POLARISATION IN SUDAN
Findings from a Perception Survey

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Acknowledgements

POLARISATION has become a defining feature of Sudan's political and social landscape, intensifying dramatically since the outbreak of a brutal war in April 2023. While rooted in a mix of colonial legacies and decades of exclusionary governance, identity-based politics, and unaddressed grievances, polarisation now permeates daily life in Sudan, directly affecting the scope for inter-group trust, survival, and peace.

This report presents the findings of a perception survey conducted on the drivers, impacts, and possible solutions to polarisation in Sudan, led by IFIT's Sudan Brain Trust in collaboration with Northeastern University's Civic A.I. Lab. The survey reflects the perspectives of 68 influential Sudanese respondents, primarily academics, civil society actors, and professionals, based both inside the country and abroad. The results provide a snapshot of how informed Sudanese voices understand the drivers, impacts, and possible solutions to polarisation at a critical moment in the country's trajectory.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Near-consensus on the prevalence and intensity of polarisation, with 94% of respondents agreeing that Sudan is deeply polarised.

- Identification of seven interconnected dimensions of polarisation: tribal, ethnic, religious, political, socioeconomic, ideological, and regional.

- Detection of long-standing marginalisation, elite manipulation of identity, and the collapse of state institutions as primary drivers of polarisation.

- Recognition of social media as the most visible space for division, amplifying hate speech, misinformation, and echo chambers.

- Understanding of polarisation as a dynamic that erodes trust, limits civic participation, and deepens exclusion in daily life.

- Emphasis on dialogue, awareness, and community engagement as solutions, with civil society and youth seen as the most credible actors to move efforts forward.

The insights from this survey will inform planned new phases of work. Phase Two will convene focus group discussions with diverse communities in Sudan to validate and contextualise the initial findings. Phase Three will integrate key findings into a Sudan-specific depolarisation toolkit to support locally led efforts to reduce polarisation and foster cohesion in the country.

Introduction and Overview

Polarisation has become a defining feature of Sudan's political and social landscape. Although rooted in decades of exclusionary rule, identity-based governance, and unaddressed grievances, it has been dramatically intensified by the war that broke out in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). What were once latent divisions have hardened into entrenched fault lines that shape daily life.

In Sudan, polarisation can be seen as a "hyperproblem": an overarching force that complicates the resolution of all other problems. Rather than one discrete issue among many, it amplifies institutional mistrust, obstructs peace-building efforts, and sustains the logic of fragmentation.

Sudan's post-independence history reflects this. Successive regimes maintained power by cultivating narrow coalitions, exploiting ethnic and ideological divides, and suppressing dissent. While moments of national transformation, including the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the 2019 revolution, opened pathways for reform, they faltered in part because underlying structures of exclusion and mistrust have remained unresolved; ideological alliances, particularly shaped by the legacy of Islamist rule, still determine access to education, employment, and justice; and economic exclusion still follows largely geographic and identity lines. Together, these factors reinforce one another, producing a polarisation landscape that is both systemic and self-reinforcing.

To provide clarity on this fraught context, the survey adopted IFIT's working definition of polarisation, which was shared with all respondents:

> *Polarisation is "a prominent division or conflict that forms between major groups in a society or political system and that is marked by the clustering and radicalisation of views and beliefs at two distant and antagonistic poles".*

In the case of Sudan, polarisation is no longer abstract; it now defines daily choices about security, trust, and survival as the present war has magnified existing divisions and created one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, to over 12 million displaced and more than 30 million in need of aid.[1]

Against this backdrop, IFIT's Sudan Brain Trust, comprising 13 Sudanese recognised civic and peacebuilding leaders from diverse professional, regional, and ideological backgrounds, identified the need to understand polarisation better as it is perceived to be a growing obstacle to peace. In collaboration

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1. *The IRC*. Crisis in Sudan: What is happening and how to help, November 2025. https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-sudan-what-happening-and-how-help

with Northeastern University's Civic A.I. Lab, the Brain Trust designed and implemented a hybrid AI-backed, human-centred survey to examine the nature and drivers of polarisation across Sudan. The findings, outlined below, are part of a multi-phase process and thus will undergo further validation in the period ahead.

Methodology

The survey – conducted in Arabic – used a mixed-methods design, combining closed-ended Likert-scale questions with open-ended prompts (see the full questionnaire in Annex 1). This generated both quantitative data on levels of agreement and qualitative insights into causes, impacts, and potential solutions. Generative AI tools assisted in drafting questions and clustering responses, while members of IFIT's Sudan Brain Trust reviewed questions to ensure cultural, historical, and linguistic salience and accuracy.

A total of 68 Sudanese respondents participated, including 32 men and 36 women, ranging in age from 26 to 74, with most between 40 and 70. Respondents were predominantly urban-based and highly educated. More than one third were academics (professors, lecturers, or researchers), while others came from civil society, law, medicine, engineering, diplomacy, media, and other professional sectors, as well as students and retired officials. We reached them through direct invitations extended via the diverse national and local networks of our Sudan Brain Trust members. In some cases, initial participants referred us to additional respondents.

As an initial diagnostic, there are recognised limitations of the survey including:

- Conflict constraints: Displacement, insecurity, and periodic internet blackouts restricted participation, particularly from Northern, Eastern, and Gezira states.
- Context limitations: Conducted during an active phase of war, the survey may reflect more emotional responses or self-censorship on politically sensitive issues.
- AI blind spots: While AI was useful for clustering responses, it struggled with coded language and some nuances in Arabic, requiring continuous human contextualisation.
- Sampling bias: Reliance on voluntary sampling skewed the sample toward educated, urban, and civically active respondents, resulting in fewer rural or marginalised group participants.

Key Findings

Perceptions of Polarisation

There was near consensus among respondents that Sudan is deeply polarised: 94% agreed, with 46 strongly agreeing, 19 generally agreeing, and only three expressing neutrality. Many qualitative responses linked polarisation to institutional collapse and pervasive mistrust: *"Political entities have been tested and proven unsuccessful."* Others stressed the absence of civic foundations: *"Our society does not have well-defined civil institutions."* Despite the bleakness of most diagnoses, several respondents pointed to opportunities for collective action: *"If all these entities work together to provide opportunities for dialogue and cooperation, polarisation could be reduced."*

■ **Perceptions of Polarisation in Sudan**

Neutral
4.4%

Agree
27.9%

Strongly agree
67.6%
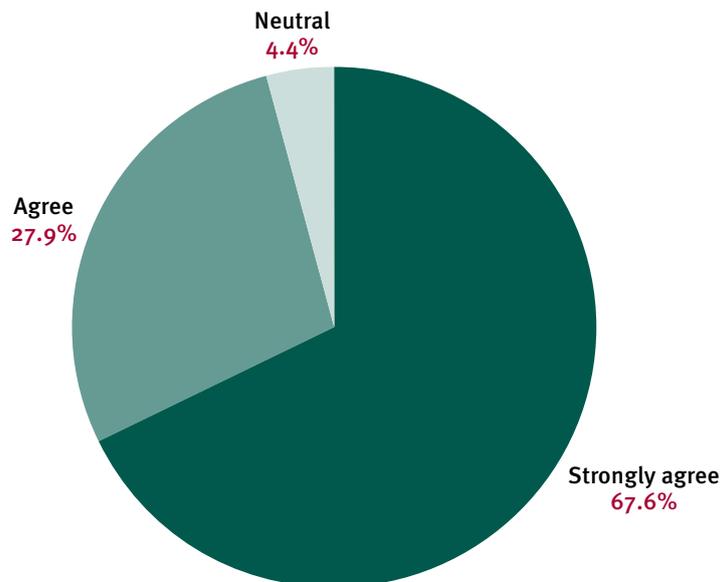
Types and Experiences of Polarisation

Respondents identified multiple, overlapping forms of polarisation, underlining how prominent divisions in Sudan cut across identity, political, and regional lines simultaneously. Political polarisation was most frequently cited, with 48 mentions (71% of respondents), followed by ethnic (62%) and tribal (60%). Ideological (25%) and regional (25%) polarisation were also highlighted, while economic polarisation was somewhat less common (19%). Religious polarisation was mentioned least frequently among the main categories (18%). A small number of respondents also pointed to social and cultural divides.

These results confirm that polarisation in Sudan is not confined to one domain. Rather, its dimensions overlap and reinforce one another, producing a web of mutually reinforcing divides. As one participant explained: *"The warring parties are currently fighting through tribal, ethnic, and political polarisation… turning the conflict into a full-scale war involving multiple parties."*

■ **Types of Polarisation**
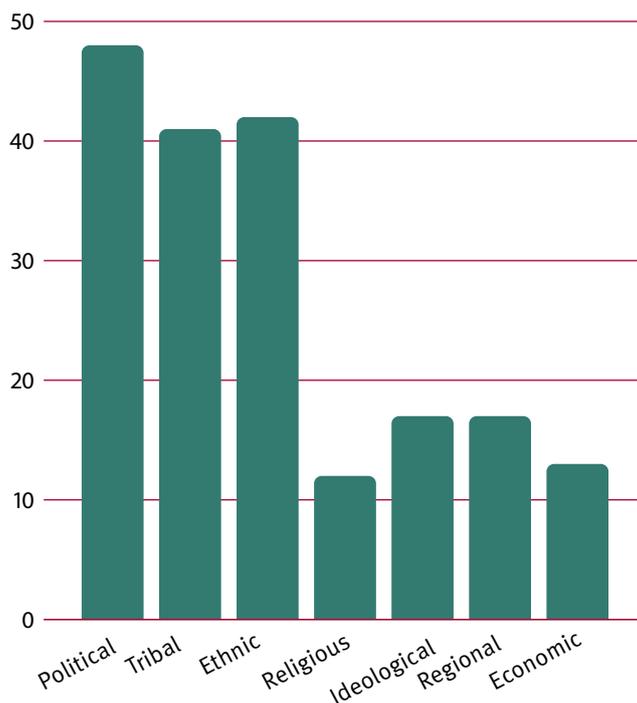
Drivers and Manifestations of Polarisation

Three recurrent drivers stood out: longstanding regional inequalities, elite manipulation of identity, and the collapse of state institutions. Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Eastern Sudan were repeatedly cited as regions marked by systematic neglect. Respondents described how successive governments and political elites have instrumentalised tribal and religious identities to consolidate power, entrenching exclusion and mistrust.

On another note, polarisation was seen as most visible in digital spaces, where social media was described as a primary amplifier of hostility and disinformation. One respondent remarked: *"Social media has added a new dimension by spreading divisive rhetoric, deepening tribal conflicts, and amplifying hate speech."* Schools, universities, and workplaces were also mentioned as settings where divisions manifest, while religious gatherings appeared less prominent in comparison.

■ **Where Polarisation is Most Visible**
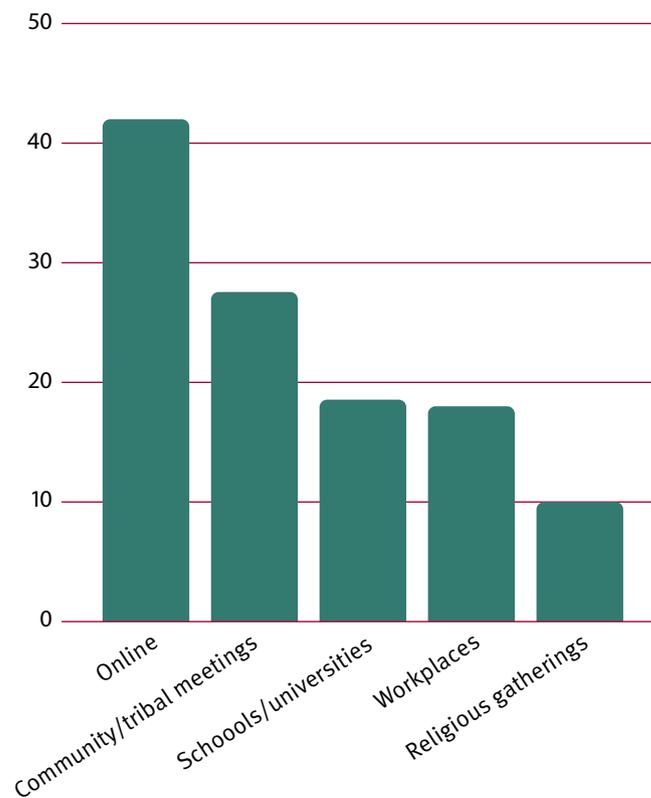
Impacts on Daily Life

Polarisation was described as corrosive to intergroup trust, civic partici-
pation, and access to opportunity. Respondents highlighted how identity
increasingly determines access to resources, jobs, and protection. Sever-
al noted that mistrust now permeates even routine social and professional
interactions.

The War's Role in Intensifying Polarisation

Predictably and consistently, respondents characterised the war as an accel-
erant of division: *"The war added fuel to a fire that was already burning."*
Differences and fault lines that were once latent have been militarised and
embedded in survival strategies, making polarisation not just a layer of addi-
tional political challenge but also an additional barrier to impartial humani-
tarian aid and national reconciliation.

Role of External Actors

About 40% of survey respondents described international and regional actors
(including governments and organisations) as exacerbating polarisation,
whether by supporting warring factions, advancing external agendas, or
exploiting Sudan's fragmentation. As one respondent put it, *"Neighbouring
countries… work to keep Sudan politically and economically weak to maintain*

control over its decisions." Around 12% emphasised positive contributions such as humanitarian aid, mediation, and support for civil society, while a similar share pointed to a dual role, acknowledging both mitigating and aggravating effects. However, more than one-third (36%) considered external actors irrelevant, absent, or ineffective in addressing Sudan's divisions. Reflecting this frustration, one respondent remarked that *"they are passive observers with their own agendas."*

Prospects for Depolarisation

Civil society organisations were most frequently identified as credible actors to reduce polarisation (53%), followed by youth groups (46%) and community leaders (32%), though often with caveats about inclusivity and capacity. Resistance committees were also recognised (28%), while political and religious leaders ranked lower (26% and 25% mentions respectively), reflecting concerns about their credibility and past roles in reinforcing divisions. A handful of respondents also pointed to other actors, including academics, women's groups, African regional organisations, and professional associations, highlighted the breadth of civic resources that could be mobilised for dialogue and trust-building. Meanwhile, international organisations were cited least often (19%), underscoring a perception that depolarisation must be led from within Sudan.

Beyond actors, many respondents emphasised Sudan's cultural traditions as an underutilised resource for depolarisation. Practices such as *nafeer* (communal mobilisation), revolutionary solidarity, and values of justice and tolerance were cited as potential assets for rebuilding unity. As one respondent observed, *"Diversity, acceptance of others, peace, and fraternity"* should be reclaimed as embedded foundations for coexistence.

■ **Actors Identified to Lead Depolarisation Efforts**
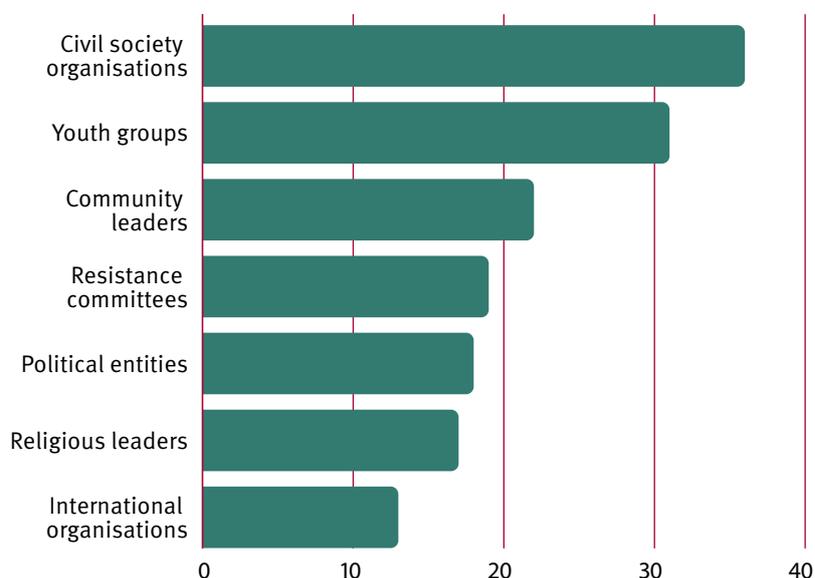
Solution Pathways

Respondents consistently emphasised dialogue as the primary pathway for depolarisation, with repeated calls for open discussions, community meetings, and the direct addressing of grievances. Alongside dialogue, they highlighted the value of awareness campaigns, peace education, and reforms to state practices that entrench division.

Civil society organisations and youth networks were regarded as the most credible conveners of such efforts, while religious and traditional leaders were seen as having supportive but secondary roles. International organisations were rarely viewed as central actors in this process; their role was framed more in terms of resourcing rather than leadership. Importantly, several respondents underscored the role of individual responsibility, noting that *"the individual is the foundation of society."*

Preliminary Recommendations

To operationalise the solutions identified by respondents, several entry points stand out:

- **Embed depolarisation locally.** Integrate depolarisation into community-level peacebuilding and governance processes, combining traditional reconciliation practices such as *judiyya* (customary mediation system) and *nafeer* with more inclusive dialogue frameworks.

- **Support grassroots trust-building.** Prioritise initiatives that foster cooperation across divides and create "pockets of peace," even in areas directly affected by conflict.

- **Empower CSOs and youth.** Identify resources and platforms for civil society organisations and youth networks to lead locally owned dialogue, mediation, and awareness initiatives.

- **Leverage moral authority.** Encourage religious and traditional leaders to use their legitimacy to reinforce reconciliation practices, counter divisive narratives, and lend credibility to grassroots initiatives.

- **Monitor narratives.** Establish community-based systems to track polarising narratives, online hate speech, and emerging risks in real time, making use of AI tools in an ethical and context-sensitive manner.[2]

2. While AI tools can assist in monitoring online narratives, IFIT's research cautions that none is ready to provide conflict resolution advice. See: Institute for Integrated Transitions. *AI on the Frontline: Evaluating Large Language Models in Real-world Conflict Resolution*, 30 July 2025 https://ifit-transitions.org/publications/ai-on-the-frontline-evaluating-large-language-models-in-real-world-conflict-resolution/

Conclusion

The results of this survey – the first step in a three-phase process – signal what many Sudanese already experience in their daily lives: polarisation is pervasive, multidimensional, and mutually reinforcing. It cuts across tribal, ethnic, political, regional, socioeconomic, religious, and ideological lines, each intensifying the others. The war has magnified these dynamics, embedding them in survival strategies and everyday interactions.

Yet, alongside this sobering picture, survey respondents pointed to cultural assets, traditions of solidarity, and the role of grassroots actors as sources of resilience and potential entry points for depolarisation. These perspectives highlight that while polarisation may seem entrenched, it is neither inevitable nor irreversible. At the same time, polarisation cannot be treated as a peripheral problem. Left alone, it can complicate solutions to every other challenge Sudan faces, from humanitarian relief to governance reform.

As such, the focus group discussions envisaged for the next phase of this project will go one level deeper in the problem analysis, bringing in underrepresented voices, interrogating the nuances behind the preliminary findings, and generating a more grounded evidence base. Ultimately, the process will culminate in the co-creation of a practical depolarisation toolkit, designed not as an external prescription, but as a locally anchored resource to help communities bridge divides.

Annex 1 – Full Questionnaire

Instructions:
This survey aims to understand the current state of polarisation in Sudan to create a work-plan focused on depolarisation efforts. Please:

- Answer based on your current hometown if you are inside Sudan.
- Answer based on your hometown in Sudan if you are outside the country and indicate when you left Sudan.

Section 1: Background Information

Name: [Open field]

Contact Details: Email or WhatsApp number: [Open field]

Age: [Open field]

Gender:
- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Occupation: [Open field]

Where are you currently located?
- ○ If inside Sudan, specify your location (e.g., city or town): [Open field]
- ○ If outside Sudan, specify your current location (e.g., country and city): [Open field]

If you are currently outside Sudan, when did you leave the country?
- ○ Month/Year: [Open field]

Section 2: Understanding Polarisation

1. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement: *"There is significant polarisation in Sudan today"*?

   Polarisation means a deep and antagonistic division between major groups in society that is marked by the radicalisation of views within and between groups.
   - ○ Strongly agree
   - ○ Agree
   - ○ Neutral
   - ○ Disagree
   - ○ Strongly disagree

   Please explain your answer: [Open field]

2. What type(s) of polarisation do you notice in your community or hometown? (You can choose more than one.)
   - a. Political
   - b. Tribal
   - c. Ethnic
   - d. Religious
   - e. Ideological
   - f. Regional
   - g. Economic
   - h. Other (please specify): [Open field]

   Please explain your choices: [Open field]

3. How much have you personally experienced the following types of polarisation in your community? (Use the scale below for each option.)
   Likert Scale: Not at all (1); Slightly (2); Moderately (3); Significantly (4); Extremely (5)

   Types of Polarisation:
   a. Political
   b. Tribal
   c. Ethnic
   d. Religious
   e. Ideological
   f. Regional
   g. Economic

4. Have you personally experienced any form of hate crime or violence in your community?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

5. If yes, please provide more detail: [Open field]

Section 3: Causes and Manifestations of Polarisation

6. What do you believe are the main causes of polarisation in your community or hometown? [Open field]

7. Where do you think polarisation is most visible? (You can choose more than one.)
   a. Online
   b. Schools or universities
   c. Community or tribal meetings
   d. Religious gatherings (e.g., mosques or churches)
   e. Workplaces
   f. Other (please specify): [Open field]
   Please explain your choices: [Open field]

8. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement: *"Social media has made polarisation worse in Sudan"*?
   ○ Strongly agree
   ○ Agree
   ○ Neutral
   ○ Disagree
   ○ Strongly disagree
   Please explain your answer: [Open field]

Section 4: Impact of Polarisation and Conflict

9. How has polarisation impacted daily life in your community or hometown? [Open field]

10. Since the start of the war in April 2023, what changes—such as in attitudes, perceptions, or positions—have you noticed in your community or hometown? [Open field]

11. How do you believe the ongoing war in Sudan is affecting polarisation? [Open field]

12. What roles have external actors (e.g., international organisations or neighbouring countries) played in increasing or decreasing polarisation in Sudan? [Open field]

Section 5: Culture and Polarisation

13. How do tribal and ethnic differences influence daily interactions and relationships in your community? [Open field]

14. Do you believe Sudan's cultural diversity is more of a strength or a source of division? Why? [Open field]

15. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Promoting intercultural understanding and increasing intergroup dialogue can help reduce polarisation"?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Please explain your answer: [Open field]

Section 6: Regional Factors and Context

16. What key challenges (internal and external) do you believe are dividing or uniting communities in your region today? [Open field]

17. How do regional disparities (e.g., between Khartoum and peripheral regions like Darfur, Blue Nile, or South Kordofan) contribute to polarisation? [Open field]

18. Do you feel that certain areas or groups in Sudan are more marginalised than others? If so, which ones and why? [Open field]

Section 7: Solutions to Polarisation

19. What steps do you think could help reduce polarisation in Sudan generally or in your region or community specifically? [Open field]

20. Who do you believe should take the lead in reducing polarisation in your region or community? (You can choose more than one.)

- a. Political entities
- b. Community leaders
- c. Religious leaders
- d. Civil society organisations
- e. Resistance committees
- f. Youth groups
- g. International organisations
- h. Other (please specify): [Open field]

Please explain your choices: [Open field]

21. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement: *"Individuals have a responsibility to address polarisation in their own communities"*?

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

Please explain your answer: [Open field]

22. What actions do you think non-polarised and non-radicalised actors in your community can take to reduce polarisation? [Open field]

23. What are the three most positive features of Sudanese culture, politics and/or history that could help to reduce polarisation in Sudan?

I F I T

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