

# OpenDoors<sup>®</sup>

## POLICY BRIEF



## Sudan

### Civil War, Displacement, and Escalating Violations against Christians

**Sudan is experiencing a protracted armed conflict following the October 2021 military coup, which dismantled the civilian transitional government formed after the 2019 revolution.<sup>1</sup> The 2019 revolution removed President Omar al-Bashir and established a fragile civilian transitional arrangement, raising expectations of reform and stronger rights protections. Sudan's governance framework was based on transitional institutions created after the fall of Omar al-Bashir to steer the country toward civilian rule.**

**The coup reversed limited progress on human rights and restored the influence of military actors and policies previously associated with the persecution of Christians under the Omar al-Bashir regime.<sup>2</sup>**

Sudan is ethnically diverse, with multiple ethnic communities and religious groups. Sunni Islam is the dominant religion, and Christians and other minority faiths are small and vulnerable communities. Sudan is also rich in natural resources, including gold and

<sup>1</sup> [cfr.org/articles/sudans-coup-one-year-later](https://www.cfr.org/articles/sudans-coup-one-year-later)

<sup>2</sup> [releaseinternational.org/sudan-coup-threat-to-religious-freedom](https://www.releaseinternational.org/sudan-coup-threat-to-religious-freedom)

agricultural land, and competition over control of these assets has long been intertwined with political power and armed influence.<sup>3</sup> Since April 2023, violent conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), referred here as warring parties, driven by disagreements over security reforms and plans to absorb the RSF into the national army, has escalated into a full-scale war, causing widespread civilian harm, mass displacement, and the collapse of basic services. As the fighting often takes place in populated areas, and civilian protection mechanisms often remain limited, Christians have experienced attacks by both parties, including the destruction and vandalism of churches and church institutions, acts of arson and bombing, harassment of religious leaders, and violence against Christian communities, particularly converts from Islam.<sup>4</sup> Other religious communities, including Shia Muslims and followers of traditional beliefs, also face heightened risks amid lawlessness and weak protection.<sup>5</sup>

The 2019 Constitutional Declaration introduced protections for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), equality before the law, and non-discrimination, but these remain largely unenforced. Ambiguous provisions in the 1991 Penal Code, particularly Article 125 (blasphemy) and Article 12 (public decency), allow for discretionary interpretation and uneven enforcement. In practice, these provisions constrain religious expression, conversion, and public conduct, increasing the risk of harassment and prosecution, especially for religious minorities and converts.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conflict Expansion, Protection Failures, and Impact on Christians**

Sudan's conflict has led to a marked deterioration in conditions for Christian communities, with violence becoming more frequent and geographically widespread.<sup>7</sup> While Christians in Sudan have historically faced heightened risks in conflict-affected regions such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the Blue Nile, the current conflict has expanded into urban areas, including Khartoum and parts of Gezira State. Both warring parties are involved in church demolitions, forced closures,

and the targeting or abduction of Christian leaders, contributing to the sustained disruption of religious life and community stability.<sup>8</sup>

As hostilities continue, grave human rights violations, including unlawful killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, and widespread sexual violence, are attributed to multiple parties to the conflict. The conflict has significantly degraded Sudan's law enforcement and judicial capacity. Across many conflict-affected areas, policing systems are disrupted, courts are unable to function consistently, and legal and administrative processes have stalled. The combined effect has significantly reduced the practical enforcement of legal protections and weakened accountability, contributing to a persistent environment of impunity in which violations against religious communities, such as attacks on churches and the targeting of religious leaders, are rarely investigated or addressed.<sup>9</sup> As a result, religious communities, including Christians, continue to experience insecurity and violations linked to various actors, with limited access to redress.<sup>10</sup>

### **Displacement, Hunger, and Discrimination in Humanitarian Aid**

Sudan's conflict has caused a severe displacement and hunger crisis. It has weakened health care services, water systems, and civilian protection structures, while exposing many children to preventable illness and malnutrition. Humanitarian organizations report that ongoing insecurity and access restrictions are severely limiting relief efforts in the country. Delays in approvals and permits, looting and diversion of aid, the killing of aid workers by warring parties,<sup>11</sup> and major funding shortfalls are further worsening the situation.<sup>12</sup>

Christians, as a small religious minority, face compounded vulnerabilities in displacement settings arising from long-standing patterns of discrimination and social exclusion.<sup>13</sup> Reports from Open Doors' sources identify barriers to equitable aid distribution affecting Christian communities, including instances where local community leaders exclude Christians

<sup>3</sup> [chathamhouse.org/2025/03/gold-and-war-sudan/04-how-sudans-gold-sector-connects-regional-conflict-ecosystem](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/gold-and-war-sudan/04-how-sudans-gold-sector-connects-regional-conflict-ecosystem)

<sup>4</sup> [time.com/2024/05/09/the-forgotten-war-on-sudans-christians](https://time.com/2024/05/09/the-forgotten-war-on-sudans-christians)

<sup>5</sup> [appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/sudan](https://www.appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/sudan)

<sup>6</sup> [ecoi.net/en/document](https://ecoi.net/en/document)

<sup>7</sup> [csw.org.uk/2025/11/17/report/6662/article](https://www.csw.org.uk/2025/11/17/report/6662/article)

<sup>8</sup> "Sudan: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2026, pp. 7. Available at [opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers](https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers)

<sup>9</sup> [ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/sudan-entrenched-impunity-fuelling-gross-human-rights-violations-and-abuses](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/sudan-entrenched-impunity-fuelling-gross-human-rights-violations-and-abuses)

<sup>10</sup> Sudan's Civil War and the Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief, USCIRF Issue update, August 2025.

<sup>11</sup> [brookings.edu/articles/sudans-deadly-divide-the-rsf-and-safs-reign-of-terror](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sudans-deadly-divide-the-rsf-and-safs-reign-of-terror)

<sup>12</sup> [data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation](https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation)

<sup>13</sup> [cgrs.be/sites/default/files/rapporten/coi\\_focus\\_sudan.\\_the\\_situation\\_of\\_darfuris\\_and\\_nuba\\_outside\\_their\\_regions\\_of\\_origin\\_20210628.pdf](https://www.cgrs.be/sites/default/files/rapporten/coi_focus_sudan._the_situation_of_darfuris_and_nuba_outside_their_regions_of_origin_20210628.pdf)



Alia (name changed), a displaced Christian from southern Sudan, with her son.

from humanitarian assistance. Christians may also experience harassment or hostility within IDP camps due to their religious identity. These risks can deter some displaced Christians from accessing official camps, which may further exacerbate their protection concerns.

### Urgency of a Sustained and Inclusive Peace Process

In Sudan, multiple diplomatic efforts have sought to establish humanitarian arrangements, strengthen civilian protection measures, and secure temporary ceasefires, including the Jeddah process<sup>14</sup> and subsequent UN-convened discussions focused on aid delivery and the protection of civilians. Despite these efforts, a durable end to hostilities is yet to be achieved.

Community leaders and locally trusted actors, here referred to collectively as local peace actors, including traditional mediators, tribal elders, religious figures, and grassroots networks, have continued to play roles in reducing tensions and addressing disputes where formal processes have weakened. Local mediation mechanisms involving tribal and community leaders have helped manage conflict at the community level and resolve disputes even in the absence of fully

functioning national institutions.<sup>15</sup> In Darfur, locally rooted reconciliation and conflict-management mechanisms have historically drawn on the authority of community elders and religious leaders to support intercommunal dialogue and tension reduction, particularly in contexts of limited formal authority and weak state presence. These informal processes continue to play a stabilizing role amid ongoing insecurity.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in South Kordofan, including the Nuba Mountains, church leaders and faith-based networks have at times acted as locally trusted intermediaries, supporting community-level dialogue, civilian protection efforts, and informal mediation initiatives amid protracted conflict and limited state presence.<sup>17</sup> Within this broader category, religious leaders and local faith actors often retain access to communities and are engaged informally in supporting civilians and facilitating dialogue and local arrangements.<sup>18</sup>

However, formal participation of local peace actors, including religious leaders and faith-based networks, in national-level mediation and peace processes remains limited. Local peace actors and mediation initiatives often lack stable platforms and reliable support within formal diplomatic processes. As a result, the potential contributions of trusted religious leaders, community elders, and grassroots networks to broader stabilization and peace efforts remain largely underutilized.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The Jeddah talks, held in 2023 and co-facilitated by Saudi Arabia and the United States, sought to secure temporary ceasefires and agreements on humanitarian access and civilian protection between the SAF and the RSF.

<sup>15</sup> Bridging Divides: Local Peace Initiatives in Sudan, UNDP, October 2025. Available at [undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-10/undp\\_sudan\\_bridging\\_divides\\_report.pdf](https://undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-10/undp_sudan_bridging_divides_report.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Harris, Geoff. "People-to-People Peacemaking and Peacebuilding: A Review of the Work of the New Sudan Council of Churches." *African Security Review*, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, Bridging Divides: Local Peace Initiatives in Sudan, UNDP.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> [paxforpeace.nl/news/sudan-peace-talks-collapsed-a-reminder-for-inclusive-peacebuilding](https://paxforpeace.nl/news/sudan-peace-talks-collapsed-a-reminder-for-inclusive-peacebuilding)

# Recommendations:

To address the ongoing conflict, civilian harm, and protection risks in Sudan, Open Doors recommends the following:

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## 1 To reduce hostilities and strengthen civilian protection:

- The warring parties to the conflict, namely the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, should immediately cease attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure and commit to upholding civilian protection obligations. Civilian protection commitments should be embedded within ceasefire arrangements and diplomatic engagements.
- The International Community should intensify coordinated diplomatic efforts to reduce hostilities, in close coordination with the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD – a regional organization of East African countries). These efforts should reinforce civilian protection, strengthen early-warning mechanisms, advance legal and institutional safeguards including for freedom of religion or belief and promote safe humanitarian access, including through coordination platforms such as the Quintet mechanism and the Sudan Quad mechanism. In parallel, these mechanisms should engage the warring parties to secure a ceasefire and support the limited deployment of peacekeeping forces, where feasible, with a clear civilian protection mandate.

## 2 To promote accountability and address impunity:

- The International Community should provide sustained political and financial support to the United Nations' Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan and support fully with its mandate. It should strengthen evidence preservation through enhanced documentation, verification, and witness protection measures, and promote impartial accountability for serious human rights violations, including those affecting vulnerable groups such as religious minorities.
- The warring parties should enable safe and unhindered access for independent and impartial investigations into alleged violations.

## 3 To facilitate humanitarian access and operational continuity:

- The International Community should increase flexible funding that prioritizes civilian protection, supports community-based response mechanisms such as the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), and promotes equitable, needs-based assistance accessible to vulnerable and marginalized communities, including religious minorities.
- The warring parties should issue clear directives prohibiting attacks on humanitarian personnel, assets, and convoys, and ensure safe and unimpeded humanitarian access. Approval procedures for humanitarian movements should be predictable and time-bound, with expedited clearance mechanisms, ideally within a 72-hour window.

## 4 To safeguard non-discrimination in humanitarian assistance:

- The International Community should urge all warring parties in Sudan to issue and enforce clear instructions within their chains of command to ensure that humanitarian aid is distributed fairly and without discrimination or interference. Failure to comply should result in appropriate accountability measures.

## 5 To strengthen inclusion and sustainability of peace efforts:

- The International Community should establish structured consultation mechanisms within mediation and humanitarian coordination processes to ensure the regular participation of trusted local peace actors including representatives of religious minorities. The warring parties should enable and avoid obstructing such engagement, recognizing the role of locally trusted actors in informing civilian protection measures, facilitating humanitarian access, and addressing local security dynamics.