

The Conflict in Upper Nile State

Describing events through 8 March 2016

On 2 October 2015, the president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, issued an administrative decree that divided South Sudan's ten states into 28, plunging the country's precarious peace process into chaos. While negotiations between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the SPLM/A-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) are ongoing, Kiir's new map of South Sudan threatens to be an unsurpassable obstacle to achieving sustainable peace in the country.

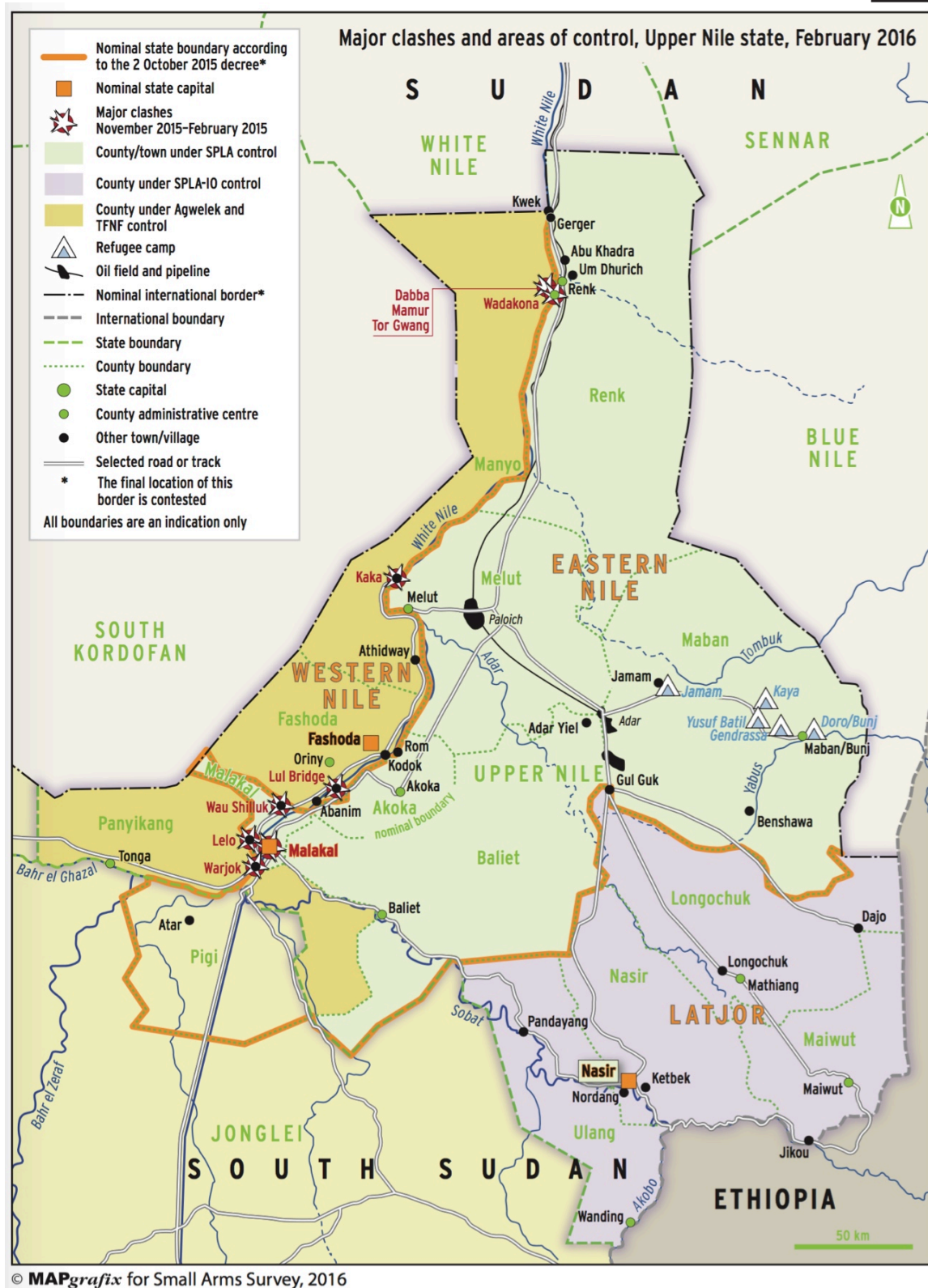
Nowhere is the tension over Kiir's decree more apparent than in Upper Nile. Shilluk anger at the proposed division of the state has already led to increased support for Johnson Olonyi and the unseating of Kwongo Dak Padiet, the Shilluk *reth* (king), who was perceived as being aligned with the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS). An increasingly ethnicized conflict between the Shilluk and the Padang Dinka is now unfolding in Upper Nile.

On 16–18 February 2016, Padang Dinka militia fighters and members of the SPLA attacked the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) protection of civilians (PoC) site in Malakal, with the assistance of some of its Dinka inhabitants. The fighting claimed the lives of at least 40 Shilluk and Nuer internally displaced persons (IDPs) and injured at least 90. Many of the camp's 15,000 dwellings were razed, although the Dinka and Darfuri areas were left undamaged. This attack was not an isolated event, but part of a concerted campaign by the Padang Dinka military and political elite of Upper Nile to push the Shilluk off the east bank of the White Nile, which is contested by both groups, and to cement control of an area that is to be called Eastern Nile state, in line with Kiir's decree.

A military overview

Militarily, SPLA and SPLA-IO positions in Upper Nile have remained relatively stable since August 2015. The largely Nuer south is still under rebel control, aside from government forces in Nasir town, Longochuk county, and in northern Ulang, close to the border with Nasir. In southern Upper Nile, the SPLA remains entrenched in several of the region's towns, while the SPLA-IO controls the rural areas. As the region has not been of strategic military importance over the last year, it remained quiet until 7–8 March 2016, when SPLA-IO forces clashed with the SPLA around their base at Nasir. Further information was not available at the time of writing.

Forces aligned with the GRSS control the east bank of the White Nile—including Akoka, Baliet, Malakal, Melut, and Renk counties—and thus have control of both Malakal, the state capital, and Paloich, the sole productive oil field in South Sudan and the country's financial lifeblood. Maban county, in the east of the state, largely remains under the control of local Mabanese militias and the SPLA, although September–December 2015 saw intermittent altercations as SPLA-IO forces moved through the area.



The government forces stationed on the east bank of the White Nile are heterogeneous. The SPLA's 1st Division, stationed in Renk and widely regarded as the best fighting force in the country, is largely Nuer. Until 2 December 2015, it was under the command of Stephen Buay, a Bul Nuer who was subsequently redeployed

to lead the SPLA's 4th Division in Rubkona, Unity state. He was reassigned after months of rumours that he was planning to desert and join the SPLA–IO, following tensions with the Padang Dinka administration in Upper Nile. The status of his troops in a planned Padang Dinka-dominated Eastern Nile state is uncertain.

Following the government's recapture of Malakal on 6 July 2015, the state capital was initially defended by the sixth battalion of the SPLA's 2nd Division, under the command of Bhutros Bol. This mixed force included Equatorian troops and, in the beginning, even some Shilluk soldiers. In Malakal, after the deployment of the 2nd Division, Padang Dinka militias moved south from Paloich; they now constitute part of the defensive forces protecting the city, with deleterious results for the Shilluk and Nuer IDPs, who are harassed when they try to leave the PoC site. Parts of the SPLA's 6th and 7th Divisions are also operative in Upper Nile, as well as elements of Kiir's presidential guard and members of the Mathiang Anyoor militia from Bahr el Ghazal, although the military importance of these out-of-state militia forces has decreased markedly over the course of the last year.

Alongside the SPLA, the government's forces on the east bank of the White Nile also comprise a series of Padang Dinka militia groups from Akoka, Baliet, Melut, and Renk counties, including those known as Mathloun (Dinka for 'injustice') from Akoka and Abu Shoq from Baliet. These militias were created in 2014, and although many of their names were those of SPLA battalions from the second civil war, there is no link between the old battalions and the new militias. This nomenclature is intended to lend a history and legitimacy to new militias, whose activities are very different from the old battalions' operations.

Initially formed to protect the oil fields at Paloich, and relied upon by the Padang Dinka for community defence during the current civil war, these militia forces rapidly became the central actors in an offensive struggle waged against the Shilluk for control of the east bank of the White Nile. The militias operate outside of the SPLA's military command structure—although they often act in concert with the SPLA—and receive their ammunition and weaponry, including Israeli ACE rifles, from the Internal Security Bureau of the National Security Service, under the command of Akol Koor; funding is provided by the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, in which China has a 40 per cent stake, and is administered by Stephen Dieu Dhau, the Padang Dinka minister of petroleum and mining.

Since March 2015, these militias have burnt Shilluk settlements, killed Shilluk civilians, and attacked the Agwelek forces of Johnson Olonyi. Over the course of 2015, the ethnic conflict shifted from the east to the west bank of the White Nile. Dinka militias initially focused their attacks on Shilluk forces in Akoka county, notably at Lelo. Since mid-2015, however, these forces have intermittently moved onto the west bank, attacking civilians and fighters in the heartland of Shilluk territory. The militias often attack with the support of SPLA air power, notably an Mi-24 Hind attack helicopter. Purchased in 2014, stationed at Paloich, and flown by Eastern European crew members, the helicopter has repeatedly been used to attack Shilluk villages; on 6 July 2015, it strafed the area around a hospital of the International Committee for the Red Cross in Kodok, killing at least 13 patients.

Since February 2016, the east bank of the White Nile has been firmly under the control of the SPLA and its associated militia forces. The SPLA has a presence along the banks of the river, which deprives Shilluk civilians of sorely needed access to a river from which they could otherwise gain valuable food resources. The west bank remains largely under the control of Shilluk forces, with Olonyi's troops in the centre and south of the west bank, in Fashoda and Panyikang counties, and the Tiger Faction New Forces (TFNF) of Johannes Okiech in the north, in Manyo county. Olonyi's Agwelek forces have largely withdrawn from the river bank to avoid SPLA attention.

As Shilluk discontent with Kiir's decree will be enduring, and the Padang Dinka attempt to consolidate control of the east bank of the Nile has national backing, the banks of the Nile are likely to remain the most active combat theatre in Upper Nile for the foreseeable future.

The politics of the new states

Kiir's decree would divide Upper Nile into three states. In the south, Latjor state would be composed of the majority-Nuer counties of Longochuk, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang. Implementation of the 28-state map continues, even though Kiir's decree has drawn strong disapproval. On 31 January 2016, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional political bloc that oversees South Sudan's peace talks, asked the GRSS to suspend its plan to implement the 28 states, claiming that Kiir's decree was inconsistent with the August peace agreement. In response, the government announced that it would suspend the plan.

On 24 December 2015, Kiir appointed Peter Lam Both, a government loyalist, as the governor of Latjor state. On 27 February 2016, Lam announced his new cabinet, drawing many appointees from the cabinet of Simon Kun Puoch, who was dismissed as the governor of Upper Nile in August 2015. Thus, for instance, Peter Hoth Tuach continues as minister of information. The cabinet as a whole is loyal to the GRSS and has almost no legitimacy in southern Upper Nile, which solidly supports the SPLA–IO. The creation of Latjor state formalizes a political structure to accompany the region's current military occupation by the SPLA.

Although Latjor state is run by GRSS loyalists, tensions between Latjor and Eastern Nile states exist nonetheless. In February 2016, members of parliament for Latjor state issued a press release accusing Chol Thon Balok, the governor of Eastern Nile state, of keeping all of Upper Nile state's assets and refusing to cooperate with the governors of Latjor and Western Nile. These allegations, which Chol Thon angrily rejected on 4 March, are indicative of a changing power dynamic in Upper Nile state, and of the increasing dominance of the Padang Dinka.

The creation of Latjor state follows a more general pattern in Kiir's new division of the country. South Sudan's Nuer are separated out from other groups and given their own mono-ethnic states. Formally, this measure accedes to the SPLM/A–IO leader Riek Machar's demand for federalism. However, it also largely cuts off the Nuer states of the Greater Upper Nile (composed of Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile) from the region's oil reserves, which are generally located within Dinka-majority states. The new map of South Sudan also tends to place smaller ethnic groups within Dinka-majority states.

According to Kiir's decree, northern Upper Nile will become Eastern Nile state, composed of Akoka, Baliet, Maban, Malakal, Melut, Pigi (in Jonglei), and Renk counties. The minority Mabanese population would thus be subsumed into a Dinka-majority state, which would also contain all of Upper Nile's oil reserves. Kiir's decree further stipulates that most of the west bank of the Nile will constitute a mono-ethnic Shilluk state called Western Nile. The tripartite division of Upper Nile thus largely follows ethnic lines; however, it does not follow them perfectly. Instead, Kiir's decree maps almost exactly onto the current positions of military forces in Upper Nile state, with the east bank of the Nile, claimed by the Dinka and Shilluk alike but currently held by the GRSS, placed in Eastern Nile state. This correlation between new state boundaries and current military positions indicates the degree to which the new Upper Nile map is an attempt to render *de facto* occupations as *de jure* administrative borders.

Kiir's planned division of Upper Nile differs in certain key aspects from the federal map proposed by Riek Machar on 21 December 2014. Most notably, on Machar's map, Malakal, the contested state capital, is included in a Shilluk-majority state centred on the west bank of the Nile. Machar's map would give the state capital to the Shilluk and ensure that the new Shilluk state—named Fashoda state, after the traditional dwelling place of the Shilluk reth—would be a coherent territorial entity. In contrast, Kiir's decree would have Malakal absorbed into Eastern Nile, while Western Nile would be cut in two, with a northern part composed of Fashoda and Manyo counties, and a non-contiguous southern part comprising only Panyikang county. Kiir's proposal would weaken the state's ability to govern itself and leave its population reliant on Eastern Nile for safe passage between its two halves.

On 24 December 2015, Kiir appointed William Oton as governor of Western Nile. Oton was the National Congress Party governor of Upper Nile in 2009. Since his brief period as governor, he has lived in Juba, worked as a lawyer, and served on various GRSS legal committees. He has no popular mandate in Western Nile and is perceived as a puppet of the GRSS. Given that the west bank is controlled by Shilluk forces hostile to the government, Oton's appointment is for now purely nominal and will have no effect on governance in the territory.

Kiir's map also arrogates the east bank of the White Nile—which is claimed by the Shilluk—to Eastern Nile state. The borders of Eastern Nile are proving the most controversial part of Kiir's plan for Upper Nile. The Shilluk claim several areas in Akoka and Baliet counties as their own, as well as Malakal and Pigi county, in Jonglei state, which is also to be included inside Eastern Nile. Both Akoka and Pigi counties are relatively recent creations and have been bitterly contested between the Padang Dinka and the Shilluk.

Shilluk politicians and community leaders immediately denounced Kiir's decree and have since been unrelenting in their criticism of the measure. On 9 February 2016, six members of parliament from the largely Shilluk Sudan People's Liberation Movement for Democratic Change (SPLM–DC)—including Onyoti Adigo, the minority leader in South Sudan's parliament—warned that the inclusion of Malakal within Eastern Nile would lead to conflict between the Dinka and the Shilluk.

Kiir's decree also had immediate military consequences. Following Johnson Olonyi's split from the SPLA in May 2015, Johannes Okiech, one of the leading Shilluk SPLA commanders, remained with the government. Okiech had been largely responsible for routing the SPLA–IO from Wadakona, Manyo county, in the first three months of 2015. He did not enjoy the full trust of the SPLA, however. While his men remained in the area around Wadakona, Okiech was effectively kept under house arrest in Juba. He refused to criticize Olonyi and stated in July 2015 that the rebel leader was 'defending his people'.

At the end of October 2015, following Kiir's decree, Okiech split from the SPLA and announced the creation of the TFNF, formed from among his own Shilluk SPLA soldiers in Manyo county. Okiech announced that the TFNF would fight the GRSS until Kiir revoked his decree, which Okiech claimed amounted to a Dinka land-grab of Shilluk territory. The TFNF has not formally joined the SPLA–IO, although his forces have been acting in concert with Olonyi's Agwelek. Since its formation, the TFNF have clashed with government forces around Wadakona, at Gabat, Mananmand Ajot, Nyanowar, and Tor Gwang. The SPLA has sent reinforcements from Paloich to the Wadakona area.

While Okiech's force is not strong enough to take Renk—the repeated target of SPLA–IO incursions from Wadakona in 2014 and 2015—unified Shilluk support for Okiech and Olonyi, and the presence of the two militias on the west bank of the White Nile, will prevent the SPLA and the Padang Dinka militias from occupying the territory permanently. Rather, the stage is now set for a war of intermittent clashes, as both sides move out from secure positions on either side of the White Nile to contest the banks of the river.

New borders, old tensions

Kiir's tripartite division of Upper Nile comes after—and is consistent with—a decade of administrative and political measures that have attempted to force the Shilluk off the east bank of the White Nile. Since 2005, the Dinka and the Shilluk have contested three principal areas: what is now known as Akoka county (created in 2010), Pigi county, and the area of Nagdiar in Baliet county. Both sides make historical claims to these areas; the Shilluk trace evidence in support of their argument back to the beginning of the community's kingdom in the 15th century. Despite the length of the histories invoked by both sides, however, the land dispute between them really only became divisive in 2005, after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which brought an end to the long second civil war in Sudan.

With South Sudanese self-governance came questions of development priorities and the establishment of local and state-level political institutions, which in turn would allocate resources from the central government in Juba. The struggle for control of these institutions became part of the political battle between the Dinka and the Shilluk. The delimitation of county borders also intensified land disputes between the two groups, as areas of shared land usage became the object of exclusionary claims by both sides. What may have seemed like the expansion of Upper Nile's government institutions from the perspective of the international community in Juba, struck the Shilluk as a divisive attempt to remove their community from its land.

This process led to clashes between the Padang Dinka and the Shilluk in 2005 and 2006, before tensions erupted once again in 2009, at a celebration in Malakal. The dispute arose over which group was to lead a parade before visiting dignitaries. The real question, however, was the ownership of Malakal; for both sides, leading the parade would indicate that Malakal belonged to their respective ethnic group. Following clashes at the stadium, Padang Dinka fighters attacked Shilluk positions at Lelo, in what is now Akoka county, and in Nagdiar, in Baliet county.

The creation of formal administrative counties in Upper Nile led to political disagreements with an increasingly absolutist character; areas were *either* Shilluk *or* Padang Dinka, as competition for land and political power intensified following 2009, and the Padang Dinka attacked the Shilluk both militarily and administratively. In 2010–11, the SPLA responded to the electoral success of the SPLM–DC, led by Lam Akol, with mounting recriminatory attacks on Shilluk communities on the west bank of the Nile. Although the SPLA operation on the west bank was officially a disarmament campaign, the SPLA razed villages, killed and raped civilians, and fuelled Shilluk hostility towards the Upper Nile administration.

The attacks on the west bank of the Nile fed directly into the emergence of the Shilluk rebellions of Johnson Olonyi, Ayok Ogat, and Johannes Okiech in 2010–13. These very same commanders are currently leading the Shilluk resistance against the GRSS forces, reflecting a significant degree of continuity between the CPA period and the current civil war. During both periods, the Padang Dinka managed to channel national military and political resources towards local communitarian ends.

While the Shilluk experienced an increasing amount of pressure on the east and west banks of the White Nile in 2009–11, they disapproved of what they saw as their leading politicians in Juba being more preoccupied with trying to establish a national, non-communitarian platform than they were with representing their community's interests in the national capital. For instance, Pagan Amum, then the leading Shilluk politician, was broadly criticized within the community for not speaking out more forcefully against the killings on the west bank in 2010–11. The loss of Shilluk confidence in their leaders was exemplified in the 2010 gubernatorial elections, during which Oyay Deng Ajak, one of the foremost Shilluk members of the SPLM, lost to the SPLM–DC candidate in Panyikang county, his place of birth.

During the CPA period, the Shilluk became increasingly marginalized in the politics of Upper Nile, while the Padang Dinka grew ever more prominent at the national level. The Padang Dinka are a riverine group; they comprise the Ngok Dinka of Abyei, the Panaru and Alor Dinka of Unity state, and Dinka groups in Akoka, Baliet, Melut, and Renk counties. In part due to their physical dispersion, the Padang Dinka have long had less political capital in the SPLM than the powerful political lobbies of the Dinka of Bor and Bahr el Ghazal. Indeed, prior to 2005, almost all the most prominent Padang Dinka politicians were from Abyei, a territory contested by the GRSS and the Government of Sudan (GoS). As a result of Abyei's particular travails, these politicians were largely delinked from the land issues in Upper Nile and Unity, which have to come to shape the contemporary Padang Dinka political lobby at the national level.

The growing prominence of the Padang Dinka in the CPA period was evidenced by the rise of Stephen Dieu Dhau. Having spent the second civil war working as a low-level banker in Khartoum, Dhau had little political capital in South Sudan around the time the CPA was signed. Yet, in 2005, following the death of his wife, Leila Ajout, an important member of the SPLM, he entered the movement with the backing of Pagan Amum—who hoped to use his protégé as part of a broad coalition to support him. Dhau was fast-tracked through the party and gained his current ministerial position in 2014.

The rise of the Padang Dinka at the national level allowed for their increased dominance in Upper Nile. A series of administrative decrees during the CPA period eroded the Shilluk claim to the east bank of the White Nile. Most notably, Akoka county was created in 2010 by presidential decree, although the Upper Nile administration acknowledged in July 2015 that the county’s population was not large enough to qualify for county status. Akoka county lies on the east bank of the Nile and is contested by the Dinka and the Shilluk. As of February 2016, the county still did not have established borders. ‘We are still making them’, claimed Santino Nuan, the minister of local government in Upper Nile in July 2015. This claim indicates the extent to which Akoka is an administrative instrument, useful for arrogating for the Padang Dinka’s use a potentially expandable area, which, if Kiir’s decree is implemented, will form the border of a Dinka-majority Eastern Nile state.

Upon the creation of Akoka county in 2010, state-level funds were made available for the construction of county administrative buildings; at the same time, international NGOs moved in to provide services in the county. Development was noticeably unequal, however; as funds and services flowed to the Padang Dinka in the new county, resentment grew in underserved Shilluk areas. The creation of Akoka county may be viewed as yet another iteration in a long history of administrative border changes in southern Sudan and then South Sudan. Redrawing borders and creating counties are tactics that have long been used by both the GoS and the GRSS to funnel resources and land to selected groups while marginalizing others. Kiir’s decree and the creation of Eastern Nile state are consonant with this history.

The opportunity of war

With the outbreak of South Sudan’s civil war in December 2013, the GRSS in Upper Nile faced a military crisis. Almost all fighters in the SPLA were Nuer, and most of them immediately defected to the nascent SPLA–IO. Other than the loyalist Nuer 1st Division in Renk, the GRSS was forced to rebuild its military presence in the state, essentially from scratch. In part, it turned to Dinka militia forces. In 2014–15, a number of Dinka militias from Warrap and Northern Bahr el Ghazal deployed to Upper Nile; these groups included the Mathiang Anyoor, which had been involved in the initial killings in Juba in December 2013 and had trained at Kiir’s private farm at Luri, in Central Equatoria state.

As the conflict continued, the Mathiang Anyoor and other Bahr el Ghazal militias increasingly recruited younger men and boys, and gave them less training; as a result, they became less useful as a fighting force. Before 6 July 2015, when the SPLA recaptured Malakal, government positions at Paloich were massively reinforced by the presidential guard and Mathiang Anyoor fighters, both flown up from Juba. However,

these forces refused to participate in the attack on Malakal. Far from their homes in Bahr el Ghazal, and without an obvious stake in the conflict in Upper Nile, Kiir's militia forces were increasingly unreliable as a combat force in Upper Nile and, as of February 2016, only small forces remained, stationed in Nasir town and at Paloich.

The Padang Dinka militias of Upper Nile have many advantages over the Mathiang Anyoor and Dinka SPLA troops from elsewhere in South Sudan. The Padang Dinka militias are based in their areas of birth, and their relationships with the local population thus tend to be much more synergistic than that of SPLA forces, which are stationed outside of their areas of origin. While the SPLA has often looted and stolen from local communities during the current conflict, in a form of predatory raiding largely countenanced by the SPLA in Juba, the Padang Dinka militias can count on the support of their own communities, whose interests they are actively defending.

The first such militia force to be constituted was the oil defence force of the Abialang Dinka of Renk county, created in 2014 to guarantee GRSS control of Paloich. As with Abu Shog and Mathloun, the oil defence force was supplied with weaponry and ammunition via the Internal Security Bureau, with funding drawn from the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company and administered by Stephen Dieu Dhau. By the beginning of 2015, the GRSS found itself increasingly reliant on the Padang Dinka militias to secure territory and oil resources in Upper Nile state. This situation was paralleled in Unity state, where Padang Dinka militias from the Panaru Dinka took control of the Toma and Toor oil fields; these militias were also funded and armed by the Internal Security Bureau via Stephen Dieu Dhau. By the beginning of 2015, Padang Dinka militias, which were not directly answerable to the SPLA military hierarchy, had control of much of South Sudan's oil and all of its functional oil fields; as of the time of writing, however, the Unity oil fields were offline.

The government's reliance on these militias was an opportunity for the Padang Dinka military and political elite in Upper Nile. While the militias have acted in concert with the SPLA, their goals are rather different. Instead of waging a national war, the militias aim to secure Padang Dinka control of the east bank of the Nile and domination of the state's political structures. By January 2015, the militias were attacking Shilluk positions on the east bank of the Nile, and tension was increasing between the Nuer-dominated state administration (then led by Simon Kun Puoch) and the Padang Dinka county commissioners for Akoka, Baliyet, Melut, and Renk, who were backed by Stephen Dieu Dhau in Juba.

At the beginning of 2015, two obstacles lay in the Padang Dinka's way to political and military domination of the east bank of the White Nile: the administration of Simon Kun Puoch, and the increasing popularity and military success of Johnson Olonyi. Just over a year later, as of 9 March 2016, the governor of Eastern Nile was a Padang Dinka military officer, Chol Thon, and Olonyi had been forced into the SPLA–IO and off the east bank of the Nile.

The rise of Olonyi

While the Padang Dinka militia forces enabled the government to secure control of Paloich, they have been disinclined to pursue a broader war with the SPLA–IO and have operated only within the areas to which the Padang Dinka lay claim, with brief

forays onto the west bank of the Nile. They are an ethnic force, pursuing an ethnic agenda; they are able to rely on national-level funding and support, as their current agenda is consonant with the aims of the Kiir administration, which also finds itself increasingly beholden to the Padang Dinka.

In 2014–15, in contrast, it was Olonyi's Shilluk Agwelek forces that were pursuing a largely ethnic agenda with funding and backing from Juba. For a time, the goals of Olonyi dovetailed with those of the Kiir administration. In December 2013, when the current civil war began, other than the SPLA—whose Nuer majority largely supported the SPLA–IO—the most significant military forces in the state were the Shilluk militias of Okiec, Ogat, and Olonyi. These commanders had led rebellions against the South Sudanese government in 2010–13, in response to Shilluk marginalization in the political administration of Upper Nile, and in retaliation for SPLA attacks on Shilluk settlements on the east bank of the Nile. Olonyi had led his forces in attacks on Kaka and Malakal in 2011, before being integrated into the SPLA in 2013. At the outbreak of the current war, however, his troops had not been fully integrated into the SPLA and remained on the west bank of the White Nile.

Both the SPLA and the SPLA–IO made overtures to Olonyi's forces. Yet Olonyi and the other commanders were wary of the nascent rebellion and refused to join it, aware that Nuer fighters loyal to SPLA–IO commander Gabriel Tanginye had attacked Shilluk settlements in Panyikang county, on the west bank of the Nile, in December 2013 and January 2014. Nevertheless, Juba harboured residual suspicion of Olonyi's force, given its history of rebellion against the GRSS. However, Paul Malong Awan, then the governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal state and currently the SPLA chief of staff, backed Olonyi and was the main political actor who supported his alliance with the SPLA.

As Olonyi's Agwelek forces began to fight for the GRSS, continued SPLA–IO attacks on Shilluk civilians—such as during the assault on Malakal on 18 February 2014—facilitated Olonyi's recruiting activities among Upper Nile's Shilluk population. In 2014, Olonyi's forces achieved marked successes in the south of Upper Nile, driving the SPLA–IO away from the south of the west bank of the White Nile, and then successfully defending this territory from attacks by Tanginye's forces, which were stationed in New Fangak. Given these successes, the SPLA increased its supply of armaments and weaponry to Olonyi's men. It should be noted, however, that Olonyi's forces did not pursue the SPLA–IO south into Jonglei; rather, his force fought a defensive war, for Shilluk territory, and did not cross the community's claimed boundaries.

At the beginning of 2015, following the breakdown of the peace talks in Addis Ababa, a combined force of the troops of Olonyi, Okiec, and Ogat attacked SPLA–IO positions around Wadakona, successfully securing the north of Manyo county for the GRSS, and driving the SPLA–IO into Sudan. By the end of March 2015, Olonyi was the most successful military commander in Upper Nile. He had driven the SPLA–IO from both the south and the north of the west bank of the Nile and secured the Shilluk kingdom. At the PoC site in Malakal, songs were written in his honour. His rise, and his links to Paul Malong in Juba, posed a direct threat to the Padang Dinka's campaign for the east bank of the Nile.

Strikingly, up until March 2015, both the Padang Dinka militias and Olonyi's forces only operated within the areas that each community claimed, with the support of the SPLA, until the SPLA–IO was effectively driven out of northern Upper Nile. From December 2013 through to March 2015, the local aims of Olonyi—to secure the Shilluk kingdom—and the national aims of the army—to defeat the SPLA–IO—cohered. Following the defeat of the SPLA–IO, the underlying antagonism in Upper Nile re-emerged: that between the Padang Dinka and the Shilluk.

Olonyi's split from the SPLA

Tensions between the two sides were already tangible in 2014. In February, July, and August of that year, Padang Dinka forces had altercations with members of the Agwelek. Just after Olonyi's successful participation in the campaign against the SPLA–IO in Wadakona, a Padang Dinka militia member shot at him, in Renk town, on 7 March. What also unnerved the Agwelek forces is that Simon Kun Puoch's state-level administration was silent about these attacks, leading the Agwelek to believe that in a confrontation, the state would side with what they saw as unprovoked Padang Dinka aggression.

Tensions came to a head in March 2015, when Mathloun, the Padang Dinka militia, repeatedly attacked Agwelek positions at Lelo and Benthian in Akoka county. Although the two forces were seemingly both on the side of the GRSS, these attacks were part of the first concerted Padang Dinka military attempt to force the Shilluk off the east bank of the White Nile. Initially, both the SPLA and the Agwelek attempted to downplay these clashes as the product of inter-community tensions, and as unrelated to tensions between Olonyi and the Padang Dinka military and political elite of Upper Nile state.

The tensions escalated on 1 April, when Mathloun militia members killed James Bwogo, Olonyi's deputy, and 12 of Bwongo's bodyguards on the Lul bridge, which connects Fashoda and Akoka counties. What precisely happened is disputed. In Juba, the SPLA claimed that Bwogo was going to investigate ongoing ethnic tensions and was accidentally killed. Mathloun claimed they had not realized that Bwogo was Olonyi's deputy and thought he was a Shilluk youth—not a credible claim given the number of vehicles and troops accompanying the deputy. The Agwelek have provided multiple versions of the killing of Bwogo, including that the attack was meant for Olonyi himself, who had been invited to a meeting in Akoka but, fearing an ambush, sent his deputy in his stead.

Over the following days, fighting between the two sides continued. Recognizing that the state government did not issue a statement about Bwogo's death, Olonyi grew worried. Many Shilluk in Malakal were reminded of the state government's silence after the 2009 Padang Dinka attacks on Nagdiar and elsewhere; they expressed concern that Simon Kun Puoch's administration was playing a partisan role, rather than serving as a neutral body and mediating between the two sides. Negotiations over Bwogo's death were ongoing when, on 21 April, there was a clash between Puoch's bodyguards and Olonyi's forces, leading to the death of two bodyguards. Tensions immediately escalated in Malakal town, and Mathloun and Olonyi's forces clashed in Paloich (on 23 April) and in Malakal (on 24 April). The Padang Dinka militias, the SPLA, and the gubernatorial guards acted in concert against Olonyi's troops.

Simultaneously, a variety of intercessors from Juba attempted to intervene and act as mediators in negotiations between the two parties, including the Shilluk reth, as well as Obac William Olawo, a Shilluk businessman with close connections to Kiir, and various members of the SPLM and SPLA. During the negotiations, which lasted two weeks, the Agwelek withdrew to the south of Malakal, although they remained in military control of the city. The intercessors demanded that Olonyi go to Juba, to answer for the killing of Puoch's bodyguards, and that his forces withdraw to the west bank of the White Nile. Olonyi resisted, knowing that if he went to Juba, he could be detained; he had by now lost faith in the ability of the national government to mediate between the Padang Dinka and the Shilluk.

On 14 May 2015, Olonyi informed his troops that they were no longer allied with the SPLA. On 15 May, Olonyi attacked Malakal from all directions. The SPLA withdrew its mechanized division from the Doleib Hills—an important strategic site south of Malakal—fearing that it would be overrun, and SPLA–IO forces advanced north from Jonglei and took the area. By 16 May, Malakal was under Olonyi's control, and the SPLA was withdrawing north towards Akoka, conceding Anak Diar and Kodok to Olonyi's forces.

The GRSS and the Padang Dinka pushed Olonyi into rebellion. Instead of mediating between the Shilluk and the Padang Dinka, the national and state-level governments actively took the side of Mathloun and the other Padang Dinka militias, essentially sanctioning the Padang land-grab that, by April 2015, was under way on the east bank of the Nile. Having used Olonyi to rout Nuer SPLA–IO forces on the west bank of the Nile, the Padang Dinka then turned on the Shilluk forces on the east bank, and the political and military calculus in Upper Nile was transformed once again.

Olonyi's relationship with the SPLA–IO

Following Olonyi's split from the SPLA, the SPLA–IO initially claimed that he had joined the rebel force. This pronouncement was inaccurate and part of a more general SPLA–IO attempt to collapse all resistance to the SPLM/A under its umbrella. Olonyi's initial formal claim was rather that the Agwelek would operate as an independent force, willing to work with other opposition forces, to prevent the ethnic cleansing of the Shilluk, which Olonyi claimed had been under way since 2005.

Simultaneously, negotiations between Olonyi and the SPLA–IO were taking place in secret; Carlos Kuol, a Jikany Nuer SPLA–IO brigadier general previously stationed in Unity state, was in Wadakona and led the proceedings for the SPLA–IO. By 1 July 2015, the two sides had signed an agreement in Nairobi and Olonyi's forces joined the rebel group. On 2 July—clearly as a result of the negotiations—Riek Machar appointed Jokino Fidele as governor of a 'Fashoda state', delimited according to Machar's December 2014 federalist map of South Sudan. Jokino Fidele had been a popular commissioner of Fashoda county until Simon Kun Puoch dismissed him due to fears that Fidele was aiming to unseat him as governor. Fidele, who led the negotiations for the Agwelek in Nairobi, is politically important to Olonyi, who famously proclaimed that he himself had a 'doctorate in fighting'—a disparaging gesture made to insult Machar, who has a PhD in mechanical engineering. Olonyi knows that he is no politician and thus relies on Fidele and other advisers to negotiate.

Olonyi was first appointed head of the 1st Division of the SPLA–IO, responsible for Upper Nile state, and then made a lieutenant general in September 2015. Despite Olonyi’s formal integration into the SPLA–IO, however, his forces remain largely independent. While they acted in concert with SPLA–IO forces under the command of Tanginye and Thomas Mabor Dhol—a brigadier general answerable to Tanginye—in May–July 2015, the Agwelek have acted in almost entirely autonomous fashion since then.

Olonyi may have changed allegiance from Kiir to Machar, but, in both cases, his fundamental allegiance is to his community, and focused on maintaining—or recovering—the territory of the Shilluk kingdom. While this military action clearly has national implications, it is also a basically defensive posture. Neither Olonyi nor Fidele has evinced any interest in the structure of national politics, nor is either man beholden to Machar’s vision of South Sudan or to an SPLA–IO government. Indeed, in October 2015, while Kiir and many upper-level members of the SPLM were in South Africa, Olonyi’s emissaries attempted to open up a dialogue about reintegration into the SPLA, only to be rebuffed. At the same time, Olonyi spent the first two months of 2016 moving in and out of Khartoum, unsuccessfully attempting to procure a supply of weapons from the GoS. These rapid movements from one side to another reveal the extent to which Olonyi’s alliances are a function of his own community’s struggle for its kingdom.

The war for the east bank

Initially, it looked as though the state government had made a huge tactical mistake by forcing Olonyi into rebellion. The SPLA was in full retreat, and Olonyi’s forces advanced to Benthing in Akoka on 18 May 2015, burning much of the village, while three barges moved up the White Nile with Olonyi. On 19 May, Olonyi took the Tangrial refinery, Melut town itself—leaving much of it destroyed—and Magok, a town at the gateway to the Adar oil field.

In view of Olonyi’s advances, the Chinese evacuated more than 400 oil workers in Paloich, despite claims to the contrary by the South Sudanese ministry of petroleum. Oil workers from Europe and South-east Asia who are necessary for maintenance on the Paloich oil field also wanted to leave during this period. As per their contracts, the GRSS should have evacuated them. Even though Olonyi was advancing on Paloich, however, the GRSS refused to evacuate the workers, effectively holding them hostage, knowing that in their absence the oil fields would have to close, eliminating the government’s last sustainable source of income. The situation was only resolved when the foreign companies chartered planes from Juba to Paloich, removing all but a skeleton staff from the oil fields.

Olonyi’s campaign in northern Upper Nile reached its high point on 19 May. The next day, the SPLA’s 1st Division, which had moved down from Renk to reinforce Paloich, engaged Olonyi’s forces, dislodging the Agwelek from around Melut on 21 May, and destroying at least one of his barges. The 1st Division soon succeeded in slowing Olonyi’s advance, and then reversing his gains, taking Akoka county before clashing with Olonyi in Malakal on 25 May, and then retaking the state capital. The SPLA’s 1st Division worked with the Padang Dinka militias during these operations.

The opposition fighters tended to withdraw in front of the SPLA's advance, rather than fight it directly. As elsewhere in South Sudan during the current conflict, overrunning the enemy's positions and taking the available materiel is more of a focus than maintaining territorial positions. In taking Melut, the Agwelek thus benefitted chiefly from their access to SPLA weapons supplies, which they took, before withdrawing before the 1st Division's advance. Olonyi's forces also withdrew from Malakal before the SPLA arrived, retreating to Olonyi's headquarters in Warjok, just across the river from the state capital.

For much of June 2015, the situation in Upper Nile was relatively quiet, with skirmishes around Kaka and Wadakona. The only break in this pattern took place on 23 June, when SPLA–IO troops attacked SPLA positions in the Doleib Hills, before the SPLA–IO and the Agwelek mounted a joint operation on 27 June, and took Malakal. This attack was a pincer operation, in which Olonyi's forces moved east across the White Nile, while Nuer troops under the command of Tanginye moved north through the Doleib Hills. After five hours of fighting, the opposition captured the town and the Shilluk residents of the PoC site came out to celebrate. The high command of the SPLA–IO apparently had not sanctioned the attack, which was intended as a show of force on the part of the rebels, rather than a substantive assault in a broader effort to occupy the capital.

Buoyed by their success, the opposition then advanced north, in a repeat of May's campaign, attacking SPLA and militia positions at Akoka and Melut. The SPLA responded immediately. In Juba, it was considered important that the GRSS had control of Malakal before the Independence Day celebrations on 9 July. The SPLA's 2nd Division was flown up from Juba to Paloich, along with a group of the presidential guards, while Padang Dinka militia fighters moved south from Renk to Paloich in preparation for the assault. On 3 July, the SPLA launched a counteroffensive, taking Akoka and Benthiong. In the face of this heavy assault, opposition forces withdrew from Malakal: the Agwelek retreated back to the west and the SPLA–IO forces of Tanginye and Mabor Dhol withdrew south to Jonglei. Agwelek forces also moved west from Wau Shilluk, away from the banks of the White Nile, in anticipation of SPLA attacks on their nearest west bank positions.

On 6 July 2015, the SPLA entered Malakal unopposed. Since then, the opposition in Upper Nile has not mounted another sustained attack on the east bank of the Nile. The SPLA has dug extensive defensive fortifications around Malakal, especially at the airport, and has extensively reinforced its military presence in the state capital. Without significant external support and armament from the GoS, the SPLA–IO is unlikely to be able to dislodge the SPLA from Malakal in the near future. At present, the GoS has little interest in arming the rebels. However, if negotiations with the GRSS over oil transit fees and the border were to intensify, the GoS could decide to fund militia forces in Upper Nile to try to force concessions from South Sudan at the negotiating table, as Khartoum has done repeatedly since 2005.

The conflict dynamic that took shape July 2015 was still in place in February 2016. Since July 2015, the GRSS has remained in control of the east bank of the Nile. Clashes with the opposition have been restricted to intermittent encounters, such as when the SPLA or associated militias cross onto the west bank of the Nile or shell

opposition targets on the opposite bank of the Nile. The SPLA has also used its air power to attack civilian and military positions on the west bank, including Owachi, in Panyikang county, and Warjok, just south on Malakal, on 23 July. In response to these air attacks and repeated artillery assaults, the Agwelek have withdrawn from the bank of the river. The SPLA's focus since July has been twofold: (1) to force the opposition to remain on the west bank, and (2) to attack the Shilluk civilian population and push them away from the contested areas on the east bank of the Nile. In light of the second objective, the presence of large numbers of Shilluk IDPs in the PoC site has become a political problem.

The political battle for Upper Nile

At the outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war, increasing Padang Dinka domination of the state was not reflected in its formal political administration. Simon Kun Puoch was the state governor, and the only one of South Sudan's governors who had not been replaced since the 2010 gubernatorial elections, although he had little popular backing in Upper Nile.

Puoch was a surprise choice for governor in 2010. Prior to the election, the SPLM's political bureau in Upper Nile could not agree on a candidate, and the tension between Shilluk and Padang Dinka candidates was escalating. The SPLM's political bureau in Juba intervened by nominating Simon Kun Puoch—who had developed close links to Salva Kiir while working for the Southern Sudan Relief and Recovery Commission during the second civil war—even though he was not on the initial list of candidates for the SPLM. In Malakal, it was felt that Puoch was effectively foisted on Upper Nile by Juba.

During 2015, the Padang Dinka militia forces experienced a dual set of tensions. First, they perceived Puoch's administration—which the governor had largely filled with expatriate South Sudanese returnees with a limited local power-base—as a block on their control of the east bank of the White Nile. Second, the militias had drawn the rancour of the largely Nuer 1st Division for attacking Shilluk in Renk county. At the Independence Day rally in Renk on 9 July 2015, these frictions erupted into the open. Stephen Buay, then commander of the 1st Division, warned the crowd that the people shooting in Renk were not the 1st Division, but the Padang Dinka militias, and that they would be punished for attacking civilians inside Renk town. Militia commanders, including Chol Ayyik Dau, expressed their anger at Buay's remarks.

By July 2015, Puoch's position in the state was tenuous. Puoch is a Nuer from Nasir, in a state in which almost all of the Nuer south was sympathetic to the SPLA-IO; as a consequence, retaining a Nuer constituency by having a Nuer governor was no longer a priority for Kiir. Puoch's administration was increasingly at odds with the territorial ambitions of the Padang Dinka county commissioners, many of whom had noticeably absented themselves from the 9 July Independence Day celebrations in Renk, which became the temporary state capital following Olonyi's initial occupation of Malakal.

Whereas Puoch remained formally in command of the state from March to August 2015, Shilluk officials at the lower administrative levels were being pushed out of their positions. During this period, Shilluk civil servants and teachers were not paid their salaries, either because—if they worked on the west bank of the White Nile—

they were told they were rebels, or simply—if they worked elsewhere—they were told their salaries were not available.

On 16 August 2015, during the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa, Salva Kiir abruptly dismissed Puoch from his position as governor and appointed Chol Thon Balok, a Padang Dinka and lieutenant general in the SPLA, who was previously deputy chief of general staff for moral orientation. This move confirmed the dominant position of the Padang Dinka in the political administration of Upper Nile.

Four months later, on 24 December 2015, Kiir dismissed Chol Thon, along with the governors of every other state in South Sudan; he went on to appoint the governors of his new 28 states, reappointing Chol Thon as the governor of Eastern Nile state. Since then, though the SPLM has officially agreed with IGAD that the 28-state decree should be suspended, and committed to pausing the process of creating 28 new states, Chol Thon has forged ahead with making Eastern Nile state a reality. On 31 January 2016, he appointed his state cabinet, which is overwhelmingly Padang Dinka; as a gesture of inclusion of the state's Maban, he made one Mabanese appointment. Chol Thon also appointed Chol Ayiik Dau, a militia commander who sees the struggle in Upper Nile in explicitly ethnicized terms, as the commissioner for Melut county.

Chol Thon's appointment and confirmation as governor of Eastern Nile state effectively brings the process begun in 2005 to completion: the Padang Dinka control of the eastern bank of the Nile, from Renk down to Pigi county. Thon has also begun purging the administration of Upper Nile—now Eastern Nile—of Shilluk and Nuer. A circular written on 1 February by Daniel Chuang, the secretary general of Eastern Nile, indicates that civil servants from elsewhere in Upper Nile will have their employment terminated, pending their transfer to the new states of Latjor and Western Nile. Given the strength of the opposition to the new states in these areas, however, such transfers are purely theoretical. Eastern Nile is the only new state that will be operative for the foreseeable future, so long as its creation is consonant with political and military realities in the area. The civil servants who were told to go to Latjor and Western Nile will simply lose access to their salaries. Thus, although the GRSS spokesperson, Michael Makuei, has repeatedly claimed that the process of establishing the new states has been suspended, the process continues unabated in Dinka-majority states such as Eastern Nile.

In Upper Nile, this process threatens to undermine the peace agreement signed by Machar and Kiir in August 2015. According to the agreement, simultaneously ratified by the SPLM/A–IO in Pagak and by the South Sudanese parliament in Juba on 10 September 2015, the governorship of Upper Nile is to go to the SPLM/A–IO. Makuei has repeatedly contended that Kiir's October decree does not necessarily have to interfere with the peace process: since the SPLM/A–IO was to have the governorship of Upper Nile, it would simply have the governorship of the three new states.

However, it is difficult to see how this would be possible in Eastern Nile. On 7 February 2016, Eastern Nile community leaders indicated that they would not accept an SPLM–IO governor. Even if one were appointed, it would be difficult to imagine how this official could lead effectively, given the lack of a local constituency and a hostile, armed population with backing from Juba. It is also hard to envisage the

SPLM/A–IO countenancing even nominating a governor for Western or Eastern Nile states, for such a move would implicitly accept the borders of Kiir’s new map of South Sudan, which are absolutely unacceptable to the Shilluk community. Any Nuer or Shilluk community leader who accepts such a governorship would immediately lose whatever credibility and support they had on the ground. So while the Padang Dinka have seemingly achieved dominance of the east bank of the Nile, no degree of legality given to this domination by Kiir’s decree will find legitimacy among the Shilluk.

Rainy-season conflict

In August and September 2015, the two sides engaged in intermittent conflict, focused on the White Nile. On 31 August, Agwelek forces attacked SPLA barges that were carrying troops and materiel to Malakal. The SPLA periodically shells the west bank of the Nile, aiming at Agwelek and TFNF positions. This shelling was accompanied by frequent strafes by attack helicopters, which, on 2 September, for instance, opened fire on SPLA–IO positions at Ditang, Lelo, and Warjok. Warjok, Olonyi’s military base, and Lelo, the contested area in Akoka county, remain the focus of these hostilities.

The SPLA has also frequently crossed over onto the west bank of the Nile, as on 4 September, when the army advanced on Wau Shilluk, sending civilians fleeing into the bush. The SPLA raids are not intended to ensure a decisive military victory on the west bank of the White Nile; rather, they are policing operations, design to keep Agwelek activity to a minimum and to ‘punish’ Shilluk civilians for supporting the rebel commander. In what is effectively a war waged on the Shilluk population, the Padang Dinka have not discriminated between civilians and soldiers. In an attempt to ensure Padang Dinka control of the White Nile, the militias have frequently razed civilian residences on the west bank of the Nile (such as at Wau Shilluk on 25 December 2015 and 3 January 2016) and fired on civilians.

Since Okiech’s creation of the TFNF in October 2015, the SPLA has also been fighting this new Shilluk force in Manyo county, attacking the Shilluk force in Jelhak, on the west bank of the Nile, on 29 October, and using helicopter gunships to bomb their positions around Tor Gwang at the end of November. At the same time, helicopter gunships attacked Agwelek positions at Kaka, and SPLA troops crossed to Lelo, where they have a cantonment site under the terms of the August 2015 peace agreement. The SPLA again attacked the TFNF on 9 February 2016, at Dabba, in the area around Wadakona; there were further skirmishes between the two sides on 11 and 15 February near Mamur, in the vicinity of Wadakona.

The humanitarian war

In addition to the military campaign waged against the Agwelek, and the political efforts to control Eastern Nile, the Padang Dinka administration of Upper Nile (and now Eastern Nile) has waged a war against Shilluk civilians.

This war has had two major periods of activity. In June–August 2015, the Padang Dinka militias and their associated SPLA forces attempted to block any food aid from reaching the west bank of the White Nile, and so effectively tried to starve out the Shilluk civilian population. In mid-June 2015, militia forces fired on humanitarian barges that were leaving Malakal for Wau Shilluk, leading to the suspension of

humanitarian river travel to the west bank of the White Nile. Simultaneously, the SPLA began denying flight clearances to international NGOs that sought to reach the west bank. July saw an intensification of this campaign. On 23 July, the SPLA suspended river transport along the White Nile. In July–August 2015, it consistently denied flight clearances to fixed-wing aircraft that were trying to land at the UNMISS base in Malakal, leading to food shortages for the IDPs at the PoC site.

The overall goal of these measures on the west bank of the White Nile was to deny any support to the Shilluk community, and thereby to reduce Olonyi's ability to sustain his forces and the Shilluk's capacity to resist Padang Dinka encroachment on their territory. On the east bank of the Nile, in Malakal, these measures were designed to limit contact between the Shilluk on the west bank and those at the PoC site, as well as to create a situation in which life in the UNMISS camp gradually became unbearable. Many of those who left the PoC site to gather food or supplies from Malakal were either raped or killed by Padang Dinka militias inside Malakal town, which remains deserted of civilians.

Given that Kiir's new map of South Sudan arrogates Malakal to a Padang Dinka-dominated Eastern Nile state, the presence of more than 40,000 IDPs, many of whom are Shilluk, in the PoC site presents a problem: these IDPs are the only remaining physical presence of the Shilluk claim that Malakal actually belongs to them. Thus, in June–August 2015, and again in February 2016, the Padang Dinka political and military elite attempted to make life as difficult as possible for these IDPs, in the hopes that they would leave the camp. This policy of forced population transfer remained in place in March 2016, achieved through the denial of humanitarian aid as well as military attacks.

For half a year, from August 2015 to January 2016, the situation improved somewhat: fixed-wing aircraft were again allowed to land in Malakal for the delivery of supplies to the PoC site, and humanitarian barges were again permitted to access the west bank of the White Nile. In February 2016, however, the situation worsened once again. In the first half of the month, international NGOs were restricted from reaching Wau Shilluk from Malakal, while the SPLA also closed the route to Wau Shilluk for civilians at the PoC site. Among the results were massive price increases at the PoC site, whose residents relied on goods from Sudan and fish from the river, delivered to the camp by traders and family members on the west bank of the Nile. The price of cooking fuel trebled in a two-week period.

The Eastern Nile administration's attempt to force the Shilluk off the east bank of the White Nile by denying access to humanitarian aid and trade links was supplemented in February 2016 with a planned assault on the UNMISS PoC site. Following Kiir's October decree, the situation inside the camp had become increasingly tense. On 16–17 February, Dinka IDPs, along with Dinka members of the SPLA and associated militias, clashed with the Nuer and Shilluk residents of the PoC site. In a statement to the press on 18 February, UNMISS claimed that the clashes had taken place solely between Shilluk and Dinka youths.

However, a very different picture of the violence emerges from interviews with witnesses and internal UNMISS reports that were not made public, presumably

because UNMISS feared aggravating its relationship with the state administration. Disturbances began on 16 February, when Padang Dinka militia fighters attempted to enter the PoC site with weapons, while Dinka IDPs began cutting the camp's fences and evacuating their women and children. This degree of prior organization indicates that the subsequent events at the PoC site were not an unexpected bout of random violence, but rather a planned assault.

Fighting within the PoC site intensified on 17 February. Some 80 members of the SPLA and Padang Dinka militias entered the PoC site and began an attack on Nuer and Shilluk IDPs, assisted by Dinka inhabitants of the camp, using small arms and grenades. Fighting continued throughout the night in PoC sections 1 and 2. UNMISS sent a single fire engine into the PoC site to attempt to put out some of the fires, but upon being attacked, the peacekeepers immediately withdrew. During the night of 17–18 February, Nuer and Shilluk IDPs ran to the main gate of the PoC site, in an attempt to escape the fighting. However, the UNMISS guards refused to open the gate, which was not breached until 10 am on 18 February, when the remaining Nuer and Shilluk IDPs fled into the UNMISS base, next to the PoC site.

The SPLA and associated militias burnt down approximately 15,000 dwellings, looting Shilluk and Nuer areas. UNMISS discussed whether it should enter the PoC site on 17–18 February, but the UN peacekeeping forces expressed a reluctance to use deadly force, although UNMISS has a Chapter VII mandate that specifically allows the use of force to protect civilians. Finally, around 3 pm on 18 February, after the fighting had subsided, UNMISS peacekeepers entered the burning PoC site.

The UNMISS response to the attack on the PoC site was roundly criticized. The SPLA–IO deputy military spokesperson, Dickson Gatluak, stated: '[The] UN and UNMISS, instead of burying their heads in the sand, should clearly come out and announce that they are powerless to execute their mandate of protecting unarmed civilians.'

The PoC site may be attacked yet again. On 1 March, UNMISS caught three armed Padang Dinka members of the state security service attempting to cut through the PoC site's perimeter fence. The Padang Dinka administration's harassment of the site's residents is not limited to military assault. On 6 March, uniformed SPLA personnel raped a Shilluk IDP just outside the PoC site. The administration hopes that if the situation for the Shilluk IDPs is made sufficiently difficult, they will leave the PoC site for the west bank of the White Nile, giving the Padang Dinka total control of the east bank of the Nile. In the PoC site, the Shilluk debate whether they should go to the west bank for reasons of security, or stay in the PoC site, for they are aware of the political consequences that come with leaving.

Meanwhile, the GRSS is moving Padang Dinka civilians living in Juba to Upper Nile. As of 9 March 2015, approximately 1,000 people had been moved. These returnees are being settled in Malakal and elsewhere on the east bank of the White Nile. In what is effectively a state-sanctioned land-grab, civilian habitation will be used to consolidate Padang Dinka territorial control, which was achieved militarily, through a forced population transfer of the Shilluk.



Following the attack on the PoC site, Olonyi returned from Khartoum to the west bank of the White Nile, while the SPLA pushed its forces to the east bank of the White Nile, and closer to the TFNF forces in the Mamur and Dabba regions around Renk. The stage is now set for further clashes.

List of abbreviations

| | |
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| CPA | Comprehensive Peace Agreement |
| GoS | Government of Sudan |
| GRSS | Government of the Republic of South Sudan |
| IDP | Internally displaced person |
| PoC | Protection of civilians |
| SPLM/A | Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army |
| SPLM/A–IO | Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition |
| SPLM–DC | Sudan People's Liberation Movement for Democratic Change |
| TFNF | Tiger Faction New Forces |
| UNMISS | United Nations Mission in South Sudan |