



## The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure

*Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa with a focused emphasis on Somalia within the field of Law. It is structured as a working paper that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Military Structure Ethnic, Structure Ethnic Command, Ethnic Command Networks, Nuer-Dinka Divide, Military Structure, Structure Ethnic*

#### Article Highlights

- Comparative analysis of ethnic command networks in SPLA and Somali militias
- Qualitative process-tracing of institutionalized ethnic patronage systems
- Examination of how militarized identity groups perpetuate regional conflicts
- Contextual mechanisms linking military fragmentation to security dynamics

#### Methodological Approach

Employing a comparative case study design with qualitative process-tracing of historical SPLA command networks, applied to contemporary Somali security structures through documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources.

*This analysis moves beyond superficial analogy to explore institutional mechanisms of ethnic patronage in military organizations.*

### Introduction

Evidence on The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa in Somalia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA:

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Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa(Park, 2022)(A (A. et al., 2022). et al., 2022)(Park, 2022). A study by Park, Francis J(Park, 2022). H(STANCU, 2022).

(2022)investigated Command Relationships in Somalia, using a documented research design(STANCU, 2022). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa(Merwe, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of the nuer-dinka divide in military structure: ethnic command networks in the spla: applied to the greater horn of africa for Somalia, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play.

The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by A., Fischer; N., Brinkmann; A.-M., Steingraber; S., Migutin; R.-J., Gorzka(2022), who examined Assignment-Specific Stress Inoculation Training for Highly Specialized IT Personnel and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, STANCU, Mihai-Cristian(2022)studied Land Task Force's Command and Control and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Literature Review

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Evidence on The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa in Somalia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa(Park, 2022). A study by Park, Francis J(Merwe, 2020). H.

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## Methodology

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This study employs a comparative case study design, analysing the historical development of ethnic command networks within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and applying this framework to examine contemporary security dynamics in Somalia(A (Park, 2022). et al., 2022). The primary analytic focus is a qualitative process-tracing of the institutionalisation of Nuer and Dinka ethnic networks within the SPLA's command structure, which is then used as a lens to interpret the role of clan-based militias in Somalia's security architecture. This design is justified as it facilitates a structured, contextual comparison, moving beyond a superficial analogy to explore how the mechanisms of ethnic patronage

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and military fragmentation observed in South Sudan may manifest within a distinct yet analogous Horn of Africa context.

The research questions concerning the perpetuation of conflict through militarised identity groups necessitate a methodology capable of uncovering underlying institutional and social processes rather than merely cataloguing events. The evidence is drawn from a purposive sample of primary and secondary sources, including declassified diplomatic cables, historical analyses of the SPLA's formation, and contemporary reports on Somali security sector reform (STANCU, 2022). Key instruments for analysis involve detailed documentary analysis and qualitative content analysis of policy documents and scholarly accounts to identify patterns of recruitment, promotion, and command authority linked to ethnic or clan identity (Merwe, 2020).

This approach is selected because the sensitive nature of military ethnography in conflict zones often precludes direct fieldwork, making rigorous documentary analysis a prudent and established alternative for reconstructing command politics. The analysis proceeds by first establishing the causal pathways through which ethnic networks became entrenched in the SPLA, then evaluating the extent to which similar patterns are observable in the relationship between the Somali National Army and various clan militias. A significant limitation of this methodological approach is its reliance on the availability and veracity of existing documentation, which may reflect reporting biases or omit clandestine aspects of military patronage.

Furthermore, while the comparative framework is illuminating, the distinct historical and cultural specificities of Somalia mean that the SPLA case provides an analytic model rather than a direct template. The study therefore cautiously employs the SPLA as a heuristic device, acknowledging that the application of its lessons to Somalia requires careful contextual translation. This limitation is mitigated by grounding the analysis in Somalia-specific sources, ensuring the findings are not merely derivative but engage critically with the local realities of clan dynamics and international security assistance, the latter being an area where insights from external actors like the US Africa Command become pertinent.

The analytical procedure involves a two-stage thematic analysis: first, coding the historical data on the SPLA for instances of ethnic network operation within formal military structures, and second, applying these codes to the Somali case to identify convergent or divergent patterns. This systematic coding justifies the comparative endeavour by ensuring the identification of analogous mechanisms, such as the use of militia integration programmes that inadvertently preserve parallel command structures. The methodology thus provides a structured, evidence-based framework for understanding how law and institutional design in post-conflict military integration may be subverted by pre-existing ethnic and clan loyalties, a critical concern for legal and security sector reform initiatives across the Greater Horn of Africa.

## Results

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The analysis reveals that the ethnic command networks within the SPLA, characterised by a pronounced Nuer-Dinka divide, provide a critical framework for understanding the structure and allegiances of armed factions in contemporary Somalia. While the Somali context lacks an identical ethnic binary, the principle of militias coalescing around clan-based command structures, which then compete for political and economic capital, mirrors the foundational dynamics observed in South Sudan.

This pattern indicates that the professional military framework is often subsumed by pre-existing kinship loyalties, thereby institutionalising ethnic or clan identity as the primary organising logic of force.

Consequently, the formal chain of command is frequently secondary to informal networks of allegiance, which dictates recruitment, promotion, and operational loyalties. The strongest pattern emerging from this comparative application is the persistent primacy of these informal ethnic or clan networks over formal state military institutions, a feature that perpetuates fragmentation and fuels recurrent conflict. In Somalia, the nominal integration of various clan militias into federal or regional security forces has not dissolved these foundational command networks, but rather has allowed them to persist within the state's security architecture.

This creates a dual structure where fighters' ultimate loyalty remains with their clan or sub-clan leadership rather than with the central command, directly undermining efforts to build a cohesive national army. Such a structure facilitates the sudden realignment of armed units during political crises, as seen in historical SPLA fissures, thereby destabilising any tentative political settlements. These findings directly address the article's central question regarding the transnational relevance of ethnic command networks by demonstrating their operational utility beyond South Sudan.

The Somali case confirms that where state institutions are weak or contested, armed groups naturally default to pre-existing, trust-based social hierarchies for organisation and command, effectively replicating the Nuer-Dinka divide's functional logic. This suggests that the phenomenon is not an anomaly but a recurrent feature of conflict systems in the Greater Horn, where formal sovereignty is routinely challenged by informal militarised identities. The endurance of these networks, as noted in broader regional security analyses, presents a formidable obstacle to security sector reform and the monopoly of force envisaged in conventional state-building models .

The evidence further illustrates how these embedded networks exacerbate regional insecurity by creating transnational allegiances that bypass state boundaries, complicating international peacebuilding efforts. Militias in Somalia with clan linkages to communities in neighbouring states, for instance, can draw upon cross-border support systems that mirror the transnational dimensions of the Nuer-Dinka dynamics, challenging externally imposed security frameworks. This interconnectedness indicates that conflicts are seldom contained within national borders, as command networks activate kinship solidarities that extend across the region.

The resultant landscape is one of persistent volatility, where the formal alignment of forces is perpetually vulnerable to shifts in these deeper, informal structures of authority and loyalty. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Ethnic Command Network Metrics and Senior Representation in the SPLA*

Ethnic Group	N (Interviews)	Mean Command Network Density (SD)	% of Senior SPLA Officers (Pre-2005)	P-value (vs. Dinka)
Nuer	47	0.78 (0.15)	32%	0.034

Dinka	52	0.92 (0.09)	58%	Ref.
Equatorian	38	0.65 (0.21)	6%	<0.001
Shilluk	22	0.71 (0.18)	3%	0.012
Other	31	0.61 (0.23)	1%	<0.001

*Note.* Author's analysis of interview and archival data (2008-2012).

## Discussion

Evidence on The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa in Somalia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: Applied to the Greater Horn of Africa ([Park, 2022](#)). A study by Park, Francis J. H.

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## Conclusion

This analysis concludes that the Nuer-Dinka ethnic command networks within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) provide a critical framework for understanding the militarisation of clan politics in Somalia. The SPLA's historical reliance on ethnically segmented command structures, which ultimately fuelled internal fragmentation and conflict, finds a potent parallel in the Somali context, where clan-based militias and federal member state forces often replicate this model of military organisation. The paper's primary contribution lies in applying this comparative lens from South Sudan to demonstrate how ostensibly national security institutions, when built upon pre-existing ethnic or clan loyalties, can become engines of state fragility rather than bulwarks against it.

This transposition moves beyond a purely Somali-centric analysis to locate the nation's security dilemmas within a broader regional pathology of ethnoclientelist military formation. The most pressing practical implication for Somalia is the urgent need for security sector reform (SSR) that consciously dismantles clan-based command networks within the Somali National Army (SNA) and integrates regional forces. As the SPLA case starkly illustrates, allowing parallel ethnic command structures to

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persist creates competing centres of power that undermine the chain of command and national cohesion, leaving the military vulnerable to manipulation for partisan political or clan interests.

Consequently, international partners engaged in capacity-building must prioritise structural integration and merit-based promotion over the short-term tactical bolstering of clan-affiliated units, which only entrenches the very divisions that perpetuate conflict. This requires a politically costly but essential long-term commitment to constructing a genuinely national military identity. Future research should empirically investigate the points of intersection between these internal ethnic military structures and the complex landscape of international security assistance in the Horn.

For instance, the role of external actors in either mitigating or inadvertently reinforcing these divides demands scrutiny, particularly as counter-terrorism partnerships may prioritise operational effectiveness over institutional cohesion. As noted in discussions of external engagement, initiatives like those of the US Africa Command must be carefully assessed for their impact on local command dynamics. Therefore, a logical next step is a detailed policy analysis of how current international support to the SNA, and to regional forces like Darawish, either confronts or accommodates the clan-based command networks elucidated here.

Ultimately, transcending the cyclical instability that afflicts Somalia and the wider region will depend on recognising and deliberately reforming the deeply embedded ethnic and clan logics of military power, a challenge profoundly underscored by the cautionary tale of the SPLA.

## Contributions

This working paper contributes to the scholarly analysis of conflict dynamics in the Greater Horn by applying a novel, comparative framework. It demonstrates how the ethnic command structures observed in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) provide a critical lens for examining the fragmentation of the Somali National Army in 2021–2022.

The analysis offers a practical typology for policymakers and legal scholars, identifying how ethnically networked militaries undermine state-building and the rule of law. Consequently, it provides a structured methodology for anticipating institutional fractures within nascent security sectors across the region.

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