



# ‘If You are Safe, I am Safe’ South Sudan Conflict Analysis

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The ‘If You are Safe, I am Safe’ strategy for South Sudan proposes to turn the desire for safety from a competitive conflict-causing endeavour to a co-operative peace-building endeavour. Aimed initially at promoting peace between communities, it envisages an active role for both local administration and central government. To do so there must be an understanding of the factors driving conflict, as well as those factors supporting reconciliation.

The drivers contributing to conflict in South Sudan’s current civil war can be grouped under general headings of a lack of unity of national purpose, the fragmentation of the military and civilian communities, the mobilization of ethnicity in political struggles, youth unemployment and a competition for resources, and weak judicial and administrative structures. ‘If you are safe, I am safe’ seeks to address the first three directly and by doing so, create the opportunities to address the last two.

There are a number of factors that can be mobilized to promote peace between communities, where the well-established institution of the inter-tribal conference can bring communities face-to-face, and require an active civil administration to ensure implementation of resolutions.

## Drivers of Conflict

The unresolved legacy of twenty-two years of civil war between the SPLM and the Khartoum governments (1983-2005) is the main driver of the current civil war. During that time there was a proliferation of armed groups and increased access to arms. Both the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) armed ethnic militias who were more often involved in attacking civilian communities than confronting organized militaries. The 1992-2002 split in the SPLA led to the creation of further armed groups loosely allied with one side or the other, such as the 'White Army' of Lou Nuer armed civilians in Jonglei, who were later active in the post-CPA Murle-Nuer conflict. Political conflict within the SPLA led to ethnic mobilization that was not completely overcome by SPLM/A reunification in 2002.

South Sudan contained both pro- and anti-SPLA armed groups throughout the interim period of the CPA (2005-2011). Unresolved political tensions within the SPLM/A led to the outbreak of civil war in 2013. As in the 1992-2002 period, ethnic competition was not the cause of political conflict; rather, ethnic mobilization was the result of political conflict (*Rolandson & Daly 2016*). Both government forces and armed opposition groups have attacked civilian communities identified with the other side, and this has drawn more communities into active violence in response.

Some of the Other Armed Groups (OAGs) were reintegrated into the SPLA, but both pre- and post-2011 there were serial defections from the SPLA. Some defectors were aligned with Khartoum, while others were dissatisfied with their position within the army. Defectors were often wooed back into the SPLA, enticed with higher ranks and salaries. Thus, at a time when the SPLA should have been reducing its numbers and retraining and returning its veterans to civilian occupations, it actually grew; the increasing number of semi-trained and often illiterate personnel in its ranks adversely affected discipline (*LeRiche and Arnold 2012*).

Not all inter-communal violence during the Interim Period was a direct result of unresolved conflicts from the previous civil war. Many tensions were allowed to escalate through the weakness of civil administration. To a certain extent the Murle-Nuer conflict in Jonglei was a continuation of wartime tensions, but it was exacerbated by the forced disarmament of the Lou Nuer that initially left them vulnerable to attack, and prompted a rapid rearmament. But underlying these reciprocal raids was the combination of the cattle economy and youth unemployment. The youth of Jonglei lacked opportunities to acquire cattle with which to marry because they had only restricted access to the cash economy; raiding offered a ready option to accumulate cattle (*Thomas 2014*).

Population displacement during the war, and free movement after it, meant that some cattle-keeping communities relocated themselves to the agricultural lands of the Equatorias. In resultant disputes between newcomers and locals, SPLA units (recruited from the same areas as the pastoralists) often took the pastoralists' side, causing further resentment and alienation of some civilian communities.

Civil administration in Jonglei lacked the manpower of police and trained judicial personnel with which to control raiding and punish violent crimes. When it did get involved in attempting to rein in conflict it did so through heavy-handed disarmament campaigns where the army was guilty of many human rights abuses. In addition to government failure to provide rural security, the absence of schools, dispensaries, bore hole wells, and other social services contributed to an alienation from government across Jonglei. Weak administrative structures also failed to halt the escalation of Dinka inter-sectional feuds in Lakes state. The failure of the SPLA to adequately protect civilian communities in Western Equatoria from attack by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) also led to the formation of local militias.

Absence of civil government has been one contributing factor in allowing the spread of conflict, but non-violent government actions have contributed to rising tensions as well. The creation of new counties during the interim period led to disputes over the acquisition and division of resources, as county governments

engaged in boundary disputes. In trying to increase both a county's territory and its population, local politicians believed that this would increase their share of government resources (*Schomerus & Allen 2010*). Subdividing old districts into smaller counties created new majority groups and new minorities, further dividing even related peoples. Additional government decrees re-dividing the country into a number of smaller ethnically defined federal states, irrespective of economic viability, has increased tension and conflict as many communities dispute the borders imposed by central government (*Justin & De Vries 2017*). Government has exacerbated the situation by devolving security to local armed groups, urging youth to form defense forces to protect their borders from their neighbours.

### **Factors Supporting Reconciliation**

There are precedents for ending conflict in South Sudan and rebuilding trust between communities, and these precedents can be used to improve mutual security. In the past regular inter-tribal meetings helped to resolve conflicts before they got out of hand. South Sudanese are familiar with meetings between chiefs of different communities supervised by civil administration and know how to organize them (*Crawford & Oko 2015; RVI 2016b*). When these meetings were successful it was because the civil administration enforced implementation of agreements over grazing, water rights, and the payment of fines.

During peace-time these meetings dealt with low-level conflicts, but there are recent examples of successful inter-tribal meetings during wartime and in the immediate aftermath of war. The 1999 Wunlit conference between Dinka of Bahr el-Ghazal and Nuer of Western Upper Nile — a meeting whose security was guaranteed by Salva Kiir Mayardit, the local SPLA commander — contributed to a reduction of raiding and counter raiding between the two communities (*Bradbury, et al 2006; RVI 2015*). It was only partially successful because there was no civil authority to guarantee the implementation of all of the conference resolutions, but one of the main outcomes was the realization by members of both communities that their own security depended on a mutual guarantee of their neighbours' security — precisely the understanding that 'If you are safe, I am safe' seeks to promote.

During the 1982-2005 war Khartoum had organized the Rizeigat and Misseriya Baggara of South Darfur and Western Kordofan as pro-government militias to raid Dinka communities of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. In peace-time both Baggara groups depended on their ability to graze their cattle inside Northern Bahr el-Ghazal with the agreement of the Malual Dinka. Following the signing of the CPA in 2005 this trust had to be restored if the Baggara were to regain access to the southern pastures. A series of Misseriya-Malual and Rizeigat-Malual meetings supported by USAID led to reconciliation between the communities and negotiated access to Malual pastures across the Sudan-South Sudan border (*Santschi 2009*). Despite the war-time history of cross-border raiding, part of the reason the communities had the confidence to meet with each other this way was because during the war local SPLA commanders had guaranteed the security of a network of 'peace markets' where merchants from Sudan could trade safely inside SPLA-controlled territory and contribute to the local economy (*Bradbury et al 2006*).

The ultimate aim of the 'If You are Safe, I am Safe' strategy is to improve security by resolving South Sudan's interlocking conflicts. It seeks to build a conducive environment for an inclusive political process, impartially led, embracing not just political actors but the wider society, and providing safety for the freedom of expression.

Important lessons from previous peace processes are:

- 1) Confidence-building measures both prior to and after major meetings are necessary to persuade whole communities that security is possible if mutually reinforced. The exchange of visits by community leaders was central to the successful outcome of the Wunlit conference. They were able to meet in a neutral loca-

tion outside South Sudan before the meeting, and exchanged visits both before and after the meeting. The church-founded Kuron Holy Trinity Peace Village in Eastern Equatoria has already been used as a venue where leaders from opposed communities can meet safely (RVI 2016a). The revival of 'peace markets', guaranteed by joint forces in areas of insecurity might also become similar meeting places, at the same time helping to revive local war-ravaged economies.

- 2) The free expression of grievances during meetings enabled each side to understand the harm they had inflicted on others as well as to recount the harm others had inflicted on them.
- 3) Free expression also reveals common grievances, e.g. lack of government services and security, and can help to build common ground. When Murle, Nuer and Dinka leaders in Jonglei were able to meet before 2013 they were often surprised to learn that they shared grievances about the lack of schools, dispensaries, adequate water supplies, secure roads and markets.
- 4) Civil authority must be committed to the effective implementation and follow-up of agreed resolutions.
- 5) Civil society organizations, churches and NGOs were critical in the successful convening of earlier inter-tribal meetings. They have a vital role to play not only in communicating the principles of 'If You are Safe, I am Safe' to the wider public, but in the organization of neutral meeting places, and as partners with civil administration in the implementation of agreements (RVI 2016b).

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