



Unity and Central Equatoria states, South Sudan. (Graphic courtesy of Google Maps)

Unified Tribes

South Sudan, Part II

Maj. Philip Neri, U.S. Army

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Shortly after arriving in Juba, I was pretty much on my own with one important exception. Barry Norman, a foreign service officer with the U.S. State Department, had arrived one full day ahead of me and was going to serve as both my political advisor and

deputy for the duration of the mission. I was glad to have him here early to help me think through this complex problem. Barry was a British born, Cambridge-educated, slim man in his early forties. This was to be his fourth deployment with U.S. ground forces. He was a dual citizen who had immigrated to the United States after graduating from college. He had done some fieldwork and then went on to a think tank in London. Once in the states,

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he joined the State Department and had done stints in Baghdad and Kabul working with the U.S. and coalition forces there throughout the 2020s–30s. His experience caused him to approach military officers with caution and what I would call a healthy skepticism that couldn't be taught in a classroom.

He had been working in the U.S. Embassy of South Sudan and knew the capital, political factions, and much of the country very well. I knew this would pay dividends later. It was readily apparent that he still possessed some mental scar tissue from previous experiences working with the military. However, I could tell

“OK, but I want to put together a plan that gets after what I think the commander is going to ask us to do. You'll have to forgive me if I think your ‘inevitably hopeless’ assessment might handicap that effort.”

“I don't mean to place the operation in despair, Colonel Hernandez ...”

“Please, call me Corey.”

“Yes, Corey. I find many military officers obsessed with pragmatic decisive action as if such simple solutions exist to all of the world's complex political problems.”

“C'mon Barry, we've come a long way from where we used to be.”

“ I think we should expect the worst... ” He paused, “... A long drawn out effort that may not amount to more than a delay of the inevitable. ”

from his candid dialogue that he viewed me different, or at least that's what I was going to tell myself to maintain a healthy working relationship. I attributed it to the fact that I was a foreign area officer and had by now spent the majority of my career either working in embassies or regional plans directorates and spoke fluent French and conversational Arabic. Unfortunately, I had to settle for video teleconferences to meet the rest of the key members of the CJIAITF (Combined Joint Interagency Task Force). They weren't due to begin arriving for another week and a half. In the meantime, Barry and I got acquainted.

“So what is your take on the Dinka-Nuer dynamic in Juba?” I asked Barry, attempting to solicit his genuine thoughts.

“I think we should expect the worst ...” He paused, “... A long drawn out effort that may not amount to more than a delay of the inevitable. I mean, these guys have been fighting for power since 2011 when the country first seceded from Sudan and, in all reality, decades prior to that when Sudan was one state.”

“I see. Is that the best or worst-case scenario?” I replied with a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

“I would say it's the most likely scenario, but not the most dangerous, to borrow a military phrase,” he quipped, referring to how the army arranges enemy courses of actions in order to facilitate planning.

“That is a fair point and I wouldn't argue against it, but in my personal opinion, there seems to be a great deal of mistaking quick action for decisive action. If we're destroying an enemy's military hardware, I would leave it to the military to consider them one in the same in most cases, but in the political realm it can be counterproductive and even dangerous to think in those terms.”

“Yeah, it's a tough problem. Training for one threat while confronting an entirely different one is hard to prepare for. I don't mean to offend, but the military does not have the luxury of

focusing on one thing in one region like other agencies of the government. There simply aren't enough forces for that level of focus.”

“Fair enough, I grudgingly admit that I do not wish to have that problem.”

While at times it can be hard to take someone's side against those who wear the same uniform as you do, I had to admit that I shared some of the

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Army, is a student attending the School of Advanced Military Studies. He has served in the 3rd and 7th Infantry Divisions, and the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), and has multiple deployments to the Central Command area of responsibility. He is a recent graduate of the Command General and Staff College, and holds a BS in management, an MBA, and an MA in international relations.

same observations he described. I concluded our talk with that thought on my mind. We had ten minutes to get to a leaders' huddle with our new boss, Maj. Gen. Tony Larson.

The CJTF-HOA commander, Tony Larson, had deployed to the area two weeks prior to us and wanted to lay out his vision on how he intended to tackle the fragile political situation. He had been in command for ten months and had previously commanded the Africa-aligned SFAB (security force assistance brigade); in short, he was not new to the continent. He stood a little over six feet tall, had a slim build, and maintained a head of dark brown

I chime in, "I can provide insight on how that came about if needed, sir."

"I know it's your brainchild, Corey. Wright gave me a read-ahead. Good news is I agree with it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, let's hope it works. I want to attack the Dinka-Nuer political hierarchy at every level. The ambassador and I will work directly with President Namir Rayan and Zareb Salim to try to get them to reconcile with one another and agree to a power sharing arrangement."

“ I want to attack the Dinka-Nuer political hierarchy at every level. The ambassador and I will work directly with President Namir Rayan and Zareb Salim to try to get them to reconcile with one another.. ”

hair. He liked to think aloud and talk through problems with subordinates, something I greatly appreciated.

We met at the commander's headquarters building; a three-story building that previously housed twelve South Sudanese companies. With many of them going out of business, the U.S. ambassador was able to obtain a lease for the building. Coincidentally, it was conveniently located ten blocks away from the UN headquarters building. Barry and I walked into the commander's conference room. The room looked modern with the exception of the wires running along the walls and ceiling that facilitated CJTF's communications network. Seated around the table were the CJTF commander and deputy commander; the chief of staff; the SFAB commander, Col. Anthony Bishop; the ARNG (Army National Guard) brigade commander, Col. Joe Harris; Barry; myself; the French battalion commander; and the British battalion commander. The latter two joined within weeks of their governments notifying the United States that they were willing to contribute ground troops. We were glad to have them.

Larson begins the meeting, "OK, gents. I want to take this opportunity to get us all on the same sheet of music as our teams come together here. I'm trying to make something of this cease, pacify, and integrate phasing model we got from AFRICOM."

The ambassador was currently in Washington receiving guidance from the president and secretary of state. His deputy was running the show at the embassy until his return. Larson paused for a moment as he referred to his notes and looked around the table.

"Corey, you've got the Dinkan minister of defense. You and Barry are going to have to figure out who among the Nuer militia leadership is issuing the orders and see if they would be willing to work with us. The deputy chief of mission is going to help you out by working through the foreign minister."

The foreign minister was the ranking Nuer within Namir's government. It was Namir's attempt to demonstrate that he did not hold all Nuer's in discontent. He was however, largely discredited by his fellow Nuer by serving under Namir.

"Anthony and Joe, you two are going to have to hold the tactical fighters at bay while we work through this mess with the government and militia. Anything you can't cover, the UN's got it. My deputy here is going to take the lead on all things UN."

The plan was to have the SFAB escort South Sudanese government forces while the ARNG sought out the Nuer militia. The thinking was that with U.S. forces accompanying both factions, we could interdict potential firefights before they happened. Presumably, the UN contingent would cover any gaps left by our forces.

“I want to be clear. Everyone here has a role in all three phases. I need you guys and the staff to help me work through how we will implement it and help me anticipate obstacles. I’m depending on you guys to keep me aware of the atmospherics below the president’s level. Let’s keep the surprises to a minimum.”

Larson looks around the table for a nonverbal consensus of understanding among the group. As everyone considers how difficult his proposition is, they nod in agreement. Larson makes his final comment to lighten the mood.

“I will say this though. Not to make light of the situation, but it is not lost on me how fortunate we are that most South Sudanese speak English. First time in a conflict zone I’ve ever been able to say that.”

Everyone around the table smirks and thinks how true those words are. Larson ended the leaders huddle and instructed us to do what we could until the rest of our troops and equipment arrived. Barry and I went to work.

“So the boss has tasked us with compelling the minister of defense to stop the killing and to find out which Nuer militant leader to partner with to do the same. Who would you recommend?”

“Well, Abdo Nazer is technically the most influential Nuer outside of the government, and he lives somewhere in Juba, but there’s evidence to suggest that he might oppose Zareb to lead and represent all Nuer in

also married with three children, all in their twenties. He was college educated and had spent most of his adulthood serving in government in different capacities. While this was no doubt informative, it did little to help me figure out how I would approach him in a future meeting. I would’ve preferred something on his leisure activities or temperament.

“It says here that prior to assuming his current position as minister of defense he had worked for Namir as his chief of staff and, prior to that, as deputy minister of defense,” Barry noted.

“Apparently he’s also been a staunch supporter of paying Chinese contracts to build up the ministry’s military infrastructure,” I responded. Chinese companies had been operating in South Sudan since the country’s independence in 2011, the most prominent being CNPC.

Barry continued, “Both the Dinka and Nuer citizens are tired of the Chinese stripping their land. There are reports that a number of farmers and business owners have had to surrender their land and property for Chinese contracts to develop and expand oil fields.”

“The intel briefing did say that Nuer business owners in Juba had to give up their property to facilitate new government buildings being constructed by the Chinese.”

Several press outlets had highlighted the discontent the Dinka and Nuer residents had for many of the Chinese contractors. We really didn’t have too



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the country. He’s been known to criticize Zareb’s strategy and has grown impatient with fighting in the bush.”

“Yeah, but if the key to getting the Nuer to stop retaliating against the government lies with him then he’ll have to do until a long-term solution presents itself.”

“Agreed.”

While we put out “feelers” to locate Abdo, we turned our focus to the government. We reviewed the biographical card that we received from intel on South Sudan’s minister of defense. He was a Dinkan named Okot Halim, and he had been in the position for three years. He was bald, stocky, and wore glasses. He was

much more than what the press reported and the little we got from our intel folks. Our intel guys had been instructed to avoid gathering intelligence that could be interpreted as the United States collecting on China’s international ventures. We were going to South Sudan to find a way to stop the genocide and nothing more. We met with Defense Minister Okot Halim in his office two days later.

“Hello, Mr. Defense Minister, I’m Colonel Corey Hernandez.”

“Hello, Colonel Hernandez. What brings you all the way from the United States to my office?”

“Well, we wish to work with you in resolving this conflict that seems to be spreading throughout the country.”

“Yes, well you see, Colonel, we have a problem here in South Sudan. Our country is under attack from two directions. One enemy is from North Sudan and the other from within, the Nuer. They both want to see our government destroyed.

“The international community,” he mutters under his breath with disdain. “Where was the international community when my father and his friends were killed?”

“So how many more fathers are you willing to see die?” I respond.

His eyes sharpen as he thinks about his response.

Before he could speak, I followed up with, “Defense

“Our country is under attack from two directions. One enemy is from the north, Sudan and the other from within, the Nuer.”

“Yes, I see, but I’m mainly concerned with the one from within.”

“Colonel, we have been with this conflict since I was born. It will probably still be here after I die.”

“But does it have to be that way? Mr. Defense Minister, may I ask you something?”

“Go ahead, Colonel.”

“What exactly is your plan for the Nuer? Extermination? Will you kill them all, or is there a possibility to integrate them back into your government?”

“There are always possibilities, Colonel. But will they accept our conditions?”

“What conditions?”

“That we, the rightful majority, rule the country and the Nuer support our rule.”

“That did not work out so well before. Do you have a plan to ensure that the Nuer are fairly represented?”

“Of course, like you Americans, we have an election process.”

More like election rigging, I think to myself, but withhold my thoughts.

“Yes, well, Mr. Defense Minister, we can no longer ignore the genocide that is currently unfolding.”

“So this is what you can no longer ‘ignore.’ You ignored it for years, decades even. There have been many atrocities and wrongs, but now it is too much for you!?” he says, raising his voice in an emotional tone.

“I understand your outrage, but the international community would respond with we’re trying to avoid another Rwanda ... if that’s even possible at this point.”

Minister Halim, I am not here to argue or justify either sides’ actions. I’m simply seeking an end to the violence. I recognize and appreciate the fact that without your help it will not be possible.”

“OK, Colonel, I will consider your plea. But please understand that nothing is final. The Nuer are calculating their next move even as we speak. I would be a fool not to do the same.”

“I understand. We will seek to work with the Nuer as well.”

“Good luck, Colonel, you are going to need it.”

I left the defense minister’s office thinking about how much better that could’ve went. Barry agreed and noted that we’d have to be cautious in working with Halim.

Juba, South Sudan, 6 August 2044

Two weeks later, the CJIATF team was coming together. I quickly became acquainted with everyone and laid out my intent for my subordinate commanders and the staff. They hit the ground running as we were short on time and long on problems. The CJIATF consisted of four detachments with personnel from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department, foreign area officers, and security and intelligence personnel. A lieutenant colonel led each detachment with a foreign service officer as a deputy. All told, I had just over twelve hundred military, interagency, and civilian contractors under my command.

It was now early August, with temperatures ranging between the mid-80s and low 90s and humid, and it was

still the rainy season until October. The warm temperatures and continuous rains made the humidity inescapable and amplified the odors, both good and bad, that travelled up and down the city's streets. The only thing that seemed more pervasive than the humidity was the press; they appeared to be everywhere. International media outlets were more interested in the rhetoric between Namir and Zareb or firefights and the U.S. response to them. Political resolution progress was painstakingly slow. As a result, the press swarmed to cover the fighting, much to the chagrin of the SFAB and ARNG commanders.

The various media agencies were consistently fielding request for interviews and permission to embed reporters eager to capture an outbreak of fighting between the Nuer and Dinka. One in particular, a young man from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), was known to tag along with patrolling units at every opportunity and query soldiers with "what ifs" to no end. I took solace in knowing that I didn't have to deal with that guy on a regular basis. Both commanders were intelligent and direct men and they appeared supportive of the CJIAF's mission. I felt lucky to have both of them assisting my team's efforts.

As Barry and I were comparing notes during lunch, my XO (executive officer) walked into the office.

while another reinforced our own security detachment down to the meeting point.

We arrived at the designated location fifteen minutes prior to the meeting and began scoping out the area.

"I guess this is the place," said Barry, unimpressed by the dilapidated building in front of us.

"Yeah. Can't say I'm surprised down here in southern Juba."

"The path to Nuer resistance flows through that doorway," said Barry, who was staring at the two militants guarding the front door. His metaphor seemed fitting considering I had no contingency plan if this partnership with Nazer went south; we had to make this work.

The clouds were low and scattered. The temperature had dropped to 60 degrees, as it usually did around that time. And a light drizzle began to fall. The scene appeared tranquil as we approached the door with the two men standing in front of it.

"Colonel Hernandez?" one man asked.

"Yes, I am Colonel Corey Hernandez here to meet with Abdo Nazer."

"He is waiting for you inside, but you can only bring in one other person with you."

"OK," I answered as I pointed to Barry to escort me in.

“The only thing that seemed more pervasive than the humidity was the press; they appeared to be everywhere.”

"Sir, we've got a time and place," my XO stated letting me know that Abdo Nazer, the Nuer militant leader, had finally agreed on a time and location for our first meeting.

We arranged to meet Nazer at 1830 local in a building located in southern Juba, both of his choosing. I was glad to finally get a chance to talk to this guy, but I also knew that southern Juba had become a cauldron of criminal activity and Dinka-Nuer violence. The last three firefights in the city had all occurred in the city's southern districts. The meeting location fell into the SFAB's area of operations, so I gave Anthony a heads-up of our intentions. He dispatched a platoon to hold just north of our location

As we walked in, a desk was to our right with a person who appeared to be serving as a secretary. Straight ahead, Nazer was standing in front of another desk. The room smelled like someone had been smoking in it minutes prior. To our left was a large window with closed blinds and a gun rack in front of it. What appeared to be a bodyguard was standing next to the gun rack.

Nazer was a tall lanky man with short gray hair. He was wearing a jungle-camouflage uniform. The red beret he wore with it was lying on the desk. He had served in the South Sudanese Army for twelve years before being forced to flee. He represented one of the many a failed attempts by Namir to integrate Nuer into South Sudanese security forces.

“Hi, I’m Colonel Corey Hernandez.”

“Hello, Colonel, please come sit.”

The secretary offered us water and tea as we sat down.

“Hi. I see you go out of your way to keep a low profile. This is my deputy, Barry Norman.”

“Hello, Barry. Tell me, Colonel; are you here to try and win our hearts and minds?”

“We’re not necessarily here to win hearts and minds; we’re here to get the Nuer back in the government with as little bloodshed as possible,” I retorted.

“That is an ambitious agenda. But if you can get us back in Juba, I will support your agenda.”

“Great. One thing that would severely hinder us would be the killing of more governmental forces and Dinka residents. Could we avoid that?”

“Can they avoid killing us? We are the ones in the bush and in buildings like this,” he said, his hands pointing to the walls and ceilings as he spoke. “You must un-

does. Namir wants to hold all of South Sudan’s power for himself.”

“I see. And if you were in power, you would ensure that Dinka, Nuer, and any other South Sudanese minority would have their needs addressed?”

“Yes. It is the only way to remain one country.”

“Thank you for that insight Nazer. But I must ask, what about Zareb? Do you support him leading the Nuer?”

“I respect Zareb, but I am not sure if he is our future. I am not sure of his vision anymore. Whatever happens, he will be a part of the solution, but I do not know if he should remain our leader.”

“What about the foreign minister? He is still serving in Namir’s government.”

“He is a puppet. As long as his stomach is full and his family is safe, he will do whatever Namir wants. He is a traitor to the Nuer.”

“We’re not necessarily here to win hearts and minds; we’re here to get the Nuer back in the government with as little bloodshed as possible,”

derstand that we must defend ourselves when attacked.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that concept. But ‘when’ is key. I am working with Defense Minister Okot Halim to stop attacking you. If he does, can we agree to suspend offensive operations?”

He does not respond at first. He glances out of the window as the drizzle hits against it. “I think we might be able to do that, for now.”

Barry chimes in. “Nazer, if you could, tell us about some of the deep-rooted causes of the fighting between the Dinka and the Nuer.”

“It is all about concentration of power. It started with Salva Kiir and now Namir believes that he is the one and only ruler of South Sudan. He says that our one true enemy is Sudan and the government in Khartoum, and anyone who opposes him supports South Sudan’s true enemy to the north. But he is wrong. Sudan is not our friends, but they also do not threaten us in the way that the Dinka government

I reentered the conversation. “I see. Well, that takes care of that. You make some good points, and I appreciate you raising our awareness of these issues. As I said, we will work with the Dinka government and explore possibilities of reforming a coalition government that will endure this time.”

Nazer looks at us and smirks pessimistically.

“Ok, Colonel and Mr. Barry. I will await your return and hope you have good news. Please, do not judge my country just on the killing that you see... there is much more to it than that.”

“We know, and we’ll be sure to keep that in mind. Thank you, Nazer.”

Our meeting ends and I feel like I’m at least in a window of opportunity that we may be able to capitalize on. However, I’m under no illusion of the challenges. Tensions run deep and I still don’t feel like I have the pulse for both factions. Plus, there’s always a wild card that you just don’t see coming in societal conflicts. ■