

Divided They Fall: The Fragmentation of Darfur's Rebel Groups

By Victor Tanner and Jérôme Tubiana



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Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|---|
| CFC | Ceasefire Commission |
| CPA | Comprehensive Peace Agreement |
| DLF | Darfur Liberation Front |
| DPA | Darfur Peace Agreement |
| ESPA | Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement |
| G-19 | Group of 19 |
| GoS | Government of Sudan |
| JEM | Justice and Equality Movement |
| MPS | Mouvement patriotique du salut (Patriotic Salvation Movement) |
| NCO | Non-commissioned officer |
| NCP | National Congress Party |
| NDA | National Democratic Alliance |
| NIF | National Islamic Front |
| NMRD | National Movement for Reform and Development |
| NRF | National Redemption Front |
| NSF | Non-signatory factions |
| PCP | Popular Congress Party |
| PDF | Popular Defence Forces |
| SFDA | Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance |
| SLM/A | Sudan Liberation Movement/Army |
| SPLM/A | Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army |

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A note on transliteration from Arabic

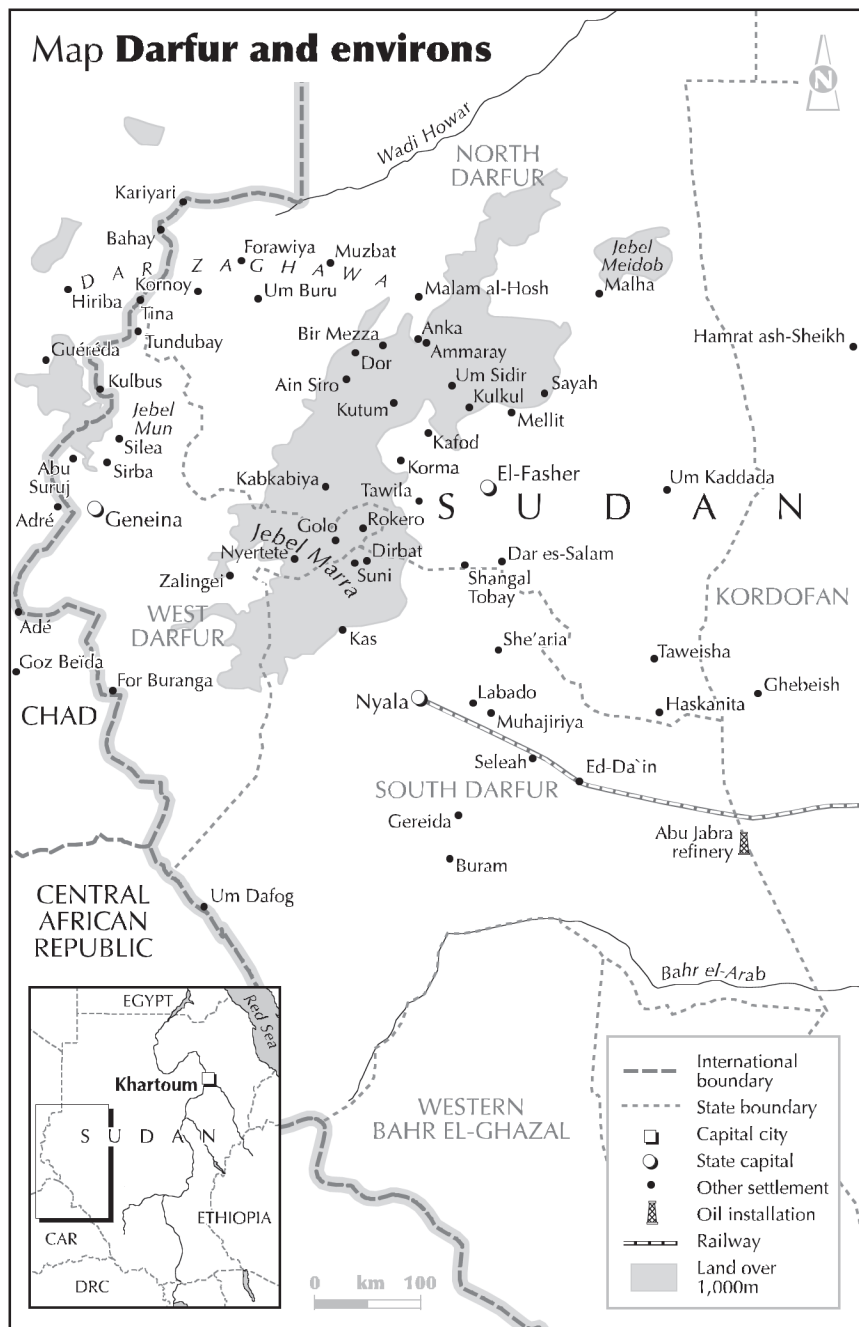
In rendering Arabic names and words into English, we sought a transcription that was both simple and that most closely resembled the Arabic pronunciation. For this reason we transcribed words beginning with so-called sun letters as they are pronounced, for example *as-Sudan* (rather than *al-Sudan*) and *ed-Da`in* (rather than *el-Da`in*). We also tried to respect Sudanese pronunciation by using, for example, a 'g' for the letter *qaf* (e.g. *Rizeigat*, *Gasim*) and a 'z' for the letter *dhal* (e.g. *ingaz*), and transcribing other letters according to the Sudanese dialect. We retained the accepted French spelling for Chadian names as they are normally written (e.g. Mahamat Ismail, not Mohammad Isma`il). We used the diacritical mark ` for the letter `ayn, except at the beginning of names, where we left the `ayn unmarked (e.g. Abdallah, Ali).

We included the article in place names as *el* (rather than *al*) because it seemed more in keeping with English usage. Likewise, we followed English usage and dropped the initial article in certain place names that carry the article in Arabic (e.g. Geneina, Khartoum).

Finally, we hyphenated all names based on the pattern 'abdallah', such as Abdesh-Shafi` or Abdel-Wahid, because writing Abdeshshafi` or Abdelwahid seemed too long, and writing Abdel Wahid or Abdesh Shafi` would inevitably lead some people to call them Mr Wahid or Mr Shafi`.

Abstract

In early 2003, after several years of simmering violence, rebel groups in Darfur launched a full-scale rebellion against Sudanese government targets. Two groups emerged. The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) enjoyed early successes, capturing el-Fasher airport, but then nearly succumbed to Khartoum's brutal counter-offensive. It was further weakened by internal tensions between its two leaders, Abdel-Wahid Mohammad Nur (a Fur) and Minni Arku Minawi (a Zaghawa). The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) was more developed politically than the SLA but less significant militarily. The JEM's narrow Zaghawa Kobe ethnic base further undermined it, as did the Islamist past of many of its leaders, particularly the chairman, Dr Khalil Ibrahim. Only one faction of the divided SLA (SLA-Minni) signed the Darfur Peace Agreement in Abuja, Nigeria in May 2006. In the 12 months since, SLA-Minni has all but withered, while the non-signatory groups, especially the Group of 19, beat back a Sudanese army offensive under the banner of a new, united group, the National Redemption Front. The rebels' new-found unity was undermined by a lack of political cooperation, however, and collective military resilience was not enough to keep them together. By late 2006, the non-signatory rebels had splintered into a variety of groups. Any political solution in Darfur will first require that the rebels unite, and this is increasingly difficult with the rapid proliferation of groups. The international community has been so far unwilling to invest the time and effort to support a unification effort, which will be by definition a long-term endeavour. Without that unity, however, there will be no sustainable peace in Darfur.



I. Historical roots of the Darfur insurgency

Marginalization and resistance in Darfur

In Darfur, the tradition of opposition to central government is an old one. The Sultanate of Darfur, a centralized state with effective administrative and security institutions, endured for over 300 years as a counterweight to state authority in the Nile Valley. During the Mahdist state (1883–98), when Sudan was ruled by a Muslim messianic movement, the most serious internal challenge came from Darfur rebels in the years 1888–92. The Khalifa Abdullahi, who succeeded the *mahdi* Muhammad Ahmad, fought a ruthless campaign of suppression, triggering Darfur's worst period of violence in modern history—before the present conflict. It took the British until 1916 to subdue Darfur, ending the sultanate a full 18 years after Kitchener's victory over the Madhist armies at Omdurman.

Darfur occupies a special place in Sudanese eyes. Large, populous, and deeply rural, with vibrant tribal and Islamic identities and a strong warrior tradition, the region is simultaneously the object of affection, disdain, and fear (Tanner, 2005, pp. 11–12). For the last 180 years, governments in Khartoum have repeatedly struggled to control this faraway and restive province.

The tradition of rebellion continued after Sudanese independence in 1956. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, two clandestine groups, *al-lahib al-ahmar* (the Red Flame) and *Suni* (named after a mountain village in Jebel Marra), articulated Darfuri dissatisfaction with *jallaba* domination and the need for all Darfurians, including Arabs, to assert their rights.¹ This was part of a broader trend: elsewhere in Sudan, the Beja Congress in the east and the General Union of the Nuba in the Nuba Mountains were speaking out on behalf of other marginalized peoples. Later, a movement called the Darfur Development Front appeared, headed by Ahmad Direige, a respected Fur leader. In the early 1980s, Darfurians, especially students at the University of Khartoum, mobilized in an effort to force the Nimeiri regime to appoint a Darfuri as governor of Darfur, which was then a single province. Violence ensued, but the protesters

did not back down and Nimeiri ultimately relented, naming Direige as governor (Harir, 1994, pp. 156 and 158).

When the Nimeiri regime fell, ultimately giving way to the democratic government of Sadiq al-Mahdi, many Darfurians, especially non-Arabs, hoped to see an end to the neglect they had suffered since independence. But marginalization only increased. The origins of the present Darfur rebel groups, like the conflict itself, are thus rooted in the political dynamics of Sudan over the past 20 years.

A time of growing violence (1987–2002)

By the time the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) emerged in early 2003, launching a spate of attacks on government targets, parts of Darfur had been in open war for several years (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 76).² In 2001 and 2002, GoS-backed attacks on non-Arab communities increased, especially around Jebel Marra and in Dar Zaghawa.

The Darfurian rebels have been shaped by violence at local, national, and regional levels. At the local level, the region has been the scene of a number of conflicts over the past 20 years that foreshadowed the present one. In 1987–89, Fur communities faced a coalition of Arab pastoralists who, probably for the first time in Darfur’s history of communal conflict, had coalesced as ‘Arabs’. Violence was widespread: villages were burned, men were hunted down and killed, women raped, livestock looted, wells poisoned, and trees cut down.

The conflict was partly driven by competition over resources. After the 1984–85 drought—the worst time in a long dry period stretching back to the great Sahelian droughts of the early 1970s—large numbers of camel-herding nomads moved south in search of pasture and water. Arab groups, and especially camel herders, looked with envy at the well-watered Fur country of Jebel Marra and its western foothills. At the same time, sedentary groups were increasing practices that restricted the movement of herds, such as dry-season *wadi* farming and fencing large tracts of non-cultivated land (*zarayib al-hawa*, literally ‘wind enclosures’). ‘Ominously, both sides feel that their livelihood—their very way of life—is under threat. And each side feels the other is responsible’ (Tanner, 2005, pp. 14–15).

Another element was the rise of GoS-supported Arab militias, increasingly referred to locally as *janjawid*.³ In the latter half of the 1990s, armed Arab groups in West Darfur attacked Masalit communities. Many were Abbala, camel herding pastoralists also known as Jammala, fleeing the repression of the Goran-dominated regime of Hissène Habré in Chad.⁴ Also, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were repeated clashes between Zaghawa and Arab camel herders in North Darfur. Their violent and political nature made them precursors to the current Darfur conflict, although they were mild by comparison.

At the national level, a key development in the 1980s and 1990s was the retreat of the GoS from its traditional role as mediator in local conflicts. From the late 1980s, both the Umma party of Sadiq al-Mahdi, which dominated the brief democratic phase that followed Nimeiri’s overthrow, and Hassan al-Turabi’s National Islamic Front (NIF), which seized power in a military coup in 1989, sought to ride local surges of Arab ethno-nationalism. The main expression of the Arab supremacist discourse was the so-called Arab Gathering (*at-tajammu` al-`arabi*), an informal grouping of Darfur’s Arab leaders (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 76). The aims of the Umma and the NIF were two-fold: to consolidate political power by harnessing the Darfur elites and to keep Darfur under heel at low cost.

These policies had a strong impact on non-Arab elites. The first generation of educated non-Arab Darfurians tended to rally around the Umma, while the second was attuned to the NIF’s more radical agenda. Disenchantment came twice: the Umma sided with the Arabs in the Fur–Arab conflict of 1987–89; and the Turabi faction of the NIF, which had done most to attract non-Arab Darfurians, lost out to President Omar al-Bashir in an internal party struggle in 1999. This disappointment with national politics fuelled Darfurian opposition to Khartoum from 2001 onward.

The other national factor was the North–South conflict between the GoS and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SPLA provided the Darfur rebels with early support in the form of weapons and training (see p. 21). It also exerted political influence on the SLA, which adopted an agenda for national reform reminiscent of Garang’s vision of ‘New Sudan’—a united, decentralized, democratic, and secular Sudan.

More important, perhaps, was the role that the North–South conflict played in influencing the timing of the armed rebellion in Darfur. As the internationally-mediated negotiations between the GoS and the SPLA gained momentum in Kenya in 2002, Darfur leaders began to fear that the future political make-up of the country was being decided without them. They launched armed operations in 2002 and officially declared their rebellion—as the SLA and the JEM—in early 2003.

Several other factors were crucial to the genesis of the Darfur rebellion. Blowback from three decades of war in Chad and meddling by Libya—in the form of weapons, exiled fighters, and successive waves of migrants who could be mobilized by rebels and governments alike—were key ingredients in the conflict. Across the central Sahel region, drought, discriminatory politics, and lack of investment in marginalized rural areas all contributed to the instability by triggering violent responses from people who felt neglected and oppressed. 🗨️

II. The Sudan Liberation Army before the Abuja peace talks

Early efforts and the Darfur Liberation Front

The roots of the SLA lie in the clandestine efforts of a group of educated Darfurian opponents of the NIF regime to mobilize village self-defence committees. These were local groups that Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit villagers set up in the 1990s (or, in the case of some Fur areas, the late 1980s) to fend off attacks by GoS-supported Arab militias. In 1989–90 the Fur received arms from Hissène Habré’s Chadian regime to fight the *Mouvement patriotique du salut* (Patriotic Salvation Movement, or MPS), a Chadian Zaghawa rebel group formed by Idriss Déby with the support of Sudanese Zaghawa and the NIF (Tubiana, 2006a, p. 24). (This supply line dried up in December 1990 when Déby replaced Habré as Chad’s president.) Despite attempts to organize them in the 1980s and 1990s, the self-defence committees were poorly equipped and coordinated. They relied on small traders and a few local officials, bartering sugar rations and livestock for light weapons and ammunition from the Chadian military. There was little cooperation between them: if Arab militias attacked one village, the self-defence force in the next village would do nothing until it, too, was raided.⁵

The instigators of renewed efforts in the late 1990s were Abdel-Wahid Mohammad Ahmad Nur, Ahmad Abdesh-Shafi`, Abdu Abdallah Isma`il, Babiker Mohammad Abdallah, and other Fur who went on to play important roles in the SLA. Abdel-Wahid was a lawyer from Zalingei, central West Darfur, who had graduated from the University of Khartoum. He was not active in politics but, like other Darfurians, he identified with Garang’s criticism of the ‘Old Sudan’ where the people of the periphery—southerners, Nuba, easterners, and Darfurians—experienced only neglect and oppression.

These activists raised money from Fur communities in Darfur, Khartoum, the diaspora in Chad, and elsewhere to buy weapons and ammunition for Fur self-defence groups in Jebel Marra and further afield. Later they travelled

throughout Darfur, seeking to establish contact with other non-Fur resistance forces.

The first SLA fighters were recruited from the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa self-defence committees, which were often rooted in traditional institutions such as the Masalit and Fur *warnang*.⁶ Each village had one or several youth leaders who, in case of attack, mobilized men to defend the community or to rally a counter-attack by blowing a horn. The committees' role in fighting declined in the 1960s and 1970s but they remained active by mobilizing male villagers for agriculture, communal works, and feasts. After the first Fur–Arab war of 1987–89, the committees again became active though they were armed only with spears, sticks, bows and arrows, locally made firearms, and a few bolt-action rifles.

'Abdallah Abbakar, Minni Minawi, Abdel-Wahid, they all used [the] self-defence committees to create rebel groups,' said one rebel leader.⁷ The first to mobilize these forces were Abdel-Wahid and Khamis Abdallah Abbakar, a Masalit who rose to a leadership position through his resistance to Arab violence in Dar Masalit in the mid-1990s. The *warnang* played an important role in providing the early SLA with fighters, small arms, food, and hospitality, and also served as intermediaries between fighters and civilians. The rebels enlisted the experience of retired Fur and Masalit non-commissioned officers (NCOs) who had served in the Sudanese army, often in the South. The Zaghawa—wealthier and traditionally regarded as raiders and warriors—drew some advantage from their presence on both sides of the Chad–Sudan border, as well as from their influence with the Chadian regime. Flint and de Waal indicate that by December 1997, 'the whole of Jebel Marra was mobilized and [Abdel-Wahid] began organizing armed groups outside the mountains in Zalingei and Wadi Saleh' (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 71).

In the late 1990s and 2000, Abdel-Wahid and his colleagues reached out to the Masalit, unsuccessfully at first (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 71). But it was the alliance they forged with the Zaghawa that proved central to the birth of the SLA (see endnote for a brief overview of the clan dynamics of the Zaghawa).⁸

After the 1989 coup, Zaghawa leaders were close to the NIF but, by 2000–01, many had become disenchanted. The Zaghawa of North Darfur were then embroiled in a cycle of clashes with the Awlad Zeid, local camel-herding Arabs.⁹

Khartoum was seen to have sided with the Arab party: the Zaghawa blamed the GoS for mediating, but then failing to force the Awlad Zeid to pay compensation—or failing itself to pay the compensation, as the government is expected to when *diyya* (blood money) is too high.

One Zaghawa leader described what followed: 'Both sides acquired [more] weapons. The Zaghawa raided the Arabs, and stole many camels. Many died on both sides. After that, the Zaghawa got together to fight not only the Arabs, but also the government.'¹⁰ Abdel-Wahid and his comrades found fertile ground among young Zaghawa who were impatient with their more conciliatory elders and eager to take the fight to the Arabs. As Flint and de Waal, the first and best-informed chroniclers of the Darfur conflict, explain:

Although it is difficult to identify a single date for the beginning of the rebellion, given the SLA's slow emergence from similar but separate, tribally based movements, the most precise is 21 July 2001, when an expanded Fur and Zaghawa group met in Abu Gamra [in North Darfur] and swore a solemn oath on the Qur'an to work together to foil Arab supremacist policies in Darfur. (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 76)

Abu Gamra was symbolic because of a 2001 Arab attack in nearby Bir Tawil that had taken many Zaghawa lives. That attack convinced a number of Zaghawa of the need for armed resistance. On the Zaghawa side at Abu Gamra were Khater Tor al-Khala, Abdallah Abbakar Bashar, and Juma` Mohammad Hagggar, all future SLA military leaders. Many of these individuals had experience in the armed forces of Idriss Déby.¹¹ Fur representatives included Abdel-Wahid and Abdu Isma`il. The committee overseeing Zaghawa self-defence efforts appointed Daud Tahir Hariga, a Zaghawa merchant, to work with Abdel-Wahid.

In November 2001 the rebels recruited the Masalit at a meeting in Zalingei, West Darfur and the Darfur Liberation Front (*jebhat tahrir dar for*, DLF), also known as the Darfur Liberation Movement (*harakat tahrir dar for*), was born. Its existence was not made public until a June 2002 attack on a police station in the Jebel Marra village of Golo, and word did not reach the outside world until early 2003, when the DLF was renamed the SLA (Flint and de Waal, 2005, pp. 76–77).

Seeking support outside Darfur

The Darfuri rebels primarily sought support outside Darfur in three places: Déby's Chad; a Darfur diaspora group called the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance (SFDA); and Garang's SPLM/A. The Chadian connection has proven over time to be the most important, despite President Déby's initial—and long-lasting—reluctance to support anti-Khartoum movements from his territory.

Déby and the Chad connection. For the insurgents, President Déby was both a natural and an unlikely ally. A Bideyat, and therefore closely related to the Wogi of Darfur, Déby had launched attacks in 1990 on his rival, Hissène Habré, from Wogi areas of Dar Zaghawa in North Darfur where he had found refuge. Numerous Sudanese Zaghawa serve in his military, especially the *Garde républicaine*.

On the other hand, Déby was indebted to the GoS for providing him with sanctuary in Darfur, where he had been allowed to operate freely. He was reluctant to jeopardize this relationship for a group of unknown, would-be rebels. When Ahmad Abdesh-Shafi` and others travelled to N'Djamena in 1997, Déby refused to meet with them (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 71). Sudanese Zaghawa who opposed Khartoum repeatedly sought his support in the 1990s, with no better success. In 1992, Adam Shogar, Khater Tor al-Khala, Ahmad Tugod, and Nurein Minawi tried to launch an anti-NIF rebel group from Chadian territory. When Déby refused to assist them, they supported his main Zaghawa opponent, Abbas Koty, whom Déby later had murdered in 1993. The same year, Dr Sharif Harir, another Zaghawa opponent of the NIF, had no more success in his petitions to Déby. Ten years later, in December 2002, a group of Sudanese Zaghawa, including Dr Khalil Ibrahim, leader of the JEM, met Déby in Tiné-Chad but failed to secure his support for a rebellion in Darfur. 'There were a number of meetings,' said an official close to Déby, 'but the president was opposed to the [Darfur] rebellion. We already had the rebellion in the Tibesti, and we thought two fronts were too many. We also wanted to avoid a conflict with the Arabs. Here in Chad, we have good relations with the Arabs, especially the [Rizeigat] Mahariya.'¹²

From 2000–01, as Arab attacks multiplied in Dar Zaghawa, the Zaghawa in Chad, and particularly inside the Chadian armed forces, started to provide

their Sudanese kin with informal support in the form of money, weapons, and vehicles. After one Arab attack on Abu Gamra, Chadian Zaghawa officers travelled to Darfur to offer condolences.¹³ Déby was unable to prevent even members of his own family from supporting the rebels. Then, in December 2005, Chadian rebels from the Khartoum-backed *Front uni pour le changement* (FUC) attacked the Chadian border town of Adré. In response, Déby began to offer more open support to the Darfurians. The Chad connection remains vital to the rebels to this day.

Ahmad Direige and the SFDA. In 2002, DLF leaders sought the endorsement of the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance (SFDA), a Darfuri diaspora opposition movement founded in 1994. It was led by Ahmad Direige, the Fur leader that Nimeiri was forced to appoint as governor in 1981 following street protests, and his deputy, Sharif Harir, a Zaghawa academic living in Norway. The SFDA's endorsement was important for a number of reasons. First, Direige and Harir could bring national and international focus to the embryonic rebel movements. Second, the SFDA was part of a national resistance umbrella group, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which would anchor the SLA in a broader national resistance.

Direige was opposed to armed rebellion, however, and overruled Harir's recommendation that the SFDA adopt the DLF as its military wing (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 81). In fact, the SLA ended up absorbing most of the forces that the SFDA had on the ground. Some say that was because the SPLA promised to support Darfur rebels who distanced themselves from the SFDA—which it saw as a rival within the NDA—in favour of the SLA.¹⁴

John Garang and the SPLM/A. The DLF had more success in obtaining support from John Garang. SPLA assistance, in the form of weapons, ammunition, and training, has been widely confirmed. The 2006 UN Panel of Experts report acknowledged the existence of 'multiple, credible reports' of such support well into 2004, if not later (UN, 2006a, p. 4). In late 2004, as North–South negotiations entered their final phase, the US pressured the SPLA to halt support for the Darfur rebels.¹⁵ Some SLA leaders maintain that the SPLA's support had less military impact than the presence of Darfuri veterans who had fought with the SPLA in the South.¹⁶ Overall, SPLA involvement was critical to the

SLA's interest in developing a nationwide agenda and to the timing of the rebellion.

Abdel-Wahid and Minni both looked up to Garang; the latter, in particular, emulated his dress and discourse. This was not popular with all Darfurians. In 2004 the ties between Minni and Garang created friction among Zaghawa field commanders who favoured a more autonomous—that is, a more 'Zaghawa'—line.

Abdel-Wahid and Minni were, however, useful to Garang. According to an SLA cadre, 'Garang wanted young guys he could easily control, like Minni and Abdel-Wahid, not like Sharif Harir.'¹⁷ For Garang, the calculus was clear: observers at the Naivasha peace talks say it was plain that he welcomed the pressure the Darfur rebels brought to bear on Khartoum as the negotiations unfolded.¹⁸ Politically, the rebellion in Darfur may have suited his plan to become the leader of a united 'New Sudan.'

It is unclear how much early assistance the DLF received from Eritrea, though Eritrean support for the SLA is well established (UN, 2006a, pp. 27–28).¹⁹ Observers believe that much of the SPLA's support was, in fact, Eritrean assistance delivered through SPLA channels.²⁰

In 2002, the DLF started attacking GoS targets such as government buildings, police stations, military checkpoints and convoys, as well as government vehicles. The first joint Zaghawa–Fur operation took place south of Jebel Marra in February 2002. Retaliatory attacks by GoS forces on Fur villages increased. In August, Fur traditional leaders held a conference in the village of Nyertete, in south-western Jebel Marra, in a bid to avert a full-scale conflict, but increased violence by GoS forces and Arab militias scuttled the attempt. Already, Khartoum seemed committed to a military solution. In November 2002 a meeting in the western Jebel Marra village of Boodkay determined how power would be shared among the movement's three constituent tribes: Abdel-Wahid, of the Fur, became chairman; it was agreed that the deputy chairman would be a Masalit (though no one was appointed until 2005); and Abdallah Abbakar Bashar, a former officer in Déby's *Garde républicaine* and a Zaghawa, was named military commander (Flint and de Waal, 2005, pp. 77–79, 85).

From all-out war to the DPA (2003–05)

In February 2003, the DLF renamed itself the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (*harakat/jeish tahrir as-sudan*, SLM/A). The change of name was an attempt to shift its emphasis from local tribal issues to a national agenda, clearly under the influence of John Garang—the SLA manifesto was written with the help of SPLA advisers. But it also reflected the efforts of Abdel-Wahid and others to resist pressure for a more aggressive approach to the Arabs, a popular sentiment among those who had been victimized by Arab militias.

The SLA also tried to reach out to Arabs. If it seldom managed to recruit Arab fighters, the SLA sought to bring in commanders from Darfur's Arab groups, especially the southern Baggara (cattle herders), who were less involved in *janjawid* operations than the northern Abbala (camel herders). Ahmad Kubur, a Baggara Rizeigat merchant associated with the SPLA who had once trained in Uganda, became a commander in the Labado area of eastern Darfur (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 85). Some members of the small, Arab sheep-herding groups on the Darfur–Kordofan border also joined the rebels.²¹ Abbala who were initially tempted were prevented by their traditional leaders, who saw the rebels as predominantly Zaghawa.²²

Early successes and travails

In the first half of 2003, the SLA achieved a series of stunning military victories. In April, SLA and JEM forces captured and briefly held the airport of el-Fasher, capital of North Darfur state, destroying government aircraft on the ground and making off with weapons, vehicles, stores, and a captured air force general. Later in 2003, the SLA attacked and briefly seized the North Darfur towns of Mellit and Kutum, and had battleground successes in South Darfur near Buram and in other areas. It also controlled large swathes of North Darfur and Jebel Marra. In the space of a few months, the SLA had demonstrated that it was a force to reckon with, and the consensus among observers was that it was a larger, more effective military force than the JEM. Generally, but not always, the rebels made a point of not attacking Arab or *janjawid* targets for fear of alienating Arab support (Tanner, 2005, p. 21, n. 55).

The brutality of the response showed how seriously Khartoum took the threat. Combined air, army, and *janjawid* attacks on villages, as well as the wear and

tear on weapons and vehicles, took their toll and by late 2003 the SLA was fighting for its life. In December 2003 and January 2004 the government recaptured Tina, Kornoy, and Um Buru, the main 'towns' in Dar Zaghawa. The SLA's charismatic chief of staff, Abdallah Abbakar Bashar, was killed near Abu Gamra in January 2004.

The SLA dispersed to survive. About 500 men remained in Dar Zaghawa, but the remainder slipped away. Fur, Zaghawa, and Meidob sought the relative security of the mountains in their traditional territories. Others melted into the civilian population in areas unaffected by the conflict. Zaghawa moved to Zaghawa communities in eastern Darfur where they built a presence around Haskanita and launched small attacks on Ghebeish, Kordofan. Some fled to Suni and Dirbat on the eastern slopes of Jebel Marra. According to a former commander, 'this is how they stayed alive.'²³

These moves resulted in increased SLA contact with civilians. In eastern Darfur the SLA disseminated the political message that 'we are fighting for you'²⁴ (Fur activists had done this before the SLA was launched). By 2004–05, the SLA had regained some strength and was estimated to have around 10,000 fighters in 13 brigades around Darfur (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 85).²⁵ But the dispersal also amplified the fracture of the movement along ethnic lines (see p. 26).

Abdallah Abbakar was replaced by his assistant, Minni Arku Minawi, a young Zaghawa from the Ila Digen (or Awlad Digen) clan, born in Forawiya, in the Dar Gala area of Dar Zaghawa. Like many young Turks in the SLA, Minni had no previous military experience. He had been a schoolteacher in Darfur, a customs officer in Chad (a lucrative job usually reserved for Bideyat and Zaghawa), and an English teacher in Nigeria where he joined with Darfurian exiles, notably people from Direige's SFDA. SFDA leader Sharif Harir, Minni's distant relative, said he gave Minni USD 5,000 in 2001 to join the rebels in Jebel Marra—and he had done the same for Khater Tor al-Khala.²⁶ Minni joined the DLF and later served as Abdallah Abbakar's secretary.

A fellow SLA leader had this to say of Minni's promotion after Abbakar's death:

If Abdallah Abbakar were still alive, Minni would never have gotten to where he is. Minni was only the secretary of Abdallah Abbakar. In the first meetings, he

was the only one who knew how to read and write. We had him take notes. We called him 'secretary'. Many of the early fighters died in the attack on Kutum [August 2003]. Minni became Abdallah Abbakar's assistant. The fighters always saw them together: they thought he was the number two. They mistrusted the elders, the people with experience. They thought the intellectuals would betray them. Minni convinced Abdallah Abbakar and the fighters that the intellectuals would take their place. When Abdallah Abbakar was killed, the fighters trusted no one other than Minni. He grabbed all the power.'²⁷

Who are the SLA?

The SLA is a mixture of Fur and Masalit self-defence forces, Zaghawa fighters, veterans of Khartoum's and N'Djamena's wars, young intellectuals, and activists. Many commanders occupied modest rungs in Sudanese society as teachers, technicians, traders, low-level bureaucrats, policemen, and NCOs. As Flint and de Waal explain, a common unhappiness with government brought these disparate strands together, but there was little common ground beyond their shared Darfurian identity.

The SLA had little access to military expertise apart from former soldiers from the Chadian and Sudanese forces (and some Darfurians who had served in the SPLA), and even less political experience. The successes of 2003 generated an influx of eager recruits and high expectations, all of which were hard to absorb and process. Many commanders were opportunists who came together 'on the basis of what united them [at the moment], with little discussion of what divided them' (Flint and de Waal, 2005, pp. 84–85).

From the beginning, the Zaghawa had their own procurement networks, which outperformed all others. Among the Zaghawa are wealthy and well-organized traders both in Sudan and abroad, particularly in Chad and Libya. As a result, Zaghawa commanders had more money, vehicles, weapons, and satellite phones. Dar Zaghawa was also better located for arms deliveries than Jebel Marra, besieged as the latter was by GoS forces. Zaghawa commanders kept most of the weapons and marginalized Fur officers, preventing them from communicating with their superiors in Jebel Marra.²⁸

As a result, the SLA took on a strong Zaghawa identity, but this obscured the fact that many non-Zaghawa fighters were present in its ranks: for instance,

Masalit in Gereida and Jughana (South Darfur) and along the Chadian border in West Darfur; Tunjur in the Kafod area (south-east of Kutum, North Darfur) and Ain Siro (north-west of Kutum); Mima in Dar es-Salam (eastern Darfur); Berti in Kulkul and Kherban (north-eastern Darfur), as well as in Haskanita (eastern Darfur); and, of course, Fur in Jebel Marra. This was part of a deliberate effort to create a pan-Darfur appeal.²⁹

The uneasy alliance between Zaghawa and Fur

The relationship at the heart of the SLA is the unlikely and unstable alliance between Fur and Zaghawa. While the relationship between Fur and Masalit—farming societies with fairly hierarchical political structures—appeared natural, that between Zaghawa and Fur is more surprising. One Zaghawa leader called it an ‘alliance of circumstance’ (Tubiana, 2005, p. 179). In Jebel Marra the differences between Zaghawa and Fur were already clear in 2002. Some Fur intellectuals and traditional leaders perceived the Zaghawa as rabble rousers, and encouraged the Fur to withhold food and support. In disgust, Zaghawa commander Abdallah Abbakar decided to return to Dar Zaghawa and pursue operations there.³⁰ The Fur also complained of acts of rape and murder, particularly the killing of the *shartay* Yusef Yahya of Rokero by Zaghawa fighters in Jebel Marra.³¹

Tensions continued to mount and in early 2004 Minni refused to send reinforcements to Abdel-Wahid who had been cornered by GoS forces in south-west Jebel Marra. With help from Eritrea, the SPLA evacuated Abdel-Wahid by plane, first to Nairobi and then to Asmara (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 86). Exiled, and far from the front lines, he began to lose influence.

In mid-2004 fighting broke out between Zaghawa and Fur in Jebel Marra, resulting in ‘scores of dead’ (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 86). As noted above, Zaghawa fighters had escaped the GoS onslaughts of late 2003 and early 2004 by seeking and receiving sanctuary in eastern Jebel Marra. Led by Commander Yahya Hassan an-Nil, the Zaghawa started behaving aggressively, however, imposing taxes on Fur markets, harassing and killing civilians, and vying for military control.³² Later, they tried to seize a key airstrip in southern Jebel Marra, presumably to cut off supplies to Abdel-Wahid’s forces, but were defeated.

Control of the SLA was one reason for the fighting between Fur and Zaghawa, but other differences had also arisen between the two groups. One was the enmity that developed—and endures—between Abdel-Wahid and Minni Minawi. The two have vied for power both on the ground in Darfur among the fighters and communities, and in the external arena among the Darfurian diaspora and the international community.

A second divisive issue was the increasing difference in outlook on how to deal with Khartoum. After the SLA’s initial successes, the GoS struck back mercilessly, targeting Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit communities with air attacks and arming the *janjawid* militias. Fur communities were the hardest hit because they are more numerous and less well organized militarily. They also live further from international borders than the Zaghawa—and life as an internally displaced person is often even more wretched than life as a refugee. Also, after abuses by Zaghawa fighters on Baggara Arab civilians in South Darfur, the Fur feared a rerun of the 1987–89 war where all the main Arab groups of Darfur came together against them. Finally, the status of the Fur as the pre-eminent group in Darfur gave them more weight with Khartoum (Tubiana, 2005, p. 179). All this made Fur leaders more inclined to negotiate. The Zaghawa, on the other hand, were more hawkish on the issue of talks with the GoS. (Paradoxically, however, it was Minni, a Zaghawa, who signed the Abuja agreement in May 2006, while Abdel-Wahid, a Fur, refused.)

Zaghawa domination of the SLA was clear, even if by 2004 each group tended to fight in its home area. Minni had begun to assert control over the SLA by then, and he completed the process at the Haskanita leadership conference in October–November 2005 where he was elected leader. Abdel-Wahid did not attend. A challenge by a respected Zaghawa commander, Adam Bakhit, who had fought with Idriss Déby in the late 1980s and later trained in Iraq, was unsuccessful. Minni managed the conference through intimidation, arresting opponents such as Meidob commander Suleiman Marejan.³³ Reuters captured the atmosphere at Haskanita with this comment by a tribal leader: ‘[Abdel-Wahid] better come or the SLA will just kick him to the curb’ (McDoom, 2005).

Minni’s attempt to dominate the SLA led to more divisions in the movement. After Haskanita there were officially two SLAs: a Fur SLA in Jebel Marra, led by Abdel-Wahid; and a Zaghawa SLA in northern, eastern, and southern Darfur,

Minni Minnawi, leader of the SLA faction that signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in Abuja. Dar Zaghawa rebel area, North Darfur, September 2005. © Jérôme Tubiana



led by Minni. The latter's heavy-handed tactics also cemented existing opposition among the non-Abdel-Wahid commanders. In December 2005, shortly after the Haskanita conference, SLA reformers met in Karo, near Bir Mezza,³⁴ and another SLA began to take shape. This loose coalition of North Darfur commanders—mostly Zaghawa opposed to Minni—would later become the Group of 19 (G-19).

Minni did derive an important benefit from Haskanita. The international community had been seeking a strong rebel leader to conduct negotiations with the GoS. The UN declined to attend the Haskanita conference because of Abdel-Wahid's absence, but the United States sent observers. After Haskanita, Libyan leader Mu`ammar al-Qaddafi offered Minni new vehicles, seeking to convince him to commit to a peace process—preferably in Libya.³⁵

Other sources of disunity in the SLA

A number of other factors contributed to disunity inside both the Minni and the Abdel-Wahid factions. One was the clash, especially among Zaghawa, between intellectuals and field commanders. Most intellectuals come from the old Zaghawa 'aristocracy', powerful families who controlled chieftaincies and educated their children well beyond the level available to the rest of the population.

Mistrust is plain to see between young rebel leaders and their communities' traditional authorities, whom the former regard as shamefully beholden to the regime in Khartoum. The rise of the self-defence groups in the 1990s had already weakened the role of village *sheikhs*. Attempts by senior members of the so-called Native Administration (*idara ahlia*) to dampen the rebellion created further unhappiness. Even today only a small number of senior traditional leaders—those considered to be 'of the people'—can travel to rebel-held areas without risk.³⁶ Minni Minnawi was especially distrustful of traditional authorities:

The traditional chiefs [. . .] have a limited role. The government gives them a title, but no power. [. . .] The fact is, there is something called the Government and something called the Rebellion. Both have weapons and are at war. The traditional chiefs have no say in this. They admit it themselves.³⁷

This is also an old-fashioned power struggle. Early in 2004, Minni's men murdered *malik* Abder-Rahman Ali Mohammadein, the traditional Zaghawa king of Dar Tuer, the home region of Minni's clan.³⁸

The conflict between rebel leaders and traditional chiefs overlaps with other tensions. One is the clash of generations. Most of the field commanders are young men—most under 40 and many under 30. At the time of writing, Minni is 34 and Abdel-Wahid is 38. They view the older activists as arrogant and insufficiently aggressive, pointing for instance to Direige’s reluctance to support the rebellion in the early days.

Another source of disunity is the mistrust, and even scorn, that field commanders have for their political counterparts outside Darfur. In late 2005, shortly before the Haskanita conference, Minni had this to say when asked about Abdel-Wahid and Sharif Harir, who were both living in Asmara at the time: ‘Who are these people in Asmara? Who are they fighting?’³⁹ Minni would suffer the same problem of credibility when he left for Asmara, Abuja, and, after the DPA, for Khartoum. 🗨️

III. The Justice and Equality Movement before the Abuja peace talks

Punching above its weight

The other Darfur rebel group to emerge in 2003, the Justice and Equality Movement (*harakat al-`adil wal-musawah*, JEM), was very different to the SLA. On the ground, it was smaller and had a lower profile than the SLA: it fought less and controlled less territory. The JEM’s first military operation was an attack near Kabkabiya, North Darfur, in early March 2003.⁴⁰ At the time, the movement had no more than 100 fighters.⁴¹ However, the JEM showed greater political maturity than the SLA due to more experienced political hands in its ranks (Tubiana, 2005, p. 180). Unlike the SLA, the JEM built a political structure, including a ‘congress’ or ‘assembly’ (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 90).

The JEM also displayed a greater aptitude for communication. Early in 2003 the movement issued a five-point manifesto calling for sweeping political and constitutional changes (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 93). The JEM’s presence on the border with Chad—at Tina, one of the few entry points for journalists and human rights workers without a Sudanese visa to the rebel-held areas of Darfur—ensured strong media coverage. Since 2003 its greater political and communications savvy allowed the JEM to punch well above its military weight.

But it is a puzzling and sometimes contradictory movement. It has clear roots in the Turabi branch of the NIF, though its leaders now denounce his legacy. It lays claim to an agenda of radical reform for all Sudan—essentially regime change from within—but its own base is a narrow, Zaghawa sub-group, the Kobe, who straddle the border and whose numbers in Darfur are limited. Both of these aspects create problems for the JEM’s relations with the SLA.

The Turabi link

Many of the JEM’s original leaders were long-time associates of the NIF’s Turabi faction, starting with Dr Khalil Ibrahim, the JEM’s president. Khalil is of the

Kobe branch of the Zaghawa, and belongs to the Angu clan and the Geyla sub-clan, like the Sultan of Tina-Sudan. He is a physician who studied in central Sudan and later in Holland. In the early 1980s, at the University of Gezira, he was a leader of the Islamist student movement *al-ittijah al-islami* (the Islamic Orientation), run by the Sudanese Muslim Brothers.⁴² (The Muslim Brothers later recast themselves as the NIF to cleanse their politically unpalatable association with Nimeiri.) After the NIF seized power in 1989, Khalil was appointed to a number of positions in the new regime. In the 1990s, he spent four months as a doctor in the Popular Defence Forces (PDF). He was later a state minister in North Darfur and in Blue Nile state. He subsequently served as adviser to the GoS governor in Juba (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 91).⁴³

In 1993–94, Khalil started to meet in secret with other NIF officials to explore how the party could be reformed from within: this was the beginning of the JEM. By the late 1990s, Khalil had started to distance himself from the regime. This may have been a reaction to intra-NIF tensions between Turabi and President Omar al-Bashir, or to President Bashir's increasing control over the government. Some argue that the JEM's war against the National Congress Party (NCP), the party of President Bashir and Vice-President Ali Osman Taha, is in fact a civil war inside the Sudanese Islamist movement.

In 2000, Khalil and his dissident colleagues launched a project to document the marginalization of Darfur and Darfurians, the result of which was the *Black Book* (*al-kitab al-aswad*). By then, they had come to the conclusion that the only way to bring about change in the Islamist movement was by force and from the outside (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 93). In 2001, Khalil became an open opponent of the regime and officially declared the existence of the JEM after going to Europe to study for a higher degree.

Other former Turabists in the JEM include:⁴⁴

- Bahar Idris Abu Garda, the JEM's vice-president and secretary-general, who is a Zaghawa Kobe from the Borso clan. He is a businessman and was active first in the NIF and then in the Popular Congress Party (PCP), Turabi's post-NIF party.
- Abubakar Hamid Nur Abder-Rahman Firti, JEM's political adviser in charge of international relations. He is a Zaghawa Kobe from the Angu clan and

Geyla sub-clan, and therefore related to the Sultan of Tina-Sudan. A businessman who trained as an agricultural engineer, he left the PCP for the JEM in 2001.

- Ibrahim Yahya, president of the JEM assembly, a Masalit who was governor of West Darfur from 1997–2000, a time of great violence against Masalit communities. He was a member of the PCP until 2004, but in June 2007 he returned to the government (NCP) side.
- Taj ed-Din Niam, in charge of political affairs and deputy chief negotiator in Abuja, as well as a humanitarian coordinator. A Zaghawa Kobe, he supported the Sudanese Muslim Brothers in the 1980s.
- Mohammad Bashar, the JEM representative on the Ceasefire Commission (CFC) in el-Fasher. He is a Zaghawa Kobe and a former member of the West Darfur parliament.

Many JEM leaders, including Khalil, have forcefully repudiated Turabi and the PCP,⁴⁵ but there are suspicions that the Islamist connection persists. One of the closest links to Turabi is Ali al-Haj, a Borno⁴⁶ from North Darfur, a long-standing manager of NIF finances—and one of Turabi's top lieutenants. Many say he swindled large amounts of money from the fund set up to build the *tarik al-ingaz al-gharbi* (the Western Salvation road), an all-weather route from Darfur to the Nile valley.⁴⁷ The road was never built and remains a charged symbol of Darfur's marginalization. Ali al-Haj refused to join the JEM, but in 2003 allied himself with Khalil in a short-lived political movement that claimed to represent the 'marginalized majority' of Sudan (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 94). Some say he is a key 'money man' for the JEM.⁴⁸ But other sources maintain that relations were severed in early 2005.⁴⁹

The Turabi-Islamist link is a difficult issue for the JEM. Whether real or perceived, it remains deeply troubling to many Darfurians, particularly old Umma supporters who cannot forgive Turabi for overthrowing Sadiq al-Mahdi's government in 1989. As a result, distaste for the JEM is often palpable, even among people who would otherwise be attracted by its discourse of decentralization and national reform.⁵⁰

Some observers argue that the Darfurian politicians who joined the NIF did so out of necessity rather than conviction (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 90). While

this may be true for some, it is not true for all. Many genuinely believed that Islam offered a solution to Darfur's problems and Khalil was among them, according to several sources. That does not mean that his subsequent disenchantment with the NIF and the PCP was not equally sincere. But it may explain the ambivalence of the JEM platform with regard to the separation of religion and politics (Tubiana, 2005, p. 180). On several occasions, the JEM has stated that, while *shari`a* law should not be imposed on non-Muslim peoples, Muslims should have the right to choose it.

Ethnic politics

The other central feature of the JEM is its extremely narrow tribal base: most JEM leaders, including Khalil, belong to the Kobe branch of the Zaghawa, from Tina on the Sudan–Chad border (see endnote 8 for a discussion of Zaghawa dynamics).⁵¹ As mentioned above, the Kobe presence on the border has afforded the JEM international exposure far in excess of its military strength, but it also posed three challenges for the movement.

First, Khalil is increasingly seen as a Zaghawa, rather than Darfurian, leader. As such, he has had to deal with the backlash across Darfur that resulted from Zaghawa heavy-handedness during the rebellion, as well as the negative reaction to Minni's signing of the agreement in May 2006.

Second, while the JEM has been increasingly successful at recruiting non-Islamist cadres, the movement remains essentially Kobe: many Kobe join the JEM because of kinship ties rather than for its political programme (Tubiana, 2005, p. 180). Other Zaghawa, particularly the Wogi who dominate the SLA, are distrustful of the Kobe. The fact that there are more Kobe in Chad than Sudan further undermines the JEM's ability to establish a broader presence on the ground.

Third, the JEM even had trouble building consensus among the Kobe. The descendents of the late Sultan Daosa of Tina-Sudan, including his son Mansur, the present sultan, favour a deal with Khartoum. However, the descendents of Sultan Daosa's brothers, who are competing for control of the chieftaincy, tend to be pro-JEM.

A national programme

The narrowness of the existing JEM base notwithstanding, the movement has a clearer national programme than the SLA and this encouraged it to reach out across ethnic lines in Darfur. Khalil sought to attract both Arabs and non-Arabs to his movement, with varying degrees of success. In western Kordofan, the JEM developed close ties with a Baggara Missiriya movement, the *Shahama*, and recruited local Arabs disenchanting with the GoS and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the SPLM in 2005 (Tubiana, 2005, p. 180).

The JEM's broader purview is also an outcome of the movement's origins: the aim of the JEM in the late 1990s was to reform the NIF for all Sudan, not just for Darfur. Since taking up arms against the GoS, the movement has adopted positions that indicate the scope of its ambitions. For instance, it rejected the CPA, arguing that the agreement allowed the NCP to maintain its hold on power and did nothing to address other marginalized areas of Sudan, such as Darfur, the east, the Nuba mountains, and southern Blue Nile, which received few or no benefits from Naivasha (Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 92). In fact, with the encouragement and assistance of Eritrea, the JEM established an armed presence in the Beja areas of eastern Sudan (see p. 52).

Khalil has gone out of his way to name non-Zaghawa to high positions in the JEM. But many of those courted by the JEM in the most marginalized areas remain sceptical. One former Nuba SPLM official said, 'One thing is the positions. But who are the decision-makers? Where does the power really lie? That is the question.'⁵²

Relations between the JEM and the SLA

The JEM fought alongside the SLA on a number of occasions, notably in the attack on el-Fasher in April 2003. But they also fought each other in the Gereida and Jughana areas south of Nyala and in Muhajiriya, north of Nyala, when Minni's forces attacked the JEM in May 2005, forcing it to retreat.

The clashes in Gereida highlight different perceptions of the two rebel groups. According to local leaders from Gereida, a Masalit pocket in South Darfur, the JEM had been accommodating to locals, their numbers were limited, and they did not harass residents. When the traditional authorities asked the JEM to leave

town for fear that its presence might trigger GoS air attacks, it obliged. The SLA, according to the same sources, behaved differently. They were more numerous, they were aggressive towards residents, and they forcefully recruited local youth. They replaced local authorities with their own people (which the JEM had not done) and did not respond to requests to leave town in order to ensure the safety of the population.⁵³

In July 2005 the two groups attempted a rapprochement. From the outset, the question of unifying the JEM and the SLA had been on the table. The SLA rejected it from the start, citing the JEM's ambiguous position on religion as a problem. The rapprochement also stumbled over a number of other points. One was the rivalry between Zaghawa Wogi and Kobe, and young SLA leaders' fears that the more experienced JEM politicians might sideline them. Many SLA cadres harbour strong anti-NIF feelings and are distrustful of the JEM's ties to Turabi.

One of the most vocal advocates of fusing the two movements was Suleiman Jamus, a Zaghawa Wogi who was the SLA's humanitarian coordinator. He too had moved in Turabist circles, but downplayed the JEM's links to Turabi: 'JEM and SLA have some differences but the same goal. In coming negotiations [in Abuja], we must draw closer. They say Dr Khalil is a Turabist. But he is now more Zaghawa than Turabist.'⁵⁴ 🗨️

IV. Tactics of the SLA and the JEM

Military tactics

The military tactics of the Darfur rebel groups mirror those used by Déby's Zaghawa forces to defeat the Chadian government of Hissène Habré in 1990. They rely on small, loosely organized but highly mobile units of 4×4 pick-ups armed with heavy machine guns. The Toyota *Hilux* is the elemental component of SLA fighting force—and one of the main currencies of military and political support in Darfur. The importance of a commander depends on the number of vehicles he 'owns', and the success of an operation is measured by how many vehicles are captured or lost.

Each vehicle carries a complement of 10–20 fighters. Rebels conduct hit-and-run attacks to demoralize government forces and acquire fuel, weapons, ammunition, and cash. Typically, the SLA does not hold territory, but denies government forces access to areas by attacking officials, cutting off roads, and controlling trade flows.

Popular support

In the rebellion's early days, it was hard to gauge its level of popular support. The SLA's demand for an end to government neglect of Darfur was overwhelmingly popular, including among many Darfur Arabs. Local communities supported rebels with food, shelter, and information—especially in those areas that had been attacked by GoS forces and its Arab proxies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Merchants and other affluent citizens donated cash and supplies. Many local youth joined up, especially after the remarkable victories of the first half of 2003.

At the same time, in those years one could discern widespread ambivalence towards the idea of armed rebellion as a route to change. Field research, conducted in North and West Darfur in May and June 2004 by one of the authors, found that:

. . . most of the Darfur people interviewed [for the research], rich and poor, Arab and African, victimized and not—and most of them supportive of the rebels' agenda for change—stated both their opposition to armed rebellion, and their belief that the current violence escalated in response to the insurgency (which is not, of course, to say that they excused the violence). (Tanner, 2005, p. 13)

By the second half of 2006, after the DPA, the situation was very different. People were desperate for security and a chance to return, but they believed only the rebels could achieve it. Popular support was stronger for non-signatory rebels although, from time to time, one still heard criticism of them. 'We parents want a peace accord. The rebels come to take our children. They speak to them in secret, they tell them, "When we win, you will have a position, a rank in the Sudanese army." We parents don't agree. We don't trust them'.⁵⁵

Such statements were rare, however. People appeared to believe more firmly than two or three years earlier that armed resistance is the only solution. Dozens of conversations held between May and October 2006 with ordinary citizens—displaced or otherwise—across GoS-held areas of Darfur indicated that support for the rebels had solidified, rather than withered, in the face of the brutality of government repression. In particular, the G-19 (see p. 48) enjoys genuine popular support, a reflection of what appears to be its concerns for human rights, humanitarian access, and the needs of the civilian population.

The same pattern was in evidence among educated Darfurians. In the early days—2002, 2003, and even 2004—many intellectuals doubted the wisdom of taking up arms against the GoS. They argued that Khartoum's reaction was all too predictable, that it could have been avoided, and that the violence had cast Darfur back several decades. Typical of this attitude was a young Zaghawa engineer, highly critical of Khartoum and otherwise sympathetic to the rebels' objectives. In 2004, he explained that he had been contacted in 2002 by friends in the DLF-SLA who asked him to join the struggle. At the time he had neither believed in the seriousness of their effort, nor thought that armed rebellion was wise. By 2004, however, he said he regretted his decision to remain aloof.⁵⁶ By late 2006, it was striking to hear Darfurian intellectuals, who in 2003 and 2004 had condemned the notion of taking up arms, say that despite their disenchantment with the shortcomings of the rebel groups, they believed armed rebellion was the only solution to Darfur's problems.⁵⁷

By mid-2007, there seems to have been another shift. After their military successes of June–October 2006, the non-signatory factions splintered, and sometimes fought amongst themselves. Many Darfurians seem less sanguine about the prospects of future rebel victories, and some even blame them for some of the abuses and suffering that civilian populations continue to endure. 🗨️

V. Abuja and the withering of SLA-Minni

The Darfur Peace Agreement

After seven rounds of negotiations in Abuja, two men signed the DPA on 5 May 2006: Majzoub al-Khalifa on behalf of the NCP-dominated Government of National Unity in Khartoum; and Minni Minawi, leader of the SLA's 'Zaghawa wing'—an unsatisfactory description, since many Zaghawa had already withdrawn their support. The other two main rebel leaders elected not to sign: Abdel-Wahid, head of the SLA's 'Fur wing' and representative of Darfur's largest ethnic group, and Dr Khalil Ibrahim, head of the JEM. The sole rebel signatory, Minni Minawi, represented less than 10 per cent of Darfur's population.

The peace process had been far from perfect. The first four or five rounds took place against a backdrop of ongoing GoS atrocities and operations, culminating in an offensive in Labado in late 2004. The rebel leaders, inexperienced and disorganized, were poor negotiators. The African Union (AU) mediators were also inexperienced. The Europeans were ultimately unable to influence the process, while the US negotiators were distracted and heavy-handed.⁵⁸

The reality was that by May 2006 relations between the two branches of the SLA—and between Abdel-Wahid and Minni—were so poor that if one of them signed, it was likely that the other would not. For a long time the negotiators believed that Abdel-Wahid, generally seen as more conciliatory, would be the one to sign. As the AU deadline loomed and US pressure on the parties increased, there was a last-minute reversal: Minni signed and Abdel-Wahid did not.

The political landscape in Darfur changed overnight, instantly dividing signatory and non-signatory groups.

SLA-Minni: hurtling towards irrelevance

When Minni signed the DPA, he became senior assistant to the Sudanese president and, in theory, the fourth-highest executive in the GoS. After Abuja, he might have expected the urgent, international pressure for peace to rally

his internal opponents to his banner. Even if he signed under pressure and possible intimidation from the United States, he might still have hoped for popular support from the people of Darfur and the commanders in the field. None of this happened. By the time of writing, Minni had lost most of the advantages he held as he entered the last round of negotiations, including the commanders, fighters, vehicles, practically all the territory he controlled, and whatever popularity he had once enjoyed.

Defecting forces: From June–September 2006, large numbers of Minni's forces joined non-signatory groups while others simply went home. In October 2006, Chadian sources estimated that Minni and his chief of staff, Juma` Mohammad Hagggar, had only a few hundred men and a couple of dozen vehicles under their command.⁵⁹ In September and October, the disarray of Minni's forces was the subject of daily conversation in Darfur:

- In September, in the GoS-held town of Kutum, North Darfur, a group of three or four SLA-Minni vehicles were reportedly driven north to non-signatory rebel lines.⁶⁰ In Wad`a, eastern Darfur, seven SLA-Minni vehicles and their occupants reportedly defected to non-signatory rebels.⁶¹
- In Gereida, South Darfur, a Masalit SLA-Minni commander named Siddiq was said to have grown disenchanted with the group's unwillingness to protect Masalit from increased *janjawid* attacks. After the rains, local residents say he left with several vehicles for the Goz Gharbi area, west of Buram, South Darfur, and started small-scale raids on GoS forces.⁶² As a single event this may seem of little importance, but it is still significant: the inability or unwillingness of SLA-Minni forces to defend Darfurians from attack is particularly damning in non-Zaghawa zones like Gereida.
- In Nyala, in September and October, a senior SLA-Minni leader said his fighters were leaving town on a nightly basis, either to join other rebels or to return home, because of their unhappiness at how the implementation of the DPA was unfolding. He also expressed deep personal disenchantment and anger at how the Abuja accord had turned out.⁶³

SLA-Minni also lost men and materiel in repeated clashes in June and July 2006 with non-signatory rebels, notably in Korma, Kafod, Sayah, Kulkul, and



SLA rebels, Shangal Tobay, North Darfur, September 2005 © Jérôme Tubiana

other locations in Dar Zaghawa. Non-signatory forces reportedly captured as many as 40 vehicles.⁶⁴ G-19 leaders say they captured 15 or 20 Sam-9 missiles, claiming that one was used to bring down a GoS Antonov aircraft near Sayah in August 2006.⁶⁵

In November–December 2006, Minni continued to lose authority over his commanders and men. Some joined the National Redemption Front (*jebhat al-khalas al-watani*, NRF), a loose, non-signatory coalition that came into being in June 2006. Others in South Darfur ‘answer to nobody else than themselves’, according to an international aid agency report on ‘SLA-ex Minni’ forces in She`aria.⁶⁶ The same has been said of SLA-Minni forces in Muhajirya, a former stronghold in South Darfur, whose leaders now seem closer to Dr Sharif Harir.⁶⁷ In Gereida, South Darfur, SLA-Minni appears to have split into two rival groups, one of which may then have been responsible for a violent attack on two international aid agencies by unidentified rebels in December 2006.⁶⁸

In October 2006, the G-19, the main force in the north, and SLA-Minni forces, led by Commander Saleh Jok, signed a non-aggression pact near Gongong,

north of Bir Mezza. Since then, many if not most remaining SLA-Minni forces have been keen to join the non-signatory SLA, but have been asked to wait until after the repeatedly postponed SLA unity conference.⁶⁹ Their past abuses against civilian populations may prove an obstacle to acceptance.

Diminishing territory: By late 2006, Minni had lost most of the territory he once held. He now only retains partial control of a few enclaves near el-Fasher (Galab, Tabit, and Tarne); isolated pieces of Zaghawa territory east of Jebel Marra (Shangal Tobay-Dar es-Salam and Muhajiriya-Marla); and the Masalit towns of Gereida and Jughana, south of Nyala. All these areas are contested, and local communities have suffered repeated and brutal attacks by *janjawid*, as well as by signatory rebels. The latter act in increasingly autonomous fashion, even if some have joined the non-signatory factions or are in the process of doing so. For instance, in November and December Muhajiriya was attacked three times by local militias linked to rival signatory factions, particularly the Birgid branch of SLA-Free Will (see p. 45), and to a certain extent the GoS.⁷⁰

In Dar Zaghawa, north of Kutum, Minni is reported to have a handful of forces in Muzbat, the main center of his native Ila Digen area; in Forawiya, his birthplace; in Um Marahik (west of Bir Mezza); and in Abu Gamra. Some SLA-Minni fighters with vehicles also sought refuge in the GoS garrison at Um Buru after being defeated by non-signatory forces in August 2006. Others are in Tawila, again with government forces.⁷¹

Waning popularity and credibility: Today it is hard to find anyone in Darfur with a good word to say about Minni Minawi. There are a number of reasons for this. First, since the DPA was signed, violence, insecurity, and forced displacement have been on the rise. This is partly due to fighting between non-signatory groups and the GoS ‘coalition’, which includes SLA-Minni. The majority of the violence, however, is linked to attacks by *janjawid* militia and GoS forces.⁷²

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, ‘200,000 people [were] displaced by intensified fighting and increased insecurity between July and September [2006]’ (UN 2006c, p. 3). Since May, the newly displaced from rural areas in South and West Darfur have been arriving in Nyala, Geneina, and other displaced centres on a daily basis.⁷³ People

have been displaced by GoS forces from Sayah, north-east of el-Fasher, and Korma, to the west. The number of internally displaced in Gereida, an area supposedly under SLA-Minni control, increased from 90,000 to 130,000 from June–September (UN 2006b, 2006c). Insecurity has also increased in towns and around the camps, often at the hands of GoS militias—now Minni’s allies. Among the more egregious incidents was the looting by *janjawid* of el-Fasher’s Mawashi market on 11 October 2006, an event that local residents cited as evidence that insecurity was mounting, even in towns.⁷⁴

A second reason for Minni’s waning credibility is that the GoS does not appear to take him seriously. Darfurians see the rising insecurity as proof of his powerlessness—a clear measure of Khartoum’s contempt for Minni as its ‘partner’ in Darfur. Not only have fighters and field commanders defected, those still loyal are bitterly disappointed. They refer to Minni’s ‘gilded cage’ and talk openly about returning to the bush.⁷⁵ A number of pro-Minni leaders, mostly Zaghawa and Masalit, seem only to stay because of rivalries with other anti-Minni elements. For instance, pro-Minni Masalit commanders are said to remain with Minni more because they are hostile to Khamis Abdallah Abbakar, the anti-Minni Masalit leader, than because they are pro-Minni.⁷⁶

A low point came in late September 2006 when Dr Ryah, one of Minni’s deputies, was attacked during a visit to Gereida in what looked like a rebel ambush. Though the attack was repelled, there were widespread rumours in Nyala of GoS collusion.⁷⁷ Whether this is true is hard to say, but it is significant that the public perceives Minni, an adviser to President Bashir and number four in the state, as unable to protect his own deputy. The Gereida episode was followed by clashes in Khartoum and Omdurman between Minni loyalists and GoS security forces (AP, 2006).

The military cooperation between SLA-Minni and the GoS has further compromised his standing. Minni is said to have received weapons, munitions, and vehicles from Khartoum following the Abuja agreement.⁷⁸ Minni’s forces fought alongside GoS forces against non-signatory rebels in Korma, Kulkul, and Tabit, respectively west, north-west, and south-west of el-Fasher.⁷⁹ Like the *janjawid*, they received support from the Sudanese air force and occasionally sought refuge behind GoS lines, for example in Um Buru (see above).⁸⁰ In August 2006 50 SLA-Minni fighters reportedly integrated with the PDF, as have many *janjawid*.⁸¹

For many in Darfur, this placed Minni beyond the pale. Increasingly, Darfurians see him as immature, brutal, and unprincipled, with an entirely Zaghawa agenda.

As public opinion of Minni soured, so did views of the DPA. In May–June, the prevailing view of an unscientific cross-section of non-Zaghawa Darfurians was that they would support the DPA if Abdel-Wahid signed it. By September–October, many were saying that, even if Abdel-Wahid signed the DPA, they would still not support it because the GoS clearly remained bent on violence.⁸²

Conscious of public opinion, Minni has on several occasions criticized the GoS of which he is now a part. After fighting broke out with *janjawid* in el-Fasher’s Mawashi market and two of his fighters were killed,⁸³ Minni reacted by threatening to leave the government. A thaw seemed under way between him and some figures in the non-signatory SLA groups.⁸⁴ Some think he might try to rejoin the rebels: Abdel-Wahid has stated his ‘hope’ that he will.⁸⁵ But it is difficult to imagine Minni ever regaining the stature he enjoyed until Abuja.

Other pro-DPA groups: GoS proxy militias?

After Abuja, Khartoum initiated a policy of courting non-signatory groups and commanders, arming and outfitting them, and sending them to fight other non-signatory groups.

While the DPA was being signed, a group of six non-Fur Abdel-Wahid delegates (Tunjur, Masalit, Zaghawa, Berti, and Rizeigat Baggara) distanced themselves from their Fur leader and endorsed the DPA, but without joining Minni. They formed the Front for Liberation and Rebirth, headed by Abder-Rahman Musa Abbakar, a Tunjur exile in France who was chief negotiator for Abdel-Wahid in Abuja.⁸⁶ The group took the name SLA-Free Will (*irada hurra*).

SLA-Free Will has little military presence on the ground and reportedly no more than five vehicles.⁸⁷ Its forces are mostly Birgid, drawn from militias in the Muhajiriya-Seleah district east of Nyala, its focus of operations.⁸⁸ Their leader, Ahmad Saleh, a Birgid, is a former SLA-Minni commander who joined SLA-Free Will in September 2006 and is believed to be close to the GoS.⁸⁹ The movement also has Tunjur fighters in areas around Kutum, North Darfur, though they are not linked to the ‘Birgid wing’. As an endorser of the agree-

ment, SLA-Free Will should have been on the same side as SLA-Minni, but it ended up fighting his forces in the Muhajiriya area in October 2006. The Birgid have long resented the influx of Zaghawa into their area, and fear Minni could attempt to obtain land tenure rights for them.

Aid agency sources say that SLA-Free Will is the creation of the GoS delegation in Abuja, whose goal is to split the rebels along tribal lines.⁹⁰ In early 2007, Abder-Rahman Musa was appointed state minister in the Council of Ministers in Khartoum, replacing the hard-line former air force general, Safi an-Nur, an Eregat from North Darfur who is one of the key links between Khartoum and the *janjawid*.⁹¹ But SLA-Free Will is politically inconsequential.

An offshoot of the JEM was also created in Abuja in May 2006. A group of six non-Zaghawa (Arab, Tunjur, Masalit) JEM delegates signed a declaration of support for the DPA and founded the JEM-Peace Wing (or Wing for Peace). Their few fighters are mostly in the Seleah area between Nyala and ed-Da`in, where they have linked up with SLA-Free Will. The two movements have signed a political and military protocol.

Another splinter group, the SLA-Peace Wing, takes a similar pro-DPA position but seeks the support of different ethnic groups, namely the Baggara Arabs of South Darfur, and especially the Rizeigat. Many Baggara traditional leaders have been reluctant to join the *janjawid*. There is a strong consensus among Darfurians, non-Arabs included, that the Rizeigat Baggara did their best to stay neutral in the face of strong pressure from the GoS and pro-government Arabs, including reported pressure on their paramount leader, *nazir* Sa`id Madibbo, from President Bashir (Tanner, 2005, pp. 22–23). The government fears some Baggara could join the rebels.

The founder of SLA-Peace Wing is Ibrahim Madibbo, the brother of *nazir* Madibbo, who was Abdel-Wahid's chief representative on the Abuja power-sharing commission. Despite his family's influence, he failed to win strong support from the Rizeigat and the SLA-Peace Wing has few members. It has agreed to cooperate with the other signatory factions, but observers suggest its main role is to impede non-signatories' progress in Dar Rizeigat, south-east Darfur.⁹² In spite of this and its pro-DPA stance, the SLA-Peace Wing's ethnic background has made it difficult to develop good relations with SLA-Minni, which the Rizeigat fear has a Zaghawa agenda to establish new chieftaincies

in Dar Rizeigat. But relations with the Birgid SLA-Free Will are equally difficult, given the long-standing Birgid–Rizeigat conflict over migration routes and wet-season pasture.

Another pro-DPA group was formed in September 2006 when Abdel-Gasim (or Abulgasim) Imam al-Haj, a former Abdel-Wahid commander, signed an agreement with the GoS that was made official in Libya last November. This group is referred to as SLA-Abdel-Gasim Imam. The organizers of the split are said to be the *wali* of South Darfur, al-Haj Atta al-Mannan Idris, and the federal minister of culture, Mohammad Yusif Abdallah, a Fur from Rokero.⁹³ The group reportedly carried out both paid and forced recruitment in the internally displaced camps east of Jebel Marra. With support from the Sudanese army, it then seized Dobo, near Dirbat, from non-signatory groups and based its forces there near a GoS army position. Abdel-Gasim and his group allegedly receive important supplies from the GoS in the form of weapons and, according to some reports, were given over 70 vehicles.⁹⁴ Abdel-Gasim—the first Fur to join the signatories—was rewarded with the post of *wali* of West Darfur. At the time of writing, he seemed unable to staunch defections and controlled no more than 150–200 fighters.⁹⁵ All these pro-DPA groups have their own local agendas, but most emerged with support from the GoS. 🗨

VI. Non-signatory groups

Non-signatory SLA factions

A number of groups have emerged from the non-signatory ranks of the SLA. The G-19 brought together many of the original anti-Minni commanders, and is predominantly Zaghawa, despite the presence of notable non-Zaghawa figures. There are also two Fur factions, headed by Abdel-Wahid and Abdesh-Shafi'. Finally, the SFDA has little military presence on the ground.

The G-19

The G-19, an SLA splinter group that emerged in March 2006, has become the main rebel group in Darfur since the DPA was signed. It was originally formed by 19 commanders from North Darfur who said they rejected both Minni's authoritarianism and abuses and Abdel-Wahid's weakness. Some came on board before the Haskanita conference, but most joined at the northern commanders' meeting in Karo, Bir Mazza, in December 2005.

Though mostly composed of Zaghawa, the G-19 drew close to Abdel-Wahid at Abuja, then accused him in April 2006 of being willing to sign a peace accord without consulting the other rebel groups. Abdel-Wahid himself remarked: 'They left us because they believed we were negotiating a secret agreement with the government.'⁹⁶ The G-19 was unable to gain recognition as a separate group. According to one G-19 leader:

Unfortunately, the AU denied the action of the G-19 and told us: either you follow Abdel-Wahid, or Minni, or JEM. We refused. But we stayed in Abuja to the end. Our members were waiting in their hotels. But when Minni rushed and signed, we said the agreement is not complete and sent our people back to the field.'⁹⁷

After the accord was signed—and after fighting erupted between SLA-Minni and the SLA non-signatories—numerous SLA-Minni fighters joined the G-19. The leaders of the movement tended to call themselves SLA-Unity, SLA-Mainstream, or just SLA. The G-19 now controls most of the territory once

held by Minni north of el-Fasher, from the Chadian border to Jebel Meidob, and the road to Kufra in Libya. In May 2006, the G-19 still had no more than 15 vehicles: by early October, five months later, it was estimated to possess around 100 vehicles, mostly taken from government forces and SLA-Minni. The fighting force is now thought to be about 5,000, almost all in North Darfur.⁹⁸ The G-19 is said to recruit with ease among the Zaghawa refugee camps in eastern Chad, but it lacks the weapons to arm its new fighters.⁹⁹

The G-19 has little political structure to speak of. In August 2006, *Africa Confidential* claimed SLA Vice-President Khamis Abdallah Abbakar, a Masalit, was its political leader and Adam Ali Shogar, a Zaghawa, its military commander—although he too is more of a political figure (*Africa Confidential*, 2006). Shogar spent time with Darfur opposition groups in Chad in the 1990s before joining the SFDA, finally moving to the SLA in 2003. He represented the SLA at the N'Djamena ceasefire talks and sits on the CFC. But both Khamis and Shogar are far from the field, where G-19's real power resides. Indeed, no formal leadership for G-19 had been announced by April 2007. The stance of the non-Zaghawa is particularly puzzling. Suleiman Ibrahim Marejan, a Meidob, and Dr Saleh Adam Ishag, a Berti, play important roles, and a Masalit, Khamis Abdallah Abbakar, is prominent out of the field. Nevertheless, Zaghawa Wogi personalities still tend to dominate. They include Jar an-Nebi Abdel-Karim Yunis (sometimes called secretary-general, sometimes military spokesman), Osman Bushra (humanitarian coordinator), Abdallah Yahya, Saleh Mohammad Jerbo Jamus, Siddiq Burra, and many others.

In October 2006, G-19 leaders claimed that though they had not managed to elect a political leadership, their military structure was clear.¹⁰⁰ The chief of staff at the time was said to be Adam Bakhit Abder-Rahman, the Zaghawa Wogi commander who had challenged Minni at the Haskanita leadership conference. But another Wogi, Commander Hassan Abdel-Karim Yunis (or 'Beujo', after the Peugeot he drove while working in Libya) enjoyed as much authority. Hassan was a respected field commander and the elder brother of Jaran-Nebi Abdel-Karim Yunis. In December 2006, he was killed in a failed rebel attack on the GoS-held town of Sayah, north of Mellit. Adam Bakhit left North Darfur for Chad and seems to have become marginalized by the field commanders. He was replaced by his deputy, Isma'il Rifa, a Meidob close to Suleiman Marejan.

G-19 leaders claim greater cohesion between their political and military wings than in the old SLA because political leaders spend more time in the field. However, at the time of writing, the G-19 had begun to repeat the SLA's schism between field commanders and diaspora politicians.

The majority of G-19 commanders are opposed to outside influences, though keen to unite with other SLA non-signatories, especially Fur factions. But a unity conference planned in November 2006 had yet to occur, and the G-19 continued to fragment along tribal and even Zaghawa clan lines. In Chad, a small group led by Khamis Abdallah Abbakar, Adam Ali Shogar, and Adam Bakhit is favourable to a broader union that would include the JEM and more open to external support from Chad and Eritrea, but their influence is limited.

Fur factions

Rejecting the DPA boosted Abdel-Wahid's popularity with commanders and the population in Darfur, but this quickly dissipated in the face of his indecisiveness and distance from military operations. He has since been challenged by another Fur leader, Abdesh-Shafi` Ya`gub Baasi '*Toba*' (a Fur word for a strong tree). Abdesh-Shafi`, an early SLA leader alongside Abdel-Wahid, was subsequently adopted as leader by 32 mostly Fur commanders—sometimes collectively called SLA-Classic—who had abandoned Abdel-Wahid in July–August 2006 (*Africa Confidential*, 2006). In August 2006, the group issued a statement dismissing Abdel-Wahid from his post as chairman. In September, there were clashes between the two groups in Jebel Marra.

According to rebel sources, Abdel-Wahid has 2,000–3,000 fighters but they only have 15 pick-up trucks, mainly concentrated in western Jebel Marra and around Korma (between el-Fasher, Kabkabiya, and Kutum), Ain Siro (or Dar Furnung mountains, north-east of Kutum), and Milagat (between Kutum and Bir Mazza). The northern sectors of Ain Siro and Milagat are connected to G-19 positions, and often fight alongside them. Abdesh-Shafi` has around 1,000 fighters and 20 vehicles, mostly in eastern Jebel Marra, from Suni and Dirbat to Sabun.¹⁰¹ Neither Abdel-Wahid nor Abdesh-Shafi` have officially joined the NRF, but the latter has good relations with both the NRF and G-19.¹⁰²

In December 2006, the two factions tried to join up with the G-19 to create the Non-Signatory Factions (NSF), an attempt to reunify the SLA. But impor-

tant differences divided the two Fur groups and continue to do so. Abdel-Wahid and most of his commanders would only agree to the reunification if he were reconfirmed as chairman. More than that, his supporters were unwilling for any other Fur leader, particularly Abdesh-Shafi`, to play a leading role.

At the time of writing, the G-19 seems to prefer unity with Abdesh-Shafi`, excluding most of Abdel-Wahid's commanders. This puts the latter's northern sectors, Ain Siro and Milagat, in a difficult position since they are caught politically and geographically between Abdel-Wahid and the G-19. Commanders in these areas propose a compromise that would confirm Abdel-Wahid as 'president' of the movement with mainly honorific powers and only for a transitional period. Abdesh-Shafi`, who is more inclined to compromise, could play an important role in the new SLA as president of a 'transitional committee', which would concentrate most political power.

Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance

More political than military, the SFDA was split over whether to support the armed rebels in 2003. The group's president, Ahmad Direige, was against it, but his deputy, Sharif Harir, was in favour (see p. 21). SLA field commanders remained distrustful of these diaspora politicians but Abuja gave the SFDA a new lease on life, for two reasons. First, the movement inherited fighters on the ground, mostly in North Darfur and a few in eastern Sudan—although they are hard to distinguish from G-19 fighters. Second, the post-Abuja groups know they need experienced leaders like Direige and Harir, to whom some G-19 and NRF leaders, such as Siddiq Burra, Khater Tor al-Khala, Adam Shogar, and Adam Bakhit, are still close. Harir also has clan-level relations with former SLA-Minni commanders who are keen to join the non-signatories. He claims he is no longer a member of the SFDA, but now belongs to the non-signatory SLA.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the 'diaspora' label remains a heavy burden to carry with the rebel rank-and-file.

The JEM after Abuja

Two years ago, the JEM was one-tenth the size of the SLA, located mainly in the Tina border area, and under a cloud because of its links with Turabi. By

October 2006, it stood alongside non-signatory SLA factions (mainly the G-19) in most rebel-held areas and had 100–200 vehicles, mostly in North and West Darfur.¹⁰⁴ JEM leaders admit that the movement's rapid growth makes it hard to ascertain the precise number of its fighters. 'There are no hard numbers. It is a revolution: fighters join us, then leave . . . [for other groups, for civilian life].'¹⁰⁵ JEM and SLA estimates put the JEM's strength at 3,000–4,000 men.¹⁰⁶ These estimates may be on the high side since many NRF fighters in North Darfur claimed to be JEM when they were not because it gave them access to the weapons and supplies procured by the JEM.

In 2005, the JEM successfully established a presence in eastern Sudan with the help of Eritrea. Before the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA), the JEM may have had as many as 2,000 fighters in the east, many of them Darfurian migrants from Gedarf.¹⁰⁷ In April 2006, negotiations between the GoS and the Eastern Front opened under Eritrean mediation, culminating in the signature of the ESPA on 14 October 2006. The agreement forced the JEM to freeze its activities in the east, and the movement's official line reflects this. 'When they assumed their mediation role, the Eritreans asked us to pull back. We had no interest in keeping a large number of men there, so we sent them home.'¹⁰⁸ Many JEM fighters, in fact, demobilized on their own initiative. Some commanders hint that they maintain a capacity on the ground, but 'the reality is that the Eritreans control whatever cross-border activities [the] JEM can carry out and it is very unlikely that they would approve of anything.'¹⁰⁹

The big change for the JEM was that it no longer feared being a movement of intellectuals without troops. On the contrary, Abuja proved the value of political experience. The JEM also made an effort to downplay its Turabi connections by focusing the spotlight on leaders with anti-NIF credentials, such as Ahmad Tugod Lissan, a Zaghawa Kobe who was the JEM's chief negotiator in Abuja. Tugod had a history of pro-Darfur, anti-NIF/NCP militancy, first as president of the Darfur Student Association in Khartoum, later with Idriss Déby, and then with the SPLA and Daud Bolad. (In late 1991, Bolad, a Fur activist formerly in the NIF who had by then joined the SPLA, led SPLA forces in a raid on Jebel Marra. He failed to rally the Darfurian communities, and with little or no support from the SPLA, was quickly isolated, defeated, captured, and executed.) In 1992, Tugod and Adam Ali Shogar joined a small pro-Darfur

opposition group. He then joined Direige in the SFDA before joining the JEM in 2001.¹¹⁰

JEM fighters are now more numerous and diverse than before Abuja, and include Zaghawa Kobe, Bideyat, Masalit, Fur, Meidob, Berti, Erenga, and Missiriya Jebel (the last two are non-Arab groups in Sirba, Abu Suruj, and Jebel Mun, between Geneina and Kulbus, West Darfur). To further enlarge its ethnic base, the JEM recruited and trained Sudanese and Chadian Dajo and other small ethnic groups in Dar Sila, south-eastern Chad. Some Arab troops and commanders, mostly Baggara from South Darfur and south-western Kordofan, also joined.

But the movement's new-found strength has proved fragile. The group's behaviour following the joint G-19 and JEM victory in Kariyari in October 2006, when it claimed all the credit, alienated the G-19. The split was confirmed with the proclamation of the non-signatory factions of the SLA in December 2006, which excluded the JEM. As a consequence, the latter cautiously reverted to its traditional areas of Tina and Jebel Mun. Since then, the movement has also been active in the Adré area in Chad, helping its Chadian backers against GoS-supported Chadian rebels. As a result, the JEM looks more and more like a pro-Déby, Zaghawa Kobe group, and is again losing influence in Darfur. The return of its most prominent non-Zaghawa figure, the Masalit former governor of West Darfur, Ibrahim Yahya, to the GoS side in June 2007 is indicative of how much the leadership of the JEM remains concentrated in Zaghawa Kobe hands.

The National Redemption Front: a failed coalition

The National Redemption Front (*jebhat al-khalas al-watani*, NRF) came together as an umbrella group for the non-signatory groups on 30 June 2006 in Asmara. For some months, groups on the ground coordinated their military activities under the NRF banner, at least nominally. But by late 2006, the NRF was beset by internal tensions created mostly by its successes—which can be as hard to manage as defeats. At least one close Sudanese observer foresaw this, warning after the victory at Kariyari that the international community should engage with the NRF before its victories gave rise to jealousy and mistrust, and divi-

sions set in.¹¹¹ At the time of writing, the NRF is greatly weakened, with the JEM as its main component.

The NRF was the first concerted attempt to bring together Darfur's remaining non-signatory groups, with support from Eritrea, Chad, and Libya. The first step, a few weeks prior to the Asmara gathering, was the signature of a military coordination agreement between the JEM and G-19 field commanders in Bir Mirge, in the Wadi Howar area of North Darfur. The SFDA later joined the pact in Asmara. A number of SLA factions did not officially join the NRF, including the Fur groups led by Abdel-Wahid and Abdesh-Shafi`, who associated themselves with the NRF but chose to retain a measure of autonomy. Abdel-Wahid was present in Asmara but did not officially sign up, though he and the NRF issued a common anti-DPA declaration. The Governments of Eritrea, Chad, and Libya, which had all sought but failed to secure leading mediation roles during the Abuja negotiations, hoped their support for the NRF would position them as peace brokers in the conflict.¹¹² Chad had the added incentive of needing an effective Darfur rebel force to help in its fight against GoS-backed Chadian rebels.

The very definition of what the NRF is—or was—can be confusing. Relations between field commanders and the diaspora are intricate and shifting, and some of the former saw the NRF as a diaspora creation, the invention of arm-chair rebels, with little bearing on the groups fighting on the ground. There is some truth to this view, given that most of the NRF's founders were far removed from Darfur operations. In August–September 2006, commanders resented that politicians based in Asmara and Europe were claiming the victories in the field as their own. Some commanders, notably Adam Bakhit, did have ties to the NRF, however, but relations grew distant in late 2006.

On the other hand, as late as October 2006 and even later, ordinary people in Darfur consistently referred to non-signatory groups as 'NRF'—*jebhat al-khalas* in Arabic, or more colloquially, *nas al-khalas*, or simply *al-khalas*. This makes it harder to dismiss the NRF as a purely diaspora invention. It was an idea that had currency on the ground, and a name that stood behind a series of remarkable battleground successes after Abuja.

Indeed, between June and October 2006, the NRF proved to be a highly effective military coalition, if not a political success:

- In early July 2006, the G-19 and JEM components of the NRF launched a coordinated attack on a GoS garrison in Hamrat ash-Sheikh, in north-west Kordofan, with 30–40 cars from the JEM and 12 from the G-19.¹¹³ The original aim had been to attack Dongola on the Nile but, fearing a strong GoS response, the rebels changed their plan.¹¹⁴ In order to avoid clashes, the NRF reportedly coordinated with Meidob forces stationed in Malha (these are officially ministry of interior forces, but they report to Meidob traditional leaders and they see their real mission as protecting Dar Meidob from any external attack, especially from *janjawid*).¹¹⁵ Though a military success, the attack threatened to disrupt relations with the Kababish Arabs of North Kordofan, who until then had remained neutral in the Darfur conflict. Kababish civilians were killed in the raid on Hamrat ash-Sheikh, an important Kababish centre. As a consequence, 50 Kababish joined a group of *janjawid* to attack the desert settlement of Wakheim, north of Anka, and Helif, in Dar Meidob, in November 2006.¹¹⁶
- In June–July 2006, NRF forces dislodged SLA-Minni from Sayah, Kafod, and Korma in North Darfur and, though it was unable to hold the towns in the face of GoS counter-attacks, it maintains a presence in the area. The NRF also cleared SLA-Minni forces from areas north of the Kutum–Tina road. The G-19 did most of the fighting for the NRF (the JEM only joined later). In Malam al-Hosh it reportedly captured 40 SLA-Minni vehicles.¹¹⁷
- On 11 September 2006, NRF forces—with around 60–70 vehicles, 50 from the G-19 and the rest from the JEM—attacked a GoS force that may have numbered as many as several thousand in Um Sidir, North Darfur. The rebels, who described this as the biggest battle of the war, captured 80 vehicles, large quantities of weapons (including heavy *dushka* machine-guns and anti-tank recoilless rifles—Russian SPG-9s and Chinese B-10s), ammunition, and fuel.¹¹⁸ Non-NRF Fur fighters also fought at Um Sidir.¹¹⁹
- The day after the Um Sidir battle, GoS and Abdel-Gassim Imam (see p. 47) forces attacked SLA-Abdesh-Shafi` in eastern Jebel Marra. The NRF reportedly reinforced the Fur fighters successfully with vehicles, weapons, stores, and troops.¹²⁰
- On 7 October 2006, NRF forces—with around 100 vehicles, half G-19, half JEM—attacked a GoS force of 900 men and 70–80 vehicles in Kariyari, on

the Chadian border near the Oure Cassoni refugee camp, which had been threatening JEM and other non-signatory positions nearby. The government suffered heavy losses and 70 vehicles were reportedly captured.¹²¹

- At the end of November 2006, NRF forces attacked oil installations near Abu Jabra on the border between South Darfur and the Missiriya areas of south-west Kordofan. The message was explicit: Abu Jabra is the symbol of South Kordofan's oil expansion and, by extension, that of South Darfur.

These victories were important for three reasons. First, they allowed the NRF to build a military force at the GoS's expense. After the battle of Kariyari in October, a Sudanese army officer bitterly quipped that the army was graciously handling logistics for the rebels and doing so quite effectively.¹²² By late October it was estimated that more than half of the NRF's vehicles had been captured from the GoS.

Second, the NRF's victories deeply demoralized the Sudanese armed forces. A number of officers who escaped the Um Sidir debacle were reportedly charged with desertion—one told an associate that many of his soldiers had fled without fighting and that others had joined the rebels.¹²³ Another former officer told of a high-ranking comrade who had been captured by the rebels at Kariyari.¹²⁴ Interviews with survivors of Kariyari who had escaped to Chad revealed soldiers who were wholly unprepared for combat (Polgreen, 2007).

Third, this series of victories and, perhaps, the GoS offensive in 2006 helped—at least until October 2006—to bind together the disparate strands of the NRF and unite commanders and fighters in the field. 'Under duress, facing a common threat, those on the ground really did not have much time for the political splits. [. . .] I would talk to all different leaders and they would say as much: "We are all in this together".'¹²⁵ By October 2006, the NRF was estimated to number around 10,000 men, as many as the SLA in 2004–05.¹²⁶

Paradoxically, Kariyari was also the beginning of the NRF's decline. The G-19 was angered when the JEM claimed the victory, and confiscated the vehicles, weapons, and prisoners captured from the GoS. Military coordination between the two movements, still officially united in the NRF, largely ended. Some G-19 commanders, notably Adam Bakhit, were keen to coordinate with the JEM, but this became a source of tension within the movement.

After Kariyari, Bakhit was in favour of launching joint attacks with the JEM away from G-19 areas of control. Others, like Hassan Abdel-Karim 'Beujo', balked at leaving North Darfur undefended. Finally, in November 2006 Bakhit joined the JEM forces with 30 G-19 vehicles for a joint raid on the oil installations in Abu Jabra, while others remained in the north under Hassan. In December, the latter was killed in Sayah. Despite his differences with Bakhit, Hassan still favoured coordination with the JEM, but after his death the G-19 became more hostile to the NRF.

Back from South Darfur a few days after Hassan's death, Bakhit was defeated by GoS forces in Jebel Gubba, east of Kutum. He then left North Darfur for Chad with 50 vehicles, some heavy weaponry (including Sam missiles), and 500 fighters—a mixture of G-19, SLA-Abdesh-Shafi`, and SLA-Minni—under the NRF banner. By March 2007, however, the G-19 had convinced most of his fighters to return with 40 of their vehicles.¹²⁷

At the time of writing, the JEM is the main component of the NRF, with the SLA contributing only a handful of vehicles (some say 12) and fighters. The SLA leaders who remain committed to the NRF—Khamis Abdallah Abakar, Adam Ali Shogar, and Adam Bakhit—are all in Chad, however, and have limited influence inside Darfur. The NRF leadership positions are hotly contested, though its leadership structure and political programme are non-existent. The JEM has a distinctive leader in Dr Khalil, but its Islamist reputation and the fact that post-SLA groups have done most of the fighting preclude the possibility of a JEM leader emerging, even if the movement's fundraising and supplies have been critical. A number of candidates exist on the SLA (or SFDA) side: Dr Sharif Harir (Zaghawa), Adam Ali Shogar (Zaghawa), Adam Bakhit (Zaghawa), Khamis Abdallah Abbakar (Masalit), Ahmad Abdesh-Shafi` (Fur), and others. The ethnic issue remains thorny: can a movement that remains militarily dominated by the Zaghawa afford to have a Zaghawa leader and yet avoid being seen as a Zaghawa—rather than a Darfurian—movement? On the other hand, would the Zaghawa accept a non-Zaghawa leader? The answer to both questions is, to some extent, no—hence the difficulty of the issue.

The position of the NRF's Chadian backers is clear:

We do not want a Zaghawa to lead the NRF because it will give a bad image of the Chadian [Zaghawa-dominated] regime. On the contrary, we want to avoid

*anti-Zaghawa propaganda from Khartoum. The NRF lacks a charismatic leader. The best ones are Dr Sharif and Dr Khalil, but they have a handicap: they are Zaghawa. It is what we told them all the time, but they have another point of view: they want to be leaders. We need a Fur, a Masalit, a Bergid, it doesn't matter. The problem is Khamis is not charismatic, [and] neither are Abdesh-Shafi` and Abdel-Wahid.*¹²⁸

A scenario that might satisfy both Chad and Eritrea would be to have Khamis as president, Adam Bakhit as military chief, and Khalil Ibrahim as head of security, a post that would allow him strong control of the movement.¹²⁹ Other names mentioned for the post of chairman are Ahmad Direige and Tijani Sese, the latter a respected politician and brother of one of the main Fur traditional leaders. Both could rally Fur support, but it is unlikely that either could win the support of fighters in the field. A rotating chairmanship has also been discussed.

The hope was that the NRF, as an umbrella group, would dilute Fur-Zaghawa tensions. A Masalit JEM cadre said recently: 'The JEM, like the SLA, is dominated by the Zaghawa. The Zaghawa are strong. They have money, power, and leaders in the rebellion and in Chad. We, the Masalit and the Fur as well, have no choice but to follow them.'¹³⁰ However, the Fur may be less willing than the Masalit to follow the Zaghawa lead.

Before October 2006, the NRF strategy was to mix forces and leaders, and not to restrict 'liberated areas' to one group or another.¹³¹ That is why the JEM, whose power base was restricted to Tina and Jebel Mun, was present alongside the SLA-NRF in most rebel-held areas.

In late 2006, the non-signatories continued their efforts to take the battle against the government outside Darfur. After the NRF attack on the Abu Jabra oilfield, rumours circulated that the GoS had known of the attack, but let it happen in the hope of creating tension between the rebels and the Missiriya Humur, the Arab group who dominate the area. The latter are unhappy with the GoS over the post-CPA dismantling of West Kordofan state, and Khartoum fears a rapprochement with the Darfur rebels. Local sources say the plan, if indeed there ever were one, has backfired: local Missiriya may be split over their support for the NRF raid, but they understood it as an attack on the

GoS, not on them.¹³² Other sources stress that disaffected youth in south-west Kordofan could prove amenable to the JEM's anti-marginalization, anti-Naivasha messages.¹³³

Coming together after the NRF

In December 2006, there were reports of a new, non-signatory alliance between the G-19 and the two Fur groups led by Abdel-Wahid and Abdesh-Shafi`. More military than political, the coalition could function within the NRF, but chooses not to. It seems the originators may wish to counter the JEM's growing influence in the NRF. NSF commanders told international sources that 'the NRF, therefore, does not exist anymore'.¹³⁴ Abdel-Wahid said:

*There is no organization called the NRF. Behind this name there is in reality only JEM—and we are convinced JEM is part of the Islamist movement. We refuse any attempt, today as tomorrow, at a rapprochement between JEM and us, politically as militarily. There is no meeting point and no hope there will be one. We are different in everything. We will never become close.*¹³⁵

Among the non-signatories, Abdel-Wahid is most strident in his opposition to the JEM and the NRF. In a bid to orchestrate his own comeback, he has raised the spectre of the JEM's Islamist image to emphasize his role as leader of the secular rebel movement. The commanders also resent the JEM for taking credit for every victory and for issuing bellicose statements.

The NSF has not officially announced its existence, whether as the NSF or the SLA or SLA-Unity, both of which are preferred by forces in the field. The fact is that the SLA is far from being united, and Abdel-Wahid's faction is far from having merged with the G-19, let alone with Abdesh-Shafi`. The idea of the NRF as a coalition of all non-signatory groups in Darfur, including the JEM, retains support. The JEM, of course, favours maintaining the NRF, even if it is in name only. 'The G-19 needed the NRF when it had only a few cars, but now the JEM needs more the NRF "address" than the G-19,' explained one JEM cadre.¹³⁶ The SFDA's Ahmad Direige, an important rival to Abdel-Wahid among the Fur, though he has little credibility with the fighters, is also pro-NRF. In between the SFDA and the SLA, Sharif Harir says the NRF still

has to be established, but only after the SLA has united.¹³⁷ This is also the position of Ahmad Abdesh-Shafi`, who says he is 'in favour of NRF as a political umbrella on the condition Dr Khalil can't be the leader'.¹³⁸

In February–March 2007, as the Chadian regime and an Eritrean delegation were trying to relaunch the NRF from N'Djamena, Abdesh-Shafi`, Sharif Harir, and other G-19 representatives convinced the Chadians that the reunification of the SLA should come before the NRF. At the end of March 2007, these leaders entered Darfur from Chad to launch the 'commanders conference', initially planned for November 2006. In April, they tried to hold the conference, but many of the field leaders refused to participate. The participants then elected the Zaghawa commander Abdallah Yahya as the head of a transition committee, but this only opened a new division. On one side is a group of mostly Zaghawa commanders who participated in this half-conference, and who have been drawing closer to Sharif Harir and, through him, to the NRF, Chad, and Eritrea. On the other are non-Zaghawa leaders (with the important exception of Jaral-Nebi Abdel-Karim) who remain strongly hostile to any influence from outside. Ahmad Abdesh-Shafi` participated in the conference but in the end did not join that group.

Another important G-19 leader told the authors:

*I hope unity is still possible between the JEM and the SLA non-signatory factions. Today it's not very clear. I think it was not really the good time to make the NRF. First, JEM and SLA people needed to meet and know each other more before really uniting. Relations between the two groups are very much affected by the JEM's [Turabist] background, and the way the JEM is dealing with leadership issues: the JEM wants to lead the others, they want to be the leaders but for the others it is impossible to accept. We tried to unite, but it was not working right and we decided to leave the JEM out for the moment. We need first to unite the SLA and then, when it will be done, we will invite the JEM to join. We can't leave them out, but if they want to be leaders, it will be difficult.*¹³⁹

The NMRD: Sudanese rebels or Chadian militia?

The National Movement for Reform and Development (*al-haraka al-watania lil-islah wat-tanmia*, NMRD) is a minor splinter movement that broke with the

JEM in March–April 2004. It is very much a Chadian creation, with encouragement from the GoS. Its two godfathers are Mahamat Ismail Chaïbo Borgo, the Chadian intelligence chief, and Hassan Mohammad Abdallah Borgo, a Darfur Zaghawa who is the NCP's director for African affairs and is close to GoS intelligence chief Salah Gosh (Tubiana, 2005, p. 181; Flint and de Waal, 2005, p. 94). Both are Zaghawa from the Kabka sub-group, who live in Chad and Sudan, and from the family of the Kabka sultan of Tundubay, south of Tina.

Most NMRD fighters are Zaghawa Kabka (Sudan and Chad), Zaghawa Kobe (Sudan and Chad), and Zaghawa Dirong (Chad), as well as a few Masalit, Dajo, Bideyat, and Zaghawa Wogi. In August 2005, the NMRD numbered 200–300 well-armed fighters, motorized thanks to the Chadian military.¹⁴⁰ Many of these fighters defected to the JEM shortly afterwards.

The founder of the NMRD and its principal military leader is Jibril Abdel-Karim Bahri 'Tek', a Zaghawa Kabka from Chad. After early opposition to Déby, he returned to the fold and later served in Déby's *Garde républicaine* in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was the JEM's military leader until his dismissal in February 2004 when he went on to found the NMRD.

The NMRD's main political leader until September 2005 was Nurein Minawi Bartcham, a Zaghawa intellectual who has straddled Chadian and Sudanese politics for 25 years. He studied in Libya, then joined the Umma party in the 1980s. After the NIF took power in Sudan, he joined Déby, then opposed him, and then joined him again. Close to Adam Shogar in the early 1990s and a JEM fellow-traveller in the early 2000s, he joined the NMRD in August 2004. In September 2005, he broke with Déby, rejoined the JEM with most of the NMRD's fighters, and is now its spokesman. His role is to mobilize support in the Goz Beïda region in Chad and across the border in Dar Masalit.

The NMRD's history is a succession of small moves, mostly unimportant to the broader conflict in Darfur. Soon after the NMRD split from the JEM, the two movements clashed in Kariyari on the Chad–Sudan border. The NMRD then settled in Jebel Mun, between Geneina and Kulbus, where it was not welcomed by the local Missiriya Jebel. The NMRD signed agreements with the GoS in December 2004 and June 2005. In 2005, it fought the SLA as its

forces tried to enter Jebel Mun. After Nurein's defection to the JEM, NMRD remnants under Jibril 'Tek' moved to the hills of Jebel Morfaïn, Chad. They were subsequently reactivated and rearmed by the Chadian government, then in need of a paramilitary force to fight Chadian rebels backed by the GoS. NMRD forces now reportedly dress in Chadian uniforms and Jibril 'Tek' wears the stripes of a Chadian colonel. They number around 300 fighters with 12 vehicles, mostly based near Adé on the border south of Geneina.¹⁴¹ NMRD is now part of the NRF, which presents a way for the Chadian regime to retain its influence in the coalition.

Bringing the *janjawid* to the rebel side

Over the years small numbers of Arabs have joined the rebels, mostly from Baggara groups who were less implicated in the activities of the *janjawid*. The notion that the *janjawid*, unhappy with Khartoum, might turn against the GoS has been recurrent since 2003. That possibility became more real after the Abuja agreement, which many *janjawid* leaders viewed as a betrayal of their interests, especially the clauses that called for their disarmament.

The more advanced contacts between rebels and Arabs, including *janjawid* groups, were initiated by SLA-Abdel-Wahid. One of the main actors in these contacts was Mujib ar-Rahman az-Zubeir, a Fur lawyer from Omdurman University who was secretary-general of the Darfur Students Union in Khartoum from 1999–2001. From 2005 onwards, Mujib approached different *janjawid* groups through Arab university classmates. After Abuja, these efforts led to the first agreement with the Baggara Rizeigat in Wadi Toro, north-west of Jebel Marra. A second agreement was signed with the Abbala Rizeigat (Mahariya and Mahamid sub-groups) in Sabanga, north of Jebel Marra. The agreements allowed for the opening of joint Fur–Arab markets in rebel-held areas in Jebel Marra; the creation of joint committees to negotiate the restitution of looted livestock; and the return of some 200 camels from the Mahamids. Finally 500 Arab fighters, mostly Abbala Rizeigat, but including formerly active *janjawid*, spontaneously joined SLA-Abdel-Wahid.¹⁴²

A similar agreement was signed in May 2006 in south-east Jebel Marra, between Fur (who later joined the Abdesh-Shafi` faction) on the one side and

Sa`da Arabs and Awlad Mansur (a branch of the Missiriya) on the other. It included joint markets, the restitution of looted animals, the opening of roads between rebel areas and Nyala, and a ceasefire. After the agreement, 250 Sa`da and Awlad Mansur *janjawid* reportedly joined the rebels.¹⁴³

Another actor in the rapprochement between the rebels and the *janjawid* is Saleh Mohammad Abder-Rahman Musa, better known as 'Abu Sura'. A Baggara Rizeigat from the Shattiya sub-group near ed-Da`in, he was born in Kosti on the White Nile. He opposed the NIF in the early 1990s and at the end of the decade joined the Sudan Alliance Forces, a group of northern opponents of the GoS active in eastern Sudan. Arrested many times, he became close to the SPLA in 2000. At the end of 2006 he founded the Revolutionary Forces Front (*jebhat al-quwa ath-thawriya*) and soon claimed to have repelled a GoS attack on his positions between Kas and Zalingei.¹⁴⁴ He reportedly enjoys good relations with the G-19, which gave him weapons, and with the NRF and the Chadian regime, which gave him his only vehicle.¹⁴⁵ He claims to have hundreds of fighters, mostly in Dar Rizeigat, but probably has very few. His aim is not necessarily to fight, he claims, but to convince Darfurian Arabs to remain neutral. 'My victory is not to make attacks, but to make the *janjawid* leave the government.'¹⁴⁶ In November, Abu Sura led 15 mid-level Arab leaders from South and North Darfur, including some *janjawid*, to rebel areas in North Darfur to conclude ceasefire agreements with the G-19 and SLA-Abdel-Wahid.¹⁴⁷

Abu Sura's field commander, Yasin Yusif, is the son of an Eregat *omda* from Kabkabiya who joined the SPLA while studying in Khartoum in 2002, and joined up with Abu Sura in 2003. He contributed to the opening of joint Fur–Arab markets in the SLA-Abdel-Wahid area in west Jebel Marra, and the restitution of 120 looted camels to the Eregat.¹⁴⁸

In the north, the rapprochement process is less advanced. The only real progress so far has been the restitution in March 2007 of some 50 stolen camels to Awlad Rashid Arabs, north of Kutum. The northern rebels, including the G-19, want the Awlad Rashid to remain neutral. Some Awlad Rashid leaders had been close to the SLA at the beginning of the war, but they were in the minority; when the GoS started organizing the *janjawid*, these leaders were forced back to the GoS by the majority of their tribe. Contacts also seem feasible with the Mahariya Rizeigat, whose *nazir* has begun to distance himself from the

GoS. Relations are less promising with other Abbala sub-groups like the Mahamid (Musa Hilal's tribe), the Eteifat, and the Eregat, all of whom have been active against non-Arab communities in the north.¹⁴⁹

These efforts at a rapprochement are real and should concern the GoS, but they should not be exaggerated. It is unlikely that the recent 'talks on a military alliance of Arab and non-Arab tribes in Darfur' between Adam Ali Shogar and Yasin Yusif 'could radically reshape the conflict', as was recently claimed in an otherwise excellent article in the *New York Times* (Polgreen, 2007).¹⁵⁰ For the time being, neither individual holds sufficient authority with the field commanders and tribal leaders in Darfur to make that kind of difference. 🗨️

VII. Conclusion

In the months following the failed Abuja agreement, it was striking how many Darfurians perceived that it was not the government in Khartoum but the rebels who had the momentum—and specifically the G-19. Perceptions are important, regardless of whether they are true, and the fact that many people in Darfur believe that peace will only come when the non-signatory rebels prevail makes it hard to envisage any successful resurrection of the Abuja peace agreement. The conclusion is clear: Abuja is dead. Moving forward requires starting from scratch.

The most immediate hurdle remains the rebels' lack of unity and political vision. Over the past four or five years, as rebel groups have formed and splintered in Darfur, one point of consistency has endured: their military effectiveness stands in stark contrast to the weakness of their political structures. They have proven this again since Abuja. In the course of the past year, the non-signatory rebels showed they have the military resilience to resist Khartoum's attempts to resolve the conflict through force, but they also confirmed they lack the political capacity and talent to move forward with negotiations. That is why, more than weapons or other forms of military support, the Darfur rebels need help in coming together politically.

In the immediate aftermath of Abuja, the non-signatory groups (and some of the signatory rebels) drew a critical conclusion from the ashes of the still-born accord: unity is necessary if they are to stand up to Khartoum. For a while, the groups within the NRF seemed committed to working together, at least on the battlefield. There was a glimpse of cooperation. Opportunism, greed and factionalism, however, remain rife. The rebel groups have continued to fight among themselves, especially signatory versus non-signatory, though even signatory groups have fought each other along tribal lines, encouraged by Khartoum. The anti-JEM feelings within the NRF show that success can divide as surely as defeat. Other conflicts are internal—between leaders, between and within clans, and between fighters and politicians. Many rebel leaders now

follow Minni's divide-and-rule tactics. The result is an increasing number of small, autonomous armed factions who answer to no one and can turn on anyone, and pursue their fortunes at the expense of local communities. The only group that seems to enjoy real popular support is the G-19. Rooted in opposition to Minni Minawi's abuses since late 2005, the G-19 seem to have some concern for human rights, as well as for access to humanitarian assistance and, more broadly, factoring the needs of civilian populations into eventual negotiations.

The international community therefore faces a difficult question: how to engage with these disparate groups? It is important to avoid the South Sudan model. For 20 years, international actors provided just enough support to the SPLM to prevent it from sinking, but never enough to make a difference in its war with Khartoum. The international community should avoid this scenario in Darfur. Now is the time to engage the Darfur rebels politically, before they splinter further, or before one group is perceived to have gained the upper hand and the others gang up against it—a process that has already started with the JEM. This does not necessarily mean relaunching a peace process. A Darfur-wide peace process may be premature. In the current circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect a workable peace settlement that is fair and that stands a chance of being implemented. The two sides are too unequal. The rebels are too divided and too weak, their battlefield successes of the past year notwithstanding, and they cannot apply sufficient pressure on Khartoum to force the government there to negotiate in good faith.

Everyone who genuinely wishes for peace in Darfur seems to agree that some degree of unity among the rebels is necessary before fresh negotiations can take place. If the international community is serious about peace in Darfur, it should give up its exclusive focus on a UN peacekeeping mission—a red herring, because no peacekeeping mission can bring security to Darfurians in the current conditions—and instead make the long-term effort necessary to help Darfur's divided rebels move towards a common political vision and shared political structures. It will be a long and painful process. But only when the rebels achieve some form of political unity will it make sense even to talk of a peace process. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 *Jallaba* are merchants and administrators from central Sudan.
- 2 The authors gratefully acknowledge their debt to the many insights contained in this history of the Darfur wars.
- 3 *Janjawid* is a local Arabic term, derived from *jawad* (horseman) and the Arabic *jim* (referring to the Belgian G3 automatic rifle), which also plays on the notion of *jinn* (genie, devil). During the 1987–89 Fur–Arab war, the word referred to pro-government Arab militias. In the current conflict it refers to proxy government militias that recruit mostly from the Arab Abbala (camel herders, mostly from North and West Darfur).
- 4 Some also came from the Bahr al-Arab area under General Mohammad Ahmad ad-Dabi. A Shaigi Arab close to President Bashir who played an important role in arming the *janjawid* in West Darfur, he now represents the GoS in the Ceasefire Commission (CFC) in el-Fasher (Author interview, Masalit intellectual, N'Djamena, Chad, September 2006).
- 5 Author interview, former Sudanese political activist, Sudan (location withheld), January 2007. This individual received military training in Ethiopia during the Nimeiri years, and spent nine months in 1990 along the Sudan–Chad border working with Fur and Masalit self-defence groups. He recalls bartering sugar for ammunition with Habré's soldiers using a *kora*, a small bucket of around two litres that measures volume in the markets of western Sudan and Chad. The accepted ratio was five *kora* of sugar for one *kora* of small arms ammunition.
- 6 *Warnang* is a term more commonly used by the Masalit and Fur for the leaders of village youth groups. The Fur also used to call them *tabu* and *sillo* ('share together'), but nowadays they refer to them as *akada*. This is an adaptation of the Arabic *uqada* (*ugada* in Sudanese Arabic), the plural or *aqid* (or *agid*), the name for a traditional military chief in Darfur—or the leader of a village militia who reports to a traditional leader, such as a *shartay*, *fursha*, or other. In standard Arabic *aqid* refers to the rank of colonel. See O'Fahey (1980), p. 152.
- 7 Author interview, SLA–NRF leader, Chad (location withheld), September 2006. Abdallah Abbakar, a field-tested Zaghawa officer from Kornoi, North Darfur who served in President Déby's *Garde républicaine*, also served as the SLA's first chief of staff until his death in December 2003 or January 2004.
- 8 Given the importance of Zaghawa politics to the Darfur rebellion, a brief explanation of the Zaghawa and their clan dynamics is useful. 'Zaghawa' is the Arabic name given to the main group of the Beri people, as they call themselves. The Beri are a non-Arab, mostly camel-herding people whose original territory straddles what is now north-western Sudan and north-eastern Chad. They are divided into three main sub-groups. The Kobe live to the west, mostly in Chad but also in Sudan, around Tina. The Wogi live in the east, in North Darfur, and are divided into several chieftancies that cover specific areas: Dar Gala, Dar Tuer, Muzbat, Dar Artaj, Dar Sueni, and Dar Bire. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s forced many Wogi to move to South Darfur where they settled as farmers and traders. Finally, the Bideyat live mostly in the Ennedi range of northern Chad, though some of their clans settled in North Darfur among the Wogi. President Déby of Chad is a Bideyat and the group has been

- closely associated with his regime. The Beri are also divided into numerous clans that do not belong to specific areas. See Tubiana (1977).
- 9 Mostly from Chad, the Awlad Zeid are a sub-branch of the Mahamid, one of the main branches of the Rizeigat Abbala.
- 10 Author interview, non-rebel Zaghawa leader, Darfur (location withheld), September–October 2004.
- 11 All are from the Zaghawa Wogi sub-group. The Kobe sub-group was not directly affected by the clashes in Abu Gamra.
- 12 Author interview, Chadian official, N'Djamena, September 2006.
- 13 Author interview, former SLA field commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 14 Author interview, SLA–NRF leader, Kariyari (Chad), October 2006.
- 15 Author interview, US State Department official, January 2005.
- 16 Author interviews, SLA leaders, North Darfur, September 2005; author interviews, SLA–NRF leaders, Chad (locations withheld), October 2006.
- 17 Author interview, SLA–NRF official, Kariyari (Chad), October 2006.
- 18 Numerous personal communications since 2003.
- 19 Author interview, former SLA field commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 20 United Nations (2006a): pp. 27–28; author interview, former SLA field commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 21 Author interview, non-Zaghawa former rebel commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 22 Author interviews with Abbala traditional and political leaders, North Darfur, August–September 2005.
- 23 Author interview, non-Zaghawa, former rebel commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
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- 25 Confidential aid agency documents reviewed by the authors.
- 26 Author interview, Sharif Harir, North Darfur (location withheld), March 2007.
- 27 Author interview, SLA–NRF official, Chad (location withheld), September 2006.
- 28 Email communication from Julie Flint, February 2007.
- 29 Author interview, non-Zaghawa, former rebel commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 30 Author interview, SLA–NRF leader, Chad (location withheld), September 2006.
- 31 A *shartay* is a senior rank in the Fur (and sometimes Zaghawa) traditional administration.
- 32 Email communication from Julie Flint, February 2007.
- 33 Author interviews with civilians and SLA fighters, North and South Darfur, September–October 2004.
- 34 Author interviews, G-19 leaders, North Darfur (locations withheld), March 2007.
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- 36 Personal communication, North Darfur Fur leader, Khartoum, October 2006.
- 37 Author interview, Minni Minawi, Dar Zaghawa (North Darfur), October 2005.
- 38 The Zaghawa, Fur, and Tunjur refer to some of their paramount leaders as *malik* (pl. *muluuk*), Arabic for ‘king’.
- 39 Author interview, Minni Minawi, Dar Zaghawa (North Darfur), October 2005.
- 40 Author interviews, JEM leaders, Chad (locations withheld), September 2006.
- 41 Author interviews, JEM leaders, Chad (locations withheld), September 2006.
- 42 Personal communication, former university colleague of Khalil, Rumbek (Lakes state), December 2006.
- 43 Author interviews, JEM leaders, Chad (locations withheld), September 2006.
- 44 Numerous discussions with JEM leaders, Darfur, Chad, and other countries, 2004–06.
- 45 For more on this, see Flint and de Waal (2005): pp. 88 and 90–92.
- 46 The Borno are a small, non-Arab group originally from West Africa, particularly from the area south-west of Lake Chad.
- 47 *Inqadh* (‘salvation’), pronounced *ingaz* in Sudanese Arabic, is the name given to the early NIF ‘Salvation’ government
- 48 Author interview, former SLA commander, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 49 Author interviews, JEM leaders, Chad (locations withheld) and Paris, September 2006.
- 50 Author interview, Masalit merchant and civic leader, el-Fasher, September 2006.
- 51 There are two Tinans: Tina-Sudan and Tiné in Chad.
- 52 Personal communication, former Nuba SPLM official, Rumbek, December 2006.
- 53 Author interview, local Masalit leaders from Gereida, Nyala (South Darfur), September 2006.
- 54 Author interview, Suleiman Jamus, Bir Mazza (Dar Zaghawa, North Darfur), September 2005.
- 55 Author interview, Zaghawa traditional leader, Am Nabak refugee camp, Chad, October 2006. As always, there may be more to this statement than meets the eye. In this case, it could be the opposition of a Zaghawa traditional leader toward rebels that compete with him for influence.
- 56 Personal communication, Darfurian professional, location withheld, June 2004.
- 57 Author interviews with Darfurians from all walks of life, Khartoum, and North, West, and South Darfur, May–June and September–October 2006.
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- 59 Author interviews, NRF and SLA-Minni representatives, Chad (locations withheld), September–October 2006.
- 60 Personal communications, Fur civic leader from el-Fasher, Khartoum, October 2006; and former SLA field commander, Khartoum, October 2006.
- 61 Personal communication, Fur elder from el-Fasher, Khartoum, October 2006. This source, who is also the first source for the Kutum defection, has strong personal contacts in both North and eastern Darfur.
- 62 Author interview, local Masalit leaders from Gereida, Nyala (South Darfur), September 2006.
- 63 Personal communication, senior SLA-Minni commander, Nyala (South Darfur), October 2006.
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- 72 See International Crisis Group (2006), pp. 4–5.
- 73 Personal observation and communications with residents and local leaders, Nyala (South Darfur), May, June, September, and October 2006; and Geneina (West Darfur), June 2006.

- 74 Personal communications from el-Fasher residents, Khartoum, October 2006.
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- 77 Personal communications from a number of prominent citizens in Nyala, an SLA-Minni leader, and an official in the South Darfur security services, Nyala, October 2006.
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- 82 Dozens of conversations with Darfurians in North, South, and West Darfur, and Khartoum, May–June and September–October 2006.
- 83 For more on this, see AFP 2006a and 2006b.
- 84 Confidential aid agency report, seen by the authors.
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- 87 Ibid.
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- 103 Author interview, Dr Sharif Harir, North Darfur (location withheld), March 2007.
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- 106 Author interviews, NRF (JEM and SLA) leaders, Chad (locations withheld) and Paris, September–October 2006; and confidential reports by aid agencies.
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