



# Sudan's Doctors Falsely Accused of Siding with the Rapid Support Forces

Social Media Monitoring

July 2023

To support the humanitarian response in Sudan, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and risks associated with misinformation and disinformation targeting the aid sector and Sudanese health workers. The aim is to contribute to the development of communication strategies that support greater understanding of the humanitarian principles that underlie aid operations and the delivery of health care.

## Summary

This brief discusses widely viewed social media posts shared in Sudan between 15 April and 21 May 2023 which show that dominant social media account holders supporting the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) attacked the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate – a professional association of Sudanese doctors – for its neutral position in the armed conflict and accused the organisation of being partial towards the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and collaborating with the so-called “Janjaweed” militia. In some instances, social media users also threatened the syndicate with violent reprisals for its perceived support for the RSF.

The brief highlights that humanitarian principles are rarely understood among high engagement social media account users, and that careful wording that conforms with the principles of neutrality and impartiality frequently attracts criticism on social media in countries affected by conflict. Such criticism often includes threats to those who try to provide impartial access to health care or aid to all. This kind of response is becoming a feature of social media users' comments on the position of health-care workers regarding the provision of health care to all those who need it during the current fighting in Sudan.

Social media users with a clear bias towards the SAF circulated the right image showing RSF soldiers attacking and damaging medical buildings, which are represented by text boxes with plumes of smoke rising from them. In the foreground is a representation of the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate (نقابة الأطباء) burying its head in the sand. The medical buildings represented by the text boxes are Khartoum Hospital (معمل استاك), a maternity hospital (مستشفى الدليات), and a laboratory (مستشفى الخرطوم).



which probably refers to the National Public Health Laboratory in Khartoum, which RSF militia reportedly [occupied](#) in late April 2023. This image captures sentiments – widespread among SAF supporters in Khartoum active on social media – promoting opinions that the Doctors Syndicate chooses to turn a blind eye to crimes committed by RSF soldiers, suggesting that it supports the RSF.

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## Context

On 15 April 2023 clashes broke out in several cities across Sudan between the SAF and RSF, a paramilitary group composed mostly of Janjaweed Arab militias led by Sudanese general Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti”, who had emerged as a powerful figure in the Sudanese state following the 2019 coup carried out by the SAF with RSF support.

The armed conflict has plunged Sudan into a humanitarian crisis, with nearly [1.4 million newly displaced civilians](#) and increasing food insecurity. The health sector has been particularly affected. Between 15 April and 20 June 2023 Insecurity Insight identified 87 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Khartoum, North Darfur, South Darfur, West Darfur and North Kordofan states. These incidents included the killing of health workers and the looting, damaging, and occupation of health infrastructure such as hospitals, pharmacies, and a medical laboratory. RSF and Janjaweed forces were reportedly responsible for at least 29 attacks on health care, most of which consisted of forceful hospital occupations in Khartoum state. In turn, SAF forces were reportedly responsible for at least six incidents, including at least two hospital occupations.

The Sudanese American Physicians Association stated that, as of 27 May 2023, at least 17 medical professionals had been killed since the start of the conflict, [noting](#) that “*the deliberate targeting of doctors has been a feature ... of the horrific crisis*”.

On 27 May 2023 a prominent surgeon and pro-democracy activist was [arrested](#) by members of Sudanese military intelligence at his home in Khartoum days after he criticised the SAF for retaining humanitarian aid in military hospitals and not distributing it to civilian hospitals. The surgeon was released on 8 June 2023.

With its members caught amid the fighting, the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate sought to distance itself from the armed conflict and appears to have adopted a neutral communication strategy. As will be discussed further in the “Main findings” section below, the syndicate’s perceived unwillingness to close ranks behind the SAF attracted hostility and threats from pro-SAF social media users.

The perception among pro-SAF supporters that the Doctors Syndicate is not a neutral actor in the conflict may also have its roots in its participation in protests against the Transitional Military Council (TMC) led by army general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan following the 2019 coup. Indeed, the syndicate was part of the pro-democracy Forces of Freedom and Change coalition, which included organisations and groups such as the Sudanese Professionals Association and the Sudanese resistance committees, among others. The syndicate’s opposition to the TMC almost certainly contributed to widespread attacks on the health system in 2019 and 2022 (please see the 2022 SHCC Sudan factsheet available in [Arabic](#) and [English](#)).

## Methodology

Social data was first collected from two social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook) in Sudan during the period 15 April-21 May 2023 using a Boolean search query with the following search string: “ببيط” “ءابطا” “ن ادوس لء ابطا”. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data. For Twitter, the tool captures data in the form of both Tweets (i.e. posts) and replies to Tweets, while in the case of Facebook, only posts are captured in the dataset.

Human analysis further filtered the collected data to exclude irrelevant content and comb for possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e. the number of social interactions by other social media users with the original post). Relevant posts, usually accompanied by reactions (i.e. comments or replies) ranging in number from a handful to several hundreds, were manually analysed using an online participant observation approach to identify social media users' attitudes to health care in the context of the conflict.

## Main findings

### **Pro-SAF social media users rejected the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate's neutral and equidistant position in the armed conflict as a sign of partiality or support for the RSF.**

From the start of the fighting on 15 April, the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate sought to distance itself from the armed conflict and employed careful language commensurate with the principle of neutrality when referring to it. Indeed, while regularly publishing violations committed by the armed actors, the syndicate has largely [refused to name the responsible perpetrators](#), choosing to use neutral language instead. Apart from asserting the syndicate's commitment to the neutrality principle, the aim was also not to expose its members to acts of retaliation from supporters of either conflict party.

Social media users met the syndicate's use of the term "parties to the conflict" when it reported attacks on healthcare with widespread hostility and ridicule. In reaction to a news report quoting the syndicate, a female social media user from Khartoum argued in Sudanese Arabic: *"It [the conflict party responsible for a violation] is called Rapid Support Forces. You should name things accordingly. This is not neutrality; this is a betrayal of the [Sudanese] people and of the country"*.

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بس تنتهي الحرب ونفضي ليكم ان شاء الله

Two reasons possibly explain the generalised hostile reaction towards the Doctors Syndicate's choice of wording. Firstly, social media users believe that the RSF is the main perpetrator of attacks on health care. While this is not the case, Insecurity Insight's tracking of security events affecting health care in Sudan suggests that the RSF was reportedly involved in more events than the SAF. In particular, the RSF frequently occupied health buildings (see "Context" section, above), a particularly visible form of attack on the health system with widespread impacts on large numbers of patients. In view of this, social media users may have suspected that the syndicate is seeking to protect the RSF by not incriminating the armed group. Secondly, social media users appear to think that by referring to both the RSF and SAF as "*parties to the conflict*", the Doctors Syndicate is putting the two parties on an equal footing, thereby giving the RSF legitimacy they believe it does not deserve.

### **Pro-SAF social media users have been widely and systematically accusing the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate of aiding the RSF.**

Whenever the syndicate was the subject of discussions on social media, the reaction tended to be overwhelmingly negative. Criticism repeatedly and systematically included insinuations and accusations that the syndicate is collaborating with the RSF against the SAF.

Referring to the syndicate as the “Janjaweed” committee – a term employed as a synonym for the RSF – one social media user from Omdurman argued that the syndicate “*was silent for more than a month and turned a blind eye to violations [committed by] the rebel militia. These are political committees that do not derive from any principles and do not have professional, ethical, or religious principles*”. Another social media user from Khartoum accused the Doctors’ Syndicate of serving as “*a civil wing [of the] RSF and [as] coordinator of Janjaweed [military] operations*”.

Although it is not possible to verify to what extent these views are representative of the wider Sudanese population, especially since they appear to reflect the opinion of SAF supporters mainly from Khartoum and its surrounding areas, it is important to highlight that within this segment of social media users little if any dissent opposing the views described here was noted in these discussions.

### **Pro-SAF social media users have repeatedly threatened the Doctors Syndicate with violence.**

While commenting on the Doctors Syndicate, a number of social media users openly threatened it with retaliation for its perceived sympathy for and collaboration with the RSF. For example, a user from Khartoum stated: “*the war will end and we will end you [i.e. the syndicate], God willing*”. The reactions to this comment were overwhelmingly in agreement.

## **Profile review**

Social media users’ profiles were systematically explored as part of the participant observation research component and in order to glean important information, including users’ location and gender. This information indicated that the social media space in Sudan is dominated by users who are mostly Khartoum based and have pro-SAF views.

## **Recommendations for aid agencies**

- Monitor the way in which aid programmes are represented on social media and design strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation about aid agency objectives.
- Be aware that the humanitarian imperative to provide aid without discrimination is very easily turned into social media disinformation that accuses aid programmes of favouring a particular armed group.
- Be aware of the extent to which discourse has become divisive in many social media areas and how this can mean that humanitarian impartiality may be interpreted as “aiding the RSF” among pro-SAF social media users.
- There is a general need to engage a wider public in awareness-raising and positive discussions around the humanitarian principles to strengthen societal consensus in favour of these principles.

**Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: [info@insecurityinsight.org](mailto:info@insecurityinsight.org).**

You may also be interested in Insecurity Insight's March 2023 report on the social media reaction to the killing of [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#) employees in Burkina Faso, which also described a shrinking humanitarian space on social media platforms. As was the case with the Doctors Syndicate in Sudan, MSF's use of neutral language in the press release announcing the killings provoked both hostility from social media users and accusations that MSF has links to the armed groups fighting the central government's armed forces.

For other material from Insecurity Insight's Social Media Monitoring programme, please consult our [webpage](#).

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