

# RSF Defections: A Turning Point in Sudan's War?

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Articles & Testimony

## The balance of power between the army and the militia that controls Darfur may be shifting, but which way is not yet clear.

A way from the international spotlight, developments in Sudan's three-year civil war may mark the beginning of a profound transformation. With America's eyes on Iran and the Gulf, and with Europe's eyes on Ukraine, several relatively unnoticed signs suggest that the battlefield situation in Africa's third-largest country may be shifting.

The four members of the 'Quad' that was set up to help resolve Sudan's war—namely the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—have had their attention drawn by the US-Israeli war in Iran and Tehran's subsequent cross-border attacks on Gulf states and international maritime trade. Yet against this regional backdrop, a new reality is slowly emerging in Sudan, one that may mark one of the most consequential moments of the war since its outbreak in April 2023.

An indirect repercussion of the war with Iran has been the rapid decline of the battlefield influence of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia, which controls the western Sudanese region of Darfur. Along with the unprecedented unravelling of its internal structure, several senior RSF commanders have defected to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), based in Port Sudan on the east coast.

Sudanese army leaders have welcomed these defectors, despite strong opposition from their domestic allies. Army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan said: "Anyone who leaves the fighting and joins the side of the state may have his case reviewed." In essence, it amounts to an amnesty. The most prominent defector to-date is Maj. Gen. al-Nour Ahmed Adam, known as al-Gubba, a senior commander who played a role in the battles of El Fasher. He joined the Sudanese army in April 2026.

Reports indicate that al-Burhan met him immediately after his arrival in Northern State, where he arrived at the head of a force comprising more than 40 fully equipped combat vehicles. He was followed by Field Commander Bashara al-Huweira, who left the ranks of the RSF in North Kordofan, and then by Commander Ali Rizkallah, known as al-Safana, in a chain of defections that began with Abu Aqla Keikal in late 2024.

The two men later appeared in public, speaking about the reasons for their return. They said the Sudanese citizen did not deserve this war, was powerless in the face of it, and that their return to the “embrace of the homeland” (the army) was the right course of action. Yet they were not universally welcomed, and several fighters posted videos on social media rejecting the army’s lenient attitude towards defecting RSF commanders.

## Double Agents?

**S**uspicious abound. Some wonder whether these commanders have genuinely jumped ship, or whether they are part of an RSF ruse to infiltrate the enemy and defeat it from within by positioning key players in Khartoum and Port Sudan. In short, they wonder whether those ‘returning to the homeland’ are in fact double-agents.

The answer does not lie in conjecture. There is a precedent: Abu Aqla Keikal, who abandoned the RSF while commanding its forces in Gezira State, before joining the army and leading the operation to retake the state in October 2024 in what some see as a turning point in the conflict. Keikal had initially been part of the army before defecting to the RSF and helping them seize Gezira, only to defect again. It illustrates how the intelligence calculations surrounding this new wave are highly complex.

Another factor deepens the doubts surrounding the defectors’ motivations: the knowledge that the RSF’s structure rests on tribal and personal bonds far more than any ideological affiliation. According to reports, al-Gubba was annoyed at not being given overall command of North Darfur after the fall of El Fasher in October 2025, when RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti) appointed Jadou Benshouk instead.

He also came under pressure from Musa Hilal, the leader of the Mahamid tribe to which he belongs, accelerating his decision to defect. This suggests that the motive was, first and foremost, personal and tribal. His defection enraged Hemedti, who stripped him of his rank and sentenced him to death in absentia. As for al-Huweira, he joined the army with up to 15 combat vehicles. His position in the Bara area near El Obeid makes his defection strategically significant, as the area serves as a junction linking western Sudan to its east and centre—a vital corridor for supplies, fuel, and fighters.

## Three Scenarios

**T**hese facts point to three possible scenarios for the war’s course. The first is that the SAF collapses into chaos and disorder, given the size and disparity of the forces now accumulating in army-held areas. Al-Burhan has recruited a combustible mix of civilians and militias. Now, with RSF commanders returning to Khartoum and Port Sudan, there is a climate of vengeance and rancour between them and those they have fought over the past three years. The danger is especially acute from Darfuri fighters, given the RSF’s well-documented massacre of civilians in El Fasher, with several thousand killed in just three days. Some defectors were involved in those operations.

The risk is of lawlessness and a security void in areas that had been secured in eastern and central Sudan, where the army faces a decisive test. Some suspect that the return of defectors may serve as a cover for infiltration, amid the RSF’s recent retreat and the army’s notable battlefield advances. Hemedti himself has suggested that not every RSF fighter left Khartoum after the army regained control of it. Wary of a secret buildup of forces, Sudanese intelligence officers now need to carefully verify every ‘returnee’.

A second scenario is Darfur’s fragmentation. More RSF defections could turn this vast and resource-rich region into a theatre of chronic war. These commanders have social and tribal constituencies, and their separation from a unified

RSF command removes them from any central authority capable of controlling the behaviour of scattered armed groups.

This could give rise to parallel tribal conflicts, making peace negotiations even more difficult than they already are. This danger is highlighted by the fact that the forces of Minni Arko Minnawi, the governor of Darfur, and those of Finance Minister Jibril Ibrahim were fighting these same defectors until very recently. Without a genuine and swift reconciliation, vengeance will remain an ember beneath the ash.

The third scenario is that pragmatism prevails and accountability becomes the price of negotiation. Judging by the Keikal model (a man who defected, returned, then defected again), commanders act according to the balance of power, rather than to loyalty, gravitating towards the stronger side whenever the battlefield conditions change. Defected RSF commanders now return to the army carrying a heavy legacy of crimes.

Are their manoeuvres ultimately an escape from accountability? Both al-Safana and al-Gubba are implicated in the mass killing of civilians, yet the army celebrates their return. Keikal has also been accused; the European Union has imposed sanctions on him. Upon their return to the army, however, all charges against them seem to fall away. There can be little hope for accountability when their return is cheered for its patriotism.

The significance of these transformations is becoming clear for the Quad members, and for the United States in particular. For the past two years, Washington has sought a ceasefire while trying to manage the balances within the Quad itself. The shifting landscape inside Sudan may open new opportunities for settlement, or—if not handled with political care—accelerate fragmentation. This is especially true in a region that is now more sensitive to security, energy and maritime corridors in the aftermath of the war with Iran and its repercussions.

## Caution Advised

**A**cross all these scenarios, the army remains a party to the equation, not merely a victim of it. Its acceptance of defectors without clear conditions for accountability exposes the weakness not just of the RSF but also of the SAF, as al-Burhan puts institutional interests above justice, leaving the Sudanese citizen to pay the price. What if Hemedti himself were to return in apology? Would his crimes be forgiven in the same way? If so, one might well ask what the war meant in the first place.

While al-Burhan honours RSF commanders as returnees, even handing one of them his private car, there are reports of civilians being executed in army-held areas, their only ‘crime’ being that they dealt with the RSF when the militia controlled the areas in which they live. These ‘collaborators’ often sought nothing more than to preserve their lives and those of their families under the coercive conditions imposed by force. In this way and others, Sudan is becoming a land of paradox.

*Areig Elhag is the Arabic content editor at The Washington Institute and former producer of the award-winning television program Between Two Niles. This article was originally published [on Al Majalla's website](https://en.majalla.com/node/331180/politics/rsf-defections-turning-point-sudans-war) (<https://en.majalla.com/node/331180/politics/rsf-defections-turning-point-sudans-war>). ❖*

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