

Briefing Paper

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A COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

The State of the Nuer White Armies of South Sudan

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Front cover photo

Gawaar Nuer fighters in Ayod county, South Sudan.
28 July 2025. Source: Ferenc Dávid Markó



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Overview

This Briefing Paper examines the state of the Nuer self-defence forces, commonly referred to as the ‘white army’, in the context of a counterinsurgency by the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS). It focuses on the organizational structure of the white armies in Upper Nile and Jonglei states, and their relationship to other military and political groups. It finds that the white armies operate with substantive autonomy from opposition forces. Even when they act in concert with these forces, their motivations and objectives remain distinct. The Briefing Paper concludes with some policy observations for the international community.¹

Key findings

- The Nuer white armies have emerged as communitarian self-defence forces with genuine popular legitimacy, in a context in which the state no longer provides security for its citizens.
- The South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) finds itself in the same position as the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005). While it has aerial superiority and can control embattled stockade towns, it is unable to subdue rural areas entirely hostile to it.
- The political fragmentation underway in South Sudan means that local conflicts are increasingly decoupled from dynamics in Juba. Ending the political impasse in the capital will not bring peace to the periphery.
- Riek Machar and the leadership of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) were not responsible for the March 2025 assault on the SSPDF barracks in the town of Nasir. The central argument of the GRSS’s legal team, which is prosecuting Machar and his associates in Juba, is unfounded.
- Machar’s arrest and the government’s counterinsurgency have revitalized the opposition leader’s standing across SPLM/A-IO supporting areas.

Introduction

Thuok Riekni is the camp of the Gawaar Nuer prophet, Makuach Tut. In Nuer, the camp’s name means ‘the end of all problems’, but in July 2025, the problems seemed to have no end. One white army fighter recited a litany:² there was no food,³ the GRSS, referred to hereafter as the ‘government’, was blocking humanitarian access to areas held by the SPLM/A-IO,⁴ and cattle were dying in floods that had displaced people to higher land around the canal.⁵ ‘What else can we do,’ the fighter asked, ‘but “go” and look for our future?’⁶ ‘Go’ in this context means a *mut*—a raid on another community.⁷

In Thuok Riekni, one can grasp the predicament of South Sudan’s present. The government has completely withdrawn from service provision and wage payments (Craze, 2025a). Integration into the national army has proved a dead-end. Flooding and conflict have rendered private enterprise almost impossible. The situation has become even worse thanks to the collapse in humanitarian funding in South Sudan, and the associated absence of NGO wages that would sustain extended families (Craze, 2025b; Falzetta, 2025a). For the young fighters of Ayod county, a *mut* is the sole means to secure the resources that might enable a flourishing life.⁸ ‘If Makuach Tut does not “go”,’ the fighter continued before shrugging, ‘we shall just “go” with someone else.’⁹

Makuach Tut set off north at the beginning of September.¹⁰ He said he intended to retrieve cattle that government forces had stolen from him.¹¹ Accompanying the prophet were approximately 4,500 fighters.¹² In Malakal, both the Shilluk living in the Protection of Civilians (PoC) site and peacekeepers from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) feared a repeat of 2014, when the white armies sacked Malakal.¹³

In theory, Makuach Tut was loyal to the SPLM/A-IO. Was the opposition about to take Malakal? The situation was not so simple. The prophet was accompanied by an SPLA-IO commander, Dual Chuol, who is a fixture at his side.¹⁴ Chuol is a Dinka from Duk Padiet, and his presence is designed to ensure that the prophet does not attack Dinka territory. What appears to be a military alliance is rather a means of regulating inter-communal conflict. The SPLM/A-IO were not directing Makuach Tut’s operations; Malakal was not the target. An assault on embedded SSPDF forces in the state capital would have led to extensive casualties and would not have given Makuach Tut’s

followers the resources they desired. Baliaet county or the west bank of the White Nile, where Makuach Tut had successfully raided in 2022, were more likely targets.¹⁵ The military interests of the SPLA-IO, which were focused on the riparian garrisons of Tonga and New Fangak, were not congruent with those of Makuach Tut.¹⁶

By the end of September, after Makuach Tut had reached Pigi county, he announced his return to Thuok Riekni. Some claimed the government paid him off.¹⁷ Officially, he indicated that he would return to await the result of Machar's trial. The real motivations for his decision were more prosaic. High river levels due to recent rains and the embedded positions of the Agwelek militia along the river made traversing Pigi and then crossing the White Nile almost impossible. Makuach Tut's northern campaign was likely to have been a publicity stunt, designed to show his strength. The real target of the prophet's next assault will be the Murle areas of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), which he previously raided in 2020.¹⁸

Should Makuach Tut's forces be understood as part of purely 'inter-communal conflicts', as his commitment to raid the Murle might suggest, or as a political force to be reckoned with?¹⁹ The prophet's aborted campaign indicates that his aims are not consonant with those of the SPLM/A-IO's. For his fighters, the acquisition of resources necessitates returning to Ayod with their spoils, not holding territory. That Makuach Tut is not controlled by the SPLM/A-IO does not mean he is apolitical.

In interviews, Makuach Tut demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of politics. According to him, South Sudanese elites—with the consent and support of the international community—first abandoned Nuer areas in the Greater Upper Nile region, leaving them without services, and then began to bomb them.²⁰ Makuach Tut understood his position, politically and spiritually, as one in which he must protect his community against these assaults.

Makuach Tut spoke from a Nuer perspective, but his outlook is mirrored by communities across the country, including in the home state of South Sudanese President Salva Kiir Mayardit;²¹ it is not simply the *absence* of government that pushes communities to organize self-defence forces, such as the white armies and the *gelweng* cattleguards of Warrap, but rather the violent *presence* of Kiir's regime. Government security services do not defend the South Sudanese people. The greatest threat to the

security of the South Sudanese population is from the violent groups empowered by Kiir's regime.

Instead of forming a national army, the regime has outsourced its monopoly of violence to militias—including the Shilluk Agwelek and James Nando's Azande forces in Western Equatoria—that fight wars for local interests under the banner of national concerns. Communities respond to such violent encroachments by organizing themselves into self-defence forces that struggle against a state that is selectively empowering some groups at the expense of others.

Kiir's regime empowers militias as a means of rule (Craze, 2024b). The constant jostling between militia commanders is not a chaotic interruption of the system—it is the system itself. The appearance of inter-communal conflict is a consequence of the intensified forms of inter-ethnic strife that result from the regime's use of instrumental disorder as a mode of governance (Craze, 2022a). Community self-defence forces are not an archaism, but a contemporary reaction to the nature of the South Sudanese state.

The formation of the white armies

The Nuer have historically constituted themselves in the absence of the state, in what was famously termed 'organized anarchy' (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Living groups are structured as segmentary sections, with young men mobilizing along such lines (Pendle, 2020a). These formations are mainly defensive and protect communities' cattle from raids. They also raid other communities to obtain livestock central to Nuer socio-economic exchange. These segmentary formations allow rival sections to join forces in response to a greater external threat. Threats to the whole Eastern Nuer, for instance, will, in theory, be addressed by the entirety of the Eastern Nuer.²²

These formations are temporary in nature. They do not hold territory other than their own, and once an objective is achieved, such 'white armies' dissolve back into their communities. Unlike professional armies, participation in white armies is a social obligation for young men—not a job—and coexists with roles in farming and cattle-keeping.²³

Unlike one normative vision of a standing army, in which legitimacy flows down from the state through a chain of command, white armies' legitimacy flows up from below. Communities

task these formations with defence, and ask them to raid other groups. White army fighters report that community members push them to raid—to not do so would invite accusations of cowardice (Young, 2007; 2016). This popular basis for mobilizations has logistical and organizational correlates. Raids are supplied on a sectional basis by Nuer customary authorities and spiritual leaders, drawing resources from participating communities. White armies also receive diaspora funds.²⁴ Section leaders for raids are collectively chosen by the white army members, and commanders of larger forces are selected from the communities forming the sectional base for such forces. White armies remain more connected to community interests than South Sudan's security services.²⁵

The name 'white army' has a contested and uncertain origin. *Burnam* were youth forces that emerged during Sudan's first civil war (1955–72) among the Eastern Jikany and Lou Nuer, and which protected livestock during the dry season (Jok and Hutchinson, 1999).²⁶ The white armies emerged out of *burnam* groups during the second civil war (1983–2005). White army fighters tell two origin stories for the group's name. *Dec in bor* (white army in Nuer) may have referred to the white cattle-dung ash that youth typically apply to themselves to ward off mosquitoes. Another possibility is that the name distinguishes youth fighters from the formal armies of SAF and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which in Nuer are referred to as *dec in char* (black army). No matter the origin, the term 'white army' has led the international media astray (Vice, 2014). The white army is not a unified command structure, but a series of temporary mobilizations, organized at a sectional level. There are only white armies, not a white army.

An imperfect marriage

A process of mutual instrumentalization characterizes the relations between white and black armies.²⁷ During Sudan's second civil war, Nuer communities faced threats from other ethnic groups and attacks by SAF and military groups such as the SPLA. The white armies, like pastoralist self-defence forces elsewhere in the country, maintained an ambiguous relationship with these more formal military forces (Wild, Jok, and Patel, 2018). Both the SPLA and other rebel movements used cattleguards to supplement their forces, leading to conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer, as

forces organized on ethnic lines were deployed for political purposes.²⁸ The white armies also pursued their own goals, with rebel operations enabling fighters to supplement their herd. There was limited overlap between the political objectives of groups like the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the socio-political needs of the white armies. The latter were disinclined to venture far from home unless it was to raid.

The white armies came to public attention after the Nasir faction—led by Gordon Koang Chuol, Lam Akol, and Machar—broke away from the mainline SPLM/A in 1991 (Akol, 2011). The split occurred amid deep dissatisfaction among many Nuer commanders with John Garang's leadership of the SPLM/A. Many Nuer were angry with Garang over the killing of Samuel Gai Tut and other Nuer Anyanya II leaders.²⁹ Machar utilized this anger to get the white armies to fight with him.³⁰ The Nuer prophet Wutnyang Gatakek was instrumental in this mobilization. In 1991, white armies, principally drawn from the Lou Nuer, acting in concert with soldiers from the Sudan People's Liberation Army's Nasir faction (SPLA-Nasir), sacked Bor.³¹ The attack offered the white armies the prospect of seizing thousands of cattle, along with the possibility of taking revenge on the SPLM/A. Machar's political aims and the socio-political goals of the white armies overlapped (Young, 2007). Thousands were killed in an episode that left a deep rift between Bor Dinka and Lou Nuer communities (Young, 2006).

The war called peace

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A in 2005 (UNMIS, 2005), the white armies were considered a threat to the government. After the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), including the largely Nuer forces of Paulino Matiep, formally entered the SPLA with the signing of the Juba Declaration in January 2006, the government decided to disarm the Lou Nuer white armies (Craze, 2020; Small Arms Survey, 2006; Young, 2006). The violent disarmament campaign that followed entrenched a sense among the Lou Nuer that the SPLA was an occupying army that did not represent a national government, but rather intervened in partisan fashion on behalf of Jonglei's Dinka communities (Garfield, 2007; Small Arms Survey, 2007).

From 2009 to 2012, inter-communal conflict occurred in Jonglei state between the Lou Nuer and other ethnic groups. During this time, the Lou Nuer white armies had deputies from the group's three counties—Akobo, Nyirol, and Urur—chosen from the communities of those areas, under a popularly selected commander. Attacks on the Murle were well-planned. Masses of youth, organized at a sectional level, congregated before assaults on the GPAA that left many thousands dead. These attacks were motivated by a variety of causes (Small Arms Survey, 2012), including the marginalization of the Lou Nuer within the state government. In an augur of the sort of dynamics that would mark Jonglei in later years, the SPLA largely stayed in their barracks, unwilling to confront better-armed white armies.

During this period, the Lou Nuer prophet Dak Kueth gained prominence and laid claim to the legacy of Ngundeng Bong, the most famous Nuer prophet.³² Fighters from the Lou Nuer white armies said that Kueth had been possessed by the spirit of Maar at a moment of great crisis for the Lou Nuer.³³ This crisis had been brought about by Murle raids and the failures of the southern Sudanese state to offer the Lou Nuer either development or security. Kueth was instrumental in mobilizing the Lou Nuer white armies in 2012 (Thomas, 2015).

The white armies acted autonomously from formal Nuer political forces. Exemplary in this regard are Machar's failed interventions, in his role as vice-president, to prevent Lou Nuer attacks on the Murle. At two meetings with the Lou Nuer in December 2012, Machar appealed to them to stop raiding. They declined, informing Machar they had given the government a six-month deadline to stop Murle raids. Since the government failed to deal with the problem, the community had decided to take matters into their own hands.

Machar's frustrations

Machar's inability to exert control over the white armies persisted into the South Sudanese civil war (2013–18). The white armies constituted one of the principal forces fighting against Kiir's regime. It would be incorrect to suggest that the white armies fought for Machar or for the SPLM/A-IO. One could instead see the civil war period as the betrayal of the white armies by a political elite more interested in securing positions in Juba than in addressing the substantive

issues that led to the Nuer uprising from 2013 to 2014.³⁴ The proximate cause for the widespread mobilization of the white armies was the massacre of Nuer civilians in Juba that occurred in December 2013 (HRW, 2014a), rather than Machar's removal from the vice presidency in July 2013 (Young, 2016). The white armies mobilized in response to an attack on the Nuer people. While this mobilization was extremely violent, it was oriented around claims to justice not as a means of competing for political positions in Juba.

Any SPLM/A-IO claims to represent the white armies' agenda are without basis. During the civil war, the white armies continued to mobilize at the sectional level, not as part of a rebel army. They were responsible for most of the opposition's military successes, including the capture of Bor and Malakal. Holding territory, however, did not interest the white armies. They returned to their areas of origin while the SPLA-IO forces left in control of cities like Malakal proved unable to hold them. In their areas of origin, which were largely under SPLM/A-IO control, the white armies served as community defence forces. Far from being the wild force that is all too frequently portrayed by the western media (Vice, 2014), they conducted themselves with greater restraint—relative to civilians—than the SPLA, which acted as an occupying army in the Nuer territories under its control.³⁵

The organizational structures of the white and black armies were clearly differentiated during the South Sudanese civil war. Personnel, in contrast, often played a role in both. In Upper Nile—and particularly in Nasir—the white armies frequently worked with SPLA-IO forces under the command of Gathoth Gatkuoth.³⁶ During the war, some of Gatkuoth's forces that had been recruited from among the white armies rejoined their former colleagues, as the SPLA-IO found it impossible to pay or even feed its troops. Once those troops returned to the white armies, they were again placed within sectional forms of organization, where their ranks no longer had any real significance. Being a soldier and a member of the white armies is not impossible. The former is a professional position, while the latter is a social obligation.

While some troops returned to the white armies, in several places in Upper Nile, opposition generals gave white army commanders positions in the SPLA-IO, as a way of trying to exert control over them. Okdur Chol Diet, the leader of Nasir's white armies, was

made a brigadier general in the SPLA-IO. Such appointments usually meant that leaders left their white armies and ‘retired’ into the black army. This was not always the case, as some joined the SPLA-IO to acquire weapons and ammunition before deserting. All the overtures made by the SPLM/A-IO could not change the white armies’ material and sociological roots.

A failed integration

The SPLM/A-IO continued to attempt to integrate the white armies after the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) (IGAD, 2018). During a recruitment drive through the opposition heartland of Upper Nile and Jonglei in 2019, Simon Gatwich Dual, the SPLA-IO chief of staff, dangled the promise of wages and weapons in front of white army fighters.³⁷ He hoped they would join the SPLM/A-IO, boosting its numbers and increasing the opposition’s bargaining power in negotiations over the size and shape of a national army (Craze, 2020). In Akobo, there was deep reluctance to join the opposition. The white armies’ leaders in this area indicated that while they would be willing to fight alongside the SPLA-IO if the Lou Nuer were threatened as a group, they would not subordinate their communitarian agenda to the national priorities of the SPLM/A-IO.³⁸ In other places, white army fighters flocked to cantonment sites in anticipation of weapons and wages. Regardless of how they got to the cantonment sites, the fighters all left in the same way. Integration stalled and opposition fighters were abandoned, with most returning home. Gatwich Dual’s attempt to absorb the white armies into the SPLA-IO crashed into the failure of the R-ARCSS’s security sector provisions.

Since 2018, the role of the white armies in Nuer society has undergone a significant transformation. Community elders from many different Nuer sections have complained about the increasing number of guns in the hands of youth, and that these weapons have made them independent of community control.³⁹ These complaints should be taken with a grain of salt, as white armies are still dependent on their communities for material and ideological support. The elders’ complaints do relate, however, to real developments in the structure of the white armies. Chiefly authority has been intentionally diluted by Kiir’s regime via the dismissal of chiefs with popular authority and the multiplication of

chiefly titles.⁴⁰ As chiefly authority has waned, the importance of the Nuer prophets in coordinating the activities of white armies has grown. In 2025, in Ayod, it was noticeable that no white army fighters spoke about seeking approval from customary authorities for raids. Instead, all of them discussed receiving the blessings of a prophet, even if that meant a form of spiritual shopping, in which a proposed mut was offered first to one prophet, and then another.⁴¹

The Nasir incident

Nasir town has long been an opposition stronghold, going back to the Nasir Declaration in 1991 (Johnson, 2012).⁴² During the South Sudanese civil war, the town was held by the SPLA-IO until 2016, when the SPLA captured it.⁴³ From the beginning, the SPLA acted as an occupying army. The local community complained that the army looted goods, stole cattle, and restricted the collection of firewood.⁴⁴ The SPLA was in a penurious situation. It received no wages, food, or support, and was forced into selling ammunition to hostile Nuer youth in the surrounding area. The relationship further soured in 2023, when Nhial Batoang—the current commissioner of Ulang county—was replaced as the commander of the Nasir barracks by Major Dak, a Dinka lieutenant general.⁴⁵

In February 2025, tensions increased between the SSPDF and members of the white armies, partially due to contentions over local women. These tensions led to armed clashes on 14 and 15 February, after government soldiers opened fire on local youth who had gone fishing. In letters to the government, Nasir’s Nuer community demanded the removal of the SSPDF from the Wechyar-Adiw barracks that are near Nasir town, and the deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF). It was thought that the NUF would be less hostile to the local community. Such a plan had been formulated during several high-level government meetings in 2024. Its implementation, however, had lost ground after the dismissal of Santino Deng Wol as the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) in December 2024 and the appointment of the more bellicose Paul Nang Majok.⁴⁶ James Koang Chuol—a Jikany Nuer commander from Nasir tasked with overseeing operations in Nasir town alongside Paromi Angui and Koang Thou—gave a statement explaining that all the available NUF had deployed, and those left in the cantonment sites only had sticks, making them unsuitable for deployment.

What followed was a violent farce. The soldiers initially tasked with replacing the beleaguered battalion in Nasir town were largely Equatorian and refused to go. The only forces willing to deploy were two communitarian militias, both of which had extremely hostile relations with the Nuer community: the Agwelek (Craze, 2019; 2022a) and the Abu Shoq, a Padang Dinka militia from the Ngok Lual Yak section of Baliet county. ‘These forces are not neutral,’ one of the fighters from the white armies said, ‘they are government militias that fought us during the war.’⁴⁷

On 22 February, two barges carrying these militias were sent to relieve the SSPDF near Nasir town, although the Sobat River’s water levels were too low for the boats to pass.⁴⁸ Whether by intention or design, the movement of the barges antagonized the Nuer communities of Upper Nile and northern Jonglei. White army fighters explained that they thought the dispatch of the two barges was a clear declaration of war.⁴⁹ All along the river, they mobilized, firing on the barges as they moved towards Nasir. Government-aligned forces further inflamed the situation by launching airstrikes on SPLA-IO positions on 25 February in Doma payam, Ulang county, and in Chuil payam, Nyirol county. The government created the enemy it would then attack.

Despite the bellicose atmosphere, some voices argued for restraint. At the beginning of March, the white armies of Nasir and Ulang counties did not reach a consensus on whether to attack the SSPDF barracks near Nasir town. Two Ulang Nuer sections refused to participate in the initial assault on 3 March, which was led by Tor Gile Thoan, the Nasir white army commander. Gile, like many white army commanders, had been given a rank within the SPLA-IO during the South Sudanese civil war. In the initial discussions over whether to attack the Nasir barracks, however, Gile participated as a white army commander rather than a member of the SPLA-IO. To the extent that the SPLM/A-IO participated in these discussions, it was to try and dissuade the white armies from attacking Nasir town. The SPLM/A-IO feared that such an assault would give the government what it was looking for—an insurgency to justify its own counterinsurgency.

Other voices, however, pushed for the assault—including hardline Nuer politicians in the diaspora and in Addis Ababa, such as Duer Tut Duer, the chairperson of the South Sudan Reform Movement/Fighters and the former SPLM/A-IO governor of Sobat state.

After a decade of mistreatment at the hands of the SSPDF in Nasir town, and with barges of Agwelek militiamen coming along the river, it was easy to paint a picture of an all-out war. An attack on the barracks would enable the elimination of a force that had long oppressed the Nuer communities of Nasir.

The initial assault on 3 March saw the white army overrun the north gate of the barracks, which faces Nasir town, leading to an SSPDF retreat to the southern gate. Gile was injured during the assault, and his five bodyguards were killed.

After the initial attack, the white armies ran out of ammunition and staged a tactical retreat. The SSPDF then mounted a search, discovered Gile, and—according to white army fighters—beheaded him, leaving his head impaled on a spike next to an SSPDF flag.⁵⁰ This story quickly circulated among the Nuer youth of Nasir and Ulang and proved to be the precipitating spark for the 4 March assault in which the Nuer white armies—including those of Ulang—under the command of Kang Makana, Gile's deputy, captured the barracks.

Dak and some of his soldiers survived the assault by hiding in an armoured personnel carrier. Negotiations began to rescue the lieutenant general, with Machar and the government contacting UNMISS to see if it could assist with the evacuation. All sides conspired in the fiction that the SPLM/A-IO was in control of the white armies. For Machar, this was a moment to demonstrate his influence. Pal Mai Deng, the SPLM-IO spokesperson, announced on 5 March that an agreement had been made to airlift Dak from Nasir town. An unsuccessful attempt to evacuate the soldiers was made the following day.⁵¹ The government was only too eager to lay the blame on Machar for the assault on Nasir town, wanting to tie him to the white armies. UNMISS, which was coordinating its operations from Juba, and where the head of the Malakal field office happened to be, was in contact with the SPLM-IO and believed its assurances that the opposition had control of the white armies on the ground, a fact not consonant with reality.⁵²

Machar and the SPLM/A-IO leadership had relied on contact with Hokdor Chuol, one of the most important Nasir white army leaders during the South Sudanese civil war. Like Gile and Makana, Chuol had also received a position in the SPLA-IO during the war. Although he intervened and asked the white armies to allow Dak to depart, his plea—like that of Machar—was not heeded. Some white army members have stated that

they intended to kill Dak, regardless of what Machar might have asked of them, in order to avenge Gile's death.⁵³ Dak was killed on 7 March during an attempted UNMISS airlift evacuation, along with 27 of his soldiers and a UN crew member.⁵⁴

Once again, as during the South Sudanese civil war, the white armies acted autonomously from the SPLM/A-IO, whose goals were political and related to its standing in Juba, not to the situation in Nasir. 'It is the IO,' one white army fighter said, 'that let the situation get to this point.'

A dispirited army

The current conflict does not have the same contours as the South Sudanese civil war. Government forces are unpaid and demoralized. While the SSPDF, led by Koang Thou, retook Nasir town on 20 April, troops soon deserted the garrison.⁵⁵ Other troops have deserted from Burebiey, on the Ethiopian border, and from Malakal. In Nasir and Ulang, the SSPDF has found itself in nearly the same position as prior to March—it controls a series of embattled garrison towns, cut off from supply routes and surrounded by hostile populations. In the absence of a functioning army, the bulk of the government's assaults have been conducted by affiliated militias.

Kiir's regime's sole saving grace is its recently improved aerial capacity. Since 16 March 2025, government-affiliated attack helicopters and planes, piloted by foreign mercenaries working for BAR Aviation, a Ugandan company, have conducted airstrikes on Longochuk, Ulang, and Nasir counties.⁵⁶ These air assaults have targeted civilian villages that Kiir's regime believes are white army gathering points. The air campaign has a suppressive logic. It aims to instil fear in restive Nuer populations that are calculating the cost of joining the insurgency. The government hopes to disrupt the organization of the white armies such that the SSPDF can maintain its embattled garrison towns in Nasir and Ulang.

The government's air campaign cannot hope to change the conflict's fundamental logic. Areas outside of Nasir town will remain under the control of communities hostile to the SSPDF (see Map 1). Aerial bombardment cannot defeat white armies that derive their legitimacy from the very communities being attacked by Kiir's regime. Given its current military strategy, the SSPDF uncomfortably resembles SAF during the second Sudanese civil war—restricted

to occupying towns in hostile territory, knowing that victory is impossible.

The opposition impasse

The events in Nasir provided a rhetorical justification for Kiir's regime to broaden the war against the SPLM/A-IO in the periphery, while consolidating its control of the capital. Much of the opposition leadership, including Machar, was arrested, while others fled abroad.⁵⁷ Kiir created a Potemkin opposition under Stephen Par Kuol, the SPLM/A-IO peace-building minister, who claimed to be the interim chair of the movement. In May 2025, he was rapidly endorsed by the SPLM and its allies in the South Sudan Opposition Alliance as the legitimate leader of the SPLM/A-IO. Despite—and no doubt partly because of—this endorsement, opposition forces on the ground dismissed Par Kuol's faction as a government ruse.

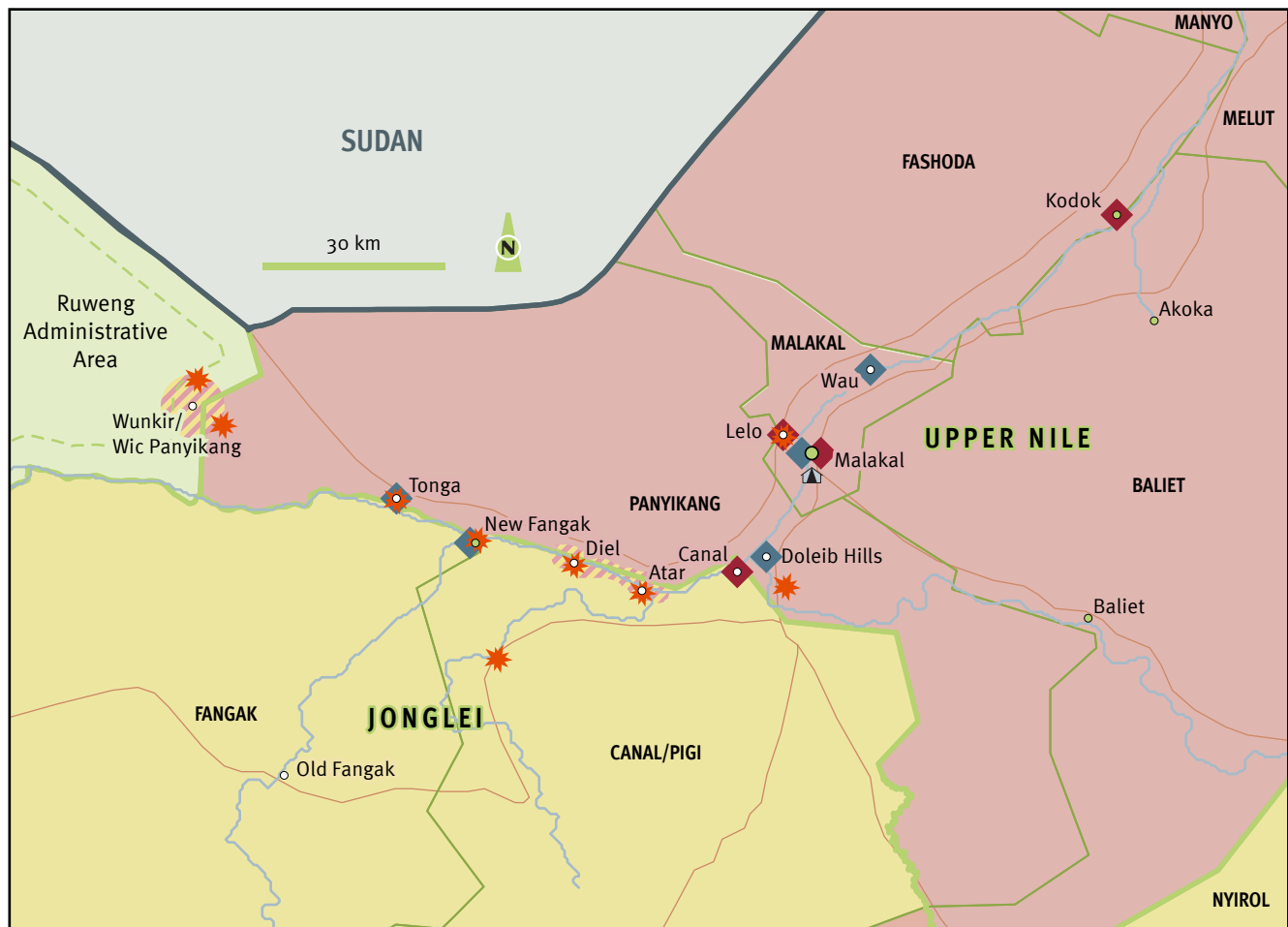
The mainline SPLM/A-IO endorsed Nathaniel Oyet, the first deputy speaker, as its interim chairperson. Oyet has been dealing with divisions within his own faction. The SPLM-IO chief whip, Farouk Gatkuoth Kam, and other members of the SPLM-IO who have remained in Juba, feel that his statements are too confrontational and risk endangering them and Machar, who as of November 2025 is still standing trial for treason over his role in the events in Nasir. Oyet is an Acholi from Eastern Equatoria state, and he has also faced political resistance from the Nuer heartlands of Upper Nile, which view him as an outsider. His solution to this problem has been to allow commanders to determine for themselves how they wage guerilla wars in the Equatorias and Greater Upper Nile.

Recent bellicose statements by Oyet are misleading. In March 2025, Oyet feared that launching an all-out war would lead the government and the international community to blame the opposition for breaking the peace agreement, and put Machar at risk. More importantly, government assaults took the SPLM/A-IO by surprise. Initially, the opposition struggled with an acute lack of materiel and due to a military leadership scattered by the bombardment of its cantonment sites.

As the SPLM/A-IO regrouped, it looked north to Sudan for support. Some SAF materiel went to SPLA-IO units in Maban county, Upper Nile state. SAF intended for these forces to act as a cross-border countermeasure against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) training

Areas of control in Jonglei and Upper Nile states,
1 November 2025





- State capital
- County headquarters
- Town
- ▨ Contested control
- SPLM/A-IO or white army control
- SSPDF and associated militias control
- ★ Selected clashes*, March–October 2025
- ◆ Agwelek barracks
- ◆ SSPDF barracks
- Other militia presence
- ▲ IDP or refugee camp
- ⛢ Oil field
- International boundary
- State boundary
- County boundary
- - - Administrative area boundary
- Major road
- River

*Does not include airstrikes which are shown on Map 2.

Sources: Natural Earth, HydroSheds, OSM, GADM, HDX OCHA South Sudan, UNMISS GIS Unit, EDX (Sabbatino, M., Romeo, L., Baker, V., Bauer, J., Barkhurst, A., Bean, A., DiGiulio, J., Jones, K., Jones, T.J., Justman, D., Miller III, R., Rose, K., and Tong, A., Global Oil & Gas Features Database, 2017-12-12, <https://edx.netl.doe.gov/dataset/global-oil-gas-features-database>, DOI: 10.18141/1427300).

camps that had been established in Blue Nile state after the alliance between the two groups in February 2025.⁵⁸ The RSF capture of SAF positions on the border, however, cut these supply corridors. Subsequent RSF attacks on SPLA-IO forces in March and April led to the death of the opposition commanders in the border zone that were trusted by SAF, and supplies of materiel from Port Sudan soon ceased.

The SPLM/A-IO's lack of success in obtaining supplies from SAF was paral-

leled around the region. Ethiopia would, due to its large Nuer population, allow the opposition and the white armies to move back and forth across the border, but it would not offer military support. No regional actor approached by the SPLM/A-IO for materiel, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, and Uganda, has shown interest in supporting what is perceived as a fractious opposition.⁵⁹ Instead, the SPLM/A-IO has been almost entirely reliant on ammunition and weapons captured

from the SSPDF, aside from some materiel purchased with diaspora funds from diverse sources, including Fellata nomads and the RSF.

As of November 2025, the SPLM/A-IO leadership in exile holds a contradictory position. It is committed to a military victory and sees little way back to the R-ARCSS agreement. Freeing Machar would not resolve the situation on its own, given the number of SPLM/A-IO positions that have now been given to

government representatives. The opposition's recent alliance with the National Salvation Front (NAS), which did not sign the R-ARCSS, also complicates matters. 'We can't leave NAS behind and just go back into government,' stated one senior SPLM-IO figure.⁶⁰

Yet the SPLM/A-IO leadership—unlike its rank-and-file—remains open to negotiations with the government, if they occur in an appropriate venue with a neutral mediator, which excludes the guarantors of the R-ARCSS, Uganda and Sudan. It fears that any new agreement might lead to the SPLM-IO losing positions to other rebel groups—a prospect that led to it undermining the Tumaini initiative (Craze, 2025a).

Such anxieties remain academic. There is little prospect of a new peace agreement. This leaves the SPLM/A-IO in a paradoxical position, clinging to an agreement it knows is dead. It cannot entirely abandon the R-ARCSS without facing international sanction, and still hopes Machar may be released and the transitional government reconstituted. These dreams have been boosted by the dismissal of Benjamin Bol Mel, who the SPLM-IO thought was the main force behind Machar's removal. At present, though, the SPLM/A-IO is committed to a guerilla war, even if, just like Kiir's regime, it knows that victory is impossible.

The white armies of Greater Nasir

In Upper Nile and Jonglei, the SPLM/A-IO leadership finds itself in negotiations. 'With the white armies,' one SPLM/A-IO politician said, 'you are not dealing with individual leaders, but with groups.'⁶¹ One of the reasons for the strength of the white armies in these negotiations is that the SPLA-IO is doing little of the actual fighting. 'Who would be fighting?' one despairing SPLA-IO officer asked. 'We are an army of generals, without any soldiers.'⁶² In the Greater Upper Nile region, the white armies have taken the lead in clashes with the government, although they suffer from an acute lack of ammunition and have resorted to ambushes to acquire materiel. The SPLA-IO has collaborated with the white armies in operations against SSPDF positions in Nasir. On the ground, these operations are determined by popular agreement among white army members. In meetings between the white armies and the SPLM/A-IO, they have demurred when asked to seize barracks, maintain control of towns, or march on Malakal.⁶³

Political elites have attempted to co-opt the white armies. There are approximately 40 Nuer rebel groups stationed in Gambella, Ethiopia, and Greater Nasir.⁶⁴ All of these groups have attempted to lay claim to the white armies. As in other parts of South Sudan (Majok, 2019), elite power is constituted by capturing the labour of the young. Many Nuer rebel groups have long-standing relationships with the white armies, and like the SPLA-IO, dream of turning them into formal forces. Chol Gaga, the former SSDF commander, is training some white army fighters on the border with Greater Nasir. Other commanders training youth include Yien Matthew, a former NAS commander, and Samuel Mut Gai, who perhaps commands the most substantial force, and is the former head of intelligence for Gatwich Dual's SPLM/A-IO Kitgwang faction.⁶⁵

Contentions over the control of the white armies are also about funding. The white armies are backed by the Nuer diaspora, which has formed groups, including the 'Naath Nation', a group whose leaders are mainly in the US and Canada, and the Naath Defence Force, which is based in Addis Ababa. Tensions over who should receive diaspora funds—the white armies or the rebel political leadership—have led to disagreements. Struggles over the taxation of the riverine trade with Ethiopia, which now must route itself around the SSPDF barracks in Burebiey, and SPLM/A-IO checkpoints in Nasir and Ulang, led to Oyet's attempt to dismiss the SPLM/A-IO Nasir county commissioner, James Gatluak Lew Thiep. This attempt failed following community resistance.

The white armies have an ambiguous relationship to the SPLM/A-IO's assertion of leadership. While they share the opposition's critique of Kiir's clique, and wish for a change of government in Juba, they do not conceive of regime change as their business. They view their conflict as a defensive war against the encroachments of government militias. Some white army fighters have also spoken about taking revenge for the aerial bombardments that have decimated civilian communities. According to them, these goals are not political.

Since March 2025, the white armies have insisted their role is communitarian and not about seeking political positions. Many fighters criticize Machar for joining the regime without transforming it. In response to this author's insistence that the white armies are the only legitimate political actor in Nuer territory in Upper Nile, and that they should seek

self-governance and constitute themselves as a revolutionary force, white army members were patient: they said that the white armies derive their political legitimacy from their communities, precisely because they are *not* political in the same sense as the SPLM/A-IO. As one white army leader stated: 'We are a community who have no political ideology. . . [we] defend our existence and the freedom of our people. We in the white army have no intention of taking any government position.'⁶⁶

This is itself a political position. The white armies are clearly involved in politics if the definition of politics is collective struggle and organization. Such collective struggle must be distinguished from the jostling for positions and pay-offs that constitute politics in Kiir's regime. The white armies are political, insofar as they organize labour. They refuse to be political in the etiolated arena demarcated by Kiir's regime. The white armies' refusal of such politics has led to their strengths and contradictions. The white armies make military decisions on the ground, but the SPLM/A-IO political class take official positions and speak politically. While the white armies control the ground, they allow themselves to be dominated politically.

Splitting the opposition

The government conceived its counter-insurgency as having two phases.⁶⁷ Initial aerial bombardment would break the will of the opposition forces—including the white armies—and scatter the SPLM/A-IO (see Map 2). After that, newly appointed politicians would divide the population and allow the government to control Greater Nasir. The strategy has not worked. While aerial bombardment by government-aligned forces has caused immense destruction, it is of limited utility against white army fighters that move in highly dispersed ways.⁶⁸ Easy access to Ethiopia has also lessened the effectiveness of aerial bombardment. White army fighters frequently cross the border to avoid the SSPDF, which cannot follow them without causing a diplomatic incident.

The government's second strategy has proved relatively more successful. In March 2025, Kiir once again abrogated the peace agreement by dismissing the SPLM/A-IO governor of Upper Nile and appointing James Koang Chuol.⁶⁹ On 11 September 2025, James Koang Chuol created 17 new payams in six counties, which took territory from SPLM/A-IO-held

Map 2

Selected government airstrikes, March–October 2025



areas and placed it in counties controlled by government loyalists. This is a high-risk strategy. Placing Shilluk territory in Padang Dinka-controlled counties risks inflaming existing tensions between two ethnic groups within the government coalition (Craze, 2019, pp. 17–34).

In May, Kiir dismissed SPLM-IO county commissioners in Nasir and Ulang and appointed government loyalists in an attempt to divide the population of the two counties. In Nasir, the new commissioner, Gatwech Joak Deng, has attempted to control the county by dismissing all the customary chiefs, centralizing authority in Nasir town, and blocking humanitarian aid to SPLM/A-IO held areas. He has used Fogbow—an American company subcontracted by BAR Aviation, a Ugandan firm participating in the government's campaign of aerial bombardment—to drop food into Nasir town, which was only populated by soldiers, while denying humanitarian access to civilians in SPLM/A-IO controlled areas (Craze and Falzetta, 2025).

Attempts to force populations into government-held areas have involved pushing humanitarian organizations into Nasir town and an outright denial of humanitarian access to areas east of it. UN agencies, including the World Food Programme, did not have access to these areas from March to October 2025. UNMISS did not visit Nasir during this period. A June 'Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Analysis' for April to July 2025 placed parts of Ulang and Nasir counties at plausible risk of famine (IPC, 2025).

None of these measures have endeared Joak Deng to the people of Nasir, who view him as Kiir's stooge—outside of members of his own subsection, which have entered government-held areas in search of food. In an echo of the previous SSPDF occupation of Nasir town, Joak Deng ordered the confiscation of cattle from Koat payam following clashes with the white army, which sparked popular protest. Control of Nasir, outside of the town, remains with the SPLM/A-IO commissioner and the white armies.

In Ulang county, the new commissioner, Nhial Batoang has had more success. He has created community dialogues and encouraged conditions for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to government-controlled areas. Despite his more conciliatory tone, he is engaged in the same strategy as Joak Deng: push civilians into government areas and deny access to humanitarian resources in SPLM/A-IO areas.⁷⁰ He faces

opposition from the SPLM/A-IO and from the white armies, including a newly formed faction known as 'Chamdor Kiir', all of which see him as a government appointee.⁷¹

Elsewhere in the Nuer south of Upper Nile, the situation has been more subdued. The SSPDF has focused its aerial bombardments in Longochuk on the SPLA-IO in Udier payam and the Mathiang area of Malual payam. As elsewhere in South Sudan, government offensives have often followed Oyet's appointment of administrative officials. In September, the SSPDF clashed with the SPLA-IO in Mathiang following the appointment of Dak Tut Dei as the SPLM-IO county commissioner—a position he had held prior to the conflict in March and his subsequent dismissal. The government is extremely sensitive to the creation of a rival administration in its territory, even though it has no control across vast swathes of South Sudan and even where it does have control, it does not govern.

The government's propensity to bomb opposition administrations has left many hesitant about the blessings of these new bureaucracies. Some in Longochuk and Maiwut counties show little interest in participating in the insurgency. In both counties, however, the white armies have organized and acted defensively against SSPDF encroachments. Given that many such attacks in Longochuk are on SPLM/A-IO bases, such defensive actions have resulted in responses from the opposition, working in concert with the white armies—even if the political goals of the two groups remain very different.

The march of the bees

Ayod county was peaceful during the first six months of the current conflict. The county headquarters, Ayod town, remained under government control and had a strong county commissioner, James Chuol Jiek, who hails from Pajiek—the same payam as Makuach Tut. Except for Kuacdeng payam, which contains an SSPDF garrison, the rest of the county was under the control of the SPLM/A-IO. The county commissioner attributed the relative peace to his own authority.⁷² The SPLM/A-IO, conversely, claimed with good reason that it could take Ayod town very easily, and that it was responsible for the peace.⁷³ Makuach Tut attributed it to his own restraint.

In July 2025, it was the people of Ayod who were, in reality, responsible

for the relative calm in the county. Extensive flooding had decimated Gawaar agricultural land. Much of the county was experiencing emergency levels of food insecurity. It was difficult enough to survive without conflict. Almost everyone in Ayod supported Machar and were angry about the treatment he had received.⁷⁴ There was also support for Oyet. This support for the SPLM-IO's political positions did not mean that the people of Ayod were willing to join the insurgency. 'If we are going to fight,' one white army fighter said, 'we should fight in Juba, not make life impossible for our families here.'⁷⁵ Oyet's appointment of Michael Nyin as the SPLM-IO administrator in September 2025 was treated with apprehension by the people of Mogok—whence hails the SPLA-IO division commander in the area, Simon Diang Kuoth—and Pagil, the SPLM-IO seat of government. They feared that the announcement of a rival administration would lead to the government carrying out airstrikes. Political problems in Juba would not mean Ayod would join the insurgency. Such a situation is analogous to July 2013, when Machar was removed from his position as vice-president in Kiir's cabinet. It required the actual attack on the Nuer that occurred in December 2013 for a more general mobilization of Upper Nile.⁷⁶

In Ayod, as in the other territories under its control, the SPLM/A-IO has attempted to revive the political structure it had in place during the South Sudanese civil war and establish administrative areas, tax traders, and control aid flows. In July, SPLM/A-IO administrators arrested NGO workers attempting to operate in its territory without an opposition-issued work permit. The establishment of dual administrations in South Sudan means that humanitarians face double registration, and potentially, double systems of taxation and fee payment. Nyin's administration is responsive to Oyet and the SPLM/A-IO leadership in exile, but, as in Nasir, it is the Nuer communities that remain in charge of their own affairs.

On the ground, the real loyalty of the Gawaar white armies is to Makuach Tut. The prophet has a level of control over opposition-held territories in Ayod that is rare in South Sudan, where fractious customary and political authorities usually render every county a smorgasbord of influences. His white armies are organized on a sectional basis and control a checkpoint on the road to Bor. In an environment where almost no NGOs

operate, Makuach Tut has also invested in development projects, including the construction of administrative buildings. He owns farms, which are collectively harvested by the communities in the areas under his control, and he receives a 5% cut of any humanitarian food distributions that occur. Apart from some young men loyal to the rival prophet, Tut Jock, in Kuacdeng payam, and a few etiolated ‘youth representatives’ in Ayod town—which play at being relevant for NGOs that would rather not leave government-controlled areas—the white armies are dedicated to Makuach Tut. Their loyalty, however, is not unconditional.

The prophet faces problems recognizable to any county commissioner in South Sudan. His cattle are in poor health due to flooding. Those same waters have damaged farms, with the 2025 harvest in Ayod county likely to fail. In July 2025, the people in areas loyal to the prophet were hungry, and he had no way of feeding them. Families that came to Thuok Riekni would be given the milk from one of the prophet’s approximately 7,000 livestock. Such beneficence, however, could not support all the people that looked to him for assistance. Although Makuach Tut has no formal political position, and has left formal political and administrative control to the SPLM/A-IO, he maintains effective military and material control of the county. In July, he had to deal with white army fighters that were desperate for something that might alleviate their straitened condition.

The demands of his fighters have sometimes pushed the prophet into disagreements with the SPLM/A-IO. In March 2025, the prophet called for a meeting of white army leaders to choose the target for a future raid. Given the events unfolding in Juba, the SPLM/A-IO decided that the timing was not propitious, and to Makuach Tut’s consternation, many leaders failed to attend the meeting.⁷⁷ This episode indicates the delicate balance between the white armies, the SPLM/A-IO, and the prophet. There is no necessary hierarchy between these three elements, and their precise configuration unfolds only in particular political contexts. Despite Makuach Tut’s material and spiritual dominance of Ayod, as an actor, his decisions are constrained.

By September, the prophet was under pressure from his own fighters and set out north with approximately 4,500 youth largely drawn the Gawaar Nuer sections of Pajiek and Mogok. Dinka youth from Duk Padiet who came to join the raid were sent back in preparation

for a dry-season campaign against the Murle. Makuach Tut’s movement north had neither the scale nor the depth of preparation that characterized his campaign into Fashoda in 2022, when he operated with an accountant’s precision. That raiding force was drawn from all the Gawaar Nuer sections, along with Dinka youth from Pigi and Duk Padiet, and Nuer white armies from Akobo and Fangak. The approximately 10,000 men who came with him on that raid gave up all their mobile phones. Communication was limited to five Thuraya satellite phones, one of which was kept by Dual Chuol, his SPLA-IO shadow, with others distributed to his commanders as a way to centralize decision-making. At the end of each day of the campaign, Makuach Tut’s personal secretary kept a rigorous written record of which white armies had seized livestock and supplies, and tallied the record against a count of the supplies that communities had contributed to the battle group. This tally partially determined the distribution of campaign loot.⁷⁸ While Makuach Tut is a prophet with a critique of a parasitic political class, he is also an entrepreneur involved in the business of predation—looting assets and redistributing them to those who follow him.

The September 2025 advance moved north through Ayod to Pigi. Officially, the prophet’s group was going to retrieve livestock that he claimed the SSPDF took from him in Dhiei, Pigi county. Despite reports that the prophet had demanded 11,000 cows to stop his march, it seems unlikely that the government paid him to desist. The Agwelek forces in New Fangak and elsewhere on the river were dug in, and the SSPDF must have been aware that the white armies had very little in the way of materiel. White army fighters in Thuok Riekni stated that they only had ammunition for two waves of attack on a given target, before they would have to acquire materiel from defeated SSPDF.⁷⁹ While the SSPDF were concerned enough about Makuach Tut’s march to subject him to aerial bombardment on 13 September, the march was likely a sizing up by both sides of the relative strength of the enemy, rather than a serious raiding campaign.

When Makuach Tut turned around, he faced fresh problems back home. At the beginning of October, Lou Nuer youth from Pading payam—the heartland of SPLM/A support in Nyirol—raided Ayod county, likely taking advantage of the prophet’s absence. The SPLM/A-IO in Nyirol, in concert with the Gawaar Nuer white armies, are reportedly preparing a

revenge attack. Ayod remains peaceful, but could easily fall into open conflict given the tense situation and the sheer amount of triggers. The white armies will react if the government bombs SPLM/A-IO positions. Given that it has been three full years since his last raid, Makuach Tut now faces waning legitimacy. Inter-communal raids by opportunistic fighters from the white armies could easily spiral into further violence if they are instrumentalized by political parties, as may become the case in Nyirol. Ayod could soon face a conflict that no one in the area wants, yet no one can escape.

Checkpoint wars

Apart from Nasir, nowhere in the Greater Upper Nile region has experienced more serious conflict than Pigi and Fangak counties in northern Jonglei. The intensity of the conflict in these areas has its origins in Makuach Tut’s campaign in Fashoda county (Craze, 2023a). At the beginning of 2023, the Agwelek general Johnson Olonyi announced his intention to retake towns on the Nile and Sobat rivers that were held by the opposition. Kiir’s regime, instead, compelled Olonyi to come to Juba, where he was placed under house arrest (Craze, 2024a). While in 2023 it suited Kiir’s regime to weaken the Agwelek, the situation was very different by 2025.

Although most observers date the current conflict in South Sudan to the Nasir town incident, the government’s assault on the SPLM/A-IO precedes the events of March 2025. From December 2024 to January 2025, Kiir’s regime launched a war for checkpoints. Under the cover of giving humanitarians and donors what they have long demanded—a removal of checkpoints around the country—it attacked SPLM/A-IO positions in Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal (Craze, 2025c). These campaigns were intended to take control of checkpoints, not abolish them entirely. Depriving the opposition of checkpoints reduces their revenue streams, while providing income that can reward actors loyal to Kiir’s regime. It was this economic war that preceded the Nasir incident and the government’s counterinsurgency.

To carry out this latter campaign, Olonyi was released from house arrest in Juba and later made the SSPDF assistant CDF for disarmament and mobilization. In this role, he has even been tasked with some of the disarmament

efforts in Warrap.⁸⁰ Principally, however, the Agwelek are useful as a fighting force in Upper Nile. Control of the campaign against the SPLA-IO and the white armies of northern Jonglei has been given to Paromi Angui, Olonyi's deputy. The Agwelek's reward for this service is control of the riparian checkpoints they capture. This continues a long-standing pattern in South Sudan, in which Kiir's regime, rather than purchasing the loyalty of commanders with now scarce petrodollars, instead distributes licences, effectively outsourcing the monopoly of violence (Craze, 2023b; 2024c).

The Agwelek in northern Jonglei, as in Greater Nasir, were supported by an aerial campaign. From April to May, government-aligned forces bombed civilian settlements and SPLM/A-IO positions in the river towns Olonyi targeted. Civilians displaced by these attacks report that Olonyi's two barges also participated in the assault.⁸¹ The Agwelek have struggled to maintain control of these ports, which have repeatedly changed hands. As of 1 November 2025, the Agwelek control New Fangak, where it has extensively dug in with trenches, and Tonga in Panyikang county, which it captured at the beginning of September. While the towns of Atar and Diel have been almost destroyed, they remain nominally under the control of the white armies, as does the rest of the river corridor running to Nasir. The government has responded to the mixed success of its counterinsurgency campaign by renewing its aerial bombardment of opposition-held territories, including Atar and Korwai.

For Kiir's regime, these airstrikes have the added advantage of enabling it to deny humanitarian access to rebel-held villages, on the basis that they are areas of active conflict where the safety of aid workers cannot be guaranteed. As in Greater Nasir, the government has tried to restrict humanitarian access to opposition areas. It held up a humanitarian river convoy for two weeks at the beginning of August 2025, which had intended to distribute aid in the opposition-held area of Korwai.⁸² The Agwelek have also had recourse to humanitarian aid in order to feed their soldiers, who do not receive wages or any substantive supplies of food from the SSPDF. On 7 September, a humanitarian river convoy was stopped at the town of New Fangak, and the Agwelek looted both humanitarian supplies and petrol. In the absence of a functioning military bureaucracy, humanitarian supplies have become a target of the war economy.⁸³

While airstrikes and the presence of the Agwelek's barges have allowed Kiir's regime to dominate the rivers, it cannot move further south into Jonglei state. Pushing into Fangak and Pigi would expose the Agwelek to the same risks as those faced by the forces in Greater Nasir—being surrounded by hostile communities with limited capacity to resupply. Even if Kiir's regime wanted to extend the war into these areas, it's unlikely it could convince the Agwelek to do so.

The Shilluk Agwelek militia has two principal motivations in the current conflict. Control of the Sobat and White Nile river corridors offers the Agwelek a valuable revenue stream, especially as it has largely been cut out of the money flowing into the Upper Nile state government, which is dominated by the Padang Dinka deputy governor, Deng Joh Angok, and his backer in Juba—the former minister of petroleum, Stephen Dhieu Dau. Expanding its economic base is the reason the Agwelek attacked SPLM-IO positions in Wunkir, located in the east of the Ruweng Administrative Area. It is also why Angui paid a visit to Megenis on the Sudanese border at the end of September 2025. The Agwelek wants to control the whole supply corridor to Sudan. It intends to establish checkpoints and tax the flow of goods and people once the dry season begins and the Fellata begin migrating south. For an Agwelek seeking to establish economic dominance over the Sobat and White Nile river corridors, there is little reason to want to be bogged down in a guerrilla war in northern Jonglei that it cannot win.

The rhetorical force behind the Agwelek was always the claim that they represented Shilluk interests. The Agwelek emerged as a means of protesting what the Shilluk claimed were land grabs by the Padang Dinka (Craze, 2019). While the Agwelek are the dominant political organization among the Shilluk and control the leadership of the Malakal PoC site, its residents are sorely aware that despite the Agwelek's formal absorption into the government, the Padang Dinka retain control of territories contested by the Shilluk in Akoka and Baliet counties. Not only have the Agwelek failed to address these issues, but administrative boundary decisions in 2025 by the then-governor of Upper Nile, James Koang Chuol, arrogated even more land to Padang Dinka-controlled counties. The Shilluk have seen few dividends from the Agwelek's alliance with the government. There is thus only a narrow zone of overlap between the government's

interests and those of the Agwelek, and discontent is mounting. In June 2025, when Angui went to Malakal to meet Olonyi, some of the men the Agwelek had recently recruited deserted. In September 2025, the Shilluk at the PoC site expressed their fears that the Agwelek would incite yet another round of Nuer–Shilluk conflict.⁸⁴

In their responses to Agwelek and SSPDF assaults on northern Jonglei, the SPLM/A-IO and the white armies have worked together far more closely than they have in Greater Nasir. This reflects a history of cooperation, both during the South Sudanese civil war (Young, 2016) and in a response to the Agwelek assault on Nuer positions in northern Jonglei in 2022 (Craze, 2023a). The 2022 assault led to Makuach Tut's campaign on the west bank of the White Nile River, where he coordinated with the currently imprisoned Gawaar Nuer opposition general, Gabriel Duop Lam. Close cooperation between the SPLM/A-IO and the white armies has continued, with the SPLM/A-IO setting up administrations in Fangak and Pigi counties.

In Fangak, the former county commissioner, Biel Boutros Biel, has continued working as an opposition commissioner after being dismissed by Kiir in May 2025. During the first six months of the conflict, he worked closely with the New Fangak white armies, including those commanded by the young leader Nhial Isaac. Previously a member of the SPLA-IO during the South Sudanese civil war, Isaac resigned in disgust in 2016 over Machar's decision to return to Juba with what Isaac considered an inadequate military force.⁸⁵ Isaac took up arms again in March 2025, although his relationship with the SPLA-IO was not perfect. In April, he attempted to cross the river to raid Panyikang county without the approval of the SPLM/A-IO leadership, who thought an assault was premature. Once again, the socio-economic demands of the white armies came into conflict with the political questions that dominate the plans of the exiled opposition leadership.

By September, Isaac was in Juba. He had taken a position with the Nile Petroleum Corporation (Nilepet), South Sudan's national oil and gas company, and had seemingly defected to the government. His rhetorical fire, however, was undimmed—he critiqued Kiir and Machar as corrupt and senile, and called for a youth revolt across ethnic lines that would take the country away from these old men. Isaac said that he had abandoned the white armies for now because he did not want to work for the

SPLM/A-IO.⁸⁶ He held that the opposition was just as bad as the government. In fact, they were part of the same problem—a system of fractious elderly men competing for their cut of the cake by forcing young men to fight for them. Isaac claimed that if there were to be clashes, they should not take place in Nuer areas, but in Juba. Isaac was realistic about his choice. He acknowledged that he was immediately replaced by another white army commander, who collaborated with the SPLM/A-IO. The collective force of the white armies is more important than any individual leader.

The SPLM/A-IO's military goal is to push the Agwelek out of New Fangak and Tonga. White army commanders work closely with Boutros Biel, Diang Latjor—the SPLA-IO commander in Diel—and Majok Gai, the Dinka opposition commander assigned to Atar. During the upcoming dry season, it is unlikely that the SPLM/A-IO will be successful. The Agwelek have heavily dug in at New Fangak. The white armies and the SPLM/A-IO find it easier to work together when operating defensively. Maintaining their positions and trying to survive is easier than coming up with a shared military strategy. The ferocity of the government's assaults on Fangak has made maintaining this unity of purpose easy. For the Nuer of Fangak, this feels like an acutely existential struggle.

The intensity of the violence wreaked on Fangak and Pigi counties, and the closer integration of the white armies and the SPLM/A-IO, has lessened the population's capacity to divide the population by appointing government loyalists to county commissioner positions. The New Fangak county commissioner, Johnson Kuol Gai Nyoap, was previously the opposition governor of Phow during the South Sudanese civil war.⁸⁷ He has proved markedly unpopular among the Thiang Nuer, even among the subsection from which he hails. He is the cousin of Turuk Ruot Ng'umdu, the leader of the Kitgwang forces under Gatwich Dual that are currently fighting alongside the Agwelek.⁸⁸

As in southern Upper Nile state, the conflict in northern Jonglei is not a battle for territorial control. Kiir's regime has no capacity to hold land that is inhabited by people fundamentally hostile to it. What is occurring is rather a campaign of pacification, in which the SSPDF and the Agwelek attempt to retain control of commercial chokeholds and ports, while ensuring that the Nuer population of northern Jonglei remains immiserated and fractured, and so unable to carry out an

insurgency against the government. The current government strategy effectively calls for a permanent counterinsurgency.

The silence of the Lou

The Lou Nuer were particularly bruised by SPLA offensives during the South Sudanese civil war. This has left them disinclined to risk another conflict with the government, regardless of SPLM/A-IO overtures. The relationship between the SPLM/A-IO and the Lou Nuer was further damaged during the R-ARCSS period (2018–25). Many Lou Nuer felt that Machar neglected their commanders, who had fought for him, and instead made a series of nepotistic, self-interested appointments to government. Lou Nuer elders have tried to avoid conflict with the government. In May 2025, for instance, they intervened to lessen tensions between the SPLA-IO and the SSPDF in Motot. The situation is fragile. A change in Machar's condition or attacks against Lou Nuer settlements due to tensions in Nyirol could easily shatter the fragile peace in Greater Akobo.⁸⁹

The government is cognisant of this fragility. In March 2025, Kiir dismissed Mahjoub Biel Turuk, the National Democratic Movement governor of Jonglei, and replaced him with Riek Gai Kok, a veteran Lou Nuer politician. Gai Kok served as the head of the humanitarian wing of SPLA-Nasir in the 1990s, before serving in the National Congress Party. In the late 1990s, he served as the governor of Jonglei for the Sudanese government. His appointment broke a pattern of Kiir appointing weak Lou Nuer governors who could be dominated by their Bor Dinka deputies. Gai Kok's appointment reflected Kiir's need to build a constituency among the Lou Nuer, the largest of the Eastern Nuer sections. In recent Lou Nuer meetings, Gai Kok has indicated that the community has little reason to fight against Juba since they now control the state government.

After being appointed, Gai Kok immediately went to visit Dak Kueth and asked him not to intervene in the current conflict. Gai Kok's intervention was seemingly successful, as Kueth has not encouraged the Lou Nuer to join the insurgency. For the Lou Nuer, the reasons for this decision may have little to do with Kueth. Many Lou Nuer remark that Kueth's spiritual powers have waned, and he is less influential among the white armies than he was previously. This remark has been exemplified by a contested election for the leadership of

the Lou Nuer white army, in which Kueth's backing of Reath Tut Dhoat found disfavour in the community, who preferred Liyliy Yieh Chan. Kueth has also attempted to mediate between the government and the white armies, although he has been rebuffed by the latter when his entreaties have toed too closely to the government line.

For white army leaders among the Lou Nuer, the principal enemy with which they are concerned is not the government, but the Murle, whose raids, white army fighters complain, are incessant. To date, only small numbers of Lou Nuer have travelled to Nasir to fight, with similarly small numbers supporting Makuach Tut. If the Lou Nuer white armies became engaged in the conflict, they would be able to take Bor. The SSPDF in Jonglei is poorly armed, while the white armies have purchased ammunition from government soldiers and could easily overwhelm SSPDF disinclined to fight. Such an eventuality is unlikely to occur. The Lou Nuer have little interest in fighting Kiir's regime, and the focus of their white armies is on preparing another raid on the Murle.

Recent moves by Gai Kok could transform this situation, and there are worrying tensions that could yet draw Greater Akobo into the conflagration of the Greater Upper Nile region. In Jonglei, as in Upper Nile, Kiir has dismissed SPLM-IO commissioners and appointed figures more amenable to the government. In Akobo, Puok Nyang Tutjiek—the Machar cadre who had been the county commissioner—was replaced by Gai Kok's nephew, James Kueth Makuach. This move was less controversial than Gai Kok's actions in Nyirol, where the SPLM-IO commissioner was dismissed and a government loyalist, Peter Gatkuoth Kong Dhuor, was appointed. Kong Dhuor was then chased from Lankien to Pading by SPLM/A-IO supporters. In response, Gai Kok moved the county headquarters to Pading, which divided the two largest Lou Nuer sections in Nyirol county—the Cieng Lang in Lankien and the Cieng Yool in Pading—who each lined up behind their own commissioner.⁹⁰ While there are now two commissioners in Nyirol, the government controls little of the county outside Pading. The transposition of a political tension onto an intersectional divide could easily produce violence—especially after Lou Nuer raids in Gawaar territory in September 2025 were claimed by some to have been sponsored by the government as a means of inciting conflict in northern Jonglei.

“The refrain from so many white army fighters was, ‘Why are we fighting here, among our own people, if Kiir is in Juba?’”

Conclusion

The current conflict in South Sudan is an oddity. It is a war fought by a population that has no interest in fighting. Even as recruitment continues in Warrap, Central Equatoria, and Upper Nile, those who are conscripted often desert. The non-payment of wages to the security services has left them demoralized and tired. People are uninterested in fighting a war that is not for a national project, but a means of concentrating power in Juba. Unable to use the SSPDF, Kiir has instead conscripted mercenaries, both from the Uganda People's Defence Force and through the local militias he has empowered across the country, who fight for their own interests and further ethnicize the conflict. Conscription into these forces works because those fighting are placed in a situation where they believe they are in an existential conflict against ethnic enemies.

Populations in SPLM/A-IO-supporting areas are also disinclined to fight, unless they are compelled to do so. Places like Akobo and Ayod contain populations that deeply dislike Kiir's regime, which they feel has failed to bring any development to the country. Yet, they are wary of airstrikes and of joining a war that there is no chance of winning, given the opposition's acute lack of materiel. There is also suspicion of the SPLM/A-IO. For many of the white army fighters, Machar's party does not represent an alternative to Kiir's regime.⁹¹ It is rather thought to be a part of a single system, in which elite actors compete for power and resources in the capital by inciting violence in the periphery. The refrain from so many white army fighters was, ‘Why are we fighting here, among our own people, if Kiir is in Juba?’

Machar's arrest and the subsequent government counterinsurgency have somewhat restored the opposition leader's popularity, and his death in custody would almost certainly lead to a wider Nuer mobilization. He remains the figure-

head of the Nuer people. Yet no white army fighters thought that Machar's release and a return to the R-ARCSS would improve their condition. The seven years of the peace agreement have not brought dividends to the Nuer. The economy has worsened, violence continues, and the political class is as unaccountable as ever. In such a context, the white armies may fight with the SPLM/A-IO, but they do not fight for it. In South Sudan today, the political projects on the table are completely exhausted. This is a country for old men.

The white armies are meanwhile at an impasse. They are one of the few collective bodies in South Sudan with genuine popular legitimacy. Their leadership is chosen in a relatively democratic fashion from the ground up. It is stunning to consider that many billions of dollars in donor funds for state-building efforts in South Sudan have not produced any institutions with the popular legitimacy of the white armies, which are systematically denigrated and thought of as a problem by international actors.

Yet for all their legitimacy, the white armies show no real interest in political power at the state level. Some individuals, of course, have defected to the government or taken positions inside the SPLM/A-IO, but that has not changed the sectional and organizational logic of the white armies, or the ways they are bound to their communities. This refusal to engage with a broken political system is one answer to a concern that Garang formulated in the 1983 SPLM Manifesto (SPLM, 1983): In reference to Anyanya I rebels, who at the end of the first Sudanese civil war (1955–72) took positions in the Sudanese government, Garang wrote that we must guard against the danger of ‘jobbists’—those that fight for a slice of the patrimonial cake rather than a transformed country, and who will then be absorbed into the very system they have struggled against (Craze, 2024c).

Such a critique could be made of the SPLM and the SPLM-IO. The white armies have resisted the dangers of jobbism by rigorously refusing to take part in a broken political arena, in which commanders leverage violence for political power. While the apparent refusal of the white armies to participate in politics is not a rejection of politics entirely, it is a rejection of the current political system.

The refusal of the system, however, has allowed the white armies to be dominated by it. Their fundamentally telluric political stance is both the strength and the limitation of the white armies. It means that they cannot be absorbed into Kiir's fundamentally transactional system. But it also means that rather than forming alternative political parties and armed resistance movements, the white armies have largely conceded the political ground to the SPLM/A-IO and other Nuer opposition parties. While this has guaranteed them the continual support and legitimacy of their communities as actors outside of a corrupt political sphere, it has left them with a defensive posture: they are community defence forces, acting in the context of a predatory and collapsing state. They cannot change this state of affairs. They can only hope to survive it.

Policy observations for the international community

This Briefing Paper surveyed the current state of the white armies of Upper Nile and Jonglei. The following are brief policy observations for the international community, derived from this research.

For peacebuilding interventions

- Across Jonglei and Upper Nile, white army fighters complained that all too often, NGOs selected ‘youth representatives’ that were able to speak English, and had internalized an NGO-discourse that foregrounded human rights and the concerns of the international aid organizations. In Ayod, the youth representative in the county headquarters was thought of as a government representative, without any sway over the actual white armies. The selection of such figures comes at a cost. The real concerns of the white armies are marginalized and peacebuilding efforts are ineffective.
- Makuach Tut repeatedly made critiques of international peace-

building efforts. He claimed that peacebuilding organizations were effectively attempting to neutralize the white armies. ‘You are not neutral. You tell us not to fight, but all your money goes to the government in Juba [through taxes, rent], and all the while, the government is bombing us.’ Peacebuilding interventions cannot be successful if they pathologize inter-communal dynamics, and do not address the political and economic context in which they occur.

For humanitarians

- Humanitarian aid has always been perceived as partisan in South Sudan. Given the massive funding cuts currently underway in the sector, such feelings of partisanship are likely to intensify as NGOs must become even more selective in the communities they support.
- The SPLM/A-IO’s establishment of parallel administrative structures across South Sudan raises the prospect of double-taxation regimes and the need for humanitarians to seek two sets of permissions for their activities.

For the diplomatic community

- The white armies are not an ancestral remnant of previous forms of social organization. South Sudan is not moving towards a state that serves its people and holds a monopoly of violence. It is rather state violence that has led to the increasing power of the white armies and their popular legitimacy. For the international community to reckon with the reality of the white armies means coming to terms with the absolute failure of the state-building project in South Sudan.
- For the international community to actually address the situation in South Sudan would mean leaving Juba, and talking to actors with real popular legitimacy—such as the white armies—on their own terms.
- The conflict in South Sudan cannot be adequately understood as a conflict between the SPLM and the SPLM-IO. A blindness to the plurality of actors currently fighting blunts the diplomatic community’s understanding of the situation in the country and blocks it from thinking rigorously about how to move towards the flourishing South Sudan it claims it wishes to help bring about. ●

Acronyms and abbreviations

CDF Chief of Defence Forces
GPAA Greater Pibor Administrative Area
GRSS Government of the Republic of South Sudan
IDP Internally displaced person
IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
NAS National Salvation Front
NGO Non-governmental organization
NUF Necessary Unified Forces
PoC Protection of Civilians (site)
R-ARCSS Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RSF Rapid Support Forces
SAF Sudanese Armed Forces
SPLA Sudan People’s Liberation Army
SPLA-IO Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition
SPLA-N Sudan People’s Liberation Army-North
SPLA-Nasir Sudan People’s Liberation Army-Nasir
SPLM Sudan People’s Liberation Movement
SPLM/A Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition
SPLM-IO Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SSDF South Sudan Defence Forces
SSPDF South Sudan People’s Defence Forces
UNMISS United Nations Mission in South Sudan

Endnotes

- 1 Fieldwork for this paper took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Kampala, Uganda; and Nairobi, Kenya; as well as in Central Equatoria, Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Warrap states, South Sudan, from January to October 2025. Many of the names of the people interviewed for this paper have been withheld for security reasons.
- 2 When this Briefing Paper uses ‘white army fighters’, or ‘white army fighter’, it is referring to a fighter or fighters that are part of one of the Nuer white armies.
- 3 Per the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) in July 2025, Ayod county was likely in IPC 4—an emergency level of food insecurity (IPC, 2025).
- 4 In all the areas of Ayod under SPLM/A-IO control that the author visited in July 2025, there was only one local NGO present.

- 5 In 2025, 57,000 people were displaced by flooding in Ayod county (UNOCHA, 2025).
- 6 Author interview in Ayod, July 2025, name withheld.
- 7 *Mut* literally means spear in Nuer.
- 8 South Sudanese states and counties will be indicated at first mention of a given state or county. This Briefing Paper will then use the state’s or county’s proper name.
- 9 Another Gawaar Nuer prophet, Tut Jock, raided Murle areas in January 2025 and was proposed by white army fighters as a possible replacement for Makuach Tut.
- 10 Author telephone interviews with sources in Ayod, September 2025.
- 11 Author audiences with Makuach Tut in Ayod, July 2025.
- 12 South Sudan is divided into ten states (and two administrative areas). Each of those states is divided into counties, which are further divided into payams, and payams, into bomas.
- 13 Author interviews in Malakal, Upper Nile, September to October 2025. See Young (2016) and HRW (2014b) for the 2014 assault on Malakal.
- 14 Author interview with Dual Chuol in Thuok Riekni, July 2025.
- 15 See Craze (2023a) for an account of the prior Tut campaign on the west bank of the White Nile.
- 16 Author interviews with SPLM/A-IO officials in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Nairobi, Kenya, July to October 2025.
- 17 Based on the author’s interview with a senior military official in Juba, in October 2025, this did not seem credible—the SSPDF did not give credence to Makuach Tut’s ambitions to cross the river in the first place.
- 18 Author interviews with Makuach Tut in Ayod county, July 2025.
- 19 For a critique of this binary opposition, see Craze (2022b, pp. 12–16).
- 20 Author interviews with Makuach Tut in Ayod, July 2025.
- 21 See Pendle (2015) and Craze (2022b).
- 22 The Eastern Nuer, who are found east of the White Nile River, include the Gawaar, who subdivide into the Raath and Bar sections; the Lou Nuer, who are overwhelmingly the largest Nuer section and whose main subdivision is between the Gon and Mor; the Eastern Jikany, including the Gaajok, Gaguang, and Gaajak; and the smaller Lak and Thiang sections along the Bahr el Zeraf. On the ground, the theoretical model outlined here becomes more complex due to contingent political developments. The general Nuer mobilization that followed the massacres in Juba in December 2013 indicates the relevance of this model, even if some groups, such as the Bul Nuer, largely decided to side with the government (Pendle, 2020b).
- 23 This is a summary description of youth mobilization among the Nuer. See Hutchinson’s (1996).
- 24 Author interviews in Addis Ababa, August 2025.
- 25 To some degree, ‘black armies’—the name given to formal armies in Nuer—are also dependent on local communities. During the second Sudanese civil war, both the

- Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Nuer rebel forces used customary authorities to organize supplies from local communities. These flows could be coercive or voluntaristic, depending on the place in question.
- 26 'Burnam' is an Anuak word. It also refers to the leaders of the white armies.
- 27 See Craze (2022b) for an exploration of these dynamics in relation to the cattle-guards of Warrap state.
- 28 The best account of these mobilizations is in Jok and Hutchinson (1999).
- 29 At the outset of the second Sudanese civil war, John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army faction from Torit (SPLA-Torit) had wiped out the largely separatist Nuer Anyanya II forces.
- 30 Author interviews with Simon Gatwich Dual in Khartoum, Sudan, October 2021.
- 31 They were accompanied by fighters from the Gawaar Nuer, Jikany Nuer, and Dinka from Duk Padiet.
- 32 See Johnson (1994).
- 33 Author interviews in Akobo in 2012 and 2019, and 2025. Maar is a Nuer spirit usually associated with conflict.
- 34 Such a position has been articulated to the author by Nuer rebel commanders in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Khartoum, Sudan; and Upper Nile, South Sudan, between 2014 and 2025.
- 35 This is not to downplay the extreme violence employed by the white armies in their conquests of South Sudan's cities (HRW, 2014b). It rather indicates that such violence is structured by an encounter with an alleged enemy, rather than being an essential characteristic of the white armies.
- 36 Author interviews with white army fighters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 2025, and conversations with Gathoth Gatkuoth in Juba, in 2023.
- 37 When this Briefing Paper uses 'white army fighters', it is referring to fighters that are part of one of the Nuer white armies.
- 38 Author interviews with white army fighters in Akobo, October 2019.
- 39 Author interviews in Akobo and Malakal, 2019 to 2023.
- 40 For two case studies, see Craze (2022a; 2022b).
- 41 Author interviews in Ayod, July 2025.
- 42 Ayod and Nasir towns will be referenced as towns to avoid confusing these locations with the two counties to which they belong.
- 43 The SPLA was renamed the SSPDF in October 2018. This paper will refer to the SPLA in reference to events that occurred before the renaming, and to the SSPDF for events that occurred after it.
- 44 Author interviews in Addis Ababa, August 2025, and telephone interviews with residents of Nasir, April–July 2025.
- 45 Author interview with a high-ranking army official, name withheld, in Juba, September 2025.
- 46 Author interviews with military officers in Juba, September–October 2025.
- 47 Author interview in Addis Ababa, August 2025. See Falzetta (2025b).
- 48 Author interviews with SSPDF officials in Juba, September 2025, and interviews with Agwelek members, location withheld, July 2025.
- 49 Author telephone interviews with white army fighters, March–July 2025, and interviews in Addis Ababa, August 2025.
- 50 Author interviews with white army fighters in Ethiopia, and Jonglei and Upper Nile, July–October 2025.
- 51 Author conversations with Pal Mai and Yiey Dak in Addis Ababa, August 2025.
- 52 Author interviews with UNMISS personnel in person and by phone, with names and locations withheld, March–October 2025.
- 53 Author telephone and in-person interviews, with locations and names withheld, March–October 2025.
- 54 Author in-person and telephone conversations with UNMISS personnel, white army members, and SPLM/A-IO commanders and politicians, March–October 2025.
- 55 Koang Thou is a Dinka from Tonj, South Sudan, who was also involved in the capture of Nasir town. He was given the position of SSPDF assistant chief for operations in recognition of his achievements in Nasir and Ulang. Ulang town was also recaptured from the white armies on 17 April. Murle soldiers deserted from Nasir town in May 2025 and made their way back to the GPAA through SPLM/A-IO-controlled areas.
- 56 Author interviews with participating mercenaries, names withheld, Kampala, November 2025.
- 57 Author interviews with opposition leaders in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, June–October 2025.
- 58 Author interviews with Sudanese intelligence officers in Juba, and withheld locations, July–October 2025. See Craze (2025d; 2025e).
- 59 Author interviews with diplomats in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, June–October 2025.
- 60 Author interview with an opposition leader in Nairobi, October 2025.
- 61 Author interview with an opposition leader in Nairobi, October 2025.
- 62 Author interview with an SPLA-IO officer in Addis Ababa, August 2025.
- 63 Author telephone interviews with white army fighters, March–October 2025.
- 64 The SPLM/A-IO has attempted to absorb some of these figures into the mainline opposition, but negotiations have run aground over the elevated ranks demanded by rebel commanders. Author interview with a Nuer opposition figure, location withheld, August 2025.
- 65 Author interviews with Samuel Mut Gai and others in Addis Ababa, August 2025, and via an encrypted messaging application, March–October 2025.
- 66 The paragraph above is distilled from interviews in Addis Ababa, Jonglei, and Upper Nile states, July–October 2025.
- 67 Author interviews with government officials in Juba, July 2025.
- 68 Author observations while moving with the white armies in Jonglei state, July 2025.
- 69 James Koang Chuol was dismissed on 3 October and replaced by Jacob Dollar Ruot. Government sources indicate that James Koang Chuol was removed at the instigation of the former governor of Upper Nile state, Simon Kun Puoc, who was recently appointed as the third deputy chairperson of the SPLM, and who has become a major Nuer power-broker. Dollar Ruot comes from the same Nasir county subsection as Puoc and is thought more amenable to his instruction.
- 70 The situation in Ulang is better than in Nasir, and UN agencies have been able to distribute aid in most SPLM/A-IO-held areas.
- 71 'Chamdor Kiir' roughly translates to 'eat the land of Kiir'.
- 72 Author interview with James Chuol Jiek in Juba, July 2025.
- 73 Author interviews with SPLM/A-IO members in Ayod, July 2025.
- 74 Author discussions with residents of Ayod, 3–31 July 2025.
- 75 Author interview in Ayod, July 2025.
- 76 See HRW (2014a) and AU (2014).
- 77 Author interviews with white army fighters in Ayod, July 2025.
- 78 Author interview with Makuach Tut's personal secretary, Ayod, July 2025.
- 79 Interviews with white army fighters in Thuok Riekni, July 2025.
- 80 Author interviews in Kuajok, Warrap state, September 2025.
- 81 Author interviews with IDPs from the settlements of Ayod, Diel, and New Fangak. Ayod, July 2025.
- 82 Author telephone interview with an Agwelek commander, location withheld, September 2025. See also UNOCHA (2025).
- 83 Such looting is not exclusive to government forces. In early September 2025, Makuach Tut's forces also looted humanitarian supplies in Mogok.
- 84 Author conversations in the Malakal PoC site and its environs, September to October 2025.
- 85 Author interview with Nhial Isaac, location withheld, October 2025.
- 86 Author interview with Nhial Isaac, location withheld, October 2025.
- 87 Phow was the SPLM-IO state constituted by Ayod, Fangak, and Pigi counties.
- 88 Gatwich Dual's position, like that of Isaac, is typical of the desperation that many rebels feel about their unpalatable options. Gatwich Dual has an advanced team in Juba, South Sudan, awaiting his integration into the SSPDF, as per his agreement with the National Security Service, signed in January 2025. He knows this integration is unlikely to occur, and that the agreement was a way of neutralizing his threat prior to Kiir's regime making its move against Machar. Some of his forces are fighting alongside the Agwelek against the white armies in New Fangak. Other parts of his forces are fighting with the white armies in Nasir county against the Agwelek, and are actively recruiting fighters. As Isaac stated, 'You need to have a plan A, a plan B, and a plan C, and you need to do them all at once.'
- 89 Greater Akobo comprises Akobo and Akobo West (Walgak), as well as the counties of Nyirol and Uror. Up until the death of the paramount chief, Gatluak Thou Kuony, there was only one para-

- mount chief for the area. There are now four, which has led to more contestations in Lou Nuer politics.
- 90 A *cieng* is a Nuer word that corresponds roughly to sectional divisions between segmentary parts of the Nuer people. For a fuller discussion of *cieng*, and its ambiguous relationship to kin- and place-based determinants of identity, see Hutchinson (1996).
- 91 Author interviews with white army fighters in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states, 2014–2025; Addis Ababa, August 2025.

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About the HSBA project

The **Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan** is a multiyear project administered by the Small Arms Survey since 2006. It was developed in cooperation with the Canadian government, the United Nations Mission in Sudan, the United Nations Development Programme, and a wide array of international and Sudanese partners. Through the active generation and dissemination of timely, empirical research, the project supports violence reduction initiatives, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes and incentive schemes for civilian arms collection, as well as security sector reform and arms control interventions across Sudan and South Sudan. The HSBA also offers policy-relevant advice on the political and economic drivers of conflict and insecurity. Selected publications are available in Arabic and French at: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

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The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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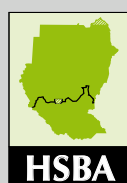
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