



The Network
for Religious
& Traditional
Peacemakers



RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE MAPPING

SUDAN

Author: Osman Mobarak Musa

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Abstract

Sudan's ongoing conflict, primarily a struggle for political and economic power between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has exacerbated ethnic and regional divisions across the country. This study examines the potential of religious leadership in mitigating violence, fostering reconciliation, and promoting sustainable peace in Sudan. It highlights historical and contemporary examples of religious mediation and explores the challenges religious leaders face in maintaining neutrality amidst a highly polarized landscape.

The study argues that leveraging religious leaders in Sudan as platforms for dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and social cohesion can counteract divisive rhetoric and extremist mobilization. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for a structured governance framework that safeguards religious diversity and integrates religious leaders into formal peace processes.

Through qualitative analysis and case studies, this research offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders seeking to harness religious leadership for conflict resolution. By positioning religious leaders as advocates for peace, Sudan can cultivate a more inclusive and resilient pathway toward national reconciliation and stability.

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1. Introduction (Why Map Religious Actors?)

The current conflict in Sudan started on April 15, 2023, as heavy clashes erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This struggle arose from long-standing differences between military factions that had previously joined forces to oust President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and later carried out a coup against the transitional government in 2021. Disputes over merging the RSF into the national army and the schedule for returning to civilian rule grew into full-scale war, pushing Sudan into a destructive struggle.

The RSF traces its roots to the Janjaweed militias, known for their brutal actions in the Darfur conflict of the early 2000s, where they faced accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Though later formalized as a paramilitary group, its leader, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), pressed for more independence, clashing with SAF commander General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Their rivalry sharpened as global and regional calls for a civilian-led government emerged, a process both sides tried to bend to their own advantage.

The ongoing war has triggered a serious humanitarian crisis, taking thousands of lives and pushing millions to escape within Sudan or to nearby countries. Civilians have faced the heaviest toll, with accounts of both sides harming civilians, taking aid supplies, and violating human rights on a wide scale. The crisis has weighed heavily on neighboring nations like Chad and South Sudan, now sheltering large groups of refugees (Associated Press, 2025c) (Associated Press, 2025a).

Attempts by the African Union, United Nations, and regional peacemakers to establish a steady ceasefire have not succeeded, as both factions battle for control on the ground (Associated Press, 2025c). The conflict's extended length endangers Sudan's unity, raising the chance of deeper divisions along ethnic and regional lines, similar to earlier troubles in Darfur and South Kordofan by the formation of a rival government (Associated Press, 2025b), (Associated Press, 2025c).

The goal of this report is to identify key stakeholders in Sudan's religious landscape, their political affiliations, and their respective levels of influence over the warring parties in order to influence the conflict resolution efforts. The need for such a study was initiated in January 2024 when the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Inclusive Peace and the African Council for Religious Leaders (ACRL) organized an event convening religious leaders from Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia. During the event, the findings of a study on Religious Actors in Formal Peace Processes (Inclusive peace, 2024), were presented and discussed. A strategic discussion on the war in Sudan, with an emphasis on the role of religious players in dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding, was hosted on the sidelines of the event by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (NRTP) and USIP. The discussion identified two primary goals:

1. The need for religious actors to use their influence to bring the two warring parties to the negotiating table i.e. restarting the stalled peace processes in Jeddah and through IGAD.
2. The need for religious actors to influence the civilian coalition Taqqadum led by former Prime Minister Hamdok.

The January meeting resulted in a joint peace initiative by Sudanese and South Sudanese religious leaders, who met in Juba on March 18–19, 2024, to develop key recommendations and action plans for religious leaders to contribute to ending the war.

Building on this previous work, the mapping of Sudan’s religious landscape aims to analyze key stakeholders, their political affiliations, and their influence on the warring parties. The findings will guide the international community, especially those working with religious actors, in engaging them to facilitate peace and end the war in Sudan.

2. Overview of the Report Structure

This report examines Sudan’s ever-shifting religious landscape, focusing carefully on how religious actors play a role in the conflict that began on April 15, 2023. It aims to provide a clear outline of Sudan’s religious groups, their locations, and their effects on social and political life. By studying the connections between religion, conflict, and peace, the research works to make clear how these actors can either add to the fighting or support efforts to bring peace to a struggling and uncertain Sudan.

The report begins with an introduction that outlines its purpose, emphasizing the need to grasp Sudan’s religious landscape as a vital step toward tackling its lasting challenges. It draws attention to the dual nature of religious actors—sometimes widening rifts, other times acting as strong backers of peace initiatives. Chapter Two presents the report’s outline, while Chapter Three explains the methodology, detailing how data was gathered, the sources used, and the approach applied to understand the findings. This part also outlines the study’s range and difficulties, such as restricted access to information and the risk of accidental bias.

Chapter Four addresses the practical and study-related hurdles encountered, such as challenges in reaching specific places or communities and ensuring fair interpretations. Chapter Five provides an in-depth look at Sudan’s main religious groups—Islamic Sufi orders, Salafi trends, the Muslim Brotherhood, Christian communities, and local beliefs—tracing their historical, social, and political roles to explain their place in today’s Sudan. Chapter Six maps where these groups are strongest and explores why they thrive in those areas. Chapter Seven explores the peacebuilding activities these groups undertake, looking closely at how they relate to one another, the hurdles they face, and the ways they help bring about justice and healing. It also sheds light on how religious beliefs can either mend disagreements or be influenced to serve different purposes.

Chapter Eight frames the ongoing war in a broader view, drawing attention to the steps religious leaders have taken—through efforts like the Sheikh Al-Yaqout Initiative and the Call of the People of Sudan—to quiet the storm of unrest. Chapter Nine pulls together interview findings, offering thoughtful insights into how religion, conflict, and peace connect in Sudan.

Chapter Ten examines the social and political influence of religious leaders, their effects on groups like the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the role of official religious bodies. Finally, Chapter Eleven wraps up with practical suggestions for using religious actors to promote peace and stability in Sudan.

3. Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research design for mapping the religious sector's contribution to peace and conflict, customized to suit research into religion in conflict-affected environments, such as Sudan.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

DESK REVIEW

The desk review formed the foundational phase of the study. It involved an in-depth review of existing literature on Sudan's religious landscape and the legal frameworks governing the religious sector. Key activities included an in-depth review of academic research, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and records from journalists, religious groups and scholars. It also included reviewing Sudanese constitutional provisions related to religion, and mapping key religious actors and assessing their contributions to conflict and peacebuilding and highlighting their capabilities and limitations.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH EMBEDDED QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights from key stakeholders. A set of questions was developed and divided into four main thematic issues central to Sudan's religious landscape such as religious groups, religious leaders, religious formal institutions, and religious thoughts and values that can be used or misused during conflicts. Each block of questions addressed a specific domain (e.g., stakeholder identification, affiliations, influence, peacebuilding roles).

Sampling Strategy A mix of purposive and snowball sampling was used to ensure that interviewees were knowledgeable and directly involved with the religious landscape or peacebuilding. This approach prioritized diversity of perspectives while accounting for the constraints of working in an active conflict zone.

A total of 37 key informant interviews were conducted for the study.

Key informants were initially identified based on their knowledge of the religious landscape or direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts. They were selected from the following categories:

- Religious leaders from major religious groups and institutions.
- Scholars and experts with knowledge of the religious sector.
- Civil society organizations and NGOs working with religious groups.
- Individuals and refugees from areas directly affected by the war.

Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants (Snowball Sampling. (n.d.). Existing participants referred additional stakeholders who possessed relevant insights into religious affiliations and political dynamics within Sudan. Existing participants referred additional stakeholders who possessed relevant insights into religious affiliations and political dynamics within Sudan. Participants needed to demonstrate knowledge or experience related to one or more elements of Sudan's religious landscape (e.g., direct engagement with religious institutions, policy expertise, conflict-affected background).

3.2 Analytical Framework

The study applied the Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), a deductive thematic method suited to research with fixed topics, to study the qualitative data collected on Sudan's religious stakeholders. The analytical framework for this study is designed to systematically explore Sudan's religious landscape, with a focus on the roles, affiliations, and influence of religious actors in conflict and peacebuilding. This approach organized participant responses into main themes—religious groups, values used or misused in conflict, religious leaders, and official religious institutions—allowing a clear evaluation of their roles in Sudan's conflict dynamics.

Responses were arranged into matrices for each theme, offering an easy, side-by-side summary of views across the sample. Interpretations highlighted key patterns and trends, supported by cross-checks with secondary sources. This thorough process produced a consistent, evidence-based analysis, capturing Sudan's complex religious landscape while maintaining clarity and depth.

3.3 Limitations

CHALLENGES IN DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for this study faced significant challenges due to the security hindrances of ongoing conflict in Sudan. The security risks for both data collectors and interviewees were paramount, as the volatile environment posed direct threats to their safety. In areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), access was severely restricted, making it difficult to gather firsthand information. Additionally, the weaponization of the internet and communication channels created an atmosphere of fear, discouraging potential respondents from participating openly or anonymously. These constraints limited the ability to conduct comprehensive fieldwork, particularly in conflict hotspots, and necessitated reliance on alternative methods such as remote interviews and secondary data sources.

Some participants chose to skip topics they considered irrelevant to their own experiences or deemed sensitive, which were designed to measure variables such as the influence of religious groups and leaders and the degree of institutional autonomy.

POTENTIAL BIASES

The study acknowledges the potential for biases in data collection and analysis. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the polarized environment, respondents may have provided information that aligns with their affiliations or reflects their perceived safety rather than objective realities. Furthermore, the reliance on purposive and snowball sampling, while necessary to access key informants, may have introduced selection bias, as participants were often connected through existing networks. Efforts were made to mitigate these biases by cross-referencing data from multiple sources and prioritizing diverse perspectives, but the limitations remain a consideration in interpreting the findings.

CONSTRAINTS IN ACCESSING CERTAIN REGIONS OR GROUPS

Access to certain regions and groups was severely constrained due to the security situation, particularly in areas under RSF control. These zones were often too dangerous for researchers to enter, and even local interviewees faced significant risks in sharing information.

The restrictions disproportionately affected the ability to gather data from marginalized or minority religious groups, whose voices are critical to understanding the full religious landscape. As a result, the study had to rely on indirect methods, such as interviews with displaced individuals or secondary sources, to fill gaps in data. These constraints highlight the challenges of conducting research in active conflict zones and underscore the need for caution in generalizing findings.

4. Religion and Politics in Sudan, Historical Background

Sudan's history is marked by the interplay of religion and politics across various eras. In ancient times, the Kingdom of Kush (c. 2500 BC - 350 AD) blended polytheistic beliefs with political authority, as rulers were seen as divine representatives. This was followed by the Christian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alwa (6th–15th century), where Christianity unified governance and shaped foreign relations.

The rise of Islam during the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821) and the Darfur Sultanate (17th–19th century) established Sharia as a legal and moral framework, fostering social cohesion and political stability.

The modern era saw Egyptian Turkish rule (1821–1885) and the Mahdist State (1885–1898), which sought to establish an Islamic state, followed by Anglo-Egyptian rule (1899–1956), where religious policies deepened the north-south divide.

These historical phases illustrate how religion has consistently influenced Sudan's political and cultural identity, shaping its governance and societal structures.

Since the formation of the Sudanese state, Christianity has been strongly present. The Sudanese state began with the formation of three Christian kingdoms: Makuria, Nobatia, and Alodia, in the mid-sixth century AD. These Christian kingdoms ruled the Nile Valley from northern Sudan to the central region. With the gradual introduction of Islam to Sudan from the 7th century AD onward, these kingdoms began to decline.

The Baqt Treaty between Muslims and Christians led to the shift of power from Christian kingdoms to Muslim kingdoms such as the Kingdom of Taqali and the Kingdom of the Funj. The first Islamic state with a Sufi and popular Islamic character mixed with African and Arab cultures was the Sultanate of Sennar on the Blue Nile and the Funj Sultanate.

Following this, the Mahdist Revolution emerged, a religious-political movement founded by Imam Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, which ruled Sudan based on Islamic Sharia from 1881 to 1898, the year the British entered Sudan. During the British colonial period (1899–1956), the British administration co-opted local religious leaders, chiefs, and administrators to govern rural areas, villages, and small towns. They established rural legislation, administrations, and courts, granting them discretionary powers issued by the Governor-General, who was the constitutional legislator of the state. This local religious administration continued until Sudan's independence in 1956 (Republic of Sudan, 1956).

SUDAN AFTER INDEPENDENCE: CONSTITUTIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING THE RELIGIOUS SECTOR

The governance of Sudan has undergone numerous turning points in matters of the constitution, legislation, and law. The role of religious leaders in legislation and governance, whether they were religious groups, political religious parties, or what is known as political Islam, has been inconsistent, with the political aspect overshadowing religiosity and faith.

For example, groups like the Ansar and Khatmiyya, as well as political Islam represented by the National Congress Party and the Popular Congress Party, had a significant influence on legislation and governance. However, there was a complete marginalization of Christians, with restrictions even placed on their places of worship, such as churches and Christian clubs, through laws like the Public Order Law and the 1998 Constitution (Riyad, 1975).

THE 1956 CONSTITUTION AND THE ABBOUD ERA

After independence, the 1956 Civil Constitution was introduced, which reduced the role of religious leaders and local administrations, limiting their authority to Sharia courts. The Abboud regime continued with the same civil constitution, but after the October Revolution and subsequent elections, the elected parliament included various religious and secular parties, including religious leaders and political Islam represented by the Khatmiyya, Ansar, Islamic Charter Front, and Communists. However, the first democratic experiment faced a setback when Islamists expelled the elected Communists from parliament and introduced the Islamic Constitution in 1968, which did not last long due to a military coup led by Jaafar Nimeiri in 1969.

The 1973 Constitution was a civil and secular constitution, reducing the role of religious leaders and political Islam in governance. However, in 1977, a national reconciliation between Islamists and Nimeiri led to the September Islamic Laws in 1983. These laws represented a new form of repression in the name of religion and political Islam, with the establishment of summary justice courts that reached the point of flogging and amputations. These laws were a misuse enforced by strict interpretations of Sharia.

After the April 1986 uprising, a civil government and objective laws were established without the interference of religious leaders in politics. The amended 1956 Civil Constitution was reinstated and remained in effect until 1989, when the National Islamic Front staged a coup and continued to rule under Islamic Sharia.

THE 2005 CONSTITUTION AND THE SECESSION

In 2005, an agreement was reached between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the National Congress Party-led government, and the National Democratic Alliance on the 2005 Constitution, a civil constitution. Its essence was that citizenship is the basis of rights without religious, racial, or political discrimination (Republic of Sudan, 2005).

The constitution adhered to international agreements, including the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

Article 27 of the Bill of Rights in the 2005 Constitution stated that all rights enshrined in international agreements are an integral part of this law, as well as women's rights in the Bill of Rights.

The National Congress Party-led government faced challenges implementing the 2005 Constitution, culminating in the secession of South Sudan, with its significant Christian and traditional religious populations, following the referendum in 2011. The government renounced the civil principles of the 2005 Constitution, imposed a state of emergency, and reverted to Islamic Sharia, the Public Order Law, and the National Security Law, practicing repression and arrests in the name of religion.

The December 2019 uprising against political Islam led to the Constitutional Document, which called for civil governance and citizenship as the basis of rights without religious or racial discrimination. However, the military's prominent role in the joint civilian-military Sovereign Council, established under the 2019 Constitutional Document, fueled ongoing protests by the youth of the December Revolution, contributing to tensions that later escalated into conflict in 2023.

5. Major Religious Groups and their Influence in Sudan

The chapter will identify the main religious groups in describing their distinctive characteristics. It will also identify their level of influence by factors such as membership size, political influence, and media presence. The findings will enable readers to learn more about which groups are more influential and whether and how their activities shape community life.

The percentages of Islam in Sudan (Sunni/Shia) is 90%, while Christians represent 5.4% of the Sudanese population. The indigenous religious beliefs represent only 1% according to data from the Faith Inspires Institution.

5.1 Islam

Sufism is a unique pathway within Islam, distinguished by its profound spiritual rituals and practices. Purifying oneself of impurities and separating oneself from worldly pleasures in order to become closer to God is a fundamental aspect of Sufism. Sheikhs serve as leaders, advisors, and instructors in the hierarchical system of Sufi orders.

Sufi traditions are also known for their extensive use of poetry, sung praises, and musical instruments like drums and tambourines to express divine love, and praises of the Prophet Muhammad. These musical praises are often performed with dance movements, which have sometimes been met with criticism from other Islamic schools.

Moreover, Sufis often face criticism by conservative and Salafi groups for constructing domes and shrines over the graves of their sheikhs. Among the harshest critics they encounter are for their belief in the possibility of receiving direct spiritual guidance during sessions of remembrance, meditation, or through dreams. On the other hand, they are praised for their tolerance and acceptance of others.

The following Sufi orders represent distinct spiritual traditions within Islam, each with unique teachings, practices, and regional influences in Sudan.

The Qadiriyya Order, founded by Abdul Qadir Gilani in 12th-century Baghdad, is one of the oldest and most widespread Sufi orders. It has played a crucial role in Sudan, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, where it has influenced both spiritual life and conflict mediation. The order emphasizes humility, philanthropy, and devotion to God. Sudanese Qadiriyya leaders, such as Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Mardi, have contributed to its integration into local communities, making it a unifying force in western Sudan.

The Tijaniyya Order, established by Ahmad al-Tijani in 18th-century Morocco, has a significant presence in Sudan, particularly in the Central and Western regions, including Khartoum and Darfur. It is known for its strong emphasis on education, spiritual discipline, and individual adherence to Islamic teachings. Prominent figures such as Sheikh Ibrahim Niass have played a key role in spreading the order's teachings, helping it gain widespread influence through grassroots Islamic revival efforts.

The Khatmiyya Order, also known as the Mirghaniyya, was founded by Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani in the 19th century and is closely associated with the Mirghani family. It is particularly influential in eastern Sudan, including Kassala and Gedaref, where it has garnered a strong following among the Beja and Rashaida communities. Beyond its spiritual role, the Khatmiyya Order has historically been engaged in political movements and peacebuilding initiatives, shaping Sudan's socio-political landscape.

The Sammaniyya Order, an offshoot of the Khalwatiyya Order, was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Sammani in the 18th century. In Sudan, it has a substantial presence in the central and northern regions, including Khartoum and Shendi. The order focuses on spiritual purification, communal rituals, and devotion to the teachings of its leaders. Sheikh Al-Tayeb Wad Al-Bashir played a vital role in its expansion and institutionalization in Sudanese society.

The Burhaniya Order, established by Sayyid Muhammad Uthman Abduh al-Burhani in the 20th century, is a relatively modern Sufi order that emphasizes simplicity and a direct spiritual connection with God. It has gained a strong presence in urban centers such as Khartoum, attracting a diverse group of followers. The order's leaders, including Sheikh Muhammad Uthman Abduh al-Burhani, have established religious centers (zāwiyas) to promote its teachings and expand its influence in Sudan.

The Ahmadiyya Order, distinct from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, is a Sufi order with origins in North Africa. In Sudan, it has a smaller yet notable presence, primarily in the northern regions. It is recognized for its mystical practices and emphasis on spiritual enlightenment. Sheikh Al-Amin Al-Mahdi has been instrumental in integrating the order's teachings into Sudanese religious traditions, particularly in rural communities where it appeals to those seeking deeper spiritual experiences.

The Idrisiyyah Order, founded by Ahmad ibn Idris in the 19th century, is known for its reformist approach and its strong emphasis on Quranic teachings. It has a presence in Sudan's northern and eastern regions, particularly among the Hadendowa and other Beja communities. Sheikh Al-Hassan Al-Mirghani played a significant role in spreading the order's influence, which has been particularly appealing to marginalized groups and those advocating for social justice (Trimingham, 1998).

The Hindiyya Order, a branch of the Qadiriyya, was introduced to Sudan in the 19th century. Named after its founder, Sheikh Al-Hindi, the order is known for incorporating local traditions into Sufi teachings. It has a strong presence in central and western Sudan, particularly among rural populations. Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Hindi has been a key figure in preserving the order's unique blend of traditional beliefs and Sufi spirituality.

Salafi influenced groups in Sudan encompass a range of movements that adhere to the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, advocating for a return to the practices of the early generations of Muslims (the Salaf). Unlike Jihadist Salafism, which endorses armed struggle, these groups primarily focus on social, religious, and sometimes political activism to promote their ideology.

The most prominent Salafi group in Sudan is Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah, which has played a significant role in shaping religious discourse. Established in the early 20th century, Ansar al-Sunnah initially focused on religious purification and education but later expanded into social services, including healthcare and humanitarian aid.

While generally apolitical in focus, some members of Ansar al-Sunnah have occasionally cooperated with state authorities, though their direct influence on legislation and policy remains limited compared to overtly political Islamist groups.

Beyond Ansar al-Sunnah, other Salafi groups have emerged with varying degrees of engagement in public affairs. Some activist Salafi factions participate in discussions on governance and social policies, advocating for stricter adherence to Islamic law while avoiding direct involvement in political competition. However, tensions exist between these groups and Sudan's more traditionalist Sufi orders, as Salafis often criticize practices such as saint veneration and shrine worship, viewing them as religious innovation.

While Salafi groups do not engage in violent extremism, their ideological proximity to more radical factions makes their narratives susceptible to manipulation by extremist actors. Addressing their influence requires fostering interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, strengthening moderate religious discourse.

Jihadist Salafism represents a radical interpretation of Salafism that advocates for violent means to achieve religious and political goals. Unlike mainstream Salafism, which focuses on theological purity and social conservatism, Jihadist Salafism legitimizes armed struggle as a means to establish Islamic governance. In Sudan, the presence of Jihadist Salafi groups has historically been influenced by transnational jihadist movements, including Al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State (U.S. Department of State, 2019) (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

The roots of Jihadist Salafism in Sudan can be traced back to the early 1990s when the country, under the leadership of Hassan al-Turabi, provided refuge to jihadist figures such as Osama bin Laden. This period saw Sudan becoming a hub for Islamist militancy, although the state later distanced itself from these groups under international pressure.

Despite this, some Jihadist Salafi factions continued to operate covertly, influencing extremist discourse and recruiting followers through informal religious networks and social grievances (Hudson Institute, 2020).

In the current Sudanese conflict, while Jihadist Salafi groups are not direct actors, their ideological narratives continue to shape the rhetoric of some militant factions (The Sudan Times, 2024). The misuse of religious texts to justify violence and mobilize fighters remains a concern, particularly in regions affected by instability and weak state control.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan has historically played a significant role in shaping the country's political and religious landscape. The most notable factions being the politicized Islamic Movement (later the National Islamic Front), led by Hassan al-Turabi, and a more conservative Muslim Brotherhood wing, led by Sadiq Abdallah Abdel Majid. While both groups share ideological roots in the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement, they differ in structure, objectives, and engagement in Sudanese politics. The Islamic Movement, under Turabi's leadership, represented a radical departure from the traditional Muslim Brotherhood's approach. In the 1960s and 1970s, Turabi transformed Sudan's Islamist landscape by adopting a highly politicized and pragmatic approach that sought direct control over state institutions. His movement played a pivotal role in the 1989 military coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power, leading to the establishment of a state governed by Islamist ideology.

Turabi's faction prioritized political Islam, economic control, and foreign jihadist connections, at times aligning with global militant networks, including providing refuge to figures like Osama bin Laden in the 1990s. However, his fallout with Bashir in 1999-2000 led to his marginalization from power and the splintering of his faction into the Popular Congress Party, though the broader Islamist governance under the National Congress Party persisted.

In contrast, the traditional Muslim Brotherhood, under Sadique Abdalla Abdelmajid, adhered to a more conservative and non-revolutionary model, aligning closely with the original principles of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hassan al-Banna. Unlike Turabi's movement, this faction refrained from direct military involvement and focused on religious education, social services, and gradual societal Islamization rather than immediate political dominance. The traditional Brotherhood maintained a lower profile in Sudanese politics, operating through advocacy, educational institutions, and community outreach rather than aggressive political mobilization.

Both factions have influenced Sudan's religious and political spheres, but Turabi's Islamic Movement had a more immediate and disruptive impact by embedding Islamism into state structures, while the traditional Muslim Brotherhood pursued a long-term, non-confrontational strategy. Understanding these distinctions is crucial to analyzing the role of Islamist groups in Sudan's contemporary political struggles and their varying degrees of influence in shaping public policy and governance.

The Islamic Movement in Sudan refers to the ideological and political organization that played a key role in shaping the country's modern governance through the fusion of religion and state power. It emerged as an offshoot of the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement but took a distinct path under the leadership of Hassan al-Turabi, who transformed it into a highly politicized and activist organization. Unlike the traditional Muslim Brotherhood faction, which maintained a more conservative and non-confrontational stance, the Islamic Movement sought direct political dominance and ultimately played a pivotal role in Sudan's political history.

Aspect	Islamic Movement (Lead by Turabi)	Traditional Muslim Brotherhood
Ideological Roots	Radical Islamism, Politicized Approach	Non-confrontational, focus on religious education and societal Islamization
Political Strategy	Direct political involvement, including military coup (1989)	Limited governmental influence, focus on advocacy
State Influence	Direct control of Sudan's government (1989-1999)	Limited governmental influence, focus on advocacy
Foreign Relations	Aligned with global jihadist movements, including hosting figures like Osama bin Laden	Neutral, avoided ties with transnational militant networks
Focus	Political Islam, economic control, foreign jihadism	Religious education, social services, societal change through advocacy
	Fragmented after 2019 revolution	Continues as a moderate religious organization without significant political involvement

The Islamic Movement gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, when Turabi strategically aligned it with the ruling elites while simultaneously working to expand its grassroots influence through educational institutions, religious outreach, and political mobilization. This approach allowed it to gradually infiltrate Sudanese state structures, culminating in the 1989 military coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power. Under Bashir, the Islamic Movement consolidated control over the government, embedding Islamist ideology into national policies and restructuring the state according to Sharia-based governance.

A defining characteristic of the Islamic Movement was its pragmatic and flexible political strategy. Unlike traditional Islamist organizations that operated strictly within religious frameworks, Turabi's movement engaged in realpolitik, forming alliances with various domestic and international actors—including militant jihadist groups, regional Islamist movements, and even Western governments at certain points. This led to Sudan becoming a hub for international Islamist activities in the 1990s, providing refuge to figures like Osama bin Laden and fostering relationships with groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Despite its initial success, the Islamic Movement experienced internal fragmentation. By the late 1990s, a power struggle emerged between Turabi and Bashir, leading to Turabi's expulsion from the ruling elite and the eventual decline of the movement's grip on state power. Although it continued to exert influence behind the scenes, the movement faced increasing opposition from civil society groups, secular activists, and political reformists, especially following the 2019 Sudanese revolution, which led to Bashir's ousting and the dismantling of key Islamist networks within the government.

Currently, the Islamic Movement remains a fragmented entity, with some factions attempting to regain political relevance while others continue to influence Sudanese society through religious institutions and informal networks.

The Al-Ansar movement represents the religious and political legacy of the Mahdist tradition in Sudan, which dates back to the late nineteenth century when Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah, known as the Mahdi, led an Islamic revolt against the Turco-Egyptian and later Anglo-Egyptian rule. The Mahdist movement sought to establish an Islamic state based on strict adherence to Sharia, with the Mahdi claiming divine inspiration as the leader of a righteous Islamic order. Following his death in 1885, his successor, Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, continued the Mahdist rule until its defeat by British and Egyptian forces in 1898.

Despite the military defeat, the Mahdist ideology persisted, evolving into the Al-Ansar movement, which became a significant political and religious force in Sudan. Al-Ansar followers view themselves as the spiritual and ideological heirs of the Mahdi and remain closely linked to the Umma Party, a major political party in Sudan founded by the Mahdi's descendants (Warburg, 2023). The movement emphasizes Sudanese nationalism, Islamic reform, and resistance to foreign influence, maintaining a strong political and religious presence, particularly in Western and Central Sudan.

Throughout Sudan's modern history, Al-Ansar has played a critical role in shaping national politics. Under Sadiq al-Mahdi, the prominent descendant of the Mahdi and former Sudanese Prime Minister, the movement sought to blend religious authority with democratic governance. However, it has also faced challenges, including conflicts with rival Islamist groups, crackdowns by military regimes, and internal divisions over its role in contemporary Sudanese society.

Today, the Mahdist tradition continues to influence Sudanese political and religious discourse, with Al-Ansar advocating for a moderate, nationalist interpretation of Islam that contrasts with both Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood-oriented movements. As Sudan navigates its political transitions, the role of Al-Ansar and the Mahdist tradition remains a crucial factor in debates over governance, religious authority, and national identity.

The Republican Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Jumhuriyon) was a unique Islamic reformist movement in Sudan, founded by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha in the mid-twentieth century. Taha advocated for a progressive interpretation of Islam, emphasizing the Meccan revelations of the Qur'an as the basis for a modern, egalitarian society. He argued that the Medinan revelations, which formed the basis of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, were context-specific and no longer applicable to contemporary life (El-Affendi, 1991). The movement promoted gender equality, social justice, and non-violence, distinguishing itself from both traditional Islamic movements and Salafi groups (Gallab, 2008).

Despite its intellectual contributions, the Republican Brotherhood faced severe opposition from conservative religious and political forces. Taha's execution in 1985 under the regime of President Nimeiri marked a tragic end to the movement's active influence, though its ideas continue to inspire debates on Islamic reform and modernity in Sudan (Sidahmed, 1997).

Shia Islam in Sudan remains a small and marginalized religious minority within a predominantly Sunni Muslim society. Although Sudan has historically been overwhelmingly Sunni, particularly influenced by Sufi traditions and Salafi movements, there has been a limited yet noticeable rise in Shia influence, particularly during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The growth of Shia Islam in Sudan can be largely attributed to diplomatic and religious exchanges with Iran, particularly during the era of Hassan al-Turabi's Islamist government in the 1990s, which fostered strong ties with Tehran.

During the 1989–2016 period, Sudan maintained close political and economic relations with Iran, allowing Iranian cultural and religious institutions to establish a limited but notable presence in Sudan. Iran provided military support, economic aid, and religious education programs, contributing to the gradual expansion of Shia teachings in Sudan, particularly among intellectual circles and students who studied in Iran. Iranian-backed religious centers were established, promoting Shia theological perspectives, which drew criticism from Sudan's Salafi and Sunni religious authorities.

However, this Shia influence was abruptly halted in 2016, when President Omar al-Bashir severed diplomatic ties with Iran in response to regional pressure from Saudi Arabia. The decision came after the execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia sparked violent protests at the Saudi embassy in Tehran, leading Sudan to align itself more closely with Riyadh. Following this shift, Sudan expelled Iranian diplomats, shut down Shia cultural centers, and placed severe restrictions on Shia religious practices. This move weakened the already fragile Shia community in Sudan, forcing many of its adherents into greater secrecy and limiting their ability to organize publicly (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Since cutting ties with Iran, Sudanese Shia Muslims have faced heightened discrimination and repression. Salafi movements, particularly Ansar al-Sunnah and other hardline Islamist groups, have intensified their campaigns against Shia practices, often labeling Shia beliefs as heretical. Reports indicate (Sudan Tribune, 2014) that Shia religious gatherings have been disrupted, and adherents have been harassed, detained, or pressured to conform to Sunni practices. The closure of Iranian-affiliated centers and religious schools has also cut off a major source of theological education for Sudanese Shia.

Today, the Shia presence in Sudan remains largely underground, with followers practicing their faith in secrecy to avoid persecution. While there is no significant organized Shia political movement in Sudan, the influence of Iranian religious thought and Lebanese Shia networks continues to shape certain intellectual and academic (AhlulBayt News Agency, n.d.) circles (AhlulBayt News Agency, n.d.). As Sudan underwent a political transition following the 2019 revolution and the fall of Bashir's regime, there is uncertainty regarding the future of religious minorities, including the Shia community (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Although Sudanese political discourse increasingly embraces the principles of religious tolerance and inclusivity, the dominance of conservative Sunni factions poses a significant challenge to the open practice of Shia Islam in the country.

ISLAMIC INFLUENCE IN SUDAN

Islamic religious groups in Sudan, including Sufi orders, Salafi movements, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Shia communities, have grown or declined based on political affiliations, financial backing, and economic shifts.

Sufi Orders: Economic Networks and Local Influence

Sufi orders in Sudan have historically expanded through strong local networks, tribal affiliations, and economic resources. However, their influence varies based on regional economic conditions.

The Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya Orders

Dominant in Western and Central Sudan, have historically relied on agricultural communities and trade routes for expansion. However, economic instability, desertification, and armed conflicts in Darfur and Kordofan have weakened their financial bases, limiting their growth.

The Khatmiyya Order

Influential in eastern Sudan, has benefited from trade ties with Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. However, political instability and economic crises have reduced its ability to maintain social programs that attract new followers.

The Sammaniyya Order

Based in Khartoum and central Sudan, has gained influence among elites, benefiting from access to urban economic resources and educational institutions.

SALAFI INFLUENCE GROUPS: GULF FUNDING AND URBAN GROWTH

Salafi movements have expanded in Sudan, particularly in urban areas, due to foreign funding and economic hardship. Financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states has allowed Salafi groups to establish mosques, schools, and social programs. Economic precarity, especially among youth and unemployed graduates in cities like Khartoum, has made Salafi teachings appealing as they promise clear moral guidelines and financial assistance. However, resistance from Sufi communities and the decline of Gulf-state sponsorship due to shifting foreign policies have slowed their expansion in rural areas.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT: POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL DECLINE

The Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, such as the Islamic Movement, have historically thrived due to their control over state institutions and economic resources. Under the rule of Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019), these groups benefited from government patronage, controlling banks, universities, and business sectors. However, since the 2019 revolution, political instability and the dismantling of Brotherhood-affiliated financial networks have significantly weakened their influence.

AL ANSAR/MAHDISTS: AGRICULTURE ECONOMY AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

The Ansar movement, linked to the Mahdist tradition and the Umma Party, has historically drawn support from agricultural and pastoralist communities in the White Nile and Blue Nile regions. Economic downturns and climate change have hurt its agrarian base, but political mobilization and historical legitimacy have sustained its relevance.

SHIA ISLAM IN SUDAN: POLITICAL ISOLATION AND ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

Shia communities in Sudan remain a minority, primarily concentrated in Khartoum. Their growth has been hindered by political repression, economic restrictions, and severed ties with Iran after Sudan shifted its alliances towards Saudi Arabia in 2016 Fluehr-Lobban, C. (2018). Islamic law and society in Sudan. Without financial backing or state support, Shia religious institutions struggle to expand.

5.2. Christianity

Christianity in Sudan constitutes a 5.4% of the Sudanese population; a resilient minority in a predominantly Muslim nation. Its followers represent various denominations, including Coptic Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic communities, each facing their unique challenges and opportunities within Sudan's socio-political landscape. Christianity in Sudan has been shaped by colonial influences, political struggles, and interfaith relations, all of which have contributed to the marginalization and sometimes persecution of its followers. Despite the societal challenges, Christians in Sudan have maintained significant roles in education, healthcare, and social services.

Coptic Christianity, deeply rooted in Sudan's Nubian history, continues to have a presence, albeit diminishing in size and influence. Historically, the Coptic Orthodox Church played an influential role in the political and cultural life of Sudan, especially at the time of the Nubian Kingdoms, before Islam became the dominant religion. However, following the spread of Islam and the Arabization policies of Sudan's governments, the Coptic Christian community became marginalized and now represents a small percentage of the population.

Today, Coptic Christians face societal exclusion, as Islamic values dominate Sudanese society. Furthermore, the political landscape of Sudan, particularly under the rule of former President Omar al-Bashir, restricted religious freedoms for Christians, leading to systematic harassment and discrimination. Despite this, the Coptic Church remains an important part of Sudan's Christian identity, offering support through faith-based education and health services, particularly in marginalized communities.

Protestant Christianity, introduced to Sudan in the 19th century by missionaries, is one of the largest Christian denominations in Sudan, especially in the south. Protestant denominations, particularly Anglicanism, Evangelical, and Pentecostal movements, have played a significant role in providing basic education and humanitarian aid to Sudanese citizens. However, the Protestant community's role has become more complex in the aftermath of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. With the establishment of South Sudan as an independent state, many Protestant Christians left Sudan and moved to South-Sudan, seeking a more supportive environment for their religious practices. Despite their dwindling numbers, Protestant Christians in Sudan still contribute to social welfare and community-building programs, although they continue to face discrimination from both the government and society. Many Protestant churches are closely monitored by the state, and church leaders often find themselves in direct confrontation with Islamic political factions that oppose religious diversity (TIMEP, 2024).

PROTESTANTISM: GROWTH IN CONFLICT AREAS

Protestant churches, particularly among the Nuba and Blue Nile communities, have expanded due to missionary efforts and humanitarian aid. Economic hardships, displacement, and war have made Protestant-affiliated NGOs and churches crucial for education and healthcare services. However, state restrictions on evangelism and land ownership have hindered their institutional growth.

Catholicism has a long history in Sudan, particularly in the southern regions where the Roman Catholic Church provided education, healthcare, and charitable services during the colonial era and through the civil conflicts of the twentieth century. After the split of Sudan and the creation of South Sudan in 2011, Catholic institutions in Sudan faced a growing challenge in maintaining their activities amidst a climate of religious intolerance. Catholic communities are often under pressure from Islamic authorities to conform to state-imposed Islamic principles, and church leaders report ongoing restrictions on religious freedoms (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom [USCIRF]). In this environment, Sudanese Catholics continue to maintain their faith through underground worship, though they remain an essential part of Sudan's social fabric by continuing to run hospitals, schools, and charitable programs, especially for marginalized groups in Sudan's rural areas.

Despite being a minority, Christians in Sudan have made significant contributions to social welfare and education. Throughout the years, churches—especially Protestant and Catholic—have been at the forefront of community service, providing schools, clinics, and social support programmes. These institutions have been critical in serving Sudan's underprivileged populations, particularly in the south, where the government has provided limited public services. However, the role of Christianity in Sudanese society is often overshadowed by the country's Islamic identity, and Christians continue to face institutionalized marginalization. This is evident in political policies, which, under the rule of the Islamic National Congress Party, sought to Islamize the country and suppress any non-Muslim religious practices (USCIRF, 2000).

Sudanese Christians also play a vital role in promoting interfaith dialogue, particularly in North-South relations, which have historically been characterized by conflict. Their contributions to human rights advocacy and peacebuilding remain a beacon of hope amidst the political instability and religious tensions. However, Christianity in Sudan remains vulnerable to government repression, and adherents must often practice their faith in secrecy due to fear of persecution.

CATHOLICISM: AID DEPENDENCY AND CONFLICT ZONES

Catholic missions have been central to humanitarian relief in war-torn areas. The church's expansion in the Nuba Mountains and South Kordofan is tied to its role in providing food aid, education, and medical care. However, economic dependency on foreign aid has made sustainability a challenge, especially when international funding declines.

CHRISTIANITY IN SUDAN: ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND CONFLICT

Christian communities in Sudan, particularly Coptic, Protestant, and Catholic groups, have faced socio-economic challenges affecting their expansion.

COPTIC CHRISTIANITY: URBAN ECONOMIC STABILITY

Coptic Christians, concentrated in Khartoum, Omdurman, and Wad Medani, have historically been merchants, doctors, and business owners. Economic stability has allowed them to maintain churches and religious institutions despite occasional political discrimination. However, economic instability and emigration trends have reduced their numbers in recent decades.

5.3. Indigenous Religious Groups

Indigenous religious groups represent 1% of the population in Sudan, and they form an essential part of the country's diverse religious landscape, particularly among non-Muslim communities in the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and parts of Darfur. These groups primarily practice traditional African religions, characterized by ancestral veneration, nature worship, and spiritual meditation. Rituals often involve offerings, divination, and ceremonies conducted by spiritual leaders, reinforcing social cohesion and communal identity. Despite centuries of Islamization and Christian missionary efforts, indigenous faiths persist, particularly in rural areas where cultural traditions remain strong. Leadership within indigenous religious communities is typically decentralized, with authority vested in spiritual elders, rainmakers, and diviners. Among the Nuba people, rainmakers hold significant influence, as they are believed to control weather patterns and agricultural prosperity through ritual practices. In the Blue Nile region, spiritual leaders known as "fighis" serve as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, guiding communities through rituals and conflict resolution. The Beja people of eastern Sudan, particularly the Hadandowa, integrate pre-Islamic spiritual traditions with elements of Sufism, relying on hereditary spiritual leaders for guidance. These spiritual leaders play a crucial role in governance, as their authority extends beyond religious matters into social and political decision-making. These indigenous religious traditions influence local governance and legal customs, particularly in rural areas where customary law holds significant authority. Spiritual leaders often serve as mediators in disputes, and their rulings carry considerable weight within their communities. Additionally, indigenous religious groups have played a role in resistance movements, advocating for cultural preservation and autonomy, particularly in the face of religious and political marginalization.

INDIGENOUS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS: ECONOMIC ISOLATION AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Indigenous religious groups, primarily in the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and parts of Darfur, continue to practice traditional beliefs despite economic and social pressures.

- **Economic Marginalization:** Many indigenous communities face extreme poverty and lack access to infrastructure, limiting external religious influence.
- **Resistance to Conversion:** Traditional religious leaders maintain authority due to their role in conflict mediation and community decision-making. The lack of economic incentives to convert to Islam or Christianity has preserved indigenous practices.
- **Geographic Barriers:** Remote locations limit the expansion of missionary and state-backed religious institutions, sustaining indigenous beliefs.

This indicates that the religious distribution in Sudan is deeply influenced by socio-economic factors, including access to financial resources, political affiliations, and economic stability. While urbanization and foreign funding have facilitated the growth of some groups, economic hardship and political repression have hindered others.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Findings on the following chapters are from the semi-structured interviews. Footnotes to secondary sources indicate support from desk review.

6. The Role of Religious Groups in Peacebuilding

Religious groups have played an effective and influential role in political stabilization and peacebuilding in the last five years. Both the Khatmiyya and the Ansar sects have long histories of influence on peacebuilding. Similarly, the Islamic Movement has maintained a significant influence, reinforced by its three-decade participation in governance, although this influence has waned during the transitional government period.

Ansar Al-Sunna Al-Muhammadiya is one of the country's most significant religious groups, due to their followers' size, exerting considerable influence over its followers throughout various regions of Sudan.

Sufi orders wield considerable influence within the Sudanese population. The General Sufi Assembly, comprising over 37 Sufi groups, has emerged as a significant entity in the religious landscape.

6.1. Relationships among Religious Groups

Based on the interviews, the relationships between followers of the three religions—Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous religions—are free from tension on community levels; there is no friction between these groups.

Looking closer at the relationships within Islamic religious groups, we see diverse dynamics. Historically, there has been rivalry between the Khatmiyya and the Ansar, which was later joined by movement-oriented or political Islamic groups (Islamic movement led by Turabi and its derivatives).

This rivalry stems from each group's ties to specific political agendas and their ambitions for power. Sunnis and Shia did not witness a tension on community levels but the regime of Omar al-Bashir as a Sunni regime had cut the ties with the Iranian government in 2017, and an amendment was made to the criminal law of Sudan to criminalize Shias which increased tensions.

Tensions occasionally arise between Salafis and Sufis due to the Salafis', especially the Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah group's, rejection of certain Sufi practices and traditions. These tensions manifest in various forms, such as verbal disputes and occasional violence, during situations like religious celebrations, in regions across Sudan.

It usually occurs once a year during the Celebration of holy Moulid (The memory of the birth of Prophet Muhammed) when clashes erupt in the heavily crowded areas of celebration.

In contrast, the interactions between Sufi orders frequently entail communication, visitation, and occasionally, collaboration to attain common goals in a very positive way. How they cooperate to administer the Moulid festival as a religious occasion is a good example. Disputes regarding leadership among Sufi groups, particularly after the demise of their sheiks, can result in internal divisions. Moreover, governmental political involvement might occasionally incite disagreement or divisions within Sufi orders. The same order might have two (sometimes more) leaderships due to the dispute between candidate heirs.

6.2 Key Challenges Facing Religious Groups

Religious groups in Sudan face a number of challenges, some of which are related to modernization and globalization, leading to an increasing detachment of the youth from religious groups, which is expected to grow over time. Religious leadership has a huge gap when it comes to media utilization in Sudan.

There are other challenges related to the limited resources of religious groups, in addition to the internal divisions that occur on political grounds or disputes over the leadership. Additionally, there are political challenges represented by the imposition of adopting certain political agendas and programmes.

Each of these challenges has its own effects. The challenge of modernization and globalization distances the youth from religious groups and leads to a decline in the acceptance of traditional discourse. Moreover, internal divisions within all the religious groups lead to broader splits in the religious community, weakening the groups and reducing the effectiveness of their social work.

Additionally, the lack of resources and funding contributes to the decline in the social role of religious groups. Political pressures also challenge these groups, whether through restrictions on their activities or by forcing them to adhere to specific political positions by the ruling authority of the Sudanese state, often diminishing their ability to engage effectively with the community. Alongside all these challenges, there are also current security complications represented by the rise in violence and difficulty in movement due to the situation on the ground.

6.3 The Roles of Religious Groups in Peace and Justice

Religious groups in Sudan have extensive experience in promoting social cohesion, particularly in resolving social and tribal conflicts, such as those in Darfur and Kordofan. They also have experience in peace mediation and reconciliation between disputing parties; However, their contributions to social cohesion far exceed their impact on unifying political factions. Some of the major sects (Ansar, Khatmiyya) and Sufi orders have precedents in community reconciliations, such as mediation in tribal disputes in Darfur, Kordofan, and elsewhere. During the transitional government period of 2019-2022, some religious groups participated in initiatives to create a form of political reconciliation (Al Jazeera, 2022). Among these was The Call of Sudan Initiative led by Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Jed, but those efforts were not successful due to the level of political polarization. During the war period of 2023, Sheikh Idris Abu Qurun mediated for the release of a number of prisoners from the Rapid Support Forces' jails. Sheikh Al-Jali made calls for peace, and Sheikh Amin Omar Al-Amin reportedly supported Omdurman residents with services and urged an end to hostilities.

6.4 Influence of Religious Groups on Warring Actors

According to Alex De waal, a British researcher, the Islamic Movement likely influences the army. The Tijaniyya order appears to have sway over the Rapid Support Forces, according to an interview with Doctor Elnour Hamad). The Khatmiyya sect has significant influence over the Democratic Unionist Party within the Democratic Bloc, whereas the Ansar sect exerts influence over the Umma Party, active in the Taqadom. Certain participants believe Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah group and some Sufi orders supporting the army also have the ability to influence it, although the influence of these latter groups is very limited.

It's important to note that influence is often mistaken for support and alignment with the positions of the warring parties. In response to the question about the influence of religious leaders on the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and progress, several names were mentioned, such as Sheikh Abdul Hai Youssef, Muhammad Al-Amin Ismail, and Dr. Ali Karti, a leader in the Islamic Movement, as individuals who can influence SAF. Leaders of the Islamic Movement are generally seen as having significant influence over SAF). There are indications that the sheikhs of the Tijaniyya order might have an influence on the Rapid Support Forces. Meanwhile, the Ansar leaders influence the Umma Party, and the Khatmiyya leaders influence the Federal Party in the Democratic Bloc.

There are several examples of positive roles played by religious leaders in Sudan in peacebuilding. Many religious leaders have a legacy of experience in mediating to resolve tribal disputes before the outbreak of this war. This role has been carried out by Sufi order sheikhs for decades. Their respected status has won the trust of the community, who are generally pleased with the outcomes they facilitate.

6.5 Recommended Conflict-Resolution Strategies

Regarding the strategies that might succeed in bringing the warring parties to the negotiation table, some interviewees believe that the ability of religious groups to achieve success in this area is limited. However, initiating an inclusive dialogue that includes all parties could pave the way for negotiations. In addition, it is essential to activate international cooperation with organizations and countries willing to achieve peace in Sudan. There is also an urgent need to return to religious values such as tolerance and coexistence, which characterize Sudanese Sufism, as they are an important foundation for achieving reconciliation.

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Most interview participants stressed the importance of conducting training workshops for religious leaders to forge a unified stance against the war and prevent the misuse of religion for incitement to violence. They also proposed the idea of benefiting from the support and efforts of international organizations working in the field of peace to support the efforts of religious leaders willing to mediate by providing resources to move to conflict areas. There are also those who believe that Sufi orders have significant popular weight, and that their unity and agreement on a unified discourse against the war could increase the moral and ethical pressure on the armed groups. Some participants suggested that addressing the roots of violence involves reinterpreting religious texts to align with the principles of peace, pluralism, and human rights.

6.6 The Use (and Misuse) of Religious Values

Islamic religious texts are diverse, and each side of the conflict can find religious texts that align with its political stance. While some Sudanese people see that one side must be fought due to its aggression, transgression, land usurpation, and expulsion of citizens from their homes; the other side believes it is fighting against decades of oppression and is therefore permitted to engage in combat.

Both perspectives find support in religious texts such as Jihad Verses in Quran. These texts have been used in religious mobilization speeches that reflect these values, with some being delivered in mosques. Some religious leaders donned military uniforms and delivered a supportive speech for both warring parties.

Both warring sides perform takbir (saying "Allahu Akbar") and tahleel (saying "La ilaha illallah") and invoke the meanings of sacrifice and martyrdom in their speeches. Some activists such as the "River and State" movement being a separatist movement led by northern activists that aim to separate Darfur from Sudan, also reference historical events like the massacres of the Mahdist period and the oppression of residents in the Nile region by Aljihadey "jihadists".

In contrast, others invoke the ancient Sufi tradition of tolerance in Sudan as a reference for reconciliation. Various religious texts and teachings advocate for tolerance and acceptance, promote peace, and condemn aggression and the expulsion of individuals from their homes, along with texts that denounce injustice as Naser Eldin Muffarah had pointed in his interview. However, the main problem lies in the selective interpretation of these texts based on political or personal interests.

7. The Current Context of the War in Sudan and the Legacy of Religious Leaders

Religious groups in Sudan have a legacy and experience in tribal reconciliations. However, these initiatives are often localized and primarily social in their focus. They usually do not address political issues or involve high political leaders. The experiences that were directly related to the political situation and political leaders were few, including the Sheikh Al-Yaqout initiative and the Sudanese People's Call. Based on findings from the desk review conducted for this study, the following provides a brief description of the three initiatives.

SHEIKH AL-YAQOUT INITIATIVE

Sheikh Al-Yaqout's initiative emerged as a crucial effort to resolve social conflicts between Darfur students and the Sudanese government, particularly following the crisis at Bakht Al-Rida Institute in May 2017. During this crisis, Darfur students were accused of killing a police officer, which led to the arrest of nine students, injuries to others, and the expulsion of several others without a fair investigation.

This injustice triggered widespread protests among the students, who resigned from the institute and began a march toward Khartoum to demand their rights. In response, Sheikh Al-Yaqout offered both material and moral support, providing shelter and food to the students who had been blocked from entering Khartoum. His actions were not merely humanitarian; they aimed at mediating between the students and the authorities, fostering dialogue to ease the tension.

The initiative underscores the potential role of religious leaders in resolving conflicts, particularly in societies deeply divided by political, social, and economic tensions. Religious leaders, through their moral and spiritual authority, can act as trusted mediators, facilitating communication between opposing parties. Sheikh Al-Yaqout's efforts exemplify how religious figures can use their legitimacy to create spaces for dialogue, thus reducing hostilities and promoting understanding. While he succeeded in gaining the trust of both the students and the authorities, the initiative was not without its challenges. Authorities blocked humanitarian aid from reaching the village, and some activists who attempted to provide support were arrested. Furthermore, the institute's administration refused to retract its unjust decisions, leaving the students in a state of frustration. This case is particularly relevant within the broader context of Sudan's ongoing war, which has intensified the role of religious leaders in fostering reconciliation and peace.

THE INITIATIVE OF SHEIKH IDRIS ABU QURUN BETWEEN THE ARMY AND THE RAPID SUPPORT FORCES

The initiative of Sheikh Idris Abu Qarun offers an insightful example of how religious leaders can contribute to conflict resolution in Sudan, particularly amidst the ongoing war.

The conflict, which erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has resulted in widespread displacement and destruction. In this volatile context, Sheikh Idris Abu Qarun, a prominent Sufi leader, took the initiative to mediate the release of 537 police officers detained by the RSF in June 2024. This humanitarian effort was carried out in response to calls for action to save prisoners suffering under harsh conditions, and it was initiated after receiving written approval from the RSF, highlighting the trust in Sheikh Abu Qarun's neutrality as a mediator.

Sheikh Abu Qarun's role in facilitating the release of prisoners underscores the potential of religious leaders to mediate conflicts through humanitarian actions.

As a respected figure within the Sufi orders, he was able to leverage his moral authority and position to communicate with both sides of the conflict, demonstrating the capacity of religious leaders to transcend political and military divides and focus on common humanitarian values. His efforts reflect a broader potential for religious leaders to serve as neutral mediators, especially when they are able to unite parties through shared ethical principles. However, the role of religious leaders in Sudanese conflicts is complex, with some religious figures taking sides, further complicating the peacebuilding process. This division indicates that religious leaders can sometimes exacerbate the conflict, depending on their affiliations.

Despite the challenges faced by religious leaders, such as a lack of trust between parties and the difficulty of accessing conflict zones, the success of initiatives like Sheikh Abu Qarun's demonstrates the important opportunities available. The presence of respected spiritual leaders who are committed to mediation offers a potential path to peace, provided they can navigate political divisions and focus on humanitarian goals. Sheikh Abu Qarun's initiative serves as a model for religious leaders aiming to foster peace through humanitarian action and neutral mediation.

SUPPLICATION, CHARITY, AND FASTING FOR PEACE INITIATIVE

The "Supplication, Charity, and Fasting for Peace" initiative was launched during the Sudanese crisis of 2023 to seek divine intervention for peace. Its united believers from various religious backgrounds, including Muslims and Christians, both within Sudan and globally, in prayer, fasting, and charity.

The initiative included Quran recitations and collective fasting across 56 cities and countries, including refugee camps worldwide. It aimed to foster unity among Sudanese citizens and their international supporters. The initiative demonstrated a collective desire for peace and the end of the conflict, it had a positive impact on Sudanese citizens but yet it is hard to measure as a qualitative variable.

They have also contributed to proposing political initiatives aimed at achieving peace, such as Sheikh Al-Yaqout's initiative, or initiatives to end the political crisis in Sudan, such as the Sudan Call initiative led by Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Jad. After the conflict, Sheikh Abu Qoron's mediation led to the successful release of hundreds of prisoners from the Rapid Support Forces' custody. Additionally, many Sufi leaders' homes served as shelters for the displaced, providing safe spaces for all, irrespective of ethnic or political affiliations.

Some interviewees believe that the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution is limited or absent. Their voice was not strong enough to end the war due to their dependence on authority, fear of losing its support, or internal divisions in addition to the security risk factor. Conversely, there was another view where respondents highlighted that religious leaders have also incited fighting using religious language.

8. Religious Leaders in Sudan

8.1. The Societal Perspective on the Political Role of Religious Leaders

There are several influential religious leaders who have had a notable presence in the past five years through their societal initiative in various Sudanese cities in the four geographical directions of Sudan. Some of them are from the Sufi tradition, such as Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Jad, Sheikh Al-Yaqout, Sheikh Al-Jali, Sheikh Abu Qurun, Sheikh Al-Amin Omar Al-Amin, and Sheikh Al-Fateh Al-Sheikh Al-Bari. Some belong to the movement of political Islam, like Ali Karti, while others are part of the Khatmiya sect, such as Jaafar Muhammad Othman Al-Mirghani, or the Ansar sect, like Dr. Abdul Mahmoud Abu.

Additionally, some are from the official religious institution (Fiqh council), such as Sheikh Abdul Hai Yusuf and Sheikh Muhammad Al-Amin Ismail.

The factors contributing to these leaders' influence are diverse. Some gained their influence due to their affiliation with prestigious religious families with roots extending back centuries, while others emerged as a result of their role in launching initiatives to stabilize the political situation in the country, or through humanitarian efforts during the war, such as providing food and medical care or releasing prisoners. Others have become prominent due to their social backgrounds, coming from families or religious sects that have significant followings across various regions of the country.

Still, others gained prominence due to their connections with state institutions and their political stances. While some religious leaders focus on political and governance issues, others concentrate more on social or missionary activities. Some leaders are deeply engaged in politics, reflecting the political orientation of the religious groups they represent. For example, groups such as political Islam movements, sects, and Sufi orders that back specific political parties have deep political connections. Conversely, other groups that do not adopt the views of movement or political Islam tend to focus on issues away from politics and governance. Religious leaders active in politics typically engage with key issues such as interpreting constitutional and Sharia law, deciding whether the state follows Islamic or secular principles, and supporting and legitimizing governmental power. They also take up political roles, and shape political landscapes by forming alliances and taking stances on important agreements.

8.2 Obstacles to the Positive Impact of Religious Leaders

The interviews revealed several obstacles that include:

Security complexity:

Ongoing battles and a near-total communication blackout in some areas, making mediation or travel for reconciliation extremely difficult.

Political divisions:

The followers of religious leaders are divided in their support for the army, the Rapid Support Forces, or rival political factions, which reduces the leadership's ability to unite and exert a cohesive influence.

The absence of independence in religious discourse:

Many "official scholars" are subject to the agenda of the government or the Islamic movement, which prevents them from taking neutral positions that earn the trust of the entire population.

Lack of experience in military mediation:

Historically, most successes of religious leaderships have been in community and tribal reconciliations, while major armed conflicts between the army and the Rapid Support Forces require international expertise and political guarantees that they do not possess.

Name	Tradition/Sect	Specific Location in Sudan	Notes
Sheikh Al-Tayeb Al-Jad	Sufi Tradition	Bahri/ Khartoum	Prominent in Nile River region
Sheikh Al-Yaqout	Sufi Tradition	White Nile state	Associated with Kahlia Tribe
Sheikh Al-Jali	Sufi Tradition	River Nile State	Linked to historic Sufi zawiyas
Sheikh Abu Qurun	Sufi Tradition	Khartoum State	influential in North Khartoum communities
Sheikh Al-Amin Omar Al-Amin	Sufi Tradition	Omdurman	humanitarian activist
Ali Karti	Political Islam Movement	Khartoum	leader of Muslim Brotherhood
Jaafar Muhammad Othman Al-Mirghani	Khatmiya Sect	Kassala / Port Sudan and Northern State	Khatmiya's Red Sea influence
Dr. AbdulMahmoud Abu	Ansar Sect	Omdurman / White Nile	Ansar stronghold (Mahdist legacy)
Sheikh Abdul Hai Yusuf	Official Religious Institution (Fiqh Council)	Khartoum	Government-affiliated scholars
Sheikh Muhammad Al-Amin Ismail	Official Religious Institution (Fiqh Council)	Khartoum	State-appointed religious authority

9. Official Religious Institutions

The analysis in the initial sections of this chapter draws upon a desk review of existing literature, providing a foundational understanding of Sudan's official religious institutions and their multifaceted roles. These institutions, encompassing the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, the Fiqh Council, and the Sudan Scholars Association, play a significant role in shaping the country's religious discourse, governance, and social stability. The influence of these institutions extends beyond religious matters, impacting policy decisions, governance structures, and peacebuilding efforts.

9.1 The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments is the central government body responsible for overseeing religious institutions, regulating Islamic endowments (waqf), and managing interfaith relations. It has historically aligned with Sudanese state policies, particularly during Islamist rule (1989–2019), when it played a role in enforcing Islamic law (Sharia) in public life. While the ministry can contribute positively to religious coexistence by promoting tolerance and regulating sectarian conflicts, its potential for politicization poses risks, particularly if it is used to suppress religious minorities or opposition groups.

9.2 The Fiqh Council and the Sudan Scholars Association

The Fiqh Council and the Sudan Scholars Association serve as key advisory bodies, providing religious rulings (fatwas) on legal, social, and economic issues.

These institutions operate within the framework of Sunni Ashaari jurisprudence, often reflecting traditionalist views aligned with the state. Their influence is particularly significant in shaping policies on family law, finance, and education. While these councils can foster peace by mediating religious disputes and promoting social justice, their conservative stance on issues such as gender rights and religious freedoms can also contribute to exclusionary policies and social divisions.

Official religious institutions in Sudan have historically been intertwined with the country's political system. Under Islamist rule, these institutions were used to legitimize authoritarian policies and suppress opposition, contributing to political instability. However, in a more inclusive political environment, they could serve as platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and interfaith cooperation.

From a peacebuilding perspective, these institutions can play either a positive or negative role. Positively by facilitating religious dialogue, mediating conflicts, and supporting initiatives that promote social cohesion or negatively by deepening sectarian divides if they favor one religious interpretation over others or are co-opted by political elites to suppress dissent.

The role of official religious institutions in Sudan is complex and highly dependent on the political context. While they have the potential to contribute to peace and stability, their historical association with political regimes also makes them susceptible to manipulation. Ensuring their independence and promoting an inclusive approach to religious governance is essential for fostering long-term peace and coexistence in Sudan.

Some interviewees who see these institutions as completely subservient point to the government funding granted to them and their reliance on official resources from the Ministry of Finance, which affects their discourse and priorities. They refer to their political orientation, which manifests in the adoption of specific speeches, and noted that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments had "directed all platforms to call on citizens for jihad". In contrast, there are some interviewees who see them as institutions that perform a religious and missionary role away from the political exploitation of governments. While opinions are divided on the degree of independence of these institutions, most testimonies lean towards them being either state-affiliated or clearly influenced by the directions of the ruling regimes.

9.3 The Extent of Autonomy of Religious Institutions from State Authority

In contrast to the historical and structural insights provided above, the following section shifts focus to contemporary perspectives, drawing exclusively on findings from semi-structured interviews. The opinions of the interviewees varied regarding the independence of official religious institutions, with some seeing them as completely subordinate to the ruling authority, others viewing them as entirely independent institutions, and some perceiving them as taking a middle position between subordination and independence.

9.4 The Stances of Religious Institutions Regarding Conflict and Peacemaking

There is nearly a consensus amongst the interviewees on the absence of any serious role for these institutions in ending national conflicts such as the war between the army and the Rapid Support Forces, or in contributing to peace negotiations.

These institutions have been criticized in some interviews for their inaction or passivity, and their inability to play a unifying role. The main reasons for the lack of a role for these institutions, according to the interviewees, are their political bias, which was the most common explanation.

A number of participants said that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and other bodies "have taken sides" in the current conflict; they supported the rhetoric of jihad and the mobilization for combat, making their role as mediators difficult. Additionally, others believe that the nature of the war is not religious, and therefore, the intervention of official religious institutions is not appropriate.

The other explanations for the non-involvement of such institutions in peace processes include a lack of autonomy or self-determination to remain neutral. Some have also pointed to the "limited desire" or "limited capacity" of these institutions to get involved in such processes and initiatives, noting that their activities have been confined to "religious" issues without addressing sensitive political and social affairs.

9.5 The Impact of Formal Religious Institutions on Policy Formulation and Governance

Interviewees differ in their opinions on the influence of official religious institutions on policy making. Some interviewees think that these institutions can influence decisions and often issue fatwas or adopt discourses that justify government policies—most notably, during times of conflict. Adopting the discourses of "defending the homeland" and "fighting the rebels" among these institutions and legitimizing military actions was mentioned as proof of the ability of these institutions to influence. On the other hand, some interviewees believe that these institutions are subject to the ruling authority and are unable to exercise any independent influence or, in the real sense, have ever influenced any critical decision on the conflict. The discourses that they adopt are but reiterations of what the ruling authority or the military commands of them.

9.6 Perceptions and Conceptualizations of Religious Institutions

Public opinion of the majority of interviewees are varied regarding the public roles of official religious institutions. There is a negative view that perceives these institutions as biased, or their influence is limited because they echo the authority's discourse and do not genuinely express the demands for peace or justice.

On the other hand, there are those who do not attach great importance to the stance of official religious institutions, considering that solving the crisis requires political/economic solutions rather than religious intervention. There is also a less common perspective that views their role positively, considering that the continuation of religious education and the maintenance of their missionary role amidst the turmoil is an achievement worth appreciating.

9.7 The Obstacles Facing Formal Religious Institutions in Playing a Larger Role in Peacebuilding

The difficulty of working objectively in conflict areas is considered a major obstacle, especially for entities linked to one of the conflicting parties and funded by that party. In addition to the weakness of institutional capacities, manifested in the absence of specialized personnel in mediation and conflict resolution. Also, the lack of community trust in these institutions is an obstacle, which is historically viewed as biased towards the authority, reducing their chances of being accepted as mediators in complex conflicts such as the current one, while the lack of sufficient security and protection remains a major obstacle.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is a struggle for political and economic power, rather than a religiously motivated war. However, the devastation caused by the war has profoundly affected Sudanese society, deepening ethnic and regional divisions. In this context, religious leaders hold significant influence over public sentiment, societal values, and local reconciliation efforts. Their historical role in mediating disputes and fostering coexistence underscores their potential to contribute meaningfully to peace efforts.

To harness this influence, religious leaders should be engaged as neutral mediators advocating for reconciliation and nonviolent solutions. Their platforms—mosques, churches, and community forums—can serve as powerful tools to counter divisive rhetoric and promote messages of peace, coexistence, and social cohesion. Given that some factions in the conflict have manipulated religious discourse to justify violence or political agendas, religious leaders must actively work to reclaim faith-based narratives for peace.

Furthermore, collaboration between religious figures, civil society organizations, and international peacebuilding entities can amplify efforts to protect civilians and establish durable mechanisms for conflict resolution. While religious leaders alone cannot resolve the broader structural and political causes of the war, their societal influence makes them key actors in reshaping public discourse and facilitating pathways to peace. Therefore, equipping them with the necessary training, resources, and strategic support can enhance their ability to mediate conflicts and mitigate violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Recognize and Uplift Local Peace Voices –** Religious leaders who actively promote peace and social harmony within their communities deserve to be identified and supported. Civil society organizations, local authorities, and faith networks should come together to map and engage these individuals, whose credibility and deep-rooted presence can help heal fractured societies and foster mutual understanding.
- 2. Support Collaboration Through Practical Means –** Bringing these leaders together—across regions and denominations—requires more than goodwill. It calls for meaningful investment. International donors and peacebuilding organizations should provide financial support and training opportunities that enable these leaders to build alliances, share experiences, and strengthen their impact both locally and beyond borders.
- 3. Amplify Religious Leadership on the Global Stage for Ceasefire Advocacy –** Religious leaders carry moral authority that can resonate far beyond their congregations. By linking them with international stakeholders—such as diplomats, peace envoys, and human rights groups—we can empower them to play a collective role in calling for ceasefires and ending violence. These connections help ensure that the call for peace echoes in the halls of power as well as in the hearts of communities.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

1. Nasreldin Mofarrih - The previous Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs during the transitional government
2. Dr. Elnour Hamad - Religious Leader (the Republican Brotherhood)
3. Rifaat Makkawi - the Republican Brotherhood
4. Alfadil Alneima Alshaikh Almokashfi - Mokashfia Order
5. Badreldein Khider Abu Albarra - Mokashfia Order
6. Khojali Alshakh Aldirdeeri - Sammania Order
7. Aljaily Alshaikh Musa _ Sammania Order
8. Osama Hommaida Ali - Qadiriyya Order
9. Ahmed Abuhoreira Ahmed - the Sudanese Society for Freedom of religions
10. Abu Bakr Mohamed Alyas - Salafi group
11. Albagir Mohamed Adam - Shi'a sect
12. Nashaat Mohamed Ahmed Mustafa - Shi'a sect
13. Awad Malk Aldar Ibrahim - Shi'a group
14. Hajo Hamid Yousif - Sibaeyaa Order
15. Raafat Sameer - Christian (Evangelical sect)
16. Ielaa Mo Sakran - Catholicism
17. Maryam Yahia Ibrahim - Catholicism
18. Alrasheed Abdallah Alsarraj - Ansar Mahadist
19. Mohamed Yousif Mohamed - the Sudanese Center for Freedom of Religions
20. Somaia Alshaikh Shampati

OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Displaced persons in Sudan:

1. Ahmed Ali Altayeb from Abugoota and fled to Port Sudan
2. Almagboul Mohamed Abdeldafea - lives in Alkotaina and fled to Kosti
3. Amna Elshareef Ahmed - lives in Alkotaina and fled to Shandi
4. Awad Adam Mohamed - lives in Jebel Awliaa and fled to Marawi
5. Mohamed Ahmed Husein - lived in Khartoum and fled to Kassala

REFUGEES IN KAMPALA – UGANDA

1. Abdulkhalig Mohamed Elnueiri
2. Sami Salah Mohamed
3. Mohamed Abdallah Hamid
4. Alfateh Hussein Mohamed Ali
5. Nuseiba Mohamed Omer

REFUGEES IN BWYALE CAMP – UGANDA

1. Mohamed Ali Sinja
2. Amna Abdelnabi Adam
3. Salma Mohamed Zain
4. Sallam Mohamed Ali
5. Asia Alrasheed Ali

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