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BRIEFING NOTE

# Urbicide in Khartoum

## An Analysis of the Al-Amarat and Mayo Neighbourhoods, 2023-24

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*Nostalgic for Sudan and its scene of the town (Credit: Galal Yousif)*

### Key messages

- The war in Sudan is reshaping Khartoum's urban landscape through both direct and indirect violence. This includes not only the systematic destruction of the built environment but also looting, the forceful seizure of property and restrictions on mobility, forms of urbicide that fragment the city and undermine urban life.
- Across Khartoum, both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have targeted civilian infrastructure and markets, causing heavy casualties and damage.
- Urbicide by both SAF and the RSF extends beyond physical destruction to include the denial of services, occupation of property and restrictions on mobility. The RSF has employed a strategy of spatial control, imposing roadblocks and checkpoints, that isolate entire neighbourhoods.
- The war is producing divergent outcomes. The urbicidal tactics have driven displacement in some areas while accelerating conflict-induced urbanisation in others. Elite areas like Al-Amarat have been emptied and militarised, while working-class area Mayo has absorbed new populations. Military strategies are profoundly reshaping patterns of settlement, mobility and access to services.



## Overview

The conflict in Sudan, though devastating rural areas, has taken on a distinctly urban focus. The fighting has often been concentrated in urban centres such as Khartoum, Nyala, El Geneina, and El Fasher.<sup>1</sup> Violence between SAF and the RSF first erupted in April 2023, targeting infrastructure, including airports in Merowe and then Khartoum. Strategic roads, bridges, and basic urban services, such as electrical substations and water networks, have all been intentionally destroyed in the ongoing conflict. But the war has not only centred around critical infrastructural complexes.

Markets, schools, hospitals, offices, and residential buildings have also been targeted as part of both sides' military strategy to make urban life unbearable for the 'other', crossing ethnic, class, and political lines. Urban contexts have been actively attacked, rather than just providing the backdrop.<sup>2</sup> The altered physical and social landscapes of the city due to the war are important to understanding the conflict itself. Furthermore, any effort towards the resolution of the conflict, including the much-needed humanitarian and development interventions, as well as 'post-conflict' peacebuilding and reconstruction, must consider the new urban geographies the war has produced.

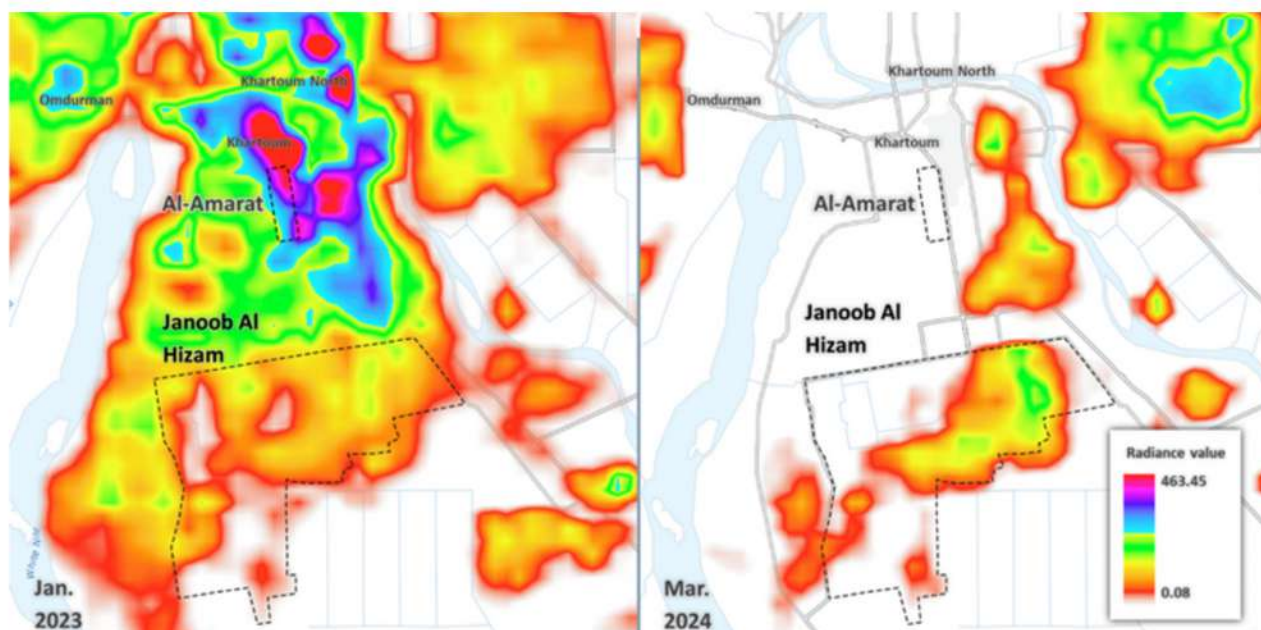
This Briefing Note uses the concept of urbicide to analyse the complex and multifaceted ways in which conflict and urban contexts have become intertwined in Sudan. The research and analysis for this Note was conducted in 2024 and before SAF expelled the RSF from Khartoum in March 2025. Urbicide has traditionally been understood as 'the deliberate destruction of the built environment.'<sup>3</sup> Recent work on urbicide has emphasised that analysing the intersection of conflict and urban contexts should consider not only incidents of destruction, but also the planning, construction, and control of infrastructural connections in cities.<sup>4</sup> This update examines the deployment of urbicidal tactics—including sieges, forced displacement, property destruction, looting, and mobility restrictions thro-

ugh checkpoints—in two neighbourhoods in Khartoum: the elite neighbourhood of Al-Amarat and the working-class area of Mayo.

Urbicide is a global phenomenon, evident in recent years in locations such as Palestine<sup>5</sup>; Syria<sup>6</sup>; and Ukraine<sup>7</sup>. Notably, urbicide manifests differently depending on the specific urban context. Khartoum's sprawling urban morphology of low-rise buildings, combined with the military technologies deployed, has led to a slower and less immediately visible form of urban violence compared to the destruction seen in Palestine or Syria. Neither SAF nor the RSF possess bombs of the magnitude that Israel has used in Gaza, for instance. This slower, less visible (at least from the air) urban violence includes sieges of certain neighbourhoods, restricted mobility, targeted attacks on essential services, and widespread looting. The RSF, for instance, has used roadblocks and surveillance to terrorize residents in certain neighbourhoods. Civilians' everyday movements are marked by the need to navigate a complex and constantly shifting series of barricades and checkpoints. This type of urbicide, also referred to by Stephen Graham as the 'denial of the city', restricts movement, fragments space, and isolates communities.<sup>8</sup>

While the specific targets and means, of acts of urbicide differ across contexts, the political stakes are often the same. Urbicide, as Martin Coward<sup>9</sup> has argued, is about the eradication of the 'other'. The logic and political stake of urbicide is the destruction of urban space (via the targeting of, for instance, markets, hospitals, schools, and shared public spaces) to achieve an enclave politics—the establishment of an area that is supposedly devoid of any oppositional groups. In Khartoum, both SAF and the RSF have undertaken instances of urbicide to attempt to control certain areas and eradicate any presence of the 'other'. The 'other' in Sudan is complex and intersectional. It can be associated with military and political affiliations and/or tied to racial and ethnic categories, such as Arab and African; class also frequently cuts through these identities.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1.** Comparison of night-time lighting in Al-Amarat and Janoob Al Hizam (including Mayo) before and after the war (January 2023 and March 2024)



Source: NASA (n.d.)

Map sources: Esri, OpenStreetMap contributors, TomTom, Garmin, Foursquare, NASA/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS), METI/NASA, USGS

There are, of course, exceptions, such as the urban violence of August 2005 that followed news of the death of John Garang, the long-time leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). This riot marks an important moment in the history of Khartoum but pales in comparison to the destruction the city has experienced since the current conflict erupted in April 2023.

This analysis of urbicide focuses on two contrasting neighbourhoods in Khartoum: Al-Amarat and Mayo. Al-Amarat, adjacent to Khartoum International Airport, was known as a middle- to upper-class area housing the international community and Sudanese elites. At the outbreak of war in April, it became one of the conflict's epicentres. Over time, Al-Amarat was isolated from the city as clashes between the RSF and SAF shifted elsewhere. In contrast, Mayo, located in Janoob Al Hizam ('south of the belt'), is an informal settlement formed in the 1970s and 1980s by those fleeing conflict in western and southern Sudan.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Al-Amarat, Mayo has not been depopulated or isolated and, despite high

levels of urban conflict, remains a bustling urban area. The war's contrasting impact on urban activities in these neighbourhoods is illustrated using night-time lights since the conflict began, illustrated in **Figure 1**.

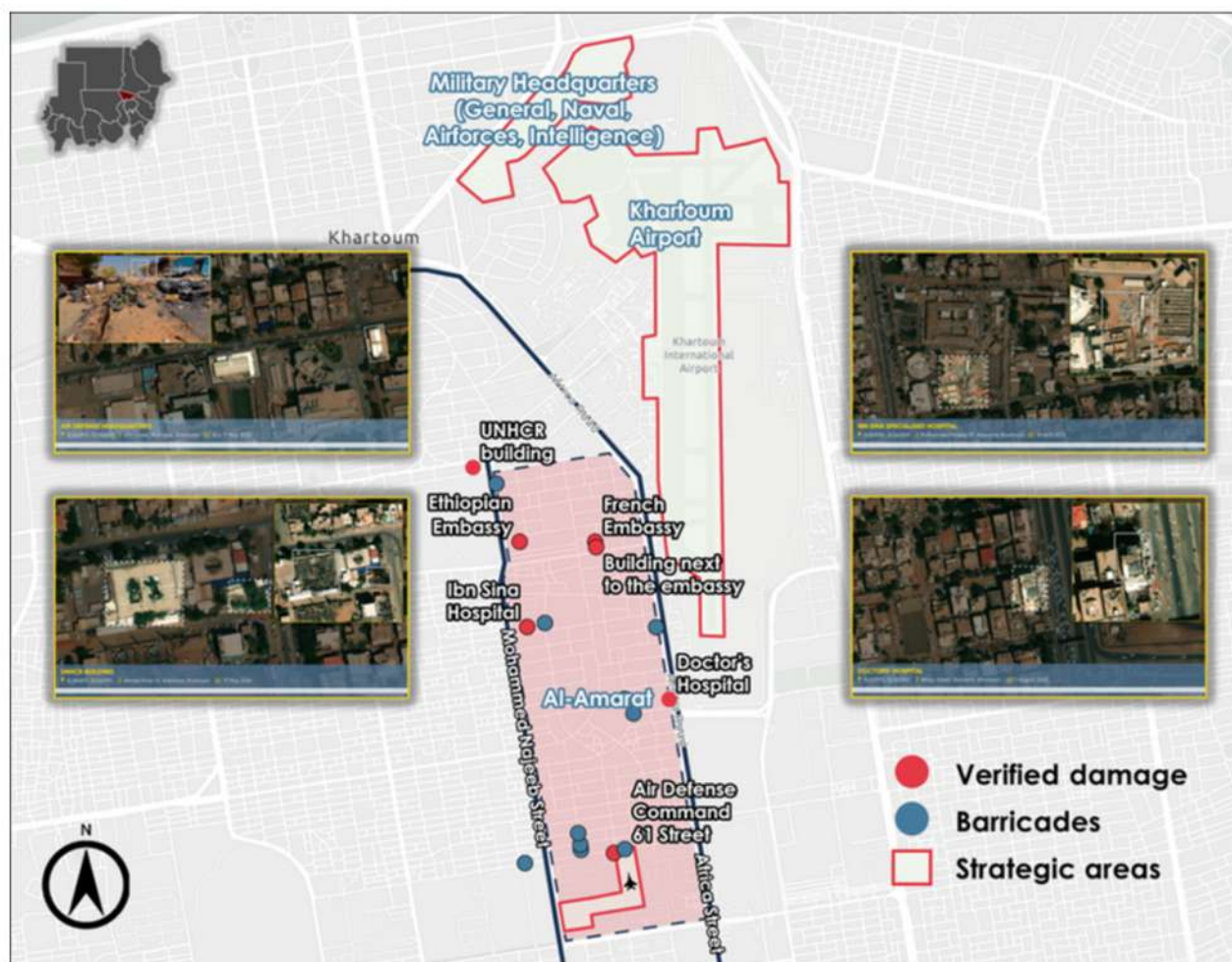
### Al-Amarat

Al-Amarat is one of Sudan's most elite neighbourhoods and was at the epicentre of the conflict between SAF and the RSF, which caused significant damage to key buildings and infrastructure. By 17 May 2023, the RSF had gained control of Al-Amarat. Although satellite imagery makes assessing street-level damage or looting difficult, interviews and social media confirm extensive looting and the displacement of most of the original inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> Looting, displacement, and restrictions on movement are defining features of the urbicide that has been deployed in Khartoum.

**Figure 2** highlights the deliberate destruction of buildings, including Ibn Sina Hospital, SAF's Air Defence headquarters, and Doctors' Hospital.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 2.** Al-Amarat neighbourhood with key sites, notable instances of damage, and evidence of barricades established from April 2023 to March 2024



Sources: Al-Arabi (2023b); Abdalrhman (2023); Al Hadath (2023); Alsyaq (2023); BBC News (2023a); Hasbu (2024); Planet Labs (2024); RSF (2023); Sayed (2023); Sky News Arabia (2023c; 2023d); Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (2023)

Map sources: Esri, © OpenStreetMap contributors, TomTom, Garmin, Foursquare, METI/NASA, USGS

Despite the RSF's announcement in May 2023 that it has taken control, fierce fighting between SAF and the RSF continued.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of satellite imagery shows that on 30 May 2023, the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and a neighbouring building were destroyed. At the time of writing in October 2024, a SAF airstrike was recorded to have damaged a building and the nearby French embassy on 15th Street.

Former residents, many of whom are now out of the country, have reported being unable to find out information about the condition or occu-

pancy status of their homes.<sup>15</sup> A June 2024 visitor described the areas as depopulated, with most homes looted and lacking water and electricity.<sup>16</sup> Al-Amarat has, as one interviewee noted, become a "no man's land."<sup>17</sup> Khartoum has not been reduced to rubble, but widespread looting and damage have devastated key areas.

Mobility restrictions via checkpoints and roadblocks are central to state formation and remains a marker of political settlements.<sup>18</sup> The RSF has locked down Al-Amarat not through static checkpoints, but by placing objects in the



streets, such as poles or sandbags, and/or blocking streets with cars. Social media reports intense restrictions on movement.<sup>19</sup> The RSF's control of mobility allows it to assert its authority, as well as its de facto ability to dictate order and sovereignty in key parts of the city. During the Jeddah talks in November 2023, the RSF reportedly agreed to withdraw from private properties, but refused to 'dismantle' the checkpoints.<sup>20</sup> In this context, urbicide is carried out by restricting mobility and denying access to the city, rather than through direct acts of destruction.

The RSF has framed the capturing of prestigious neighbourhoods, such as Al-Amarat and Khartoum II, which borders the north side of Al-Amarat, as a symbolic act of revenge of a marginalised periphery against Sudan's political and economic centre (see [Figure 3](#)).<sup>21</sup> Home to Sudan's diplomatic and expatriate community, many political and economic elites had family homes in this area. A key practice in urbicide is the erasure of symbolic spaces. While the centre of Khartoum is now an empty shell, new centres of urban activity have emerged in other neighbourhoods, such as that of Mayo, where there is evidence of increased urbanisation (as discussed below). The RSF is reshaping Khartoum's geography, creating new settlement patterns and socio-economic nodes.

## Mayo

In stark contrast to the influential area of Al-Amarat, Mayo is a working-class neighbourhood with complex, ambiguous boundaries. Officially called Nasr District<sup>22</sup>, it lies in Janoob Al Hizam (south of the belt), which is made up of several administrative units that include Nasr city (also known as Mayo), Alazahri, Hai Alnahda and the camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), Mandela.<sup>23</sup> The 'belt' refers to the area originally planned as a green belt for Khartoum in the late 1950s but intensely urbanised from the 1970s onwards.<sup>24</sup> Janoob Al Hizam emerged from the bottom up rather than as a defined municipality created by the state. The Janoob Al Hizam Resistance Committee played an important role

**Figure 3.** Notable incidents of physical destruction in Al-Amarat since the outbreak of war in April 2023 until April 2024



Note: Data was verified by satellite imagery.

Sources: Abdalrhman (2023); Al Arabiya (2023); Al-Amarat RC (2023); Al hadath Al sudani (2023); CIR (2023b); Sky News Arabia (2023c); Sudan Tribune (2023c)

in the revolution and in mobilising residents in this area to resist state-led eviction programmes.<sup>25</sup>

Mayo is primarily inhabited by long-term IDPs and the urban poor. War has driven urbanisation throughout Sudan and Mayo exemplifies this. During the 1980s and 1990s, millions of IDPs fleeing conflict in the south of Sudan, Darfur, and Kordofan sought refuge in Khartoum's peripheries

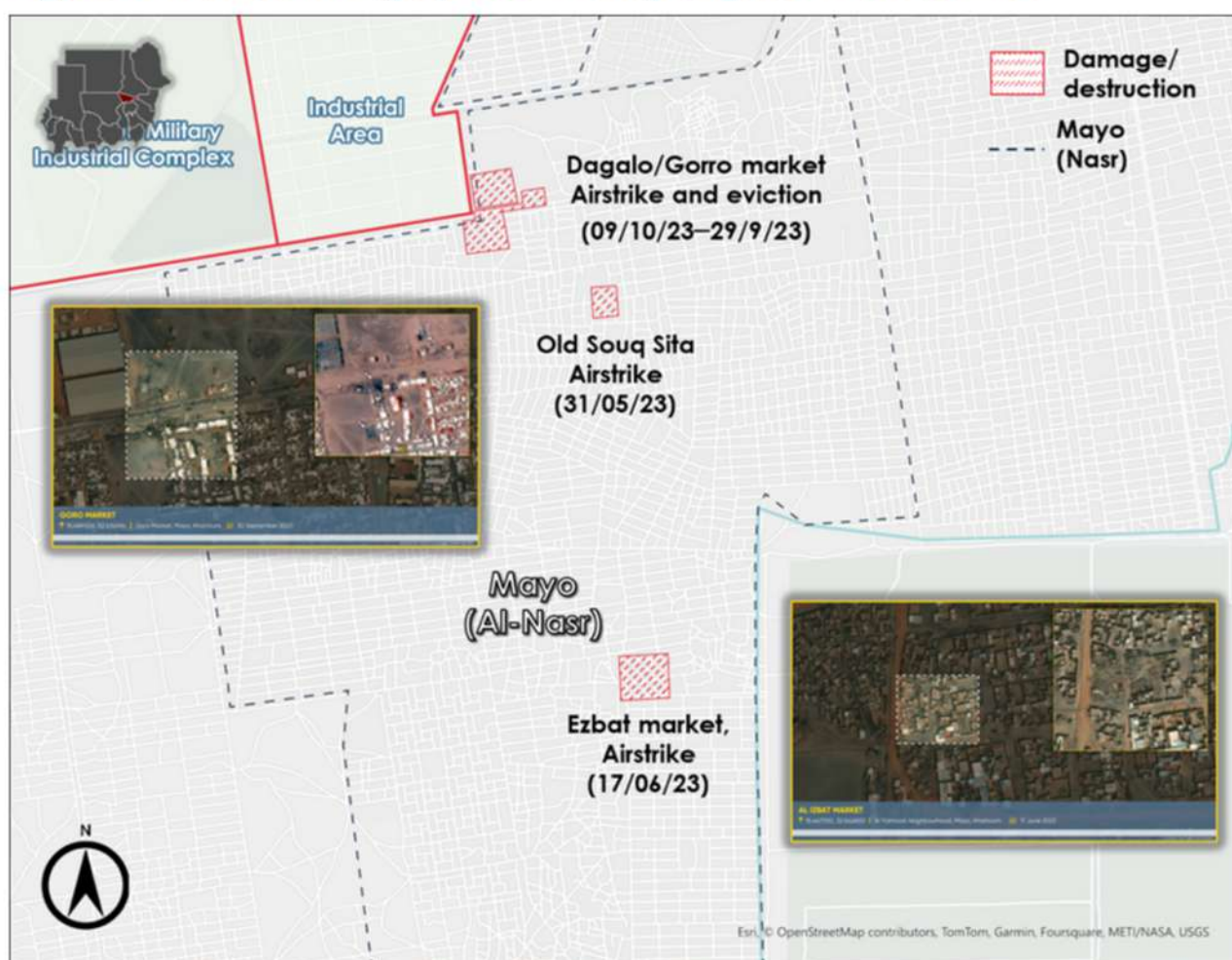


particularly in Mayo or Janoob Al Hizam.<sup>26</sup> As a result, this area is highly ethnically diverse and occupied by inhabitants who have been subject to multiple displacements.

The neighbourhood of Mayo has become an important site of conflict in the current war for several reasons. One is the Yarmouk military and industrial complex—a key weapons manufacturing site.<sup>27</sup> Yarmouk saw extensive RSF–SAF fighting, with the RSF taking control on 7 June 2023, restricting SAF’s access to fuel and ammunition.<sup>28</sup> The adjacent industrial area has also been a significant battleground. The military–industrial complexes in central Khartoum highlight the city’s extensive militarisation and the need for demilitarisation in any future reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts.

A second focus of conflict has been the markets (see **Figure 4**). Mayo hosts several important markets, including Broos, Ezbat, Goro, New Sita, and Old Sita, which have remained operational during the conflict, providing food to local residents and the broader Khartoum population.<sup>29</sup> Old Sita market, also known as Jamloon, was hit by an SAF airstrike on 31 May 2023, reportedly killing 18 people and injuring more than 100.<sup>30</sup> The airstrike caused significant damage to areas around the market, as well as the eviction of residents from the surrounding area. SAF denied that innocent civilians were killed, claiming that it had targeted legitimate military objectives in accordance with international law.<sup>31</sup> It is unclear whether the market met the legal threshold of being a legitimate military target.

**Figure 4.** Markets in Mayo predominantly targeted in the conflict

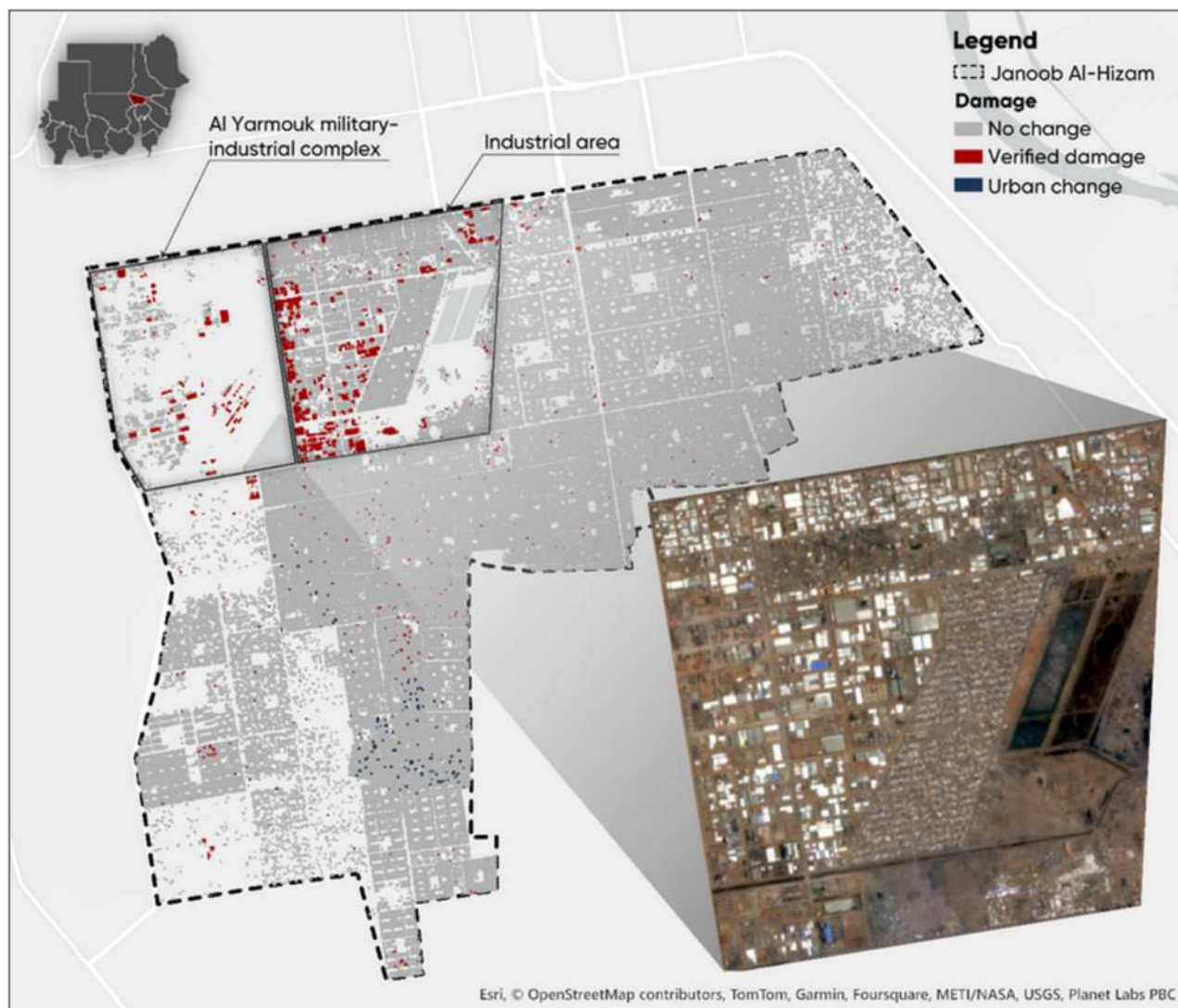


Sources: Al Jazeera (2023a); Al-Sudan Al-Yaum (2023); Amin (2023); BBC News (2023b); CIR, (2023a); Janoob Al Hizam ER (2023a; 2023b); Janoob Al Hizam RC (2023a; 2023b); Othman (2023); Planet Labs (2024); Reuters (2023b); Van (2023); Wli (2023)

Map sources: Esri, © OpenStreetMap contributors, TomTom, Garmin, Foursquare, METI/NASA, United States Geological Survey (USGS)



**Figure 5.** Damage to urban infrastructure in Janoob El-Hizam area, based on satellite imagery from before and after the conflict



Note: The inset image of the industrial complex dates from 25 May 2024.  
Source: Planet Labs, 2024

Map sources: Esri, © OpenStreetMap contributors, TomTom, Garmin, Foursquare, METI/NASA USGS

Satellite imagery confirms extensive damage caused by a subsequent SAF airstrike on 17 June that targeted Ezbat market and surrounding areas, and reportedly killed 17 people and damaged 25 buildings.<sup>32</sup> In September 2023, Goro market was targeted, reportedly killing 47 civilians.<sup>33</sup> Both SAF and the RSF denied responsibility, blaming each other.<sup>34</sup> Social media accounts suggested that Goro market served as an RSF recruitment area, possibly prompting SAF to target it.<sup>35</sup> The seeming disregard for the civilian population in this area is also an act of potential urbicide. The deliberate targeting of the

market areas strikes terror into the urban civilian population and renders markets—a key function of the city—unusable. Both parties have deliberately created an environment of fear and insecurity that deters people from living in and using urban spaces, effectively denying the city to its inhabitants.

In contrast to Al-Amarat, Mayo has not been closed off and most residents remain. Many inhabitants, being working class, may lack the financial means to flee. Historically, Mayo has been an important refuge for those fleeing war fr-

om other parts of the country. **Figure 5**, using artificial intelligence (AI)-driven analysis of satellite imagery, highlights urban changes, some due to destruction and others due to new construction, such as roofing. This influx of people from other areas of Khartoum to Mayo was also confirmed through interviews with residents of Mayo.<sup>36</sup> Preliminary findings show that war is driving not only destruction and displacement, but also urbanisation. This conflict-driven urbanisation raises issues related to urban informality, access to basic urban services, and considerations of post-conflict reconstruction. For the latter, important issues such as property rights, inclusive governance, and priorities for the rebuilding of infrastructure and services also need to be considered.

## Conclusion

The contrasting trajectories of Al-Amarat and Mayo underscore how Sudan's war is producing divergent urban conditions that demand differentiated, context-specific policy responses for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In March 2025, SAF regained control of Khartoum from the RSF, creating a potential opening to reframe the city's future as one shaped by civilian needs rather than military imperatives. In Al-Amarat, post-conflict efforts must guarantee displaced residents' housing, land, and property (HLP) rights to ensure their safe return and reintegration. In contrast, many original Mayo residents remain, with evidence of new urban construction. While HLP rights for Mayo's displaced are important, a needs assessment for the existing population and newly arrived refugees is even more urgent to ensure that mechanisms prevent further displacement.

Across both areas—and urban Sudan more broadly—the demilitarisation of civilian spaces must be a national priority. Military installations such as weapon depots, command centres, and other infrastructure embedded in urban civilian neighbourhoods contravene international humanitarian law and directly endanger civilians. As detailed in this update, civilian populations continue to suffer not only from direct attacks but

rom the systematic occupation, looting, and restricted mobility within their communities. Reclaiming urban space from military control is thus not only a legal obligation but a foundation step toward building a safe, livable and just environment in Sudan.



## Notes

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## BRIEFING NOTE

### Urbicide in Khartoum: An Analysis of the Al-Amarat and Mayo Neighbourhoods

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