactic whereby regime elites construct co-ethnic armies by restructuring the officer corps of the existing army along co-ethnic lines, or by disarming the regular army and constructing parallel military institutions (Harkness 2016, p. 594, Enloe 1980).

The evidence from Sudan suggests that “ethnic stacking” is not necessarily one coherent practice, but a complex array of tactics that vary not only by the security institution targeted, but also by where in the hierarchy stacking practices occur and which co-ethnic identity regime elites choose as a basis for stacking. Across Sudan’s security institutions, Bashir’s regimes recruited soldiers on the basis of riverain Arab, Arab, Muslim, and at times tribal identities. Likewise, which identity is emphasized has varied across and within the hierarchy of each institution.

Second, there remains some ambiguity in the existing scholarship concerning where precisely in the hierarchy security force ethnicity is most salient. To date, much of the scholarship, and virtually all of the empirical scholarship, has focused on co-ethnic ties between regime elites and officers in the senior ranks of security forces.<sup>2</sup> Most of the

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<sup>2</sup> For an exception, see Johnson and Thurber (2017), who have introduced a yet-to-be widely used dataset that includes ethnic composition military forces at both higher and lower ranks in the Middle East between 1946 and 2013.



major outcomes, from coups to authoritarianism, that have been linked to ethnic stacking or other measures of military ethnicity are defined and measured as such.

Yet it is not unreasonable to expect that where there are differences in ethnic stacking tactics, they serve different purposes and there are differences in the outcomes associated with them. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest where the entire military hierarchy is stacked, or where different ranks are stacked with different ethnic groups, there are distinct outcomes. The split between the predominantly Ba-athist officer, compared to a predominantly Arab rank-and-file, for example, has been suggested as one of the main causes of the fracturing of Syria's security forces during its civil war (Belin 2011; Gause 2012; Nepstad 2013; Nassif 2015). Other recent scholarship suggests there are systematically different democratization outcomes in ethnically stacked regimes that are military-led versus those that are not (Allen 2018).

The analysis presented here confirms that differences in ethnic stacking tactics matter. Specifically, ethnic stacking at the senior ranks of Sudan's security forces appear to serve as coup-proofing measures and to ensure the loyalty of the security apparatus as a whole to the regime's leadership. By contrast, ethnic stacking at lower ranks, particularly in Sudan's militia groups, have served more of a repressive, warfighting function.

Moreover, though these stacking strategies were deployed with distinct logics in mind, there are also linkages between the two. The Bashir regime's warfighting strategy of subcontracting violence to tribal and ethnic militias grew out of a failure of Sudan's more centralized state institutions to prosecute wars with the South and in Darfur. These

institutions, which relied on broad, conscript-based recruitment, were costly and could not be relied upon to maintain the level of unity, cohesion, and coercion necessary to conduct effective counterinsurgency. The use of comparatively cheap, irregular militias, by contrast, drastically increased the human costs of each conflict, but prevented rebel groups from ever seriously challenging Khartoum in central Sudan. Beyond helping to explain civil war onset (Roessler 2016; Harkness 2018) or violence (Lyal 2010), this evidence suggests that ethnic stacking at the lower ranks may be a particularly salient tactic when the security apparatus is institutionally weak, the regime's ethnic base is narrow, or the loyalty of out-groups cannot be counted on.

The article arrives at these conclusions through a detailed analysis of variations in ethnic stacking tactics in three of Sudan's major security force institutions under Bashir – the Sudanese Armed Forces, the Popular Defence Forces, an important parallel military institution, and the constellation of militia groups that have proliferated in Sudan since the 1980s. In each of these three institutions, the paper traces how political elites have ethnically stacked their security forces, where in the hierarchy ethnic stacking has occurred, and to what ends.

The diversity of ethnic stacking tactics and variation in outcomes within a single regime makes the Sudanese regime an ideal “pathway” case to build theory and trace causal mechanisms about ethnic stacking tactics and their consequences. By virtue of such widespread ethnic stacking practices, one would expect ethnic stacking in Sudan to be both an important cause of, and capture a large share of, the effect on the outcomes of loyalty and violence hypothesized in the existing literature. This “extreme” value on the

dependent variable makes the Sudanese case viable for theory building by investigating the concepts and causal pathways proposed by scholars (Seawright 2016).

## **Empirical Analysis: The Anatomy of Ethnic Stacking in Sudan**

### ***The Sudanese Armed Forces***

Under Bashir, the officer corps of the SAF was stacked with Arab, and northern-riverain Arab co-ethnics, as well as officers that were members of National Islamist Front, an Islamist political party that brought Bashir to power. The primary function of ethnic stacking practices within the Sudanese Armed Forces was regime security: the stacking of the SAF with both Arab and Islamist officers under Bashir were intended to foreclose attempts by rivals inside and outside the military to seize power.

On June 30th, 1989, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Bashir, toppled the civilian government of Sadiq al-Mahdi in a coup. The military seizure of power in Sudan was masterminded not from within the armed forces, but by the National Islamist Front (NIF), a political party committed to turning Sudan into an Islamist state (Collins 1999, p. 106). The NIF had infiltrated the military and, after being rebuffed by several other officers, had recruited Bashir to lead the coup attempt. Among the first moves of the military-controlled Revolutionary Command Council was not only to arrest much of the political class, but also to place under house arrest Hassan Al Turabi, the NIF leader who was behind the coup. In fact, this turned out to be an elaborate ruse designed to placate the American and Egyptian governments, who were wary of Islamists (Roessler 2016, p. 151). In December 1989, Al Turabi was released from prison, upon which all

members of the RCC, including Bashir, swore an oath of allegiance (Collins 2008, pp. 185-194).

Though Bashir was a political neophyte, over time he and his close associates came to represent the interests of the northern or riverain Arab elite, a group that has dominated Sudan's state institutions since independence. The riverain Arabs, and in particular three tribes that live along the Nile north of Khartoum and constitute about five percent of the population, represent an elite-within-the-elite; every Sudanese president has hailed from this northern region and its officials have made up a majority of ministerial and other high-level positions in nearly every government since independence. The three main groups from this region are the Ja'aliyyin of President Bashir, the Shagiyya of former vice-president Ali Osman Mohamed Taha and the Dangla of Defense Minister Bakri Hassan Saleh (Flint and De Waal 2008, p. 116; Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), 2004). The riverain Sudanese are "overwhelmingly Arabic speaking... wholly Muslim and to a greater or lesser degree identify themselves as genealogically and culturally Arab" (O'Fahey 1996, p. 213).

The dominance of riverain Arab groups extends to the SAF officer corps. Exact statistics are not available due to their sensitive nature, but the consensus among scholars is that the dominance of Arab officers is persistent. The British recruited officers for what became the SAF from mostly urban, educated elite based around Khartoum in the north, who were required to pass oral and written exams and display proficiency in Arabic (Lesch 1998). In 1981, at most 5-10 percent of officers in the Sudanese officers were southerners (Metz 2015, p. 310). Though up to 60% of enlisted men were drawn from western regions such as Darfur and South Kordofan, soldiers from these areas were

underrepresented in the officer corps. Even when Sudan was at peace between 1972 and 1983 and southerners were integrated into the armed forces, no southerners held important commands. Arab officers have continued to dominate the SAF officer corps in the Bashir era, even after the 2005 peace agreement (Metz 2015, p. 312). In her analysis of ethnic stacking practices in Sudan, Kristen Harkness (2018) codes the SAF as being stacked by predominantly riverain Arab or “Muslim Jellaba” co-ethnics.

Yet a closer reading of precisely how ethnic stacking was implemented by Bashir suggests that it was astute manipulation of both Islamist and riverain Arab political identities that solidified his position in power. The seizure of power by the NIF government allowed Bashir to strengthen his hold over the military in two crucial respects: by purging officers hostile to the Islamist agenda and by appointing co-ethnics from a small sub-group of northern Arab tribes into key positions in the military’s highest ranks. Despite the Arab bias within the officer corps, Bashir appears to initially have been opposed by a number of groups within the armed forces that were either more moderate in their political leanings or seeking themselves to seize power. Bashir’s response was to purge hundreds of officers not affiliated with the NIF agenda, sometimes brutally. In April 1990, Bashir’s government executed 28 officers in the aftermath of an alleged coup plot, an act which “left the majority of active duty officers silent for fear of being dismissed, jailed or shot” (Metz 2015, pp. 310-312) Within the first five years of his rule, Bashir forced as much as one third of the Sudanese officer corps not affiliated with the NIF into retirement (Salmon and Walmsley 2007, p.17; Flint 1993). The atmosphere of fear created by Bashir’s purges and the NIF infiltration of the military were such that the several coup plots that emerged over the subsequent years never appear to have advanced

much beyond the planning stages, were not well connected to the political class, and were quickly snuffed out by loyalists within the military.

Bashir's efforts to purge the officer corps of those opposed to the NIF agenda was accompanied by efforts to even further narrow the political representation of senior officers, who were almost exclusively appointed from northern or "riverain" Arab tribes. Under al-Mahdi's government, northern Arabs were considerably overrepresented but less so than they had been at any point in post-independence Sudanese history, filling about 45% of the country's ministerial positions (Seekers of Truth and Justice 2004). Under Bashir's government, northerners had filled 60% of all ministerial positions, 80% of the top staff appointees in the presidential palace, and two thirds of the RCC. Nearly all presidential ministers, ministers of defence, and ministers of internal affairs were generals from the north. When the RCC was disbanded, only northern officers remained in the government, and most senior generals in the Sudanese administration appear to be of riverain extraction (Flint and De Waal 2008, p. 17).

The evidence presented here suggests three conclusions. First, though it is certainly the case that, as other scholars have claimed, Bashir reinforced the dominance of riverain Arab ethnic groups in the Sudanese officer corps after he seized power, he reinforced the dominance of Islamist officers as well. Bashir's stacking of security forces with alternatively Islamist, Arab, and riverain Arab co-ethnics reinforces the observations made by scholars such as Enloe (1980) and Chandra and Wilkinson (2008) that ethnic identity is fluid and ascriptive, and that what matters most is how these identities intersect with political goals and aims.

Second, ethnic stacking efforts in the SAF under Bashir appear to have mostly been targeted at the senior ranks. For most of Bashir's tenure, recruitment into the enlisted ranks of the SAF has been mandatory as part of service requirements for all youth between the ages of 18 and 33 (Central Intelligence Agency 2019). Though there were some differences in representation, particularly with respect to soldiers from Sudan's western regions, there does not appear to have been any deliberate attempt to privilege the recruitment of some enlisted soldiers over others.

Third, Bashir's ethnic stacking practices, which involved purging of officers disloyal to Islamists and appointing riverain co-ethnics into senior positions in the officer corps, appear primarily to serve the functions of regime security. Bashir's initial purge of officers suspected of disloyalty to the Islamist cause, followed by subsequent stacking of the senior ranks with riverain co-ethnics, were both undertaken primarily as measures to prevent coups and ensure the personal loyalty of senior officers viz a viz potential rivals.

The Sudanese regime's use of ethnic stacking practices to reinforce loyalty at the senior ranks of security forces becomes even clearer when analysing the Popular Defence Forces (the PDF), Sudan's largest parallel military institution.

### ***The Popular Defence Forces***

Founded by legal decree in November 1989 and composed of Islamist party activists, Arab militias in the south and west of the country, and students, youth, and conscripts, the PDF was intended to become one of the regime's primary instruments of political and popular mobilization (Salmon and Walmsely 2007, p. 10). All male Sudanese citizens over the age of 16 were required to attend PDF training, which was

supervised by pro-NIF military officers, and included “Islamist lectures, religious songs, and chants alongside basic military training” (Salmon and Walmsely 2007, p. 17). The PDF was also initially intended to replace the SAF, whose loyalty the Islamists felt was suspect and whose fighting capacity had at that time been significantly diminished as a result of years of civil war.

In part, the struggle over the PDF became a deeper contest for power between Bashir, who came to represent the interests of the northern elite and Turabi, the NIF party founder who attempted to “broaden the agenda and the constituency of the Islamist movement” by appealing to all Muslims, including those of non-Arab extraction, such as the Hausa, Fulani, Fellatta, Fur and Masalit (Salmon and Walmsely 2007, p. 22).

Through a deft series of manipulations, Bashir managed both to turn the PDF into an important paramilitary force while maintaining the loyalty of the SAF. In the first place, despite the attempt to draw recruits from across a broad spectrum of Sudanese society, the PDF maintained a “a distinct Arab-Islamic philosophy” (Penniken 2009, p. 17). The PDF was a heterogeneous organization, and many of its units were simply rural, Arab militias that had been incorporated into the PDF at its founding and were supplied through local PDF offices and committees (Salmon and Walmsley 2007, p. 22). Its upper echelons were dominated by Islamist student groups which also had a distinct Arab orientation, principally the Muslim Brotherhood. And as with the regular army, the westerners and southerners recruited into its ranks were mostly used as foot soldiers. Thus, though the PDF’s orientation was designed to give it a nationally representative veneer, in practice it was still controlled by the Arab elite.



This structure allowed Bashir to use the PDF as a force that both counterbalanced and complemented the regular army. The PDF counterbalanced the armed forces in the sense that it was a parallel military institution with a separate command structure. Accompanying the regime's extensive purges of disloyal military officers in the early 1990s was the forced recruitment of military officers into the PDF for re-education. By 1996, the PDF's 150,000 members outnumber the 80,000 soldiers who served in the army, and were being extensively recruited to fight large scale combat offensives (Salmon and Walmsley 2007).

Yet the PDF also complemented the SAF. Faced with a well-armed, mobile enemy, the SAF had, by the early 1990s, ceded vast amounts of territory in its war with the South and lost most of the war's engagements. Poor morale plagued the SAF, whose fighting efficiency had been degraded by prolonged deployments and significant casualties. Initially, the government attempted to rely on southerners who had been recruited into the SAF to prosecute the war, but this proved a liability because enlisted southern soldiers often had ties to the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and hesitated to be used to kill their compatriots (Glickson 1995, p. 5). PDF recruits, by contrast, did not receive nearly the same level of training as their military counterparts, which instead emphasized indoctrination into Islamist principles. This allowed Khartoum "to continue the war without large numbers of northerners dying. PDF forces have been crucial in conflicts in Sudan as low-cost alternatives to trained military professionals" (Penniken 2009, pp. 18-19). Between 1992, and 1995, the government then attempted to re-orient its strategy by making the PDF spearhead an offensive into southern territory.

Though the PDF might have been a convenient prop, it was largely ineffective in combat. According to Salmon and Walmsley (2007), the PDF's coercive recruitment practices angered most Sudanese, including "devout and highly orthodox Muslims who did not adhere to the NIF's project." Many young men went to great lengths to escape conscription. One newspaper reported in 1997 that of the 70,000 graduates and drop-outs legally obligated to attend training, only 4,000 had joined the PDF (Salmon and Walmsley 2007). In part recruits were reluctant to join because the strategy of sending significant numbers of ill-trained soldiers into southern strongholds failed, leading to mass casualties among the ranks of the PDF.

As his rift with Turabi over the direction of the NIF widened, Bashir was able to use widening disenchantment within the PDF and his support within the regular army to further secure his hold on power. According to Collins (2008), "senior officers never trusted Turabi... and were determined not to permit the rabble of the PDF to supersede their authority" (p. 227). Bashir, too, had "assiduously cultivated his popularity with the military, particularly the officer corps, for he was one of them" (Collins 2008, p. 227). Signs that the military had prevailed on the regime to reign in the PDF became clear in 1997, when mass recruitment into the PDF was eased, the armed forces was allowed to take de facto control of internal appointments into the organization, and a higher authority for mobilization led by a northern general who reported directly to Bashir was placed in charge of the PDF. In 1998, compulsory national service for the SAF was reinstated (Salmon and Walmsley 2007, pp. 21-22).

Backing from the country's security institutions was crucial in Bashir's ultimate confrontation with Turabi, which reached a climax in 1999. After signing legislation in

which *shari'a* law became the country's sole source of legislation and which significantly curbed the powers of the presidency, Turabi reconstituted the NIF into the National Congress Party (NCP) and attempted to broaden his base of support. He then proposed legislation to allow governors to be elected directly rather than be selected by Bashir and sought to push through a constitutional amendment that would allow a two-thirds vote of parliament to depose the president. This Bashir deemed a mortal threat to his presidency and mobilized the armed forces (Roessler 2016, pp. 158-159; Collins 2008, pp. 225-227). On December 12, days before the National Assembly was to vote to curb Bashir's powers, soldiers and tanks surrounded the legislative building, allowing Bashir to dismiss Turabi as speaker and dissolved the National Assembly.

Shortly thereafter, elections that were neither free nor fair were held in northern Sudan in which Bashir was able to claim a mandate by winning 86 percent of the vote. After Turabi's dismissal as speaker, Bashir faced no serious threats to his power until the mass protests that forced his resignation twenty years later. Crucially, it was not Bashir's support within the Sudanese political establishment, but rather backing within the armed forces, that allowed him to prevail in this confrontation.

This backing, in turn, is explained in no small part by Bashir's deft use of ethnic stacking tactics in both the PDF and SAF, which were actually quite similar despite the differences in each organizations' political orientation. Like the SAF, the upper ranks of the PDF were stacked with Arab co-ethnics and Islamist party members. Recruitment into the lower ranks was not conducted along strict lines of co-ethnicity, though the PDF itself was initially intended to function as an armed wing of the Islamist political party and, eventually, to supplant the SAF itself. Yet, it ultimately proved more useful to Bashir as a

tool to complement and counterbalance the influence of the regular military, further validating the observation that ethnic stacking at senior ranks serves crucial functions of regime security. Opposition from within the military, as well as Arab co-ethnics in the upper echelons of the PDF, helped ensure that it never achieved this aim and remained loyal to Bashir.

Finally, the foregoing analysis also hints at another crucial shortcoming shared by both the SAF and PDF in the war against the South Sudanese: each institution struggled to achieve success in combat. In part because the military deemed it a threat, the PDF never achieved its potential as a relatively cheap, effective fighting force to complement the SAF on the battlefield. The SAF, in comparison, remained depleted after years of purges and attrition, and Sudan's leaders were wary of further risking the lives of expensive, highly-trained, and predominantly northern soldiers in battle. It was because of the struggles within these more traditional security force institutions to achieve battlefield success that the Sudanese regime eventually turned to another strategy: the use of informal, ethnic militias to wage unrestrained warfare against civilian populations in regions on the border between the north and south. This strategy of unrestrained warfare succeeded in destabilizing these regions enough to allow the elite in Khartoum to hang on to power.

### ***Ethnic Militia and the War in the South***

Ethnic militias largely did not exist in Sudan until the 1980s, comparatively late in Sudan's country's post-colonial history. Their widespread use developed as a strategic response to advances made by the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the

earlier phases of the second Sudanese civil war. As the war progressed, the arming of tribal based groups with modern weaponry to ravage the south and exploit divisions among SPLA leaders became the central plank of the government of Sudan's war-fighting strategy. Escalating the conflict in this matter further embittered ties between the north and the south, but helped maintain Bashir in power by dividing previously peaceful areas into militarized factions and facilitating fractures within the SPLA from which South Sudan has never fully recovered.

The process of "militarizing tribalism" in Sudan began with the northern Muslim Arabic-speaking tribes bordering the south into militias known as the *murahiliin* in order to check the advances of the SPLA. These groups, collectively known as Baggara Arabs but made up of a number of subgroups, provided particularly convenient sources of recruitment because their areas were directly threatened by southern advances. The Sudanese government's strategy of unleashing the *murahiliin* proved critical in preventing the SPLA from ever mounting a sustained offensive in northern Sudan. They did this not just by engaging in battles with rebel forces, but also by terrorizing members of non-Arab ethnic groups and conducting cross-border raids into the south, significantly increasing the scope, the costs and consequences of the war.

The experience of the Ngok Dinka and Homr Arabs serves as a good example of how the use of the *murahiliin* by the Sudanese government helped blunt the progress of rebel groups northward while militarizing peaceful regions of the country. The Ngok Dinka are the only sub-group of the several million Dinka that were administered in northern Sudan, in the province of South Kordofan. In part because of cordial ties between the ruling families, the Ngok Dinka co-existed peacefully with the Homr Arabs,

a subgroup of the Baggara who outnumbered the Dinka in the region (Deng 2001). During the civil war, the government of Sudan recruited the Homr Arabs into militia groups to fight against the southern rebel movement, but did not use them to hit military targets. Instead, as recounted by Deng (2001), the Homr Arab militias were unleashed “against their Dinka neighbours. They killed at random, looted cattle, razed villages to the ground, and captured women and children as slaves” (p. 18). The strategy succeeded in ripping the previously peaceful community apart, with the Dinka in the area now firmly aligned with the south and the Arabs aligned with the north. Not only did the use of ethnic militias in such a manner decrease the need for Khartoum to rely on its regular army; the Homr militia in South Kordofan became a buffer between the rebels and Khartoum and was indebted to the regime for continued funding and political support.

The strategy was also employed with perhaps even greater effect to take the fight into the south itself, where, as De Waal observes, “the government of Sudan played an effective game of divide and rule, exploiting the greed and grievance of southern elites to turn the civil war into an internecine conflict between southern Sudanese armed groups, with militia commanders selling their services to the highest bidder” (De Wall 2014, pp. 352-353). At first, the Sudanese government merely exploited links with local groups that formed to defend themselves from heavy-handed SPLA tactics, such as assassinations of local leaders, corruption, and forced recruitment methods. These groups, including the Bari, Mundari, Didinga, Toposa and Fertit, became known as the “Friendly Forces.” These forces had a relationship with the government that was mainly “tactical and defensive,” receiving arms and training from the Sudanese government in order to defend their communities against a common enemy (Young 2003, pp.423-434).

However, the greatest damage to the rebel war effort occurred in 1991, when the SPLM-United led by Dr. Riek Machar and Dr. Lam Akol split off from the SPLM – Mainstream led by Dr. John Garang. Although Machar and Akol cited their opposition to Garang’s vision of a united Sudan and their desire for southern self-determination as reasons for the split, Garang’s dictatorial style and recruitment of his Dinka co-ethnics into top positions of the SPLA also loomed large. The result of the dispute was a further tribalization of the conflict, resulting in vicious conflict between the Dinkas on one side and the Nuers and Shiluks, who fought for Machar and Akol, on the other. Both sides deliberately targeted civilian non co-ethnics, including the brutal 1991 “Bor Massacre” where the Nuer White Army fighting alongside Machar’s killed 2,000 Dinka civilians (Young 2003). When the better equipped SPLA mainstream won, Riek and Akol turned to Khartoum for arms and survival, signing agreements in 1992 and 1996 in which, contrary to the rebels’ stated aims, the unity of Sudan was unequivocally re-affirmed (Collins 2008, p. 112). Though the liberation movement did not totally collapse, it never regained its former vigour, and Garang was left as the only commander in the country with a military force viable enough to take on Khartoum.

The civil war with South Sudan was finally brought to an end in 2005, when the government of Sudan and the main rebel groups signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Under the terms of the agreement, both sides laid down their arms in exchange for a dual share in Sudan’s governance, oil wealth, and a referendum to be held in 2011 during which South Sudan would decide once and for all whether to stay or to part ways with Sudan. The agreement was hailed mainly as a victory for the South, who had managed to convince much of the northern establishment that the conflict was not

winnable through military means. Despite the doubling of Sudan's military budget and the joint efforts of the SAF, the PDF, and affiliated militias, the regime could not claim a single substantial battlefield victory over the SPLA in the south (Collins 2008, p. 252). Moreover, the government hoped to normalize relations with the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks by cooperating with the United States on terror and bringing the war against Southern Sudan to an end.

Despite the heavy price, however, Sudan's policy of total war against the south succeeded in keeping the Bashir regime intact and Bashir's position as a personalist dictator secure. The regime's mobilization of tribal militias prevented any dreams the SPLA had of bringing the fight to the north by militarizing the border regions. And the regime's divide and rule tactics prevented the formation of any politically or militarily unified opposition that could pose a fundamental threat to Khartoum. The existence of armed factions whose collective force in fact had come to outnumber Garang's SPLA meant that, regardless of the outcome of the referendum, southern Sudan's political leaders would be as consumed by struggle amongst themselves as they were with Khartoum. Finally, beginning the early 2000s, the Sudanese regime faced a much more existential threat to its rule: the rise of armed insurgent groups in Darfur, who had long attempted to make common cause with the south and were equally incensed at Sudan's domination by northern elites.

### ***Ethnic Militia in the War in Darfur***



The origins of the conflict in Darfur began with the fallout from the split within the northern Sudanese ruling coalition. With the expulsion of Turabi, many Darfurians who had come into the governing Islamist movement left and founded the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), one of the two major rebel groups in Darfur. The JEM's publication of the Black Book in 2000 laid bare the extent to which the riverain Arab elite dominated Sudanese government institutions at the expense of everyone else (Roessler 2016, pp. 168-169). Shortly after the publication of the Black Book, members of the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit tribes mobilized into the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), the second major rebel group in Darfur. Free of association from the regime in Khartoum and as a coalition of three of Darfur's largest ethnic groups, the SLA eclipsed the JEM in terms of manpower, equipment, resources, and fighting capacity (Flint and De Waal 2008).

In 2002, the SLA began mounting offensives against government police stations and army convoys, and announced themselves publicly after a major attack on Golo, the district headquarters of the province of Jebel Marra in February 2003 (Flint and De Waal 2008). JEM followed suit shortly thereafter, but had to appeal to the SLA for rescue after they were surrounded by government forces; as a result, many JEM soldiers joined and remained with the SLA (Flint and De Waal 2008, pp. 99-100). On April 25th, a group of 300 rebels with light vehicles and anti-aircraft weapons managed to capture a government airbase at Al Fasher, destroying all seven of the base's aircraft and killing over seventy government troops. The victory was significant. Not in 20 years of war had the SPLA inflicted those kinds of losses on the SAF air force (Flint and De Waal 2008, p. 121).

The rebel victory at Al Fasher spurred the Sudanese government into action. Like it had been during the war in the south, Khartoum's army was overstretched. In addition, the fact that so many enlisted members of the SAF were drawn from Darfur made the elites in Khartoum wary of defection or suspicious that the regular army's troops would not be reliable in combat (Prunier 2005, p.97). As a result, the government's response was rather obvious. According to De Waal:

Critically for Bashir, the central pillar of the Sudanese state - a cabal of security officers who have been running the wars in Sudan since 1983 - was still in place. Faced with a revolt that outran the capacity of the country's tired and over-stretched army, this small group knew exactly what to do. Several times during the war in the South they had mounted counter-insurgency on the cheap - famine and scorched earth their weapons of choice. Each time, they sought out a local militia, provided it with supplies and armaments, and declared the area of operations an ethics-free zone (2004, p. 723).

Like it had in the war in the South, the SAF ultimately settled on a strategy of providing cash, arms, and training to Arab militia groups, who were unleashed onto non-Arab populations, dramatically escalating the scope and the costs of the conflict. Given the substantial Darfur based population that identified as Arab, the government found a number of pre-existing groups with which it made common cause.

The formation of Arab-based militias was not new to Darfur. Though the history is complex, the first militias appeared in the mid-1980s, when former Arab fighters during the first Sudanese civil war were mobilized into Baggara and Bedouin militias. Like Homr Arabs in South Kordofan, they were formed to help fight the SPLA and were crucial in checking the SPLA's advances northward. In southern Darfur, the government had relied on the Beni Halba *fursan* (horseback) militias, who had routed the only major attempt by the SPLA to take Darfur in 1991; in cooperation with the SAF, they had had burned entire villages they suspected of cooperating with the SPLA (Flint and de Wall

2008, p. 56). Finally, there were soldiers, mainly from Chad, who had fought for the Libyan leader Muamar Ghadafi and were defeated by the Chadian army at Ouadi Doum in 1987 and settled over the border, making alliances with cross-border Arab groups such as the Abbala Rizeigat (De Waal 2005, p. 198).

Between 2003 and 2004, the Sudanese government funded an unprecedented expansion of these militias. In northern and western Darfur, militias were directly incorporated into the government armed forces, including the PDF, intelligence, border guard, and the police. In most of eastern and southern Darfur, the entire native administration system was reorganized to resemble military commands, creating militia units up to the level of the brigade (Haggar 2007, pp.128-129). The most powerful of these militia groups, the “Swift and Fearless” brigade run by Abbala Rizeigat Sheikh Musa Hilal, ran a sprawling military base, maintained a direct line to Khartoum outside of the normal chain of military command, and could reportedly muster up to 20,000 men. According to De Waal and Flynn, these men “were distinguishable from regular troops only by their sandals, turbans, and the emblem they wore on their jackets – the armed man on camel-back” (2008, p. 38). Collectively, they came to be popularly known as the *janjaweed*, a reference to the fact that, many Arab militia groups of Darfur have nomadic origins and conducted raids and other operations on camel or horseback. The term’s actual origins are more obscure, dating to as early as the 1960s when *janjaweed* was used to pejoratively describe vagrants from other Arab tribes, and then adopted by non-Arabs to refer to Arab armed groups.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to Haggar (2007), many of the *janjaweed* themselves prefer simply to be referred to as *fursan* or “horsemen” (pp. 114, 126-127).

At the height of the conflict in Darfur between 2003 and 2004, Arab militias cooperated hand in glove with government forces to inflict massive suffering on non-Arab ethnic groups. On February 27th, 2004, Hilal's "Swift and Fearless Brigade" attacked the town of Tawila. Over three days, hundreds of Hilal's men killed 75 people, abducted 350 women and children, and raped over 100 women. Though Hilal denied ever being there, the raid was witnessed by hundreds of people, many of whom recognized him in the uniform of any army colonel. The militia men had been armed with light and medium weapons, Toyota land cruisers, and were resupplied by military helicopters in the midst of the attack (De Waal and Flint 2008, pp. 35-36). In other instances, cooperation between regular forces and militias was even closer, with militias becoming integrated into military barracks and into army operations in the field. In Wadi Saleh near the Chadian border, regular army and janjaweed burned 32 villages, displaced tens of thousands and killed hundreds in a matter of weeks. Military attack helicopters and airplanes were often brought in would burn empty villages and target columns of fleeing and displaced civilians (De Waal and Flint 2008, pp. 129-132). Their participation, which required the authorization of the chief of staff's office in Khartoum, made it transparently obvious that the counterinsurgency operations in Darfur were being coordinated at the highest level of Sudan's government.

The government's actions led to a massive escalation in the conflict that has permanently altered Darfur's politics. In a few short years, thousands of villages were destroyed, as many as 300,000 people killed and 2 million displaced, a total of one third of the region's pre-war population (Prunier 2005, pp. 148-152). As Prunier recalls:

The massive amount of violence had led to a point where the society had almost ceased to function. Communities were not only at each other's throats, but they were quickly becoming incapable of regulating themselves on a day-to-day basis. The whole of Darfur was turning into a lawless refugee camp where social patterns were under severe strain (2005, p. 122).

The explicit targeting of non-Arab ethnic groups led U.N. officials and many others in the international community to use the term "ethnic cleansing" to refer to the Sudanese government's policies. In September 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell concluded that "genocide had been committed" during his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Quoted in Collins 2008, pp. 290-292). In 2008, the International Criminal Court (ICC) charged President Bashir with genocide.

As it had in the South, the Sudanese government used negotiations largely as a tactic to attempt to further divide the opposition. In 2006, the Sudanese government signed the Darfur Peace Agreement with one faction of the SLA, while remaining SLA and JEM forces continued the rebellion. Though the violence has never reached the scale of what it was in 2003 and 2004, the conflict remains unresolved despite numerous attempts at negotiation and the deployment of a U.N. peacekeeping force. It helped fuel ongoing conflicts in neighbouring regions, including South Kordofan and the Upper Blue Nile. In 2016, the government of Sudan reportedly began using chemical weapons during its attacks in Jebel Marra region of Darfur, killing up to 250 people, most of whom were children (Rothwell 2016).

In sum, the primary beneficiary of the Sudanese government's decision to mobilize Arab militias were neither the 'Arab' nor 'Africans' civilians of Darfur, but the elites in Khartoum. These militias provided the regime with cheap, motivated foot-soldiers that complemented the regular army and prevent the large contingent of non-

Arab Darfurians within the armed forces from having to actively fight fellow Darfurians. Even more importantly, like the Dinka, Nuer, and other ethnic groups in the south, the proliferation of ethnic militia meant that tribal groups in Darfur have spent much of the past two decades focused on fighting one another rather than making common cause against Khartoum.

## **Discussion: Summarizing Ethnic Stacking Tactics in Sudanese Security Force**

### **Institutions**

Table 1 below summarizes the key conclusions from the analysis conducted above for each of the three major security institutions in Sudan. For each of the Sudanese Armed Forces, the Popular Defence Forces, and militia groups, the identities stacked, the location in the security force hierarchy, and the primary function of the stacking is considered. The comparison reveals key differences in the form and function of ethnic stacking tactics across these security force institutions.

### **Insert Table 1 Near Here**

Both the Sudanese Armed Forces and Popular Defence Forces were stacked with soldiers that were either Muslim, Arab, or riverain Arab co-ethnics of Bashir. The stacking was confined to the senior ranks, as both institutions practiced open recruitment policies at lower ranks, various times during which recruitment was mandatory across the Sudanese population. With its upper ranks recruited from groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the PDF was more Islamist in its orientation; the officer corps of the SAF

by contrast, is dominated by Arabs. By the late 1990s, both institutions were commanded by riverain officers with close ties to Bashir.

In Sudanese militias, by contrast, soldiers from both the upper and lower ranks were recruited according to tribal or ethnic ties. Most such groups within present-day Sudan, such as the Baggara or the *janjaweed*, were Arab co-ethnics of Bashir. At times, the regime recruited non-co-ethnic militia forces onto its payroll, such as the Nuers and Shiluks that formed the basis of the SPLA-United.

Accompanying these differences in where in the hierarchy ethnic stacking occurred were clear differences in how the regime employed ethnic stacking in each of suggests that the stacking practices were intended to strengthen regime security. The purges of the SAF of non-Islamist officers suspected of disloyalty to Bashir's regime were clearly intended to secure Bashir's shaky rule immediately after taking power. Likewise, the domination of riverain officers within the highest levels of Sudan's security apparatus suggests the regime placed a high premium on personal ties of loyalty and trust.

In Sudan's militia groups, ethnic stacking served a different purpose altogether: to enable the use of militia groups as instruments of irregular warfare. More important than co-ethnicity appears to have been proximity to or rivalry with other ethnic groups that could be mobilized against the regime. This recruitment tactic appears to have made the rank-and-file soldiers in these groups more willing to commit violence against civilian populations who did not share the same ethnicity as militia members..

Finally, it is crucial to note that while the ethnic stacking tactics practiced by the regime were varied and served distinct functions, they were also interlinked. Bashir's regime adopted the militia strategy because Sudan's traditional security institutions were not the most effective counterinsurgents. Their expense and broad-based recruitment policies rendered each institution largely ineffective in combat, particularly in regions of the country where the regime enjoyed little support. Likewise, though Sudan's militia groups were not founded as coup proofing measures, their nearly limitless capacity for repression and violence did help prolong the length of Bashir's regime. During the civil war with the south, Arab militias use of unrestrained warfare prevented the advance of rebel groups northwards. In Darfur, Khartoum's policy of supporting the *janjaweed* and other Arab militia in their war against non-Arab civilian populations kept a once relatively peaceful region in a nearly perpetual state of conflict.

## **Conclusions**

This analysis contains several important implications for the scholarship on civil-military relations and military ethnicity in Africa and elsewhere. First, this is one of a few of a relatively small number of studies that have studied the strategies and tactics of ethnic stacking at the lower ranks of security force institutions, and one of the only to have considered the utility of ethnic stacking as a warfighting tactic.<sup>4</sup> The evidence from Sudan suggests that the strategy of using ethnic or identity-based militia to wage irregular warfare is a potentially compelling one when a regime's elite compact is narrow and its

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<sup>4</sup> For an exception, see Lyall (2010).



regular forces are depleted or ineffective. Further research could seek to extend these findings into other country contexts.

Second, despite significant progress that has been made in understanding how ethnic stacking practices shape security force institutions, further refinements in how military ethnicity is conceptualized and measured are needed. Scholars should focus on building theory and investigating how variations in ethnic stacking identities, hierarchies, and recruitment practices influence outcomes such as coups, regime transitions, and political violence, rather than focusing on mostly on relationships between regime and elites and one co-ethnic group at senior ranks of security force institutions.

Finally, future scholarship should pay more attention to the linkages between ethnic stacking practices and other common tactics and outcomes studied by civil-military relations scholars (Brooks 2019). The evidence from Sudan suggests that some effects of ethnic stacking tactics might be conditional on each another and on other common tactics such as counterbalancing. It is likely that additional linkages exist between ethnic stacking and kinds of patronage, security force recruitment, or financing tactics.

In short, ethnic stacking is not one coherent practice or tactic. As the evidence from Sudan illustrates, it can be employed by regime elites through numerous means to serve a tremendous variety of ends.

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**Table 1. A Summary of Ethnic Stacking Tactics in Sudanese Security Institutions**

<b>Security Force Institution</b>	<b>Identities Stacked</b>	<b>Placement in the Hierarchy</b>	<b>Primary Purpose of Stacking</b>
Sudanese Armed Forces	Riverain / Arab / Islamist	Senior ranks	Regime security
Popular Defence Forces	Riverain / Arab / Islamist	Senior ranks	Regime security
Militias	Arab / Tribal	Entire institution	War-fighting