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UCDP Bulletin *Special*

Mapping Conflict in Sudan: Bashir and Beyond

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Introduction

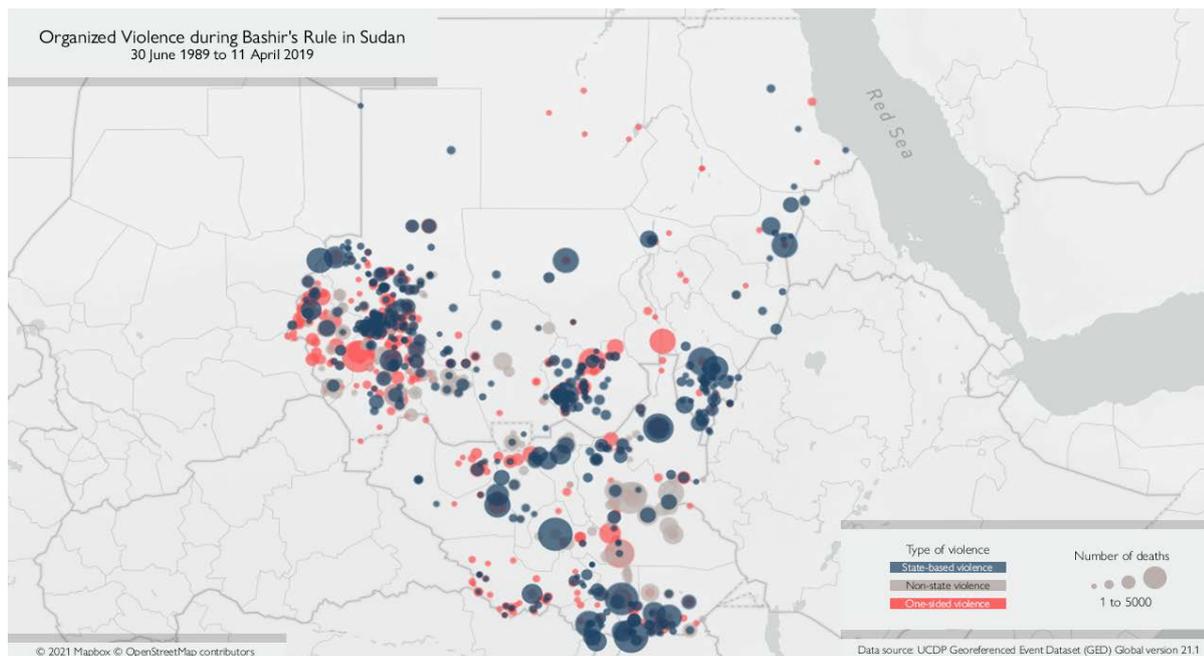
April 11th, 2021, marked two years since Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, was ousted after months of civil protests. Al-Bashir, who had been in power for almost 30 years, left a conflict-ridden country behind, having endured several intrastate wars and an economy in a devastating condition. The regime was notorious for its disastrous human rights record, repeatedly having armed militia groups who conducted widespread killings, including ethnic cleansing, which al-Bashir was indicted for by the ICC in 2009.¹

The long-running conflict in the south, eventually leading to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, and the disastrous conflict in Darfur starting in 2003, is the most well-known legacy of al-Bashir. However, communal conflicts and one-sided violence (the deliberate targeting of civilians) have also plagued the country since al-Bashir took power in a military coup in June 1989.

As Sudan has started a new chapter of its history, there are hopes that the country can leave its conflict-torn past behind. In this UCDP Bulletin Special, we will examine the trends of organized violence during al-Bashir, comparing it with recent developments in Sudan during the last two years.

¹ International Criminal Court (ICC), Al Bashir Case, accessed 210520, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/albashir>.

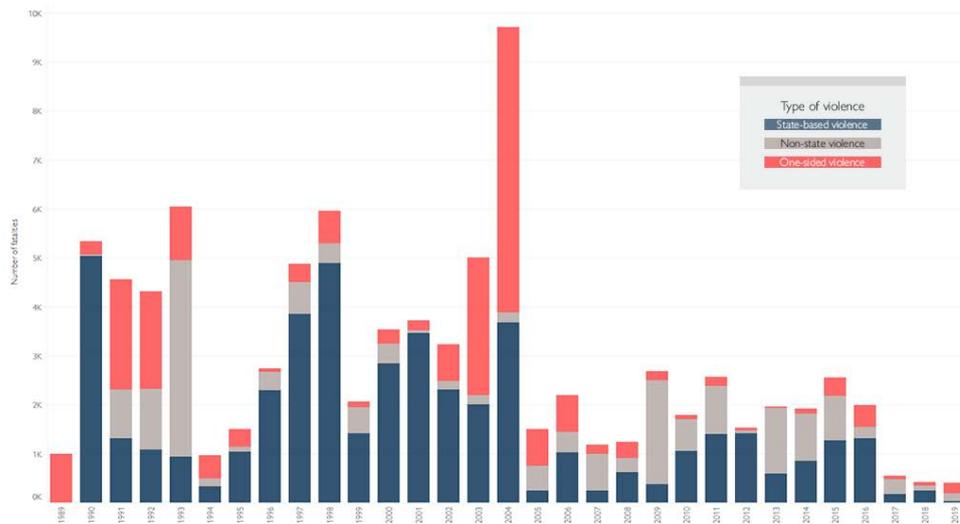
Organized violence during Bashir



When al-Bashir took power by mid-1989, the Sudanese government had been involved in a full-scale civil war with the SPLM/A (Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army) in the country's southern parts for several years. This state-based conflict continued to be the primary driver of organized violence in Sudan during the following decade. Fighting between rival factions of rebel groups in the south led to higher levels of non-state violence in the early 1990s. As both SPLM/A and SSDF (SPLM/A Nasir) targeted civilians based on ethnicity, fatalities in the one-sided category of violence increased during the same period.

The conflict in southern Sudan de-escalated in the early 2000s. Peace talks that started in the late 1990s led to a ceasefire in 2003 and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. As these peace talks were ongoing, conflict broke out in the marginalized Darfur region in the west in 2003, where two rebel groups, the SLM/A and JEM challenged the Sudanese government. Initially, the rebels were successful on the battlefield, such as an attack against the airport in el-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, where the rebels managed to destroy several military airplanes and helicopter gunships. To turn the tide on the battlefield, the government started to arm militia groups in the region, often referred to as Janjaweed. Together with these militia groups, the government carried out scorched earth tactics, which included killing civilians and burning villages, resulting in the displacement of millions of Darfurians.

Organized Violence during Bashir's Rule in Sudan
30 June 1989 to 11 April 2019



Data source: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 21.1

Fatality figures for Darfur are intensively debated in the scholarly community. The lack of accessibility to the region at the height of this conflict in 2003 and 2004 created great difficulties procuring reliable fatality numbers. Hence, the differences between UCDP's best and high estimates in the one-sided category are tangible for those years, varying between several thousand civilians killed and well into the tens of thousands.²

An increase in humanitarian support to the region, and negotiations between the parties supported by the international community, led to lower levels of organized violence by 2005. Nevertheless, fighting continued in Darfur for several years. As South Sudan gained its independence in 2011, fighting grounds in the 'new' southern parts of Sudan reopened, often referred to as the Two Areas. Remnants of the SPLM/A called SPLM/A-North, based in this area, joined forces with several rebel groups from Darfur against al-Bashir's regime and created an alliance named the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF).

² For an in-depth discussion and the basis used for the number of fatalities, please see the UCDP website, <https://ucdp.uu.se/additionalinfo/947/6>.

Conflicts between communities³ have been part of the conflict landscape of Sudan for a long time, and the dynamics of the relationships between different communal groups in the country have been interconnected with both the politics, economics, and conflicts in Sudan in multiple ways. As their dynamics have had an impact on both state-based and one-sided violence.⁴

The communal conflict in and around the disputed border area with South Sudan called Abyei (sometimes referred to as Sudan's Kashmir) has been highly politicized. The Ngok Dinka community making up most of the permanent residents in the area, has been allied to the SPLM/A, the governing party of South Sudan, since its independence. The Misseriya community, on the other hand, claims a historical right to migrate through the Abyei area with their cattle during the dry season and has been given support by the Sudanese government. In late May 2011, just over a month before South Sudan's independence, Sudan invaded the Abyei area; the Sudanese government clashed with the government of Southern Sudan (as the ruling administration in Juba was called at the time). The area remains contested, and clashes between Misseriya and Ngok Dinka have regularly taken place since 2011.

Throughout al-Bashir's time in power, Sudan was continuously recorded in UCDP's data as one of the ten countries with the most fatalities in organized violence. For the majority of al-Bashir's nearly 30 years in power, state-based violence was responsible for the most fatalities in organized violence in the country. However, as cautious peace talks between the Sudanese government and SRF were initiated, state-based violence in Sudan decreased in 2016.

“The people's choice is revolution”⁵

Drastic changes took place in Sudan in 2019. Protests that started on 19 December 2018 concerning the worsening economic situation in the country gained momentum in early 2019 and became increasingly political. The demonstrators demanded the resignation of al-Bashir's government. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese participated in the demonstrations, and the government responded with a violent crackdown. On 11 April 2019, the military intervened and removed al-Bashir from power.

3 Communal conflicts are often defined as conflicts between non-formally organized non-state groups, organized along with a shared collective identification, see Brosché J. (2019).

4 Brosché J. (2019) Ethno-communal Conflict in Sudan and South Sudan. In: Ratuva S. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0242-8_49-1.

5 Slogan chanted by protesters in Khartoum in February 2019, (Reuters, 20190216, Sudanese policeman dies from wounds after protesters stone vehicle)

A Transitional Military Council (TMC) took control initially. Still, after continued protests against the country's military rule, a Sovereignty Council (consisting of six civilians and five military representatives) ascended to power. Sudan's new draft constitution stipulates that the Sovereignty Council holds power until elections, scheduled for November 2022.

Lieutenant General al-Burhan is the current chairman of the Sovereignty Council. However, the deputy chairman, Mohamed Daglo (known as Hemeti), is largely seen as the most influential person in Sudan today. Hemeti, an infamous Janjaweed-leader during the civil war in Darfur, became leader of the government's new para-military force called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013, another organization notorious for atrocities against civilians. As the influence of Hemeti and the RSF increased over the years, the force became the de facto security force in Khartoum after al-Bashir's ousting.⁶

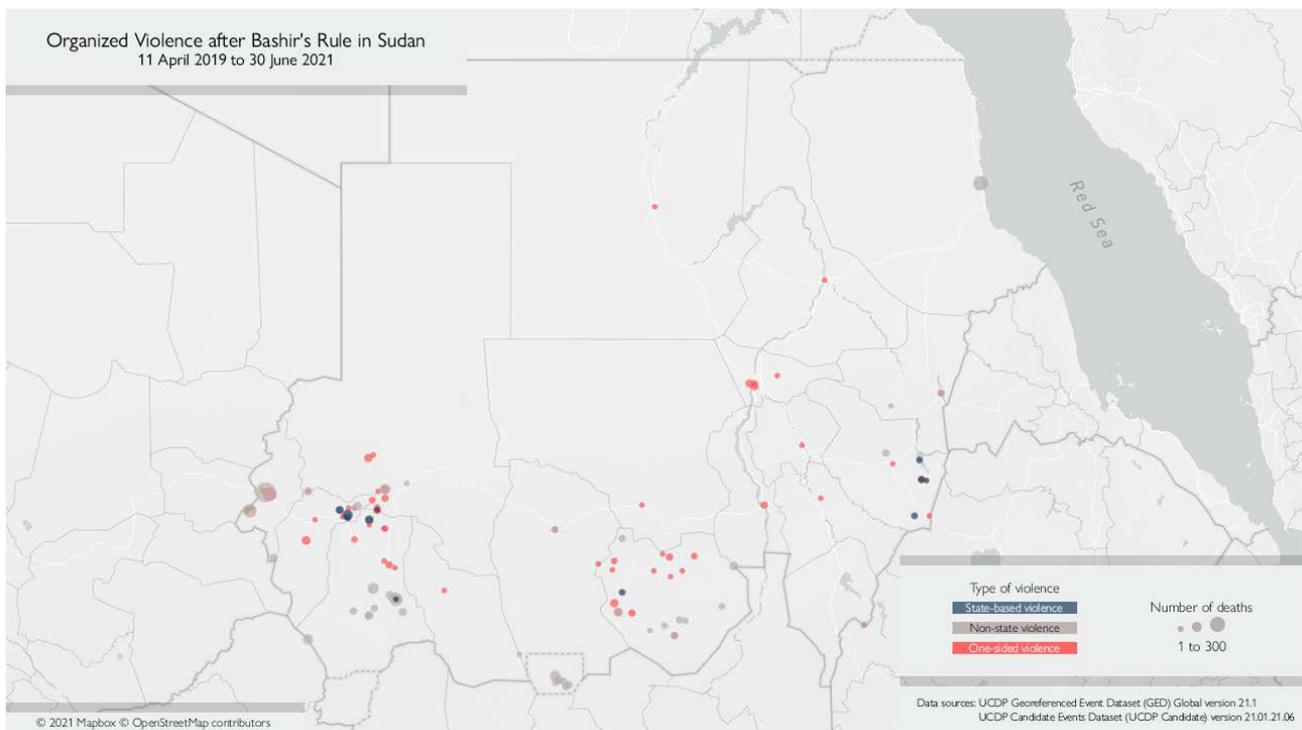
The historic political change in Sudan affected the armed conflicts in the country. The halting peace negotiations between the government and the SRF gained new momentum, and the parties signed several peace agreements containing political roadmaps and cessation of hostilities agreements. Although some rebel factions did not sign these agreements, UCDP did not register an active conflict over the government - for the first time since 1983 - in Sudan in 2019.

Beyond Bashir – two years with changing conflict trends

Two years have passed since al-Bashir was forced to leave power, and the character of organized violence in Sudan has changed. While state-based violence has significantly decreased, non-state violence has intensified.

The levels of state-based violence between the Sudanese government and SLM/A, the only group recorded fighting government forces at this time, did not reach the UCDP threshold of 25 battle-related deaths during 2019. Sporadic fighting in the Jebel Marra area of Darfur rendered less than 50 deaths in 2020, consequently leading to an active conflict being registered in Sudan once again. Comparing this to the earlier period where state-based violence was the main driver of organized violence for decades, the difference is indeed worth noting, despite the latter period after al-Bashir's ousting being considerably shorter.

⁶ Al Jazeera, 20190606, Who are Sudan's RSF and their commander Hemeti?
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/6/who-are-sudans-rsf-and-their-commander-hemeti>.



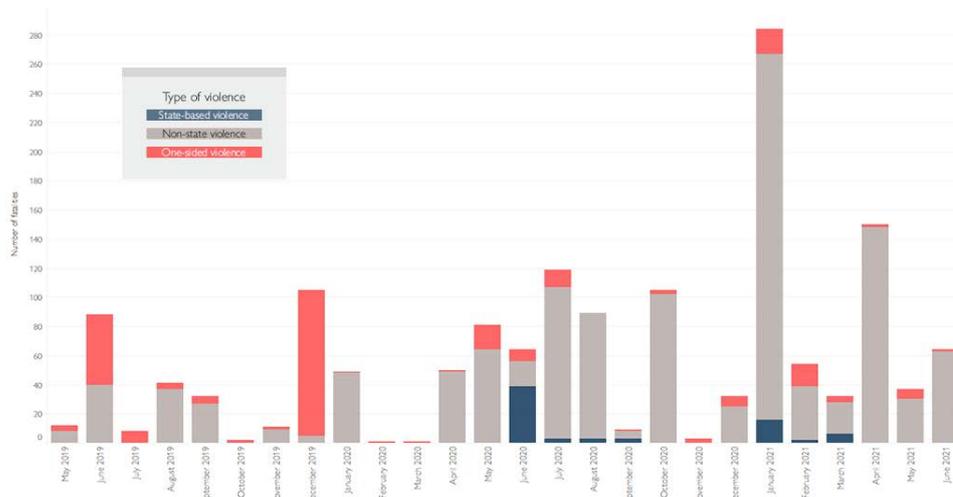
No significant shifts have been visible in the levels of one-sided violence during the past two years. Reoccurring instances of one-sided violence continued to be perpetrated by government paramilitary forces primarily and took place in the Darfur and Kordofan regions, with few exceptions. However, the new Sudanese regime continued to crackdown heavy-handedly on protesters after al-Bashir's ousting in April 2019. One notable event took place on 3 June 2019, which later became known as the Khartoum Massacre. As protestors had continued to demand civilian rule in the country, Hemeti accused the sit-in camp in Khartoum of becoming an area where illegal activities took place.⁶ TMC security forces, led by Hemeti and the RSF, attacked the sit-in camp of demonstrators, resulting in the death of more than 100 persons and hundreds of civilians were injured.⁷

The majority of organized violence in Sudan since al-Bashir left power has been non-state violence, and the number of people killed in this category in 2020 was the highest in five years. Parts of the non-state violence occurred between rival SLM/A-factions in Darfur, but the largest share was part of communal conflicts.

6 Human Rights Watch (HRW), 20191117, They Were Shouting 'Kill Them': Sudan's Violent Crackdown on Protesters in Khartoum, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/18/they-were-shouting-kill-them/sudans-violent-crackdown-protesters-khartoum#>.

7 As there were reports of violent clashes between the security forces and the protesters a number of fatalities from that attack were not included in UCDP's one-sided category of violence, but rather in a forthcoming additional category which includes violence in civil protest.

Organized Violence after Bashir's Rule in Sudan
11 April 2019 to 30 June 2021



Data sources: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 21.1
UCDP Candidate Events Dataset (UCDP Candidate) version 21.01.21.06

Tensions between different community groups in Eastern Sudan have historical roots but had not caused any recorded outbreaks of violence during al-Bashir's time in power. After the fall of al-Bashir's regime, the power vacuum changed the relationships between various community groups across the country as leaders and groups tried to find their footing in the new political situation. Deadly clashes between the Beni Amir and Nuba broke out in May 2019 in Gedarif state, and the fighting escalated further later that year in Port Sudan. The appointment of new civilian state governors in July 2020 triggered numerous instances of communal violence in Sudan and led to renewed clashes between the Beni Amir and Nuba with dozens of fatalities.

Communal conflict near El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur, pitted nomadic Arabs and Masalit, primarily farmers, against each other. With clashes in early 2021 resulted in hundreds of fatalities, reaching a level of fighting between the two not seen since the late 1990s.

Conclusion

As Sudan finds itself in the middle of political transitions, some changes in the organized violence can be discerned, with lower levels of state-based violence and the dynamics moving towards more non-state violence. It is also worth considering the changing regional context, such as the eruption of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region. In addition, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile River has put further strain on the Sudan-Ethiopia relationship, where tensions over the al-Fashqa border area recently led to deadly skirmishes. And towards the south, will South Sudan's ability to hold on to a fragile peace after years of devastating civil war impact Sudan in the coming years.

In conclusion, the question of Sudan's move towards a more peaceful future remains to be answered. A critical issue for Sudan's future is how the democratic transition will continue and if military leaders in powerful positions (such as Burhan and Hemeti) are willing to loosen their grip on power. Sudan's history of many peace agreements but little peace raises another key question concerning the durability of the most recent agreements. In addition, as groups often attempt to promote their position during turbulent times, maneuvering the landscape of communal interests throughout the country is far from easy. Despite these challenges, we should not forget that the Sudanese revolution in 2019 was a remarkable achievement by the Sudanese people that hopefully will contribute to more peace in the coming 30 years than the atrocities, abuses, and war that characterized al-Bashir's three decades in power.

UCDP

Uppsala Conflict Data Program
ucdp.uu.se

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is the world's main provider of data on organized violence and the oldest ongoing data collection project for civil war, with a history of almost 40 years. Its definition of armed conflict has become the global standard of how conflicts are systematically defined and studied.

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