



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: SUDAN'S CIVIL WAR AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FoRB

August 2025

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler
Mohamed Elsanousi
Maureen Ferguson
Stephen Schneck
Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

By Katherine Todd, Policy Analyst

Sudan's Civil War and the Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Since April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have engulfed Sudan in a brutal civil war, representing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and placing civilians across the country under massive threat regardless of religious, ethnic, and tribal distinctions. Amid the widespread violence and destruction of governance throughout the last two years, the conflict has also effectively erased significant advancements in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and broader human rights that Sudan had achieved since the uprising in 2019.

Sudan's present conflict is not predominantly religious; it is first and foremost a struggle for military and political control between two rival, armed factions. However, both SAF and the RSF have devastated places of worship, arbitrarily detained members of religious minorities, and created a pervasive climate of fear. Such targeting, and the particularly chaotic nature of the conflict in which it takes place, has contributed to destroying Sudan's social fabric and institutions of governance—a mere six years after the Sudanese people had ushered in a period of unprecedented hope, renewal, and systematic improvements in their country's FoRB conditions.

This report examines the current religious freedom environment in Sudan as the ongoing civil war has entered its third year, following the transitional government's previous, historic progress on FoRB reforms between 2019 and 2021. It outlines how the country's two warring parties and their affiliates have frequently subjected religious communities and places of worship to violence and abuse, contributing to an environment of fear for religious and ethnic minorities and exacerbating a severe crisis of mass forced displacement.

Background on Sudan's War: From Reform to Conflict

Religious freedom and broader human rights conditions were exceedingly poor under the former regime of Omar al-Bashir, who led Sudan's authoritarian government from 1989 to 2019. During that time, the government enforced a strict, singular interpretation of Shari'a law on all Sudanese regardless of their individual beliefs or community affiliations, as laid out in the country's 2005 Constitution. The result of this enforcement was the systematic, ongoing, and egregious oppression of nearly all minority religious communities over the course of three decades, including Muslims who did not adhere to the regime's interpretation of religious ideology. The

state violently enforced apostasy and blasphemy laws, for example, often reserving its harshest treatment for women who faced such charges.

Following the 2019 uprising revolution that brought an end to that regime, the joint civilian-military transitional government under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok brought historic and systematic [changes](#) to Sudan through legislative and institutional reforms. Those reforms involved meaningful advancements in FoRB, including repealing the country's blasphemy and apostasy laws (Articles 125 and 126 of the Penal Code, respectively). The government also repealed a notorious public order law that the former regime had regularly used to enforce its extremist vision that placed severe constraints on Sudanese religious life and broader society.

In October 2021, despite the significant progress the transitional government had achieved over the prior two years, the Sudanese military [dissolved](#) the joint transitional government to shore up its own dominance of the country's governance. SAF, under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, took this dramatic backstep with support from the paramilitary RSF and its controversial commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known colloquially as "Hemedti." The two military leaders and their respective forces then turned on each other, first in the form of internal tensions over military influence and then into all-out war in April 2023. The subsequent conflict has devastated cities and communities across Sudan and displaced millions, with seemingly no end in sight. As of June, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the war has [displaced](#) a staggering 12 million people or more. Furthermore, then U.S. Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken [determined](#) in December 2023 that members of both SAF and the RSF had committed war crimes in Sudan and, in January 2025, further [determined](#) that members of the RSF and its allied militias had committed genocide. The latter determination led to sanctions against RSF leader Hemedti for his role in systematic atrocities and gross violations of human rights.

Evolving FoRB Conditions in Sudan

As USCIRF noted in its 2021 [policy update](#), a lack of comprehensive or credible national census data renders any demographic information for Sudan imprecise and incomplete—and that uncertainty has only worsened. U.S. government [estimates](#) place Sudan's population at around 49 million: 91 percent represent the Sunni Muslim majority, 5.4 percent identify as Christians, 2.8 percent follow indigenous beliefs, and the remainder

either belong to smaller religious communities (e.g., Shi'a Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, and Hindus) or do not identify with any particular belief. Christians, whose conditions are prominently featured throughout this report due to their representation in extant documentation, belong to at least 36 denominations across the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions. Sufism also plays an integral socioreligious role across Sudan's Sunni Muslim community, although Salafi ideological currents often view its adherents with suspicion or derision.

Attacks on Houses of Worship

While it is exceedingly difficult to ascertain their motivations in doing so—beyond pressing their military offensives with utter disregard for civilian casualties—SAF and the RSF's belligerent actions have repeatedly impacted houses of worship. Such actions included looting and bombing such sites as well as assaulting worshipers gathered inside. Indiscriminate attacks on Christian churches, for example, has been a recurring feature of both forces' operations, reportedly forcing the [closure](#) of over 165 churches and severely limiting many others' activities. In April 2023, just days after the war began, RSF fighters seized the Anglican cathedral in Central Khartoum for use as a military base, vandalizing the property as well as assaulting and forcibly evicting over 40 civilians who were taking shelter there. In January 2024, the RSF [set fire](#) to the Evangelical Church of [Wad Madani](#), and in December, its militants reportedly attacked the Sudanese Church of Christ in Al Jazirah State during a church prayer service, wounding 14 Christians. Just 10 days prior, SAF launched an airstrike that hit the Al Ezba Baptist Church in Khartoum North, killing at least 11 and significantly damaging the church building. That same month, as RSF forces attacked the Church of Christ in Al Jazirah, fighters reportedly vowed to the congregants that they would "eliminate all Christians" as they destroyed the church building. Most recently, in July 2025, SAF reportedly tore down a Pentecostal church in Khartoum North, claiming the demolition was part of a campaign to enforce building regulations. These violent incidents—and many others whose details remain difficult to obtain or corroborate amid the conflict—have forced Sudanese Christian communities to worship and carry out other traditions in hiding as a protection mechanism from the unwanted attention of either warring faction.

Numerous reports have also shown the impact on mosques of both forces' use of violence across the country at various points in the conflict. A UN Security Council [report](#) in April blamed SAF and the RSF for indiscriminately striking densely populated areas,

damaging “civilian objects and critical infrastructure including homes, markets, hospitals and mosques.” For example, in March, the RSF launched a drone strike during Ramadan prayers at the Radwan Mosque in eastern Khartoum, killing 11 people. In March 2024, a militia allied with SAF vandalized and detonated explosives inside the Sheikh Qarib Allah Mosque in Omdurman. In July of the same year, RSF militants destroyed three mosques in El Fasher, killing at least 11 Muslim worshippers. In December 2024, an SAF airstrike killed seven individuals at the Sheikh Elsidqi Mosque in Khartoum North, while an SAF bombing of the Sheikh El Jeili Mosque in Wad Madani, Gezira State, killed 15 and injured 30. These attacks demonstrate—at best—both forces’ abject failure to protect mosques and other places of worship.

Arbitrary Detention

Throughout the war, both SAF and the RSF have particularly subjected Christians to systematic and arbitrary detentions under abysmal conditions. In March 2025, SAF reportedly detained 19 Christians with the Sudan Council of Churches in Madani on their way to a prayer meeting, subjecting them to harsh interrogations before releasing them a week later. In October 2024, the SAF Military Intelligence Unit (MIU) reportedly detained 26 men in Shendi, River Nile State, most of whom were Christians from the Sudan Council of Churches. The MIU officers reportedly harassed and physically assaulted the prisoners in front of their families, accusing them of supporting the RSF. The MIU released 14 of the detainees within weeks but have reportedly continued to detain the other 12 individuals, blocking all visits from their families or lawyers.

Reported conditions in SAF and RSF detention centers are also deeply concerning, including in relation to religious observances and broader human rights violations. Witnesses have described SAF’s Kirkab detention center as a place of “severe overcrowding, lack of hygiene, and inadequate access to food” where an unknown number of prisoners have died under those conditions. In a prison in Khartoum State, an RSF detention center reportedly limited detainees’ access to essential services such as food and water; former detainees [told](#) the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that RSF guards provided only one jug of juice for an entire ward of detainees (167 persons) for the iftar meal in Ramadan 2024. Guards have also reportedly forced Muslim detainees to pray without ablution and have beat them for praying without permission.

Threat of Return to Religious Authoritarianism

As the conflict in Sudan continues to engulf the country in violence, paramilitary groups justifying their use of violence based on a singular interpretation of Islam have exploited the collapse of the transitional government. Such groups have gained influence and legitimacy while reaping the benefits of military protection. Al-Bara’ibn Malik Brigade, for example, has been a key supporter of SAF since the start of the war. It has also pushed for the return of the former Bashir regime’s religiously justified governance, which severely restricted FoRB and other related human rights. As of March, the brigade comprised an estimated 20,000 fighters and has reportedly come to play an influential role in SAF decision-making.

The RSF, too, shares a concerning past with groups like al-Bara’ibn Malik Brigade despite opposing them in the present conflict. It emerged from the Janjaweed militias, a collection of western Sudanese tribal forces with shared loyalty to the Bashir regime, an ideological preference for violence in the name of religion, and hatred of ethnic and religious minorities in Sudan’s peripheral areas. The Janjaweed gained international notoriety in the early 2000s for committing numerous atrocities against civilians in the Darfur region on behalf of the regime, which the United States later determined as genocide. The Sudanese government later converted the Janjaweed into the RSF in 2013, naming it a more organized paramilitary force under the command of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), even as it remained fiercely loyal to Hemedti.

Developments over two years of war have also [ignited concern](#) about the nominal military government’s apparent slide toward religiously repressive policies under al-Burhan and SAF. In February 2025, his military government amended the 2019 Transitional Constitutional Declaration to remove mentions of the civilian Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and the RSF, likely in an effort to further cement its control. Crucially, that amendment reportedly reversed some legislative reforms that former Prime Minister Hamdok and his supporters had championed as key steps to improving religious freedom conditions, such as removing blasphemy and apostasy provisions. These regressive policies and other shifts have raised serious concerns of a potential return to power for Omar al-Bashir’s National Congress Party and a disastrous reversal of remaining protections for FoRB and other human rights.

Religious and Ethnic Inequities in Humanitarian Aid Distribution

Amid this vast array of challenges and forcible displacement, SAF and the RSF have reportedly weaponized and politicized the distribution of humanitarian aid, blocking its lifesaving resources. For example, SAF has reportedly prevented aid from reaching specific areas of the country that are home to significant religious and ethnic minority communities, such as the Nuba Mountains region. In October 2024, RSF fighters reportedly forced Christians in Wad Madani, Gezira State, to convert to Islam in order to receive aid and protection. Meanwhile, the patchwork of territorial control among rival factions in South Kordofan has made the movement of aid nearly impossible to that area, which is home to significant Christian and indigenous religious populations.

U.S. and International Engagement

As Sudan's conflict has entered its third year, calls have emerged for a more strategic and tailored approach for cohesive international engagement in Sudan, particularly given the country's regional significance. In January, one of the last major foreign policy announcements of the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden was the [determination](#) of genocide in Sudan along with relevant accountability measures, including sanctions against both the SAF and RSF. Later that same month, President Donald J. Trump issued Executive Order [14169](#), "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid," which mandated the suspension all U.S. foreign assistance. That suspension directly impacted Sudan, where the United States has consistently remained the

[largest contributor](#) of humanitarian assistance throughout the conflict and a longstanding supporter of FoRB-related programming. For example, the suspension halted the work of a U.S. Department of State-funded [American Bar Association Rule of Law](#) (ABA ROLI) program that had addressed legal and social challenges facing religious minority communities in Sudan's South Kordofan, Khartoum, and Blue Nile regions.

Recent U.S. congressional initiatives have included efforts to address Sudan's ongoing crisis. In March 2025, Reps. Gregory Meeks (D-NY) and Sara Jacobs (D-CA) reintroduced the Sudanese Peace Act ([H.R. 1939](#)) which calls for the fulfillment of a U.S. special envoy for Sudan, a new U.S. strategy to support the protection of civilians, delivery of humanitarian assistance, and progress toward a sustainable peace in Sudan. And in May, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) presided over an Africa Subcommittee [hearing](#) for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on the critical situation in Sudan, stressing the urgency of U.S. engagement.

Conclusion

Despite Sudan's historic progress under the transitional government prior to the outbreak of the present war between SAF and the RSF, the conflict has brought significant backsliding in the country's religious freedom and broader human rights conditions. Sudan now remains engulfed in this brutal and drawn-out violence, leaving civilians from all religious communities deeply vulnerable and preventing their ability to practice and express their religion or belief openly and freely.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino

Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai

Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum

Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor

Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen

Supervisory Policy Advisor

Andrew Hamm

Public Affairs Associate

Sema Hasan

Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer

Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery

Supervisory Policy Analyst

Veronica McCarthy

Public Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller

Policy Analyst

Nora Morton

Operations Specialist

Molly Naylor-Komyatte

Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre

Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd

Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner

Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller

Deputy Director of Research and Policy

Nathan Wineinger

Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu

Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.