



What Research Can Hold in War: Diaries from Sudan



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Overview

These diaries capture how humanitarian research in Sudan unfolded over the course of 2025, through the parallel experiences of two researchers working from inside and outside the country. The research was undertaken as part of ALNAP's 2026 *State of the Humanitarian System* work, to understand how humanitarian assistance in Sudan was being delivered and experienced during the war, and what this reveals about the wider humanitarian system.

Aymen, a Sudanese researcher, was the study's local consultant and worked inside Sudan to support field access and in-country engagement.

Jana managed the research from outside the country, led remote interviews, analysis and sense-making with ALNAP and Aymen.

As conflict intensified and access became increasingly constrained, Aymen and Jana reflected on how their roles, methods, and assumptions were tested. The entries do not aim to summarise findings of the research, but to document moments of listening, restraint, and uncertainty, offering insight into what it means to conduct humanitarian research during an active conflict.

May 2025

Aymen

After the war broke out in Khartoum in April 2023, Port Sudan became people's best option for a sense of safety. Flights were still operating, markets were open, the streets were busy, and you could still make plans for the next day.

I moved with my family to Port Sudan in 2024. The city had become crowded with people who had arrived with the same hope, that here, at least, the ground would not shift under them again. Government offices had relocated, humanitarian teams had set up their bases, and the city had become a hub for movement and decisions. You could feel the weight of it, the sense that everyone was relying on this one place to hold.

But now even this fragile sense of safety is gone. Drones hit the airport, then the fuel tanks, then the power plant. The city went dark. In hours, the place that was our refuge turned into a trap.

We were just about to start the interviews for the SOHS. My role sat between field reality and research needs, keeping interviews and focus groups moving, drawing on contacts to reach people inside the response, and making sure what we were documenting stayed anchored in what people were actually living.

But I had to leave. We were getting out, but the guilt was physical. I'm looking at my children, relieved they are safe, but I can't stop thinking about the colleagues I left behind who don't have the passports or the money to move. I feel like I am abandoning the story I am supposed to be telling.

Still, I am going. And I am carrying with me the weight of these moments, the memories of May, and the hope that the work we are doing matters.

May 2025

Jana

Today, we did our first remote interview with a humanitarian from Gedaref. I felt sick with the disparity of it. I was sitting in my room asking him about "coordination mechanisms." He was exhausted. They have no electricity, the data bundle is scarce, and yet he is giving me two hours of his time.

He stopped me when I asked about aid interventions. He used a word: *Takaaya*. I had to ask him to define it, which felt like a failure of preparation. He explained it's a centuries-old Sudanese tradition built on the Sudanese practice of *nafeer* (mutual aid): families or entire neighbourhoods prepare large pots of food and offer free meals to anyone who needs them. It is simply what communities do when things fall apart. As he spoke, I realised he was not talking about an "intervention" revived during the war. He was talking about a cultural inheritance, an instinctive form of solidarity that predates the humanitarian system.

June 12, 2025

Aymen

It took us time to settle and find a sense of stability again after relocating. Despite everything, I know I have to continue my work. I am planning a trip to Kassala and Gedaref for KII and FGDs. Yet the memories of May are still with me. Boarding the flight from Port Sudan to Kassala, knowing that both airports had been targeted and damaged just weeks earlier, made me incredibly anxious. I was taking a risk, but I kept going because I believed in the importance of the work we're doing. I felt a strong sense of commitment to my fellow citizens who had been displaced and severely affected by this conflict, to carry some of their voices and tell the world what it feels like to lose everything and still have to keep going. The feeling in my stomach was heavy, a sense of duty mixed with fear and responsibility, and the lingering shock of how quickly everything had changed.

I was also lucky to have some friends and relatives in Kassala and Gedaref. They supported me in different ways, helping me find accommodation, connecting me with key stakeholders, and arranging transportation. Their support relieved a lot of pressure.

Jana

The vocabulary isn't holding up. I tried to ask about "localisation" today. In Arabic, it literally translates to *tawteen*, but it isn't a clean equivalent.¹ I have to stop using our jargon. I am rephrasing and reframing constantly, searching for language that doesn't distort the meaning. Asking a question isn't a neutral act, is it? Sometimes it requires translation not only of words, but of entire ideas.

The call dropped four times. Every time we reconnected, he apologised. He is in a war zone, and he was apologising to me for the bad signal. Each apology was making me feel a little guilty. We were asking so

¹ *Tawteen* (توطين) is used in Arabic with meanings that include "settlement/settling-in" and "localisation" in the sense of "making something local", which can make it a slippery stand-in for humanitarian "localisation", meaning shifting leadership and delivery to local responders.

much of him – long conversations, difficult topics, revisiting memories and decisions made under pressure – and the poor connectivity only added more strain. The calls stretched on far beyond the planned time.

Scheduling is its own puzzle. I am in Beirut, Aymen is in Saudi Arabia after the Port Sudan attack, and our interviewees were across Sudan. Time zones overlapped awkwardly. Most people we're speaking to were working full days with no real days off. We're speaking late at night and I feel tired, but people are too generous and still willing to speak for hours.

June 20, 2025

Jana

We finally had our first focus group discussion. We had to reschedule it several times because the heavy rain in Gedaref was disrupting the connection. We spoke with men and women displaced from different states and resettled in a camp in Gedaref. They were also volunteers, supporting aid distributions and trying to maintain a sense of order in a place where stability was constantly eroding.

Despite everything, they all logged in early and were introducing themselves with a shared sense of purpose.

We talked about the rain. One man told me how their tents were not built to withstand it, how wind had already torn shelters apart and how people were rushing to protect what little they had. There was no performance here, it was just raw, unfiltered exhaustion. I couldn't continue with my prepared questions. It felt violent to ask about "future planning" when the roof is literally blowing off. That conversation reshaped how I approached every FGD and KII that followed. Depth isn't produced by perfect questions, but by conditions that make sharing possible, even across unstable connections, late-night calls, and the sheer effort it takes to keep speaking in the middle of a war.

July 19, 2025, Kassala

Aymen

I arrived in Kassala Friday afternoon. The airport was quiet, and the city felt paused, that familiar stillness that settles in at the start of the weekend. I began making calls, trying to arrange a visit to one of the displacement sites inside the city.

The camp's location seemed relatively favourable. The central market was nearby, as was the main hospital and other essential services. But I saw people were subdued, anxious, visibly worn down.

The reason quickly became clear. A government decision had been made to dismantle the camp and relocate families to a site outside the city so the school could reopen for students. People spoke of the move with anger and fear. The relocation site was far from everything, the market, the hospital, the very things that had allowed them to survive in the city. For them, proximity was not a convenience; it was a lifeline.

After speaking to a few people, I learned that services inside the camp had already been suspended. Police were present. People spoke openly about the threat of forced eviction. The sense of uncertainty was palpable, not knowing when they would be moved, how, or what awaited them. They felt abandoned and scared.

I thought they wouldn't let me inside the camp. At one point, the school principal questioned my presence, asking to see official permission and citing the government's decision to close the site. The exchange was not hostile but it was tense, a reminder of how tightly controlled space, movement, and voice had become.

July 20, 2025, Gedaref

I am in Gedaref. When I first arrived, the weather felt almost gentle. Cooler air and the smell of rain. But inside the camps, the rains meant something else entirely.

Most shelters were built from local materials on cotton clay soil, unable to withstand heavy downpours. The night before my arrival, a storm had torn through the area. Families had been awake all night, trying to hold their shelters together, rescuing what little they owned as water poured in. Several tents collapsed completely.

I saw parents who had spent the night hiding their children inside the communal latrines because they were the only concrete structures that wouldn't collapse. Think about that. The only safe place for your child is a toilet.

And yet, people spoke less about loss and more about helping one another through the night.

The solidarity was striking. Neighbours supporting neighbours. Strangers sharing space, food, reassurance. Still, the risks were impossible to ignore. Each storm threatens not only shelter, but health, safety, and dignity.

Certain moments from those conversations stayed with me long after they ended. As the discussions closed, people began to rise slowly. There were quiet words of thanks, the gathering of worn shawls and water bottles — the transition back to the reality of camp life.

I could not help but think back to early May 2023, when my family and I left our apartment believing we would return in a few weeks. That hope did not survive the months that followed.

Meeting people in the camps brought those memories rushing back. Many in the camps reminded me of someone I knew - neighbours, friends, relatives. Their stories echoed my own, but their losses were heavier, their journeys harsher.

August 2025

Aymen

We moved back to Port Sudan. It was not an easy decision, especially with children in tow. We had spent time in the Gulf, moving between three countries, but did not feel settled anywhere. In the end, no place felt more right than home.

Being outside Sudan sharpened everything. I watched Sudanese families struggle in places where they had no real footing: limited work, endless paperwork, temporary permissions, and a constant sense of not belonging. Many carried the war with them, in their memories, in their silences, in the way they spoke about the future as something already constrained.

Returning to Port Sudan felt like trying to gather scattered pieces of life and put them back together. There was hope, but also fear and uncertainty. I focused on continuing the research. It became a way to hold onto continuity when everything else felt unstable.

Jana

I was supposed to interview Hiba earlier today. A local responder working with one of the international aid organisations, I had earlier reached out to her on LinkedIn after I saw one of her posts on her humanitarian work in Khartoum. I connected with her and when I asked if she would speak with me about Sudan, she agreed immediately. She did not show up.

Later that evening, she messaged to apologise. She wasn't ignoring me, she was in an ambulance. Her uncle had Dengue fever. They couldn't find a bed. No ICU. No pain killers. No platelets. He passed away on the way to the hospital.

She has been separated from her children for one year and eight months. She finally gets back to Sudan, and now this. A month after the war began, she left Sudan, making the impossible choice to separate from her children. For a year and eight months, she lived apart from them, working and sending money, carrying the guilt and strain of distance. She returned to Sudan after seven months but still could not reunite with them. Only after Khartoum was liberated did she finally return home and bring her family back together.

September 2025

Jana

We're still trying to reach people inside conflict zones to speak to them, especially in areas under RSF control. It is important that we speak to them as they are living the sharpest consequences of the war in real time. Hearing from them will keep our research anchored in what daily survival looks like and correct our assumptions. Messages are failing. Connection is dropping. Silence. Each failed attempt feels like a quiet reminder of who remains unheard. Even when we can't always reach them, the effort itself matters, it reminds us to be careful about what we think we know.

October 2025

Aymen

El Fasher has fallen. I can't look at the news. I was there in 2016. I worked with teachers, parents, and students. I still remember their faces, conversations, ordinary moments that had stayed with me. The reports coming out now... we knew this was coming. The world watched it happen in slow motion and did nothing. Despite repeated warnings, despite reports and appeals, the world looked away. Like many people watching these atrocities unfold, I keep asking myself what this does to people's faith in the humanitarian sector, and in the system more broadly. We have seen this kind of failure before, Rwanda is the example that keeps coming to mind, when the UN and the international community watched a genocide and did not act in time.

Jana

We've stopped the research. I opened the analysis framework and — the columns about "coping strategies" and "adaptive mechanisms"; —and I just couldn't do it. It feels obscene to analyze "coping" while El Fasher is being erased.

We still tried to reach people inside RSF-controlled areas. We wanted those voices to be present, especially now. But people stopped responding. The silence itself became an answer. I felt helpless.

Closing thoughts

Aymen

Seeing people's determination to return and rebuild gave me a kind of hope I hadn't expected. Living through war in your own country is different from hearing about it elsewhere. To watch cities empty, to see people uprooted again and again, it leaves a permanent mark.

The image I can't shake is from Gedaref. A woman, nine months pregnant, standing in the mud. Her three-year-old was clinging to her leg. She told me she was awake all night, not just afraid of the storm destroying her tent, but afraid she would go into labor and there is no midwife, and the hospital is an hour away on flooded roads. I look at my own family, and I realize: I am not an observer. I am just lucky.

Jana

When this work began, my own country, Lebanon, was being pulled back into violence. Villages in the south were emptying. Civilians were being killed daily. My family was evacuating and re-evacuating, chased by danger. At the same time, the conflict in Gaza was unfolding with unbearable intensity. None of this stayed outside the research. It followed me into every interview, every transcript, every conversation.

Because of where I come from, conflict has never been abstract. I recognise it in the way people speak — steady voices describing the unbearable, practical language used to survive danger, the instinct to move quickly past details that hurt too much to hold.

What stayed with me were not grand conclusions, but small moments: people continuing with daily life, offering time even when exhausted, speaking honestly without drama. Sudan reshaped how I think about endurance - not as heroism, not even as resilience, but as the accumulation of ordinary choices people make every day to keep going.

That is what I carry with me now. More than any finding or conclusion.