

Identity in Flux: Tracing the Rapid Support Forces' Evolutionary Path

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ABSTRACT

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On April 15, 2023, armed conflict erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF finds its origins in the Janjaweed militia, one of the militia groups created under the Sudanese government's "militia strategy" and the main perpetrator of the Darfur conflict in the early 2000s. Formative to the assembling of these militias and the perpetration of their activities was the government's manipulation of threats which at the surface level of the conflict appeared to be on the basis of ethnicity and race. Similarly, the actions of the RSF have been considered with this narrative of ethnic based conflict. This paper will look at the factors that have historically influenced the formation of militia identity as well as the unique factors that have contributed to the evolution of the RSF's identity through historical process tracing as well as the assessment of the RSF's self-descriptions and media statements. This paper will show potential factors that have shifted the boundaries of identity through the legitimization of their institution and an intergroup struggle for power with the SAF.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On April 15, 2023, armed conflict erupted in a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF had previously joined forces with the SAF in the military coup that brought an end to the 30-year rule of former President Omar al-Bashir.¹ A power-sharing agreement was reached between the military and the pro-democracy movement four months later, creating a joint military-civilian council that would rule Sudan for the following three years until elections were held.² This was brought to a halt with yet another military coup in 2021, again with join SAF and RSF forces.³ While both the SAF and RSF had signed a preliminary agreement in December, the agreement consisted only of broad outlines, leaving much of the most contentious political issues unresolved, including the matter of the integration of the RSF into the Sudanese military forces and who would ultimately maintain control over the troops and weapons.⁴ A frequent stipulation in these negotiations demanded by the SAF and pro-democracy groups was the integration of the RSF into the regular forces which has created a tense environment as RSF leader Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) has continuously vehemently objected to this as he has consistently advocated for the autonomy of the RSF.⁵

The RSF, who had evolved from the institutionalization of the former Janjaweed militias, was now a pivotal entity in a different capacity than it had been in the past. At the time of this most

¹ "Sudan Unrest: What Are the Rapid Support Forces?"

² "Sudan Unrest: What Are the Rapid Support Forces?"

³ "Sudan Unrest: What Are the Rapid Support Forces?"

⁴ Magdy, "What Sparked the Violent Struggle to Control Sudan's Future?"

⁵ "Sudan Unrest: What Are the Rapid Support Forces?"

recent conflict, tensions had been escalating for weeks between the two Sudanese generals, General Adel-Fattah Burhan at the head of the SAF and General Dagalo leading the RSF, as they vied for control of the resource-abundant country.⁶ At the point of escalation, each pointed the finger at the other in accusation of who struck first; the RSF accusing the army of the initial attack while the SAF claimed a defensive response.⁷ Further, the RSF announced that it had seized control of the presidential palace and the international airport.⁸

The RSF has significantly grown from its origins of local militia groups to an enigmatic paramilitary force that has exerted considerable influence in Sudanese affairs and continues to have a significant impact as the conflict wages on. From its origins to its current state, the RSF has undergone considerable transformations. However, in the different phases of transformation how has its identity been impacted and evolved? What factors have influenced it? How does it perceive itself in relation to Sudan?

This paper seeks to better understand the RSF's identity evolution and some of the factors that have impacted it. This will be done through a multidisciplinary approach that includes historical analysis, sociopolitical examination, and narrative analysis. By examining the RSF's origins and changing roles in various contexts, this assessment aims to gain insight into the interconnections between identity, politics, and societal perceptions, developing an understanding of the RSF's transformation over time. The first section, Theoretical Discussion, will expand on theories related to the formation of social identity, intergroup conflict, threat narratives, and ethnic conflict. This section will also establish a framework through which this paper will assess factors dating back to pre-colonial times that continue to influence modern-day

⁶ Maclean, "Who Are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?"

⁷ Maclean.

⁸ Maclean.

identity. The following section, Historical Context, will trace the process of the formation of post-colonial identities. The next section, Janjaweed, will assess the RSF's predecessors looking at the formation of social boundaries and the development of threat narratives as a result of the government's manipulation of factors such as access to land, resource scarcity, and poverty and inequality. This paper will conclude with an assessment of the Rapid Support Forces from its establishment in 2013 to the period after the military coup that brought down Bashir's regime.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper will look at the identity evolution of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) through historical process tracing and analyzing foundational features as developed predominantly through colonial times. This paper will also examine how the RSF were used throughout the post-colonial period into modern day that would eventually be utilized in the formation of militant forces and justify the actions and existence of militias. I will then proceed to conduct an analysis of the RSF in two periods: first, from its establishment in 2013 to the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, and second, from 2019 to the outbreak of the current conflict in April 2023. The purpose for investigating the evolution of identity in these separate periods is to identify changes in identity markers that have not only unified the Rapid Support Forces since its beginning as Janjaweed militia through its establishment as an official institution but enabled its recruitment and encouraged individuals to join forces. Additionally, I will be examining shifts in self-identifying narratives of the RSF and potential influencing factors such as changes in its role within the security forces and the potential impacts on group identity.

In order to conduct this narrative analysis, I have examined a number of statements provided on the RSF's official website as well as statements made to news reports from international and local news sources. I have focused my analysis on articles that include political reports; official press releases; and quotes from officials, members, and spokespeople belonging to the RSF, in order to understand the various narratives surrounding this group.

The research questions at the core of this paper are: How has the identity makeup of the Rapid Support Forces evolved since their roots as Janjaweed militia? What identity markers are

currently employed to recruit for the RSF? Does the RSF currently find itself in conflict with the SAF for similar reasons that it found itself in conflict with the former government both as RSF and as Janjaweed militia? How has international intervention, or the lack thereof, impacted its social identity and its posture in relation to the government, other official bodies, and the people of Sudan?

This thesis will continue as follows: The literature review will present existing theoretical discourse on the formation of identity with an emphasis on social identity. This section will discuss different frameworks of social identity as it pertains to boundary creation and the development of intergroup conflict particularly threat narratives. Additionally, this section will present the theories of foundations of a socially constructed identity that have continued from colonial times. This section will be followed by the historical context of Sudan beginning with the establishment of the Fur Empire and going through the different stages of colonization by the Ottoman-Egyptians Empire and then by the British Empire. This historical context is significant in understanding the development of social identity that initially used to manipulate the formation of the Janjaweed militia, but which history continues to impact the current identity makeup of the RSF. This paper will then conclude with an analysis of potential factors in the evolution of the RSF since their establishment.

III. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of conflicts has shifted from state-centric international wars that dominated global conflict for centuries towards intrastate violence involving non-state actors, often in the form of militant groups. Particular to these groups is the increasingly prevalent trend towards identity-based conflicts that present in the forms of conflict across ethnic, racial, or other social boundary divisions. These conflicts often include factors such as issues of autonomy, resource competition, and institutional access. Theorists including Hogg,⁹ Horowitz,¹⁰ Korostelina,¹¹ and Mamdani¹² recognized this shift emphasizing a reflection of a paradigm shift in the approach of conflict studies, and the necessity for addressing the foundation of identity in the development of conflict.

In the case of Sudan, the use of irregular and paramilitary forces dates back to the 1980s, becoming a common strategy used by successive governments to fight peripheral wars.¹³ Considered “counter-insurgency on the cheap,” these locally recruited forces gained prominence and essentially became more prominent than the official Sudanese Armed Forces.¹⁴ This strategy, however, largely depended on the successful recruitment and control of militia groups. This paper will demonstrate how many of the tactics used fall in the frameworks of social identity development, ethnic and racial boundary creation, intergroup comparison, and threat

⁹ Hogg, “Social Identity Theory.”

¹⁰ Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.

¹¹ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*.

¹² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*.

¹³ Tubiana, “Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias,” 1.

¹⁴ Tubiana, 1.

narratives. These theories will then be used to examine the narratives of identity of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), how they have evolved, and the potential factors that may have influenced shifts and changes in narratives. The purpose of this research is to better understand the different postures the RSF has had in relation to the government, official forces, and the people of Sudan at large and how its evolving social identity has impacted these relationships, particularly in its unity as a group and recruitment of members.

This paper seeks to better understand the evolving social identity of the RSF in order to shed light on its participation, particularly its actions and behaviors, and involvement in past and current conflicts in which it finds itself. Thus, this section will first explore the construction of identity and its impact across different levels of a social apparatus and then delve into the formation, development, and interaction of social groups and identities before discussing the role of social identity in conflict and the development of perceptions and norms regarding threat narratives. The purpose of this section will be to establish a theoretical framework from which I will be processing and analyzing the narratives of the identity of the RSF, shifts and changes, and factors that impact that structure. In exploring the literature surrounding social identity theory, this section seeks to construct a framework from which the evolution of social boundaries throughout Sudan and specifically Darfur's history can be understood and from which their impacts on the militia strategy and the eventual emergence and further development of the RSF can be traced.

Social Identity

Henri Tajfel and his colleagues first pioneered social identity theory to understand better intergroup conflict within a society and the development of the factors in relation to identity that

contribute to these conflicts, such as prejudice and discrimination.¹⁵ They believed that the dynamics of intergroup conflict are rooted in human motivations and perceptions influenced not only by one's beliefs about themselves but also about the "society, social context, and immediate situations [they] find themselves and their groups in."¹⁶ While in the past some have presented social identity as primordially intrinsic or inherent, predominant research affirms social identity as a social construct that is shaped by the mechanisms and dynamics of existing social systems.¹⁷ Thus, the creation of social identity has less to do with existing communities and the protection thereof, but as Fredrik Barth argues, is rather the consequence of boundary formations between an "us" and a "them."¹⁸ As a result of the establishment of such boundaries, the development of identities based on shared histories and common ancestry begins to emerge.¹⁹ However, it is these created factors—consequences of identity formation rather than the root of the identity itself—that are often used to justify and promote social and political identity without acknowledgment of the original process of boundary formation.²⁰

Tajfel defines social identity as "an individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional value and significance to him of this group membership."²¹ Essential to the development of group identity and an individual's social identity is this concept of common and shared group membership, a marker that surpasses an individual's interpersonal relations with other members of the group.²² As individuals identify as members of a social category or group, they adopt and internalize the norms, values, and identities of that

¹⁵ Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 3.

¹⁶ Hogg, 4.

¹⁷ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 15.

¹⁸ Korostelina, 16.

¹⁹ Korostelina, 16.

²⁰ Korostelina, 16.

²¹ Hogg and Terry, "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts," 122.

²² Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*. 24.

particular group.²³ These characteristics become integral to their understanding of self-concept, influencing the way they perceive themselves and others in relation to themselves and their ingroup.²⁴ Additionally, they weaken the boundaries between the individual and others within their group in comparison with the boundaries that emerge between their own group (ingroup) and others (outgroups).²⁵ However, Giddens emphasizes the need for an individual to take an active role in the conception of self-identity through reflection and adjustment arguing that “identity has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflective activities of the individual.”²⁶ Thus, an individual’s self-identity in relation to their social identity is not fixed but somewhat changeable according to their interactions with their social group.²⁷ Fundamental to this is an individual’s interactions with other groups and individuals as social identity is created in relation to the development of one’s perceptions of others.²⁸ Tajfel defines groups as collections of individuals who self-categorize as belonging to the same social category and tie their self-concepts, further explained by how they define and evaluate themselves to their social group’s identity-defining attributes and characteristics.²⁹ This natural tendency to self-categorize into social groups based on shared characteristics provides the framework through which ingroup members understand the social world and interactions within and outside of the ingroup.³⁰

Significant to one’s understanding of self-concept in relation to their ingroup, or their group membership, is the possession or adoption of shared attributes and values that carry emotional weight for the individual and thus influence “what one should think and feel, and how

²³ Hogg and Terry, “Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts,” 123.

²⁴ Brewer and Gardner, “Who Is This ‘We’?: Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations,” 83.

²⁵ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 25.

²⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 52-53, as found in Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*., 16.

²⁷ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 25.

²⁸ Korostelina, 25.

²⁹ Korostelina, 25.

³⁰ Korostelina, 25.

one should behave.”³¹ These shared attributes that tie members of a group through shared identity surpass congruous traits and common characteristics, often leading to the development of myths and shared history.³² This process of identification and social categorization strengthens one’s emotional connection to their group by highlighting these shared characteristics as positive.³³ Additionally, it realizes two essential functions for the individual: “(1) realization of the individual need to belong to a group that provides protection and confidence and (2) inclusion of a person into a system of social relationship.”³⁴ Not only is this process done with oneself in relation to one’s ingroup, but it also plays a role in the manner in which an individual orders their social environment to create significance and understanding in “groupings of persons in a manner which is meaningful to the subject” thus creating distinction between groups.³⁵ Social groups use these distinctions to standardize expectations of intergroup behavior and perceptions, including determining the role and position a group member holds in society.³⁶ As these standards of attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics are formed, so too are the perceptions of ingroup and outgroup prototypes.³⁷

Prototypes are created as individuals form mental representations and distinctions between human groups and categories by grouping similar or interrelated attributes as well as generalized differences.³⁸ This categorization overwhelmingly results in the binary groupings of ingroups and outgroups.³⁹ With regard to the ingroup, prototypes capture both the shared

³¹ Hogg, Terry, and White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” 260.

³² Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 16.

³³ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 17.

³⁴ Korostelina, 18–19.

³⁵ Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups*, 69.

³⁶ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 19.

³⁷ Korostelina, 19.

³⁸ Hogg, “Social Identity Theory,” 8.

³⁹ Hogg, 8.

characteristics of the ingroup as well as differences between the ingroup and a particular outgroup.⁴⁰ Thus, ingroup prototypes are often dependent on the comparison with an outgroup and can change depending on the attributes being compared and the context of comparison.⁴¹ As outgroup prototypes are formed, the anticipated result is that persons are seen less as individuals and rather generalized through the perception of the preconceived category of a prototype.⁴² This leads to the depersonalization of an individual and the assignment of certain attributes and normative behaviors that are projected from both one's self-conception as part of an ingroup as well as the prescribed categorization of the outgroup.⁴³ The distinction between ingroup similarities and outgroup differences is further accentuated as individuals favor their ingroup over the outgroup, ensuring a positive distinction of their ingroup, "clearly differentiated from and more favorably evaluated than relevant out-groups."⁴⁴ This sense of "we-ness" that binds a group's social identity around a focal point serves as a motivating force in strengthening that identity and investing a greater interest in the health and welfare of the group.⁴⁵ Thus the individual shifts from the social self "I" mindset to the collective self "we" mindset, internalizing "the norms and characteristics of important reference groups, and [consisting] of cognitions about the self that are consistent with that group identification."⁴⁶ Similarly, stereotypes are formed when a collection of individuals share a prototype of a group whether their own or another.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Hogg, 8.

⁴¹ Hogg, 9.

⁴² Hogg, 9.

⁴³ Hogg, 9.

⁴⁴ Hogg, 8.

⁴⁵ Volkan, "Ethnic Tents: Descriptions of Large Group Identities," 91.

⁴⁶ Brewer and Gardner, "Who Is This 'We'?": Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations," 84.

⁴⁷ Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 9.

Some of the motivational dynamics that are associated with these processes of social identity development are self-enhancement through positive intergroup distinctiveness, uncertainty reduction, and optimal distinctiveness.⁴⁸ The self-esteem hypothesis focuses on the desire for positive intergroup distinctiveness which is achieved through self-enhancement.⁴⁹ Individuals and their groups strive to assert group superiority over others to protect or promote the notion that the “we” of the ingroup is greater than the “them” of the outgroup.⁵⁰ This is motivated by the idea that the self-concept of group members is closely tied to the group identity.⁵¹ Thus, “the status, prestige, and social valence of the group” carries significant weight and impact on an individual’s self-esteem.⁵² Consequently, individuals seek to feel better about themselves or raise their self-esteem by emphasizing their group’s superiority over another group, reflecting the human motivation for self-enhancement and self-esteem.⁵³ Uncertainty theory on the other hand focuses on the motivation to reduce uncertainty about the world and the behavior of oneself and others.⁵⁴ The concept of reducing uncertainty becomes particularly significant as it relates to one’s perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behavior, especially in regard to those pertaining to the self and identity.⁵⁵ At the core of this theory is the idea that individuals “need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think, and who others are, how they might behave, and what they might think.”⁵⁶ Lastly, the phenomenon of optimal distinctiveness suggests that individuals seek a balance between inclusion and sameness

⁴⁸ Hogg, 9.

⁴⁹ Hogg, 9.

⁵⁰ Hogg, 9.

⁵¹ Hogg, 9.

⁵² Hogg, 9.

⁵³ Hogg, 9.

⁵⁴ Hogg, “Social Identity Theory.” 10.

⁵⁵ Hogg. 10.

⁵⁶ Hogg. 10.

through assimilation and distinctiveness or uniqueness through differentiation.⁵⁷ Individuals want to feel sufficiently connected to a group to satisfy their need for belonging and social identity which is often fulfilled through group membership.⁵⁸ This is emphasized in larger group settings where inclusiveness tends to be the more prevalent nature.⁵⁹ However, individuals also desire to maintain a level of distinctiveness to preserve a distinctive sense of self that is inversely more prevalent in smaller groups in which case an individual will seek more inclusivity.⁶⁰ This concept implies that individuals will seek mid-sized groups that strike a balance between distinctiveness and inclusivity.⁶¹

In addition to the motivations for the development of social identity, one must also consider the various functions that social identity fulfills including fulfillment of protection, safety, support, opportunities for growth and development (whether personally, socially, or professionally), and boosting self-esteem.⁶² The salience of these functions may vary depending on the type of social identity and the degree of involvement within a group.⁶³ Thus, understanding the concept of social identity is essential when considering the dynamics of intergroup relations, particularly in the context of intergroup conflict. In order for social identity to exist, there must be an outgroup (“them”) to determine the boundaries of an ingroup (“we”).⁶⁴ The reasons for the emergence of these boundaries vary but relate both to one’s understanding of self and others in relation to each other.⁶⁵ As a consequence of a variety of motivations and

⁵⁷ Hogg, 10.

⁵⁸ Hogg, 10.

⁵⁹ Hogg, 10.

⁶⁰ Hogg, 10.

⁶¹ Hogg, 11.

⁶² Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 67.

⁶³ Korostelina, 67.

⁶⁴ Korostelina, 29.

⁶⁵ Korostelina, 29.

efforts to fulfill certain needs, but particularly the need to see oneself and one's group in a positive light, ingroup bias and an increased potential for intergroup conflicts develop.

Intergroup Relations and Conflict

Social identity as a theory has significant implications for understanding relationships between social groups. Tajfel and Turner primarily focus on this connection to intergroup relations examining the dynamics of conflict and cooperation among different social categories.⁶⁶ As discussed earlier, social identity has a significant impact on the formation of one's self-concept and expectations regarding how one will be perceived and treated by others.⁶⁷ When individuals compare their ingroup to an outgroup their priority is to ensure the positive distinction of their own group compared to the outgroup.⁶⁸ These intergroup comparisons inherently favor one's own group and tend to be ethnocentric.⁶⁹ In what is effectively a struggle over relative status and prestige, the concern of groups with higher status becomes protecting and maintaining their relative superiority while groups of lower status aim to overcome social stigmas and advance a positive narrative.⁷⁰

Two major components of Tajfel and his colleagues' theory of social identity are intergroup comparison and minimal group paradigm.⁷¹ Intergroup comparison is the engagement of social comparison between one's ingroup and surrounding outgroups.⁷² This frequently results in the act of favoring the ingroup and the denigration or discrimination of the outgroup to enhance their self-esteem and boost their social identity.⁷³ Donald. H. Horowitz adds to this theory arguing that

⁶⁶ Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 7.

⁶⁷ Hogg, 7.

⁶⁸ Hogg, 7.

⁶⁹ Hogg, 7.

⁷⁰ Hogg, 7.

⁷¹ Hogg, 6.

⁷² Hogg, 6.

⁷³ Hogg, 6.

intergroup comparisons emerge as a sense of collective merit when in an environment that holds two or more groups as group members desire their group to have a positive evaluation as compared to other surrounding groups.⁷⁴ Social tendencies in these cases often emerge in the form of preferential discrimination in favor of ingroup members.⁷⁵ Significant to belonging to the group is the membership as opposed to similar characteristics.⁷⁶ Whereas the concept of the minimal group paradigm asserts that the most arbitrary and minimal group distinctions are utilized to strengthen ingroup favoritism and emphasize outgroup discrimination.⁷⁷ These components of social identity theory provide significant insight into the psychological process that underlies intergroup behavior such as prejudices and discrimination as well as highlight the value of social context and group membership in influencing and shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward others.⁷⁸

William G. Sumner on the other hand focuses his theory on ethnocentrism, a concept that explores the connection between the attachment an individual has to their own group and the negative feeling that develops towards an outgroup.⁷⁹ Sumner argues that the human tendency is to create a clear distinction between one's ingroup and the outgroups by evaluating other cultures and societies from the focal point of their own group.⁸⁰ In this approach, ingroup members coexist in harmony and abide by laws and an order of cooperation whereas the outgroup are perceived as adversaries who may incite conflict and competition.⁸¹ Thus, ethnocentrism brings one's own values, norms, and customs as the central and superior standard evaluating other

⁷⁴ Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 143.

⁷⁵ Horowitz, 143.

⁷⁶ Horowitz, 145.

⁷⁷ Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 6.

⁷⁸ Hogg, 6.

⁷⁹ Brewer, "Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?," 18.

⁸⁰ Brewer, 18.

⁸¹ Brewer, 18.

groups resulting in a heightened perception of one's own group and of contempt towards others.⁸² Sumner postulates a negative correlation between the attitudes of ingroups and outgroups, suggesting that stronger attachments and cohesion within an ingroup could lead to a corresponding development of hostility and contempt towards the outgroups.⁸³ Significant to Sumner's theory is the argument that the need for war with outgroups shifts the focus away from internal discord which could weaken the group thus promoting peace within the ingroups.⁸⁴ However, theories by Tajfel and his colleagues challenge the notion that divergent attitudes and behaviors toward ingroup and outgroup members emerge as a consequence of "cooperative interdependence within groups and competitive relations between groups," focusing rather on the categorization of social groups as the source for preferential discrimination for the ingroup despite the potential absence of interdependence.⁸⁵

The strategies assumed by groups to manage their identity vary depending on subjective belief structures, or the beliefs of group members regarding the type of relationship between the ingroup and a particular outgroup.⁸⁶ These beliefs focus on several key aspects regarding the ingroup's relationship with the outgroup including status, stability, legitimacy, permeability, and cognitive alternatives.⁸⁷ Two key belief structures are that of social mobility and social change.⁸⁸ A social mobility belief structure centers on the idea that intergroup boundaries are permeable, that individuals can change their social identity by crossing into another group, and that doing so is easy.⁸⁹ In these cases, members of lower status groups may disidentify from their own group

⁸² Brewer, 18.

⁸³ Brewer, 18.

⁸⁴ Brewer, 18.

⁸⁵ Brewer, 18.

⁸⁶ Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," 7.

⁸⁷ Hogg, 7.

⁸⁸ Hogg, 7.

⁸⁹ Hogg, 7.

and endeavor to join an outgroup of higher status.⁹⁰ However, the reality of the situation is that intergroup boundaries are seldom permeable and attempts to cross into another group frequently result in social exclusion from both groups.⁹¹ Dominant groups may purport the idea of social mobility as an achievable venture and even tolerate a limited number of cross-overs in order to undermine collective action by the minority in the long run.⁹²

A social change belief structure, on the other hand recognizes the unlikely probability of permeability and the difficulty of passing to another group.⁹³ As a result, groups of lower status are driven to engage in social creativity by attempting to redefine their group's social value in combination with avoiding upward comparisons with groups of higher status and rather engaging in downward or lateral comparisons with groups of lower status to build themselves up.⁹⁴ Dominant groups tend to encourage this belief structure as downward or lateral comparisons among subordinate groups as a strategy to maintain control through "divide and conquer."⁹⁵ When this belief structure is coupled with the perception of an illegitimate social order, group members may develop what has been termed as cognitive alternatives, or critical ideologies and strategies for achieving social change.⁹⁶ This in turn may lead groups to engage in social competition, or the direct competition with an outgroup over status.⁹⁷ These competitions may present in the form of debate, protests, revolution, or even war.⁹⁸

⁹⁰ Hogg, 7.

⁹¹ Hogg, 7.

⁹² Hogg, 7.

⁹³ Hogg, 7.

⁹⁴ Hogg, 7.

⁹⁵ Hogg, 7.

⁹⁶ Hogg, 7.

⁹⁷ Hogg, 8.

⁹⁸ Hogg, 8.

While achieving cooperation between groups and fostering social harmony, particularly where ethnocentrism and prejudice are involved, is challenging, an effective approach may be cross-categorization or the promotion of an environment in which multiple dimensions of identity are recognized.⁹⁹ This allows for distinction between groups while also acknowledging the sharing of common identities on other dimensions.¹⁰⁰ However, even in these communities some identities may be more salient and interconnected thus creating boundaries from where the negativity of outsiders emerge.¹⁰¹ The potential negative impacts that follow as a consequence, such as the formation of stereotypes and the development of prejudice and discrimination, often result in intergroup conflict.¹⁰²

There are several factors that influence the development of negative perception of outgroups, one being the individual need for differentiation.¹⁰³ Particularly in homogenous societies where members may develop strong loyalties to their ingroup, individuals may seek to satisfy the need for differentiation through the emphasis of minor differences to outsiders.¹⁰⁴ Another factor to consider is the basis on which favorable self-identity is built. Groups tend to develop positive social identity through the practice of favorable social comparison which results in the denigration of outgroups typically in the form of negative stereotypes, biases, and prejudice.¹⁰⁵ A third factor is the perception of relative deprivation.¹⁰⁶ Even in socially and economically equal situations, comparisons between the ingroup and the outgroup eventually result in an underestimation of the power of one's own group leading to feelings of relative

⁹⁹ Hogg, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Hogg, 8.

¹⁰¹ Hogg, 8.

¹⁰² Hogg, 8.

¹⁰³ Rothbart and Korostelina, "Moral Denigration of the Other," 32.

¹⁰⁴ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹⁰⁶ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

deprivation which in turn drives further unfavorable perceptions.¹⁰⁷ In situations of inequality or asymmetric status, low-status and minority groups tend to develop “a stronger sense of collective self and more ingroup homogeneity” which then strengthens ingroup bias and negative perceptions of the outgroup.¹⁰⁸ This is particularly true of communities that have experienced intergroup violence as the ingroup identity solidarity becomes the priority over any other identity.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, in communities that have experienced a history of conflict between groups, the various group identities have a tendency to merge into a single dominant category that may retain symbols, of ethnicity, nationality, or religion which provide the dominant identity with a sense of security and emphasize moral legitimacy and authority.¹¹⁰ This new, unified identity, formed and dependent on ideological myth, is then contrasted against the perceived “dangerous Other” and used not only as a tool to further shape the ingroup identity but to demonize the outgroup or the “Other.”¹¹¹

The readiness to engage in conflict can also be attributed to the development of negative stereotypes. Stereotypes reflect commonly shared ideas of the features and characteristics that are representative of members of a particular group.¹¹² Once a stereotype is established whether it pertains to the ingroup or the outgroup, people have a tendency to “rationalize the differences between a group member and the group’s majority, without excluding this member from the group.”¹¹³ In this regard, “one exception from the stereotypic ‘rule’ does not change regularity.”¹¹⁴ However, as discussed earlier, the need to increase self-esteem and develop

¹⁰⁷ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹⁰⁹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹¹⁰ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹¹¹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 32.

¹¹² Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 128.

¹¹³ Korostelina, 27.

¹¹⁴ Korostelina, 64.

positive stereotypes for one's own ingroup through favorable comparison often leads to the development of negative stereotypes towards members of the outgroup.¹¹⁵ The consequences of these often inaccurate developments inevitably present as biases, discrimination, prejudice, and the perception of the "other" as less than.¹¹⁶ As negative stereotypes influence the way ingroup members perceive and estimate the behavior of outgroup members, it is difficult to change negative images even when factual evidence is not in concurrence with the projected stereotype.¹¹⁷ Negative stereotypes thus reinforce the readiness to engage in conflict.¹¹⁸ It's significant to note that, according to cognitive dissonance theory, there is a need on the part of the ingroup for the behavior of an outgroup to align with the beliefs and opinions of the negative stereotypes being projected.¹¹⁹ In the situations in which these do not align, members of the ingroup will adjust their stereotypes to accommodate their behavior.¹²⁰ Thus, the negative stereotypes may become even more negative, at times to an extreme, to avoid this inconsistency.¹²¹

Threat Narratives

A major source of identity-based conflict, and significant to the evolution of militias and paramilitaries in Sudan, is the perception of threat and the development of threat narratives. The presence of threat narratives in these cases is significant to understanding the evolution of social identity as these identities and threats often develop in relation to each other. Volkan posits that "individuals are not usually preoccupied with their large-group identity until it is threatened."¹²²

¹¹⁵ Korostelina, 92.

¹¹⁶ Korostelina, 128.

¹¹⁷ Korostelina, 128.

¹¹⁸ Korostelina, 132.

¹¹⁹ Korostelina, 132.

¹²⁰ Korostelina, 132.

¹²¹ Korostelina, 132.

¹²² Volkan, "Ethnic Tents: Descriptions of Large Group Identities," 25.

Threats impact the behavior of ingroup members whether the threats are real or perceived.¹²³ The perceptions of “outgroup threats increase as the perceived competition between groups for resources rises,” as hostile groups tend to believe that there is more profit from competing rather than cooperating.¹²⁴ Realistic conflict theory emphasizes the idea of conflicting goals and interests between groups strengthen prejudices within the ingroup.¹²⁵ Other studies suggest that homogenous outgroups as opposed to heterogenous outgroups are perceived as a greater threat due to the idea that they are better able to mobilize.¹²⁶ Additionally, the perception of outgroup threats leads to greater hostility projected towards them which is then utilized to justify conflict or unfavorable attitudes and behaviors of outgroup members.¹²⁷ It’s important to note that not only do ingroup members perceive outgroups and their members on the basis of projected stereotypes but also ascribe goals to the outgroup.¹²⁸ This consequently leads to a heightened sense of threats toward the well-being and status of the ingroup.¹²⁹ This attribution error reflects the human tendency to overemphasize behavioral explanations based on personality as opposed to considering explanations based on the influence of situational factors.¹³⁰ In the context of perceived competition, ingroups interpret the actions of outgroups as having harmful and hostile motivations and intentions, potentially posing a threat to the interests of the ingroup.¹³¹

Volkan argues that the human tendency is to ascribe negative characteristics and intentions to outgroups because ingroup members encounter difficulties when attempting to

¹²³ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 139.

¹²⁴ Korostelina, 139.

¹²⁵ Korostelina, 139.

¹²⁶ Korostelina, 139.

¹²⁷ Korostelina, 139.

¹²⁸ Korostelina, 139.

¹²⁹ Korostelina, 139.

¹³⁰ Korostelina, 139.

¹³¹ Korostelina, 139.

reconcile both positive and negative features of their own group's image.¹³² Returning to the human need for a positive identity, ingroup members internalize positive group traits, externalizing and projecting any negative attributes associated with their ingroup onto the outgroup.¹³³ Similarly, individuals may perceive the ingroup to lack power as a consequence of an immoral and aggressive outgroup, having previously defeated the ingroup in some manner of conflict.¹³⁴ These perceptions manifest "in the form of negative reservoirs that characterize outgroups and chosen traumas that stress an outgroup's negative intentions toward the ingroup."¹³⁵ Hence, the perceived threats posed by the outgroup are primarily founded on the negative attributions assigned to the outgroups based on the interpretation of intergroup relations.¹³⁶ There are many contexts in which an ingroup may perceive outgroups as a threat including:

- (a) unequal economic, cultural or political positions of ethnic groups;
- (b) different citizenship of ethnic groups;
- (c) memories of the former domination of the outgroup and attribution of the desire for its revival;
- (d) a perceived weaker or worse position in comparison with the outgroup;
- (e) limiting of the socioeconomic opportunities of the ingroup by outgroups;
- (f) political extremism, violence, and nationalism of out-groups."¹³⁷

Under these conditions of perceived or real outgroup threats, the attitudes and behavior of members of the ingroups become complicated.¹³⁸ The readiness and willingness to engage in conflict and fight for group goals may fluctuate among ingroup members depending on the importance and urgency of ingroup interests.¹³⁹ The more urgent and vital the goal, the greater

¹³² Korostelina, 139.

¹³³ Korostelina, 140.

¹³⁴ Korostelina, 140.

¹³⁵ Korostelina, 140.

¹³⁶ Korostelina, 140.

¹³⁷ Korostelina, 140.

¹³⁸ Korostelina, 141.

¹³⁹ Korostelina, 141.

the perceived outgroup threat, and, likewise the readiness and willingness of ingroup members to engage in conflict, with the opposite effect with less critical and significant goals.¹⁴⁰

Additionally, the status of majority and minority groups also has an influence on the conditions for engaging in conflict.¹⁴¹ If a minority group holds a significant position while having few interests at risk, the perception of threat will strengthen their intentions to engage in conflict.¹⁴² Conversely, the majority group may be more inclined to engage in compromise when pursuing its own objectives than when opposing minority goals.¹⁴³ Consequently, the primary goal then becomes maintaining and preventing changes to the social structure and the fulfillment of outgroup goals.¹⁴⁴

Particularly in situations where there has been a history of hostility and conflict, these threat narratives begin to develop as stories to make sense of and understand not only the violence perpetrated but also the perpetrators and the uncertainties that surround them.¹⁴⁵ In these narratives centered around threats, storytellers frequently develop moral judgments about the perpetrator's actions and address certain themes, including normative agency, predictability, and global positioning.¹⁴⁶ With regard to normative agency, threat narratives tend to move beyond the empirical and factual descriptions of criminal actions, instead incorporating moral condemnation and implying criminal responsibility—the notion of being a causal agent and morally culpable.¹⁴⁷ These narratives attempt to explain the normative agency, or comprehensive culpability, of the perpetrators by revealing the motives and intentions behind the violent acts as

¹⁴⁰ Korostelina, 141.

¹⁴¹ Korostelina, 141.

¹⁴² Korostelina, 141.

¹⁴³ Korostelina, 141.

¹⁴⁴ Korostelina, 141.

¹⁴⁵ Rothbart and Korostelina, "Moral Denigration of the Other," 33.

¹⁴⁶ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁴⁷ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

well as plans and projections of potential future actions.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the narratives lose the separation between objective descriptions and moral judgment and instead present a comprehensive culpability in which “the truth about an agent’s capacity to exert influence merges with normative denunciation.”¹⁴⁹ The “other” begins to be described not as agents of malicious and vicious deeds” but rather as those who behaved or acted in such a way because of their character and are thus of a malicious and vicious nature, stepping away from the context of what happened and relying on explanations of who they are and why they are.¹⁵⁰ As victims of violence recount their experiences, axiological differences begin to develop, contrasting virtues with vices in different behavioral contexts.¹⁵¹

The second theme, predictability, address the likelihood and anticipation of future crimes.¹⁵² These narratives center around the fear of the unknown and the distress caused by the inability to predict future aggression and its consequences.¹⁵³ Thus, these narratives aim to construct a framework to explain and predict future violence against the ingroup by the outgroup.¹⁵⁴ However, establishing the accuracy and veracity of these narratives and predictions becomes challenging as they cannot be validated through empirical scientific methods.¹⁵⁵ Rather, those that form and purport the narratives rely on limited experiences with and accounts of past behaviors.¹⁵⁶ Thus, they are generally speculative at best or entirely fabricated.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁸ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁴⁹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Rothbart and Korostelina, *Identity, Morality, and Threat*, 11.

¹⁵¹ Rothbart and Korostelina, “Moral Denigration of the Other,” 33.

¹⁵² Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁵³ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁵⁵ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁵⁷ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

Lastly, the theme of global positioning addresses the normative positioning of groups in relation to the “threatening Other.”¹⁵⁸ Research done on religious-based terrorism observes that terrorists devoted to a divine power develop feelings of exculpation and adornment based on a belief in sacred covenants made with that higher authority.¹⁵⁹ By recounting what is considered morally condemnable actions of individuals from the outgroup, storytellers provide a means for the “faithful ingroup” to morally separate themselves from the criminals.¹⁶⁰ This, in turn allows the faithful to align themselves with those they perceive to be civil, moral, and virtuous, thus reaffirming their sense of virtue and moral privilege as well as “their existential orientation in a world of violence and evil.”¹⁶¹ In such a dangerous world, the “good people” fix their morally elevated status, “rewarding the faithful and comforting the ‘innocent.’”¹⁶² These three themes contribute to the development of threat narratives, which then leads to the perception of “the Other-as-enemy.”¹⁶³

When perceived negative characteristics and blame are attributed to the larger group of the “other” rather than to the individual, one’s approach becomes that of collective denigration.¹⁶⁴ This denigration of characters that are uncivilized, savage, and subhuman is accompanied by negative images from invented stories of the past and reinforces the “other” as a threat.¹⁶⁵ This narrative of the “perceived ‘enemy’” justifies violent actions taken against them as protection, glorifying them as defensive and thus, fosters a continual development of hate and

¹⁵⁸ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁶⁰ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁶¹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁶² Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁶³ Rothbart and Korostelina, 34.

¹⁶⁴ Rothbart and Korostelina, 33.

¹⁶⁵ Rothbart and Korostelina, *Identity, Morality, and Threat*, 11.

fear within the ingroup.¹⁶⁶ Thus, threats provide a catalyst for the construction and development of social boundaries and group identities.¹⁶⁷ Within this them/us dual framework, ingroups distinguish themselves from outgroups by painting narratives of “bad, vicious, and unjust” and presenting themselves as “good, virtuous, and just.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, in these narratives, the “threatening Other rarely, if ever,” acts in a just manner.¹⁶⁹ When these hate narratives intensify, conflict ensues. In the case of Sudan, this paper will find that these threat narratives were and continue to be spurred by the manipulation of a variety of factors, including representation in government, resource scarcity, and access to rights and services. Particular to the case of Sudan is the social engineering of identities, particularly the creation, systematization, and politicization of identities through the use of memories and histories to divide communities and magnify this threat narrative for the purpose of recruitment and carrying out of activities for the “militia strategy.”¹⁷⁰

Ethnic and Political Identities

The process of border formation creates a distinct boundary between the notions of “them” and “us.”¹⁷¹ Ethnic identity serves as a link among individuals on the basis of shared histories, common experiences, and anticipations of future experiences.¹⁷² It necessitates a sense of shared destiny, encompassing expectations of being treated similarly, mutual concerns of security and survival/extinction, and beliefs surrounding the value, dignity, and recognition of the group.¹⁷³ According to anthropologist Howard Stein, “ethnicity is a mode of thought, not a

¹⁶⁶ Rothbart and Korostelina, 11.

¹⁶⁷ Rothbart and Korostelina, “Moral Denigration of the Other,” 33.

¹⁶⁸ Rothbart and Korostelina, 11.

¹⁶⁹ Rothbart and Korostelina, 11.

¹⁷⁰ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda.*, 27.

¹⁷¹ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*.

¹⁷² Ross, “Psychocultural Interpretations and Dramas: Identity Dynamics in Ethnic Conflict,” 225.

¹⁷³ Ross, 225.

category in nature.”¹⁷⁴ This is to say that where ethnicity is often thought to be tied to physical characteristics or a gene pool, ethnicity is rather more accurately characterized through shared histories and memories and social ties such as cultural or religious.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, racial distinctions are often presented as differing characteristics of biological features, including one’s physical characteristics such as build, skin color, and hair type.¹⁷⁶ In the context of conflict, racism tend to present as a distinction of physical characteristics “to reflect different stages of human development and [which] are used to support granting or withholding rights and privileges.”¹⁷⁷

Horowitz suggests that colonial rule played a significant role in shaping ethnic identities, as the colonial legal structures “made ethnic identity a more important matter than it might otherwise have been.”¹⁷⁸ As previously discussed, Horowitz asserts that group identities form through intergroup comparisons, desiring comparative positive evaluations of one’s own group.¹⁷⁹ This preference for one's own group results in favoritism toward ingroup members, emphasizing the importance of group membership over shared characteristics.¹⁸⁰ Thus, when analyzing conflicts presented as having ethnic origins, a further investigation may consider ethnicity as having less of an important role in these groupings.¹⁸¹ The direct and indirect forms of colonial rule established a hierarchy of racial superiority and different levels of “civilization” among the colonized, resulting in the categorization of “backward” and “advanced” groups, with

¹⁷⁴ Volkan, “Ethnic Tents: Descriptions of Large Group Identities,” 21.

¹⁷⁵ Volkan, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Volkan, 22.

¹⁷⁷ Volkan, 22.

¹⁷⁸ Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 139.

¹⁷⁹ Horowitz, 139.

¹⁸⁰ Horowitz, 139.

¹⁸¹ Horowitz, 139.

preferential treatment being given to the latter.¹⁸² These hierarchal distinctions often persisted into post-colonial times, influencing social, political, and legal structures.¹⁸³

Mahmood Mamdani further examines how institutional and legal frameworks shape and influence political identities. He contends that political identity is predominantly a product of the historical process of state formation, particularly in light of the influence and impact that direct and indirect colonial rule have on the development of post-colonial legal and institutional structures.¹⁸⁴ These political identities are thus closely tied to and sustained by the state apparatus.¹⁸⁵ A state's laws and institutions have the authority and ability to categorize individuals on the basis of their race and ethnicity by giving these identities legal and institutional statuses.¹⁸⁶ To the extent that is permitted by the law, these legal identities can thereby influence an individual's rights and participation in politics and society.¹⁸⁷ Thus, race and ethnicity should be viewed and considered as political identities that through legally defined identities, shape and impact one's relationship with the state and with others.¹⁸⁸ According to Mamdani, these political identities are reinforced not only by the law but also by the resistance and dissent of marginalized groups in an effort to break free from legal restrictions.¹⁸⁹ While these identities may act as a springboard for political action, they do not dictate or constrain the development of such action.¹⁹⁰ Mamdani emphasizes that while not all political identities

¹⁸² Horowitz, 151.

¹⁸³ Horowitz, 166.

¹⁸⁴ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda.*, 20.

¹⁸⁵ Mamdani, 20.

¹⁸⁶ Mamdani, 21.

¹⁸⁷ Mamdani, 22.

¹⁸⁸ Mamdani, 22.

¹⁸⁹ Mamdani, 22.

¹⁹⁰ Mamdani, 22.

become polarized when polarization occurs, it produces binary divisions that eliminate the likelihood for finding ambiguity, middle ground, or hybridity.¹⁹¹

Mamdani expands on this framework as a product of political identities that originated and were shaped during colonial rule. Direct and indirect colonial rule imposed legal orders that established racial hierarchies, whether between colonizer and colonized or between native and non-native populations.¹⁹² These hierarchies determined the order of superiority among the various groups.¹⁹³ In particular, indirect rule tended to create two distinct categories, indigenous and nonindigenous, and would then proceed to further subcategorize the indigenous populations into separate ethnicities.¹⁹⁴ This second division established a race and ethnic-based hierarchy, with the former being ruled by civil law and the latter by “customary” law.¹⁹⁵ Thus as a consequence of these imposed divisions, political identities emerged along the lines of ethnic boundaries.¹⁹⁶ In certain situations, the colonizing authority designated particular groups from the colonized as nonindigenous subject races elevating their status in the hierarchy compared to other indigenous groups.¹⁹⁷ These groups received preferential treatment under the law as they were perceived as peoples with the potential to become full citizens.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ Mamdani, 23.

¹⁹² Mamdani, 23.

¹⁹³ Mamdani, 24.

¹⁹⁴ Mamdani, 24.

¹⁹⁵ Mamdani, 24.

¹⁹⁶ Mamdani, 24.

¹⁹⁷ Mamdani, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Mamdani, 27.

IV. Historical Context

The historical context that this paper will be examining will begin with the Kiera empire of the Fur Sultanate, at which point Dar Fur was an independent political entity. One can frequently find tribal names labeled across wide areas on maps of Darfur, suggesting that some of the region's more than thirty ethnic groups occupy specific areas in their entirety.¹⁹⁹ This misconception fails to address a lengthy history of domestic migration, cultural blending, and intermarriage, a situation in which ethnic boundaries were more a matter of convenience than fixed inherited lines.²⁰⁰ One will find that throughout this history, it is reasonable to believe that identities had greater fluidity and such an environment in which individuals and groups could transition from one identity to another and hold multiple identities (which in modern times may be considered contradictory) simultaneously was cultivated.²⁰¹ Despite the labels of 'Arab' and 'African,' it is difficult to distinguish which group a Darfurian individual belongs to solely based on physical features, such as skin color, as the two have not only coexisted but mixed and merged for centuries, as will be demonstrated in the following section, with the predominant identity of the majority being Muslim identifying.²⁰² However, this section will also go through different periods of colonization in which, primarily under the rule of the British Empire, these labels of 'African' and 'Arab' were cemented into hierarchal legal structures which have continued to impact sociopolitical systems and environments through post-colonial times and which identifiers have been used to motivate and justify conflict.

¹⁹⁹ de Waal, "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap," 718.

²⁰⁰ de Waal, 718.

²⁰¹ de Waal, 718.

²⁰² de Waal, 718.

Fur Sultanate

To understand the evolution of racial and ethnic identity labels and boundaries more fully in modern-day Sudan, one must look back at the series of events that have built upon each other throughout its history. While the nature of these identities has changed, the origins can be traced back as early as the emergence of the Fur Sultanate in the seventeenth century. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century until a period of time under the Ottoman-Egyptian Empire and then the integration of the province of Dar Fur into the British-Egyptian colonized Sudan in the early 1900s, the Keira Sultanate ruled the area of the Jebel Marra Mountains in present-day western Sudan alongside two kingdoms in the Sudanic belt, the Funj Sultanate to the east and the Wadai Sultanate to the west (modern-day eastern Chad).²⁰³ The kingdom of Keira not only encompassed a large and diverse geographical area, but much of its expansion comprised of the acceptance of a multiplicity of ethnic groups.²⁰⁴ The identities and place of residence of the various groups' inhabitants often corresponded with the patterns of subsistence practiced in each area: primarily Arabic-speaking nomadic groups, known as *Jammal* for their predominantly camel pastoralism, occupied the northern semi-desert area; cultivators made up the majority of the agricultural central zone; and the Baggara cattle nomads who had existed semi-autonomously from Dar Fur for centuries resided in the wetter southern zone.²⁰⁵ However, despite the dominance of each production system in separate areas, the two were not mutually exclusive, nor did they correspond to defined ethnic or linguistic boundaries.²⁰⁶ Rather, the systems could often be characterized as agricultural-pastoral systems crossing ethnic and linguistic boundaries.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Bassil, "The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur," 348.

²⁰⁴ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 2.

²⁰⁵ Bassil, "The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur," 348.

²⁰⁶ Bassil, 348.

²⁰⁷ Bassil, 349.

This lack of clear and exclusive boundaries more fully characterized the unstructured and fluid political and social systems of Dar Fur and the nature of identities during this time.²⁰⁸

This lack of definiteness in social and political identity boundaries is further exemplified in the practice of intermarriage between ethnic groups. This common practice could be found among the inhabitants of the kingdom as well as with their leaders, particularly beginning in the eighteenth century, as seen with Sultan Muhammad Tayrab, of Zaghawa and Fur descent.²⁰⁹ The integration of ethnic groups produced a condominium of diverse ethnicities and cultures within a kingdom largely shaped at a crossroads of western African influence and ‘Arab’ influence from the east and north.²¹⁰ However, even with the increased acceptance and inclusion of Arab groups, and the resulting Arabization of the region, there is evidence of efforts of integration and assimilation between Arab and non-Arab social structures and the incorporation of “strangers” into the various social groups.²¹¹ Intermarriage served as one means by which people of the Dinka, Fur, Nuba, and other ‘non-Arab’ groups and their offspring were ensured unreserved acceptance and inclusion into the expanding Arab groups, particularly in Baggara society.²¹² This process of assimilation and integration was also expanded to slaves, who could intermarry or be “declared freed by [their] owner” and “...once liberated, a male slave and his offspring were Arabs and full members of the surra and tribe.”²¹³ This integration and absolute inclusion of people into the social system contributed to what became a common practice of inventing genealogy and attributing ethnicity to shared culture regardless of “ethnic origins.”²¹⁴

²⁰⁸ Bassil, 349.

²⁰⁹ Bassil, 349.

²¹⁰ Bassil, 350.

²¹¹ Bassil, 350.

²¹² Bassil, 352.

²¹³ Cunnison, *Baggara Arabs: Power and the Lineage in a Sudanese Nomad Tribe*, 67; Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 352.

²¹⁴ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 352.

Along with the Fur language, Arabic was adopted as the *lingua franca* used in areas of faith, scholarship, and jurisprudence.²¹⁵ At this time, a multiplicity of identities was the norm, with one's affiliation often depending on the context of a situation, such as with one's profession or the language being spoken in a given environment, and maintaining a fluidity to interchange among various situations.²¹⁶ Political allegiances and marriage consideration were frequently considered in an ancestral context (although more than half of marriages crossed ethnic boundaries), one's spoken language became particularly significant in the marketplace, while the collection of taxes and the use of water wells largely depended on where one lived.²¹⁷ There also existed a long-standing economic and environmental interdependency between Arab nomadic herders and generally non-Arab farmers.²¹⁸ As Francis M. Deng points out, "As long as one spoke Arabic, was culturally Arabised, and was preferably a Muslim, the colour of skin was not a significant obstacle to the enhancement of status."²¹⁹ Thus, identities, as they existed in the Fur Sultanate, had a variety of influences, allowing for the intermixing and adoption of identities one may not have been born into in addition to those that may have been inherited.²²⁰

While there is uncertainty and debate as to when Islam was first introduced in the kingdom, it is a significant feature of the history and development of social identities in Dar Fur both during its independent sultanic reign and in modern times.²²¹ Because of the traditional pilgrimage of Mecca, many Muslims journeyed from West Africa through the Sudanic belt along with other travelers, including merchants from the north and east.²²² These groups found themselves

²¹⁵ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 3.

²¹⁶ Flint and De Waal, 3.

²¹⁷ Flint and De Waal, 3.

²¹⁸ Flint and De Waal, 4.

²¹⁹ Deng et al., "Myths and Reality in Sudanese Identity," 62; Bassil, "The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur," 352.

²²⁰ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 4.

²²¹ Bassil, "The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur," 352.

²²² Bassil, 350.

traveling through the Keira kingdom of Dar Fur, and many chose to settle in the area, becoming a significant source of the Islamization of the region.²²³ There is agreement that Islam spread throughout the kingdom gradually and peacefully and is argued to have been adopted as a “religion at ‘court’” between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly with the conversion of Sultan Suleiman Solong,²²⁴ which led to the Sultanate becoming the first Muslim state in the region.²²⁵ In doing so, the Sultanate transformed from solely an African Kingdom to one that had a greater connection to the Islamic world.²²⁶ The expansion of Islam continued to penetrate the state and social systems with state facilitation as the Sultanate actively recruited Islamic holy men to settle in the region and promoted the establishment of mosques and madrasas throughout Dar Fur.²²⁷ A bureaucratic class of Islamic scholars was soon formed, and the Quran was adopted as the primary legal and administrative guide.²²⁸ However, as Islam extended its reach throughout the kingdom, a majority of the Sultanate’s inhabitants continued to embrace “a syncretism of Islam and indigenous beliefs.”²²⁹

Significant to the rise and success of the Keira kingdom, as well as its ethnic diversity, was the extensive transcontinental trade relations across Africa.²³⁰ However, as was the case across the region, commercial trade and capitalism in the Fur region was accompanied by a rise in the slave trade.²³¹ Considering the investment and centrality of trade on the success and development of the Sultanate, the slave trade became an industry found necessary to protect.²³²

²²³ Bassil, 353.

²²⁴ de Waal, “The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview,” 13.

²²⁵ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 2.

²²⁶ de Waal, “The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview,” 13.

²²⁷ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 352.

²²⁸ Bassil, 353.

²²⁹ Bassil, 353.

²³⁰ Bassil, 353.

²³¹ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 8.

²³² Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 353.

As a Muslim state, the Fur Sultanate considered its inhabitants and those who had accepted Islam as *dar al-Islam*, with which came protection from enslavement,²³³ and relied on the “forest peoples” of the southern periphery as their source of slavery.²³⁴ This distinction between a people protected from enslavement and a population considered to be a legitimate source of slavery can be considered the beginnings of the categorization and stigmas between “advanced” and “backward.” However, in these beginnings, it is important to note that while the stigma of non-Arabs as “less than” would continue and be further perpetuated by colonial rule, the distinction was not one of between Arab and non-Arab as the Fur Sultanate had largely mixed racial and ethnic groups.²³⁵

The Keira Sultanate had the ability to successfully assimilate and integrate a multiplicity of identity groups into a unified territory.²³⁶ Much of their success appears to come from not only the cooperation between professional practices, which seemed to largely be the basis of one’s general identity, but from the inclusivity of the varying groups in social, economic, and governmental practice.²³⁷ During this time, Dar Fur could not said to be explicitly characterized by issues of ethnicity, race, or “tribalism.”²³⁸ This is not to say that conflict did not exist between different identity groups but rather that Dar Fur relied on interdependence and cooperation of groups to ensure the stability of the kingdom as well as the continuity of the ruling group, which in turn cultivated a region of ethnic and other identity fluidity.²³⁹ Thus, representations of historical divisions by ethnicity and race and the emergence of conflicts based on these divisions

²³³ Deng, *War of Visions*, 11.

²³⁴ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 8.

²³⁵ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

²³⁶ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 362.

²³⁷ Bassil, 352.

²³⁸ Bassil, 362.

²³⁹ Bassil, 362.

in Sudan, particularly in the area of Dar Fur, should be considered misleading and inaccurate.²⁴⁰ However, recent studies of modern-day Sudan have depicted the occurrence of an inverse situation in which these very divisions, and particularly the history of these divisions, are used to sway perceptions regarding the reasons that undergird the conflicts as well as their use for the recruitment of individuals to the armed forces.²⁴¹ While at the surface level, a depiction of conflict based on ethnicity and race is a simple illustration of the current situation, the complexities of what is considered long-established ethnic divisions are better understood through the development of boundaries that emerged throughout the Ottoman-Egyptian occupation and the legal systems enforced during the British colonial era. However, while the defining of boundaries could begin to be witnessed during the Ottoman-Egyptian occupation, the subsequent development and execution of the Mahdi Revolution exemplifies yet another instance of identity boundary shifts and cooperation among the multiplicity of ethnic groups in the region.

Ottoman-Egyptian Occupation

Significant to the history and decline of the Keira sultanate and the beginnings of the emergence of ethnic divisions was its colonization by the Ottoman-Egyptian empire. The decline of the Keira Sultanate could be considered beginning with the loss of the key region of Kordofan to the ambitious Egyptian leader Muhammad Ali Pasha and his continuous campaigns for conquest.²⁴² Egypt, having been ruled by the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century but still functioning with a degree of autonomy, sought to modernize and expand its influence by extending its control southward into the Sudan.²⁴³ Driven by ambitious aspirations to create a slave army, pursue the enemy Mamelukes, and expand sources of revenue through access to

²⁴⁰ Bassil, 363.

²⁴¹ Bassil, 363.

²⁴² Bassil, 355.

²⁴³ Bassil, 355.

natural resources, Muhammad Ali set out to gain control of the region south of Egypt, including Dar Fur.²⁴⁴ In early 1821, under the leadership of Isma'il Pasha, Muhammad Ali's forces rapidly gained control of the southern frontiers, overthrowing the Funj sultans.²⁴⁵ The subjugation of Dar Fur and the southern provinces was evidently a far greater challenge as this intrusion was met with resistance from local leaders and communities.²⁴⁶ These campaigns for conquest by Turco-Egyptian forces and resistant efforts by the Keira Sultanate would continue over the following half-century before the ultimate fall of Dar Fur.²⁴⁷

The loss of Kordofan, an area that was key for both its material wealth and as a source of military recruits for the Sultanate, also gave way for Turco-Egyptian forces to take over “the practice of the slave trade from which the Sultanate derived the greater part of its wealth.”²⁴⁸ A new significant force in the region with considerable military advantages, the Turco-Egyptians posed a threat to the Sultanate's substantial source of income derived from the slave trade.²⁴⁹ Additionally, the Egyptian expansion created opportunities for Egyptian merchants to supersede the activities of Dar Fur traders, resulting in yet another significant blow to the Sultanate's economy.²⁵⁰ This period of sustained loss in the Keira's economy led to its eventual conquest in 1874 and its occupation and administration as a province of the Egyptian empire.²⁵¹ It is significant to note that despite the Turco-Egyptian victory in Dar Fur, this period was marked by numerous forms of resistance and rebellion against the “foreign” occupation.²⁵² In addition to the

²⁴⁴ Deng, *War of Visions*, 70.

²⁴⁵ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 356.

²⁴⁶ Bassil, 357.

²⁴⁷ Bassil, 357.

²⁴⁸ Bassil, 356.

²⁴⁹ Bassil, 356.

²⁵⁰ Bassil, 356.

²⁵¹ Bassil, 356.

²⁵² Bassil, 357.

resistance from the people of Dar Fur, there were concerns regarding how the Turco-Egyptian government would maintain control of the peripheries of the region.²⁵³ While this had also been a similar concern during the time of the Sultanate, this challenge was addressed through the distribution of land grants and the incorporation of individuals from a variety of groups throughout these areas of concern into the hierarchy of the governing class.²⁵⁴ This structure of administration, in addition to the common practice of intermarriage, created an environment in which the kingdom could forge sustainable alliances across Dar Fur, including its peripheries.²⁵⁵ While the occupying administration maintained the use of tribal systems where chiefs reported to centralized control, the local Sudanese resented the loss not only of their tribal independence but also of the newly established taxation system.²⁵⁶ The concept of taxation was considered deplorable by tradition, but even more so as the revenues were pocketed by Egyptian officials rather than put towards social services that would support the local communities, emphasizing and reaffirming the projected characterization of corrupt occupiers and infidels.²⁵⁷ In these circumstances, one can begin to see the occurrence of the formation of boundaries, particularly in the negative characterization of an “intruding group” as a consequence of the direct action felt by the people of Dar Fur.

While the Turco-Egyptian rule reinforced a preference for Arab-Islamic identity, the predominantly Muslim north resented the occupying administration, not only in their actions towards the occupied peoples but also in their practice of Islam, and characterized them as infidels imposing a foreign law.²⁵⁸ The predominantly Muslim, northern Sudanese considered

²⁵³ Bassil, 357.

²⁵⁴ Bassil, 357.

²⁵⁵ Bassil, 357.

²⁵⁶ Deng, *War of Visions*, 47.

²⁵⁷ Deng, 47.

²⁵⁸ Deng, 47.

themselves as adherents to the Islamic law of *shari'a* and their already established laws as Islamic and abiding by *shari'a* even though, as earlier discussed, Sudanese laws, customs, and traditions were a result of a blending and modification of pre-Islamic customary laws and Islamic principles.²⁵⁹ The local peoples, in turn, considered themselves better adherents and practitioners of Islam than their occupiers, which they viewed as morally low fueling “genuine feelings of religious revulsions and contempt among the Sudanese.”²⁶⁰ In this regard, not only had the people of the former Sultanate negatively characterized their occupiers as having low moral character but further supported this perception with a positive characterization of their own peoples as morally, and particularly religiously, superior. This shared sentiment towards an outside, intruding group and it's then resulting reaffirming sentiments about the people of Sudan supporting resistant activities across the region.²⁶¹ Acknowledging these resisting attitudes and perceptions as a hurdle, the Turco-Egyptian administration turned to local religious leaders to bridge the two Islamic approaches creating a system of patronage with a number of Sufi leaders.²⁶² However, these efforts failed to garner the legitimacy among the people that the government sought making it challenging for the administration to establish authority in the region, especially in the outskirts of Dar Fur.²⁶³

The Mahdi Revolt and the Reign of Ali Dinar

The suppression and exploitative practices of the Turco-Egyptian administration brought about a number of rebellions that were at first easily crushed but which, in turn, created a ground fertile for further attempts.²⁶⁴ This in combination with an exploitative Egyptian administration

²⁵⁹ Deng, 47.

²⁶⁰ Collins, *The Southern Sudan, 1883-1898: A Struggle for Control*; Deng, *War of Visions*, 48.

²⁶¹ Deng, *War of Visions*, 48.

²⁶² Deng, 48.

²⁶³ Deng, 48.

²⁶⁴ Deng, 49.

but a weakening Egyptian economy and army, provided an open stage for one of the most significant rebellions, the successful Mahdi revolt (1881-1898) led by Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdallah.²⁶⁵ The mobilization of this rebellion not only emphasized the dissatisfaction experienced across the region controlled by the Turco-Egyptian empire but was exemplary of a transethnic movement which for a period of time cut across the regional divisions of northern Sudan.²⁶⁶

The concept of the “Mahdi” could be considered one of the imports of West African ideas that came with the preceding centuries of migration to the region through the pilgrimage routes than one organically grown in the local region.²⁶⁷ The Mahdi was said to be a messiah come to lead the people in jihad (an Islamic term for struggle) against the foreign oppressors²⁶⁸ and the Muslim population believed Muhammad Ahmed (al-Mahdi) to be this prophesized Messiah, come to establish the Islamic kingdom and proclaim justice and the veracity of Islam.²⁶⁹ The goal thus became to liberate the region from its foreign occupation, to restore justice and to purify Islam.²⁷⁰ Accordingly, Islam became a unifying ideology for a group consisting of a variety of ethnic groups across the Sudanic belt, including the people of Darfur, Kordofan to the west, and the region surrounding the Nile in a common, united political movement.²⁷¹ This movement could be considered the basis of what would encompass the political identity of the northern Sudanese region.²⁷² However, the scale at which this movement spanned again became a concern, and the emphasis on unity under a common identity, “a new

²⁶⁵ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 358.

²⁶⁶ Bassil, 358.

²⁶⁷ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 4.

²⁶⁸ Mamdani, chap. 4.

²⁶⁹ Deng, *War of Visions*, 49.

²⁷⁰ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 4.

²⁷¹ Mamdani, chap. 4.

²⁷² Mamdani, chap. 4.

religious order to supersede the old, a new loyalty to transcend old loyalties of tribe and kinship,” became the priority.²⁷³ Thus, moral boundaries were clearly drawn between the occupiers and those occupied and differences that had spanned the larger region were minimized as a new identity feature came into the focal point. Winning battle after battle, the Mahdists eventually emerged triumphant over the regime in 1885.²⁷⁴

While the Mahdist movement was mobilized under an anti-Turkish campaign, Muhammad Ahmed’s ultimate objective was not Sudanese nationalism.²⁷⁵ The Mahdi’s efforts undermined the political and religious influence of local Sufi leaders, broadening Islamic identity.²⁷⁶ However, this was met with resistance, particularly from the Khatimiyya sect, which had benefitted from the previous Turco-Egyptian patronage, creating new sectarian divisions.²⁷⁷ Additionally, the southern region of Sudan continued to be targeted by slave raids under the Mahdist administration.²⁷⁸ Having originally united with the northern region in the rebellion, the South saw the Mahdist religion as a means of liberation from oppressive foreign rule.²⁷⁹ However, they did not convert, and Islam turned against them, no longer the unifying element but rather an emerging source of division.²⁸⁰ Primarily supporting the Mahdi were the Darfurian Arab Baggara, who had been frustrated by the Turco-Egyptian administration’s antislavery campaign and to whom the Mahdi had promised the restorations of such activities and practice, and the intellectuals of the north who came to see al-Mahdi as “the father of Sudanese

²⁷³ Mamdani, chap. 4.

²⁷⁴ Deng, *War of Visions*, 11.

²⁷⁵ Deng, 49.

²⁷⁶ Deng, 49.

²⁷⁷ Deng, 48–49.

²⁷⁸ Deng, 11.

²⁷⁹ Deng, 49.

²⁸⁰ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 50.

nationalism.”²⁸¹ The Beja tribe, motivated by their leader’s opposition toward the Khatimiyya order, also allied themselves with the Mahdist movement, though reluctantly.²⁸² Thus, the "variety of motivations almost inevitably produced a degree of fragmentation even within the Mahdiyya... something reflected in the structure of the Mahdist army, different factions fighting under different flags, each division commanded by its own caliph."²⁸³ It is also significant to note that while the Arab Baggara tribes may have been in support of the Mahdi state, larger Dar Fur may not have been as impacted by this sense of “nation-building” and the binding ties that had once enveloped the distinct groups across the Sudanese region was quickly disintegrating with the absence of a “common enemy” and the loyalty they held for their former Sultans began to reemerge.²⁸⁴ Throughout the reign of the Mahdi’s successor the region of Dar Fur was in constant rebellion, perceiving the Khalifa as yet another foreign occupier.²⁸⁵

After more than a decade of the Khalifa’s control and its eventual defeat by H. H. Kitchener in 1898, the Keira Sultanate reemerged under Sultan Ali Dinar.²⁸⁶ Dinar was the descendant of Suleiman Solong, founder of the Fur Sultanate.²⁸⁷ Typical of many of the Sultanate’s key political leaders, Solong came from a mixed ancestral line, his father an Arab and his mother of the Fur.²⁸⁸ As an individual Dinar served as a prototype of the former Keira Sultanate and was this recognized and accepted by Dar Fur, resuming control without extensive bloodshed.²⁸⁹ This is not to say that the reign of Dinar was without discord, though there were

²⁸¹ Deng, *War of Visions*, 49.

²⁸² Deng, 50.

²⁸³ Deng, 50.

²⁸⁴ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 359.

²⁸⁵ Bassil, 359.

²⁸⁶ Bassil, 359.

²⁸⁷ de Waal, “Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap,” 718.

²⁸⁸ de Waal, 718.

²⁸⁹ Bassil, “The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur,” 360.

few difficulties, and the majority of Dar Fur successfully returned under the Sultanate's control.²⁹⁰ However, the Rizeigat in the southernmost parts of the province persisted in their claim for autonomy.²⁹¹ Dinar resented this resistance, frequently ordering the use of force to punish the Rizeigat.²⁹² Believing that the tribes of the Baggara nomad had attempted to utilize the Mahdi reign to take revenge against the land-settled Fur, Dinar expelled the nomads from settled areas.²⁹³ This in itself could be considered the creation of a boundary between the Baggara Arabs and the Fur through the exclusion of the Baggara people as a consequence of a perceived threat to the security of the Sultanate. This divide between the two would only become more pronounced with the French, and eventually British, conquest.

The French conquest of the Wadai Sultanate in 1909 could be considered the most threatening event to the Sultanate of Ali Dinar.²⁹⁴ The Tama, Masalit, Gimr, and Sila peoples had traditionally inhabited the areas of Wadai and Dar Fur Sultanates, developing kinship ties between the two Sultanates through intermarriage and were thus tied to both to varying degrees.²⁹⁵ Dinar challenged the French seizure of their Wadai ally and, under British pressure, the matter of control was set to be determined by meditation between the British (acting on behalf of the Sultanate) and the French.²⁹⁶ However, the issue was postponed with the outbreak of World War I, "by which time, the British had killed Dinar and Darfur had been incorporated into the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan."²⁹⁷ It is significant to note that a principle means by which the British achieved this was through the armament of the Baggara Arabs, pitting them against the

²⁹⁰ Bassil, 360.

²⁹¹ Bassil, 360.

²⁹² Bassil, 360.

²⁹³ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 9.

²⁹⁴ Bassil, "The Rise and Demise of the Keira Sultanate of Dar Fur," 360.

²⁹⁵ Bassil, 360.

²⁹⁶ Bassil, 360.

²⁹⁷ Bassil, 361.

people of the Fur, and “[further] sowing the seeds of conflict” as the tension between the Baggara Arabs and the Fur would continue to grow.²⁹⁸

British Colonization and development of origin narratives

The prevailing narrative surrounding ethnic identities in Sudan could be considered predominantly shaped during the British colonial era. This narrative was structured on a racially biased framework that was typical of imperial histories written in Western societies at the beginning of the 19th century.²⁹⁹ Having defeated the army of Sultan Ali Dinar, the British Empire conquered Darfur in 1917 incorporated it into larger Sudan.³⁰⁰ Upon invading the region, the British found what they assumed to be a system of jurisdiction in which paramount chiefs had defined authority over specific ethnic groups, which, in turn, corresponded with a demarcated territory.³⁰¹ This assumed fictional system was accepted by Darfurians, which facilitated an indirect British administration under the imposed system of “Native Administration.”³⁰² This system sought to re-create an environment of “tribal purity,” organizing local leaders into a streamlined hierarchy of chiefly authority.³⁰³ Key to the success of this system was the manner in which territories, or *dar*, were awarded to the various groups.³⁰⁴ It is significant to note that the awarding of land did not equate precisely to land ownership, rather paramount chiefs were permitted to distribute rights to territory to members of their group.³⁰⁵

²⁹⁸ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 33.

²⁹⁹ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

³⁰⁰ de Waal, “Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap,” 718.

³⁰¹ de Waal, 718.

³⁰² de Waal, 718.

³⁰³ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

³⁰⁴ de Waal, “Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap,” 718.

³⁰⁵ de Waal, “The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview,” 25.

This system would continue throughout post-colonial times and become a major point of contention with the event of the drought of the 1980s which will later be addressed.³⁰⁶

In addition to the imposed hierarchy of chiefly titles, the British colonizers established a tribal and racial hierarchy in which they determined the Arab race to be superior to the non-Arab inhabitant races.³⁰⁷ Harold MacMichael, the then British intelligence secretary, further legitimized these claims through his authored works in which he formally documented the tribes of Darfur, classifying them by “groups of tribes” and “race.”³⁰⁸ However, as previously discussed, depending on the context, the identities of “Fur” and “Arab” and the sub-identities contained within them could be considered fluid and were frequently interchanged.³⁰⁹ However, this was not understood nor taken into account; rather, the assumption of fixed and permanent identities became the norm.³¹⁰ As a result, those who at the time of documentation claimed to be from either Fur, Zaghawa, or Baggara people absorbed cultural features that would have previously and otherwise been considered as from a distinct culture.³¹¹ Moreover, MacMichael cited Arab ancestral claims that linked them with land rights.³¹² Race came into play as colonial authorities determined that tribes belonged to two races, “Arab” and “Negroid” (non-Arab), regardless of whether they shared language or other cultural elements.³¹³ In this manner, race evolved into what Mamdani argues as a political construction. Thus, those granted the highest of chiefly titles including nazir, or paramount chief, were chosen from tribal leaders considered

³⁰⁶ de Waal, 25.

³⁰⁷ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

³⁰⁸ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

³⁰⁹ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³¹⁰ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³¹¹ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³¹² Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

³¹³ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

Arab.³¹⁴ With these titles came numerous privileges such as political representation and land rights.³¹⁵ This status was largely defined by “customary” law restricting those individuals who could lay claim to certain privileges and rights, such as *dar*, or tribal homeland and governance through local administration, to those members of tribes.³¹⁶ Whereas most Arabs experienced this preferential treatment, nomadic Arab herders and their tribes were often disregarded in the dispersal of chiefly titles for their leaders and in the accompanying privileges, including land rights and institutional developments.³¹⁷ Not only did these systems establish a hierarchy of superiority, but for those it overlooked, they set a standard to which they felt they were entitled.

Even though the Abbala tribe was predominantly composed of individuals who self-identified as Arab, they were still at a disadvantage in this system.³¹⁸ As a result of their transient lifestyle, they were historically disregarded in the dispersal of lands and traditionally had no fixed settlement.³¹⁹ As with other communities of nomadic peoples, this translated to having no tribal homeland, or *dar*.³²⁰ Given how closely chiefly titles and accompanying privileges were connected to tribal territory, this effectively indicated a further lack of access or claim to any tribal rights within the British colonial system of Native Administration.³²¹ This is in contrast to their cattle herding counterpart, the Baggara, for whom *dar* had been developed from the beginning of colonial rule.³²²

³¹⁴ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

³¹⁵ Flint and De Waal, 11.

³¹⁶ Flint and De Waal, 11.

³¹⁷ Flint and De Waal, 11.

³¹⁸ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

³¹⁹ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³²⁰ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³²¹ Mamdani, chap. 3.

³²² Mamdani, chap. 3.

What could formerly be considered fluid identities became structured and fixed, having greater permanency with the imposition of colonial ethnic and racial hierarchal frameworks of indirect rule, as can be seen in the examination of pre-colonial and colonial history. The benefits and drawbacks of colonial rule's preferential treatment or further subordination that resulted from being categorized as having a lower hierarchal standing could reverberate in what came to be regarded as "customary practice" and persist throughout post-colonial periods.³²³ Although it is reasonable to think that, as Mamdani argues, these ethnic and racial identities are a result of political structures, they have developed as engrained, ancestral and inherited identities that were distinguished by a process of tribal organization and the establishment of two "distinct" races, Arab and non-Arab, under British colonial authority.³²⁴ It is by these labels that subsequent post-colonial governments would use to engage and justify ensuing conflict and by which militias and paramilitaries, including the Janjaweed and the Rapid Support Forces, would begin to draw their boundaries of self-identity and distinguish themselves from their non-Arab targets of aggression.

Post-colonial independence

While the formation of boundaries and the basis of identity that has permeated the history of conflicts in modern-day Sudan could be considered having been foundationally formed during the colonial era, with the imposition of racial and ethnic hierarchies and the accompanying legal structures and institutions, one must also take into account factors that contributed to the further engraining of these divisive lines. The following section will look at the post-colonial impacts of poverty and inequality, particularly as it pertains to the region of Darfur; resource competition; use of *hakura*; and the development of the "militia strategy." While this is not an exhaustive

³²³ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 13.

³²⁴ Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, chap. 3.

account of factors, these elements in particular speak to the boundaries drawn between the central government and Darfur but even more so the various communities within Darfur.

Poverty and inequality

Since independence, Darfur has continually experienced extreme poverty, frequently scoring as one of the lowest on indices for well-being and ranking as the poorest area in northern Sudan.³²⁵ Much of the development, or lack thereof, experienced in the region could be tied to Native Administration policies of the colonial era as it was essentially a system of low-cost local government in which chiefs were given minimal payment and rewarded with local despotism.³²⁶ Following Sudan's independence in 1956 and attempting to recover from the impacts of 'Native Administration' on the local communities, many administrations endeavored to expand local services including police forces, schools, and clinics.³²⁷ Additionally, the local systems of administration through sheikhs and nazirs were officially ended and 'people's councils' were established to perform a similar function.³²⁸ However, the central government failed to deliver the funds required to sustain this newly established system and soon after the local administration in Darfur was financially depleted.³²⁹

If the governor of Darfur wanted to mount a police operation against bandits, he had to commandeer vehicles and fuel from two rural development projects funded by the World Bank, or from an aid agency. If he wanted to hold an inter-tribal conference to resolve a dispute, he had to ask wealthy citizens to cover the expenses.³³⁰

Situations such as these began to set the tone for the relationship between the people of Darfur and those in control in Khartoum.³³¹ It is also reasonable to consider that the seemingly

³²⁵ de Waal, "The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview," 9.

³²⁶ de Waal, "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap," 719.

³²⁷ de Waal, 719.

³²⁸ de Waal, 719.

³²⁹ de Waal, 719.

³³⁰ de Waal, 719.

³³¹ de Waal, 719.

indifference felt by the Darfurians from the government contributed to a growing division and disillusionment.

Lacking ties to territory, many nomadic groups, such as the Jalul Rizeigat people of Sheikh Hilal Musa, were given these such “rural people’s council” by the socialist government of President Jaafar Nimeiri in the 1970s in the form of small villages.³³² However, this was merely a procedural convenience and served at most to be a site where one could register to vote or where children could attend school.³³³ These nomadic groups continued to rely on mobility to pasture their herds, traveling traditional routes between the villages of the Fur and Tunjur.³³⁴ Most nomadic tribes depended on a socio-geographical order in the absence of a *dar*, which provided them through customary law the right to migrate and graze their animals in places that were dominantly settled by farmers.³³⁵ This proved to be successful for a number of years until the 1980s when drought, desertification, and agricultural development began to threaten these rights.³³⁶

Since the fall of the Fur, economic development was not seen as a priority nor was it given much attention to in Darfur.³³⁷ Records show that in 1945 a colonial governor in Darfur began to deliberate the potential for development.³³⁸ However the “Economic Development, Darfur Province” shows that this culminated in a mere five entries for the period between 1917-1950, with most entries lamenting the impossibility to achieve anything productive but modest exports of cattle and gum in the region.³³⁹ This lack of attention and initiative has resulted in one

³³² de Waal, 718.

³³³ de Waal, 718.

³³⁴ de Waal, 719.

³³⁵ de Waal, 719.

³³⁶ de Waal, 719.

³³⁷ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

³³⁸ Flint and De Waal, 11.

³³⁹ Flint and De Waal, 11.

of the most impoverished regions of Sudan and can be seen in the history and development of their education and healthcare systems.³⁴⁰ In 1935, British policy deliberately endeavored to “restrict education to the sons of chiefs” as an attempt to control the education of people and consequently the ability to challenge the power of these select few.³⁴¹ During the colonial era, only three Darfurians had been provided with a secondary education and a school for girls had not been established until 1939.³⁴² In 1951, only one of the twenty-three government secondary schools that existed throughout the country was in Darfur.³⁴³ With regard to healthcare, before the 1940s, the region lacked maternity clinics and in 1956 the hospital count maxed at three with only 0.57 beds per 1000 population.³⁴⁴ In the early 2000s, before the breakout of war and along with Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states which had been impacted by conflict since the 1980s, Darfur—particularly Western and Southern Darfur—had the lowest ranking of health, nutrition, and child survival throughout northern Sudan and extremely poor access to education.³⁴⁵ In all these respects, Darfur has failed to catch up to the relative standard across the country.³⁴⁶ Additionally, Darfur fell significantly behind in the private sector according to investment data from the 1970s to 2002 as businessmen from northern Sudan that had profited in western Sudan then invested in Khartoum which became the typical pattern of private sector investments.³⁴⁷

The imbalance of power in the Sudanese government, specifically in regard to positions of power, infrastructure and services was yet another defining feature of inequality. *The Black*

³⁴⁰ Flint and De Waal, 11.

³⁴¹ Flint and De Waal, 12.

³⁴² de Waal, “The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview,” 9.

³⁴³ de Waal, 9.

³⁴⁴ de Waal, 9.

³⁴⁵ de Waal, 9.

³⁴⁶ de Waal, 9.

³⁴⁷ de Waal, 9.

Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan was published by the organization “The Seekers of Truth and Justice,” who would later rise in prominence as the leaders of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).³⁴⁸ *The Black Book* “documented the privileged position of riverine Arabs and the marginalized position of [the western populations].”³⁴⁹ It laid out a compilation of statistics regarding the unequal distribution of key government positions including that the large majority of these positions were by individuals coming from three tribes which represented a mere 5.4 percent of the Sudanese population.³⁵⁰ It also included over 200 tables which showed, in addition to the imbalance of key government positions, an unequal allocation of infrastructure and services.³⁵¹ To this point, Darfur was not only the poorest region in northern Sudan, but the government’s top economic strategists made it plain the the official approach was to concentrate on the “Hamdi Triangle” of Dongola (northern), Sennar (Blue Nile) and al-Obaid (Kordofan).³⁵² The JEM criticism was similar to that of John Garang, the founder of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), who justified the SPLM’s armed fight by pointing out the egregious disparities in the country’s wealth and power distribution.³⁵³

In Darfur, the domestic tax base is low, relying heavily on financial support from Khartoum.³⁵⁴ According to a 2006-2007 World Bank review, Darfur experienced significant budgetary challenges including minimal budgetary transfers from the central to local governments, especially in Western and Southern Darfur, at about 2 percent of GDP in the period from 2000-2002.³⁵⁵ Additionally, state governments significantly lacked administrative resources

³⁴⁸ de Waal, 10.

³⁴⁹ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 16.

³⁵⁰ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 16.

³⁵¹ de Waal, “The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview,” 10.

³⁵² de Waal, 10.

³⁵³ de Waal, 10.

³⁵⁴ de Waal, 11.

³⁵⁵ de Waal, 11.

and personnel support, leading to the inappropriate allocation of funds and weak credibility.³⁵⁶ Most state funds were spent on salaries, leaving essential services and development underfunded.³⁵⁷ The national development budget prioritized projects such as the construction of dams on the River Nile and the expansion of the infrastructure in and around Khartoum, neglecting Darfur even more.³⁵⁸

Inequities within Darfur are also evident, with areas surrounding al-Fashir, Nyala, and al-Da'ien receiving considerably better services than other parts of the region.³⁵⁹ Western Darfur consistently ranked poorly on all indicators.³⁶⁰ Arab nomadic groups faced difficulties accessing education and healthcare compared to land-settled farmers leading to increased feeling of marginalization which has frequently been overlooked by outsiders, including international aid organizations.³⁶¹ Darfur lagged behind other regions in this regard, which were roughly 40 percent urbanized.³⁶² Prior to the 2003 conflict, al-Fashir, Nyala, and al-Da'ien were the main urban centers with approximately 18 percent of the population residing in these areas which were also the least urbanized areas of northern Sudan.³⁶³ Urban livelihoods made a negligible contribution to the economy.³⁶⁴ The region also hosted a sizeable influx of displaced people fleeing conflicts primarily in southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile as well as those looking for shelter from the pervasive insecurity and regional conflicts in Darfur, which had become common from around 1987.³⁶⁵ These cities provided limited aid and many people

³⁵⁶ de Waal, 11.

³⁵⁷ de Waal, 11.

³⁵⁸ de Waal, 11.

³⁵⁹ de Waal, 11.

³⁶⁰ de Waal, 11.

³⁶¹ de Waal, 11.

³⁶² de Waal, 11.

³⁶³ de Waal, 11.

³⁶⁴ de Waal, 11.

³⁶⁵ de Waal, 11.

began to develop within a complex pattern of supplementing livelihoods reliant on farming, urban income, and food aid.³⁶⁶

Resource competition and the rise in conflict

Several factors have played a role in the long-term decline of agricultural productivity in the northern areas of Darfur including long-term droughts, increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, as well as land degradation brought on by over farming, deforestation, and rising human and animal populations.³⁶⁷ While there is debate regarding the impacts and contribution of climate change to conflict, it is reasonable to think that it has strained livelihoods, in turn increasing tensions and hostilities between different groups.³⁶⁸ As a result of these environmental factors, patterns of migration have shifted to the more prosperous southern regions.³⁶⁹ While historically there existed a cooperative relationship between farmers, pastoralist nomads, and cattle herders, clashes between the different groups also occurred particularly with regard to disputes over access to pasture and water, damage of fields and crops, or the theft of animals.³⁷⁰ These disputes were often resolved through negotiation by traditional leaders and resulted in compensation and migration agreements.³⁷¹ However, the patterns of conflict witnessed a major shift from smaller outbreaks of conflict between African farmers and Arab nomads during the 1950s-1970s to battles of greater intensity and scale in the mid-1980s.³⁷² One particular reason to which this could be attributed was competition over access to limited resources, primarily a struggle over land, which only increased with the drought of the early 1980s.³⁷³

³⁶⁶ de Waal, 11.

³⁶⁷ de Waal, "The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview," 12.

³⁶⁸ de Waal, 12.

³⁶⁹ de Waal, 12.

³⁷⁰ Arbab, "Darfur: The Fight for Peace," 148.

³⁷¹ Arbab, 148.

³⁷² Arbab, 148.

³⁷³ Arbab, 148.

Following the drought and successive famine between 1984 and 1985, Darfur experienced a number of local conflicts as tensions rose between pastoral and farming communities.³⁷⁴ As communities bitterly struggled for dwindling resources, pastoral groups were pitted in what quickly evolved into vicious competition against farmers.³⁷⁵ Where nomadic groups drifted further south, farmers strategized to prevent and deter their movement by building fences or burning fields of grass.³⁷⁶ As the government lacked the means to effectively intervene, groups and their members began to arm themselves; pastoralists bought automatic weapons to protect their most valued commodity, their herds, and in response so too did the villagers.³⁷⁷ Efforts were made for reconciliation through a conference in 1989, but the recommendations proposed failed to be implemented and no resolution was met.³⁷⁸

While many Arab nomads struggled with adapting to a different lifestyle, the nomadic Zaghawa people were among some of the Arab groups moving southward, some seeking water and pasture for their livestock and others, those who had lost so much of their herds, seeking an area to settle permanently and a transition to trade livelihood.³⁷⁹ This southward migration was met with great resistance from the Fur, who perceived it as an intrusion and provoked land disputes with the settled agriculturalists, fighting to regain any losses of land.³⁸⁰ A 1985 food security assessment reported that the primary issue for the Rizeigat settlers near Kutum was the quality and amount of Tunjur-controlled land that had been allotted to them in conjunction with a declining demand for labor on farms.³⁸¹ Thus, the settled Rizeigat contended an inability to

³⁷⁴ de Waal, "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap," 719.

³⁷⁵ de Waal, 719.

³⁷⁶ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 44.

³⁷⁷ de Waal, "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap," 719.

³⁷⁸ de Waal, 719.

³⁷⁹ de Waal, "The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview," 12.

³⁸⁰ Arbab, "Darfur: The Fight for Peace," 148.

³⁸¹ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 44.

emigrate as they could not afford the expenditures of moving and establishing new farms as a consequence of their lack of resources.³⁸² In other areas, some Rizegat farms had been abandoned due to diminishing quality of soil and agricultural yields.³⁸³

The settled Rizegat claim that they now have so few resources that they cannot outmigrate because they cannot afford the costs of transport and setting up new farms ... There are some Rizegat farms in Goz [sandy soil] areas close to Birka Saira. Many of these have been abandoned due to declining yields, but there is currently an influx of impoverished Rizegat ex-nomads into the area looking for work.³⁸⁴ The lack of access to lands and land rights only further contributed to feelings of marginalization on the part of Arab tribes, as land was keenly tied to political power.³⁸⁵ These feelings of resentment towards the political dominance of the local Fur administration in the region drove several Arab tribes to form an “Arab alliance” (1986) to increase and establish their own political dominance through the restructuring of local administrative systems with the aim to expand their control of the region.³⁸⁶ However, from 1987 to 1989, another conflict broke out as feelings of marginalization drove Arab tribes to declare war on the African groups of Darfur.³⁸⁷

At the same time, the Fur were deeply opposed to and distrusted the Arab-controlled central government, which increasingly showed favoritism toward Arab citizens and communities and which had generally failed to address the near-famine conditions brought about by the drought and the social and economic consequences of this “environmental disaster” particularly in the region of Darfur which sat at the peripheries of the country.³⁸⁸ The favoritism towards Arabs and the overall neglect of the Darfur region stoked a fear of Arab domination within African communities, only to be exacerbated by policies brought about by President Sadiq

³⁸² Flint and De Waal, 44.

³⁸³ Flint and De Waal, 44.

³⁸⁴ Flint and De Waal, 44.

³⁸⁵ Flint and De Waal, 44.

³⁸⁶ Arbab, “Darfur: The Fight for Peace,” 149.

³⁸⁷ Arbab, 149.

³⁸⁸ Arbab, 149.

al-Mahdi.³⁸⁹ One such policy saw to the armament of the southern Baggara Arab militias and the emergence of the Murahaliin, which will be further discussed later in this section.³⁹⁰

Use of hakura

Tribal lands, or the lack thereof, would become both an incentive the government would utilize to motivate militias towards aggression and a rallying cry for the Janjaweed perpetrators of the Darfur conflict. As previously discussed, the tribes of Darfur, as organized by colonial rule, could be classified into groups with land-holding rights and those who otherwise lacked these rights, the former primarily consisting of sedentary groups as well as cattle-herding tribes and the latter comprising mainly of Arab nomadic camel herders.³⁹¹ Land-holding groups obtained their land rights through the practice of *hakura* (plural *hawakir*), a customary form of land grant within a *dar* used since the establishment of the Fur Empire in the seventeenth century.³⁹² Nomadic, primarily Arab, camel herders were often overlooked in the dispersal of these land grants due to the nature and occupation of camel herding and their dependency on a transient lifestyle for pastoralism and livestock trade, with a preference for *hawakir* given to sedentary groups.³⁹³ While historically this was not a significant issue, the implication of land-holding rights would emerge as a fundamentally important point in the Darfurian conflict.³⁹⁴

While the *hakura* was often interpreted to mean “tribal land ownership,” it is significant to note that the *hakura* system was not originally directly tribal.³⁹⁵ Those holding these land grants obtained them through court appointments under the Fur Sultanate which entitled them to

³⁸⁹ Arbab, 149.

³⁹⁰ Arbab, 149.

³⁹¹ Unruh, “Land and Legality in the Darfur Conflict,” 106.

³⁹² Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 7.

³⁹³ Flint and De Waal, 7.

³⁹⁴ Unruh, “Land and Legality in the Darfur Conflict,” 106.

³⁹⁵ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 7.

collect dues from those residing in their boundaries.³⁹⁶ However, the association between *hakura* and tribes developed as the heads of the *hawakir* became the authorized local leader and sought to build independent bases from the Sultanate.³⁹⁷ This was often done by gathering one's kinsmen into the boundaries of the *hakura*, thus establishing the group and tribal dominance and creating a hereditary leadership office.³⁹⁸ What may have initially begun as a land tenure or management system under the Fur Sultanate, began to evolve into the quest for independent tribal lands which became more heightened under the Native Administration colonial policy.³⁹⁹

The Native Administration system was a crucial aspect of customary tenure in the colonial policy of indirect rule.⁴⁰⁰ Within this system, chiefs administered to tribes on behalf of the government and were confirmed custodians of *dar*, now defined as tribal land as opposed to its original form.⁴⁰¹ British administrators sought to organize Darfur's by imposing a hierarchy of chiefly titles in addition to the racial hierarchy.⁴⁰² The title of nazir, or "paramount chief", was bestowed on Arab chiefs across the northern and southern regions of Darfur.⁴⁰³ The title of paramount chief was accompanied by a *dar* in which the chief held the responsibility of "allocating land for settlement and cultivation," resolving "disputes regarding land rights or natural resources," and essentially providing "a system of local governance" for the continued management of these issues.⁴⁰⁴ As leadership positions often translated to government positions that were accompanied by government recognition and benefits, the resulting identity politics

³⁹⁶ Flint and De Waal, 7.

³⁹⁷ Flint and De Waal, 7.

³⁹⁸ Flint and De Waal, 7.

³⁹⁹ Unruh, "Land and Legality in the Darfur Conflict," 109.

⁴⁰⁰ Unruh, 109.

⁴⁰¹ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 11.

⁴⁰² Flint and De Waal, 11.

⁴⁰³ Flint and De Waal, 11.

⁴⁰⁴ Unruh, "Land and Legality in the Darfur Conflict," 112.

motivated tribes to obtain their own nazir in order to seek out individual recognition for an autonomous *dar*, independent from the larger *dar* and majority tribe.⁴⁰⁵ However even under this system the titles, specifically of nazir, were denied to the landless nomadic camel-herding tribes, namely the Abbala Rizeigat.⁴⁰⁶ This system was continued post-independence and while, in 1971, the government eliminated the Native Administration system, it would later reinstitute the system with government-selected members as the designated leaders, creating a system which was highly distrusted and ineffective.⁴⁰⁷

In 1925, in an effort to bring about a more formalized and centralized approach to land ownership and administration, the Land Settlement and Registration Act was authorized to define and allocate land rights, establish a system for surveying and demarcating land, and create a register of land-holders.⁴⁰⁸ Customary rights linked to *dar* and *hakura* while recognized by this law were never eventually incorporated into it.⁴⁰⁹ While this law presented little concern to the inhabitants of Darfur at the time, it became a significant problem with the passage of the Unregistered Land Act of 1970 (ULA).⁴¹⁰ Both statutory and customary law underwent a significant transformation as a result of the introduction of the ULA.⁴¹¹ According to this law, all land that had not been registered under the Land Settlement and Registration Act of 1925 (before the passage of the ULA) became “state land for the state to allocate.”⁴¹² Rights to use the land could be granted in the names of certain people, but proprietary rights could not be attained over

⁴⁰⁵ Unruh, 110.

⁴⁰⁶ Unruh, 110.

⁴⁰⁷ Unruh, 112.

⁴⁰⁸ Unruh, 108.

⁴⁰⁹ Unruh, 108.

⁴¹⁰ Unruh, 108.

⁴¹¹ Unruh, 114.

⁴¹² Unruh, 114.

this land.⁴¹³ Although the ULA was a federal law, it was initially created for the Nile regions and did not at first apply to Darfur given the system of *hakura* that was in place.⁴¹⁴ However, those who lay outside the customary tenure system began to see the advantages of the ULA as applied to land in Darfur bringing about its implementation in the region.⁴¹⁵ Thus, land that was claimed under the *hakura* system, which had not fully been incorporated Land Settlement and Registration Act and was this not legally protected, became land controlled by the government and that could readily be dispersed.⁴¹⁶ Those who would be most impacted and disadvantaged by this would be the rural tribes of Darfur, including non-Arab tribes as a whole whose *hawakir* lay dependent on larger tribes as well as Arab herders, both the settled Baggara and the nomadic Abbala, whose distance separated them from the Khartoum elite.⁴¹⁷

The case of land rights speaks particularly to Mamdani's arguments of the continuation of political identities through legal structures as the laws determined a group's access to individual rights and government participation. Where the *hakura* system had once provided access to these rights and participation, it evolved into a system controlled by central government elites who claimed rights through their Arab superiority which by Horowitz's argument could be considered an "advanced" group while those who still depended on the *hakura* system could be considered "backward." Contemporary land rights provided direct links to Khartoum, including the development of infrastructure and foundational institutions and social services.⁴¹⁸ Implications of this included a further lowering of the status of non-Arab groups who relied on the *hakura*

⁴¹³ Unruh, 114.

⁴¹⁴ Unruh, 108.

⁴¹⁵ Unruh, 114.

⁴¹⁶ Unruh, 115.

⁴¹⁷ Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 8.

⁴¹⁸ Flint and De Waal, 8.

system as access to land and governance.⁴¹⁹ On the other hand, Arabs who had historically been denied land rights saw the non-legality of the *hakura* system as an opportunity to claim land they believed to be their tribal and racial right and improve the status of their tribes.⁴²⁰

Considering themselves as part of the superior Arab group yet historically being disadvantaged by the *hakura* system, Darfurian Arab pastoralists saw the government's call to arms against Darfurian non-Arabs, as an opportunity to correct past wrongs of landlessness, thus not only gaining tribal lands but also inclusivity in government and greater political participation.⁴²¹ Khartoum further preyed on these insecurities of "land loss" by manipulating fears of non-Arabs pushing Arabs out of Darfur, claiming that the rebellion that had arisen prior to the conflict was targeted at Arabs, specifically the Arabs of Darfur.⁴²² In positing the situation as such, Khartoum created a wider political identity of Arabs that included the rural Arabs of Darfur, despite their lack of rights and land under the administration and the historical context of the racial framework.⁴²³ Khartoum maintained the membership of these Arabs which was readily accepted by Darfurian Arabs.⁴²⁴ Even prior to the call to join arms under the umbrella of an Arab identity, those who joined the *murahaliin*, and later the *Janjaweed*, did not consider themselves as sharing a group identity or similar to the "backward" non-Arabs of Darfur despite greater similarities in histories and sociopolitical and economic positions with the non-Arab tribes of Darfur than perhaps with the Arab elite of Khartoum that incited them. The narrative of a denial and quest for a homeland would become a primary rallying cry for the *Janjaweed* (predecessor of

⁴¹⁹ Flint and De Waal, 8.

⁴²⁰ Unruh, "Land and Legality in the Darfur Conflict," 117.

⁴²¹ Unruh, 117.

⁴²² Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 23.

⁴²³ Flint, 23.

⁴²⁴ Flint, 23.

the RSF) and would continue to characterize the boundaries that would mark the RSF.⁴²⁵ It is significant to note that the first mobilization of the Janjaweed was not uniquely Arab but rather a mixed group including a substantial number from the Tunjur tribe.⁴²⁶ This being reflective of the majority of the population of Darfur and Sudan, maintaining the consideration of the created racial and ethnic framework during colonial rule. Despite this, one returns to the influences of political identity and the motivating factors of Janjaweed found in a created racial hierarchy and acquisition of land which further validated their membership to what they consider to be the superior racial group and reaffirmed their position as they evolved into the RSF.

Militia Strategy

The utilization and mobilization of armed local militias in counterinsurgency operations can be traced back to the 1980s.⁴²⁷ Their growing prominence has often eclipsed the official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).⁴²⁸ This militia-based approach, dubbed “counter-insurgency on the cheap,” has served Khartoum’s interests in a number of ways over the years, with some clear drawbacks, but also with significant impact on the identity boundaries and the eventual development of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).⁴²⁹ At the outset, the deployment of these militias may have seemed less expensive than using the SAF as these groups had the capacity to subsist off the land and could reward themselves through looting and plundering.⁴³⁰ However, with time, these militias have become more costly, as their leaders increasingly demand higher financial and political benefits for their services.⁴³¹ Additionally, the expenses associated with them go beyond

⁴²⁵ Flint, 24.

⁴²⁶ Flint, 24.

⁴²⁷ Tubiana, “Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias,” 1.

⁴²⁸ Tubiana, 1.

⁴²⁹ Tubiana, 1.

⁴³⁰ Tubiana, 1.

⁴³¹ Tubiana, 1.

immediate financial outlays.⁴³² Militias frequently shift their allegiances, sometimes clashing with and often provoking other paramilitary forces and government supporters.⁴³³ In fact, their misconduct has occasionally backfired for Khartoum, resulting in heightened backing and recruitment for local insurgent factions, leading to longer-lasting conflicts in general.⁴³⁴

The first use of militias could be seen during the administration of General Abdel Rahman Suwar al Dahab in his efforts against the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan and has been consistently used in wars in Darfur, the Nuba mountains, and southern Sudan.⁴³⁵ Since the early 1980s, Darfur has experienced a chronic lack of development and marginalization by Khartoum, severe droughts that had been mishandled throughout 1983 and 1984 and subsequent devastating famines in 1985 and 1986, impacts of the conflict between north and south Sudan as well as the increasing migrant flow from neighboring Chad, the weakening of what can be considered the "indigenous dispute solving mechanism," and the general favoritism of the Arabs by the government.⁴³⁶ This general collapse of law and order accompanied by "economic shortages and high inflation led to massive protests and strikes."⁴³⁷ Together with the formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the subsequent fighting resulted in the collapse of the Nimayri administration in 1985, making way for Sadiq al-Mahdi and his coalition government.⁴³⁸

The continuation of Nimayri's September Laws of 1983, which enshrined a specific version of sharia as the legal foundation, under al-Mahdi and his aggressive Arabism approach

⁴³² Tubiana, 1.

⁴³³ Tubiana, 1.

⁴³⁴ Tubiana, 1.

⁴³⁵ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 16.

⁴³⁶ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 110.

⁴³⁷ Etefa, 110.

⁴³⁸ Etefa, 110.

maintained the country in a state of war between the northern and southern regions.⁴³⁹ However, al-Mahdi's strategy introduced the formal use and support of militias, called murahaliin, made up of local Muslim tribesmen of the southern regions of Kordofan and Darfur.⁴⁴⁰ Given the high cost of assembling the regular army to combat the SPLA rebels, the resistance against the draft, and the ambiguous allegiances of soldiers, Military Intelligence equipped the Arab Missiriya and Southern Rizeigat of South Darfur and South Kordofan with weapons, encouraging them to wreak havoc in areas where the SPLA was thought to be supported.⁴⁴¹ Where Nimayri had used the Arab militias to counter the SPLA, al-Mahdi's government essentially provided them with weapons, organized them into a fighting force, and authorized them to engage in razing and looting on their own account, encouraging "aggressive Arabism."⁴⁴² Thus, introducing an explicit racial dimension in support of an ideologically based "Arab supremacy" and an intense ethnic divide between the militias predominantly made up of Arab-identifying pastoralists and rebels primarily made up of African-identifying settled and semi-settled communities.⁴⁴³ One of the driving forces behind the "militia strategy" was former retired General Fadllala Burma Nasir, a Baggara Arab who promoted this method with an inherent understanding of the inter-tribal dynamics in the region.⁴⁴⁴ Beginning in 1985, Burma Nasir formalized the military role and unified the various traditional militias into a single Arab militia to support the army in Darfur and Kordofan, no longer a mere "local problem created by local disputes and a supply of automatic weaponry"⁴⁴⁵ but rather a group gaining military significance.⁴⁴⁶ The Murahaliin were further

⁴³⁹ Etefa, 110.

⁴⁴⁰ Etefa, 110.

⁴⁴¹ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 16.

⁴⁴² Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 111.

⁴⁴³ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 12.

⁴⁴⁴ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 110.

⁴⁴⁵ de Waal, "Some Comments on Militias in Contemporary Sudan."

⁴⁴⁶ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 111.

supported by Libya, with credit to the efforts toward pan-Arab ideology and their support of al-Mahdi's fight against the SPLA.⁴⁴⁷

Significant to the Murahaliin mission in suppressing the rebellion was the attention they directed to the Dinka community. The general assumption in Khartoum blamed the Dinka for the rebellion against the New Islamic Republic in Sudan.⁴⁴⁸ This in turn set the tone for not only overlooking but encouraging scorched earth activities and other atrocities in Bahr al-Ghazal and other Dinka inhabited areas by the Murahaliin.⁴⁴⁹ When the Murahaliin were later more formally structured under a different government, a Baggara officer was selected to lead the Militia in the attack against the Dinka for their alleged support of the SPLA.⁴⁵⁰ The reorganization of the Misseriya militia as the Popular Defense Force (PDF) paramilitary only further exasperated the systematic killing of the Dinka in efforts to intimidate and curb the support of the SPLA.⁴⁵¹ The Murahaliin would

“attack a Dinka village at dawn, kill all but adult males who could not escape, rape the women, and enslave the children. The village would be burned, the wells stuffed with dead Dinka males, schools and clinics destroyed, and the huge herds of cattle rounded up as loot.”⁴⁵²

These attacks would serve as a precursor to the methods adopted by the Janjaweed militia from where the RSF paramilitary found its origins.⁴⁵³

Former president Omar al-Bashir himself played a significant role in the development and legitimization of the PDF prior to and during his administration. Before staging the coup that would bring him to power, al-Bashir served in the PDF with Baggara Arabs “personally

⁴⁴⁷ Etefa, 111.

⁴⁴⁸ Etefa, 112.

⁴⁴⁹ Etefa, 112.

⁴⁵⁰ Etefa, 112.

⁴⁵¹ Etefa, 112.

⁴⁵² Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan*, 174; Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 112.

⁴⁵³ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 113.

[participating] in the development of the militia strategy.”⁴⁵⁴ When the National Islamic Front came to power, al-Bashir further legitimized the role of the Murahaliin through the Popular Defense Act (October 1989), which incorporated the Murahaliin Arab militias into the regular security forces such as the Popular Defense Forces as paramilitary forces.⁴⁵⁵ In this respect, President Bashir continued the standard of impunity and found a more legitimate way to further support these forces with arms and training for the aggressive affronts carried out against the Dinka in Kordofan and Darfur, further sharpening the ethnic divisions between Arabs and Africans.⁴⁵⁶ The government especially played an active role in inciting the Baggara Arabs against the Dinka community, taking advantage of the historical context of their conflict.⁴⁵⁷ Tensions between the Arab and Dinka communities over pasture and water rights had long existed but had traditionally been addressed with local dispute-solving mechanisms.⁴⁵⁸ However, the mechanisms were dismantled with the abolishment of the Native Administration under Nimayri and replaced with a new form of local administration.⁴⁵⁹ While many tribes continued the use of local mechanisms to address disputes, the lack of government support and cooperation left these mechanisms without the authority to implement solutions.⁴⁶⁰ Worse yet, a combination of Arab favoritism, “easy access to weapons and government manipulation” made these mechanisms weak and defunct, giving way to the escalation of conflict with the SPLA and between the Baggara and Dinka.⁴⁶¹ More specifically, the perceived association between the

⁴⁵⁴ Etefa, 113.

⁴⁵⁵ Arbab, “Darfur: The Fight for Peace,” 150.

⁴⁵⁶ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 113.

⁴⁵⁷ Etefa, 113.

⁴⁵⁸ Etefa, 114.

⁴⁵⁹ Etefa, 114.

⁴⁶⁰ Etefa, 115.

⁴⁶¹ Etefa, 115.

Dinka and the SPLA was used to justify the withdrawal of government support for the local dispute mechanisms.⁴⁶²

After years of assaults and counterattacks that resulted in the deaths of almost 700 civilians and the burning of dozens of towns, President Bashir dispatched General Mohamed Ahmad al Dabi on a personal mission to "restore calm" in January 1999.⁴⁶³ The peace forces, better known as Quwat as Salaam, a well-known militia from Southern Sudan, were Al Dabi's main weapon.⁴⁶⁴ It was backed by government-sponsored individuals gathered by the recently appointed Arab tribal leaders.⁴⁶⁵ In particular, attacks on villages occurred near the Jebel Marra mountains, a key area for Fur and Zaghawa activists met.⁴⁶⁶ In May 2001, these activist would decide to "fight the government together to create a united democratic Sudan on a new basis of equality, complete restructuring, and devolution of power."⁴⁶⁷ From that point on, attacks on villages continued to occur regularly with impunity.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶² Etefa, 115.

⁴⁶³ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 17.

⁴⁶⁴ Flint, 17.

⁴⁶⁵ Flint, 17.

⁴⁶⁶ Flint, 17.

⁴⁶⁷ Flint, 17.

⁴⁶⁸ Flint, 17.

V. Janjaweed

Bashir's government, recognizing the continued weakness of its army and still lacking trust in it, continued its efforts of appealing to Arab tribes for support to fight as it launched a brutal counterinsurgency from 2003 to 2004 in an effort to suppress a growing rebellion in Darfur.⁴⁶⁹ After years of disenchantment and disillusionment with the Sudanese government, three non-Arab groups—mainly the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa—led the uprising, while in response, the government leaned on primarily Arab identifying groups to join the counterinsurgency.⁴⁷⁰ The government's "militia strategy" had previously been tried and tested, and its continued implementation reflected their distrust in the efficacy of the professional army.⁴⁷¹ Confronted with unconventional mobile warfare strategies, the government sought assistance from local Darfurians who were familiar with the terrain and were already armed to safeguard their livestock.⁴⁷² This combined government-militia offensive and its devastating campaign would lead to the deaths of no less than 200,000 people, driving an additional 1.85 million into displaced people camps and over 200,000 across the Chadian border to the west.⁴⁷³ However, it is significant to note that recruits for these militias initially came from both Arab and non-Arab communities.⁴⁷⁴ A pivotal moment came in April 2003 when rebel forces attacked the military zone of the airport in al Fasher, destroying military planes and killing numerous

⁴⁶⁹ Flint, 10.

⁴⁷⁰ Flint, 10.

⁴⁷¹ Flint, 14.

⁴⁷² Flint, 14.

⁴⁷³ de Waal, "The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview," 59.

⁴⁷⁴ Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias," 4.

troops.⁴⁷⁵ This attack signaled a significant shift in the conflict, with the rebels now posing a serious threat to the government's military power.⁴⁷⁶

Musa Hilal, a prominent Arab leader, initially opposed the government as a result of a previous arrest.⁴⁷⁷ In his frustration, he turned to the rebels, expressing a willingness to fight against the government.⁴⁷⁸ However, after an incident in which Zaghawa insurgents stole camels from his tribe to feed their troops, Hilal turned his energy again towards the government, joining forces with them to organize a counterinsurgency.⁴⁷⁹ The government supported the mobilization of Arab tribes, providing weapons, funds, and training.⁴⁸⁰ It has been documented that Hilal reached out to governors of Darfur, encouraging them to join the counterinsurgency for the sake of the Arab cause, saying, "Join us... We have money if you want it. The Arab problem is with the Zaghawa. For this reason, Arabs are joining the government."⁴⁸¹ Arab tribes were thus mobilized against the rebels, allowing the government to portray the conflict as "tribal," emphasizing the ethnic aspect of the conflict and exploiting existing tension and historical grievances.⁴⁸²

However, it is significant to note that the intentions of the rebellion movements led by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) were not tribal by nature.⁴⁸³ Organizing the resistance in Darfur, the rebel movement sought to act against the central government for "ignoring the needs of Darfur... [demanding] an end to decades of

⁴⁷⁵ de Waal, "The Conflict in Darfur, Sudan: Background and Overview," 50.

⁴⁷⁶ de Waal, 50.

⁴⁷⁷ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 18.

⁴⁷⁸ Flint, 18.

⁴⁷⁹ Flint, 19.

⁴⁸⁰ Flint, 19.

⁴⁸¹ Flint, 19.

⁴⁸² Arbab, "Darfur: The Fight for Peace," 151.

⁴⁸³ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 143.

marginalization of Darfur by Khartoum.”⁴⁸⁴ Even though the SLA manifesto encouraged Arabs to participate in the uprising, the rebellion started without having discussed it with the tribal leaders of the Arab communities.⁴⁸⁵ This allowed the government to utilize these “intentions” to manipulate Arab groups and continue a "divide and rule policy."⁴⁸⁶

As the mobilization of the groups gained traction, the nature of the militias began to change.⁴⁸⁷ Like past militia strategies, service was rewarded with whatever militants could loot or plunder, not salaries.⁴⁸⁸ Contrary to popular belief, the nomadic Abbala who served as the government's counterinsurgency campaign's backbone—most importantly, the landless Rizeigat of North Darfur—were more socially and economically neglected than the non-Arabs who spearheaded the rebellion.⁴⁸⁹ Arab tribal leaders backed the counterinsurgency efforts primarily due to land and financial incentives.⁴⁹⁰ As discussed in the section on the *hakura* system, the 1980s saw the downfall of the system “whereby nomadic tribes not assigned land of their own had customary rights to land and water along transhumant routes,” with an almost complete collapse in many areas in the early 2000s as the rebellion expanded.⁴⁹¹ Arab groups without land viewed this as a chance to acquire territory, potentially leading to political influence through “paramount chiefdoms.”⁴⁹² Tribes that already possessed land aimed to stay neutral.⁴⁹³

Additionally, pastoralists' livelihoods had been further harmed by the destruction they had contributed to, including the loss of markets, clinics, educational institutions, and other facilities

⁴⁸⁴ Etefa, 144.

⁴⁸⁵ Flint, *Beyond “Janjaweed,”* 24.

⁴⁸⁶ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 144.

⁴⁸⁷ Flint, *Beyond “Janjaweed,”* 21.

⁴⁸⁸ Flint, 21.

⁴⁸⁹ Flint, 21.

⁴⁹⁰ Flint, 14.

⁴⁹¹ Flint, 14.

⁴⁹² Flint, 14.

⁴⁹³ Flint, 14.

and the dissolution of the mutually beneficial connection between farmers and herders.⁴⁹⁴ For many underprivileged communities, receiving militia pay became a means of financially coping, while for others, particularly in poor communities, it began to hold status.⁴⁹⁵ Thus, the government secured the loyalty of these militia groups through monetary payments.⁴⁹⁶ Specifically, the recruitment to the Border Guards, a mounted division of the army, which offered monthly salaries of SDP 300,000 (USD 117) to individuals and dispersed monetary incentives to tribal leaders, became the primary vehicle for recruitment and mobilization.⁴⁹⁷ However, when these payments eventually ceased, defections began to occur.⁴⁹⁸

Initially, the government publicly denied any association with these militias, labeling them as mere “bandits.”⁴⁹⁹ However, mounting evidence contradicted these claims, revealing a deliberate cooperation policy between the government and the Janjaweed.⁵⁰⁰ The government responded, admitting they had asked Darfurians for help against rebel forces but claiming it was “standard practice.”⁵⁰¹ However, they consistently denied having any association with the militias, even during significant attacks in 2003 and a major offensive in 2004.⁵⁰² Human Rights Watch obtained documents revealing official cooperation, providing arms, and the urging of officials to “tolerate ‘minor’ abuses of civilians,” all while manipulating ethnic tensions.⁵⁰³ Khartoum capitalized on the narrative that rebels had plans to drive Arabs out of the region, striking fear in an already tense situation.⁵⁰⁴ The government was compelled to use tactics such

⁴⁹⁴ Flint, 13.

⁴⁹⁵ Flint, 21.

⁴⁹⁶ Flint, 21.

⁴⁹⁷ Flint, 21.

⁴⁹⁸ Flint, 21.

⁴⁹⁹ Flint, 23.

⁵⁰⁰ Flint, 23.

⁵⁰¹ Flint, 23.

⁵⁰² Flint, 23.

⁵⁰³ Flint, 23.

⁵⁰⁴ Flint, 23.

as fear, threats, and financial incentives to gain support from Arab communities as the professional army had deteriorated and could not fight.⁵⁰⁵

Originally, the government's mobilization efforts were not solely directed at Arabs; rather, a mixed group, including members of the Tunjur tribe, were trained and armed.⁵⁰⁶ However, leaders of major rebel tribes like the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa “refused to mobilize their people, deepening the polarization between pro-government and pro-rebel tribes.”⁵⁰⁷ The situation escalated in August 2003 when trained Tunjur fighters joined the rebels in attacking Kutum.⁵⁰⁸ This event further intensified ethnic tensions, with Arab leaders accusing the rebels of targeting Arabs, which drove many of them to increase their efforts to mobilize in response to this perception of an increased threat, including in the recruitment of their youth.⁵⁰⁹ Additionally, when non-Arab individuals responded to call for mobilization, the government would “[turn] these individuals away or [refuse] to give them weapons, unlike the Arab recruits.”⁵¹⁰ The 1980s saw numerous Darfurian Arabs being given weapons, promoting an “agenda of Arab domination” under the influence of Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.⁵¹¹ This historical context contributed to the vulnerability of a new generation of Arabs susceptible to militarization.⁵¹² Additionally, attacks on Arab communities, including “the looting of camel herds and attacks on busses, villages, settlements, and feriks (nomadic camps),” as well as the rapid spread of a rumor about a movement called harakat FAZAM, allegedly planning to expel

⁵⁰⁵ Flint, 23.

⁵⁰⁶ Flint, 24.

⁵⁰⁷ Flint, 24.

⁵⁰⁸ Flint, 24.

⁵⁰⁹ Etefa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*, 142.

⁵¹⁰ Etefa, 142.

⁵¹¹ Flint, *Beyond “Janjaweed,”* 24.

⁵¹² Flint, 24.

Arabs from Darfur, reinforced the perception among Arabs that the rebellion was fundamentally anti-Arab.⁵¹³

Arab tribal leaders had diverse responses and varied motivations for the conflict. Some Arab leaders, like Musa Hilal, sought land for their people due to colonial policies, while others were enticed by guarantees of wealth and influence, ignoring the potential consequences of intertribal conflicts.⁵¹⁴ However, by 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for alleged war crimes, and Arab leaders who had engaged in the conflict attempted to distance themselves from associations, asserting that they only joined the fight in 2003 out of self-defense.⁵¹⁵ While the actual threat they faced was often exaggerated, it is reasonable to believe that the Arab tribes felt targeted, especially with the claims of weapons that had not been seen before in Darfur.⁵¹⁶

Others, like the Mahariya, refused to participate, leading to tensions within their tribes and negative consequences from the central government.⁵¹⁷ The Mahariya tribe's leader, Mohamadein al Dud Hassaballa, refused to join or contribute to the conflict despite the assaults of the rebels.⁵¹⁸ While the Mahariya previously had good relations with the Zaghawa, the rebellion strained relations between the two, with unknown Zaghawa arriving in Mahariya territory, turning the area into an armed camp.⁵¹⁹ The rebels inflicted significant harassment on the Mahariya, targeting women and abducting an elder for ransom.⁵²⁰ Despite criticism,

⁵¹³ Flint, 24.

⁵¹⁴ Flint, 25.

⁵¹⁵ Flint, 25.

⁵¹⁶ Flint, 26.

⁵¹⁷ Flint, 26.

⁵¹⁸ Flint, 26.

⁵¹⁹ Flint, 26.

⁵²⁰ Flint, 26.

Mohamadein remained passive and ordered Mahariya to leave for Kabkabia.⁵²¹ This refusal to engage was condemned and many of the tribe's young men opted to join the Border Guard against his wishes.⁵²² Mohamadein passivity also came to be suspected by government officials.⁵²³ As a result, all Mahariya employed in security positions in al Fasher had their monthly salary reduced and were fired shortly after due to alleged suspicions of cooperation between Zaghawa and Mahariya.⁵²⁴

In South Darfur, the government aimed to defend Nyala and contain rebels in Jebel Marra. Key allies included Abbala—Mahamid, Nawaiba, and Mahariya tribes.⁵²⁵ Military Intelligence exploited opportunities, enlisting locals like Mohamed Hamdan Dogolo (Hemedti), whose profession was in camel trading, to secure Nyala.⁵²⁶ The Terjem, previously peaceful with the Fur, joined the PDF and Popular Police under their leader Mohamed Yacoub Ibrahim's approval to defend Nyala.⁵²⁷ Part of the government's strategy involved arming smaller tribes of Arabized people like Gimr, Tama, Kinin, Salamat, and Saada, aiming to create political support and constituencies.⁵²⁸ In 2003, the government demanded military backing from chiefs.⁵²⁹ By 2009, some Arabs involved in the counterinsurgency blamed smaller tribes, labeling them 'the Arabs of 2002,' including militia leader Ali Kushayb, who was of mixed parentage, creating further divisions within the Arab community.⁵³⁰ Additionally, Arab militias, in particular, faced

⁵²¹ Flint, 26.

⁵²² Flint, 26.

⁵²³ Flint, 26.

⁵²⁴ Flint, 26.

⁵²⁵ Flint, 27.

⁵²⁶ Flint, 27.

⁵²⁷ Flint, 27.

⁵²⁸ Flint, 28.

⁵²⁹ Flint, 28.

⁵³⁰ Flint, 28.

significant retaliation from rebel groups, further escalating the violence.⁵³¹ The conflict resulted in devastating attacks, with both sides engaging in brutal violence against civilian populations.⁵³²

The international community repeatedly urged the government to disarm the Janjaweed.⁵³³ In July 2004, the UN Security Council, through Resolution 1556,⁵³⁴ demanded the disarmament of the Janjaweed militias, giving the government a 30-day deadline to do so.⁵³⁵ However, this call for action overlooked the diversity of the militias and their goals and overestimated Khartoum's capacity to manage its proxies.⁵³⁶ Many Janjaweed fighters were now formally part of the PDF and other new paramilitary groups.⁵³⁷ However, negotiations with opposition movements, such as the SPLM/A that led to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), brought to light the issues Khartoum faced with the Arab groups who had participated in the conflict.⁵³⁸ Despite being significant actors in the conflict, Darfurian Arabs were rarely represented at the peace negotiations.⁵³⁹ Apprehensive of the government's initiative in advocating for their benefit, and growing realizations "that pastoralist communities could not survive without farming groups due to the rural markets they enabled and the support services they gave to livestock migration," a delegation tried to attend these negotiations but they were not permitted to participate.⁵⁴⁰ The delegation cautioned that any accord that did not "involve all Darfur citizens, particularly those who [had] suffered much from the rebels" would be rejected by Arabs.⁵⁴¹

⁵³¹ Flint, 29.

⁵³² Flint, 29.

⁵³³ Flint, 43.

⁵³⁴ "Resolution 1556 (2004)."

⁵³⁵ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 43.

⁵³⁶ Flint, 43.

⁵³⁷ Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias," 4.

⁵³⁸ Tubiana, 4.

⁵³⁹ Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed,"* 30.

⁵⁴⁰ Flint, 30.

⁵⁴¹ Flint, 30.

According to the CPA, 'Other Armed Groups,' including all irregular (militia) forces, were required to undergo a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.⁵⁴² The government repeatedly assured its Darfurian Arab allies that they were exempt from this provision while also confusing international actors by forming new paramilitary groups with new names.⁵⁴³ One such unit, the Border Guard, into which many Abbala Rizeigat were integrated, was established as early as 2003.⁵⁴⁴ While the SAF may have had genuine intentions to establish a force to guard Sudan's borders, the Border Guards were the primary militia employed in operations against Darfur's non-Arab people from 2003 to 2005.⁵⁴⁵ Another new force emerged shortly after: the Central Reserve Police (CRP). Compared to other militia groups, its members had superior training, compensation, and were less reliant on looting.⁵⁴⁶ Additional Abbala militias were incorporated into the CRP, however, they soon became known as one of the Janjaweed groups responsible for attacking civilian communities.⁵⁴⁷

However, fearing the abandonment of Khartoum and the downsizing of their units as a consequence of the CPA, thousands of Rizeigat and Misseriya PDF joined the SPLA, feeling that it would increase their chances of keeping a job and salary and potentially allowing them to join the regular troops.⁵⁴⁸ The 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), reinforced Arabs' fears that Khartoum would forego their needs in order to maintain political viability.⁵⁴⁹ The DPA required Khartoum to “neutralize and disarm the Janjaweed/armed militias” as well as absorb 5,000 rebels

⁵⁴² Tubiana, “Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias,” 4.

⁵⁴³ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁴ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁵ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁶ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁷ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁸ Tubiana, 4.

⁵⁴⁹ Flint, *Beyond “Janjaweed,”* 30.

troops into the SAF.⁵⁵⁰ The DPA was also thought to disadvantage pastoralists in terms of land ownership.⁵⁵¹ The landless Abbala had the most interest in altering the outdated system of tribal land domains, favoring contemporary laws that would legally protect the territory that they had gained throughout the conflict.⁵⁵² However, the 99-page agreement only briefly discussed pastoralism in one paragraph, mentioning the “‘important problem’ of competition for pasture and water.”⁵⁵³ The Abbala started discussing "betrayal," with some asserting that they had suffered more than the displaced people, who were being supported with aid from abroad, due to the loss of trade, migration routes, and livestock.⁵⁵⁴

The government's anxiety increased as the Arab militias started to assert a sense of autonomy and communicate with the insurgents.⁵⁵⁵ The security arrangement clauses of the DPA included specific controls for the militias, such as a gradual restriction on their access to weapons and freedom of movement.⁵⁵⁶ The principle was to legalize everyone who carried arms responsibly and to use them as a tool to regulate those who refused to do so.⁵⁵⁷ Confiscation of small arms was only employed in response to infractions of these laws.⁵⁵⁸ This strategy was to be used by all paramilitary groups.⁵⁵⁹ Khartoum, however, found it challenging to retake command of the militias as they fractured and tribal elders expressed a desire to go their own way as they felt that the government only approached them when it needed fighters.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁰ Flint, 30.

⁵⁵¹ Flint, 31.

⁵⁵² Flint, 31.

⁵⁵³ Flint, 31.

⁵⁵⁴ Flint, 31.

⁵⁵⁵ Flint, 43.

⁵⁵⁶ Flint, 43.

⁵⁵⁷ Flint, 43.

⁵⁵⁸ Flint, 44.

⁵⁵⁹ Flint, 44.

⁵⁶⁰ Flint, 44.

Despite the importance of Arabs to Darfur's peace, they were barred from practically all forms of international action, from peace talks to relief aid.⁵⁶¹ Except for UNICEF, “one of the very few organizations that has acknowledged their vulnerability and worked to alleviate it,” nomads, in particular, developed a suspicion of outsider.⁵⁶² They lost faith in the government and grew increasingly critical of Darfurian politicians in Khartoum, claiming they had forgotten their origins and traditions.⁵⁶³ In order to promote the interests of Arabs, a number of Darfurian tribe leaders requested to join the Arab Coordination Council (ACC) in 2007 but their request was rejected.⁵⁶⁴ Arabs in Darfur were also bitterly critical of Westerners, who they claimed “[made] no distinction between ‘Arab,’ ‘nomad,’ ‘pastoralist,’ and ‘Janjaweed.’”⁵⁶⁵ They completely lacked confidence in peace brokers, feeling that they had never given them an opportunity to voice their grievances, but rather pursued an initiative to confiscate even the small arms that they had always utilized to protect their herds and livelihoods.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶¹ Flint, 50.

⁵⁶² Flint, 50.

⁵⁶³ Flint, 50.

⁵⁶⁴ Flint, 50.

⁵⁶⁵ Flint, 50.

⁵⁶⁶ Flint, 50.

VI. Rapid Support Forces

This section will examine the shifts in identity experienced by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as they evolved from an unofficial capacity of militia groups to an official capacity as part of the intelligence services. In order to more fully understand these shifts of identity, this section will also analyze other potential factors that could have contributed to the shift in identity, including its establishment and the changes in roles within the political and social sphere and cooperation with or resistance to other official agencies.

Background, 2013-2019

Beginning in 2006, instances of blatant disloyalty, abuses committed by militias, and outright combat between militias and SAF troops grew in frequency.⁵⁶⁷ This, in combination with the frustration with the lack of confidence felt by Khartoum, members of the SAF began to criticize the government's reliance on the "militia strategy."⁵⁶⁸ However, the government's distrust in the SAF only increased with the 2008 JEM raid, which made it to Khartoum without being stopped by the SAF and intercepted only when special forces intervened at the capital.⁵⁶⁹ This came at a crossroads of unexpected challenges, including the aftermath of the 2011 secession of South Sudan, the spillover effects of the 'Arab Spring,' and public dissent from prominent figures like Ghazi Salaheddin al-Attabani.⁵⁷⁰ More significantly, by this time, Darfurian Arabs had grown increasingly distrustful of Khartoum and reluctant to organize

⁵⁶⁷ Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias," 5.

⁵⁶⁸ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁶⁹ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷⁰ Tubiana, 5.

militias to combat insurgencies.⁵⁷¹ Militias that were already in place were largely fighting among themselves and eluding government authority.⁵⁷² Khartoum grew increasingly aware that the combination of both a distrust in the government as well as their own inability to control militias was increasing the risk for a new wave of insurgency.⁵⁷³

The culmination of these elements with President Omar al-Bashir's desire to institutionalize the remaining Janjaweed forces supported the development of the Rapid Support Forces in 2013.⁵⁷⁴ The earliest RSF members were drawn from existing established units, primarily the Border Guards, which had been the first paramilitary force created from the Janjaweed.⁵⁷⁵ Additionally, the RSF was established in part as a response to a new need and demand from the militias themselves to be recognized, as had been the case with the establishment of the Border Guards ten years prior.⁵⁷⁶ The government saw an essential need to regain control of the increasingly rebellious Arab militias in Darfur.⁵⁷⁷ To address this, they chose who they considered the most disloyal soldiers to make up the first RSF units, the Darfur Arab Border Guards, and sent them to central Sudan and South Kordofan, believing they would be easier to manage in a different environment.⁵⁷⁸ However, this did not stop them from engaging in abusive practices, some of which went against official government policy, thus obligating Khartoum to return a majority of the RSF forces to Darfur in 2014.⁵⁷⁹ From 2014 to

⁵⁷¹ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷² Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷³ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷⁴ Tubiana, 5; Peltier and Dahir, "Who Are the Rapid Support Forces, the Paramilitaries Fighting Sudan's Army?"

⁵⁷⁵ Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias," 4,5.

⁵⁷⁶ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷⁷ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷⁸ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁷⁹ Tubiana, 5.

2016, the RSF oversaw government counter-insurgency operations, proving to be just as problematic as other previous militia organizations.⁵⁸⁰

Although the establishment of the RSF followed the government's conventional militia strategy, it marked a significant development by initially placing the forces within the jurisdiction of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS).⁵⁸¹ This move was significant as it provided the security organization with an independent paramilitary unit.⁵⁸² Initially commanding the RSF was NISS major general Abbas Abdelaziz, while former Border Guard commander Hemedti served as the operations commander.⁵⁸³ Over time, Hemedti gained prominence, leading to suggestions that both men held authority over distinct sections of the force.⁵⁸⁴ It is reasonable to believe that Hemedti held sway in the government as with his appointment, several of his Rizeigat kinsmen who held close links with him were given positions within the government.⁵⁸⁵ Additionally, during this time, Hemedti's commercial ventures expanded with support from al-Bashir, and soon, his family acquired and controlled stakes in the infrastructure, cattle, and gold mining industries.⁵⁸⁶

As these troops continued to grow, they were used as border guards to deter and prevent unauthorized immigration.⁵⁸⁷ Starting in 2015, troops were sent from the RSF, in addition to the Sudanese Armed Forces, to fight alongside Saudi and Emirati forces in the Yemeni conflict, enabling Hemedti to establish links with the Gulf states.⁵⁸⁸ According to a presidential decree in

⁵⁸⁰ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸¹ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸² Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸³ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸⁴ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸⁵ Tubiana, 5.

⁵⁸⁶ Maclean, "Who Are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?"

⁵⁸⁷ Maclean.

⁵⁸⁸ Maclean.

April 2016, the RSF was placed under the direct jurisdiction of the government, namely the president, a step that could be considered a mechanism of further legitimization.⁵⁸⁹ Later, in January 2017, despite Hemedti's opposition, the Sudanese Parliament attempted to pass an 'RSF Act' with support from SAF, aiming to bring the RSF under SAF jurisdiction.⁵⁹⁰ The proposed law was drafted in a way that ambiguously designated the RSF "into an 'autonomous' force but under the control of the [SAF]" and the president.⁵⁹¹ Members of Parliament, as well as SAF officers, protested this ambiguity, but Hemedti embraced the potential ongoing autonomy.⁵⁹²

Beginning in 2013, military officials had expressed concerns that the RSF, like previous paramilitary forces, could potentially rebel against the government in Khartoum.⁵⁹³ In a parliamentary discussion in June 2015, SAF General Adam Hamid Musa, formerly seen as a proponent of the militia strategy in Darfur, reportedly remarked that "the use of militias comes at a high cost."⁵⁹⁴ Another member of Parliament cautioned that "Arab tribes in Darfur and Kordofan were better armed than the state forces."⁵⁹⁵ According to the UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan, 15 percent of militia-led assaults in Darfur in 2015 were directed at the government.⁵⁹⁶ In mid-2016, SAF forces working alongside the RSF in Jebel Marra allegedly requested the removal of RSF members, accusing them of committing atrocities against civilians.⁵⁹⁷ Later that year, RSF and SAF forces reportedly clashed south of Khartoum.⁵⁹⁸ Additionally, the army expressed reluctance in their deployment to Yemen as part of the "Islamic

⁵⁸⁹ Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias," 6.

⁵⁹⁰ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹¹ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹² Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹³ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹⁴ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹⁵ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹⁶ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹⁷ Tubiana, 6.

⁵⁹⁸ Tubiana, 6.

Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism” because it would mean leaving certain war zones to the RSF.⁵⁹⁹ Despite this reluctance, several thousand RSF troops were reportedly sent to Yemen by early 2017.⁶⁰⁰

Shift in Identity

Where the Janjaweed were known for “war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur,” the RSF would continue to face accusations of numerous violations of human rights in Darfur and other locations reflective of their militia past,⁶⁰¹ some referring to it as the “recycled Janjaweed.”⁶⁰² The name Janjaweed itself would become a term that the NCP would seek to disassociate from, going as far as having it removed from official reports.⁶⁰³ After using the Janjaweed in Darfur to crush the rebellion, former President Omar al-Bashir used the RSF as a means to support the armed forces in suppressing further uprisings or coup attempts throughout his presidency.⁶⁰⁴ Despite possessing a formidable air force and substantial armament, Sudan's military continued to face the challenges of effectively engaging in combat in rural areas and the arid regions of Darfur due to limitations in mobility.⁶⁰⁵ Thus, the RSF, as its Janjaweed predecessors, continued to “[enforce] Khartoum’s will” on the more rural areas, attacking rebel groups and civilian villages alike.⁶⁰⁶

The name Janjaweed carried with it associations of crimes against humanity, including genocide and the perpetration of other heinous crimes of war.⁶⁰⁷ The shift to the official name

⁵⁹⁹ Tubiana, 6.

⁶⁰⁰ Tubiana, 6.

⁶⁰¹ Matfess, “The Rapid Support Forces and the Escalation of Violence in Sudan.”

⁶⁰² Suleiman, “Rapid Support Forces Are the NCP Recycled Janjaweed.”

⁶⁰³ Suleiman.

⁶⁰⁴ Maclean, “Who Are Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces?”

⁶⁰⁵ Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Who Are the Rapid Support Forces Clashing with Sudan’s Military?”

⁶⁰⁶ Rosenzweig-Ziff.

⁶⁰⁷ Rosenzweig-Ziff.

Rapid Support Forces could be considered in itself a significant means by which the RSF could not only be incorporated into the Sudanese state in an official capacity but also shift their identity and status within the social and political structure. The emphasis on the distancing from the name Janjaweed can be exemplified in the way the name was removed from official documents. In an interview with former UNAMID spokesperson Aisha al-Basri, she explained that the name Janjaweed had been erased from UNAMID official documents and reports “under the bullying tactics of coaxing and intimidation of the NCP régime” shifting to the terms Rapid Support Force (RSF) and Rapid Respond Force (RRF).⁶⁰⁸ However, it was not just in the name that the disassociation was emphasized but in the very behavior and action with which the RSF was related. In one incident, NUP leader al-Sadiq al-Mahdi was arrested and imprisoned after making accusations of alleged crimes and atrocities against the RSF, released only after he had offered an apology.⁶⁰⁹ In a televised statement, RSF Commander Major General Abbas Abdul-Aziz expressed that “the majority of the members in the [RSF/RRF] are Darfurians who usually adored military service and love engaging in the armed forces.”⁶¹⁰

Pres. Al-Bashir incentivized units and commanders with financial rewards, many of them growing wealthy and powerful, including now General Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti.”⁶¹¹ Hemedti himself began as a rebel, coming from a minority camel herding tribe in Darfur, eventually switching sides and joining the Border Guards.⁶¹² He would lead the RSF to become the powerful mercenary group it is today.⁶¹³ As he gained influence, power, and wealth in Sudan, Hemedti expanded his regional reach as he deployed troops in Yemen on behalf of Saudi Arabia

⁶⁰⁸ Suleiman, “Rapid Support Forces Are the NCP Recycled Janjaweed.”

⁶⁰⁹ “Sudan’s National Dialogue Only Gathers Islamist Parties: Opposition.”

⁶¹⁰ Suleiman, “Rapid Support Forces Are the NCP Recycled Janjaweed.”

⁶¹¹ Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Who Are the Rapid Support Forces Clashing with Sudan’s Military?”

⁶¹² Rosenzweig-Ziff.

⁶¹³ Rosenzweig-Ziff.

and in Libya on behalf of the United Arab Emirates.⁶¹⁴ Hemedti also claims ties with Russia through his connections with the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company composed of mercenaries, and the joint business ventures conducted with them in gold mining and security operations in Sudan.⁶¹⁵ This expansion, both financial and international influence, could be considered to have a significant impact on the identity dynamics of the RSF, particularly as it pertains to its autonomy. Autonomy would be a major factor in the tensions that developed between Hemedti and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and can thus be considered an important attribute of the group identity of the RSF.

After the Coup

In April 2019, the RSF, along with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) seized power in Sudan following the popular uprising that overthrew former president Omar al-Bashir.⁶¹⁶ Later, in July of the same year, General Dagalo (Hemedti), then acting on behalf of the military leaders, signed a power-sharing accord with pro-democracy protesters.⁶¹⁷ This agreement made him deputy chief of the ruling military council, which was then headed by SAF leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.⁶¹⁸ However, this came about after military leaders missed multiple deadlines to sign the accord.⁶¹⁹ A matter of contention throughout the negotiations was a civilian-headed demand that military commanders be held responsible for the human rights violations committed in the previous months.⁶²⁰ Earlier that June, paramilitaries had dispersed a peaceful protest in the country's capital of Khartoum that had resulted in the death of over 100 civilians, with many

⁶¹⁴ Rosenzweig-Ziff.

⁶¹⁵ Rosenzweig-Ziff.

⁶¹⁶ Maclean, "Who Are Sudan's Rapid Support Forces?"

⁶¹⁷ Burke and Salih, "Sudanese Military and Protesters Sign Power-Sharing Accord."

⁶¹⁸ Burke and Salih.

⁶¹⁹ Burke and Salih.

⁶²⁰ Burke and Salih.

more injured in the confrontation.⁶²¹ Additional reports of rapes, deaths, and injuries at the hands of armed forces and security personnel were made during that same period.⁶²² Although military leaders denied the allegations, particularly the ordering of the violent dispersal of protesters, the incidents of brutality sparked criticism on a global scale.⁶²³ The accord established a joint civilian-military sovereign council and stipulated the administration of Sudan first by a military leader for 21 months, followed by a civilian official for the subsequent 18 months.⁶²⁴

Establishing legitimacy

It is reasonable to think that the Rapid Support Forces perceive themselves as necessary to the security and stability of Sudan and seek for the country and its people to view them in this same light. The following section looks at the way the RSF presents themselves and the narrative they promote regarding their role in the ingroup of the Sudanese people. On their official page, they detail specific strategic missions with which they take charge of securing and maintaining, including firearms collection, the protection of the economy, community, and borders, as well as confronting illegal migration.⁶²⁵ While there may be valid concerns regarding these issues and their impact on the security of Sudan, in detailing their role and participation in these services, the RSF seem to present themselves and their actions as a legitimate and necessary force for the protection of the Sudanese people and the security and stability of the nation.⁶²⁶ Additionally, through their participation in these services, they insert themselves into a greater legal and

⁶²¹ Magdy, "Sudan's Military and pro-Democracy Protesters Sign Power-Sharing Agreement."

⁶²² Magdy.

⁶²³ Magdy.

⁶²⁴ Magdy.

⁶²⁵ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶²⁶ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

legitimate process in coordination with medical, judicial, and other security forces, possibly further claiming legitimacy for themselves in doing so.⁶²⁷

The RSF considers the collection of firearms to be one of its most important operations.⁶²⁸ According to the government, at the point when the RSF was designated for this strategic operation, the Darfur states had experienced considerable stability.⁶²⁹ According to their statement, in order to maintain this stability and prevent the spread of armed conflict, the RSF was charged with the collection and seizure of unlicensed firearms from local citizens and the enforcement of law against violators.⁶³⁰ The RSF presents this collection campaign as an indicator of the decline of insurgency and its role in the campaign as a measure to achieve and ensure general safety for citizens and protection from the dangers posed by insurgents.⁶³¹ Additionally, they present this strategy as a "clear message" to the international community of the Sudanese commitment to achieve stability and security.⁶³² This message to both citizens and the international community depicts the RSF's attempts to validate their services both at the local and international levels.

In addition to firearms collection, the RSF takes responsibility for strategic operations for the protection of the economy, the community, and borders.⁶³³ Regarding the protection of the economy, the RSF presents its achievements in the seizure of large quantities of smuggled subsidized commodities.⁶³⁴ The RSF explains that the smuggling of these goods is a contributing

⁶²⁷ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶²⁸ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶²⁹ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶³⁰ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶³¹ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶³² "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶³³ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶³⁴ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

factor to that could lead to the deterioration of the national economy, thus indicating the significance of its role in the protection of the economy.⁶³⁵

Regarding human trafficking, the RSF presents itself as a force with the ability to combat human trafficking despite the sophistication of networks, media and technological advancements, and other challenges, such as being a popular crossing point in East Africa.⁶³⁶ In this section, they highlight eight examples of RSF achievements in the confrontation of illegal migration between January 2017 and September 2019.⁶³⁷ In each example, a measurement of official or legal action is documented, including being referred to the concerned authorities or courts for further procedure.⁶³⁸ By this measure, one can infer that the RSF considers itself to be an official and legitimate part of the process.⁶³⁹ The official page further details RSF measures in the case of both victims and perpetrators, specifying when they have participated in the interception of trafficking attempts of Sudanese nationals which may indicate the need to reaffirm themselves within the “in-group” of Sudan.⁶⁴⁰

Additionally, the RSF claims to promote psychological support, social services, medical care, and legal services for victims by either providing it themselves in the most urgent setting or connecting them to the necessary services.⁶⁴¹ Particularly with regards to legal services, the RSF considers themselves a necessary part of access to services "to preserve [the victims'] rights and dignity" and the process of bringing perpetrators "to justice to be charged according to the

⁶³⁵ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶³⁶ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶³⁷ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶³⁸ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶³⁹ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁴⁰ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁴¹ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

laws."⁶⁴² Thus, it is sensible to presume that they consider themselves and the services they provide to be aligned with the legitimate legal structures and authorities.⁶⁴³

The RSF presents irregular migration as a major security obstacle for Sudan.⁶⁴⁴ Their official web page enumerates three primary challenges: 1. Sudan's strategic position makes it an attractive destination for irregular migrants who view Sudan as a crucial transit point; 2. The surge in irregular migration has given rise to a thriving human trafficking market in the area, where various groups of brokers utilize social media platforms to conduct their operations, with many of these brokers being from the countries of the migrant victims, necessitating a comprehensive effort to apprehend them; and 3. The expenses associated with providing services to irregular migrants who choose to remain in Sudan have detrimental effects on the nation's national security, as well as its economic and social landscape.⁶⁴⁵ It stands to reason that the RSF perceives these issues as threats to the security of Sudan, and thus, its people necessitate the services of the RSF, especially in such "rural areas far from the monitoring eye of Khartoum."⁶⁴⁶ Thus, the manner in which the RSF presents the framework of human trafficking as a negative effect of irregular migrants and insecure borders, as well as the additional negative impacts on the security, economy, and society, may indicate that they self-validate through their role as border security.⁶⁴⁷

As far as their legitimacy as officially trained troops, the RSF explains that they are specifically trained for working in the field and the subsequent measures taken in curbing

⁶⁴² "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶⁴³ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶⁴⁴ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶⁴⁵ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶⁴⁶ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

⁶⁴⁷ "Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions."

irregular migration.⁶⁴⁸ The RSF asserts that troops receive the required training that qualifies them to endure and address all circumstances regarding irregular migration, as well as receiving intensive courses in the humanitarian aspect and laws regarding the work with the victims and perpetrators of human trafficking with the least amount of losses.⁶⁴⁹ It may seem as though to further legitimize their services, they claim to be “supported by specialized medical units and researchers” that support “conducting awareness activities in remote areas to show the facts about [the] danger of human trafficking.”⁶⁵⁰ It is significant to note the emphasis that is placed throughout its strategic missions on the least number of losses.⁶⁵¹ As they are widely known for their humanitarian rights abuses, this posturing may indicate their desire to present themselves in a positive light, as a service that is committed to the "least amount of losses," which could potentially place the losses experienced in an area out of their control for which they cannot be held responsible.⁶⁵² The official page on strategic missions concludes with the following remarks: "What the RSF is doing towards the illegal migration deserves appreciation due to its dealing with the issue in complete responsibility to achieve stability."⁶⁵³ It is possible that this statement indicated a perceived responsibility to the protection of a collective group. It is also reasonable to think that the emphasis on “illegal migration” is a mechanism for defining an outgroup and a perceived threat. Lastly, the supposition of deserved appreciation may speak to the way the RSF perceives its status within the ingroup of its nation.

⁶⁴⁸ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁴⁹ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁵⁰ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁵¹ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁵² “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

⁶⁵³ “Rapid Support Forces Official Website, Strategic Missions.”

Struggle for Influence

It is also reasonable to believe that Hemedti, as the RSF's leader, has a strong influence on the direction of the RSF's identity. Thus, a struggle for power, as is being seen with General al-Burhan and the SAF, could also have a significant impact on intergroup comparisons and the creation of a boundary. Particularly in the struggle for influence, one would seek to depict themselves as not only the prototype of the ingroup but in a characteristically positive way as opposed to the outgroup and any of its members. As previously discussed, this intention to bolster one's image has a high potential to lead to the denigration of the outgroup.

In June 2022, Hemedti left the capital of Khartoum, signaling what may have been the first indication of disagreement with General al-Burhan. Reports indicated that he had left for Darfur angry after a tense disagreement with al-Burhan.⁶⁵⁴ Upon his return, he claimed to commit to reconciliation with the civil groups there.⁶⁵⁵ However, in an interview with BBC Arabic, when asked if he had plans to run for president at any time, Hemedti replied:

I have no political ambition... if the government comes with patriotic people who will preserve Sudan's security and stability, we will not need to get into this issue of candidacy. But if we see Sudan collapse, we will be present, and we are part of the Sudanese people, and what applies to others applies to us. I have no political ambition, but reality forced me to exist, and this is a fact that I must say. If people come to fill this void, and they are up to the responsibility, we will certainly help them so that our country does not collapse.⁶⁵⁶

In this statement, Hemedti denies intentions to run for office.⁶⁵⁷ However, he does so on certain conditions: a government with patriotic people who can maintain the security of Sudan.⁶⁵⁸ In this comment alone, it is reasonable to believe that Hemedti has formulated what it means to be patriotic, a political identity, and what it means for Sudan to be

⁶⁵⁴ "بدران، "ماذا بعد إقرار حميدتي بفشل الحكم العسكري في السودان؟"

⁶⁵⁵ بدران.

⁶⁵⁶ بدران.

⁶⁵⁷ بدران.

⁶⁵⁸ بدران.

secure. To this latter point, Hemedti also affirms that “we” (from the context of the interview, it is reasonable to believe that he speaks of himself and the RSF when referring to “we”) are part of the Sudanese people.⁶⁵⁹ In doing so, he expresses a strong sense of national identity, collective identity, and commitment to this ingroup as he emphasizes concern for and responsibility toward the security and stability of Sudan. This tie to the fate of the nation and concern for its security can be an indicator of a potential or possible threat to which Hemedti feels compelled to protect the country. Despite claiming a lack of personal political ambition, Hemedti acknowledges the role he, along with the RSF, might have to play if Sudan faces a crisis. Lastly, Hemedti states that “reality forced [him] to exist,”⁶⁶⁰ indicating an adaptive political identity that came about because of specific circumstances. Thus, it is also possible to think that under the right circumstances, the reality could shift from having no political ambition to “stepping up” to the reality of the political climate and national exigencies according to how he perceives the situation as a duty and responsibility to his ingroup.

In March 2023, prior to the outbreak of the currently ongoing conflict, SAF leaders refused to attend the closing session of the Security and Military Arrangements working group in protest against not including the integration of the RSF into the armed forces.⁶⁶¹ Later, both Hemedti and al-Burhan refused to attend the closing session of the Security Reform working group as disputes broke out between the two leaders regarding the status of integration for the RSF into the SAF. SAF officials demanded a condition

⁶⁵⁹ بدران.

⁶⁶⁰ بدران.

⁶⁶¹ “ورشة اصلاح الأجهزة الأمنية تفجر الخلاف مجددا بين الجيش والدعم السريع”

that the RSF halt recruitment operations and that the legal status of the paramilitary group be amended, stipulating the subordination of the RSF to the army.

It is possible that in the context of these disputes, the core identity conflict lies in the integration of the RSF into the SAF. Particularly as Hemedti has sought increased autonomy in the past and has largely succeeded in attaining it, the integration into another group, more specifically the subordination, may be considered a threat to his already established ingroup and the status and privileges he presently holds. This may suggest that the resistance to the demands is rooted in an identity struggle that aims to redefine the identity and role of the RSF within the military framework, thus, reflecting not only an identity conflict but a power struggle within the larger context of the Sudanese military forces and their present position after the coup.

VII. Conclusion

The evolution of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) from unofficial militia groups to an official paramilitary unit with different phases of autonomy represents a complex interplay of political, social, and identity dynamics. The RSF's inception in 2013 could be considered a response to the government's need to regain control over rebellious Arab militias in Darfur, leading to the formation of a force that participated in the toppling of that same government and which has continuously gained a relative amount of autonomy. The RSF's identity and influence expanded significantly, both nationally and internationally, with the leadership of Hemedti creating a unique and powerful force within Sudan. However, in expanding its influence and ultimately its power, it has come into conflict with the regular armed forces who they once supported. Thus, when considering the growth of the RSF one must also take into account its shifting identity and the formation of new boundaries.

The shift in identity from the notorious Janjaweed to the RSF was marked by efforts to distance themselves from past atrocities. The RSF engaged in various operations, portraying themselves as crucial for Sudan's security and stability. Their official narrative emphasizes their role in firearms collection, border security, and combating human trafficking, presenting themselves as essential protectors of Sudanese citizens. However, the RSF's actions often contradicted this narrative, and continue to do so, leading to global criticism and allegations of human rights abuses.

Furthermore, internal power struggles, particularly between Hemedti and other military leaders, intensified the RSF's identity conflict. The resistance to integrating the RSF into the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) showcased the struggle for autonomy and status within the military hierarchy. Hemedti's assertion that he would step up if Sudan faced a crisis revealed the adaptive nature of his political identity, shaped by the changing dynamics of the country and potentially the opportunity to further expand his power and influence.

It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive assessment of the RSF's identity or the factors that have influenced changes and shifts. Other factors that can be considered are financial autonomy, ethnic narratives, as well as religious narratives. These factors could significantly influence how the RSF perceives itself as an ingroup alone but also in the larger context of Sudan. The RSF's ability to redefine its identity, both internally and externally, play a significant role in its survival and prominence. As Sudan continues to navigate its political landscape, understanding these identity dynamics is pivotal for comprehending the nation's future trajectory and the role the RSF might play in it.

This author acknowledges the limitations and difficulties with gaining insight into the RSF identity from first-hand accounts with the ongoing war. It should be noted that both the RSF's official website as well as its Facebook account which provided a sense of firsthand account have been taken down as of August 2023. As the RSF continues to abuse human rights the likelihood of finding original narrative may prove difficult with the monitoring of content online.

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