



(Graphic by author)

Coalition sectors of Juba, Capital of South Sudan

Unified Tribes Part III

Maj. Philip Neri, U.S. Army

Back at Combined Joint Interagency Task Force Headquarters, the Morning of 8 August 2044

I called General Larson's office attempting to meet up with him to update him on what I had discussed with Abdo Nazer, both the most influential Nuer outside of

the government and key militant leader of the Nuer rebel force. The general's secretary said he was out, and I could update him tonight at the update brief. I turned to my email and noticed that I had received an email from my old boss back at U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), Maj. Gen. Brandon Wright. He asked how things were going and if we had made any progress in getting the two factions to talk to

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one another. He said the National Security Council (NSC) back in Washington was pinging the headquarters every day, sometimes multiple times a day, for updates. The catchphrase “cease, pacify, and integrate” that I had coined to describe the conceptual framework for the strategy being implemented had become a buzz phrase at the NSC and had even made it into a few of the policy letters circulating the president’s cabinet. I knew that Maj. Gen. Larson and the U.S. ambassador

“That should work as long as you don’t leave him waiting too long,” said Mather. “Don’t forget you have to come back up here once you’re done,” he added laughing. “But seriously, most meetings focus on what end state would allow the U.S. to disengage, at least militarily.”

“Already looking for the door, huh?” I said.

“Uhhh, something like that, yeah,” he said. “On another note, my wife and I spoke to Jill two days ago. She was asking

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would not want me bypassing them to update AFRICOM. But before responding to Wright’s email, I decided to give my friend at AFRICOM, Col. Carl Mathers, a call to get a better feel for the current atmospheric and how best to approach Wright’s questions.

[Phone rings]

“Colonel Mathers, AFRICOM J5.”

“Carl, it’s me. Corey.”

“Hey! How’s it going? I was wondering when I would hear from you,” Mathers said.

“Yeah, it’s been busy here. How you doing up there without me?” I said.

“We were just talking about you up here. Everyone has been wondering how the man that pitched this strategy four months ago has been implementing it. So, you tell me, how’s it going down there, buddy?”

“Some interesting cats down here,” I replied. “It’s one thing when we’re reading about it up there instead of seeing, smelling, and living it. Speaking of AFRICOM though, I got an email from General Wright asking me if we had made any progress getting the Dinka and Nuer closer to a ceasefire.”

“Yeah, like I said, everyone up here has been talking about it,” Mathers said. “As if AFRICOM doesn’t have fifty something other nations besides South Sudan. But I think he wants you to give him a better feel for how things are going day-to-day. The briefings from General Larson and his staff are helpful but much of it seems the same as what we see in the headlines.”

“I see. Well, the short answer is, not really, but I think we may have a window,” I said. “I just don’t want to overpromise and underdeliver. I think I’m going to talk to General Larson first and then respond to Wright’s email tonight based on what he says.”

when I thought you would be back. I told her the truth, which is I have no idea.”

“That’s good to know. I appreciate it,” I said. “Yeah, Jill wants me home ASAP. I haven’t had much sleep between all that’s been going on here and trying to call her when I get a chance.”

“I know how it is. Try and take care of yourself and don’t worry about stuff here. Everything is fine. Well, everything outside of AFRICOM,” he said, laughing.

After hanging up with Carl, I couldn’t help feeling like there was an expiration date fast approaching to see this operation through to the end. I had to admit though, if and when a ceasefire was established, I was not sure of the conditions in which I would, or even could, recommend we breakaway from the conflict. With this lingering thought in mind, I called my deputy, political advisor, and seasoned foreign service officer Barry Norman, over into my office to see what he thought.

“Barry, I just got an email from my old boss General Wright at AFRICOM,” I said, “and it appears they are getting a lot of traffic from D.C. I got kind of a broad question for you. How do you see our engagement ending here?”

“I was just on the phone with a colleague discussing that very question,” Barry replied. “Whatever it is, it can’t be like the previous failures, which means it has

Maj. Philip Neri, U.S. Army, is currently serving as the SAMS planner for 10th SFG(A). He holds a B.S. from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, an M.B.A. from Pennsylvania State University, and an M.A. from King’s College London. He has served in 3ID, 7ID, and 7th SFG(A) with multiple deployments to the CENTCOM and Indo-PACOM areas of responsibility.

to be more than PR [public relations] deep. The Dinka and Nuer have had three ceasefires in 2015, 2018, and 2031. All saw the country fall back into conflict. So we must somehow move beyond ceasefire and convince the government that the Nuer are valuable partners and fellow sojourners instead of deadly competitors.”

genuine on his desire to leave a lasting personal legacy on the situation in the South Sudan. As such, we may have an opportunity to give him an enduring legacy that will go beyond South Sudan. The emergence of a ‘great unifier’ is something that Africa is not known for; becoming one for the region would certainly be an enduring legacy.”



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“How are we going to do that?” I asked with a hint of sarcasm. “The Dinkan officials in government don’t feel that they need the Nuer. Even if they did, do you believe the Nuer would cooperate?”

“We have to start with the assumption that they would cooperate if they had a reason to,” Barry stated adamantly. “Otherwise this whole thing is a wash. Besides, Nazer said he would support us getting his people back into power in Juba.”

Pausing in brief reflection, Barry went on to say, “The Dinkas hold all the cards. We have to find a way to demonstrate the benefits of having the Nuer as allies in governing the country rather than seeing it as giving up power.”

“When I suggested the ‘Cease, Pacify, and Integrate’ framework back at AFRICOM,” I said, “I was thinking in terms of finding an economic solution more so than a security one for the integration phase. It seems to me that economic ties are more reliable than any other when trying to get two factions to stick together through good and bad times. It certainly forms a better connective tissue, but I’m not sure how we could create such a dynamic.”

Without saying anything, Barry turned and faced the window overlooking the courtyard beneath, his brow pinched with consternation and clearly seeming as if in deep thought.

“The problem is the UN, the AU [African Union], and others have tried and failed,” I stated flatly. “Maybe the solution is to get foreign investment in Nuer businesses?”

Barry did not reply.

“On second thought,” I said to myself, contradicting myself, “that probably won’t work. The only people willing to invest here are the Chinese and they only work with the Dinka government.”

“Indeed, the security situation doesn’t exactly inspire confidence for potential investors,” Barry said breaking a long pause. “However, it is my estimation that President Rayan is

“So appeal to his ego?” I asked. “Are you sure that’s what we want to pitch?”

“I believe it will be a critical part of the larger plan,” Barry stated confidently. “The Nuer have to be on board with accepting any outreach he is willing to meet, and then there are the calls of betrayal from his own side that will undoubtedly surface.”

“OK, but the ambassador and General Larson are going to have to carry that water,” I said. “We can only recommend it.”

Barry and I had mulled over the possibilities for about forty-five minutes before finally resting on the idea that opposing factions—whether religious, tribal, political, or otherwise—generally only agree to coexist and cooperate when the mutual benefit is obvious and more desirable than the alternative. Playing to South Sudanese President Namir Rayan’s ego for a lasting legacy seemed a bit of a longshot, but I tried to remain optimistic. At any rate, we would have to get the ambassador and Maj. Gen. Larson on board.

I figured I had until after tonight’s update brief with Maj. Gen. Larson to come up with a response to Maj. Gen. Wright’s email. In the meantime, I turned back to thinking about how best to handle Defense Minister Okot Halim and how to gain the trust of Abdo Nazer, a key leader of the Nuer rebel force. I thought Halim would demand more attention because the government held the power, and if he felt neglected, it could cause problems for Maj. Gen. Larson and the ambassador’s efforts. Similarly, if I took my eyes off him for too long, who knows what mischief he could cause?

Although the government held the power, it appeared that the Nuer rebels held the initiative. Getting them to the table to talk was not in the cards for the moment. I wasn’t even confident that Nazer would support Zareb Salim, the overall Nuer leader in addition being leader of the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement/Army and Nuer White Army. In any

event, the trick was figuring out how to get one side to cease operations while convincing the other not to exploit the lull. Constant engagement was going to be a must and losing tabs on either was not an option.

I tasked one of my subordinate commanders, Lt. Col. Dominic Turner—a cool-headed and calculating officer who had served in Africa several times and had volunteered to serve in the CJIATF to get back to the continent—as the primary handler for Nazer. In the beginning, I engaged often in key leader meetings but slowly let Turner assume the lead with the Nuer rebel leader. Soon afterwards, Turner and my other subordinate commanders were working well with the U.S. Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and U.S. National Guard brigade as well as the British and

violence. The 12,000-strong UNMISS force spent most of its time breaking up fights and riots and responding to looting and other criminal activity among the various internally displaced persons camps. They also assisted in the delivery of humanitarian aid. In short, there was little effort toward deterring government security forces and Nuer rebels. In fact, just prior to the massed killings, UNMISS troops reported what they believed to be the funneling of weapons and supplies to Nuer forces operating in and around Juba. However, under the UN mandate, they could not take any action that risked the mission's neutrality status.²

Moreover, UNMISS had assumed a more Chinese character over the decades as it continued to operate in the country. In 2019, for example, China's troop contribution

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French battalions in managing the security situation. At first, many were skeptical of this bifurcation of efforts in the same space, but, as it turned out, the commanders were somewhat relieved that they did not have to deal with many of the political aspects of the conflict. Of course, they were not relieved of politics altogether, but it was clear that the CJIATF shouldered the political burden along with the ambassador and Maj. Gen. Larson.

Maj. General Larson had split Juba largely between the National Guard brigade and the SFAB. The Guard brigade with a strength of 4,700 took the north, and the SFAB at just over 5,000 troops operated in the south. The French and British battalions patrolled the western portion and southernmost edge respectively. Additionally, a Special Operations Task Force operated throughout the capital region reporting valuable intelligence and tracking high-value individuals in the event things escalated. The United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) zones of control surrounded the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa's area of operations.

International forces had been operating under the UNMISS [United Nations Mission in South Sudan] mandate since 2011 and had established bases in Juba and Malakal.¹ Malakal and a few other UN camps operated in the northern part of the country. These bases attracted a lot of internally displaced persons seeking protection from the ongoing

to UNMISS was 1,036.³ Today, it has ballooned to 4,058, the most of any other contributing nation. China used this fact as leverage to lobby for the UNMISS force commander position. As a result, Maj. Gen. Chao Wannian took command in July 2014 from the previous commander.

China also has provided troops to UN missions in Darfur and Mali. But South Sudan has been the focus of its current interest in East Africa because it was an important source of oil to fuel China's Belt and Road economic initiative. Despite some of the international community's objections regarding this Chinese initiative to develop a global economic network and infrastructure system with the Chinese mainland as its centrifugal hub, the initiative undeniably contributed to the economic growth of many of its participants.⁴ However, China's Belt and Road economic rise hit a plateau and slowed significantly in the mid-2030s, though China was able to maintain a modest annual increase in nominal gross domestic product to stay ahead of the United States after surpassing it in 2029.⁵

Due to the expanding Chinese investments in Africa, reports have emerged of ongoing discussions in Beijing regarding setting up a permanent base in South Sudan to better protect its interests rather than simply participating via UN missions. Owing to Chinese sensitivity and long-standing adversarial tensions between China and the United States, some politicians in Washington, D.C., U.S. diplomats, and military

leaders had become concerned that the United States' latest intervention in South Sudan would be perceived as a direct threat to its economic interests, pushing the discussions beyond China's tipping point resulting in the establishment of a second Chinese military base on the continent. (The first was established in Djibouti in 2017.)⁶ Interestingly, China was

the ambassador told him that the UN was thinking about upgrading UNMISS from peacekeeping to peace enforcement to give the mission more teeth to go after aggressors as an alternative to a prolonged U.S. presence. Maj. Gen. Larson's discussions with Zareb centered around the unhelpful language the two tribes had been using in public to describe each

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well positioned for such a move because it already had long experience with regard to forward basing of overtly coercive forces on the African continent due to Chinese private security contractors having maintained a presence in South Sudan to protect China National Petroleum Corporation workers since they began working there in the early 2000s.⁷

Update Brief with Maj. Gen. Larson, Evening of 8 August 2044

Barry and I walked into the conference room fifteen minutes early. Only a few people were in the room. A captain was busy loading the slides for the brief while a few staff members were reviewing their notes. I always liked the conference room because the air conditioner pumped cool air into it constantly. I saw the SFAB commander, Col. Anthony Bishop, step in and went to ask him how things were going, while Barry took the opportunity to chat it up with a fellow Brit, the British battalion commander. A few minutes into my conversation with Col. Bishop, I learned that Col. Joe Harris, Army National Guard brigade commander, was running late due to his forces having had to respond to two firefights between Juba residents. It was unclear if it was between Dinka and Nuer fighters or some other dispute.

The meeting began with Maj. Gen. Larson discussing his latest conversations with the ambassador, Nuer leader Zareb Salim, and UNMISS Commander Maj. Gen. Chao. When you add that cast of characters to the challenge of leading the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, it was easy to see that Maj. Gen. Larson's plate was full. He told us that although the ambassador stated that Operation UNIFIED TRIBES is one of the president's priorities, he did not wish to see the United States become committed to an endless operation in Africa. He also mentioned that the AU is reluctant to see a long-term U.S. presence in South Sudan. Additionally,

other; not a lot of progress there. He then turned it over to the chief of staff to run the brief.

The two brigade commanders emphasized the security concerns for some of their company and battalion outpost. Maj. Gen. Larson removed his glasses and looked a little uneasy before he spoke.

“Guys, we don't intend to stay here for five or ten years,” said Larson. You both have legitimate concerns, but, candidly, there is not an appetite to fund more permanent security measures. The ambassador has made it clear that, despite the president's reelection, D.C. does not want to expend more political capital than necessary.”

Cols. Bishop and Harris nodded in acknowledgment before Larson turned to the British and the French battalion commanders for their updates. The French sector had been the calmest while the British commander reported that there were signs of arms trafficking in Juba. I then briefed my updates with both the defense minister and Abdo Nazer.

Afterward, Maj. Gen. Larson highlighted the political component for the room by stating, “We are not going to ‘secure’ our way out of this. For the United States to realize our objective, the Dinkan government must be persuaded to accept Nuer existence in South Sudan and integrate them into all forms of society.”

Taking the opportunity to weigh in, Barry said, “Sir, I couldn't agree more. Gentlemen, there have been three previous peace agreements, one in 2015, another in 2018, and the last one in 2031.⁸ It is incumbent upon us to help the Dinka and Nuer avoid the pitfalls that led to the collapse of the previous peace agreements.”

Moving his hands toward his chin, Col. Bishop asked, “What's your proposal for avoiding these pitfalls?” Without directly answering Col. Bishop's question, Barry continued, “Any outreach either side makes must be more than public relations

deep. It can't just be for the cameras to catch conciliatory sound bites that create a false sense of security. Col. Hernandez and I," he said, nodding my way, "Have been discussing a way to make the Dinkan government more reliant on the Nuer population rather than seeing them purely as competitors."

Maj. Gen. Larson squinted his eyes to focus on Barry, and asked, "Reliant? How do you mean?"

"We may have an opportunity to play to President Rayan's ego by allowing him to become the unifier of the Dinka and Nuer," Barry stated. "Something his predeces-

"And how do you make that happen?" Maj. Gen. Larson asked.

"Like Abdo Nazer told me at the meeting I had with him, President Rayan sees Sudan as their true enemy," I said. "If that's the case then we can attempt to exploit that narrative to get them to unify."

Maj. Gen. Larson laughed a little and then said, "Whoa, Corey. Let's keep this conflict in bounds. Yes, President Rayan has mentioned his concerns with Sudan as well, but we can't go stoking fires outside the country to try and fix this one."



Let's keep this conflict in bounds... we can't go stoking fires outside the country to try and fix this one.



sor couldn't achieve. Salva Kiir Mayardit is known for becoming the first president of South Sudan and the leader in the nation's break away from Sudan in 2011. Rayan gets to be known for what? Failing to quell the Nuer rebellion while allowing China to harvest its natural resources? Not much of a legacy."

"I see the appeal, but I'm not sure his relationship with Salim will permit that," said Larson.

"That's the beauty of it, sir. He gets to take the high road and appear to be a tolerant leader of all South Sudanese. It could work toward the idea of this 'great unifier' despite the challenges."

"What do you think, Corey?" Larson asked, turning toward me.

"Sir, I think it's the best we got," I said. "We looked at the feasibility of tying the Nuer in economically to incentivize the government, but we came to the conclusion that the Nuer would be seen as a burden to take care of rather than an asset to leverage. We also struggled on how we could get the government to allow the Nuer to be integrated into the country's security apparatus as a value-added partner. Sure, that will have to happen, but we didn't think it could serve as the main carrot for President Rayan."

"So you and Barry have given this some thought and that's good, but we need to get a ceasefire in place ASAP to show some progress," Maj. Gen. Larson said.

"Sir, I think we can get the ceasefire," I said, continuing. "The problem is its durability. We need something to carry the wave of optimism after everyone comes off the high of a new ceasefire; the great unifier as played by the president."

"No, sir," I doggedly continued, "I don't want that at all and fully understand the point. We just need something to get these guys to see that there are other worst-case scenarios according to their own words."

"OK, I'm not sure how helpful that is though," he said. "I'll have to give it some thought."

"Yes, sir, like Barry said, these challenges can help play into the president's ego if he can rise to the challenge. We think that personal ambition will have to serve as the offset to corruption and persistent violence."

As soon as the meeting concluded, I got up and motioned for Barry to follow me as I approached the general.

"Sir, can I speak with you for a moment?" I asked.

"Sure, Corey, what's up?"

"AFRICOM is asking about my progress, and I wanted to get your thoughts prior to my response," I said.

"Who at AFRICOM?" he asked.

"Uhhh, it's my old boss, General Wright."

"Ahh, I hope Brandon is doing well," Maj. Gen. Larson said. "I'm sure they are getting their share of inquiries from D.C. What were you thinking about telling him? To be honest, whatever you choose I'm sure it's fine. I'm not concerned with Brandon's judgment."

"Well, sir, truth is ... I'm not sure now. Before the meeting, I thought we had an opportunity to at least establish a ceasefire but after hearing you describe your conversations with Salim, maybe not."

"Yep, you're in the same spot as me," Maj. Gen. Larson said. "I'm not sure either. But try not to sweat it too much and do the best you can. I appreciate you keeping me in the loop though."

“Yes, sir,” I said.

After returning to the CJIAF headquarters, I sat down to respond to Maj. Gen. Wright’s email. I simply told him that we may be getting close to a ceasefire, but without an incentive to resolve the root problems, no one was confident it would last. I was having a hard time staying awake and glancing over at the phone, I saw it was now 2300. I contemplated calling Jill, but decided tomorrow would be better ... hopefully.

In the face of the SFAB response, Nuer troops retreated swiftly, weaving in and out of the city’s streets on foot in small groups. SFAB elements attempted to pursue them while two squads with medics tended to wounded Dinkas and Chinese contractors on the scene. SFAB troops were able to detain three Nuer fighters attempting to flee, and the Dinkan government demanded they be handed over to South Sudanese authorities.



The lull in fighting that had presumed a lowering of animosity was deceptive. The Nuer rebel force had exploited the lull in violence to build up a stockpile of arms and to organize troops for an assault.



Juba, South Sudan, 12 October 2014

After two months of routine patrols, engaging with both factions, and responding to firefights, the situation had appeared to become more stable. In terms of atmosphere, both the Dinka and Nuer appeared to have concluded that they simply had to get along in order to convince the coalition that they could leave. The result had been a dramatic reduction in violence.

However, the lull in fighting that had presumed a lowering of animosity was deceptive. The Nuer rebel force had exploited the lull in violence to build up a stockpile of arms and to organize troops for an assault. In the early morning hours of 12 October, it initiated the planned attack, which resulted in an intense firefight breaking out between Nuer and Dinka factions near a Chinese construction project in the SFAB’s area. As the government security forces called the Presidential Guard for reinforcement, the Nuer rebels killed or injured thirty-nine Dinkan troops.

The Chinese workers and private security contractors at the site fled the firefight, seeking safe haven in one of the Presidential Guard’s unfinished annex buildings the Chinese workers had been building. SFAB troops responded in their up-armored vehicles, positioning them just off the road so they could be seen but out of the line of fire to persuade the two sides to disengage from the fighting. However, eight minutes after arriving, the vehicles began taking effective machine-gunfire from behind the two-story frame annex building. In response, two U.S. vehicles fired .50-caliber into the building’s frame to suppress the machine-gunfire. The beaten zone formed by the .50 caliber proved too much for the fragile unfinished structure to withstand, and the building collapsed.

To try and get a better read on the situation, Col. Harris went to the scene and spoke with residents and community leaders in the area.

Indicative of the general local mood and response, one leader shouted, “Zareb Salim is attempting a coup to take power from President Rayan.”

“I’m not sure we know everything going on here,” Col. Harris replied in an effort to dampen emotions in as moderate a way as he could.

“They attacked,” another community leader said. “That is all we need to know.”

“Yes, the attack isn’t helpful,” Col. Harris replied in a calm and measured voice. “But before we retaliate, we need to see if we can find only those responsible for the attack instead of declaring the entire Nuer tribe as enemies.”

“They are not our friends,” another leader argued. “Since they are not friends, what would you have us call them?”

Pausing, Col. Harris considered his words carefully and then said, “I would refer to them as your fellow South Sudanese citizens who are tired of living in the bush away from a government that oppresses them.”

“Are you on their side?” one of the leaders shouted.

“I’m on the side that wishes to see South Sudan not fighting. I know it’s hard to tell after this morning that the Nuer do not want violence, but just like there are Dinkas who want to kill, there are Nuer who want the same thing.”

As Col. Harris continued to try and calm the residents and local leaders, I decided to grab Lt. Col. Turner and talk face-to-face with Abdo Nazer to understand why his guys attacked this morning. As we walked up to the building where Nazer and I had met most recently, I was intercepted by one of his lieutenants.

“How can I help you?” Nazer’s lieutenant said in an edgy voice that exuded contempt.

“I’m looking for Nazer,” I replied in a curt manner. “We need to know why your forces attacked this morning.”

“Because some of our men had an opportunity,” the lieutenant said. “The government holds the power, so we must take our chances when we have an opportunity to resist. However, the men that attacked this morning did it on their own. Abdo Nazer did not instruct them to do this.”

“So he didn’t know about it?” I said.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said with barely concealed sarcasm.

“Where can I find him?” I asked.

“He is away talking to Zareb Salim,” the lieutenant said rather nonchalantly. “He will return in three days.”

“OK, I may just call him. Thank you,” I said.

I knew this incident was going to make my next visit with the defense minister interesting. I had Barry call his office to see if we could talk as soon as possible. As it turns out, Maj. Gen. Chao requested a meeting with Maj. Gen. Larson to discuss the incident. After letting the ambassador know, Maj. Gen. Larson got into his convoy and headed to the UN headquarters building, leaving me with a sneaking suspicion that the Chinese presence here may have been the wildcard we hadn’t properly accounted for in our assessment of the situation and resultant planning. ■

Notes

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