

Briefing Paper

December 2018



IDENTITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The Fertit opposition in South Sudan

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Front cover photo

Lt. Gen. Ashab Khamis (right), a representative of the Fertit opposition, meets with the SPLA's Division 5 commander Gen. Keer Kiir Keer (left) at the governor's office in Wau town, South Sudan, 22 November 2018.

Source: Sam Mednick/AFP Photo

About the author

Sarah Vuylsteke is a humanitarian aid worker who has lived and worked in South Sudan since early 2015. She initially worked with Médecins Sans Frontières and subsequently as the humanitarian access negotiator for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Food Programme. She has spent most of her time since 2016 working on and in former Western Bahr el Ghazal state and other hard-to-reach areas, interfacing directly with actors from both sides of the conflict and on both sides of the front line. She has authored and co-authored numerous reports on the post-2013 conflict in South Sudan. Prior to working in South Sudan she was employed in various other capacities in the aid world across Africa.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank members of the Fertit community in South Sudan in both government-controlled and opposition-held territories for allowing her unparalleled access to interlocutors at all levels and for their willingness to engage with her. In particular she is grateful to AK, A, G, J, C, O, DG, and T for their participation in and facilitation of key meetings and interviews, without which she would have been unable to grasp the complexities of the region and the Western Bahr el Ghazal conflict.

JA provided support, guidance, insights, and vivid story-telling over the past three years, while remaining objective and introspective about the Fertit history and current situation. This paper would not have been written without him. John Draper deserves a special mention for his constant support through the writing of this paper.

The author and Small Arms Survey would also express their thanks to the United States Government for its financial support to the HSBA project.

Overview

The conflict that started in South Sudan in December 2013 has deep historic roots and is highly complex. It is driven by a struggle for existential survival for some; a demand for fairer representation for others; and the desire for power, access to resources, and ultimate control for many. Grievances are not only born of the current civil war, but date back to previous events, linking historical issues to the post-2013 conflict.

The above is true for the Fertit, a minority ethnic community in South Sudan that inhabit the former Western Bahr el Ghazal state. Like others across the country, they are currently opposing the current regime in Juba. However, while some of the Fertit's aspirations fit into the wider opposition's national agenda, some are specific to them. The reasons for their opposition are individual and personal to their perception of the history and developments of power dynamics across South Sudan. Understanding the Fertit's perception of historical events and how these events affect them in the present is therefore key to understanding the root causes of their opposition to the government, which in turn is crucial to any attempts to establish sustainable peace and coexistence for the inhabitants of South Sudan.

Key findings

- The Fertit opposition to South Sudan's government is rooted in their belief in their right to security and self-preservation, to control their own land, and to defend their identity. The Fertit opposition was born out of a fear of marginalization and the long-held perception that members of the Dinka tribe are attempting to seize control of former Western Bahr el Ghazal (WBEG) state. This fear has intensified more recently by the reorganization of South Sudan into 28 states in 2015, which has tilted the demographic balance of parts of the former WBEG in favour of the Dinka, making the indigenous Fertit a minority in their ancestral lands.
- The Fertit opposition joined other groups in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) under Riek Machar in 2014. The Fertit theorized that any resolution of local grievances in the context of the current civil war would have to be brokered at the national level. The subsequent evolution of the conflict and the balkanization of the opposition since 2017 call into question the effectiveness of the Fertit's use of this platform.
- The 12 September 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (RARCSS) between the government and opposition parties continues to undermine the effective resolution of the conflict. Despite recognizing a grass-roots demand for decentralized decision-making, the agreement entrenches power dynamics put in place during the war. As a result, the likelihood that it will deliver sustainable peace across the country is low, in particular in the new Wau state and former WBEG, where opposition and armed struggle are likely to continue if the local issues that fuel armed resistance are not addressed.

Introduction

Wau state is extremely polarized on tribal lines and tribalism has reached a level whereby the social fabric of society has been affected (GRSS Commission of Inquiry, 2016, pp. 18–19).

On the evening of 24 June 2016 shooting started in the south-western neighbourhoods of Wau town.¹ The residents of these areas are known to be predominantly from the ethnic Fertit community.² The attackers were reported to be armed Dinka youths in civilian clothes supported by others in military uniform who moved from house to house attacking civilians with machetes, firearms, sticks, and spears, and engaging in widespread rape.³ The violence continued throughout the night and scores of bodies could be seen in the streets the next morning.⁴ Those who were able to escape fled to the nearby United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) base and local church compounds (known as collective centres). Over the following days more people arrived at these sites as the insecurity continued, and large numbers of reports detailing atrocities and the killing of civilians were gathered (Niell, 2016).⁵ Thousands of civilians fled from Wau town and sought refuge in Baggari, an area to the south-west under the control of the Fertit Lions, an opposition group that had joined the SPLM/A-IO platform led by Riek Machar the previous year.

Opposition to the government in South Sudan is long-standing and is rooted in a perception among minority communities, such as the Fertit, that members of the Dinka tribe are attempting to seize power over and control of these communities and their land—in this case in former WBEG state (see Map 1).⁶ This decades-old perception was born out of events during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005) and the birth of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under the late John Garang and Riek Machar, and has led to the current conflict becoming deeply ethnicized. For the Fertit, the fear of domination has been reinforced by events in the past decade, including the moving of the Wau county capital to Baggari; tensions between the Fertit and neighbouring communities over the movements of the latter's cattle; and the reconfiguration of the ethnic make-up

of former WBEG through the creation of 28, and then 32, states in South Sudan since 2015. This has led to the Fertit taking up arms against what is perceived as a Dinka-dominated governance system on multiple occasions, most recently under the umbrella of the SPLM/A-IO.

It is unclear how long their allegiance to this organization will last, however. As the conflict has spread across the county, drawing in a variety of communities and interests, the SPLM/A-IO has expanded to encompass a broad range of actors, as other parties have joined both the conflict and the negotiation table. This has had two effects. Firstly, the space at the negotiation table has become crowded, and the lack of a unified opposition has weakened the opposition's leverage in negotiations and made compromise harder. As a result, negotiations have often focused on brokering power-sharing formulas and attempting to enforce cease-fires that have routinely been broken shortly thereafter.⁷ This has occurred at the expense of addressing the root causes

of the conflict, which are entrenched in an array of local grievances and a widespread fear of Dinka domination among minority groups in South Sudan.⁸ Secondly, while representing a solid block of opposition across the country, the SPLM/A-IO has had to contend with heavy military losses that have occurred simultaneously with the emergence of these other parties and platforms at the negotiation table. Alternative avenues of armed resistance are now open if factions feel that their key issues are not being addressed. In this context the relevance of the SPLM/A-IO for the Fertit has become questionable.

This Briefing Paper⁹ examines the roots of the Fertit opposition in former WBEG and demonstrates how the current resistance is a continuation of previous unresolved grievances. It discusses key events from the Fertit perspective between the 1970s and mid-September 2018, and examines the internal make-up of the Fertit Lions, the Fertit opposition's current status under the SPLM/A-IO

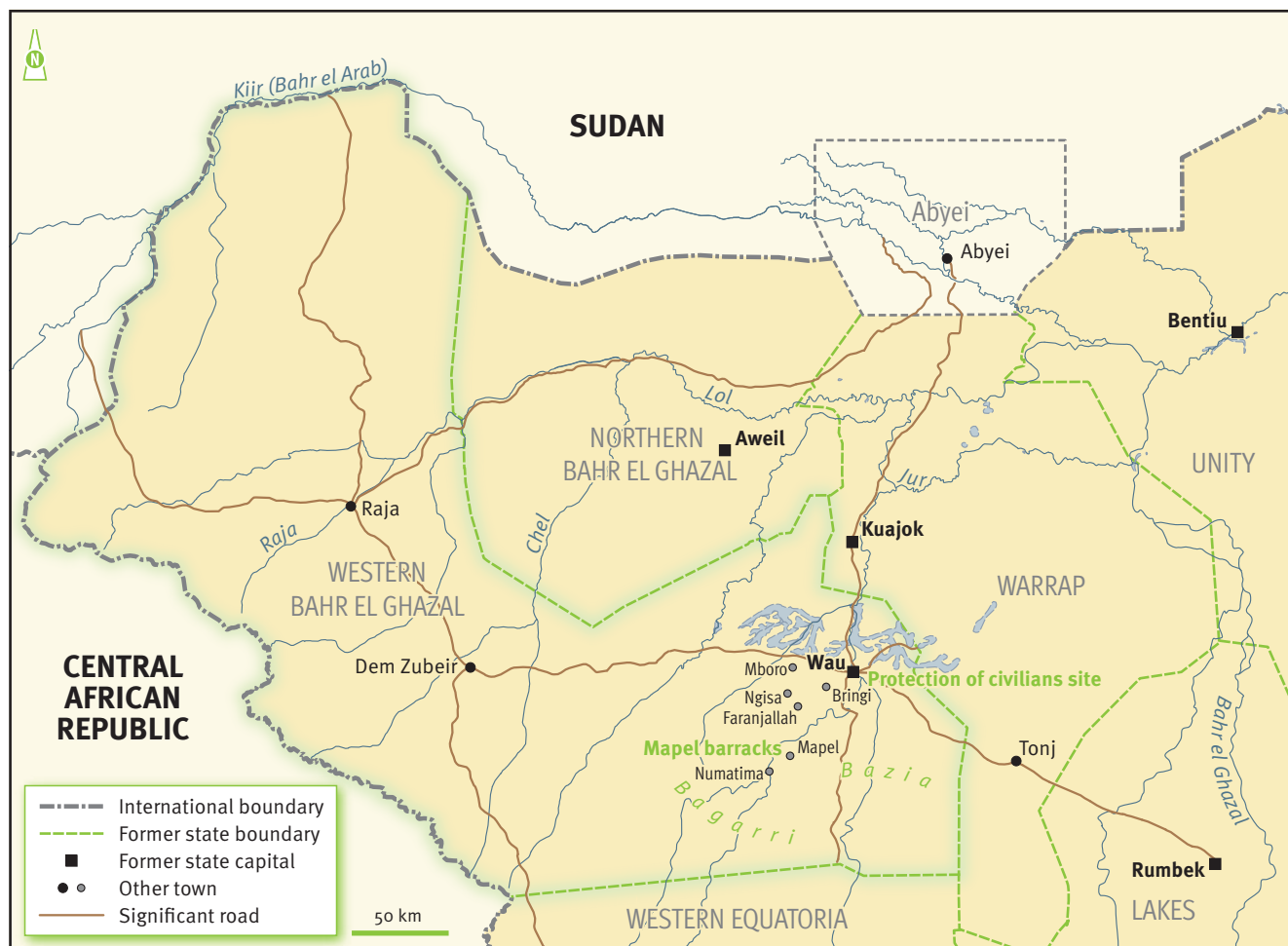
umbrella, and the prospects for a resolution of the conflict at both the local and national levels. The prospects for peace seem slim at both levels and it is likely that armed opposition will continue.

The opposition in Western Bahr el Ghazal: roots and current causes

The origins of a rebellion: the Qwat Salem

The origins of the opposition movement in Wau and WBEG date back to the 1970s and the earliest days of the SPLM/A in the 1980s. They are rooted in the Fertit community's struggle to protect its land and identity from a perceived encroachment by the more dominant Dinka ethnic group,¹⁰ members of which control the Bahr el Ghazal states.¹¹ Indeed, tensions between the Fertit and the Dinka have been recorded as far back as the 1950s (Blocq, 2014, pp. 713–14).

Map 1 Former Western Bahr el Ghazal state, pre-2015



Source: Logistics Cluster (2017)

Wau town was originally established as a French fort in the 19th century,¹² which was followed by its establishment as a military camp set up by commercial slave traders (Rone, 1999, pp. 235–341). It was an ethnically mixed town combining Arab slave traders from the north, ex-soldiers, and former slaves with people from the rural areas around Wau. To the north, east, and south-east the area was inhabited by the ethnic Dinka (this area made up former Northern Bahr el Ghazal (NBEG), Warrap, and Lakes states), and to the south by the Azande (in what is now Western Equatoria). WBEG's proximity to what was then northern Sudan, combined with the arrival of commercial traders from Darfur and South Kordofan and the presence of Italian missionaries, led the area to become largely Arabic speaking, with both a strong Muslim and Christian presence. In the mid-20th century, Wau was also an important trading hub that was linked to Khartoum by rail. This shared history with the north has resulted in the Fertit retaining strong relationships with Sudan, even after South Sudan's independence in 2011.¹³

The first fears of a Dinka-dominated Southern Sudan surfaced at the end of the first Sudanese civil war in 1972, with the establishment of the autonomous Southern Region¹⁴ governed by a High Executive Council (HEC). Abel Alier, a Dinka politician from the south, had become vice president of Sudan in 1971 and was thus appointed as the first president of the HEC in the following year. Dinka representatives subsequently filled over half of the cabinet posts across the Southern Region, thereby effectively gaining control of both policy and administrative decisions (Willems and Deng, 2015, pp. 7–9). This sparked rumours of corruption and nepotism and instilled widespread fears of a move towards a one-tribe hegemony over other groups in Southern Sudan (Johnson, 2003, pp. 52–53).¹⁵

For the Fertit, these fears were not unfounded. In Wau, for example, the police force was made up almost exclusively of Dinka officers (Rone, 1999, p. 25), and Fertit leaders argued that the Dinka received a disproportionate number of government jobs (Thomas, 2010, pp. 105–6). Dinka-appointed personnel also began to take up administrative and clerical positions that had earlier gone

to the Fertit (Johnson and Prunier, 1993, p. 132, fn. 14). As a report from the Committee for the Redivision of the Southern Provinces from this period noted:

There is the intense feeling of the Fertit of Wau and Raga [Raja, a predominantly Fertit town in WBEG] against the Dinka and there is the strong aspiration for a separate province for them. The Fertit, they said, are afraid of being dominated by the Dinka (Thomas, 2010, p. 106).

Statements made by local Fertit politicians regarding their belief that the HEC's plan was to increase Dinka hegemony also illustrate these fears. Tom al Nur, then a member of President Jaafar Nimeiri's Sudan Socialist Union, stated that:

Abel Alier's idea was to take Raga [Raja] and make it part of Aweil, put Tonj with Wau. After 50 years Fertit would be no more. They would all marry Dinkas. We studied this whole issue (Thomas, 2010, pp. 110–11).¹⁶

Ethnic tensions in Wau were not appeased by comments supposedly made during a debate by the speaker of the state parliament at that time. He reportedly described the Fertit—specifically those from around Raja—as not 'belonging to Sudan'.¹⁷ This is not the only time such allegations were made about the Fertit. When the Dinka initially approached them to join the SPLM/A, a Dinka officer reportedly stated: 'if you don't join us in the movement we will send you [back] to Central Africa' (Thomas, 2010, p. 116).

Therefore, when the SPLM/A was formed in 1983 few Fertit joined, seeing it as a predominantly Dinka movement that would be used to further establish Dinka hegemony across Southern Sudan¹⁸ (Ali, Elbadawi, and el-Batahani, 2005, pp. 200–1). This perception was entrenched by tactical mistakes made by the SPLM/A leadership during the recruitment of supporters to the movement. While the original idea had been to send local mobilizers to different areas to recruit, the SPLM/A leadership did not use Fertit or Luo (the Luo are also indigenous to the area) to carry out this task in WBEG. Exacerbating matters, Dinka mobilizers sent by the SPLM to the region reportedly used aggressive tactics (Pinaud, 2014, pp. 197–98).¹⁹ The situation deteriorated

around 1985 when the SPLA began to act violently towards civilians who were perceived as hostile, taking resources (including food, water, ammunition, and houses) by force. Like the Fertit, the Murle (from Boma), Toposa (from former Eastern Equatoria) and Mundari (from former Central Equatoria) were targeted by the Dinka for being seen to oppose the SPLA (Johnson, 2003, p. 83). The SPLA carried out violent looting raids in areas south-west of Raja, while rape and killing became widespread. Tribal leaders reported that the perpetrators were of Dinka origin, and believed that ethnic grievances influenced the violence used in the raids (Blocq, 2014, pp. 714–15).

At the same time the SPLA carried out violent raids targeting Fertit communities in and around Wau town. Fertit leaders strongly believe that the SPLA's reasons for doing this were threefold: as a punishment for the Fertit's failure to join the SPLM/A; as a way to settle old scores related to land and resources; and as part of a Dinka plan to take over Wau (Blocq, 2014, p. 716).²⁰ This last belief was reinforced by the circulation of a 'secret' paper by an unknown author allegedly entitled 'Dinka Policy against Fertit Groups'. The premise was that to take control of the Fertit, Dinka men would marry Fertit women, thereby eventually subjugating the Fertit (Thomas, 2010, p. 106).

Fertit leaders appealed to the then (Dinka) governor of Bahr el Ghazal, Albino Akol Akol, for their communities to be protected. He reportedly refused the request and instead withdrew police and security services from Fertit-inhabited areas (Blocq, 2014, p. 717). As a result, following a request from Fertit leaders, Tom al Nur and Ashab Khamis²¹ established a locally organized self-defence force or militia called the Qwat Salem,²² constituting the birth of the first official Fertit opposition in Wau in the mid-1980s.²³ Fertit leaders around Raja also convened to mobilize local defence forces to protect their communities from the raids (Blocq, 2014, pp. 715–16).

The resulting clashes in and around Wau devastated the town and communities in the late 1980s in a spiral of violence fed by reprisal attacks. Both the Dinka and Fertit committed atrocities (Rone, 1999, pp. 26–30), increasing resentment on

“The first fears of a Dinka-dominated Southern Sudan surfaced at the end of the first Sudanese civil war in 1972...”

both sides. During this time the Khartoum government exploited the Qwat Salem, using it to its advantage to contain the SPLA without having to dedicate its own forces to controlling the area. It supplied the militia with both material and tactical support (Blocq, 2014, pp. 717–18).²⁴ As a result, a common misconception among the Dinka today is that the Fertit fought against the independence of South Sudan²⁵ and even voted against it in the 2011 referendum.²⁶

A local (non-SPLA) peace deal between the militia and the Dinka communities was finally brokered in 1988, although the militia was not disbanded. Ethnic tensions continued to linger and occasionally surfaced in violent episodes. These were exacerbated after the collapse of the Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia in May 1991, which had been supporting the SPLA for years. The SPLA and thousands of refugees were forced to move back to Southern Sudan from Ethiopia, many of whom settled around the garrison towns of Wau and Aweil in SPLA-controlled areas. In turn, the mass arrival of SPLA members and their families from Ethiopia, many of whom were Dinka, further entrenched the belief among the Fertit that the Dinka were planning to take over Wau and its environs,²⁷ leading to occasional violent flare-ups (Rone, 1999, pp. 45–50).

However in 1991, following overtures from the SPLA, which had learned from its earlier mistakes and undertaken a more nuanced campaign to unite the south in its quest for autonomy from the north, the Fertit finally joined the fight for independence (BBC, 1991). They were crucial in the capture of major towns such as Rumbek, Tonj, Raja, and eventually Wau.²⁸ After the war, during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement period (2005–11) the Qwat Salem was even demobilized and

officially integrated into both the Sudan Armed Forces and the SPLA in line with relevant protocols (GoS and SPLM/A, 2005, arts. 3(d) and 7, pp. 88–90; 2004, art. 11, pp. 100–2). In March 2005 the Cross-line Peace Recovery and Reconciliation Conference was held in Mapel²⁹ to address outstanding tensions among the Fertit, Luo, and Dinka communities; and to deal with security, administration, and social relations. Although the conference was lauded as a success at the time, the Fertit have always had reservations regarding its outcomes. Their main criticism was that mostly Dinka representatives of the SPLM/A attended the conference and that the discussions were, therefore, not well balanced.³⁰

Despite these reservations and lingering tensions, Wau and WBEG remained calm for the most part until over seven years later.

Resurgence of ethnic tensions and violence: the proposed move of county headquarters in 2012

In late 2012 tensions between the Fertit and Dinka communities reignited over the proposed move of the Wau county capital from Wau south-west to Baggari, in line with the SPLM's policy of 'bringing the town to the people' (SPLM, 2008, sec. IV 24). At the time Wau was serving not only as the capital of WBEG state, but also as the capital of Wau county, leading to competition over scarce resources. Moving the capital of the county was seen as a solution to this problem because it would result in the development of the more rural area of Baggari, with the added advantage of fulfilling a national agenda item.

The then Fertit governor of WBEG state, Rizik Zacharia,³¹ had first proposed

the move in 2011. He formed a committee to consult the residents of Wau county on the proposal in an attempt to obtain popular support. The committee determined that the people rejected the idea, however. They found that the Fertit perceived the proposal as a way to increase Dinka political dominance by extending central government control to the surrounding areas. Some Fertit even believed the impetus for the move to have come from Tonj, linking it to the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE), a group of Dinka elders who were influential in national decision-making and were often linked to major policy changes (the JCE continues to serve the same function to this day).³² Yet despite the clear popular rejection of the plan, the governor issued a decree in October 2012 to implement the move to Baggari, leading to significant anger among the Fertit in Wau town (*Sudan Tribune*, 2012). Such was the importance of this event that Fertit opposition members often cite the events surrounding the move as being a trigger of their current struggle.³³

After the decree was issued, Fertit youths organized a public forum in Wau that questioned whether it had been passed by the state parliament in accordance with the 2009 Local Governance Act.³⁴ Parliamentarians then denied that the state parliament had approved the decree, but the security services (acting on behalf of the governor) nevertheless arrested some of the Fertit youths and removed some local members of parliament (MPs) from their positions (AI, 2013, p. 6). In protest at the arrests, youths blockaded the roads west, south-west, and south of Wau on 5 December. Three days later security forces forcibly ended the blockade on the orders of senior government officials³⁵ by shooting at the protesters, killing two people and injuring several more (AI, 2013, p. 6). The killings led to further protests in Wau town by Fertit women and youths, but these were met with violence: when protesters were on their way to deliver a petition to the governor, security forces opened fire on them without any provocation (Cavell, 2012).³⁶ At least eight people were killed and over 20 were injured (AI, 2013, p. 8).

On 15 December the bodies of six Dinka farm workers were discovered in Faranjallah, further heightening tensions

and triggering revenge attacks by Dinka youths on Fertit neighbourhoods in Wau a few days later. Seven people were killed, many more were injured, and over 400 homes were destroyed (AI, 2013, pp. 11–12). It remains unclear if or how local security forces were involved in the violence. Some Fertit believe that the incident at Faranjallah, and subsequent rumours regarding the mutilation of the bodies and more murders in the area, were fabricated to justify the Dinka silencing opposition to the move to Baggari (AI, 2013, pp. 11–13).

After these incidents the (Dinka) president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, visited Wau and made a speech at the Wau National Stadium on 24 December 2012 (GreenAcity Media, 2012). Although the official message of the speech was related to peaceful coexistence between communities, most of the Fertit community interpreted it as a threat. This perception was based on the president's stating that he could destroy the town in an hour, that he himself would have fought the protesters 'who had created the problem' if he had been there, and that the Fertit should 'go back to their place'. He also stated that he would 'give all the power to the army and allow them to run the place' if there was any further dissent.³⁷

Regardless of Kiir's intended meaning,³⁸ the WBEG state government interpreted the speech as giving it carte blanche to crack down on the Fertit opposition. In 2013, in the weeks following the deaths of the six Dinka, police and officers from the National Security Service (NSS) arrested over a hundred people. These arrests included youths, politicians, civil society actors, community members, media workers,³⁹ academics, and members of the police, prison services, and fire brigade accused of failing to stop the protest, or of having acted in support of the protesters who blocked the roads (Radio Tamazuj, 2013; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2013). All but one of those arrested were Fertit (HRW, 2013), which further heightened ethnic tensions in the town. After these events many (male) Fertit youths fled to areas surrounding Wau, fearing arrest and reprisals. These youths make up some of the core forces of the current Fertit opposition.⁴⁰

The Fertit opposition regroup and joins the SPLM-IO

In the aftermath of the arrests tensions continued to simmer. These tensions were not helped by the sentences handed down by a special court made up of three judges from Juba who were brought in to investigate the events that led to the arrests and try the accused. A total of 11 Fertit youths were sentenced to death by hanging, the chief of Faranjallah was sentenced to ten years in prison, and several MPs and other youths were given prison sentences (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013).

Meanwhile, in December 2013 the current civil war began with clashes in Juba, leading to the deterioration of security across the country and a heightening of tensions between communities of different ethnicities, particularly between the Dinka and the Nuer:

Shortly after the outbreak of the civil war Paul Malong (a Dinka from Aweil) was appointed SPLA chief of general staff. The appointment created anxiety among SPLA Nuer soldiers, because Malong was alleged to have played a key role in organizing the killing of Nuer civilians in Juba in December 2013.⁴¹ Fighting broke out between Dinka and Nuer soldiers on 25 April 2014 in the Mapel barracks close to Wau (see Map 1). This had a direct impact upon the Fertit, and some 800 civilians fled to the UN base in Wau (OCHA, 2016). While the exact reason for the clashes remains contested, it is likely to have been triggered by Dinka community members attacking a Nuer SPLA trainee in a local market (Small Arms Survey, 2014). After the clashes 100–500 Nuer SPLA soldiers deserted their posts, fearing further attacks.⁴²

After these events, and a marked increase in the repression by state and national security services of local media and civil society, the Fertit began to quietly mobilize, activating old networks and preparing for what they considered to be the inevitable conflict with Juba. The exact timeline of events remains unclear, but in late 2014 several prominent Fertit fled Wau under the threat of arrest by security forces. Ashab Khamis, a founding member of the Qwat Salem and currently a leading opposition commander, was

among them. Fertit opposition cells were established around Wau, on the roads leading south and west out of Wau town, and in the areas south-west of Wau, with an initial headquarters established in Numatima.⁴³ These cells, under the auspices of the Fertit Lions, were quickly reinforced by groups from the Golo, Ndogo, Bai, Kresh, Banda, Yulu, Forogi, Shere, Bongo (Bussere), and Balanda Viiri/Boor communities from the areas south-west of Wau, Dem Zubeir, and Raja (see Map 1).

While the mobilization and establishment of Fertit opposition cells outside of Wau town were inspired by local concerns and events, they were also heavily influenced by the ongoing civil war and the realization that some issues were related to the wider national agenda. The Fertit recognized that any solution would need to be brokered at the central level, at the political negotiation table.

Therefore, the then deputy speaker of the Wau state parliament, Peter Tingo,⁴⁴ contacted SPLM/A-IO leader Riek Machar via contacts in Sudan and an agreement was made in 2014 for the Fertit to join the SPLM/A-IO. The deal was seen to be mutually advantageous. The SPLM/A-IO would be able to broaden its representation across the country, use additional garrison sites and other resources, and bring another group under its umbrella in support of its claim to be a non-ethnic and inclusive movement, thereby increasing its leverage in negotiations with Juba. For their part the Fertit saw two fundamental advantages to joining the SPLM/A-IO: they would be included in national political negotiations through the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) peace process,⁴⁵ with a federal system of government as their end goal; and they would gain access to resources. They viewed national inclusion as particularly important following the presidential decree increasing the number of states in South Sudan from ten to 28 (GRSS, 2015; Mayom, 2015), thereby significantly altering the ethnic balance in some areas, including WBEG (see Box 1, and Maps 2 and 3).⁴⁶ Access to resources—in particular military resources—would also be necessary to ensure the survival of the opposition and the protection of its territory.

At the same time as the civil war began to spread to previously untouched areas in 2015, land insecurity spread rapidly and would eventually contribute to a crisis in Wau in 2016. Livelihoods in former WBEG depend mostly on sedentary agriculture, and the annual migration routes of cattle from formerly NBEG, Warrap, and Lakes states into farming land around Wau has historically caused tension between the predominantly Fertit and Luo farmers and the pastoralist Dinka. Tensions between farmers and cattle keepers are not uncommon,⁴⁷ and elders have brokered numerous accords designed to regulate these movements and control access to grazing land, but they are often broken. Indeed the tensions sparked a confrontation that put Wau and former WBEG at the centre of the civil war:

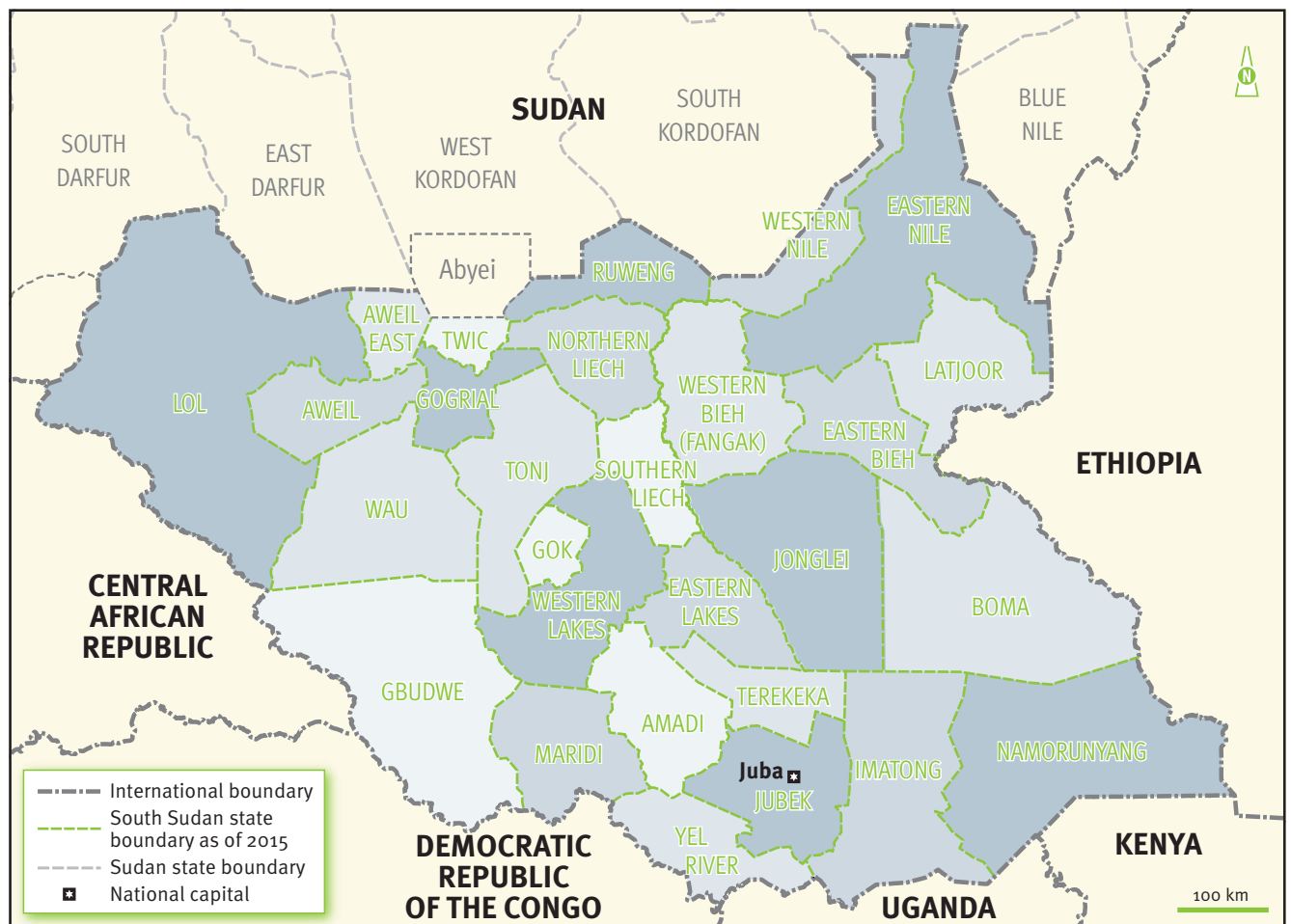
In 2015 cattle from the former Warrap and Lakes areas began to arrive in the area of Bazia, south of Wau town, accompanied by well-armed Galweng cattle keepers.⁴⁸ These cattle keepers failed to uphold local accords, reportedly destroy-

ing crops and terrorizing the local population.⁴⁹ Letters and verbal statements of protest were sent to the Fertit governor, Rizik Zacharia, in Wau state, but as the cattle belonged to senior Dinka SPLM/A members from (former) Warrap state, the complaints were ignored.⁵⁰ Violence broke out between the farming communities and cattle keepers, with government-aligned militia reportedly joining the cattle keepers with support from the SPLA's 5th Division.⁵¹ As a result, communities from the affected areas fled into the bush, with many seeking support from or joining the Fertit Lions. In May 2015 these local tensions led to the first recorded direct clashes between SPLA forces and the Fertit under the umbrella of the SPLA-IO (Deng, 2015).

Although the government and SPLM/A-IO had signed the ARCSS peace deal in Juba in August 2015 (Al Jazeera, 2015), the government used the farmer-pastoralist clashes as a pretext to launch counter-insurgency operations in the areas south and south-west of Wau in December 2015.

The campaign intensified with the arrival of the new Commander of Division 5, Maj. Gen. Thayip Gatluak Tai Tai,⁵² and new troops mainly from Aweil, Aweil East, Twic, Gogrial, Tonj, Eastern Lakes, Western Lakes, and Gok states (formerly NBEG, Warrap, and Lakes states). These troops were mainly badly clothed and armed youths.⁵³ Reports of violence, characterized by the widespread destruction of property, the looting of food stores, the burning of crops, and the displacing of local populations, emerged from villages south and south-west of Wau town, and tens of thousands of civilians fled into the town (HRW, 2016). The SPLA then substantially increased its presence in Fertit areas of Wau town⁵⁴ at the start of 2016 and residents began to report increased harassment and sexual violence.⁵⁵ At the same time the number of Fertit being detained by security forces increased (HRW, 2016). Civil society members protested, which led to further arrests, based on accusations of their supporting 'rebels' (Radio Tamazuj, 2015).

Map 2 The 28 States of South Sudan as of 2015



Source: OCHA (2015)

On 18 February 2016 clashes broke out to the west of Wau town, following rumours that several Dinka had been killed. Dinka youths attacked local civilians, and soldiers returning from operations outside town came to their support, setting numerous houses alight in the area of Hai Lokoloko (see Map 4). Soldiers fired indiscriminately on civilians, killing two men in front of a police station.⁵⁶ Further killings and executions were reported and security deteriorated, forcing civilians to abandon their homes and seek refuge in other parts of town (HRW, 2016). Following an SPLA raid on the hospital that led to the reported ‘disappearance’ of wounded patients (on the grounds that any wounded person was likely to be a rebel),⁵⁷ patients and staff alike abandoned the hospital. By mid-March over 60,000 civilians from in and outside the town were displaced in Wau (OCHA, 2016).

By the end of May 2016 governor Elias Waya Nyipuoc⁵⁸ confirmed that SPLA soldiers had killed at least a hundred civilians, and that he had reported the cases to the government (Wani, 2016; HRW, 2016). The SPLA leadership denied that any SPLA soldiers had committed abuses (Wani, 2016). Meanwhile, there had been no enforcement of the ceasefire signed in August 2015 between the SPLA and local SPLM/A-IO groups. In an attempt to block the establishment of garrison sites for SPLA-IO forces in former WBEG, the government then denied that SPLM/A-IO forces were in the region altogether, further complicating matters (Ali, 2016). Meanwhile, in Wau town tensions continued with multiple violent incidents recorded on a daily basis.⁵⁹ With security forces unable or unwilling to stop the violence that was targeting civilians in Fertit areas of the town, the latter began to take security into their own hands, fighting back by attacking perceived perpetrators in self-defence. This further increased the cycle of revenge killings, as security in Wau town and its surroundings deteriorated even more.

These tensions eventually escalated into the violence described at the beginning of this paper on 24 June 2016. It is widely believed that troops of the SPLA’s 5th Division supported the attack on the Fertit in Wau town and that the then divisional commander, Maj. Gen. Thayip Gatluak Tai Tai, ordered it, with the support of top-level government officials in

Box 1 The demographic shift in WBEG

The 2015 national decree that increased the number of states from 10 to 28 (GRSS, 2015; see Map 2) and then 32, significantly shifted the ethnic power balance in South Sudan. It has been a key point of contestation during the peace negotiations, and has been blamed for fuelling much of the conflict (HRW, 2017). Analysis of its impact indicates that the new national structure essentially reorganized the country along ethnic lines, with a civil society member calling it ‘a form of gerrymandering that will exacerbate South Sudan’s problem of tribalism over nationalism’ (Su, 2016).

Like other parts of the country, the creation of the 28 states affected former WBEG significantly, particularly the newly created Lol State (see Map 3). Under the new configuration WBEG was split into two: Wau state and Lol state. Wau maintained its status as the capital of Wau state, which consisted of what used to be Wau, Jur River, and Baggari counties (previously Wau county), but Raja county was put together with Dinka dominated Aweil North and Aweil West counties to make

up new Lol state. With the inclusion of the two more densely populated Aweil counties, the new boundaries of Lol state tilted the demographic balance in favour of the Dinka (Map 3, green shading), making the indigenous Fertit tribes (blue-grey shading) a minority in what they see as their ancestral lands.⁶⁰

This is not the first time that Raja county has been politically penalized. In 1973 it lost its headquarters to Aweil and its parliamentary constituency to a Dinka politician (Thomas, 2010, p. 105). This latest change is viewed locally as yet another part of a series of attempts to change the structure and ethnic make-up of this part of former WBEG.

Local communities widely rejected the creation of Lol state. Fertit chiefs in Raja met shortly after the decree appeared and issued a statement contesting what they viewed as the ‘annexation’ of Aweil North and Aweil West counties to Raja, citing cultural differences (Marcello, n.d.; *Sudan Tribune*, 2015). Dinka chiefs from Aweil North and Aweil West also opposed the move (Agoth, 2016).

Map 3 The demographic balance of Lol state, 2018



Source: Pomarico (2018)

Juba (Golla, 2016).⁶¹ The Fertit and the international community interpreted the attack as a collective punishment and retaliation for an SPLM/A-IO attack on Raja nine days earlier (*Sudan Tribune*, 2016a; also see Box 2), and that it was born of government frustration that efforts to push the opposition back outside Wau were failing.⁶²

The current state of affairs and prospects for peace

A creeping takeover: changes to the ethnic make-up of Wau

Since June 2016 the situation in Wau and its surroundings has remained largely in flux, though events since November 2018 could give rise to cautious optimism following meetings between opposition and government in Wau town under the auspices of the RARCSS (Mednick, 2018a). The government continues to hold Wau and Raja towns and has recaptured previously held opposition territory in Baggari in recent and ongoing offensives.⁶³ These offensives are undertaken in violation of multiple ceasefires that have been signed over the years, including a ‘permanent’ one that was signed on 27 June 2018 and violated within hours (Al Jazeera, 2018).⁶⁴ There have been sustained, extremely violent clashes following renewed SPLA incursions into opposition territory around both Wau and Raja. The most violent of these occurred in April 2017 when an SPLA offensive into Baggari led to the deaths of several senior SPLA soldiers, including Maj. Gen. Matur Chut Dhuol, who was the head of military logistics and the brother of the Western Lakes governor (Africans Press, 2017). As a result, government security forces in Wau carried out revenge killings and collective punishments, leading to the deaths of civilians, the burning of houses and neighbourhoods perceived to be Fertit, and the arrest of youths (CTSAMM, 2017, p. 5, sec. 3) and some humanitarian aid workers.⁶⁵ By September 2018 the SPLA⁶⁶ had pushed deep into the areas around Mboro and into Baggari, often violently displacing civilians, destroying civilian infrastructure such as markets, and occupying humanitarian infrastructure such as clinics.⁶⁷ SPLM/A-

Box 2 Conflict dynamics in Raja

Although it has been highly affected by the 28/32 state structure (as detailed in Box 1; see also Map 3), the issues of the wider Raja area are regularly overlooked due to the low presence of humanitarian actors, the paucity of information about Raja, and the limited access to areas outside of Raja town.⁶⁸ Yet the conflict in Raja plays a particular role in the history of, and the current conflict in, former WBEG. For example it was the attack on Raja on 16 June 2016 (*Sudan Tribune*, 2016a) that precipitated the violence in Wau that started on 24 June, and the area around Raja has also been a strategic rear base for the Fertit opposition. The area is vast and sparsely populated, and road infrastructure is poor, making it advantageous terrain to surreptitiously operate from. It has long been rumoured that various training camps for Sudanese opposition groups such as the Darfuri militia, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and SPLM/A-IO are located in the area and that supplies have been flown into remote areas of Raja that are completely beyond the reach of any authorities.

Raja also poses an additional frustration for the Fertit opposition. The current governor of Lol state is Rizik Zacharia, the former governor of WBEG state before it was split into two. Rizik is directly blamed by the Fertit for the 2012 crisis and subsequent events⁶⁹ (see ‘Resurgence of ethnic tensions and violence: the proposed move of county headquarters in 2012’, above). Although a Fertit himself, he is deeply unpopular with his constituency, members of which see him as a traitor and accuse him of having sold out to the Dinka in return for his continued hold on power. The Fertit’s distrust of Rizik is exacerbated by his use of members of the JEM as personal bodyguards and as auxiliary forces to bolster local security services.⁷⁰ JEM members have been used by the SPLA and by the governor directly as personal militias and bodyguards in offensives against the SPLM/A-IO in Raja as recently as 2018. For the Fertit—given the community’s close ties with Darfur and Sudan more

generally—it is unacceptable that the JEM would fight them at the behest of the South Sudanese government, which, as the SPLM/A, fought against the JEM in the civil war. As a result of Zacharia’s actions, the Fertit in Raja are currently fighting not only the Juba government, but also the JEM. So much is Zacharia hated, that people say it is more likely that Raja town will be attacked when the governor is in town; the Fertit opposition’s deep-seated personal animosity towards make him a highly prized target.⁷¹

The Raja area is also important to the SPLM/A-IO for two other reasons. Firstly, the area is home to many illegal smuggling routes and markets. Trade in diamonds, gold, and arms among the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan, and Sudan is all concentrated around the borders between CAR, South Sudan, and Sudan,⁷² with the enclave of Kafia Kingi near Raja being an important but disputed area for this trade.⁷³ It is through these routes and markets that many of the Fertit’s weapons and ammunition are obtained.⁷⁴

The second reason is the linkage that has developed between the Western Equatoria Azande opposition under the SPLM/A-IO based out of the Yambio area (former Western Equatoria which is now Gbudwe state) and the Fertit opposition in the Raja area.⁷⁵ Following events at the end of 2016, senior Azande commanders and their soldiers made their way to the Raja area, where they remained until ordered back to their original positions at the beginning of 2018. Although the circumstances of their stay in the Raja area remain disputed,⁷⁶ it is clear that the Fertit opposition hosted the Azande and facilitated fresh supplies of ammunition and firearms for them throughout their stay in the area.⁷⁷ The cooperation between the Azande and Fertit serve to form a strong block of SPLM/A-IO opposition to Juba that spans the entire western part of South Sudan. This opposition displays significant strength, and provides for greater leverage in negotiations.

IO forces have been pushed out of large areas of Baggari since October 2018, but still control areas to the south and far south-west of Wau town, as well as most of the area around Raja.

The constant violence has led to continued displacement from and the steady depopulation of Fertit and Luo areas in

Wau town (see Map 4). Many Fertit remain in the UNMISS PoC site, local collective centres, and outside the town.⁷⁸ Some sources, mainly government officials and the UNMISS leadership, who have a vested interest in portraying normalcy in order to be able to close the PoC site and collective centres, claim that things are

“ Perhaps more worryingly ... the Fertit also face challenges in their own military structure.”

However, while the SPLM/A-IO's political commitments have been upheld, their military ones have not. The main frustration voiced by Fertit opposition members is related to the promised supply of weapons and ammunition from the SPLA-IO. Almost four years after the Fertit joined the umbrella adequate supplies have failed to materialize, the reasons for which are unclear.⁹⁰ Organizing supply lines into relevant areas has undoubtedly proved to be complicated for the SPLM/A-IO leadership; but resources intended for the Fertit have often reportedly also been sold or bartered by senior Nuer SPLM/A-IO military officials before they reached their intended destination.⁹¹ The Fertit opposition has therefore organized its own supply lines, obtaining military supplies from sources other than the SPLM/A-IO leadership. It has done this successfully, due to its extensive pre-existing networks in Sudan and its ability to take advantage of smuggling networks linking CAR, South Sudan, and Darfur and related clandestine regional markets (see Box 2). That said, Lt. Gen. Khamis has clearly indicated during recent meetings with the Government that his orders originate directly from Machar, and that at this point in time their affiliation continues to lie with the SPLM/A-IO opposition faction.⁹²

Perhaps more worryingly than their frustrations with the SPLA-IO leadership, the Fertit also face challenges in their own military structure. On the one hand, cohesion across the ranks in the Fertit Lions is relatively solid. Unlike in the Equatorias, for example, where the senior SPLM/A-IO leadership contains both Nuer and Equatorian commanders, leading to tensions, the Fertit have maintained complete command and control over themselves, without any outside appointments. Military orders are provided by a command structure often referred to as ‘the radio room’, which is thought to be situated outside South Sudan.⁹³

On the other hand, the actions of some individuals have negatively affected the movement. For example Lt. Gen. Ashab Khamis, one of the founders of the Qwat Salem in the 1980s, assumed initial command of the Fertit Lions when they formed in 2014 after the Fertit joined the SPLA-IO. His objective has always been clear: to protect Fertit communities from violence and encroachment by other tribes, in particular the Dinka. For him, the current struggle is a direct extension of the struggle from the 1980s and a response to the events of 2012 (see ‘Resurgence of ethnic tensions and violence: the proposed move of county headquarters in 2012’, above).⁹⁴

The SPLA-IO forces in former Western Bahr el Ghazal are structured within a sector (Sector 7) with two divisions; 6A for Wau and 6B for Raja, each headed by a division commander.⁹⁵ Following the clashes in Baggari in April 2017 that led to the loss of the Fertit Lions’ forward operating base in Bringi, the SPLM/A-IO leadership restructured its forces in former WBEG and Khamis was promoted from divisional commander of Division 6A (covering Wau) to the head of administration and finance for Sector 7, and subsequently to overall sector commander for Sector 7.⁹⁶ This promotion would have required him to give up his command post as division commander in Baggari to Maj. Gen. Abdalla Ujang. Khamis refused to leave the area and give over the division commander post. For him, giving up his role as commander would have meant abandoning his leadership of and duty to his people and his constituency. Until his promotion to likely join the Joint Military Ceasefire Commission or Joint Defence Board for SPLM/A-IO under the RARCSS in November 2018, and his transfer to Khar-toum, Khamis directly commanded the greater Baggari area.⁹⁷ As a result, while official command of the area belonged to

Ujang, in practice the command over the Wau area has been split. Khamis controlled the area south-west of Wau—the wider Baggari area—while Ujang controlled the Bazia areas directly south of Wau as well as the area around Mboro, leading to tensions within the Fertit command structure.⁹⁸

This awkward division of command is worsened by other problems, too. Although Khamis and Ujang are Fertit and both hail from the Balanda tribe, they are from different clans.⁹⁹ The Balanda from Baggari, where Khamis is from, believe that they have borne the brunt of the suffering and invested the most in the Fertit struggle;¹⁰⁰ Khamis himself was part of Qwat Salem and the original Fertit opposition in the 1980s. The change in operational leadership resulting in the appointment of Ujang, someone considered to be more junior, was thus deemed to be unacceptable. Although there has been no direct confrontation between the two commanders and their respective troops, the situation has led to serious tensions.

Indeed the fractious relationship between the two officers and their commands are not new, with tensions between the two already appearing in January 2017 following the killing of a national Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM) liaison officer¹⁰¹ in Wau town in January 2017 (Eye Radio, 2017). It is widely believed that the Fertit Lions killed him on suspicion that he was working with Machar’s replacement as national first vice president Taban Deng Gai,¹⁰² who was attempting to recruit the opposition outside Wau town by sending in agents with cash to incentivize their defection (Joakino, 2017).¹⁰³ It remains unclear whether the killing was ordered and by whom, but it led to confrontations between the two major generals and increased distrust. As a result, in July 2017 Khamis had several of Ujang’s officers arrested on suspicion of treason as they were crossing Baggari to Bazia. All of them were executed after a military trial. Since then, despite attempts to broker a reconciliation, the two commands have remained divided, with each side blaming the other. This has also affected the delivery of services to the local population.

For example, military officers in Mboro and Besillia under Ujang's command refused to allow referrals of malnourished children to a stabilization centre in Ngisa in June 2018, which fell under Khamis's command, citing problems between the two commands as the reason.¹⁰⁴ In the face of subsequent government offensives, however, the two sides of the Fertit opposition command in Wau have reconciled for operational and practical reasons. On the 12th November 2018, with Khamis pending departure from the Baggari area, a new division commander was appointed to Division 6A; Maj. Gen. Daniel Joseph Dongo. The new division commander was previously a brigade commander in the Baggari area and likely one of Khamis's protégées and trusted soldiers.¹⁰⁵ It remains unclear what the role of Ujang is and whether this will continue to exacerbate internal tensions within the Fertit military.

Prospects for a mediated peace in Wau

To date, efforts to find a solution to the current South Sudan conflict have mainly focused on finding a national solution through the IGAD-sponsored peace process. Four years after the start of the current civil war, however, most of the country remains in a state of insecurity, with regular confrontations between government and opposition forces despite the signing of multiple ceasefires and peace accords. Sustainable solutions remain absent because none of the actors have been willing to implement the basics of any of the agreements that have been reached.

The prospects of finding a solution to the Fertit grievances as part of the Revitalized ARCSS (RARCSS) signed on 12 September 2018 between the government and opposition parties remain slim. Indeed the official statement by opposition factions under the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA)—most notably Thomas Cirillo's National Salvation Front, Lam Akol's National Democratic Movement, and part of the former detainees faction under Pagan Amum—rejected the agreement.¹⁰⁶ According to the dissenting parties, the accord 'has remained a power sharing agreement between elites and for

the elites' (SSOA, 2018; Radio Tamazuj, 2018) and thus offers little hope in terms of lasting peace.

The SSOA's statement does have some merit. The 2018 RARCSS deal focuses mainly on unrealistic power-sharing arrangements and an unwieldy governance mechanism to be led by a president (Salva Kiir), a first vice president (Riek Machar), and four additional vice presidents (IGAD, 2018, p. 7, sec. 1.5). The practicalities of such a model combined with the personalities of the six post holders¹⁰⁷ make the likelihood of successful governance highly questionable. The security arrangements and other provisions also suggest a replication of the modalities of the 2015 ARCSS peace agreement,¹⁰⁸ which ultimately failed and heavily compromised the security of the civilian population of South Sudan. Considerable scepticism thus surrounds the new RARCSS deal, scepticism which has since been vindicated by the parties' failure to adhere to the latest ceasefire (Mednick, 2018b; Fick and Dimo, 2018).

Two other key issues—the creation of 28/32 states, and the opposition's representation in local government (and, by extension, policy-making)—are also likely to remain unaddressed. According to the RARCSS, the issue of the 28/32 states is supposed to be tackled through the creation of an Independent Boundary Commission (IGAD, 2018, pp. 21–24, sec. 1.15). The commission of 15 members will decide on the number of states and the boundaries of each. If it fails to reach an agreement, the matter will be put to a referendum (p. 23, sec. 1.15.14). However, considering the long-standing deadlock during peace negotiations on the issue of the number of states, the likelihood that the commission will manage to come to a consensual decision is small. Meanwhile, most territorial control rests with the Juba government, with the areas most affected by the boundary decision—such as former WBEG—remaining contested, largely inaccessible, and volatile. How representative any referendum would be under these circumstances is unclear.

On the issue of representation, the RARCSS contains no attempt to reverse the Juba government's control over South Sudanese territory established since the outbreak of the civil war. According to the

agreement, all state and local government control will be decided by a set ratio whereby the current government will remain in control of the majority (55 per cent) of local government positions and will be able to appoint people to fill these positions as it sees fit (IGAD, 2018, pp. 24–25, sec. 1.16). The SPLM-IO will be given 27 per cent of positions, the SSOA 10 per cent, and other political parties 8 per cent. This set ratio does not bode well for groups such as the Fertit, given the government's seizure of much of their land and most of their political positions, including governorships and commands of security forces in Wau and Lol states. The provision stating that

in sharing State and local government positions the Parties shall take into account the relative prominence each Party has in the respective State or county (IGAD, 2018, p. 25, sec. 1.16.4)

is also of concern. This incentivizes the seizure of contested areas before the start of a transitional period.

In addition to the above, it is clear that the RARCSS involves a trade-off between the parties if it is to work. The Nuer and Equatorians have the largest representation and leverage, considering the territory they represent. Their demands therefore have to be taken into account, but to do this other issues and demands have to be sacrificed. The Fertit are a minority; their demands and the issue of Wau could be sacrificed as a (relatively) small trade-off that would mean a lot to the Dinka, and may be enough to secure an agreement on other interests.¹⁰⁹ The continued ceasefire violations outside of Wau town (Fick and Dimo, 2018), and the perpetual lack of accountability for them, are an indication of the extent to which the Dinka would like to dominate the former Fertit-controlled areas.

Despite the above and the markedly slow process of implementation of the RARCSS, a first attempt at reconciliation between opposition and the Government in Wau is taking place. On the 22nd November 2018, CTSAMM brokered a meeting between Khamis and his representatives and Maj. Gen. Keer Kiir Keer and the governor of Wau, Angelo Taban. Though the meeting was filled with the

“The prospects of finding a solution to the Fertit grievances ... remain slim.”

right words, commitments to peace, and a ceasefire, it was also clear that deep mistrust still exists between the two sides. Reportedly the conversation was filled with accusations regarding responsibility for continued fighting, and after the meeting Khamis indicated that he remains wary of the government's sincerity, stating that “It's trying to use force to gain more ground in order to prepare for elections” (Mednick, 2018a). Since then, more meetings between opposition representatives and government officials in Wau town have taken place. It remains to be seen whether the fragile detente will continue to hold.

Parallel to the slow progress made at the national level, local peacebuilding initiatives have been implemented across the country involving various actors and with varying degrees of success. There is some hope that a civil society-led initiative could work in former WBEG in the future.¹¹⁰ The church, representing multiple denominations, could also spearhead mediations. It plays an important role in South Sudan generally, and in Wau its influence is paramount. Even during the height of the violence of June 2016, for example, church compounds where communities had fled for protection were considered off limits to attackers.

Unfortunately, however, successful church-led efforts elsewhere, such as in Gbudwe state, have not yet been replicated in Wau. This is mainly due to the diversity of ethnic groups in the former WBEG region. Historically Wau was the capital of the Bahr el Ghazal region under the rule of Khartoum. Many of the churches that set up their dioceses in the region in the early 20th century used Wau as a base, while also encompassing congregations with a majority of Dinka members in neighbouring states such as Aweil, Gogrial, and Warrap (see Map 1). As a result, although much of the clergy and those who administer the various

church denominations have been Fertit, the leadership of the dioceses and the bishops have largely been Dinka appointees.¹¹¹

This has led to tensions over the handling of the conflict in Wau and Lol states, and disagreements as to how to approach mediation. The experience of the late bishop of the Catholic diocese, Rudolph Deng Majak, illustrates the challenge.¹¹² Bishop Majak was accused internally and by people in the community of failing to mediate in the 2012 crisis, choosing the side of the government, and failing his constituency. As a result he lost credibility and was unable to invigorate a local, church-led peace process. Bishops of other church denominations have also had similar problems. At the same time, there is a reluctance to hand over responsibility for mediation to local and indigenous church leaders. The suggestion of making the Fertit administrator of the Catholic church, Father Marko Mangu,¹¹³ responsible for a locally initiated peace dialogue was reportedly blocked by the senior leadership of an interfaith council in Wau due to personality clashes and divisions based on ethnicity.¹¹⁴ The new governor of Wau state, Angelo Taban Biajo, has put a request for a church-led mediation on hold. As such, a church-led mediated solution remains unlikely in Wau as of mid-2018.

Despite these setbacks other positive initiatives are taking place in Wau. Since 2014 civil society groups such as the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization have been working on inter-communal peace initiatives at a local level, recognizing that a central challenge is the different and sometimes-conflicting perceptions of communities' shared history. Programmes have focused on bringing together elders, youths, and women from different ethnicities in various affected locations to foster an understand-

ing of different perspectives on history, the national conflict, and the local context, thereby breaking down some common misconceptions and prejudices. This initiative has had some success, although it is understood that tensions outside of Wau between the Fertit opposition and the SPLA have direct impact on security in the town. The need for political mediation is, therefore, also critical to ensuring stability and peace.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The Fertit struggle is grounded in a desire for self-determination; that is, a wish to define their own political status, preserve their identity, and govern their land and people in the face of a fear of being marginalized by political elites from the Dinka tribe. This fear has deep-seated roots in the past that have been reinforced at key moments in more recent history. The creation of the 28/32 state structure in 2015, for example, was in many ways a realization of these fears.

The Fertit are not alone in fearing Dinka hegemony. The Shilluk in Upper Nile to the west have similar beliefs regarding the takeover of their kingdom by the Padeng Dinka, and the Equatorians to the south have for decades demanded federalism for similar reasons. Developments since the formation of the SPLA and the second Sudanese civil war have evidenced the conviction among minority tribes in South Sudan that they are at risk unless they physically fight for their own survival, and it is these beliefs that are fuelling the current conflict.

The current civil war has many 'layers' or causes ranging from land insecurity and fear of marginalization, to a desire for control over both power and local and central resources. Such a complex mixture of issues cannot be resolved by putting in place power-sharing arrangements among the elites, nor by the imposition of top-down security arrangements that do not take into account the long-standing animosity and distrust among the current armed actors. Neither can peace be imposed by (external) actors who have a limited understanding of the intricacies of the underlying causes of conflict in South Sudan.

Real, long-term peace will only be achieved if all South Sudanese agree to accept one common history from the multiple, sometimes competing, narratives. It will be important to address these pre-existing narratives head on by bringing local communities together to resolve decades of violence and fear. Grievances must be resolved at the local level, thereby creating a solid foundation for peace and for communities to live together harmoniously. Efforts in this direction are currently under way through the church (although not currently in Wau) and civil society, with potential for success.

The latest peace agreement (the RARCSS) is unlikely to provide solutions to the long-standing issues of the Fertit—or indeed any other minority communities—as several parties who have distanced themselves from it have recognized (SSOA, 2018). While the agreement recognizes that a federal system of governance is a popular demand and that there is a need to devolve powers (IGAD, 2018, p. 7), it remains unclear what this will change in practice while governance continues to be top-heavy and revolve around a power-sharing agreement among elites. Exacerbating matters, this recognition is also contradicted by the RARCSS’s provisions on local government, which are likely to consolidate the skewed power dynamics that have been put in place since the outbreak of the current civil war.

At the same time the allegiance of the Fertit to the SPLM/A-IO platform could also be on rocky ground. The Fertit Lions’ allegiance was based on pragmatism and the belief that the local grievances that inspired their opposition could only be resolved at the national level. In 2015 the SPLM/A-IO under Riek Machar was the only platform available that offered this opportunity in addition to the promise of materiel support. Since then, however, much has changed. The RARCSS has not delivered solutions, resources have not been delivered, fighting continues on the ground, and the negotiation table has become crowded.

Continued Fertit allegiance and a successful end to the fighting will, of course, depend on the implementation of the RARCSS. If, in contrast, key demands on issues that have fuelled the conflict are not addressed, it is likely that the armed

struggle will continue, including for the Fertit. Even if Riek Machar returns to take up his post as first vice president, how much influence he will have over policy decisions and the resolution of key issues—considering the new power-sharing structure and split controls over portfolios—is unclear. Meanwhile, different political avenues to oppose Juba have become available since 2015. Thomas Cirrillo—a well-respected Equatorian leader—is offering an alternative opposition platform through his own movement (the National Salvation Front) and the SSOA. Together with other political parties and the former detainees, this opposition has focused more on politics rather than ground-level insurgency, and could offer a more constructive and peaceful end to the conflict.

There are, of course, many unanswerable questions at this point. Will the RARCSS hold, despite many observers’ reservations and the failure to implement the ceasefire? Will the SPLM/A-IO be able to deliver on its promises to the various communities it represents? Will the opposition parties manage to present a solid front against the current government to push through policy changes, or will infighting undermine the agreement and distract attention from the ultimate goal of peace in South Sudan? Will RARCSS, despite its shortcomings in addressing local issues, still lead to the end of opposition at the local level? And what will those who have rejected it do in the future?

As it stands, the chances of a successful end to the civil war and to local opposition to a centrally run governance system are slim. But the steps needed to allow for local solutions to local issues (such as introducing fair representation, decentralization to allow for local control, and mediation alternatives from the church and civil society) are clear. It remains to be seen whether those at the negotiation table will pursue these steps, or—as has happened in the past—favour short-term personal gain instead. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

- ARCSS** Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
CAR Central African Republic
CTSAMM Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism
GRSS Government of the Republic of South Sudan
HEC High Executive Council
IGAD Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JCE Jieng Council of Elders
JEM Justice and Equality Movement
MP Member of parliament
NBEG Northern Bahr el Ghazal
NSS National Security Service
PoC Protection of civilians (site)
RARCSS Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
SPLM/A Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition
SSOA South Sudan Opposition Alliance
TGoNU Transitional Government of National Unity
UNMISS United Nations Mission in South Sudan
WBEG Western Bahr el Ghazal

Notes

- 1 The areas of Hai Nazareth, Hai Ngobu, Hai Kosti, Bazia Jedid, Jebel Rabi, Jebel Khier, Hai Kamsine, and Baggari Jedid were particularly affected.
- 2 The Fertit do not constitute a single ethnicity, but are an amalgamation of various indigenous minority tribes. The term encompasses the Balanda (Viiri, Boor, Baggari), Bongo, Ndogo, Bai, and Kresh tribes.
- 3 Author interviews with displaced civilians in the protection of civilians (PoC) site and collective centres, Wau, June 2016.
- 4 This information was gathered from eye-witness humanitarian personnel on the ground in Wau during the events described.
- 5 Multiple author interviews with civilians in the PoC site and collective centres, Wau town, June 2016.
- 6 Technically, WBEG state no longer exists, having been divided into Wau and Lol states in 2015. It is used in this paper to refer to events before 2015.

- 7 This applies also to the current peace deal: fighting continued in Baggari and parts of former Central Equatoria, and sporadic clashes in former central Unity state despite the RARCSS peace deal in September 2018.
- 8 The recent establishment of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), representing a diverse array of communities that have come together in opposition to the current government, illustrates the point. While alliance members are united in a few common areas—the need for a different leadership in South Sudan and a new system of governance—all these groups have different, often-localized motivations and reasons for opposing the system imposed by Juba. The same differences also exist under the SPLM/A-IO.
- 9 The author collected the information on which this paper is based as part of two-and-a-half years of fieldwork undertaken in Wau and the wider region of (former) WBEG. She has spent extended periods of time in the field for operational reasons, including before and during the crises in Wau in 2016 and 2017, giving her privileged access to interlocutors on both sides of the conflict and allowing her to witness events at first hand. She undertook dozens of formal interviews and informal conversations with a variety of actors (from the opposition, government, civil society, the civilian population, and international organizations) during this period, in both former WBEG and Juba, as well as via phone and WhatsApp.
- 10 The Dinka are the largest single southern Nilotic group in South Sudan, making up approximately one-third of the entire population (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).
- 11 The Bahr el Ghazals encompass the former states of WBEG, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Gogrial, Lakes, and Warrap and the current states of Aweil, Aweil East, Eastern Lakes, Gogrial, Gok, Lol, Tonj, Twic, Wau, and Western Lakes (see Maps 1 and 2).
- 12 The original plaque of Fort Desaix (Wau) can be found in the Peace Hall at the governor's offices in Wau town.
- 13 Fertit interlocutors repeatedly mentioned the closeness between the Fertit and Sudan, which is illustrated by the many Fertit opposition members who base themselves in Sudan in general and Khartoum in particular.
- 14 The South was divided into three administrative regions: Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile, and Equatoria.
- 15 Author interview with a senior UN national staff member, Juba, 2016.
- 16 Tom al Nur went on to be a founder of the Qwat Salem, which is discussed below in note 21.
- 17 Author interview with a senior UN national staff member, Juba, May 2018; author interview with a Fertit civil society leader, Wau town, June 2018. While there is no written record of these proceedings, Fertit interviewees referred to this incident in various conversations and the community perceives it to be true.
- 18 Author interviews with UN officials and multiple Fertit representatives from the opposition, the church, and civil society, Wau town and surroundings, 2016–18.
- 19 Author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 20 Author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 21 Tom al Nur was a Fertit government official in Wau town at the time, with family links in Sudan. He later joined the government and has not participated in the recent opposition. Ashab Khamis was part of a well-respected family in Wau and later went on to train at the Sudan Armed Forces college in Khartoum, where he studied before returning to Wau and working with state television. He is currently one of the main opposition commanders in Baggari.
- 22 Qwat Salem is loosely translated as 'Peace Force' in Arabic. The group is also referred to on occasion as al-Qwat al-Sadiqqa or 'Friendly Forces'.
- 23 Author interviews with Fertit representatives, UN national staff, and civil society representatives, Wau and Juba, 2016–18.
- 24 Author interviews with two senior Fertit opposition representatives, Mboro, September 2017.
- 25 Author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, May 2018; author interview with a national UN staff member, Juba, April 2018.
- 26 In the 2011 referendum only 7,000 people in Wau and Raja counties, or 4.5 per cent of voters, opted to remain with Sudan (Southern Sudan Referendum 2011, 2011).
- 27 Author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, April 2018; author interview with an international policy analyst, Wau town, June 2018.
- 28 Author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 29 The conference was followed by a meeting in Khartoum in June 2005 to consolidate the resolutions (Gurtong, 2005).
- 30 Author interview with a civil society representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 31 Rizik Zacharia is currently the governor of Lol state, with headquarters in Raja.
- 32 Members of the JCE are often rumoured to make decisions for president Salva Kiir and have been linked to decisions such as the creation of the 28/32 states in 2015, as well as furthering a plan for Dinka domination of South Sudan (author interview with a senior Fertit representative, Wau town, April 2018; author interviews with three opposition members, Baggari, September 2017).
- 33 Author interview with a Fertit opposition leader, Baggari, December 2017; author WhatsApp conversation with a senior Fertit opposition representative, September 2017; official Fertit Lions Facebook page (not available since August 2018).
- 34 See the South Sudan Local Government Act (GRSS, 2009).
- 35 The order reportedly came from the current governor of Wau town, Angelo Taban Biajo, then serving as minister of local government and law enforcement (information based on an author interview with a Fertit representative with direct knowledge of the events, Wau, June 2018).
- 36 Video footage of the protest shows that it was peaceful.
- 37 A World Food Programme national staff member unofficially translated the speech, which was given in Arabic. The speech is widely referenced by interviewees discussing the turning point of the conflict in Wau.
- 38 Speeches in South Sudan often have hidden meanings and can be indicators of violence to come (author interview with an international analyst specializing in Upper Nile, Juba, June 2018).
- 39 Ashab Khamis, a senior Fertit opposition commander and a former director of Wau state television, was arrested.
- 40 Author interview with a Fertit opposition member, Mboro, June 2016.
- 41 The US government imposed sanctions on Malong and several others on 6 September 2017 (US Department of the Treasury, 2017), accusing them of threatening the peace, security, and stability of South Sudan. The UN Security Council also sanctioned Malong on 13 July 2018 for being responsible for, or complicit in, actions or policies that threatened the peace, security, or stability of South Sudan (UN, 2018). He is also widely cited as being responsible for war crimes and atrocities in UN Panel of Experts reports and the final report of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS, 2014).
- 42 For example, 'A day after the events in Mapel at least 61 Nuer troops and four commanding officers fled from an SPLA base at Wau' (Small Arms Survey, 2014). The SPLA reported 'that three people died during clashes that occurred as the troops deserted' (Small Arms Survey, 2014).

- 43 Author interviews with three Fertit opposition members, Baggari, June 2016; author interview with a Fertit source, Wau town, June 2018.
- 44 Peter Tingo went on to become the shadow governor of WBEG and was part of the advance team for Riek Machar's arrival in Juba in 2016. After the Juba crisis he fled to Khartoum and was promoted to his current position of secretary-general of the SPLM-IO.
- 45 At the time, joining the SPLM/A-IO was the only option in order to gain access to national-level negotiations. The government, SPLM/A-IO, and former detainees signed the ARCSS peace agreement in August 2015 (IGAD, 2015).
- 46 See Maps 2 and 3, and Box 1. The number of states was further increased to 32 in 2017 by Establishment Order 1/2017 (GRSS, 2017). Because the former WBEG was not affected by the increase to 32 states, the focus in this paper is on the change to 28. The number of states is referred to as '28/32' states throughout this Briefing Paper.
- 47 Author interview with a UN expert on cattle migration and land, Juba, May 2016.
- 48 The Galweng are the traditional armed security guards accompanying cattle keepers from Gogrial East and Tonj states (formerly Warrap state).
- 49 Numerous reports from the UN and civil society highlighted the tensions between farmers and cattle keepers during this period.
- 50 Author interview with a UN information analyst, Juba, March 2016; author interview with a UN civil affairs analyst, Wau town, June 2018. As in other places in South Sudan, cattle belonging to senior SPLM/A or government officials are frequently protected politically, including by security forces (Copeland, 2016, p. 35).
- 51 Author interviews with a UNMISS civil affairs analyst, Wau town, June 2016; author interviews with local community members, Bazia, June 2018.
- 52 Tai Tai has been accused of being key in operationalizing mass violence in the 2015 Unity state offensive and of war crimes and crimes against humanity (Panel of Experts on South Sudan, 2016, pp. 19, 42).
- 53 Personal observation made by the author during time spent in Wau in March and June 2016.
- 54 Particularly in Baggari Jedid, Hai Khamsin, and Hai Bazia Jedid.
- 55 Author interviews with medical personnel, Wau town, March 2016 (MSF, 2016).
- 56 Author interviews with eyewitnesses, Wau town, March 2016.
- 57 Author interview with hospital staff, Wau town, March 2016; author observations during a visit to Wau hospital, March 2016.
- 58 Governor Waya was dismissed from his post on 23 June 2016 and arrested by the NSS two days later on the pretext that he was responsible for the insecurity in Wau town (*Sudan Tribune*, 2016b; 2016c). It is widely believed that he was arrested for attempting to stop the orchestrated violence in Wau of 24 June 2016.
- 59 The security incidents were widely reported in daily security situation updates from the UN and the South Sudan NGO Forum.
- 60 The former WBEG covered a vast but sparsely populated area. Neighbouring NBEG and Aweil West and Aweil North counties, which are inhabited by the Dinka Malual, are much more densely populated.
- 61 Author interview with a senior international analyst, Juba, July 2016; author interview with a civil society representative, Wau town, June 2016; author interview with a security force member, Wau town, June 2016.
- 62 Author interview with a national security forces member, Wau Town, June 2016; author interview with an opposition representative, Wau, June 2016; author interview with a senior UN analyst, Juba, July 2016.
- 63 The recent fighting is well documented in internal UN security reports and briefings.
- 64 See *The Economist* (2018) on the consistent violations of ceasefires since the current conflict began.
- 65 Reports from humanitarian agencies through author interviews, as well as pictures and reports shared by sources on the ground. The author was involved in the crisis response in 2017 and has first-hand knowledge of events.
- 66 On 2 September 2018 president Salva Kiir issued a decree formally changing the name of the SPLA to the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (*Sudan Tribune*, 2018).
- 67 Author's observations based on a visit to the Mboro and Baggari areas on 29 September and 1 October 2018.
- 68 Because the network of interlocutors in Raja is small and communications are poor due to the complete lack of mobile phone reception and the limited presence of satellite phones on the ground, information-gathering in this vast and underpopulated area is very difficult.
- 69 Author interviews with multiple Fertit opposition members, 2017; author interview with a senior UN national analyst, Wau town, June 2018.
- 70 JEM has been present in South Sudan for a long time. The SPLA has used members of the group as mercenary forces, and JEM members engage in trade throughout the country (Small Arms Survey, 2013, p. 2). JEM also controls the charcoal trade in Juba.
- 71 For example, clashes in Raja in June 2016 were a direct consequence of an assassination attempt targeting governor Rizik.
- 72 Author interview with a UN national analyst, Juba, April 2018; internal briefing by an international researcher, Juba, September 2018.
- 73 Kafia Kingi is a mineral-rich border enclave whose territorial control is disputed. Formerly under the control of South Sudan as part of Raja, the area is currently under the administration of South Darfur in Sudan (Thomas, 2010, pp. 6–11).
- 74 Author interview with a UN national analyst, Juba, April 2018; author conversation with an arms expert, Panel of Experts on South Sudan, March 2018.
- 75 The author witnessed first-hand the linkages referred to in the paper and the presence of Azande opposition in the Raja area in December 2017 and June 2018 in both Lol and Gbudwe states.
- 76 One version of events has senior Azande commanders being arrested by the Fertit/SPLM-IO over atrocities committed against civilians, while another version links the Azande presence in the former WBEG area to economic necessity.
- 77 Author interview with a senior UN national analyst, Juba, April 2018; internal briefing by an international researcher, Juba, September 2018; author's own observations during field missions in Lol and Gbudwe states.
- 78 In August 2018 the PoC site in Wau hosted 17,732 people (UNMISS, 2018b), while in June the collective centres hosted 9,796 people (CCCM, 2018). There is some doubt as to the accuracy of these figures, however. Since the middle of 2018 drastic reductions in the number of people in the PoC site and collective centres have been recorded, with little explanation of where people have gone. In July 2018, for example, over 29,000 people were registered in the PoC site (UNMISS, 2018a); the discrepancy with the most recent figure is unaccounted for.
- 79 Author interviews with PoC site and collective centres residents, Wau town, June 2018; author's observations.
- 80 Author interviews with PoC site and collective centres residents, Wau town, June 2018.
- 81 Observation made by a senior UN analyst, Wau town, April 2018.
- 82 Author interview with several UN national staff members who have returned to their

- neighbourhoods, Wau town, May 2018; author observations during visits to affected neighbourhoods, Wau town, June 2018.
- 83 Author interview with a Fertit resident, Wau town, June 2018; author interview with a senior UN international analyst, Juba, May 2018; author observations during a visit to Wau market and in discussions with shop owners.
- 84 The 5th Division commander as of November 2018 writing was Maj. Gen. Kiir Keer Kiir.
- 85 Akol Kur is a Dinka from Warrap and has been named by both the Panel of Experts in various reports and in the final report of the AU Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS, 2014) as being complicit in the perpetration of war crimes.
- 86 Author interview with UN international staff member, Juba, August 2017.
- 87 Peter Marcello Nasir Jelenge was previously the minister of labour, the public service, and human resource development in the TGoNU, but was fired for his loyalty to Riek Machar and replaced.
- 88 Since August 2017 the SPLM/A-IO has lost all of its territory around Malakal and on the west bank of the Nile, and vast stretches of land in former Unity, Jonglei, and Western Equatoria states, as well as more recently in Baggari (see Map 1).
- 89 There are no top-ranking Fertit representatives in the current Juba government.
- 90 Author interview with multiple opposition members, Baggari, September 2017–June 2018; author conversation with an arms expert, Panel of Experts on South Sudan, March 2018.
- 91 Author WhatsApp interviews with three national analysts, Wau and Juba, 2018.
- 92 Interview with AP reporter Sam Mednick, present at the CTSAMM organised meeting between Lt. Gen. Ashab Khamis and Government, 22 November 2018.
- 93 Author interview with an opposition commander, Baggari, 2016; author interview with opposition representatives, Baggari, 2018.
- 94 Author conversations with Lt. Gen. Ashab Khamis, Baggari area, 2017.
- 95 Maj. Gen. Musa Ahmed Dakume Abdulaziz heads Division 6B.
- 96 Confidential documents seen by the author.
- 97 Author interviews with Lt. Gen. Ashab Khamis, Baggari area, August and December 2017 and November 2018.
- 98 Until the August 2018 government offensives Maj. Gen. Ujang also controlled the area of Mboro/Besillia directly west of Wau. This territory was lost in August 2018.
- 99 Ashab is a Balanda Viiri from the Baggari area, whereas Ujang is a Balanda Bor from Bazia.
- 100 Internal UNMISS report seen by the author, September 2017.
- 101 CTSAMM liaison officers monitor areas of conflict in order to assess violations of the permanent ceasefire and report findings to the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission. Monitors from both government and opposition parties are appointed to ensure a balanced view.
- 102 As of November 2018 Taban Deng Gai is the first vice president of South Sudan. He used to be the chief negotiator for the SPLM/A-IO under the initial ARCSS agreement, until he ousted Riek Machar in July 2016 and took over the role of first vice president in the original TGoNU.
- 103 Author interviews with two UN analysts, Wau town and Juba, February–March 2017; author interview with an opposition commander, Baggari area, September 2017.
- 104 Witnessed by the author, Mboro, June 2018.
- 105 Author meeting with the new Division commander Maj. Gen. Daniel Joseph Dongo in Baggari November 2018.
- 106 The RARCSS was signed by the incumbent TGoNU, the SPLM/A-IO (on behalf of all of its members, including the Fertit Lions), former detainees, the SSOA, an umbrella of political parties (the National Alliance of Political Parties), other stakeholders and adherents, and the agreement's guarantors (Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the IGAD special envoy).
- 107 The likely post holders are Salva Kiir, Riek Machar, Taban Deng Gai, Wani Igga, Thomas Cirrillo or Joseph Bakasoro, and Rebecca Garang.
- 108 The security arrangements provide for the cantonment of forces in sites across the country, followed by their integration into one army, police force, or security force (IGAD, 2018, pp. 31–41).
- 109 Author's own analysis, supported by other South Sudan analysts.
- 110 The Council of Churches initiated a local peace initiative after its successful mediation between government and SPLM/A-IO representatives in Western Equatoria. It has been suggested that a similar approach might be successful in Wau.
- 111 Author interview with a former member of the Catholic clergy, Wau town, June 2018; author interview with a civil society representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 112 Rudolph Deng Majak was a bishop from November 1995 until his death in March 2017. To date he has not been replaced.
- 113 Father Marko Mangu is a Balanda Viiri from Baggari.
- 114 Author interview with a former member of the Catholic clergy, Wau town, June 2018; author interview with a civil society representative, Wau town, June 2018.
- 115 Author interview with a civil society representative, Wau town, June 2018.

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A publication of the Small Arms Survey's Human Security Baseline Assessment for Sudan and South Sudan project funded by the United States government.

