

COUNTRY REPORT: South Sudan Conflict Update

JULY 2016

Introduction:

Despite both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO signing a peace agreement in August 2015, conflict has continued across South Sudan (see Figure 1). To date, almost 17,000 people have been killed in the five years since Independence; over 15,000 since the ‘civil war’ of 2013 onwards. There are multiple active conflict zones, and a recent count for 2016 suggested three rebel groups and upwards of forty active militias (both political and communal) (see Figure 2 and 3). A recent increase in attacks across Juba is concerning mainly because of the combatants: both the SPLA (as the armed faction of both the government of South Sudan, hereafter GoSS and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-SPLM) and SPLA-IO (the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition) are in contest again. This cleavage has dominated the civil war that has gone on nearly as long as the country’s short existence. The August 2015 peace agreement has had little effect on the actual fighting patterns throughout the state. There are important caveats to that general pattern:

1. The conflict has demonstrated a shift from the north/northeast area to the south and southwest of the state over time (see Figure 2).

2. There are several active conflicts throughout the state, which are linked through strategic relationships, but are loosely integrated into the dominant competition between the SPLA and SPLA-IO.

3. Changing the political geography of the country through the 28 states plan has created multiple new grievances, land disputes, resource access conflicts, and opportunities for politically connected agents who want to benefit from the newly enforced distribution of resources.

A renewed focus on South Sudan is in order given the recent conflict in Juba from July 7-11; this time period coincided with the country’s fifth anniversary. There are many questions as to who is behind the violence, although that appears to be a superficial question given the highly contentious nature of Southern Sudanese politics; the level of militarization across the society at large; the ineffectiveness of the peace agreement; and the presence of high ranking, discontented elites who can benefit from further violence.

The violence is likely to have massive ripple effects, similar to the situation in December 2013. However, the agents, issues, and locations of interest have shifted somewhat to make this probable return to conflict unlike earlier in-

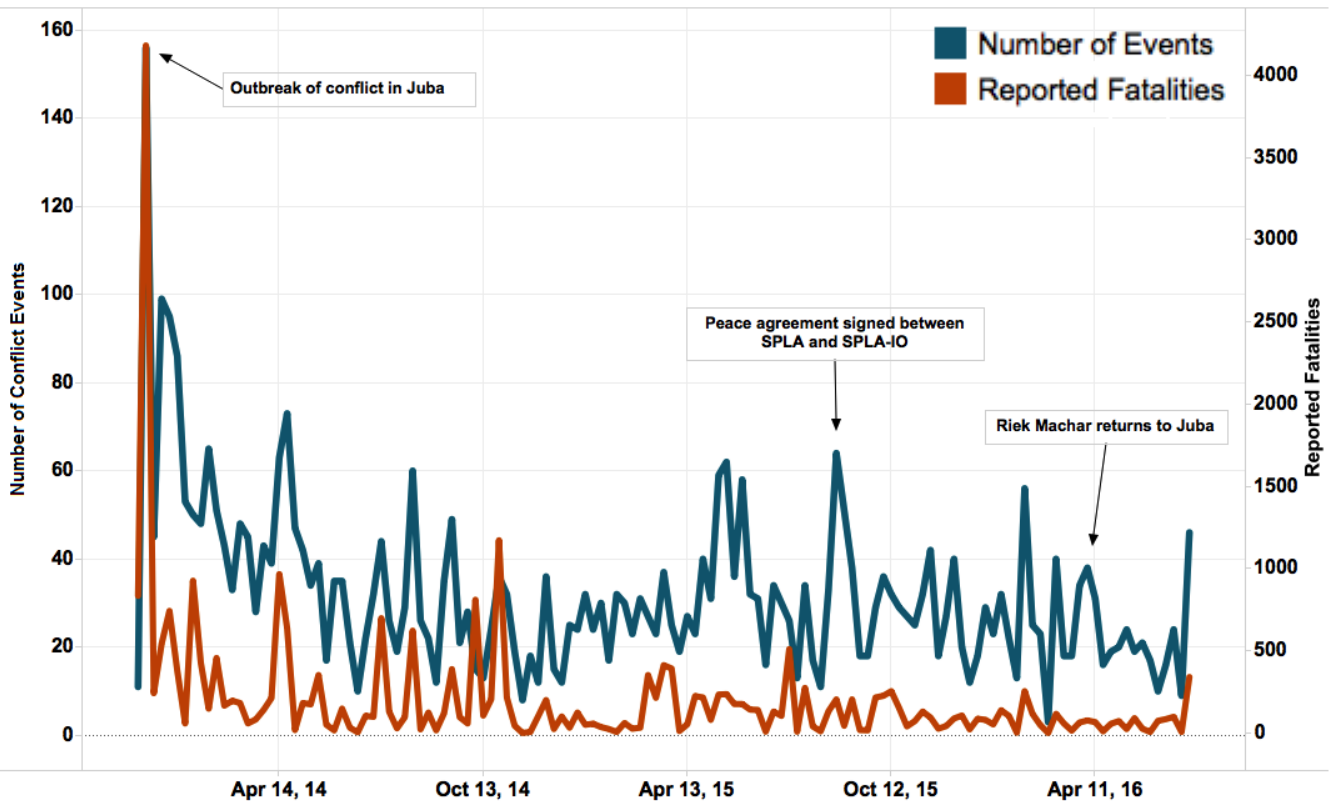


Figure 1: Timeline and Rates of Conflict Events in South Sudan, from December 2013 - 9 July 2016.

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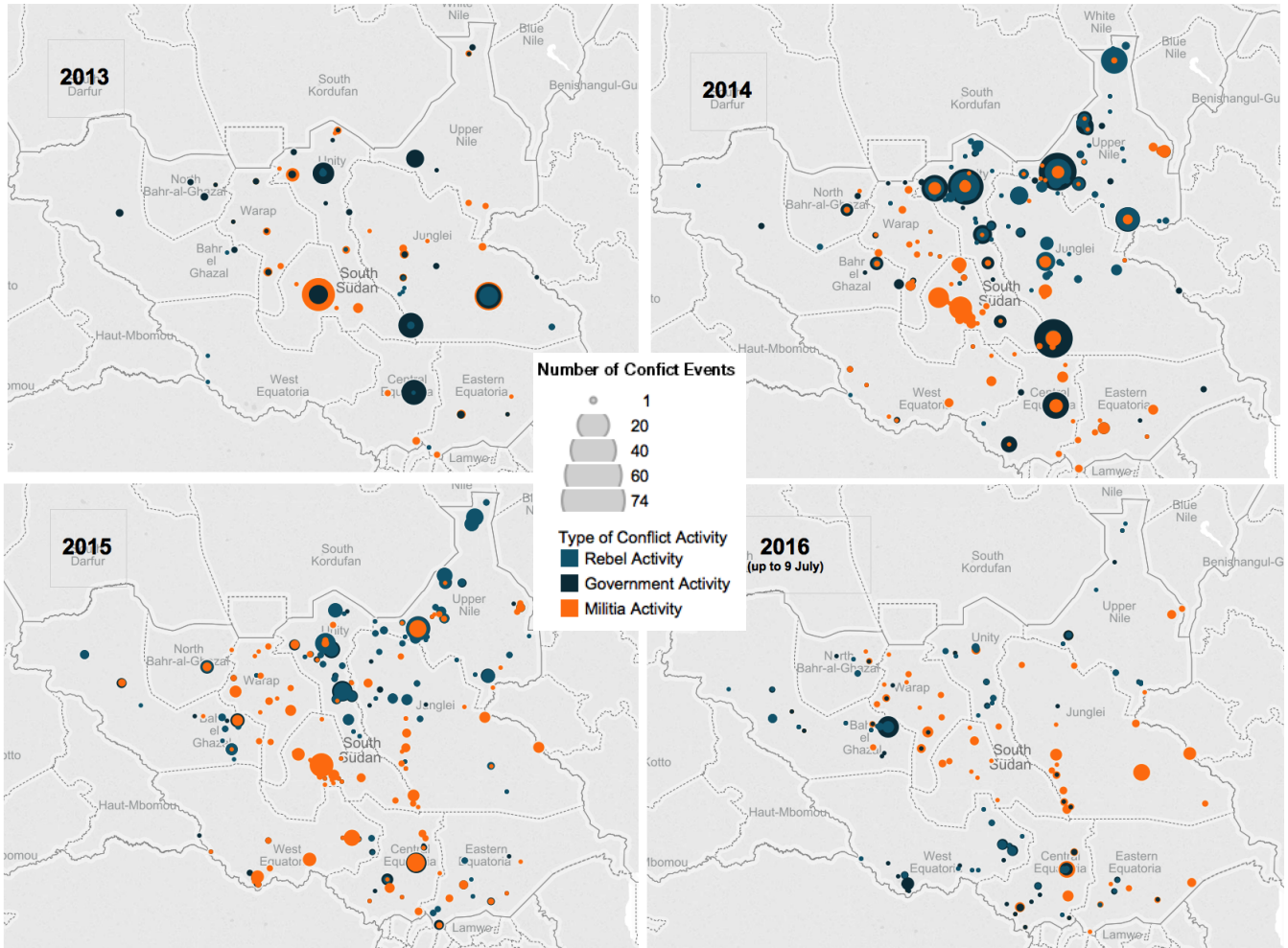


Figure 2: Temporal Trends of Conflict Activity by Type in South Sudan, from January 2013 - 9 July 2016.

stances.

The patterns of the conflict underscore that political wrangling and opportunism is behind most of the violence in Southern Sudan, and that local defense forces and militias are responsible for conducting campaigns to benefit national level elites, who have cast politics as distinctly ethnic. Despite this casting, the alliances throughout the state are not uniformly the same for ethnic communities. For instance, in some cases, sub-clans of Nuer and Dinka (the main ethnic cleavage represented by Vice President Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir, respectively) are fighting against their dominant clan association (SPLA-IO and SPLA, respectively).

This return to violence is taking place within a context of

many national and local issues and grievances, including the government’s decision earlier in 2015 to postpone June’s scheduled elections in the interest of: ongoing peace negotiations; the extension of Kiir’s presidential

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term until 2017; and the ‘redistricting’ plan which nullifies the proposed system of power-sharing of the existing 10 states (SPLA/M-IO was to be given control of oil-rich Upper Nile and Unity States), replacing it with 28 ethnically-divided states (per Kiir’s unilateral decree in late 2015). Kiir recently agreed to allow a committee to review the borders of the 28 new states, but not to consider a reversal of the decree.

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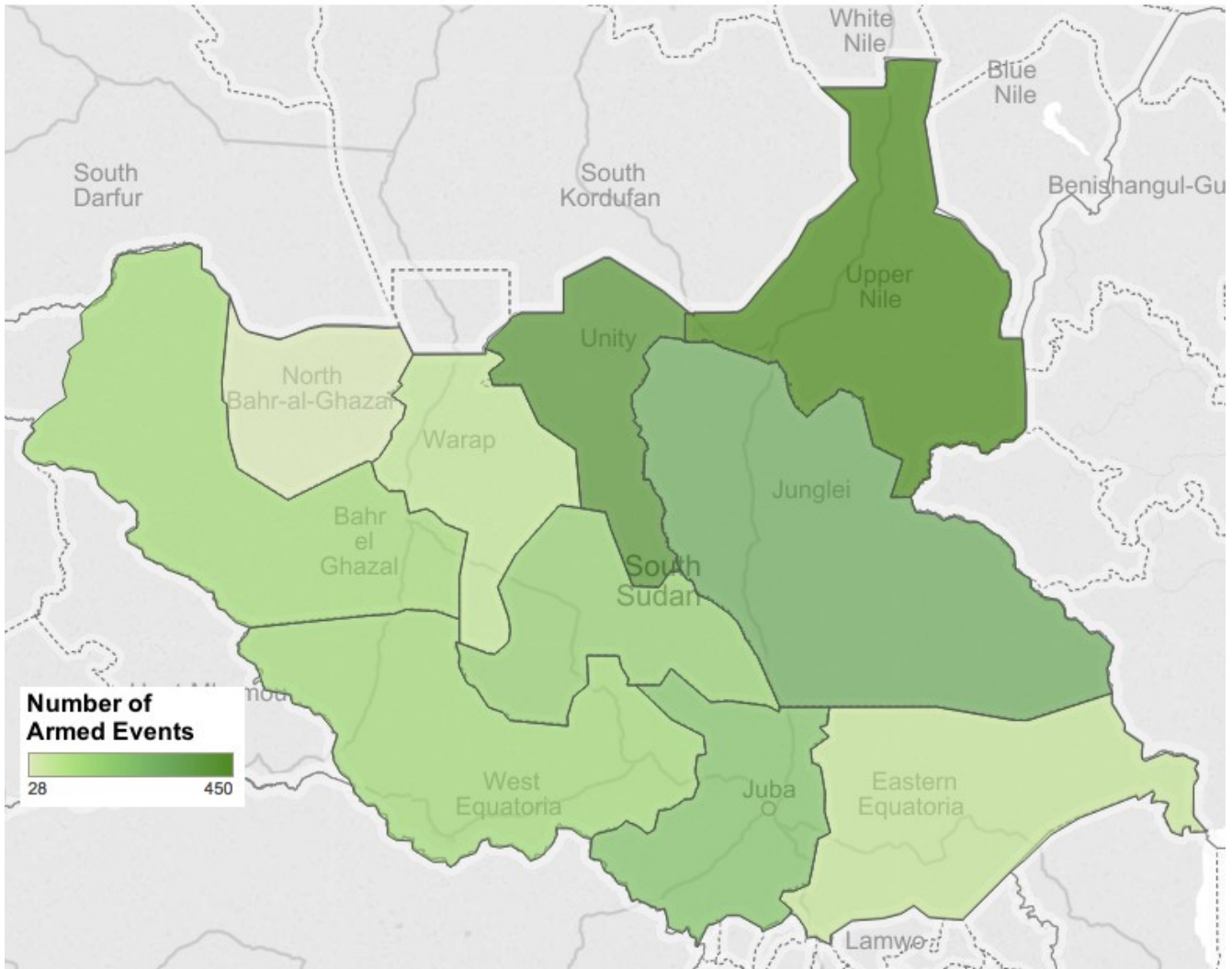


Figure 3: Number of Armed Events per State, in South Sudan, from December 2013 - 9 July 2016.

Brief Review of Conflicts:

1. SPLA vs. SPLA-IO

This violence has dominated the conflict since December 2013, and throughout 2014, and was fought in the north and northeast regions of the country primarily. Contests over cities across Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states, as well as oil resources, destroyed a large part of the country. There was a stalemate in the conflict capacity for the past eighteen months while the two leaders of the respective groups arranged several peace agreements that were not kept. Militarily and territorially, the sides were at an impasse. Effectively, this represents a broader Dinka/Nuer division within the SPLM and the government, although there are many intra-party and intra-government disputes that are superficially regarded as ethnic.

2. Western Conflict/Wau

The Wau region has had a series of massacres over the past five decades, and the Fertit people of the region have a history of militias that challenged the SPLA during the 1980s (Blocq, 2014). The Fertit are considered marginalized by the power structures of the state (supported by the small, insignificant role they played in the cabinet through their representation, which stopped in 2013) (see Cabinet Figures 7, 8 and 9). Violence against civilians in Wau at the hands of the government increased substantially in 2015 and has doubled in 2016; if continuing at its current rate, it will likely be four times as high in 2016 compared to 2015. There is a limited SPLA-IO presence; a small-identified armed group level of activity; and recently, the group called 'Islamic Movement for the Liberation of Raja (IMLR)' has been active. Wau may be sought

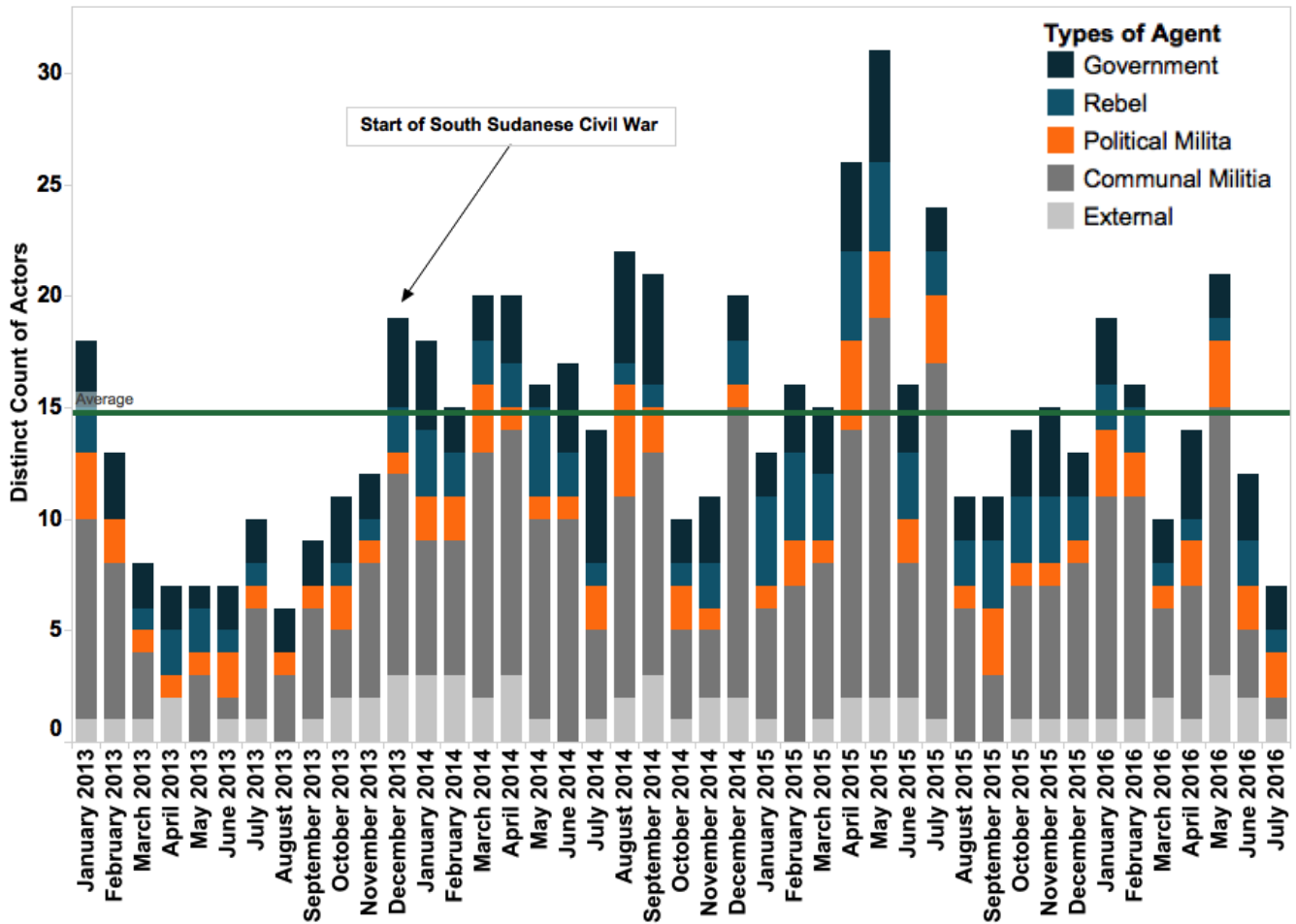


Figure 4: Distinct Count of Actors by Type in South Sudan, from January 2013 - 9 July 2016.

as a new capital for Western Dinka political elites (such as Commander Malong).

3. Equatoria Conflict

The conflicts taking place in Equatoria are both deeply intertwined with the larger cleavages in the state, but are also rooted in local circumstances. The armed groups in Western Equatoria are myriad and not unified (HRW, 2016). The fighting forces active in Western Equatoria in the south of the country include the Arrow Boys (both those allied with outside groups and those who conduct ‘local community police’ functions) and the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM), who have a smaller, anti-SPLA role. The region also hosts the South Sudan People’s Patriotic Front. The Arrow Boys are actively fighting the Ugandan rebel group the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) during incursions, and operate as the security forces for many populations. In addition, the Western Equatoria region is the site of high rates of cattle rustling

and disputes between Dinka (perceived outsiders) and locals – leading to a request that Dinka leave in April 2015 (see [South Sudan’s South: Conflict in the Equatorias ICG report no. 236](#)). A recent report suggests that 800 armed youth are being trained in Western Equatoria (by the newly assigned governor who claims they will operate as police). In Eastern Equatoria, a new armed group calling itself the South Sudan Armed Forces has overrun several outposts in rural Torit County (HRW, 2016).

Violence amongst militarized armed cattle herders in areas outside Juba is often explained as a violent “cattle-rearing culture” and a generational rebellion, instead of acknowledgement that these groups were militarized by SPLA and opposition forces two decades ago (Pendle, 2015).

4. Northern Upper Nile/Unity Conflict

The northern conflict morphed into an intercommunal,

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high violence dispute after President Kiir’s decision to carve the area into new regions, with the 28 states plan believed to benefit Dinka communities. This has caused considerable unrest in Upper Nile region, and has led to an alliance between previously opposing Shilluk groups. Part of the complications with this region is that Shilluk forces have often previously fought with the government, and the government also used a series of Dinka local militias, or those imported from the West, to fight the SPLA-IO, which had a hold in the Southern region. With Kiir’s decree to divide the region, territorial designations are closer to the military reality as opposed to the demographic reality. Kiir is attempting to hold and control areas that are heterogeneous, and to distribute such areas to Dinka who have fought alongside government forces. This is leading to tensions in neighboring Unity state where Nuer have also allied with SPLA.

5. Other

Since Friday, July 8, conflict has spread throughout the country (especially to areas including: Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei, and Warrap regions, where a disarmament of Dinka communal militias is likely ceasing). In addition, the number of active groups in the regions suggests that the peace agreement is only being applied to a very limited set of political circumstances while ignoring the realities on the ground. Given the weak hold of both leaders over their forces, and their dependence on ‘affiliated’ local-level organizations operating as supplemental armed groups and community police, this was a poor and short sighted strategy for peace.

Agents of Violence:

The top 10 active organizations are noted in Table 1. While much of South Sudan’s activity involves the main two groups in opposition, a number of other political militias, and a plethora of communal militias (approximately 40) are also active. The South Sudan ‘relational’ space is best thought of as a national elite competition core, surrounded by a number of militias that operate both as local and supplemental troops for both core members (SPLA and SPLA-IO), surrounded by a much larger group of militias who operate solely within a communal, local space. Violence is significant from all of these violent agents.

The main opposition force is SPLA-IO, which is now technically part of the transitional government. Multiple offshoots of SPLA-IO that were angered when Machar reconciled with the Government (i.e. Gen. Peter Gadet) now

exist. In 2015, the government promised an amnesty to rebels that disarm. Some did not want to disarm unless local forces first replaced Dinka elements of the army. In Yambio (Western Equatoria), the government signed a peace agreement with the South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) in April 2016, after engaging in clashes with the military in January 2016.

In protest of Kiir’s 28 states decree, military defectors of the Shilluk ethnic group formed the Tiger Faction New Forces (TFNF) under the leadership of Yaones Okij in Manyo County (Upper Nile) ([Radio Tamazuj, 3 October 2015](#)). On 31 October 2015, TFNF held the Manyo County Commissioner hostage, claiming control of Wadakona as its headquarters. In November, the group clashed with military forces in Malakal. “The mobilization of armed young men highlights the peace deal’s limitations in addressing the deeply rooted grievances of smaller ethnic groups” ([Al Jazeera, 21 November 2015](#)).

In Eastern Equatoria, the South Sudan Armed Forces (SSAF), led by Anthony Ongwaja and consisting predominantly of Latuke ethnic group members, announced its arrival by taking control of a police station in Idolu in December. SSAF was also involved in battles in Longiro and Torit in Eastern Equatoria in December, in which 34 soldiers, police officers, and rebels were killed. Since December, SSAF has not reportedly been active.

Some of the most significant violence emanates from Dinka and Nuer militias, operating in and out of their home areas. South Sudan has had a long history of militarizing and training Dinka cattle herders, which are then partially or unofficially incorporated into government forces, leading to “hybrid domains of security” ([Pendle, 2015](#)). Prior to independence, Dinka youth often become *de facto* armed groups, comprised of young men protecting their land against raids committed by the Government of Sudan and by the White Army (the Nuer militia armed by Machar in the mid-1990s which would raid Dinka areas controlled by SPLA, at the time led by John Garang). Dinka militias such as *Duk ku Beny* received *quasi* support from SPLA forces, or at least tacit permission to become armed, in what was then Southern Sudan.

This tacit support effectively caused the Dinka militia in South Sudan to act similarly to the government-supported Janjaweed militia in Sudan. In other words, the presence

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Brief Timeline of Significant Events

Summer 2015

- ◆ SPLA (IO) announced that Major General Johnson Olony had defected and that SPLA-IO forces under his overall command had recaptured Malakal, along with a number of previously government-held towns.
- ◆ Government of South Sudan admitted that a new rebel group under the leadership of the former MP Wesley Weluba has emerged and captured Mundri town in Western Equatoria. The group is called the Revolutionary Movement for National Salvation (REMNASAS).
- ◆ Two weeks of inter-clan fighting between two Dinka rival groups left between 18-25 dead and 13 wounded in Warrap state.
- ◆ Ongoing revenge attacks between the Pan-Nguong and Pan-Awuor sub-clans in Lakes state.
- ◆ SPLA-IO claim to have regained control of Leer county in Unity state and Farajalla town in Western Bahr el Ghazal, Wau.
- ◆ A split in leadership of SPLA-IO as Machar fires Peter Gatdet and Gathoth Gatkuoth.
- ◆ In October, government troops again launched attacks through Leer county on 24 October, killing dozens more civilians. By late November, the situation in southern Unity state calmed down, allowing aid groups to tentatively return and the United Nations peacekeeping mission to set up a temporary base in Leer County. But skirmishes continue to take place in the state, including a large cattle raid by rebels on Nhialdiu in Rubkona county (HRW, 2016).
- ◆
- ◆ Continued trouble with revenge attacks in Lakes state, and continued communal fighting in Jonglei state with Murle militias.
- ◆ GoSS announced the arrest of 76 suspected members of Somalia's Al-Shabaab group in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state that may have been a precursor to IMLR.
- ◆ A new rebel group, Tiger Faction New Forces (TFNF) has been formed in protest of the presidential establishment of the 28 new states. President Kiir, according to the statement, was attempting to give away the land of ethnic Shilluk tribe in Upper Nile state to members of a section of ethnic Dinka from which he comes.
- ◆ November saw a continued attempt by the government to quell conflict in both the Equatorias and northern Upper Nile state. Military vs. SPLA-IO fighting in oil-rich Unity and Upper Niles states bordering Sudan through November 2015 (control of cities of Malakal and Nyal has changed hands multiple times in the past year). Battles then moved to Western Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal. In November, military attacked SPLA-IO camps in Magwi and Opari in Eastern Equatoria.

Brief Timeline of Significant Events (cont...)

Early to Mid 2016

- ◆ The ‘Arrow Boys’ claimed their forces occupied several locations in Western Equatoria state, warning the government not to provoke them into further clashes.
- ◆ SPLA double attacks on Wau.
- ◆ Kiir announced reunification of the SPLM, but the two other SPLM factions remain hesitant.
- ◆ Continued sightings of LRA in Western Equatoria
- ◆ David Yau Yau and his Lou Nuer raiders carried out attacks in the greater Pibor area from 8-13 February, as revenge attacks.
- ◆ At least 25 killed over two days inside UN protection site in Malakal after fighting between Dinka and Shilluk displaced communities. Fatalities included 3 MSF staff. During fighting between Dinka and Shilluk militia, SPLA soldiers entered camp on the night of Feb 18 and attacked Shilluk and Nuer IDPs, burning tents and killing civilians. According to an HSBA [report](#) by the Small Arms Survey, the Malakal UN protection site attack was part of an organized effort by authorities in Upper Nile state to push Shilluk people off the east bank of the White Nile river (see HSBA website).
- ◆ The Arrow Boys clashed with military in areas surrounding Yambio in Western Equatoria. The Arrow Boys were most recently involved in events in February, when a faction entitled South Sudan National Army – 8,000 in number, led by Gen Abel Mathwo Banga – denounced alliance with the military, allying itself with the rebel SPLA -IO in Rangu. The defection was due to a lack of clarity and implementation of the peace deal. Also, there are reports of the Arrow Boys clashing with Uganda Peoples’ Defense Force.
- ◆ Different Nuer ethnic militias fight each other with spears and machetes within the UN protection site in Juba. Peacekeepers fired tear gas. At least 1 dead, 110 wounded, including 2 UNMISS peacekeepers.

Table 1: Timeline of Significant Events in South Sudan, Summer 2015 - Early to Mid 2016.

of armed youth militias (whether Dinka in South Sudan, or Janjaweed in Sudan) is not simply a product of local disputes, but rather the effect of government forces arming cattle herders as a method of creating proxy fighters to ally against any existing opposition forces, as well as ensuring that new opposition is not created (by keeping local communities content and feeling able to defend themselves). Over time, the status of the Dinka militia may have changed (from informal to semi-formal and back again); however, their actions have remained essentially the same, except for violence being moved to new geographical spaces.

Disarmament campaigns amongst Dinka and other militias have been presented from the 2000s onward as an alter-

native to integration into armed forces. This has blurred the “government – home boundary” and altered limits of “legitimate violence” for communal militias that had become accustomed to being able to defend their lands through the acquisition of guns ([Pendle, 2015](#)). In order to remain legitimately armed, Dinka groups had to become increasingly (but still only *partially*) government-affiliated. Some armed groups were transformed into ‘community police’, eventually becoming Mathiang Anyoor. This group fought alongside Kiir against the SPLM-IO, further blurring the lines between ‘community police’ and soldiers. The integration of the Dinka militia into government forces or the transformation of Dinka groups into ‘community police’ has also left the impression that the GoSS has favored

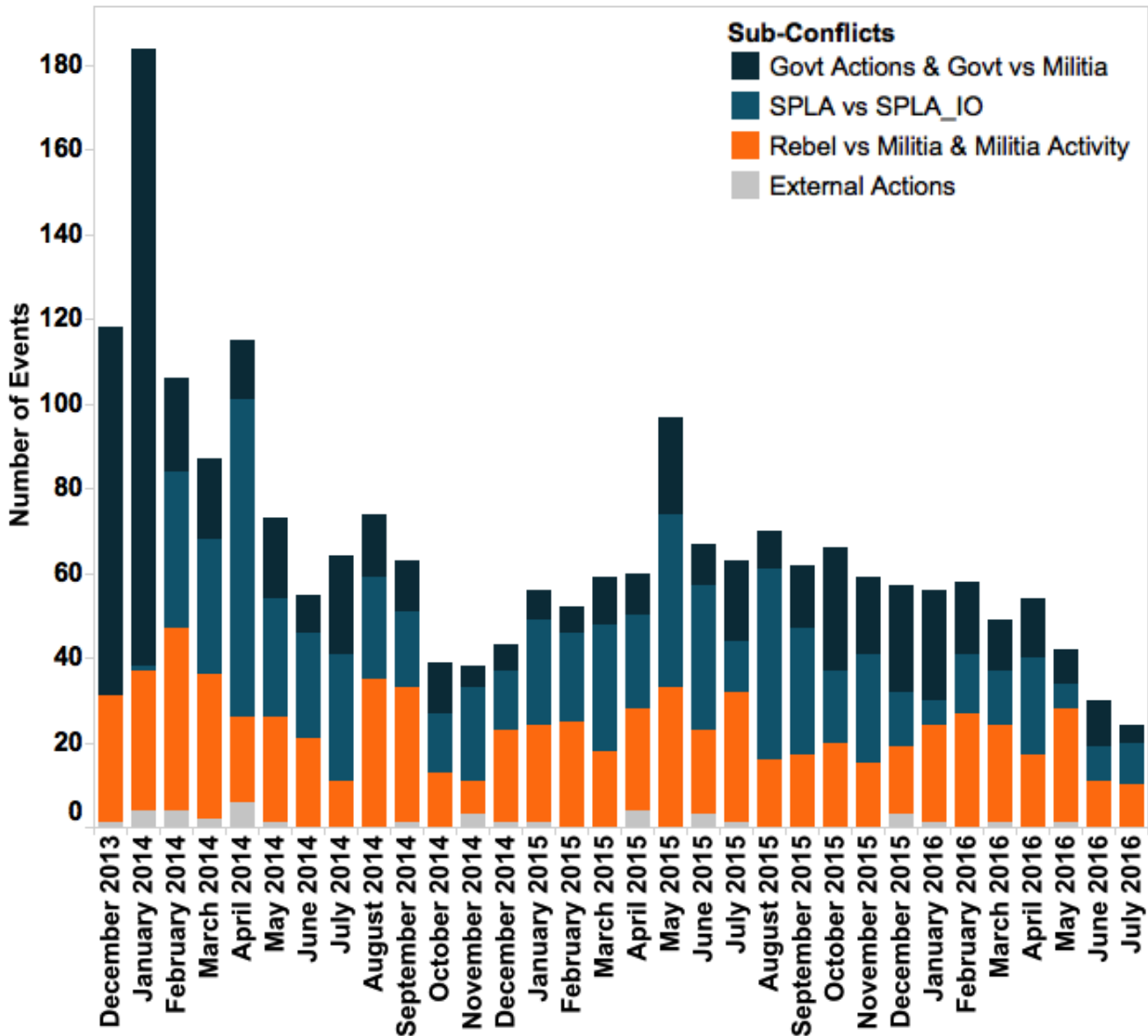


Figure 5: Types of Violence by Sub-Conflict in South Sudan, from December 2013 - 9 July 2016.

Dinka over ‘illegitimately’ armed Nuer groups, such as the White Army. The groups such as Mathiang Anyoor are believed to underscore the newest violence in the state.

Local Communal Militia Activity

Ethnic and communal militias outside of Juba continue to fight through cattle raiding and revenge attacks. Jonglei state has the most battles involving ethnic and communal militias (due mainly to the Murle ethnic militia). Also, communal militias are involved in cattle raids and violence. Most unidentified communal militia activity over the past year takes place in Jonglei state. For example:

Sept 2015: Inter-ethnic fighting amongst Ayal militia in Lakes state.

Oct 2015: Inter-clan clashes between Thiik and Luach militia in Warrap state.

Nov 2015: Anuak clash with police and with Nuer militia in Jonglei state.

Dec 2015: Clashes between Aliap and Gony clan militia in Lakes State.

Clashes between Akok and Marial Lou in Tonj North in Warrap state.

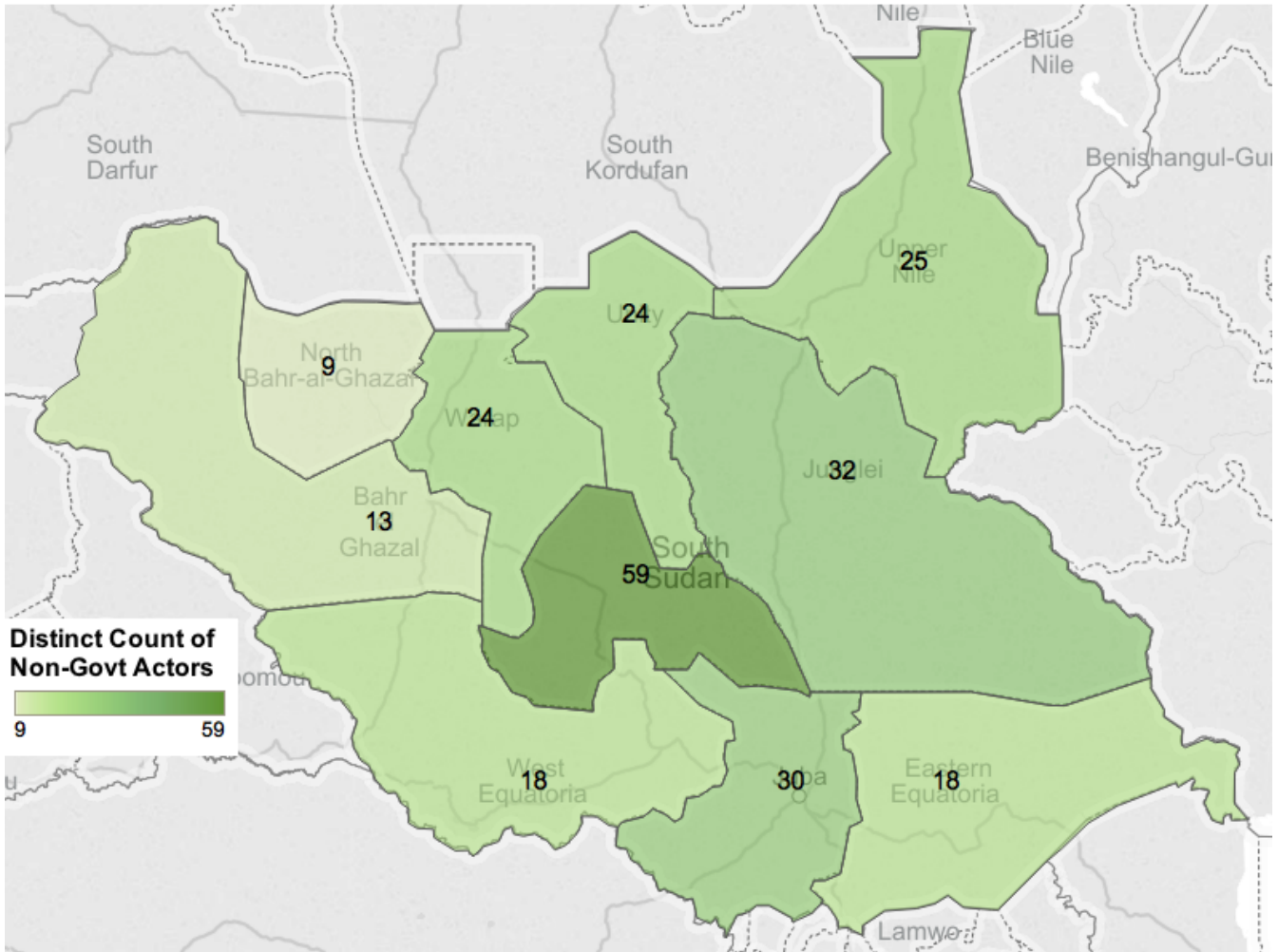


Figure 6: Distinct Count of Non-Governmental Actors per State in South Sudan, from January 2013 - 9 July 2016.

Jan 2016: Clashes between Bor Dinka and Bari militias in Juba county. 5 killed. Abuok militia in battles with Thony (Al-el Thony militia) over land and water in Warrap state.

Feb 2016: Heavy clashes between Lou Nuer and Murle militia in Pibor, Jonglei state.

Apr 2016: Clashes between Kuei and Rup clans in Lakes states.

May 2016: Toposa and Didinga militia clash in Eastern Equatoria.

May 2016: Mundari militia attack military forces in Unity state but also in Juba county, killing 3 soldiers and a civilian.

2016 Targets

The outcome of the Juba conflict will have serious ramifications for whose civilians are safest within that space, as

well as for the losing party. Rumors about cracks in the government political elite (e.g. Malong splits from Kiir) will likely lead to a severe restriction in the formal SPLA forces, as they are dependent on the militias created and sustained by Malong. Further, new fronts (including Northern and Western Bahr El Ghazal) could open, as the conflict in Wau continues to increase. Should this pass, an agreement is likely between Kiir and Machar, and those communities allied with both.

Cabinet Figures

The figures below note the rate of ethnic and regional representation in the South Sudanese national cabinet from independence to now. These indicate increasing exclusion and how violence is occurring in areas that have been denied or restricted in positions. Politics and political wrangling is causing political violence in South Sudan.

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Appendix:

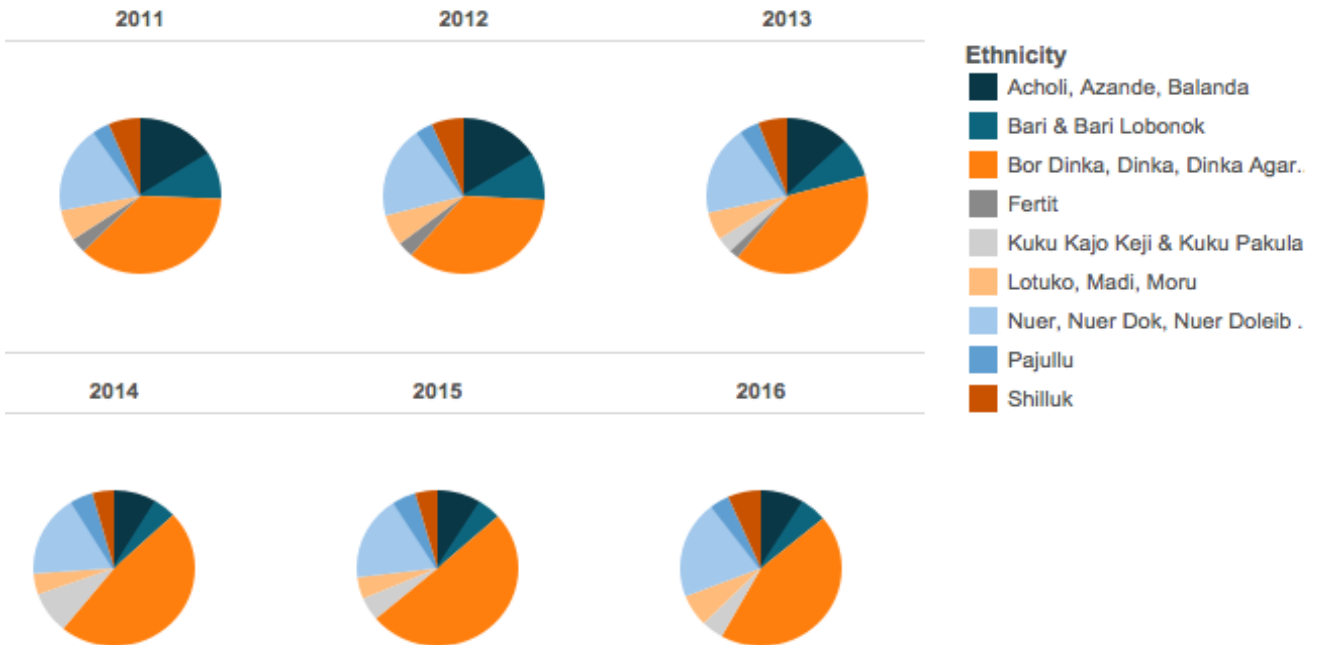


Figure 7: Ethnicity of Cabinet Ministers in South Sudan, from 2011 - 2016.

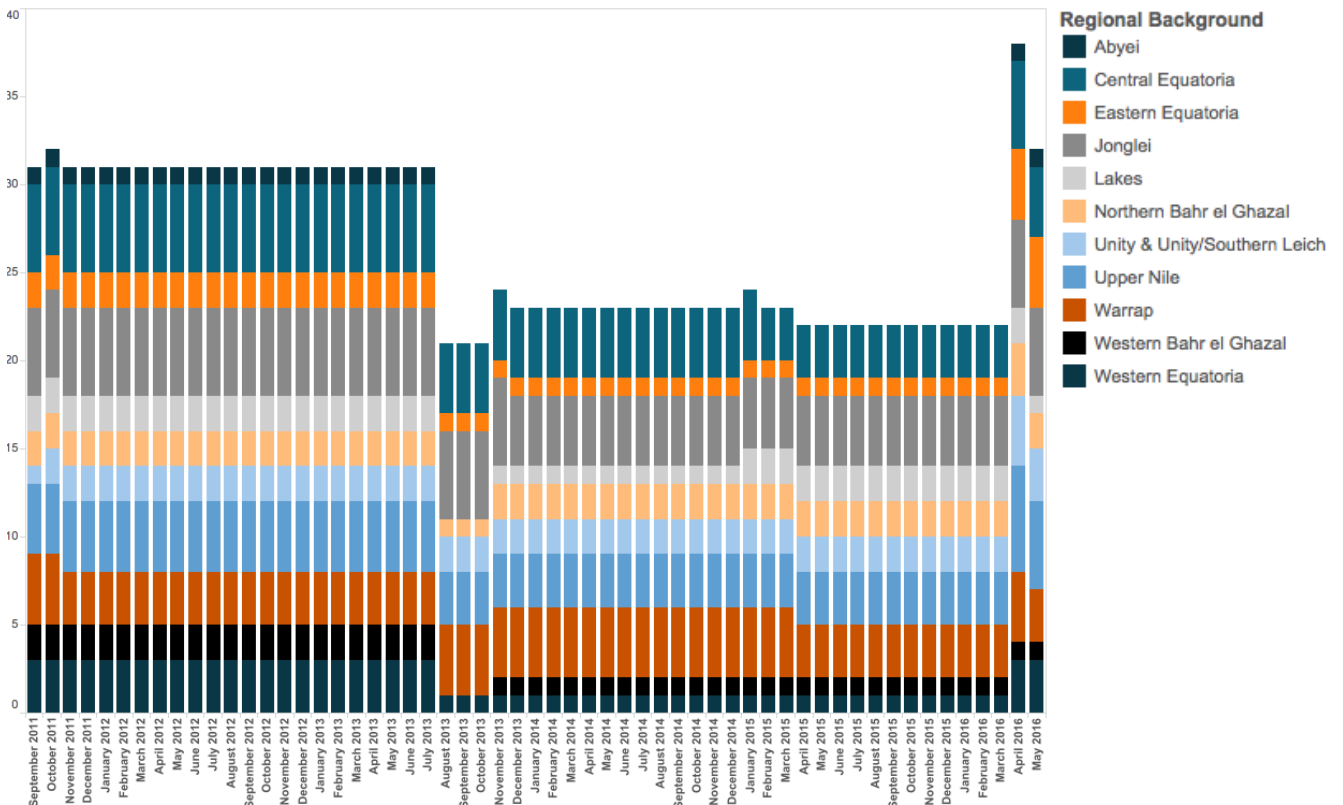


Figure 8: Regional Background of Cabinet Ministers in South Sudan from September 2011 - May 2016.

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Ethnicity

- Acholi, Azande, Balanda
- Bari & Bari Lobonok
- Bor Dinka, Dinka, Dinka
- Fertit
- Kuku Kajo Keji & Kuku P.
- Lotuko, Madi, Moru
- Nuer, Nuer Dok
- Pajullu
- Shilluk

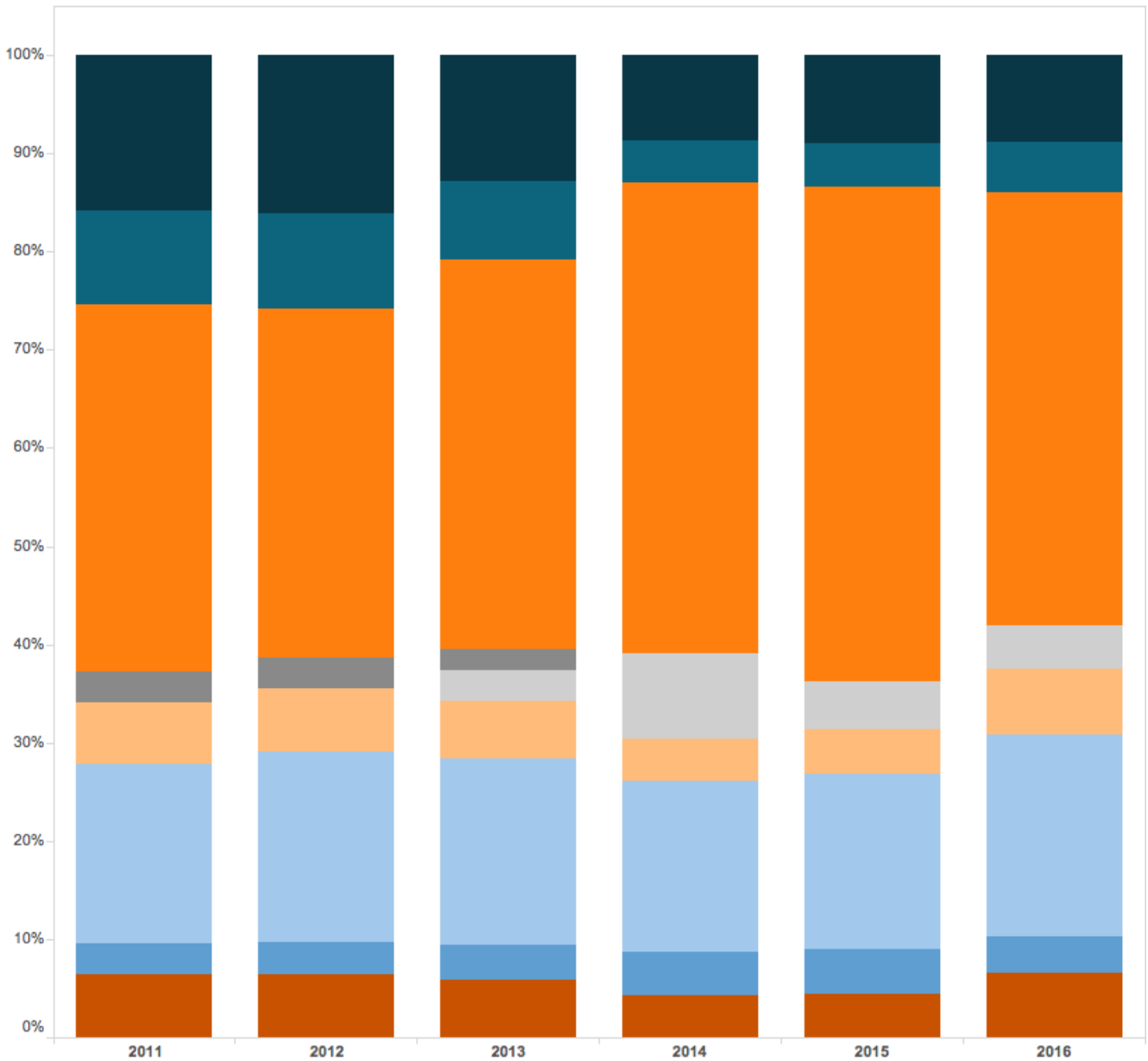
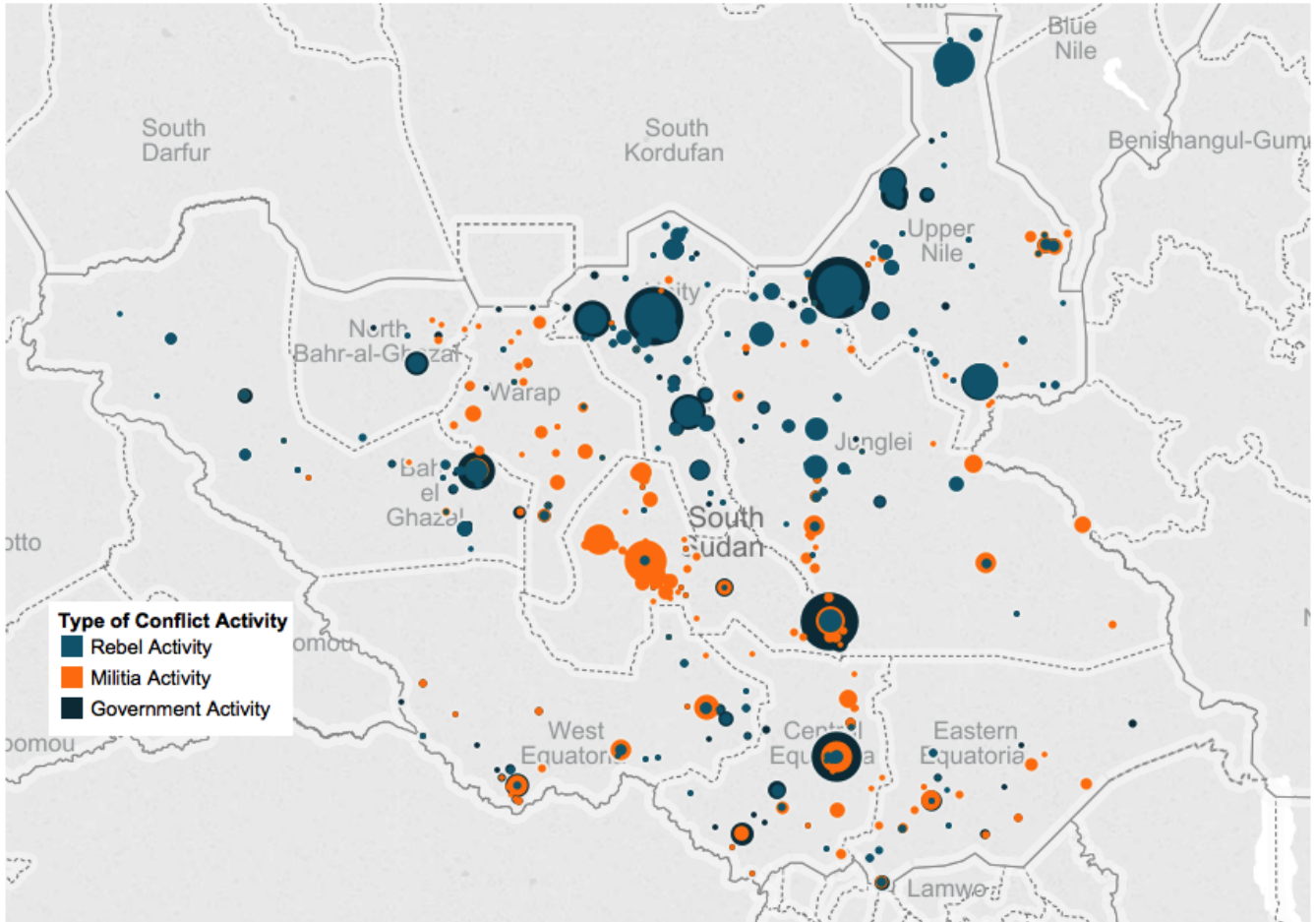


Figure 9: Percentage of Ethnic Representation in South Sudan Cabinet, from 2011 - 2016.

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Appendix Map: Rebel, Militia and Government Conflict Activity in South Sudan, from December 2013 - 9 July 2016.