

MAAPSS UPDATE

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SPLA-IO Split

What's new in the SPLA-IO?

- On 3 August 2021, [Simon Gatwich Dual](#), the Chief of General Staff of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO), along with [Thomas Mabor Dhuo](#), the commander of [SPLA-IO Sector III](#), and [Johnson Olonyi](#), the commander of [SPLA-IO Sector I](#), issued the [Kitgwang Declaration](#), dismissing [Riek Machar](#) as the chairman of the SPLA-IO. Machar quickly condemned the announcement and declared that Gatwich did not have the power to remove him as chairman. This stand-off effectively splits the SPLA-IO into two factions: [SPLA-IO \[RM\]](#), and the splinter group, [SPLA-IO \[Kitgwang\]](#).
- Armed clashes broke out between the two factions on 7 August in Megenis, on the South Sudan-Sudan border, but the situation has since calmed. In Upper Nile state, where the majority of the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] is based, the two sides peacefully disaggregated and moved to separate camps on the west bank of the White Nile.
- The majority of the SPLA-IO forces remain with Machar and have taken on a wait-and-see approach to the split. Some commanders, exasperated by the fracture, have opted out of the SPLA-IO altogether and joined the government's [South Sudan People's Defence Forces \(SSPDF\)](#).
- While the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] is almost entirely comprised of Shilluk and Nuer soldiers, the addition of [Henry Odwar](#), a prominent Equatorian politician has

given a boost to the splinter movement's political wing.

Why does it matter?

- The split represents a crisis *in* the political marketplace of South Sudanese politics. Neither Gatwich nor Olonyi were satisfied with what Machar had offered them since the signing of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). They rebelled in order to leverage their improved bargaining power, created by the rebellion, pursuant to re-joining the SPLA-IO with the promise of improved positions in the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) or in a newly unified South Sudanese army, which at present exists only on paper, due to the stalled security sector reform (SSR) process.
- The split also represents a crisis *of* the political marketplace of South Sudanese politics. While few SPLA-IO commanders have joined the splinter group, Gatwich maintains broad support amongst the opposition movement's ground troops, particularly amongst his own Lou Nuer constituency, who feel they've been marginalized under Machar's leadership and have not seen tangible benefits from the R-ARCSS process.
- Machar has retained the loyalty of the majority of the SPLA-IO commanders, but the split has weakened him. Gatwich and Olonyi command what were the SPLA-IO's most important military divisions. Without them, Machar has little military strength, leaving him ever more dependent on the largesse and

legitimacy given to him by President [Salva Kiir](#).

- The split further undermines an already faltering R-ARCSS process. In addition to [Thomas Cirillo’s National Salvation Front \(NAS\)](#), the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] represents another prominent military group uncommitted to the agreement, raising questions of the adequacy of the R-ARCSS framework.
- The SPLA-IO in Unity state remains loyal to Machar, but the rank-and-file there are also disgruntled with the peace process. The spectre raised by this is of a return to an earlier scenario during the second Sudanese civil war, and an intra-Nuer ‘civil war’ between the Lou Nuer and the Nuer sections loyal to Machar. However, opposition members interviewed for this Update are cognisant that such a fracture in the opposition would play into the government’s hands. At present, intra-Nuer conflict seems a remote possibility.
- In many respects, the SPLA-IO-split is in continuity with the divisions created by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, which brought an end to the second Sudanese civil war. None of the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] commanders were in the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), meaning none were part of the post-CPA political compact that benefitted from donor funds and oil revenues over the next decade. Amid devastating seasonal floods, a stalled SSR process, escalating economic collapse, and continuing violence, Gatwich’s message of combatting nepotism and corruption in Juba, while addressing the failure of the peace agreement to bring positive developments to the people of South Sudan, has fallen on receptive ears.

What now?

- Thus far, the split does not seem like it will benefit Gatwich and the other defectors. Few SPLA-IO commanders have joined the splinter group, and there have been no overt moves by neighbouring states or the international diplomatic community to recognize the splinter group or petition for its formal inclusion within the R-ARCSS. While Kiir’s government initially tried to persuade Gatwich to join the SSPDF, the government has changed course, and now sees a separate Kitgwang faction as better serving its interests.
- Previous splits in the SPLA-IO do not set an encouraging precedent. The previous major fracture in the SPLA-IO occurred in 2015, when three commanders—[Peter Gadet](#), [Gabriel Tanginye](#), and [Gathoth Gatkuoth](#)—signed a letter denouncing Machar’s leadership of the SPLA-IO. Gatwich was initially a part of this group but opted not to sign the letter. Denied international recognition, and without a source of arms, Gadet died in Khartoum, marginal to South Sudanese politics, while Tanginye, desperate for support, improbably joined [Lam Akol](#)’s forces, only to be hunted down and killed by Olonyi’s men. The only commander of the three to better his post-defection position was Gathoth Gatkuoth, now comfortably ensconced on the side of Kiir’s regime. The fate of this prior split is not particularly encouraging for the three who broke ranks from Machar in 2021. For Gatwich, Olonyi, and Dhuo, marginality or collaboration with the government are unpalatable outcomes.
- A best-case scenario for the new splinter faction is that the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), currently chaired by Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla

Hamdok, sees the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] as a viable threat to the R-ARCSS, and insists that they are absorbed into the new South Sudanese army, thus ensuring its incorporation in the R-ARCSS framework. Since the Kitgwang Declaration, Kiir has already changed the apportioned ratio of SSPDF to SPLA-IO commanders and fighters in the unified force, from 50-50 to 60-40. Machar, of course, would resist formal recognition of the Kitgwang faction, but Kiir, insofar that this outcome would weaken Machar, may opt to push for this. Machar's 40 per cent may yet have to be subdivided with Gatwich.

Main Developments

Background to the split

Tensions between Gatwich and Machar are longstanding. In 2015, a cleavage emerged between the political and military leadership of the SPLA-IO, just prior to the signing of the original ARCSS agreement, over the way the war was being conducted. The military leadership held that Machar was self-interested, focused on a future political settlement with the government, and was uninterested in the fate of the Nuer people. This disagreement compelled Gatwich to write a letter to then-president of Sudan, Omar Bashir, in June 2015, requesting that military supplies bypass [Taban Deng Gai](#), then a member of Machar's inner circle, and go directly to SPLA-IO field commanders. While Gatwich was not involved in the SPLA-IO fracture that occurred later that year, tensions with Machar remained unaddressed.

In May 2021, Gatwich dismissed the head of military intelligence, [Dhiling Keak Chuol](#), a Machar appointee and relative. Machar immediately countermanded the move, and in an effort to squash growing resistance to his leadership, attempted to remove Gatwich from his position as chief

of general staff by having him appointed as a presidential peace advisor. Gatwich refused, starkly aware that such an appointment would neutralize him politically and militarily, and distance him from his forces.

Johnson Olonyi also has reasons to feel aggrieved with Machar. Long promised the governorship of Upper Nile, a red line for the Padang Dinka political elite in the state, Olonyi was isolated by the appointment of [Budhok Ayang Kur](#) as governor. The marginality of Olonyi's position was reinforced by [subsequent developments](#), which showed that Budhok had effectively been side-lined by his Padang Dinka deputy governor, [James Tor Monybun](#), who currently holds power in Upper Nile.

The Kitgwang Declaration describes the failure of the peace process, the disintegration of security in South Sudan, and warns of the emergence of private armies that serve individual political interests. It accuses Machar of poor leadership and making self-interested, nepotistic appointments to the benefit of the SPLA-IO elite in Juba at the expense of addressing the broader crisis in South Sudan. Machar has, the declaration holds, forsaken the cause for which the SPLA-IO fought, and abandoned the forces that made possible his return to Juba.

The initial reaction in Greater Upper Nile

In Upper Nile, there were initially clashes between the SPLA-IO [RM] and the SPLA-IO [Kitgwang] at Megenis, where the bulk of Gatwich's forces are based. Megenis is an important trading town on the Sudan-South Sudan border, which serves as a transfer point for supplies of *materiel* from Sudan to South Sudanese forces. Reportedly, the Sudanese army also intervened in initial clashes on the border, and the two SPLA-IO forces have subsequently disengaged. In Kodok, on

the west bank of the White Nile in Upper Nile state, Olonyi's Shilluk forces withdrew to Kalgany. Despite rumours that a combined SPLA-IO [RM] and SSPDF force was mobilizing in Wadakona to push Olonyi from Atar, no such attack was forthcoming, though rumours continue to circulate: most recently of Machar moving barges towards Tonga on 6 September, in preparation for an assault on Gatwich's positions on the west bank of the White Nile. Such a military assault, if forthcoming, would represent an unlikely and uncharacteristic gamble by Machar, who could only be weakened by failure, and would struggle to dislodge embedded Agwelek positions without SSPDF assistance.

Indeed, since the clashes in Megenis in early August, leaders from both IO sides have largely made conciliatory statements. Both organizations fear that the split will only benefit the government. Among the Nuer and Shilluk rank-and-file in the SPLA-IO, there is a fear that the split will enable further 'Dinka domination.' Most SPLA-IO commanders, keen not to fracture the opposition unnecessarily, have opted to wait and see. Machar, eager to avoid a domino effect of defections to Gatwich's side, acted quickly in response to the initial Kitgwang Declaration. In Greater Akobo, Machar promoted [Wal Nyak Hoth](#), formerly Thomas Mabor Dhuo's deputy, as the new commander of Sector III, and promoted [James Otong Liah](#), now [Division 8](#) commander in Jonglei.

Following his promotion, Hoth immediately issued a letter announcing that he would remain with the mainline SPLA-IO. He was formerly with the SPLA, before the South Sudanese civil war, and served as a brigade commander in Division One in Renk. Liah, the division commander in Jonglei's Akobo, Nyirol and Uror counties, is also a former SPLA

soldier. Together, they should ensure Machar has a solid command of Sector III.

However, these appointments do not diminish Gatwich's popularity in the Nuer areas of Jonglei, particularly amongst the Lou Nuer. He is, for the Lou Nuer, the embodiment of their successful struggle to maintain control of Nuer territory, including Akobo town and the area along the Ethiopian border. For Nuer communities in Jonglei, the R-ARCSS represents more of an equitable compromise than the negotiated surrender it is perceived to be in Unity state. These varied perceptions of the R-ARCSS shape how different groups see the stalled SSR process. For the Lou Nuer, the peace agreement requires the full implementation of the security arrangements, and this is why Gatwich's message is popular in Greater Akobo.

Reportedly, entire platoons in Akobo, Lankien, Pieri, and Pulturuk, are on the verge of defecting from Machar's side to the splinter group. For now, the SPLA-IO [RM] military leadership has retained these troops, but should Gatwich commence a recruitment campaign in Jonglei, mass defections from the mainline SPLA-IO could result.

The leadership of the [Lou Nuer White Army](#) has remained quiet over the split, but maintains a cordial relationship with Gatwich, who successfully mobilized the White Army in the 1990s. The only leader openly announcing his support for Gatwich is [Tutnyang Gatkaal](#), the head of the White Army in Pieri, Uror county. However, in recent years, the White Army has been relatively deaf to SPLA-IO entreaties. Its focus remains on a communitarian, rather than a national, agenda, and its recent tactical alliance with the Bor Dinka against the Murle in 2020, which resulted in military victories and livestock, means that it will be hesitant to join a campaign that could

lead to combat with the SSPDF and its new Bor Dinka allies. However, if a broader conflagration between the two factions of the SPLA-IO takes place, it seems likely that the Lou Nuer White Army, if it were to participate, would back Gatwich.

The political divide

The absence of political leadership doomed the 2015 SPLA-IO splinter-group. It is a worrying precedent. Gatwich is not a politician, doesn't speak English, and is ill at ease in Juba. Olonyi is similar to Gatwich in many respects, and he has often relied on supplementary figures to play the role of diplomat and politician. Thus, the defection of the veteran Lango politician Henry Odwar from Machar's camp to the Kitgwang faction is a boon for Gatwich and Olonyi.

Henry Odwar was the deputy chairman of the SPLA-IO and the minister of mining in the R-TGoNU. He was the highest ranking Equatorian in the organization and one of its most popular politicians. Machar nominated him to lead one of the most important ministries under SPLM-IO control because of his trust in Odwar, who also served as Machar's emissary while under house arrest in South Africa. His defection surprised Machar, apparently unaware that Odwar was in talks with Gatwich in Khartoum. On 24 August, Odwar was named the leader of the Political Bureau of the Kitgwang faction, effectively the leader of the political wing of the new movement.

Simon Gatwich hoped Odwar's defection would prompt other politicians to follow suit, but almost no other high-ranking politician has done so. One reason might be that with the top-spot now occupied, only lesser positions remain open in the new faction. SPLA-IO politicians, like the military commanders, are waiting to see how the split develops before committing

to any change of allegiance. Leaving the SPLA-IO means leaving lucrative positions in government, and all such politicians are replaceable. Reportedly, [Oyet Nathaniel Pierino](#), a young and ambitious Acholi politician and former academic, is eyeing to replace Odwar in the ministry of mining, as well as becoming the deputy chairman of the SPLA-IO. Pierino currently serves as the deputy speaker of the reconstituted national assembly, and is co-chairman of the National Constitutional Amendment Committee.

It might seem surprising for a high-ranking Equatorian politician to join a largely Shilluk and Nuer movement. However, there are several possible motivations for Odwar's defection:

- Some international observers claim that Odwar was frustrated as national minister of mining. Both government and SPLA-IO appointed governors were ignoring him and issuing lucrative mining concessions without the involvement of his ministry. Odwar also had a tense relationship with Kiir-appointed Eastern Equatorian governor [Louis Lobong](#), and felt Machar was unsupportive.
- Odwar's home county of Ikotos in Eastern Equatoria has experienced an intensification of fighting and a proliferation of armed groups and criminality since the signing of the R-ARCSS. Competing groups of SPLA-IO belonging to different divisions, [NSS](#), [Military Intelligence](#), [Tiger Division](#), and [SSPDF Ground Forces](#) are all active in the county, and small NAS units also recruit in Ikotos. Gatwich's message about the costs of failed SSR resonates with Odwar's own experiences, and those of his constituents.
- Several sources have suggested that Odwar has very large hotel bills and personal loans accumulated during the

last three years. The [National Pre-Transitional Committee](#), under the iron fist of presidential advisor [Tut Kew Gatluak](#), has declined to pick up the tab, leaving Odwar in a rather difficult financial situation. From this perspective, Khartoum offers more commodious confines.

Machar's support amongst the Equatorial political elite has never been particularly solid. They have always questioned the degree to which he is committed to supporting Equatorial political goals, and have consistently remained open to other offers. In 2016, [Alfred Ladu Gore](#), a Bari politician who served as Riek Machar's deputy and as a minister of the interior, joined Taban Deng Gai and remained in Juba in July 2016 following Machar's flight from the capital. Odwar's initial appointment followed Gore's defection.

Another prominent politician to join the Kitgwang faction is [Mabior Garang](#), the son of former SPLA leader John Garang, and current Vice-President [Rebecca Garang](#). He served as the communications director for Machar. His decision to join the SPLA-IO in December 2013 shocked his own Twic Dinka constituency. Alongside [Dau Aturjong](#), Mabior was once the most prominent Dinka member of the SPLA-IO. Following the signing of the R-ARCSS, he became deputy minister of interior in the transitional government, but he resigned in June 2020, citing the stalled implementation of the peace deal. Mabior remains, however, something of an outlier, and was not particularly significant within the SPLA-IO leadership. For the bulk of the political class of the SPLA-IO, the R-ARCSS enables them to remain in Juba, and eke out whatever funds they can from the peace process. Joining the Kitgwang faction would ensure the loss of their lucrative positions and a long walk to marginalization.

Kiir's reaction and regional dynamics

Initially, Kiir's regime made overtures to the Kitgwang faction. Gatwich joining the SSPDF would have made for a humiliating development for Machar, and discredited his claim that the SPLA-IO constitutes a substantive opposition in South Sudan. However, such a move is a non-starter for Gatwich.

Gatwich staked the Kitgwang Declaration on a critique of Machar's self-interested abandonment of the Nuer people for a seat in government. Joining the government forces would rob Gatwich of the credibility and popularity that he currently has among his supporters. For Olonyi, who sided with the government once before, the situation is more complicated, but he would need to be offered an adequate position by Kiir's regime, and anything short of the governorship of Upper Nile would render his defection a personal defeat.

The government's position is that a splintered SPLA-IO is a weakened SPLA-IO; Machar is now even less able to resist the dominance of the government in Juba. While the SPLA-IO is formally part of the government, its ministers complain that all the substantive decisions about money and power are made behind closed doors by Kiir's regime. The acute loss of military power that the split represents for Machar will only intensify these dynamics.

The split has also led to further defections from the SPLA-IO to the government, following earlier defections of commanders such as [James Koang](#), who abandoned the opposition for the SSPDF in March 2020 following the formation of the R-TGoNU. The most high-profile of these more recent defections, the former Upper Nile sector commander and erstwhile rival of [James Ochan Puot](#), [James Khor Chol](#), decided to reunite with Puot, his former SPLA-IO colleague, this

time on the government's side. Chol, echoing Gatwich's critique of Machar, declared that the opposition had lost its vision, but extended that critique to include Gatwich.

Much will depend, once again, on the actions of the broader region. In Sudan, the SPLA-IO split is of relatively minor significance to ongoing struggles for control of the Sudanese state. Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagolo and his Rapid Support Forces (RSF) remain supportive of Machar, while Gatwich continues longstanding relations with members of the Sudan Armed Forces' (SAF) Military Intelligence (MI) that stretch back to his time in the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF). The MI has continued to back Gatwich, partly out of loyalty, and partly due to its embittered relationship with Hemedti. At present, Gatwich and Olonyi are able to remain in Khartoum, and will receive some support from MI – 'enough to keep them alive,' one source told MAAPSS, but not enough to mount a sustained military challenge in South Sudan. Nevertheless, with negotiations over Abyei again underway, and questions of the South Sudan-Sudan border still up in the air, it is beneficial to the SAF to have at least one potential South Sudanese spoiler.

For the Kitgwang faction to become anything more than spoilers will depend on the position of IGAD. If the regional organization, under Hamdok's chairmanship, pushes for the Kitgwang faction's inclusion in the R-ARCSS architecture, the splinter group could bargain for a share of the positions and salaries apportioned to the SPLA-IO. This might suit Kiir, for it would result in a weakened opposition. If he were presented such an option by the region, or so sources inform MAAPSS, he might be in favour of it. However, there is little to suggest that IGAD would do so, or that the international diplomatic community

would support such a measure. All have banked on the success of the R-ARCSS. Following years of failed agreements, the diplomatic community is risk-averse, and more likely to support the continuance of the status quo, with the mainline SPLA-IO continuing to be effectively marginalized in Juba, while formally forming part of the government. In this situation, barring a serious military campaign by the Kitgwang faction, spoiler status and marginalization in Khartoum looms large.

Western Bahr el Ghazal

Side-lined politicians

Disappointed and marginalised politicians and commanders in Western Bahr el Ghazal are among the most likely in South Sudan to join the new movement. Those in positions of power are either benefiting from the R-ARCSS, or are looking forward to new roles in the Necessary Unified Forces of the South Sudanese army, if the SSR process ever goes ahead.

One such marginalized politician is [Tingo Peter Regbibo](#), who officially joined the Kitgwang faction in early September 2021. Back in 2014, Regbibo, as deputy speaker of the Western Bahr el Ghazal state assembly, went to Khartoum—at great personal risk—as [one of the leaders of the Fertit resistance](#), to take part in secret talks with Machar that led to a deal between the SPLA-IO and the Fertit. Since December 2016, following the collapse of the ARCSS, he has served as Secretary General of the SPLA-IO. He was the highest-ranking Fertit politician in the opposition, connecting the organizations political leadership with former Fertit Lions commanders ([Assab Khamis](#), [Abdallah Ujang](#), [Musa Dakumi](#)) who had joined Riek Machar.

Regbibo was confident that with the signing of the R-ARCSS and the allocation of gubernatorial positions, Machar would

nominate him to be the governor of Western Bahr el Ghazal. However, Machar chose the relatively unknown [Sarah Cleto](#), side-lining Regbibo, who was not given a national ministerial position, either. Indeed, the only SPLA-IO Fertit politician in the cabinet is the much younger [Peter Marcello](#), minister of energy and dams, and who is also Machar's son-in-law. Infuriated, Tingo Peter resigned in November 2020 and moved to Khartoum. Tingo might serve as a political bridge between the Kitgwang faction and Fertit opposition commanders who have remained loyal to Machar.

Fragile military structure

As the SPLA-IO [RM] military moved into cantonment throughout the country, and systematic defections—orchestrated by the government—further diminished the military power of the opposition, its forces in Western Bahr el Ghazal remained significant. Losing them would further debilitate the SPLA-IO. Machar, and his governor Sarah Cleto, have to rebuild the trust of Abdallah Ujang and Musa Dakumi, and resist Juba-driven policies of land-grabbing in Wau town, otherwise they risk the defection of the remaining Fertit opposition.

Abdallah Ujang is the most influential military commander in Western Bahr el Ghazal. However, he was side-lined within the SPLA-IO, mostly due to his unwillingness to disarm and send his troops to the Mapel training site. Until 2020, he was the [Division 6A](#) commander in Wau and organized the personal protection unit for Governor Cleto. Forces under his command occupy Bazia, south from Wau, controlling the road to Western Equatoria.

Gatwich's argument about the failure of security sector reform resonates with Ujang's experience. Ujang's main ideological goal is to protect Fertit

(Balanda) land and keep Wau town under the control of his political constituency. He is a vehement opponent of Juba's plan to relocate Wau county's capital from Wau town to Baggari, as this would open the possibility of further land grabs by government-aligned Dinka businessmen. As long as the SPLA-IO governor is able to withstand pressure from Juba, Ujang has no direct incentive to join Gatwich.

Ujang's ally and fellow Fertit commander, [Mussa Dakumi](#), holds a significant economic interest in the status quo. Dakumi is the [Division 6B](#) commander in Raja, a strategically important county that is entirely under the control of SPLA-IO. The county commissioner in Raja is [Salah Mameji](#). Unlike many of the county commissioners appointed by Machar, chosen on the basis of their proximity to the leadership, Mameji has genuine popularity in his constituency. He is also a former commander and an ally of Dakumi. Similarly to Ujang, Dakumi has refused to send most of his troops to training and has maintained his military autonomy in Raja. Dakumi also maintains lucrative trade relations with Darfur and Kafia Kingi, and is allegedly involved in the gold trade, supposedly exchange for a steady supply of weapons and ammunition from Hemedti. It is alleged that some of these guns not only reach Abdallah Ujang, but are also transferred to Balanda Fertit IO troops in Western Equatoria and possibly to NAS forces under the command of Thomas Cirillo.

Eastern Equatoria

Once a stronghold of Machar's movement, Eastern Equatoria, under the firm control of SPLM-IG governor Louis Lobong, has seen a disintegrating SPLA-IO, and fighting for future positions in the Necessary Unified Forces. The highest ranking Eastern Equatorian politician in the SPLM-IO, Henry Odwar, left Machar and joined Gatwich. The commander of

the Eastern Equatorial sector, Justin Akudo, is also on the verge of defecting to Gatwich, which will further destabilize SPLA-IO's position in the state.

The highest-ranking SPLA-IO military commander of Eastern Equatoria, [Sector IX](#) commander [Justin Akudo](#), served in the SAF during the second Sudanese civil war, and remained in Khartoum after the signing of the CPA in 2005. He returned to South Sudan only in 2017, when Gatwich needed a commander for Eastern Equatoria. In 2016, after [Machar fled Juba](#), the SPLA-IO left a contingent of experienced Nuer fighters in its wake, in order to organize the Equatorial rebellion. Akudo was to lead this effort.

He set up three divisions in Eastern Equatoria, a mostly Acholi and Ma'adi [Any-Nya Division](#) in Magwi county, an almost exclusively Toposa [Nadokor Division](#) in former Kapoeta state, and the [Tafeng Division](#) in Ikotos, Lafon, and Torit counties. Disagreement between Justin Akudo and [Patrick Ohiti Oswaldo](#), the Tafeng Division commander, arose over the implementation of the peace deal and the number of soldiers to be sent to training sites. Akudo felt that Machar was favouring Ohiti, and he returned to Khartoum a few months before the Kitgwang Declaration, though he remains Sector IX commander. He has not yet not come out publicly in support of Simon Gatwich, though sources close to him indicate that he supports the new movement.

Amongst IO troops in Eastern Equatoria, levels of morale vary. The forces of Patrick Ohiti in the Irube cantonment site, near Torit, frequently receive food and medication from Juba, directly from either Riek Machar's office, the ministry of defence (controlled by [Angelina Teny](#), the wife of Riek Machar), or the SPLM-IO deputy governor, [Mary Nadio](#). However, SPLA-IO divisions in Kapoeta and Magwi

rarely receive supplies and their morale is extremely low. Reportedly, soldiers of the Nadokor division, under the command of [Yusuf Peter](#), left their cantonment sites and moved to the mountains, likely in search of defensible bases if the need arises. In Magwi, soldiers of the Anya-Nya division, commanded by [Okeny Lam George](#), burned their cantonment site and integrated into the surrounding communities, waiting for a call to remobilize. After assessing his opportunities, the SPLA-IO [RM] head of administration of the Ashwa cantonment site of the Anya-Nya division, Brigadier General Solomon Peter Angelo defected to the SSPDF. He is the first Eastern Equatorial commander to leave Riek Machar and join the SSPDF since 2013.

While it is too early to say if the future defection of Justin Akudo might lead to the collapse of the SPLM-IO in Eastern Equatoria, there are worrying signs for Machar. Machar mobilized his deputy governor and commissioners (in Kapoeta East and Ikotos) to hold consultative meetings with local communities and local troops. During these meetings, high-level SPLA-IO politicians argued that infighting only serves the interest of President Kiir and they asked for patience from the troops until the graduation of forces.

Conclusion

The splintering of the SPLA-IO can only be understood in the broader context of the failure of the R-ARCSS to deliver a prosperous South Sudan. The peace process has only accentuated the tendencies of the South Sudanese civil war: an elite in Juba enriching itself from resource extraction and predation; a population increasingly displaced and immiserated, unable to rely on the state for security; a political system given legitimacy by broad international acceptance, but almost wholly without popular support on the ground. Critiques

of this system, such as that made by Gatwich, will fall on fertile earth.

As much as the Kitgwang Declaration is a critique of a failing political system, however, it is also an embodiment of that very system. A political process that rewards military actors with political power within an elite accommodation will always generate spoilers, who look to leverage their military might, and parlay guns in the bush into positions at the table. That Gatwich has made a populist critique of the system should not mean we forget that for many years, he formed an important part of it, and is seeking to do so again.

Whether or not the Kitgwang faction find a seat at the table, it is likely that they will increasingly represent a growing number of groups without loyalty to Machar, rendering his position increasingly tenuous. It is further likely that regardless of the fate of the Kitgwang faction's leadership, its rank and file will join a growing number of young men across the country who wait restlessly in cantonment sites, and remain disgruntled by a stalled SSR process in a country in widespread socio-economic collapse. None of these issues can be addressed by the R-ARCSS.

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