

National Identity in Sudan after the 2023 War Reconfiguring Belonging and National Narratives

<https://www.doi.org/10.56830/IJHMPS06202602>

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Received: 03 March 2026 Revised: 27 April 2026 Accepted: 02 May 2026 Published: 1 June 2026

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the April 2023 war on the reconfiguration of national identity in Sudan by analyzing changes in national narratives, conceptions of the state, citizenship, and national belonging. While previous studies have primarily treated identity as a source of conflict, this article argues that armed conflict also reshapes national identity by transforming the political and social context through which it is understood. Employing a qualitative research design, the study combines historical analysis, process tracing, and narrative analysis to examine political discourse, media narratives, policy documents, reports by international organizations, and academic literature published between 2023 and 2025.

The findings demonstrate that the war did not create Sudan's identity crisis but fundamentally reordered the hierarchy of existing national narratives, redefined their priorities, and generated new forms of expressing national belonging. Alongside growing emphasis on state survival, social solidarity, and shared national destiny, the conflict also reinforced ethnic polarization, regional fragmentation, and competing narratives of victimhood and responsibility. The study identifies four major challenges facing the reconstruction of national identity in post-war Sudan: managing the collective memory of the conflict, developing an inclusive national narrative, rebuilding trust between the state and society, and managing cultural and ethnic diversity within a framework of equal citizenship.

The article contributes to the literature by conceptualizing war not merely as an outcome of identity conflicts but as a transformative process through which national identity itself is renegotiated and reconstructed.

Keywords: Sudan; National Identity; National Narratives; Civil War; National Belonging; State-Building; Citizenship.

1. Introduction

National identity has remained one of the most enduring and contested issues in Sudanese political thought since the country's independence in 1956. Sudan's ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity has made questions of national belonging inseparable from state-building, linking debates over national identity to governance, constitutional design,

citizenship, the distribution of political power and economic resources, center–periphery relations, and the country's foreign policy orientation.

Most studies of Sudan have assumed that the failure to construct an inclusive national identity constitutes one of the principal causes of the country's protracted armed conflicts and persistent political instability. Accordingly, the literature has emphasized political and economic marginalization, weaknesses in state formation, and the rise of subnational identities as factors that undermined shared national belonging and contributed to violent conflicts in South Sudan, Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the Blue Nile. These conflicts have generally been interpreted as consequences of the state's inability to develop a national project capable of accommodating Sudan's diversity within a common political framework (Deng, 1995); Sharkey, 2008).

While this perspective offers important insights, it pays less attention to the extent to which wars themselves reshape national identity. Comparative scholarship on nation-building and state formation suggests that wars not only reflect pre-existing social and political crises but also transform collective understandings of the state, citizenship, national belonging, and collective memory. In doing so, they redefine the boundaries of the political community, reshape notions of legitimacy, and alter the foundations of social solidarity (Hutchinson, 2005).

Against this background, the April 2023 war represents a critical turning point in Sudan's contemporary history. What began as a military confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) rapidly evolved into a nationwide crisis affecting virtually every aspect of political, social, and economic life. The conflict weakened state institutions, destroyed significant parts of the country's infrastructure, displaced millions of Sudanese, and created a fundamentally new social reality that reshaped patterns of interaction and transformed perceptions of the state, the nation, and national belonging.

The significance of these developments is heightened by the fact that they followed Sudan's post-2018 transitional period, during which public debate increasingly centered on citizenship, democracy, and state–society relations, giving rise to new conceptions of national identity grounded in the values of freedom, peace, and justice. The outbreak of war fundamentally altered this trajectory by weakening state institutions, elevating security concerns, and generating both new forms of social solidarity and new patterns of political and societal polarization.

1.1 Research Problem

Against this background, the present study examines the impact of the 2023 war on the reconfiguration of Sudanese national identity by analyzing the transformations that have occurred in national narratives, patterns of belonging, and prevailing conceptions of citizenship and national legitimacy. The central research problem concerns whether these transformations have contributed to the emergence of new forms of social cohesion and national solidarity or, alternatively, have reinforced existing divisions and generated new patterns of political and societal polarization.

1.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following overarching research question:

How has the 2023 war reshaped national identity in Sudan?

This question is further explored through the following subsidiary questions:

1. What were the principal national narratives that shaped conceptions of Sudanese national identity before the outbreak of the 2023 war?
2. How has the war affected these national narratives?
3. What new forms of national belonging have emerged during the conflict?
4. What are the implications of these transformations for the future of national identity and state-building in Sudan?

1.3 Research Hypothesis

This study argues that the 2023 war did not create Sudan's national identity crisis; rather, it fundamentally reconfigured the political and social context through which this crisis is understood. The institutional collapse, large-scale internal displacement and cross-border migration, together with profound changes in patterns of social interaction, have reshaped the relationship between the state and the national community, giving rise to new forms of expressing national belonging.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is twofold. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the growing literature on the relationship between armed conflict and national identity by examining how war reshapes national narratives rather than merely reflecting pre-existing identity cleavages. In doing so, it advances our understanding of the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between identity formation and violent conflict.

From a practical perspective, the study offers insights that are directly relevant to post-war Sudan. By examining the transformations in national identity generated by the conflict, it provides an analytical framework for understanding the challenges of peacebuilding, national reconciliation, and post-conflict state reconstruction.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how the April 2023 war reshaped national identity in Sudan through changes in prevailing conceptions of the state, the nation, citizenship, and national belonging. To achieve this objective, it combines three complementary methodological approaches: historical analysis, process tracing, and narrative analysis.

Historical analysis traces the evolution of Sudan's national narratives and situates the transformations associated with the war within their broader historical context. Process tracing identifies the causal mechanisms linking the conflict to changes in national identity, including institutional decline, large-scale displacement, changing patterns of social

interaction, and the emergence of community-based initiatives.

Narrative analysis examines representations of the state, the nation, and citizenship in political, media, and public discourse, focusing on how pre-existing national narratives have been reinterpreted and new narratives have emerged during the conflict.

The unit of analysis consists of national narratives circulating within political and societal discourse related to the war. The study draws on a wide range of sources, including academic literature, scholarly books, specialized studies, reports published by international organizations, political documents and speeches, and media materials produced between April 2023 and 2025.

The study does not seek to measure Sudanese public opinion or produce quantitative conclusions regarding attitudes toward national identity. Instead, it analyzes political and societal narratives as indicators of broader transformations in conceptions of the state, citizenship, and national belonging. Accordingly, its findings should be understood as an interpretation of discursive and narrative transformations accompanying the war rather than as direct measurements of public opinion.

2.1 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is confined to the analysis of political and societal narratives and public discourse associated with the April 2023 war as an analytical lens through which changes in conceptions of Sudanese national identity can be understood. It does not aim to measure public opinion or provide quantitative assessments of citizens' attitudes toward identity and national belonging. Accordingly, its findings should be interpreted as evidence of transformations in national narratives and public discourse during the war—and of the renegotiation of meanings attached to national belonging—rather than as evidence of the emergence of a new national consensus or a comprehensive shift in societal attitudes.

2.2 Structure of the Article

The article is organized into four main sections. The first develops the theoretical framework concerning the relationship between war, national identity, and national narratives. The second examines the dominant national narratives that shaped Sudanese national identity prior to the outbreak of the 2023 war. The third analyzes the impact of the war on the reconfiguration of national belonging and national narratives. Finally, the fourth discusses the principal challenges facing the reconstruction of national identity in post-war Sudan.

3. War and the Reconfiguration of National Identity: A Theoretical Framework

The relationship between identity and conflict has traditionally been examined through the role of ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions as principal drivers of armed conflict. This perspective assumes that social diversity, when combined with the absence of institutions capable of managing it effectively, may become a source of political instability and violent conflict. Although this approach provides important insights, it is less able to explain how wars themselves reshape identities. Armed conflicts are not merely consequences of pre-

existing divisions; they also constitute critical historical junctures that redefine belonging, loyalty, collective memory, and perceptions of the national community and its boundaries.

Building on this perspective, the present study conceptualizes the 2023 Sudanese war as a transformative historical event whose consequences extend beyond the political and security spheres. Rather than viewing the conflict solely as the outcome of longstanding political crises, the study argues that it has reopened fundamental debates concerning the nation, the state, citizenship, and national belonging. To analyze these transformations, it draws upon three complementary theoretical approaches: national identity, national narratives, and war as a process of collective identity reconfiguration.

3.1 National Identity: Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

National identity occupies a central place in the social sciences and generally refers to a collective sense of belonging to a political community whose members share common values, symbols, historical memories, and perceptions of a common destiny. Anthony D. Smith defines national identity as a named human community occupying a historic territory, sharing common myths, historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all its members (Smith, 1991).

By contrast, Benedict Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an "imagined community," whose members perceive themselves as belonging to a single political community despite never knowing most of their fellow members personally (Anderson, 2006). His formulation profoundly influenced contemporary understandings of nationalism by emphasizing that nations are socially constructed rather than naturally given.

Contemporary scholarship has consequently moved beyond essentialist conceptions of identity, viewing it as an evolving social process shaped through continuous reinterpretation and reconstruction. In this regard, François Jullien argues that cultural identity is not an immutable essence but an imagined intellectual construct frequently mobilized for political and ideological purposes (Jullien, 2021). This interpretation is consistent with constructivist approaches, which regard identities and social groups as historically contingent products of ongoing social interaction.

The literature also distinguishes national identity from subnational identities, including ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations. While national identity provides a broader political and cultural framework capable of accommodating social diversity, it becomes vulnerable when the state fails to institutionalize equal citizenship and promote national integration. This challenge has characterized many developing countries, particularly in Africa, where debates over national identity have been closely linked to state formation, nation-building, and political integration.

3.2 National Narratives and the Construction of National Identity

National identity is inseparable from the shared narratives through which members of a political community interpret their collective past, understand their present, and envision their common future. These narratives construct collective consciousness by providing a shared interpretive framework through which historical experiences, symbols, and values acquire

meaning. As (Anderson, 2006) argues, stories, symbols, and collective memories constitute indispensable components of nation-building.

The literature further emphasizes that national narratives are among the principal mechanisms through which social cohesion is created and sustained. By explaining the historical trajectory of the national community and defining the values upon which it rests, they shape collective belonging and establish the boundaries of political membership. Consequently, disputes over national identity are better understood as struggles among competing narratives seeking to define the nation, the state, citizenship, and political legitimacy according to different ideological visions rather than as conflicts between fixed identities (Anderson, 2006).

3.3 War as a Process of Collective Identity Reconfiguration

Traditional studies of civil war have focused primarily on the causes of armed conflict, including economic inequality, ethnic divisions, and state weakness. More recent scholarship, however, conceptualizes war as a social and political process that actively reshapes collective identities. Armed conflict transforms patterns of social interaction, alters relationships among individuals and groups, and generates new collective experiences that may reinforce existing identities, redefine them, weaken them, or produce entirely new forms of collective belonging.

Research further demonstrates that the consequences of war extend well beyond human casualties and material destruction to encompass social relations and interpersonal trust. (Blattman & Miguel, 2010) argue that the social and institutional consequences of civil wars constitute some of the most significant yet least understood dimensions of violent conflict. Conversely, Charles Tilly's historical analysis suggests that warfare has often contributed to state formation and the development of national identities by fostering a shared sense of collective destiny and strengthening ties between populations and central political institutions (Hutchinson, 2005).

These effects, however, are not uniform. In some contexts, war strengthens national identity and social solidarity, whereas in others it deepens fragmentation, reinforces subnational identities, and intensifies political and social divisions. Which outcome prevails depends on the nature of the conflict, the performance of state institutions, and the political narratives that emerge during wartime.

3.4 War and the Reconfiguration of National Belonging

This study proceeds from the proposition that major wars constitute critical moments during which national identity is renegotiated. Renegotiation refers to the process through which individuals and communities reassess prevailing understandings of the state, citizenship, and national belonging, generating new meanings in response to wartime experiences.

Such processes become particularly pronounced during profound institutional crises, when formal institutions fail to perform their essential functions and citizens increasingly seek alternative sources of security, legitimacy, and belonging. Under these conditions, perceptions

of who represents the nation, who defends it, and who threatens its existence undergo significant transformation.

Accordingly, national identity is conceptualized not as a static structure but as a dynamic social process continuously reconstructed through interpretation, negotiation, and collective experience. Wars accelerate this process because of their far-reaching political, social, and psychological consequences (Hutchinson, 2005).

Within the Sudanese context, four principal pathways through which the 2023 war has contributed to the reconfiguration of national identity can be identified. The first concerns transformations in state–society relations resulting from institutional decline and the erosion of state capacity. The second involves changing conceptions of citizenship and national belonging associated with mass displacement, refugee movements, and wider demographic and social transformations. The third relates to the emergence of new national narratives emphasizing resilience, survival, and the defense of both society and the state. The fourth concerns the redefinition of the boundaries of the national community and the criteria for membership through political, media, and societal discourses that have reshaped understandings of the nation and national identity.

4. Dominant National Narratives in Sudan before the 2023 War

Sudan's national identity crisis predates the 2023 war and is rooted in the formative stages of the modern Sudanese state and the longstanding challenge of constructing an inclusive national framework capable of accommodating the country's ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Since independence, debates over national identity have remained closely intertwined with broader questions concerning the nature of the state, citizenship, political authority, and the distribution of power, giving rise to competing conceptions of the Sudanese nation and the sources of state legitimacy.

Within this context, several influential national narratives emerged. Some emphasized Sudan's Arab-Islamic character as the principal foundation of national identity, while others advocated recognition of the country's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. A third perspective interpreted Sudan's crisis primarily through political and economic marginalization and unequal power and resource distribution. Although these competing narratives enriched public debate, they failed to produce a broad national consensus regarding the nature of the Sudanese nation, contributing to the persistence of political and social conflict throughout the post-independence period.

4.1 The Arab-Islamic Narrative

The Arab-Islamic narrative has long been one of the most influential conceptions of Sudanese national identity. It is founded on the premise that Arab and Islamic affiliations constitute the principal historical and cultural foundations of the Sudanese nation. According to this perspective, the Arabic language and Islam have provided a common cultural and symbolic framework capable of uniting broad segments of Sudanese society. Historically, this narrative developed alongside the spread of Islam, the expansion of Islamic educational institutions and Sufi orders, and the adoption of Arabic as the dominant language of

communication, culture, and public administration (Deng, 1995).

Supporters of this perspective regard Sudan as an integral part of both the Arab and Islamic worlds and argue that these affiliations have decisively shaped modern Sudanese national consciousness and the country's regional and civilizational orientation. Former Prime Minister Mohamed Ahmed Mahjoub expressed this view by stating:

"The ideal intellectual movement in this country should be one that respects the principles of Islam, derives its guidance from them, and reflects an Arab character in its language and cultural orientation." (Haj Hamad, 1996)

Following independence, this narrative was embraced by a range of political and intellectual movements as a principal foundation for national unity. Its political influence became particularly evident during the final years of President Jaafar Nimeiri's rule after the introduction of Islamic law in 1983 and later under the National Salvation regime (1989–2019). At the same time, it generated sustained debate concerning its capacity to accommodate Sudan's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity and its relationship with alternative conceptions of national identity (Deng, 1995).

4.2 The Plural Sudan Narrative

The Plural Sudan narrative is founded on the premise that Sudan's ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity constitutes one of its defining characteristics rather than an obstacle to nation-building. Accordingly, national identity should be constructed through the recognition and accommodation of diversity within a common political framework based on equal citizenship (Deng, 1995).

This perspective was advanced by several Sudanese intellectuals and political movements, most notably the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) under John Garang. His "New Sudan" project represented one of the most comprehensive expressions of this vision by advocating the reconstruction of the Sudanese state on the principles of equality, inclusiveness, and recognition of multiple identities rather than the dominance of a single cultural or ideological tradition (Kamir, 2025).

The narrative gained increasing prominence following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 and the secession of South Sudan in 2011, developments that revived fundamental debates concerning the nature of the Sudanese state and the possibility of constructing an inclusive national identity.

4.3 The Centre–Periphery Narrative

The Centre–Periphery narrative argues that Sudan's national crisis cannot be explained solely in cultural or identity terms but is fundamentally rooted in longstanding inequalities in political authority, economic development, and resource distribution.

According to this perspective, political influence, state institutions, and economic opportunities became concentrated in the central Nile Valley, while peripheral regions experienced political exclusion, economic marginalization, and developmental neglect (Niblock, 1987).

Consequently, armed conflicts and protest movements in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Eastern Sudan have been interpreted as demands for political representation, equitable development, and a fair distribution of national resources in addition to their cultural and ethnic dimensions. Identity, therefore, is understood as inseparable from political power, socio-economic inequality, and spatial justice.

4.4 The Civic-Democratic Narrative

The Civic-Democratic narrative emerged most prominently during the popular movement culminating in the December 2018 Revolution. Unlike narratives grounded primarily in cultural or religious affiliations, it places citizenship at the centre of national belonging and emphasizes equal rights, the rule of law, democratic participation, and constitutional governance as the principal foundations of the modern state (Abu Shouk, 2021).

From this perspective, national identity derives primarily from citizenship and participation in public life rather than ethnic, religious, or cultural affiliation. The narrative found its clearest expression in the revolutionary slogans of *Freedom, Peace, and Justice*, which articulated an inclusive vision of national unity based on shared citizenship, democratic governance, and civil consensus (International Crisis Group, 2019).

4.5 Interaction among National Narratives and Their Impact on National Identity

These narratives evolved through continuous interaction rather than in isolation, each offering a distinct interpretation of the nation, the state, citizenship, and the causes of Sudan's political crises. Although particular narratives gained greater prominence at different historical moments, none succeeded in establishing a broad national consensus regarding either Sudanese national identity or the character of the Sudanese state. Consequently, debates over religion and politics, cultural diversity, citizenship, and the distribution of political authority and national resources remained central features of Sudanese political life.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that Sudanese national identity has never been shaped by a single dominant vision but has evolved through continuous negotiation among competing conceptions emphasizing Arab-Islamic affiliation, cultural pluralism, centre-periphery relations, and civic-democratic citizenship. Against this background, the April 2023 war constituted a critical historical turning point that reopened fundamental debates concerning the nature of the national community, the foundations of social cohesion, and the meaning of shared national belonging. The conflict not only tested the resilience of pre-existing narratives but also challenged many assumptions that had shaped debates on Sudanese national identity since independence, creating the conditions for the emergence of new understandings of national belonging. The following section examines these transformations in greater detail.

5. The Impact of the 2023 War on Reshaping National Narratives and National Belonging

5.1 The War and the Transformation of State-Society Relations

The April 2023 war marked a major turning point in state-society relations in Sudan. As

military operations expanded across large parts of the country, state institutions were disrupted in vast areas, and their capacity to provide security and essential public services declined significantly. The conflict also exposed the fragility of key state institutions, particularly in Khartoum, long regarded as the country's administrative and political center. The collapse of public services and the paralysis of large segments of the state bureaucracy reopened fundamental questions concerning the nature of the Sudanese state, its core functions, and its capacity to protect citizens and provide essential services (World Bank, 2024).

Against this backdrop, large segments of the population increasingly relied on community initiatives and local solidarity networks to meet their basic needs. These developments highlighted the expanding role of society in mitigating the consequences of the conflict and compensating for the retreat of state institutions.

The war also produced the largest displacement crisis in Sudan's modern history. According to the (IOM) (International Organization for Migration, 2025), the conflict displaced millions of Sudanese both internally and across international borders, creating new patterns of interaction among communities and regions that had previously experienced only limited direct contact (IOM, 2025). Beyond altering the country's demographic structure, these developments reshaped everyday experiences of belonging and coexistence while reinforcing the role of society as a principal actor in responding to crisis through solidarity networks and community initiatives established to address humanitarian needs. As a result, national belonging became associated not only with the state and its institutions but also with the collective experiences and forms of social solidarity that emerged during the war.

5.2 Transformations of Belonging and Citizenship during the War

The war profoundly reshaped experiences of belonging and citizenship across broad segments of Sudanese society while generating a new collective memory forged through displacement, loss, violence, and deprivation. These shared experiences became an integral part of public discourse on Sudan's future and the reconstruction of both the state and society. Importantly, the consequences of the conflict extended far beyond areas directly affected by military operations, reaching most parts of the country through large-scale displacement, economic collapse, and the disruption of essential public services (FAO, 2024).

The wide geographical reach of the conflict encouraged the emergence of social discourses and practices that, to some extent, transcended traditional forms of regional particularism. As these shared experiences spread across different parts of the country, they increasingly became part of the national conversation on Sudan's future and post-war reconstruction.

These developments, however, did not diminish the importance of local and regional affiliations. As state institutions weakened, many individuals relied more heavily on family, tribal, and local networks as their primary sources of protection and support. Consequently, the impact of the war on national identity assumed a distinctly dual character. While the conflict fostered broader experiences of solidarity and a stronger sense of shared national destiny, it simultaneously reinforced the continuing importance of local social ties as mechanisms for coping with the insecurity and uncertainty generated by the war.

5.3 The Emergence of New Narratives of National Belonging

The war generated new patterns of discourse surrounding the nation and national belonging. Among the most prominent was the growing emphasis on the survival of the state and the unity of society in the face of fragmentation and institutional collapse. Consequently, security and stability assumed far greater prominence in public debate than during the pre-war period.

This narrative emerged strongly from the first months of the conflict, not only in the discourse of the Sudanese Armed Forces and the political forces allied with them, but also across segments of the political and media discourse accompanying the war. The conflict was increasingly portrayed as a struggle over the survival of the Sudanese state and the preservation of its institutions. As a result, expressions such as *the national state*, *preserving state institutions*, and *preventing collapse* became increasingly prominent in public discourse, introducing a new dimension of national belonging centered on defending the state as the overarching framework uniting society regardless of political or ideological differences.

The war also generated a new narrative centered on the role of community initiatives, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), and volunteer networks that provided humanitarian assistance and essential services as state capacity declined. Across several Sudanese cities, ERRs and community response committees became key actors in delivering food assistance, healthcare, and shelter in coordination with local and international humanitarian partners. Reports issued by the United Nations and international humanitarian organizations highlighted their pivotal role in responding to urgent humanitarian needs (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025). Their contribution, however, extended well beyond humanitarian relief by strengthening the image of society as a principal actor in confronting the crisis and fostering new forms of solidarity among citizens.

These developments were particularly reflected in the discourse surrounding the Emergency Response Rooms, which established a close relationship between humanitarian action, civic engagement, and citizenship-building. As (Olson, Dahab, & Parker, 2024) observe, the ERRs developed organizational structures based on participation, transparency, and accountability while drawing upon the organizational experience of the Resistance Committees in local mobilization. This strengthened their capacity to build public trust, expand volunteer participation, and institutionalize new forms of civic action rooted in community participation and local solidarity. The study further notes that many participants regarded this experience as a model capable of contributing to more cohesive and sustainable community networks in the future (Olson, Dahab, & Parker, 2024). Collectively, these developments reflect a shift away from political and ideological affiliations toward solidarity, participation, and collective responsibility as emerging foundations of national belonging under wartime conditions.

The conflict also generated a new discourse surrounding the role of Sudanese diaspora communities and transnational support networks. Large numbers of Sudanese living abroad organized humanitarian relief campaigns, mobilized financial donations, and provided

assistance to conflict-affected populations. These initiatives expanded the geographical expression of national belonging beyond the territorial boundaries of the state, demonstrating that national identity was increasingly expressed not only through attachment to state institutions but also through transnational networks of solidarity connecting Sudanese communities inside and outside the country.

Another increasingly prominent narrative centered on the notion of a shared national ordeal. Experiences of displacement, insecurity, disruption of essential services, and human loss came to be represented in public discourse and community initiatives as common experiences shared by broad segments of the population across different regions of Sudan. This process broadened the experiential foundations of national identity to include communities and regions that had not previously shared similar historical experiences. Consequently, new conceptions of national belonging emerged that increasingly emphasized common destiny rather than traditional political or regional affiliations. At the same time, concepts such as resilience, survival, and reconstruction acquired greater prominence as unifying values associated with Sudan's post-war future, while solidarity networks inside and outside the country further expanded expressions of national belonging beyond the state and its institutions to encompass humanitarian and community initiatives operating across geographical and regional boundaries.

These developments, however, were accompanied by countervailing trends that deepened some of Sudan's existing social divisions. Recent studies and reports document the escalation of ethnic and regional polarization together with the spread of hate speech across social media platforms and media outlets. They also highlight growing attempts to interpret the conflict and explain the positions of individuals and groups according to their ethnic or regional backgrounds, thereby reproducing patterns of mutual distrust among different social groups (Mohamed, 2025).

Taken together, these developments suggest that the impact of the war on Sudanese national identity has been inherently dual in nature. On the one hand, public discourse increasingly promoted the notion of a shared national ordeal and a common destiny. On the other, the wartime environment simultaneously created favorable conditions for the emergence of new forms of polarization and division. Accordingly, the transformations affecting national identity cannot be understood as a linear progression toward greater national cohesion; rather, they represent a complex process in which dynamics of integration and fragmentation evolved simultaneously and interacted throughout the conflict.

Rather than replacing the dominant conceptions of national identity that had shaped Sudanese political discourse before the war, these emerging discourses interacted with them, reinterpreting their underlying assumptions and redirecting their priorities in response to wartime realities. The following section examines this process of reinterpretation across Sudan's principal national narratives.

5.4 Transformations of National Narratives and the Redefinition of National Identity during the War

The reinterpretation of Sudan's major national narratives took different forms during the

conflict as political and social actors reassessed many of the assumptions underlying national identity and state-building. Wartime developments revived longstanding debates concerning national unity, the management of diversity, and the relationship between the center and the peripheries, while simultaneously redirecting them toward the challenges of preserving the state and rebuilding the national community.

Within this context, the Arab-Islamic narrative underwent significant reassessment. Security and the preservation of state unity became considerably more prominent than issues associated with the Islamization of political life. Several proposals and policy documents issued by political actors affiliated with the Islamist movement increasingly emphasized safeguarding Sudan's territorial integrity, confronting external intervention, and creating conditions for a transitional period in which civilian forces would assume a leading role. This shift reflects a relative movement away from emphasizing ideological identity toward prioritizing the survival and unity of the state as prerequisites for Sudan's political future (Al Jazeera Net, 2025).

The Plural Sudan narrative likewise evolved in response to wartime realities. Before the outbreak of the conflict, cultural pluralism and equal citizenship constituted central principles in the discourse of armed movements originating from Sudan's peripheral regions. The founding documents of both the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) affirmed that Sudan's crisis stemmed not from its cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity itself but from attempts to impose a singular national identity while excluding its multiple social components. Accordingly, both movements called for rebuilding the Sudanese state on the foundations of recognition of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, equal citizenship, and a political order capable of accommodating all Sudanese citizens without discrimination (Basic Statutes of JEM and SLM/A).

Following the outbreak of the war, this narrative was not abandoned but reformulated within a framework linking the management of diversity to the preservation of the Sudanese state. The Justice and Equality Movement reaffirmed that one of its principal objectives was "to eliminate the phenomenon of systematic social injustice and entrenched political despotism in Sudan, to achieve justice and equality among all citizens without exception, to improve their living conditions, to safeguard the unity of the country, and to ensure its development" (Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), n.d). Likewise, the Sudan Liberation Movement, led by Minni Arko Minnawi, continued to advocate a state founded upon equal citizenship, federal governance, and the accommodation of Sudan's diversity within a unified state (BBC News Arabic, 2023).

These developments reflect a shift from emphasizing the recognition of diversity primarily as a means of addressing the grievances of marginalized regions toward viewing it as one of the principal foundations for preserving state unity and rebuilding the national community on the basis of equal citizenship.

The Centre–Periphery narrative also underwent an important transformation as violence and destruction spread to Khartoum and the central regions after decades in which Sudan's wars had been concentrated primarily in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile. The

conflict extended experiences of displacement, institutional collapse, and insecurity to areas that had traditionally constituted the country's political and economic center, transforming state fragility from a predominantly peripheral concern into a nationwide crisis.

This process also prompted a reassessment of some of the narrative's underlying assumptions. The traditional distinction between a stable center and marginalized peripheries became increasingly inadequate once institutions in the center themselves proved vulnerable to collapse. Consequently, questions of justice in post-war reconstruction and the equitable redistribution of political power and national resources assumed renewed importance as prerequisites for sustainable peace. From the perspective of national identity, this evolution redirected debate from demands for justice for the peripheries toward the search for a new national compact capable of addressing structural imbalances affecting both the center and the peripheries while strengthening a sense of belonging founded upon a shared national destiny.

The Civic-Democratic narrative likewise survived the outbreak of the war but underwent a significant reordering of priorities. Before the conflict, civilian and revolutionary forces focused primarily on civilian rule, democratic transition, and constitutional reform. Wartime conditions, however, shifted immediate attention toward ending the conflict, protecting civilians, preserving social peace, and preventing the collapse of state institutions. This shift did not represent an abandonment of democratic aspirations but rather their reformulation within a context in which peace and state survival became indispensable prerequisites for resuming democratic transition. These developments are reflected in the official statements and political positions of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and the Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Taqaaddum).

Taken together, these competing visions demonstrate that the consequences of the 2023 war extended well beyond changes in the political and military balance of power. Rather than replacing the major national narratives that had shaped Sudanese political discourse before the conflict, wartime developments reinterpreted their priorities and redirected their substantive content in response to the realities created by the war. Table 1 summarizes the principal transformations affecting Sudan's dominant national narratives during the conflict.

Table 1. Transformations of Major National Narratives during the 2023 War

National Narrative	Before the War	During the War
Arab-Islamic Narrative	Emphasis on Arab and Islamic identity as the principal foundation of Sudanese national identity.	Growing emphasis on protecting the state and society and preserving national unity in the face of the risks of state collapse.
Plural Sudan Narrative	Recognition of Sudan's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity as the basis of national identity.	Greater emphasis on shared wartime experiences and collective suffering as foundations of national belonging.
Centre–Periphery	Focus on marginalization and the unequal distribution of political	Greater attention to the nationwide consequences of war, post-war justice,

Narrative	power, wealth, and development among Sudan's regions.	and balanced reconstruction across both the center and the peripheries.
Civic-Democratic Narrative	Democratic transition, civilian rule, and constitutional reform.	Greater emphasis on ending the war, protecting civilians, preserving social peace, and sustaining civic action as prerequisites for democratic transition.

These transformations extended beyond changes in the priorities of political actors to reshape the substantive content of national identity itself. Whereas pre-war debates largely revolved around competing conceptions of the nation and the state, wartime realities encouraged diverse political forces to search for common ground centered on state unity, citizenship, the management of diversity, and social peace. In this sense, the central question shifted from "Who are we?" to "How can we preserve a shared state capable of accommodating our diversity?" This evolution reflects a movement away from competition over defining national identity toward identifying the foundations upon which Sudan's national community can be reconstructed in the post-war period.

6. Challenges of Rebuilding National Identity in the Post-War Period

The 2023 war reopened fundamental questions concerning national belonging and the relationship between the state and society. It also prompted a broad reconsideration of many prevailing conceptions of national identity. On the one hand, the conflict generated shared collective experiences manifested in mass displacement, the loss of security, and the deterioration of living conditions. At the same time, community initiatives and various forms of local solidarity reinforced the prominence of shared destiny and national belonging within public discourse. On the other hand, the war exposed the persistence of political and social divisions and gave rise to competing narratives concerning the causes of the conflict, responsibility for it, and its consequences. Within this context, rebuilding national identity in Sudan faces four interrelated challenges.

6.1 The Collective Memory of the War

The first challenge concerns the management of the collective memory of the war. The literature indicates that societies emerging from armed conflict often encounter considerable difficulties in constructing a shared narrative of the past when competing interpretations exist regarding the causes of the conflict, responsibility for it, and its consequences (Bar-Tal, 2013). In the Sudanese case, competing narratives concerning the nature of the conflict, its principal actors, and its broader implications began to emerge during the war itself. While some discourses portrayed the conflict primarily as a struggle to preserve the Sudanese state and its institutions, others interpreted it as the outcome of long-standing structural crises relating to political authority, the distribution of resources, and the management of diversity (Bar-Tal, 2013).

At the same time, competing narratives of victimhood and responsibility developed as different political and social actors sought to emphasize the suffering experienced by the communities they represented while attributing responsibility for destruction and human

rights violations to opposing parties (Bar-Tal, 2013). This divergence became particularly evident in competing interpretations of wartime events in Khartoum and Darfur. While some narratives focused on the destruction of state institutions and the devastation of the capital as the most visible manifestations of the conflict, others devoted greater attention to the violations experienced by local communities in Darfur and other conflict-affected regions. These differences reflect contrasting priorities in collective memory and divergent views regarding which experiences should constitute the foundation of the national narrative of the war.

Moreover, wartime experiences differed substantially across regions and social groups. The experiences of communities in Khartoum, Darfur, Kordofan, and other parts of Sudan were far from identical. Likewise, the experiences of internally displaced persons, refugees, residents who remained in active conflict zones, and populations living in relatively secure areas varied considerably. Consequently, constructing a shared national memory cannot depend solely on documenting the events of the war. It also requires establishing an inclusive national framework capable of accommodating these diverse experiences and interpretations without exclusion or marginalization. Such a framework would enable collective memory to serve not as a source of renewed division, but as a foundation for reconciliation, national healing, and the reconstruction of national belonging.

6.2 Building an Inclusive National Narrative

The second challenge concerns the ability of the Sudanese to construct an inclusive national narrative capable of accommodating the diverse experiences generated by the war. Armed conflicts produce not only physical destruction but also competing interpretations of the nation, the state, and national belonging. The literature suggests that the durability of national identity in post-conflict societies depends largely on the capacity to develop an overarching national narrative that embraces diverse experiences without becoming a mechanism for excluding particular groups or marginalizing their suffering (Bar-Tal, 2013).

This challenge is particularly significant in Sudan because the war produced highly diverse experiences across different regions. While mass displacement, the collapse of public services, and the destruction of Khartoum occupy a central place in some narratives, issues relating to the protection of civilians, local atrocities, and transitional justice assume greater prominence in others. Consequently, rebuilding an inclusive national narrative requires integrating these diverse experiences within a common national framework rather than allowing them to develop into competing or mutually exclusive narratives.

6.3 Rebuilding Trust and the Relationship between the State and Citizenship

The third challenge lies in rebuilding trust between citizens and the state, as well as among the different social groups themselves. The war exposed the limited capacity of the state to provide security, public services, and protection across large parts of the country. At the same time, it compelled many communities to depend on local solidarity networks and community initiatives to meet their basic needs. Consequently, rebuilding national identity extends beyond reconstructing infrastructure or restoring the operational capacity of state institutions; it also requires restoring confidence in the state as the overarching framework

through which citizenship, rights, and obligations are guaranteed. (Lederach, 1997).

The peacebuilding literature emphasizes that reconciliation and long-term stability in post-conflict societies depend on rebuilding social relationships, strengthening mutual trust, addressing the consequences of war, and promoting justice in ways that contribute to sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997). Equally important is the state's ability to restore both its legitimacy and institutional effectiveness, since these remain decisive conditions for strengthening national belonging.

In the Sudanese context, the conflict revealed a widening gap between citizens and state institutions in many areas where security, public services, and protection either deteriorated substantially or collapsed altogether. Simultaneously, community initiatives—including the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and local response committees—emerged to provide food assistance, healthcare, and shelter for conflict-affected populations. This experience demonstrated both the resilience of society and its capacity to respond to crisis despite the declining institutional role of the state. It also raised fundamental questions regarding whether the post-war Sudanese state will be able to reclaim its position as the principal guarantor of protection, public services, citizenship, and rights, while rebuilding trust between state institutions and society.

6.4 Managing Diversity

The fourth challenge concerns the management of Sudan's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, which has long constituted one of the defining characteristics of Sudanese society. The war revived many longstanding debates concerning the relationship between national unity and social diversity, while simultaneously revealing the dangers of allowing cultural and ethnic differences to become instruments of political polarization and violent conflict.

The pre-war literature consistently emphasized that Sudan's diversity should be regarded as a source of national strength rather than a cause of political fragmentation. The events of the war, however, demonstrated that diversity may become a source of division when political conflict is interpreted through ethnic or regional lenses or when collective identities are mobilized for political and military purposes. These developments underscored the continuing importance of developing institutional and political arrangements capable of managing diversity within a framework based on equal citizenship and the rule of law. (Kymlicka, 2001); (Deng, 1995).

The escalation of ethnic polarization and hate speech during the conflict further illustrated the consequences of the absence of effective mechanisms for managing diversity. As documented by recent studies, public discourse in some contexts increasingly associated political and military positions with ethnic and regional identities, reinforcing mutual distrust among different social groups and complicating prospects for post-war reconciliation (Mohamed, 2025). These developments demonstrate that rebuilding national identity will require not only ending the armed conflict but also addressing the social and political consequences of polarization that accompanied the war.

Accordingly, the post-war management of diversity will require a comprehensive national approach that recognizes Sudan's cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralism while strengthening equal citizenship as the common basis of national belonging. Such an approach should promote inclusive political participation, equitable access to public institutions and national resources, and constitutional guarantees that protect diversity without allowing it to become a source of exclusion or political conflict. Only within such a framework can diversity become a foundation for national cohesion rather than a driver of renewed fragmentation.

Taken together, these four challenges demonstrate that rebuilding national identity in post-war Sudan extends far beyond reconstructing damaged infrastructure or restoring state institutions. It requires rebuilding collective memory, developing an inclusive national narrative, restoring trust between citizens and the state, and establishing effective mechanisms for managing diversity within a framework of equal citizenship. These challenges are closely interconnected, and progress in one area is likely to reinforce progress in the others. Conversely, failure to address any one of them may undermine the broader process of national reconstruction.

The analysis presented in this section further suggests that national identity should not be understood as a fixed outcome that automatically emerges once armed conflict has ended. Rather, it represents a long-term political and social process requiring sustained institutional reform, inclusive political dialogue, and broad societal participation. The future of national identity in Sudan will therefore depend not only on ending the war, but also on the ability of Sudanese political and social actors to transform the shared experiences of conflict into a foundation for reconciliation, inclusive citizenship, and a renewed national community. (Bartal, 2013); (Lederach, 1997).

7. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the April 2023 war on the reconfiguration of national identity in Sudan by analyzing transformations in national narratives, conceptions of the state, citizenship, and national belonging. The analysis demonstrates that Sudanese national identity has never been shaped by a single dominant narrative. Rather, it has evolved through the continuous interaction of multiple—and often competing—conceptions of the nation, the state, and citizenship. Consequently, Sudan's identity crisis did not originate with the outbreak of the 2023 war; instead, the conflict fundamentally transformed the political and social context within which that crisis is interpreted and debated.

The analysis further shows that the principal consequence of the war was not the emergence of an entirely new national identity. Rather, the conflict reordered the hierarchy of existing national narratives, reshaped their substantive priorities, and generated new ways of interpreting the relationship between the state, society, and citizenship. Narratives that had previously emphasized ideological, regional, or political differences increasingly incorporated concerns related to state survival, societal resilience, collective solidarity, and the preservation of national unity. At the same time, the war reinforced countervailing tendencies, including ethnic polarization, regional fragmentation, and competing interpretations of victimhood and

responsibility. These developments demonstrate that the transformation of national identity during the conflict cannot be understood as a linear movement toward either cohesion or fragmentation, but rather as a complex process in which integrative and divisive dynamics evolved simultaneously.

More broadly, the Sudanese case suggests that civil wars should not be understood solely as consequences of unresolved identity crises. They should also be viewed as transformative historical moments during which societies renegotiate the meanings of nationhood, citizenship, legitimacy, and collective belonging. The relationship between war and identity is therefore reciprocal rather than unidirectional: while identity may contribute to the outbreak of conflict, war itself actively reconstructs the narratives through which national identity is subsequently understood and expressed.

From this perspective, the principal theoretical contribution of the study lies in conceptualizing national identity not as a relatively stable explanatory variable, but as a dynamic outcome of wartime political and social transformations. By shifting analytical attention from identity as a cause of conflict to war as a process of identity reconfiguration, the study offers an alternative analytical framework for understanding post-conflict societies generally and Sudan in particular.

The findings also carry important policy implications. Rebuilding Sudan after the war cannot be confined to reconstructing physical infrastructure or restoring state institutions. Sustainable peace will depend equally on rebuilding the symbolic foundations of the national community through an inclusive national narrative capable of accommodating diverse historical experiences, managing the collective memory of the conflict, strengthening equal citizenship, and institutionalizing the peaceful management of diversity. Without such a process, post-war reconstruction risks reproducing the same competing narratives that have repeatedly contributed to Sudan's cycles of political instability.

Ultimately, the future of Sudanese national identity will depend not simply on the cessation of armed conflict but on the ability of the post-war political order to transform shared experiences of war into a shared vision of the state, citizenship, and the nation. Whether the current conflict becomes a turning point toward a more inclusive national identity or reinforces existing patterns of division will depend less on the war itself than on the political institutions, public narratives, and state-building strategies that emerge in its aftermath.

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