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From Social Capital to Social Liability: Sudan, Civil War, and the Transformation of Social Networks under Conditions of Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Social capital has long been regarded as one of the most important resources available to individuals and communities. Networks of trust, reciprocity, and social cooperation have been associated with economic development, democratic participation, collective action, institutional effectiveness, and social resilience. While scholars have increasingly acknowledged that social capital may also generate exclusion, conformity pressures, and unequal access to resources, existing approaches have generally treated these outcomes as secondary consequences of otherwise beneficial social relationships. This article argues that under certain political and institutional conditions, social relationships may undergo a more fundamental transformation. Rather than functioning primarily as sources of support, networks may become mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced. Building upon earlier...

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From Social Capital to Social Liability: Sudan, Civil War, and the Transformation of Social Networks under Conditions of Conflict

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Abstract

Social capital has long been regarded as one of the most important resources available to individuals and communities. Networks of trust, reciprocity, and social cooperation have been associated with economic development, democratic participation, collective action, institutional effectiveness, and social resilience. While scholars have increasingly acknowledged that social capital may also generate exclusion, conformity pressures, and unequal access to resources, existing approaches have generally treated these outcomes as secondary consequences of otherwise beneficial social relationships. This article argues that under certain political and institutional conditions, social relationships may undergo a more fundamental transformation. Rather than functioning primarily as sources of support, networks may become mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced. Building upon earlier work on corporate social capital and liability (Leenders and Gabbay 1999), the article develops the concept of social liability as a framework for understanding how social relationships become channels of surveillance, categorization, coercion, and violence. Using Sudan as a strategic case study, the article examines the transformation of social networks under conditions of state fragility, civil war, ethnic mobilization, militia governance, and mass displacement. Drawing upon historical and contemporary evidence from Darfur, the rise of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the displacement crisis generated by the current conflict, the analysis demonstrates how social relationships frequently generate forms of visibility that can be mobilized for political and military purposes. Individuals become vulnerable not because they are socially isolated but because they are socially embedded. Networks that ordinarily facilitate trust and cooperation may become mechanisms through which identities are identified, loyalties evaluated, and violence organized. The article further argues that social liability extends beyond Sudan and represents a broader sociological process observable across diverse forms of conflict and social control, including ethnic violence, insurgency, authoritarian repression, religious persecution, honor-based violence, and forced migration. By identifying the conditions under which social capital becomes social liability, the study contributes to social capital theory, conflict studies, and political sociology while offering a new framework for understanding the relationship between social structure, vulnerability, and violence.

Keywords: *Social capital, social liability, Sudan, Darfur, civil war, social networks, political violence, displacement, conflict studies, political sociology*

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1 Introduction

Social relationships are generally regarded as sources of support, trust, cooperation, and resilience. Across much of sociology, political science, and development studies, networks are viewed as resources that help individuals and communities navigate uncertainty, overcome collective action problems, and achieve shared goals. Yet many of the most devastating episodes of collective violence depend not upon the absence of social relationships but upon their presence. Individuals are frequently identified, monitored, categorized, and targeted through the very networks that ordinarily sustain collective life. Family

ties, community affiliations, ethnic identities, religious memberships, and patronage networks may simultaneously generate protection and vulnerability. This paradox poses a fundamental challenge for existing theories of social capital and raises a broader question regarding the relationship between social structure and violence.

Civil wars are commonly analyzed through the actions of states, military organizations, insurgent movements, political elites, and international actors. Explanations of conflict frequently emphasize state weakness, ethnic competition, resource scarcity, political exclusion, economic grievances, or ideological mobilization (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas 2006). While these factors undoubtedly influence the

emergence and trajectory of violence, they do not fully explain how violence penetrates everyday social life. Armed organizations do not recruit from abstract populations. They recruit through families, communities, friendship networks, religious institutions, and systems of patronage. They gather intelligence through personal relationships, identify targets through local knowledge, and establish authority through existing social structures (Kalyvas 2006; Staniland 2014). Violence is therefore not merely a political or military phenomenon. It is also a relational process that operates through networks of social interaction.

The importance of social relationships has long occupied a central place within sociological theory. The concept of social capital emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how networks generate resources that facilitate trust, cooperation, information exchange, and collective action (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000). Social capital has been linked to democratic participation, economic development, educational attainment, organizational effectiveness, public health, and community resilience (Woolcock 1998; Lin 2001; Aldrich 2012). Although scholars differ in their definitions and theoretical orientations, most approaches share a common premise: social relationships constitute valuable resources that individuals and groups can mobilize to achieve desired outcomes.

The dominant orientation within this literature has been overwhelmingly positive. Social networks are typically portrayed as productive assets that generate opportunities and strengthen social cohesion. Even critical perspectives often focus on the benefits of social relationships while acknowledging certain limitations. Scholars have demonstrated that networks may reinforce inequality, restrict individual autonomy, impose obligations upon members, and deepen divisions between groups (Portes 1998; Fine 2010; Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi 2017). Dense social ties may generate exclusion as well as inclusion. Strong communities may encourage conformity as well as cooperation. Nevertheless, existing discussions generally treat these outcomes as secondary consequences of otherwise functional social relationships.

This article argues that such approaches remain insufficient for understanding social relationships under conditions of violent conflict and institutional collapse. Under these circumstances, social networks do not merely generate occasional negative consequences. Rather, they may undergo a more fundamental transformation. Relationships that ordinarily provide support, information, and protection may become mechanisms through which individuals are monitored, identified, categorized, and targeted. Networks may cease functioning primarily as sources of support and increasingly become channels through which vulnerability is produced. Social embeddedness may generate exposure rather than security. Visibility may become vulnerability.

Building upon earlier work on corporate social capital and liability (Leenders and Gabbay 1999; Gabbay and Leenders 1999), this article develops the concept of **social liability** to explain this transformation. Social liability refers to a condition in which social relationships become pathways through which vulnerability is generated. The concept does not imply the disappearance of social capital. On the contrary, social networks frequently remain highly active and may become even more important during periods of instability. What changes is the function of those relationships. Networks that once generated protection increasingly generate exposure. Relationships that once facilitated trust increasingly facilitate surveillance. Social structures that ordinarily sustain collective life become pathways through which coercion, exclusion, and violence operate.

The central argument of this article is that social liability emerges through a process of transformation rather than replacement. Conflict does not eliminate social networks. In many cases, it strengthens their

importance. As formal institutions weaken, individuals become increasingly dependent upon informal relationships for security, information, economic survival, and social support. This dependence simultaneously increases social visibility. Family ties, tribal affiliations, ethnic identities, religious memberships, and community relationships become increasingly important markers through which individuals are identified and evaluated. As political competition intensifies and collective identities become politicized, these same networks may become channels through which violence is organized and experienced. More broadly, this article argues that violence frequently succeeds not because social networks collapse, but because they endure.

Sudan provides a particularly valuable case through which to examine this process. Few contemporary conflicts illustrate the interaction between social structure and violence as clearly as the Sudanese civil war. For decades, Sudan has been characterized by uneven state development, extensive reliance upon tribal and kinship networks, patronage-based governance, regional inequalities, and recurring cycles of political violence (Johnson 2016; de Waal 2015). Informal systems of authority have frequently played a greater role in shaping everyday life than formal state institutions. These conditions have made social relationships central to both governance and conflict.

The Darfur conflict demonstrated how community affiliations and social identities could become mechanisms of mobilization and targeting (Prunier 2005; Flint and de Waal 2008; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008). The emergence of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) revealed how armed organizations could grow from existing social and tribal networks into powerful national actors. More recently, the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF has generated one of the world's largest displacement crises, further exposing the dual role of social networks as sources of both resilience and vulnerability (UNHCR 2024; IDMC 2024). Across each stage of the conflict, violence repeatedly followed social pathways.

Sudan is not presented here as a unique or exceptional case. Rather, it serves as a strategic case through which broader sociological mechanisms become visible. Similar dynamics can be observed in contexts as diverse as Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Nigeria. Across these settings, social relationships frequently function as mechanisms of protection under ordinary circumstances while becoming mechanisms of vulnerability under conditions of crisis. Sudan therefore provides an opportunity to develop a broader theoretical framework applicable beyond a single country or conflict.

The article makes three contributions. First, it extends social capital theory by identifying conditions under which social relationships undergo functional transformation. Second, it bridges social capital scholarship and conflict studies by explaining how violence travels through social structure. Third, it develops social liability as a broader sociological framework applicable across diverse forms of conflict, repression, and social control, including insurgency, ethnic violence, authoritarian governance, honor-based violence, religious persecution, and identity-based targeting.

Methodologically, the article employs Sudan as a theory-building case study (George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2018). Drawing upon historical analysis, conflict scholarship, social capital theory, and research on displacement and state fragility, it examines how social networks become integrated into systems of violence. Rather than treating conflict solely as a military or political phenomenon, the analysis focuses on the relational mechanisms linking social structure to vulnerability.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing literature on social capital, conflict, and network-based approaches to violence. It then develops the concept of social liability as a theoretical extension of existing scholarship. Subsequent sections

examine the historical foundations of Sudanese social organization, the Darfur conflict, the rise of the Rapid Support Forces, and the role of displacement in reproducing vulnerability. The article concludes by considering the broader implications of social liability for conflict studies, political sociology, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Understanding Sudan's conflict requires more than an examination of armies, militias, and political institutions. It requires attention to the social relationships through which power operates. Civil wars are fought not only through weapons and military organizations but through networks of belonging, identity, and community. Sudan demonstrates that the social structures that ordinarily sustain collective life may, under certain conditions, become the very mechanisms through which violence is organized and reproduced.

2 Literature Review: Social Capital, Conflict, and the Problem of Social Liability

The concept of social capital has become one of the most influential and widely debated ideas in the social sciences. Over the past four decades, scholars have employed the concept to explain a diverse range of social, political, and economic outcomes, including educational achievement, economic development, democratic participation, organizational performance, public health, community resilience, and collective action. Despite significant variation in theoretical emphasis, a common theme runs throughout much of the literature: social relationships constitute valuable resources that individuals and groups can mobilize to achieve desired objectives. Social networks are generally understood as assets that facilitate cooperation, information exchange, trust, and mutual support.

The intellectual foundations of social capital are commonly associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam, although each approached the concept from a distinct theoretical perspective. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as resources embedded within durable social networks that individuals could access and mobilize to maintain or improve their positions within social hierarchies. Social capital, in this formulation, was closely linked to power, inequality, and the reproduction of social advantage. Rather than viewing networks as inherently beneficial for society as a whole, Bourdieu emphasized how social relationships could be strategically utilized to preserve existing distributions of privilege and influence.

Coleman (1988) approached social capital from a more functional perspective, emphasizing the ways social structures facilitate coordinated action. For Coleman, social capital resides within relationships themselves and provides resources that make certain forms of social behavior possible. Trustworthiness, obligations, expectations, and information channels enable individuals to achieve goals that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to attain. Social capital therefore serves as a productive resource embedded within social organization.

Putnam (1993, 2000) further popularized the concept through his work on civic engagement and democratic governance. He argued that dense networks of civic participation generate trust and reciprocity, thereby strengthening democratic institutions and improving collective outcomes. Putnam's formulation significantly influenced subsequent scholarship by highlighting the relationship between social capital and social cohesion. Communities characterized by strong associational life were expected to display higher levels of cooperation, political participation, and institutional effectiveness.

Subsequent scholarship further refined these insights by examining how network structure influences access to resources and opportunities. Burt (1992, 2005) emphasized the importance of brokerage and structural holes, demonstrating that actors occupying positions connecting otherwise disconnected groups often enjoy significant informational

advantages. Lin (2001) similarly argued that social capital derives from resources embedded within social networks and highlighted the importance of network position in shaping access to those resources. More recently, Aldrich (2012) demonstrated the critical role of social capital in community resilience and post-disaster recovery, arguing that social networks frequently matter more than physical infrastructure in determining how communities respond to crisis. Collectively, these contributions reinforced the broader conclusion that social relationships represent powerful social resources capable of shaping a wide range of social, political, and economic outcomes.

Although these foundational perspectives differ in important respects, they collectively contributed to a broad scholarly consensus that social relationships frequently produce beneficial outcomes. Social capital became associated with cooperation rather than conflict, trust rather than coercion, and inclusion rather than exclusion. As the literature expanded, however, scholars increasingly recognized that social capital possesses a more complex and ambivalent character.

One of the earliest and most influential critiques emerged from Portes (1998), who argued that social capital scholarship had often overlooked the negative consequences of network membership. While social relationships provide access to valuable resources, they may also impose obligations, constrain individual freedom, exclude outsiders, and reinforce conformity. Strong social ties can generate demands that limit personal autonomy and restrict opportunities for social mobility. Portes emphasized that social capital is not inherently positive and that its consequences depend significantly upon the social context within which networks operate.

Subsequent scholarship expanded these concerns. Fine (2010) criticized what he viewed as the excessive conceptual expansion of social capital and warned against treating networks as universally beneficial. Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi (2017), reviewing research across public health and social science fields, documented numerous cases in which social capital produced adverse outcomes, including exclusion, discrimination, social pressure, and unequal access to resources. These studies collectively challenged simplistic assumptions regarding the inherently positive character of social relationships.

The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital further complicated the picture. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties connecting individuals within relatively homogeneous groups, while bridging social capital refers to connections linking individuals across different social categories (Putnam 2000; Woolcock 1998). Bonding ties often generate strong internal solidarity but may simultaneously reinforce social boundaries and exclusion. Bridging ties may facilitate broader cooperation but are frequently more difficult to sustain. The same network structures that strengthen internal cohesion may contribute to external conflict.

These critiques significantly enriched social capital theory and helped correct the tendency to view social networks as inherently beneficial. Yet most discussions of the negative consequences of social capital continue to conceptualize harmful outcomes as secondary effects of otherwise productive social relationships. Networks may generate exclusion, conformity pressures, unequal access to resources, or excessive obligations, but they continue to function primarily as mechanisms of support, cooperation, and resource exchange.

The concept of social liability developed in this article identifies a different process. Rather than focusing on the negative consequences of network membership, social liability refers to a transformation in the primary function of social relationships themselves. Under conditions of political instability, institutional weakness, and violent conflict, networks may cease functioning primarily as mechanisms of support and increasingly become mechanisms through which information

is gathered, identities are categorized, loyalties are evaluated, and vulnerability is produced.

This distinction is important because it shifts attention from the outcomes generated by social relationships to the changing functions of social relationships. Social liability does not emerge because social capital disappears. Indeed, social networks frequently remain highly active and may become even more important during periods of crisis. Families continue to provide support, communities continue to facilitate cooperation, and informal institutions continue to coordinate collective action. What changes is the role these relationships play within broader systems of power. Networks that once generated protection increasingly generate exposure. Visibility becomes vulnerability. Social embeddedness becomes a source of risk.

This perspective also helps bridge social capital theory and conflict studies. While social capital scholars have focused primarily on the resources generated by networks, conflict scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of local social structures in shaping violence. Together, these literatures suggest that social relationships may simultaneously generate resilience and vulnerability depending upon the political and institutional environments within which they operate.

The conflict studies literature provides important insights into this problem. Research on civil war has increasingly emphasized the importance of local social structures in shaping patterns of violence. Rather than viewing armed conflict solely through the actions of states and insurgent organizations, scholars have demonstrated that violence frequently depends upon social networks, community relationships, and local information.

Kalyvas (2006), in his influential study of civil war violence, argued that local knowledge plays a central role in determining patterns of targeting and control. Armed actors rarely possess complete information regarding local populations. Consequently, they often rely upon civilians, informants, and community networks to identify opponents and potential collaborators. Violence becomes deeply embedded within local social structures. Community relationships provide the information necessary for selective targeting.

Similarly, Weinstein (2007) demonstrated that patterns of insurgent organization and behavior are strongly shaped by the social composition of armed groups and the resources available to them. Staniland (2014) further argued that insurgent cohesion and organizational durability frequently emerge from preexisting social networks. Family relationships, friendship ties, community affiliations, and local identities provide the foundations upon which armed organizations are built. Insurgencies do not emerge independently of society; they emerge from within society.

Research on ethnic violence has also highlighted the importance of social mechanisms. Petersen (2002) demonstrated that ethnic conflict often depends upon emotional processes embedded within social relationships. Fear, resentment, and collective identities are transmitted through communities rather than operating solely at the individual level. Tilly (2003) similarly emphasized the relational foundations of collective violence, while Fearon and Laitin (2003) challenged purely ethnic explanations of civil war and highlighted the importance of local conditions and social organization in facilitating insurgency.

These studies collectively demonstrate that violence frequently travels through social networks. Yet conflict scholarship has generally focused on how networks facilitate recruitment, information exchange, and mobilization rather than on how networks themselves become mechanisms of vulnerability. Social relationships are often treated as resources available to armed actors rather than as sites through which vulnerability is produced.

The Sudanese case highlights the importance of this distinction. Research on Sudan has repeatedly documented the central role of tribal affiliations, kinship systems, patronage networks, and local authority structures in shaping both governance and conflict. Johnson (2016) argues that Sudan's recurring civil wars cannot be understood apart from long-standing patterns of political exclusion and uneven state formation. Flint and de Waal (2008) demonstrate how local identities became politicized during the Darfur conflict and subsequently incorporated into broader systems of violence. Mamdani (2009) similarly emphasizes the historical and political processes through which communal identities became transformed into categories of conflict. Hagan and Raymond-Richmond (2008) further illustrate how social identities became central mechanisms through which violence was organized and experienced.

The rise of militia organizations such as the Janjaweed and later the Rapid Support Forces further illustrates the significance of social structures. These organizations did not emerge in isolation. They relied upon existing tribal affiliations, kinship networks, patronage relationships, and local forms of authority. Social relationships provided organizational infrastructure, information channels, and recruitment mechanisms. Violence became embedded within networks that had previously served social, economic, and political functions.

Existing scholarship therefore provides three important insights. First, social capital theory demonstrates that social relationships constitute valuable resources capable of facilitating trust, cooperation, information exchange, and collective action. Second, network scholarship demonstrates that the structure of relationships influences how those resources are distributed and mobilized. Third, conflict studies reveal that violence frequently depends upon local social structures and informational networks. What remains underdeveloped is a framework capable of explaining how these insights intersect under conditions of conflict and institutional decline.

The Sudanese case highlights the importance of this gap. Existing theories explain why networks matter and how violence operates, but they do not fully explain how supportive social relationships become mechanisms of vulnerability. The concept of social liability seeks to address this problem. Rather than viewing violence as operating independently of social structure, it examines how violence becomes embedded within social relationships themselves. The central question is not merely whether networks produce positive or negative outcomes. The question is how changing political and institutional conditions transform the functions of networks.

By focusing on this transformation, social liability provides a conceptual bridge between social capital theory and conflict studies. It retains the central insight that relationships matter while directing attention toward the conditions under which social embeddedness becomes a source of exposure rather than protection. Under conditions of institutional decline, increased dependence upon informal networks generates increased social visibility. As political identities become polarized and collective affiliations acquire heightened significance, visibility becomes vulnerability. Social networks cease functioning primarily as sources of protection and instead become mechanisms through which information, monitoring, targeting, and coercion occur.

This perspective has implications extending far beyond Sudan. Similar dynamics appear in cases involving militant recruitment, authoritarian repression, honor-based violence, religious persecution, LGBTQ targeting, clan conflict, and political surveillance. Across these diverse contexts, individuals frequently become vulnerable because they are socially embedded rather than socially isolated. Their relationships generate visibility. Their identities become knowable. Their communities become mechanisms through which power operates.

The following section develops this argument more systematically by introducing the concept of social liability and specifying the mechanisms through which social capital is transformed under conditions of conflict, polarization, and institutional decline.

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-building research design that integrates historical sociology, social network analysis, conflict studies, and social capital theory. The primary objective is not to test a narrowly specified hypothesis through statistical analysis but rather to develop and refine a theoretical framework capable of explaining how social relationships are transformed under conditions of institutional decline, political polarization, and violent conflict. The analysis therefore adopts an interpretive, relational, and mechanism-oriented approach, focusing on the social processes through which networks that ordinarily generate support become sources of vulnerability.

The study utilizes Sudan as a strategic case for theory development. Case study research is particularly valuable when the objective is to explore causal mechanisms, refine concepts, and generate theoretical insights rather than establish statistical generalizations (George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2018). Sudan offers an especially useful setting because it combines several conditions that make the transformation of social relationships unusually visible. These include weak and uneven state penetration, extensive reliance upon informal systems of authority, recurring civil conflict, ethnic and regional mobilization, militia-based violence, large-scale displacement, and ongoing competition among armed actors. Together, these characteristics provide an opportunity to examine how social networks function when formal institutions become unable or unwilling to provide security, governance, and protection.

The methodological strategy adopted here is best characterized as a theory-building analytical case study. Sudan is not treated as representative of all civil wars. Rather, it serves as a theoretically significant case through which broader sociological processes can be identified and examined. The purpose is therefore analytic and theoretical generalization rather than statistical generalization (Yin 2018). By investigating how social relationships operate within the Sudanese conflict, the study seeks to illuminate mechanisms that may also be present in other contexts characterized by political violence, institutional fragility, and identity-based conflict.

The analysis is informed by relational sociology, which emphasizes that social life is constituted through relationships rather than isolated actors or static structures (Emirbayer 1997). From this perspective, violence is not simply the product of individual motives, state policies, organizational strategies, or material grievances. It is also a relational process that operates through networks of interaction, information exchange, social identification, and collective mobilization. Understanding how these relationships change under conditions of conflict provides a means of identifying the mechanisms through which vulnerability emerges.

The paper relies primarily upon secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed academic scholarship, historical analyses, conflict studies research, policy reports, humanitarian documentation, human rights investigations, and publications produced by international organizations. Particular attention is devoted to research examining Sudanese state formation, the Darfur conflict, ethnic mobilization, militia politics, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), displacement, and post-conflict governance. Sources include works by Johnson (2016), Flint and de Waal (2008), Mamdani (2009), Jok (2001), de Waal (2015), Tubiana (2017), Hagan and Raymond-Richmond (2008), and other scholars whose research has

contributed significantly to understanding Sudan's social and political development.

To strengthen analytical rigor, the study employs source triangulation. Rather than relying upon any single account, evidence is drawn from multiple forms of scholarship and documentation. Academic studies are considered alongside reports produced by humanitarian organizations, conflict-monitoring groups, international institutions, and human rights organizations. This approach allows for comparison across sources while reducing the likelihood that findings are driven by a single perspective, dataset, or methodological tradition.

The analysis also utilizes process tracing as a methodological tool. Process tracing focuses on identifying the causal mechanisms that connect broader structural conditions to specific outcomes (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen 2013). Rather than asking merely whether social networks matter during conflict, a proposition that existing scholarship has already established, this study examines how social networks become transformed from mechanisms of support into mechanisms of vulnerability. Process tracing allows the analysis to move beyond descriptive association by identifying the sequence of social processes through which this transformation occurs.

The concept of social liability is developed through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductively, the framework builds upon scholarship on social capital, social networks, organizational liability, conflict mobilization, and political violence. Earlier work on corporate social capital and liability demonstrated that network relationships may generate constraints and vulnerabilities alongside benefits (Leenders and Gabbay 1999; Gabbay and Leenders 1999). The present study extends this insight beyond organizational settings into the broader social and political environment of civil conflict.

Inductively, the concept emerges from recurring patterns identified across the literature on civil war, ethnic violence, militia mobilization, displacement, political repression, communal conflict, and identity-based violence. Across these diverse contexts, social relationships repeatedly appear as mechanisms through which information circulates, identities become visible, loyalties are evaluated, and vulnerability is produced. Sudan provides a particularly useful setting because many of these dynamics become visible simultaneously within a single conflict environment.

The analytical framework focuses on several interconnected mechanisms. First, the study examines institutional decline and the resulting increase in dependence upon informal social networks. Second, it analyzes how increased dependence generates heightened social visibility. Third, it investigates the role of political polarization and collective identity formation in transforming visibility into vulnerability. Finally, it explores how armed actors, communities, and political institutions utilize existing social relationships for recruitment, surveillance, information gathering, mobilization, and targeting. These mechanisms collectively form the foundation of the social liability framework.

Methodologically, the study adopts a mechanism-based approach to explanation (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). The objective is not simply to demonstrate correlations between conflict and social networks but to identify the social processes linking network structures to specific forms of vulnerability. The central question is therefore not whether relationships matter, but how relationships become transformed under particular political and institutional conditions. More specifically, the study seeks to explain how social capital may become social liability through identifiable social mechanisms.

The study also recognizes the limitations of case-based theory development. Sudan possesses historical, cultural, political, and institutional characteristics that may differ from those found elsewhere. The objective is therefore not to claim universal applicability. Rather,

the paper proposes social liability as a theoretical framework whose usefulness can be evaluated, refined, and challenged through future comparative research. Sudan serves as the starting point for this theoretical exploration rather than its endpoint.

Ultimately, this methodology reflects the paper's central premise: violence cannot be fully understood through military, political, or institutional analysis alone. Conflict is also a social phenomenon. Understanding how violence emerges, spreads, and persists requires attention to the networks through which individuals are connected to one another. By integrating social capital theory, relational sociology, conflict studies, and historical analysis, the present study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which ordinary social relationships become integrated into systems of coercion, surveillance, and political violence.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies primarily upon secondary sources, including academic literature, reports produced by international organizations, humanitarian agencies, conflict-monitoring groups, and human rights organizations. While source triangulation was employed to reduce dependence upon any single perspective, all secondary materials are themselves products of particular institutional, political, and methodological contexts.

Second, conflict environments present unique challenges for data collection and verification. Access restrictions, security concerns, political sensitivities, and uneven reporting capacities may influence the availability and reliability of information. Some regions and populations are more extensively documented than others, potentially creating biases in the empirical record.

Third, humanitarian, governmental, and advocacy organizations often pursue different institutional objectives, which may shape the framing of events, patterns of evidence collection, and analytical priorities. The findings presented here should therefore be understood as theoretically informed interpretations based upon converging evidence rather than definitive factual reconstructions of all events. Future research incorporating primary fieldwork, interviews, network mapping, and comparative case studies would provide additional opportunities to evaluate and refine the social liability framework.

4 Theoretical Framework: From Social Capital to Social Liability

The concept of social capital occupies a central position in contemporary sociology, political science, organizational studies, and development research. Despite substantial variation in theoretical emphasis, scholars generally agree that social relationships constitute resources that individuals and groups can mobilize to achieve desired objectives. Networks facilitate cooperation, generate trust, transmit information, create opportunities, and strengthen collective action (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993; Burt 2005). Social capital theory has therefore been enormously influential in explaining outcomes ranging from economic development and organizational performance to political participation and community resilience.

Network theorists have further emphasized that the structure of relationships shapes access to information and opportunities. Burt's (1992, 2005) work on structural holes and brokerage demonstrated that actors occupying strategic network positions gain advantages through access to otherwise disconnected social worlds. Lin (2001) similarly argued that social capital derives from resources embedded within social networks and that network position significantly influences access to those resources. These insights are important because they highlight how networks generate informational power, a feature that becomes

particularly significant when information itself becomes a source of vulnerability.

While the benefits of social capital have been extensively documented, its darker dimensions have received comparatively less systematic theoretical attention. Existing research has demonstrated that social relationships may also generate exclusion, conformity pressures, excessive obligations, and unequal access to resources (Portes 1998; Fine 2010; Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi 2017). These studies have contributed important corrective insights by demonstrating that social networks are not universally beneficial. Nevertheless, much of this literature continues to conceptualize negative outcomes as secondary effects of otherwise productive relationships. The central function of the network remains supportive, while harmful consequences are treated as unintended by-products.

The argument developed here is different. Rather than focusing primarily on the negative consequences of network membership, this article examines circumstances in which the primary function of social relationships undergoes transformation. Under certain political and institutional conditions, networks cease functioning primarily as sources of support and instead become mechanisms of surveillance, categorization, coercion, exclusion, and vulnerability. This transformation is conceptualized as social liability.

Building upon earlier work on corporate social capital and liability (Leenders and Gabbay 1999; Gabbay and Leenders 1999), the concept is extended here beyond organizational settings to encompass broader social and political environments. Earlier formulations demonstrated that network relationships within organizations generate both advantages and liabilities. Dense social ties may facilitate information exchange, cooperation, and trust while simultaneously creating constraints, obligations, and vulnerabilities. The present study argues that similar dynamics operate at the societal level, particularly under conditions of institutional decline, political polarization, and violent conflict.

Social liability refers to a condition in which social relationships generate vulnerability rather than protection. Individuals become exposed to risk because of their embeddedness within social structures rather than despite it. The same networks that ordinarily provide support become channels through which information circulates, identities are categorized, loyalties are evaluated, and sanctions are imposed. Social liability therefore emerges not from the absence of social capital but from its transformation.

The framework is also informed by relational sociology, which emphasizes that social life is constituted through relationships rather than isolated actors or static structures (Emirbayer 1997). From a relational perspective, vulnerability does not arise solely from individual characteristics or institutional conditions. Rather, it emerges through patterns of social connection. Social liability therefore represents a relational condition in which networks become mechanisms through which exposure, surveillance, coercion, and political control operate.

This distinction is critical. Social liability should not be understood as the opposite of social capital. The two concepts are closely connected. Social liability emerges precisely because social capital exists. Trust, visibility, obligations, reciprocity, and social embeddedness create the conditions through which vulnerability may later develop. Networks cannot become mechanisms of coercion unless they first possess the capacity to organize information, relationships, and collective behavior.

The theoretical foundation of social liability rests upon five interconnected propositions.

4.1 Institutional Decline and Network Dependence

The first proposition is that institutional decline increases dependence upon informal social networks. In societies where formal institutions

function effectively, individuals may rely upon legal systems, bureaucratic procedures, professional organizations, and state authorities to access protection and resources. As institutional capacity weakens, however, individuals increasingly depend upon family networks, tribal affiliations, religious communities, neighborhood relationships, and personal contacts.

This process has been widely observed in fragile states and conflict environments. Communities frequently compensate for institutional weakness by relying upon informal systems of governance and support (Woolcock 1998; de Waal 2015). Social networks become more important because alternative sources of protection are unavailable or unreliable.

Proposition 1: Institutional decline increases dependence upon informal social networks.

4.2 Network Dependence and Social Visibility

The second proposition is that increased dependence generates increased social visibility. The more individuals rely upon social networks, the more visible they become through those networks. Family relationships, community memberships, tribal affiliations, religious identities, and social connections create information about who individuals are, where they belong, and how they are connected to others.

Visibility constitutes one of the central mechanisms linking social capital and social liability. Networks are valuable precisely because they generate information regarding identities, reputations, obligations, and patterns of behavior. Under ordinary conditions, this information facilitates trust, cooperation, and collective action. Under conditions of conflict, however, the same informational capacity may facilitate monitoring, categorization, surveillance, and targeting. Information itself becomes politically consequential.

Under ordinary circumstances, visibility may facilitate cooperation and trust. Communities function because members possess information about one another. However, visibility also creates exposure. The same social structures that generate support make individuals identifiable.

This insight connects social capital theory with conflict studies. Networks are valuable because they contain information. Yet information is not inherently beneficial. The consequences of information depend upon how it is utilized and by whom.

Proposition 2: Increased network dependence increases social visibility.

4.3 Political Polarization and Identity Activation

The third proposition concerns the role of political and social polarization. Visibility alone does not necessarily create vulnerability. Individuals become vulnerable when identities acquire heightened political significance. Under conditions of conflict, social categories such as ethnicity, tribe, religion, political affiliation, regional origin, or community membership often become increasingly salient.

Political actors, armed groups, and communities themselves begin categorizing individuals according to collective identities. Membership in a social group becomes a basis for inclusion, exclusion, suspicion, loyalty, or targeting. Visibility is transformed into vulnerability because identities become politically meaningful.

Research on ethnic conflict, civil war, and political violence consistently demonstrates the importance of this process (Petersen 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas 2006). Collective identities do not merely describe social reality. They become mechanisms through which power operates.

Proposition 3: Political polarization transforms social visibility into vulnerability.

4.4 Network Activation and the Organization of Violence

The fourth proposition concerns the activation of social networks by political and armed actors. Armed organizations rarely emerge independently of society. Research on insurgencies consistently demonstrates that recruitment, cohesion, intelligence gathering, and organizational durability frequently depend upon preexisting social networks (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Staniland 2014). Family ties, friendship networks, kinship systems, tribal affiliations, and local community structures provide the social infrastructure through which violence is organized.

Militias recruit through kinship networks. Insurgents gather intelligence through local contacts. Communities enforce norms through family relationships. States monitor dissent through neighborhood and community structures. Violence therefore travels through social pathways rather than operating independently of them.

The social liability framework extends these insights by emphasizing that network activation transforms relationships themselves into mechanisms of vulnerability. Social networks do not merely facilitate violence. They become embedded within the processes through which violence is organized, justified, and implemented.

Proposition 4: Armed and political actors utilize existing social networks for recruitment, surveillance, information gathering, mobilization, and targeting.

4.5 The Emergence of Social Liability

While the framework is presented sequentially for analytical clarity, the relationship between identity activation and network dependence should not be understood as strictly linear. Identity activation may emerge as a consequence of increased network dependence, but it may also function as an antecedent that intensifies reliance upon existing social relationships. Individuals experiencing heightened ethnic, tribal, religious, or political polarization frequently retreat into familiar networks perceived as trustworthy and protective. In such circumstances, identity activation strengthens bonding ties and reinforces network dependence. At the same time, increased dependence upon these networks further intensifies collective identities by increasing interaction, information exchange, and social monitoring within the group.

The relationship is therefore recursive rather than unidirectional. Identity activation and network dependence mutually reinforce one another through a feedback process in which heightened identity salience increases reliance upon social networks, while increased reliance upon social networks further strengthens identity boundaries. Under conditions of conflict and institutional decline, this recursive process may accelerate the transformation of social capital into social liability by increasing both social visibility and the political significance of group membership.

This sequence does not imply deterministic outcomes. Not every society experiencing institutional decline will produce social liability. Nor will every social network become a mechanism of coercion. Rather, the framework identifies conditions under which the likelihood of transformation increases.

Proposition 5: Social liability emerges when social visibility created by network dependence becomes politically consequential and subject to activation by social, political, or military actors.

4.6 Social Liability and Conflict

The implications of this framework extend beyond Sudan. Similar mechanisms appear across diverse forms of political violence and social control. Honor-based violence depends upon family and community surveillance. Apostasy accusations spread through religious and social networks. LGBTQ persecution frequently originates within families and communities rather than solely through formal institutions. Militant

recruitment relies upon friendship networks, kinship ties, and local relationships. Authoritarian regimes frequently utilize social structures to monitor populations and suppress dissent.

In each case, vulnerability emerges through social embeddedness. Individuals become exposed because they are known. Their relationships generate visibility. Their identities become legible. Their communities become channels through which power operates.

The Sudanese conflict provides a particularly valuable opportunity to observe these mechanisms because they occur simultaneously and at multiple levels of social organization. Tribal affiliations, kinship structures, patronage systems, militia recruitment networks, displacement patterns, and ethnic mobilization all reveal different dimensions of the same underlying process.

The concept of social liability therefore serves as a bridge between social capital theory and conflict studies. Social capital theory explains why networks matter. Conflict studies explain how violence operates. Social liability explains how the social relationships that sustain collective life may become the very mechanisms through which violence is organized, experienced, and reproduced. Violence frequently succeeds not because social networks collapse but because they endure. The persistence of social structure provides the informational and relational foundations through which coercion becomes possible.

The following section applies this framework to Sudan by examining the historical foundations of state formation, informal authority, and social organization that made the transformation of social capital into social liability possible long before the outbreak of the current civil war.

5 Historical Foundations: State Formation, Informal Authority, and Social Networks in Sudan

Understanding the contemporary conflict in Sudan requires situating it within the country's broader historical trajectory. The transformation of social capital into social liability did not emerge suddenly with the outbreak of civil war in 2023, nor did it originate solely with the rise of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) or the Darfur conflict. Rather, it reflects long-term patterns of state formation, political exclusion, informal governance, and social organization that have shaped Sudanese society for generations. The contemporary conflict represents the culmination of historical processes through which formal institutions remained unevenly developed while informal networks became increasingly central to governance, security, economic survival, and political authority.

From the perspective of social liability, Sudan is particularly significant because it illustrates how social networks can simultaneously function as mechanisms of resilience and vulnerability. Throughout much of Sudan's modern history, state authority coexisted with powerful systems of informal governance. Tribal affiliations, kinship structures, religious networks, patronage relationships, and local leadership systems frequently exercised greater influence over everyday life than formal political institutions. These informal structures often compensated for the state's inability to provide security, justice, economic opportunity, and social welfare. While such arrangements contributed to social resilience under conditions of institutional weakness, they also created the social foundations through which relationships could later become mechanisms of surveillance, targeting, and coercion.

The historical roots of this pattern extend to the nineteenth century. Ottoman-Egyptian rule sought to establish centralized authority across a vast territory characterized by substantial ethnic, linguistic, ecological, and regional diversity. Yet state penetration remained uneven, particularly outside major urban centers and economically strategic regions. Local communities therefore continued to rely heavily upon tribal leaders, religious authorities, customary institutions, and kinship

networks to regulate social and economic life. Informal authority structures frequently possessed greater legitimacy than distant political institutions, reinforcing the importance of local social relationships as mechanisms of governance and social organization (Johnson 2016).

The Mahdist movement of the late nineteenth century further illustrates the political significance of social networks in Sudanese history. The success of the Mahdist revolution depended not only upon military mobilization but also upon the activation of preexisting religious, tribal, and communal networks across geographically dispersed regions. Social relationships facilitated communication, recruitment, resource mobilization, and political coordination. The movement demonstrated how informal social structures could be transformed into powerful political organizations capable of challenging established authority. More importantly, it revealed that networks designed for social cohesion and religious solidarity could also serve as mechanisms of large-scale political mobilization.

The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956) institutionalized many of these dynamics through systems of indirect rule. Colonial administrators frequently governed through tribal leaders, local intermediaries, and traditional authorities rather than through direct bureaucratic administration (Daly 1991; Johnson 2016). Native Administration policies formalized the authority of tribal leaders and integrated communal identities into governance structures. Rather than replacing informal authority with universal state institutions, colonial governance reinforced the political significance of local identities and social networks.

This process had consequences extending far beyond the colonial period. Mamdani (1996) argues that indirect rule frequently transformed fluid social identities into administratively recognized political categories. In Sudan, tribal affiliation increasingly became linked to systems of governance, representation, and access to resources. Identities that had previously functioned primarily as social affiliations acquired growing political significance. The result was not merely the persistence of informal authority but the institutionalization of identity as a mechanism of governance.

Following independence in 1956, Sudan inherited a fragmented political structure characterized by uneven institutional development, regional disparities, and competing centers of authority. Rather than consolidating a universally accessible system of governance, postcolonial governments often relied upon existing patronage networks, local intermediaries, and communal structures to exercise control. Formal governmental institutions existed alongside deeply entrenched systems of informal authority. Tribal leaders, religious figures, local elites, and patronage brokers continued to mediate access to resources, protection, dispute resolution, and political influence.

The relationship between the political center and the periphery became one of the defining features of Sudanese political development. Power, investment, administrative capacity, and economic opportunity were concentrated disproportionately within the Nile Valley and northern regions, while Darfur, Kordofan, eastern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and what later became South Sudan experienced varying degrees of political and economic marginalization (Johnson 2016; Jok 2001). Communities located outside the political center frequently relied upon local social structures to compensate for the absence of effective state institutions.

These conditions contributed to the expansion of patronage-based governance. Access to employment, security, land, education, and political influence often depended upon personal relationships rather than universal institutional procedures. Patronage networks linked local actors to political elites through systems of reciprocity, obligation, and political loyalty. Such arrangements provided certain forms of stability,

but they also reinforced dependence upon informal social structures. Individuals increasingly navigated political and economic life through relationships rather than through impartial institutions.

From the perspective of social liability, this dependence is particularly significant. Networks that provide access to resources simultaneously generate visibility. The more individuals depend upon informal systems, the more identifiable they become through those systems. Access to opportunities becomes linked to social relationships, while social relationships become increasingly relevant to political competition. The same networks that provide protection also create exposure.

The significance of patronage became particularly evident during the regime of Omar al-Bashir. After coming to power in 1989, Bashir's government relied extensively upon patronage, selective alliances, identity-based mobilization, and strategic co-optation to consolidate authority (de Waal 2015). Rather than replacing informal structures with stronger institutions, the regime frequently incorporated local networks into broader systems of political control. Loyalty was rewarded through access to resources, positions, and protection, while opposition was managed through fragmentation, selective repression, and divide-and-rule strategies.

This strategy further blurred the distinction between formal and informal authority. Political power increasingly depended upon the ability to mobilize networks of loyalty rather than solely upon institutional capacity. Tribal leaders, regional intermediaries, religious figures, militia commanders, and local elites became integrated into systems of governance that relied heavily upon personal relationships. Social capital became a central component of political power.

At the same time, these arrangements increased the political significance of social identity. Tribal affiliation, ethnic background, regional origin, and family relationships became increasingly important in determining access to opportunities and protection. Identities that had long existed within Sudanese society acquired heightened political salience as competition over resources intensified. Social relationships became mechanisms through which inclusion and exclusion were organized.

The consequences of these developments became particularly visible in Darfur. Environmental pressures, demographic changes, political marginalization, and competition over land and resources interacted with existing social structures to produce escalating tensions (Flint and de Waal 2008; Mamdani 2009; Prunier 2005). Importantly, these tensions did not arise simply because tribal or ethnic identities existed. Rather, they emerged because political and economic conditions transformed those identities into increasingly significant categories of mobilization, competition, and conflict.

The Darfur conflict therefore represents not a departure from Sudan's historical trajectory but an intensification of existing patterns. Networks that had long facilitated social organization became mechanisms through which political and military actors mobilized support, gathered information, enforced loyalties, and identified targets. Social relationships that once generated resilience under conditions of institutional weakness increasingly became integrated into systems of violence.

From the perspective of social liability, Sudan's history reveals a critical insight. The networks that later became instruments of coercion and vulnerability were not created by conflict itself. They existed long before violence escalated. Tribal affiliations, kinship ties, religious communities, and patronage systems historically served important social, economic, and political functions. What changed was the environment within which those networks operated. As institutions weakened, political competition intensified, collective identities became increasingly politicized, and armed actors expanded their influence, the functions of social relationships began to shift.

The historical significance of this transformation cannot be overstated. Sudan demonstrates that social liability emerges not because social capital disappears but because social capital becomes politically activated. The very networks that provide belonging, trust, cooperation, and support under one set of conditions may become mechanisms of surveillance, targeting, coercion, and violence under another. Understanding this transformation requires attention not only to conflict itself but also to the historical relationship between state formation, informal authority, and social organization.

These historical foundations set the stage for the emergence of one of the most consequential episodes in contemporary Sudanese history: the Darfur conflict. It was within Darfur that the transformation of social capital into social liability became particularly visible, as community identities, local knowledge, and social relationships were increasingly incorporated into systems of violence, displacement, and political mobilization.

6 Darfur, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Social Production of Violence

The conflict in Darfur provides one of the clearest illustrations of the transformation of social capital into social liability. While the violence that emerged in Darfur has frequently been described through the language of ethnic conflict, rebellion, counterinsurgency, and humanitarian catastrophe, such descriptions only partially explain the mechanisms through which violence was organized and sustained. The conflict was not merely a military confrontation between armed actors. It was also a social process that relied upon existing networks of identity, kinship, tribal affiliation, and local knowledge. Violence traveled through relationships. This observation is consistent with Tilly's (2003) argument that collective violence emerges through relational processes linking social groups, political actors, and organizational structures. Violence is therefore not simply imposed upon communities but often operates through the very relationships that connect individuals to one another.

The origins of the Darfur conflict extend beyond the formal outbreak of rebellion in 2003. For decades, the region experienced political marginalization, uneven economic development, environmental degradation, and increasing competition over land and resources. Desertification and population growth intensified pressures on agricultural and pastoral communities, while successive governments in Khartoum devoted limited attention to the structural challenges facing western Sudan (Johnson 2016; Flint and de Waal 2008). These pressures did not automatically produce violence. Rather, they interacted with existing social structures and political inequalities, gradually transforming local grievances into broader forms of political mobilization.

A critical feature of this transformation was the politicization of identity. Darfur has historically been characterized by complex patterns of interaction among diverse ethnic, tribal, and linguistic communities. Trade, intermarriage, migration, and local conflict resolution mechanisms frequently connected groups that later came to be portrayed as rigidly opposed. The categories that became central to the conflict were neither fixed nor inevitable. Instead, political actors increasingly framed local disputes through broader narratives of ethnic and regional competition (Mamdani 2009).

Petersen (2002) argues that ethnic violence frequently depends upon the activation of social identities through processes of fear, resentment, and collective threat perception. Such identities are not merely psychological categories but social realities maintained through networks of interaction. The Darfur case illustrates how these social identities became increasingly consequential as political competition and insecurity intensified. Social identities that had long functioned

primarily as mechanisms of belonging and social organization became politically activated. Tribal affiliation, community membership, and local relationships acquired new significance as markers through which individuals and communities could be categorized. Visibility increasingly became vulnerability.

The emergence of armed rebellion further accelerated these dynamics. Groups such as the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) challenged the authority of the central government, citing political exclusion, economic marginalization, and unequal development. The government's response relied heavily upon local militia mobilization rather than exclusively upon conventional military forces. This strategy fundamentally altered the relationship between social structure and violence.

Rather than creating entirely new organizations, government authorities frequently drew upon existing tribal and community networks to recruit and mobilize armed actors. Many of the militias later associated with the Janjaweed emerged through preexisting systems of kinship, local authority, and regional affiliation (Prunier 2005; de Waal 2007). Recruitment often depended upon personal relationships, tribal loyalties, and established patterns of trust. The organizational foundations of violence were therefore deeply embedded within existing social structures.

To understand this transformation, it is necessary to distinguish between the horizontal, trust-based networks of kinship that characterize local community relations and the highly vertical, co-opted patronage structures deployed by the al-Bashir regime. The mobilization of militias was not simply an organic activation of communal solidarity; rather, it represents the deliberate intersection of state-sponsored resources with traditional authority systems. The state injected resources—including modern weaponry, financial stipends, vehicles, and political impunity—into local contexts where economic grievances and environmental degradation had already strained inter-communal relations. By bypassing or co-opting traditional tribal leadership (such as the Native Administration), the regime created alternative, vertical patronage lines. Horizontal ties of mutual assistance and community trust were thus instrumentally reoriented and subsumed under hierarchical command structures, transforming kinship networks into efficient conduits for state-sponsored military mobilization.

This pattern highlights an important feature of social liability. The same social capital that facilitates cooperation can also facilitate mobilization for violence. Trust, reciprocity, and shared identity make collective action possible regardless of the specific objectives being pursued. Social networks that ordinarily strengthen community resilience may therefore become mechanisms through which armed organizations recruit members, coordinate activities, and establish authority.

The role of local knowledge further illustrates this transformation. Armed actors rarely possess complete information about local populations. Identifying political opponents, locating communities, distinguishing allies from enemies, and assessing local loyalties requires information that is often embedded within social networks. During the Darfur conflict, local knowledge became a strategic resource. Information regarding family affiliations, tribal memberships, village locations, economic activities, and community leadership structures frequently circulated through existing social relationships.

Consequently, individuals often became vulnerable because they were socially embedded. Their identities, relationships, and affiliations were known within the communities in which they lived. Networks that ordinarily generated belonging and support simultaneously generated visibility. Once political and military actors began utilizing this information, social embeddedness became a source of risk.

The violence directed against non-Arab communities in Darfur demonstrates the significance of these mechanisms. Numerous investigations documented systematic attacks against villages identified with particular ethnic groups, including the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa populations (Human Rights Watch 2004; Flint and de Waal 2008). These attacks frequently relied upon detailed local knowledge. Communities were not targeted randomly. Rather, violence often reflected the ability of armed actors to identify populations through social and geographic information embedded within local networks.

Hagan and Rymond-Richmond (2008) argue that violence in Darfur was not simply a consequence of spontaneous ethnic hostility but reflected organized processes of social categorization, political identification, and collective targeting. Their analysis highlights how identities became operationalized within systems of violence. From the perspective of social liability, this process demonstrates how social categories become actionable because they are embedded within preexisting networks of social knowledge.

6.1 Local Knowledge, Selective Violence, and Social Liability

One of the most significant contributions of recent conflict scholarship has been the recognition that violence is often highly selective rather than indiscriminate. Kalyvas (2006) argues that armed actors rarely possess complete information regarding local populations and therefore depend heavily upon civilians, informants, and existing social networks to identify opponents, collaborators, and potential targets. Violence, in this view, is not simply a product of military capability but also of information. Those who possess local knowledge acquire the ability to shape patterns of coercion and targeting.

The Darfur conflict illustrates the importance of this insight. Armed groups operating across vast territories faced substantial informational constraints. Identifying communities, locating individuals, distinguishing friend from foe, and assessing local loyalties required access to detailed social knowledge that could not be obtained solely through formal intelligence systems. Consequently, information embedded within local social relationships became a strategic resource. Family ties, tribal affiliations, village networks, economic relationships, and community contacts provided the information necessary to transform broad political objectives into specific acts of violence.

This informational dimension of conflict reveals a limitation within much of the existing social capital literature. Social capital is frequently understood as a mechanism facilitating cooperation through the efficient flow of information (Coleman 1988; Burt 2005). Yet information itself is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful. The consequences of information depend upon the social and political environment in which it is used. Under ordinary circumstances, information circulating through networks may facilitate trust, reciprocity, and collective problem-solving. Under conditions of conflict, the same information may facilitate surveillance, exclusion, and targeting.

The Darfur case demonstrates how this transformation occurs. Individuals often became vulnerable because their identities were widely known within their communities. Family relationships revealed kinship affiliations. Village residence revealed ethnic and tribal identity. Economic relationships revealed patterns of association and movement. Social embeddedness generated visibility. Once conflict actors sought to identify populations associated with particular communities or political loyalties, the informational advantages generated by social capital became mechanisms of exposure.

The concept of social liability helps explain this transformation. Existing approaches often describe local information as a resource utilized by armed actors. Social liability shifts analytical attention toward the consequences of possessing identifiable social relationships.

Individuals become vulnerable not merely because information exists but because they are embedded within networks that continuously generate information about who they are, where they belong, and how they are connected to others. Visibility becomes a byproduct of social membership itself.

This process is particularly evident in conflicts characterized by identity-based mobilization. When ethnic, tribal, religious, or regional affiliations become politically salient, social information acquires heightened significance. Relationships that ordinarily facilitate belonging become mechanisms through which individuals are categorized and evaluated. Social networks effectively transform collective identities into operational categories. Violence follows these social pathways because the underlying information is already embedded within existing relationships.

The experiences of numerous communities in Darfur reflect this dynamic. Villages were frequently targeted not because individual residents had engaged in specific acts of political opposition but because they were associated with broader social categories. Ethnic identity became visible through community membership. Community membership became visible through social relationships. Social networks therefore served as the informational infrastructure through which violence could be organized.

This perspective extends Kalyvas's emphasis on local knowledge by identifying a deeper sociological mechanism. The critical issue is not simply that armed actors require information. Rather, the production and circulation of information are themselves embedded within social structure. Networks generate visibility. Visibility generates vulnerability. Violence becomes possible because social relationships make populations legible to those seeking to exercise power over them.

Building upon earlier work on corporate social capital and liability (Leenders and Gabbay 1999), the Darfur conflict suggests that network liabilities may operate far beyond organizational settings. Entire communities may experience forms of social liability when the relationships that ordinarily provide social support become mechanisms through which individuals are identified, monitored, categorized, and targeted. Social capital does not disappear under such conditions. It is transformed into a form of social exposure.

From this perspective, one of the central sociological lessons of Darfur is that violence often follows preexisting social pathways. Armed actors may initiate violence, but the ability to implement violence depends upon information embedded within networks of belonging. The social structures that ordinarily sustain collective life become the channels through which coercion is organized. Understanding this transformation is essential for understanding not only Darfur but also the broader relationship between social networks and political violence.

The experiences of the Masalit community provide one of the clearest contemporary examples of social liability. Throughout multiple phases of the conflict, Masalit populations experienced displacement, targeted violence, and repeated attacks. Reports by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and humanitarian organizations documented large-scale attacks in and around El Geneina during 2023 and 2024. These attacks were not random. They reflected the ability of armed actors to identify populations associated with particular communal identities. The visibility of those identities was rooted in social structure itself. Community membership, family relationships, residential patterns, and local affiliations generated information that facilitated targeting. The result was a form of collective vulnerability rooted in social embeddedness.

From the perspective of social liability, the significance of these events lies not only in the violence itself but in the mechanisms through which violence occurred. Communities became vulnerable

because their identities remained embedded within social structures. Ethnicity functioned not merely as a cultural characteristic but as a social category that organized information and facilitated identification. Social relationships became pathways through which targeting was made possible.

The conflict also demonstrates how violence can transform the functions of local authority structures. Tribal leaders, community representatives, and local intermediaries often occupy positions that connect multiple social networks. Under ordinary circumstances, such actors may facilitate dispute resolution, resource allocation, and community coordination. During conflict, however, these same positions may become politically consequential. Local leaders may be pressured to provide information, mobilize supporters, or align with particular factions. Their embeddedness within social networks creates both influence and vulnerability.

The concept of social liability helps explain why conflict frequently extends beyond direct combatants. Traditional military analysis often focuses on armed organizations and battlefield dynamics. Yet many of the most significant consequences of the Darfur conflict were experienced by civilians. Communities became targets because of their social identities, affiliations, and relationships rather than because of direct participation in armed activities. Social visibility transformed entire populations into objects of political and military action.

The Darfur conflict therefore demonstrates that violence frequently depends upon the persistence rather than the collapse of social structure. Communities became vulnerable not because social networks disappeared but because they remained intact. Relationships generated information. Information generated visibility. Visibility generated vulnerability. Armed actors were able to mobilize violence because identities remained embedded within networks of belonging, trust, and social organization.

From the perspective of social liability, Darfur represents more than a regional conflict. It provides a sociological illustration of how social capital can be transformed under conditions of political polarization and institutional decline. The networks that once facilitated cooperation, reciprocity, and collective survival increasingly became mechanisms through which coercion, targeting, and exclusion were organized. Violence followed social pathways because social structure itself provided the informational foundations upon which violence depended.

The significance of this transformation extends beyond Sudan. Similar processes can be observed in ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, authoritarian systems, honor-based violence, and other forms of identity-based coercion. Darfur therefore serves not only as an empirical case but also as a theoretical demonstration of how social liability emerges. The networks, militias, and patronage structures that developed during the conflict would subsequently contribute to the rise of a powerful new actor whose influence would extend far beyond Darfur itself: the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The next section examines how localized systems of mobilization evolved into a national military organization and how social liability became increasingly institutionalized within Sudan's broader political landscape.

7 Displacement, Refugee Networks, and the Reproduction of Social Liability

One of the most visible consequences of contemporary civil war is displacement. Armed conflict disrupts communities, destroys livelihoods, fragments families, and forces populations to seek safety beyond their places of origin. Conventional analyses typically approach displacement primarily as a humanitarian phenomenon characterized by loss, vulnerability, and social dislocation. While these dimensions are

undoubtedly important, displacement also reveals a deeper sociological reality. Individuals rarely flee conflict as isolated actors. They move through networks. Information, resources, transportation, shelter, employment, and survival frequently depend upon social relationships. Consequently, displacement provides a particularly valuable setting in which to examine both the benefits and liabilities of social capital under conditions of extreme insecurity.

The Sudanese conflict has produced one of the largest displacement crises in the contemporary world. Since the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023, millions of Sudanese have been displaced internally or forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries, including Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Central African Republic (UNHCR 2024; IDMC 2024). Entire communities have been uprooted from Khartoum, West Darfur, North Darfur, Gezira State, and other regions affected by fighting. The scale of displacement has generated immense humanitarian challenges while simultaneously demonstrating the central role of social networks in shaping survival strategies.

Social capital scholarship has long emphasized the importance of networks during periods of crisis. Aldrich (2012) argues that social relationships often prove more important than physical infrastructure in determining resilience following disasters and large-scale disruptions. Communities characterized by stronger networks frequently recover more effectively because social ties facilitate information sharing, mutual aid, and collective action. Similar findings appear throughout refugee and migration research, where kinship networks, friendship ties, and community affiliations routinely influence decisions regarding movement, settlement, and adaptation (Massey et al. 1993; Jacobsen 2006).

The Sudanese case strongly supports these observations. Many displaced individuals relied upon relatives, tribal contacts, religious communities, neighbors, and personal acquaintances to obtain information regarding safe routes, transportation options, shelter opportunities, and humanitarian assistance. Decisions regarding whether to flee to Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, or other destinations were often influenced by the presence of preexisting social connections. Networks reduced uncertainty and provided practical resources necessary for survival. Social capital functioned as an essential coping mechanism during crisis.

Yet focusing exclusively on these benefits obscures a more complicated reality. The concept of social liability suggests that displacement may simultaneously reproduce many of the vulnerabilities that individuals seek to escape. The same networks that facilitate survival often preserve visibility. The same relationships that provide protection may continue to expose individuals to monitoring, pressure, exclusion, or retaliation. Displacement therefore reveals a paradox at the center of social life: individuals depend upon networks for survival while remaining vulnerable because of those same networks.

7.1 Displacement Without Anonymity: The Persistence of Social Liability Across Space

Conventional understandings of refuge often assume that physical distance reduces vulnerability. Individuals flee dangerous environments, cross borders, and establish new lives elsewhere. Safety is frequently imagined as a function of geographic separation. The social liability framework suggests a more complicated possibility. In highly networked societies, displacement may alter geography without eliminating visibility.

Historically, physical movement sometimes enabled individuals to disappear from existing social environments. Contemporary displacement often functions differently. Mobile communication technologies, social media platforms, diaspora networks, humanitarian registration

systems, and transnational family connections allow information to circulate across vast geographic distances. Individuals frequently remain embedded within social relationships long after leaving their original communities. Family members continue communicating. Community networks remain active. Information regarding location, activities, affiliations, and personal circumstances continues to circulate.

As a result, displacement frequently fails to produce anonymity. Individuals may leave particular places while remaining socially visible. The liabilities associated with social embeddedness therefore persist because the underlying relationships continue to exist. Geography changes, but social structure often remains remarkably resilient.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in cases involving identity-based persecution. Ethnic, tribal, religious, political, and communal identities do not disappear during displacement. Communities often reconstruct themselves in refugee camps, urban settlements, and diaspora environments. Social categories that contributed to vulnerability in the country of origin may continue shaping opportunities and constraints after migration. The social foundations of visibility travel with displaced populations.

The Sudanese experience illustrates this process clearly. Communities displaced from Darfur frequently maintain extensive connections with relatives and acquaintances who remain in Sudan or who have relocated elsewhere. Information regarding family members, political developments, security conditions, and community affairs continues to circulate through these networks. Such connections provide valuable support but also maintain forms of social visibility that may generate continuing vulnerability.

7.2 Networks of Survival and Networks of Control

The dual role of social networks becomes particularly evident when examining how displaced populations access resources. Refugees and internally displaced persons frequently depend upon community relationships to locate housing, employment, food assistance, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Social networks function as informal welfare systems that compensate for institutional shortcomings.

However, dependence creates obligations. Individuals embedded within networks often encounter expectations regarding behavior, loyalty, identity, and participation. Community relationships may generate support while simultaneously limiting autonomy. The liabilities associated with network membership do not disappear simply because populations have crossed borders or relocated to safer areas.

Research on refugee communities consistently demonstrates that social networks can simultaneously facilitate integration and reproduce social control (Jacobsen 2006; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). Community structures frequently preserve cultural traditions, collective identities, and mutual support systems. Yet these same structures may also reinforce existing hierarchies, monitor individual behavior, and constrain social mobility. Social capital and social liability frequently coexist within the same relationships.

This observation is particularly important because it challenges simplistic distinctions between protection and vulnerability. Networks rarely function exclusively as one or the other. Rather, they generate both simultaneously. The same family that provides shelter may impose obligations. The same community that offers protection may restrict autonomy. The same diaspora organization that facilitates adaptation may reproduce political divisions originating in the country of origin.

7.3 The Reproduction of Social Liability Across Borders

The persistence of social liability becomes even more visible when examining transnational networks. Sudanese diaspora communities have played a crucial role in supporting displaced populations through

remittances, advocacy, humanitarian assistance, and information sharing. These networks frequently provide resources unavailable through formal institutions. They represent important forms of social capital operating across national boundaries.

At the same time, transnational networks may reproduce many of the social dynamics associated with conflict. Political divisions, ethnic tensions, communal rivalries, and identity-based conflicts often extend beyond the territorial boundaries of the state. Diaspora communities may become sites in which old disputes are maintained, reinterpreted, and transmitted across generations. Social relationships extend both support and vulnerability across space.

The persistence of these dynamics suggests that displacement should be understood not simply as population movement but as the relocation of social structure. Communities do not disappear when they move. Networks do not dissolve when borders are crossed. Rather, social relationships are reconstructed within new environments. The liabilities associated with those relationships frequently travel alongside the resources they provide.

Displacement does not eliminate social liability. In many cases it relocates and reproduces it. Refugees frequently remain embedded within networks that extend across national boundaries. Information regarding personal behavior, political activities, religious beliefs, family relationships, and community affiliations may continue to circulate despite geographic separation. Consequently, vulnerability often persists after migration because the social structures through which information travels remain intact. Social liability may therefore operate transnationally as well as locally. The persistence of these connections demonstrates that vulnerability is often rooted less in physical location than in social embeddedness.

The comparative significance of this pattern should not be underestimated. Across diverse conflict environments, displaced populations frequently remain connected to the very social structures that shaped vulnerability in their countries of origin. Family networks, communal affiliations, religious institutions, and diaspora organizations continue to generate information, obligations, expectations, and forms of social monitoring. The persistence of these relationships suggests that displacement often changes the geography of vulnerability without fully eliminating its social foundations.

7.4 Social Liability, Displacement, and Conflict Beyond Sudan

The patterns observed in Sudan are not unique. Similar dynamics have been documented among displaced populations from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and numerous other conflict environments. Refugees routinely depend upon networks for survival while remaining vulnerable because of their continued social embeddedness. Identity, affiliation, and visibility continue shaping experiences long after physical displacement occurs.

This broader pattern suggests that social liability may provide an important framework for understanding displacement in conflict settings generally. Migration does not necessarily eliminate vulnerability because vulnerability often originates within social relationships rather than geographic locations. Individuals remain connected to the networks through which information circulates and identities are recognized. Consequently, relocation may reduce certain forms of risk while leaving others intact.

The Sudanese case demonstrates that displacement changes geography but often does not fundamentally alter social structure. Communities move. Networks move with them. Social capital continues generating resilience, support, information, and collective action. Yet social liability continues generating visibility, dependency, monitoring,

and vulnerability. The two remain inseparable because they emerge from the same underlying social relationships.

Understanding this dual reality is essential for understanding both the experiences of displaced populations and the broader sociology of conflict. Violence does not necessarily end at the moment of flight. Its social consequences frequently persist through the networks that survivors carry with them. The movement of people is therefore also the movement of relationships, identities, obligations, and forms of social exposure.

These observations point toward a broader theoretical conclusion. If social liability can be observed in militia mobilization, communal violence, political repression, and displacement, it may represent a more general sociological process rather than a phenomenon specific to Sudan. While Sudan provides a particularly powerful illustration of these dynamics, similar mechanisms can be observed across a wide range of conflict environments and systems of social control. The next section therefore expands beyond the Sudanese case and considers social liability as a broader framework for understanding conflict, coercion, vulnerability, and social control across diverse social settings.

8 Social Liability as a General theory of Conflict

The Sudanese case suggests that social liability is not merely a country-specific phenomenon but rather a broader sociological process observable across diverse forms of conflict, political violence, and social control. While Sudan provides a particularly powerful illustration of how social networks can be transformed into mechanisms of vulnerability, similar patterns appear repeatedly across societies characterized by institutional weakness, political instability, communal conflict, and normative enforcement. The transformation of social capital into social liability may therefore represent a more general mechanism linking social structure to violence.

This argument challenges conventional approaches that often treat different forms of violence as distinct phenomena requiring separate explanations. Civil wars, ethnic conflicts, militant insurgencies, honor-based violence, religious persecution, political repression, and social exclusion are frequently studied as independent categories of social behavior. Yet despite important differences, these phenomena often rely upon remarkably similar social mechanisms. In each case, existing social relationships become channels through which information circulates, identities are categorized, loyalties are enforced, and deviance is punished. Violence does not operate independently of social structure. It moves through networks.

The operation of social liability is particularly visible in ethnic violence. Research on Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and other cases demonstrates that violence rarely emerges solely from ideological directives issued by political leaders. Successful campaigns of ethnic targeting depend upon local knowledge, community participation, and social visibility. Armed actors must identify who belongs to which group, where targeted populations reside, and how they are connected to others. Such information is rarely available through formal institutions alone. Rather, it is embedded within social relationships. Communities become vulnerable because social networks make identities visible. Violence becomes possible because people are known.

This observation is consistent with Kalyvas's (2006) argument that violence frequently depends upon local information and community-level knowledge rather than solely upon centralized command structures. It is also consistent with Tilly's (2003) emphasis on the relational foundations of collective violence. Violence succeeds not merely because armed actors possess coercive capacity but because they are able to access

the social information necessary to identify, categorize, and target populations.

Insurgencies reveal similar dynamics. Studies of armed mobilization consistently demonstrate that recruitment occurs disproportionately through friendship networks, kinship structures, tribal affiliations, religious communities, and local social contacts (Weinstein 2007; Staniland 2014). Individuals rarely join insurgent organizations as isolated actors. Participation often emerges through trusted relationships that reduce uncertainty and provide social validation. The same networks that facilitate recruitment may also expose individuals to retaliation, surveillance, and coercion. Social capital creates organizational capacity while simultaneously generating vulnerability.

Authoritarian systems similarly rely upon social liability. While states possess formal institutions of surveillance and coercion, they frequently govern through social relationships rather than independently of them. Informal informants, neighborhood committees, family structures, workplace relationships, and community organizations often become mechanisms through which compliance is monitored and dissent identified. Individuals become vulnerable because they are socially embedded within networks capable of transmitting information. Social visibility becomes a resource for political control.

The concept of social liability is particularly useful in understanding honor-based violence. Honor systems depend upon dense social networks capable of monitoring behavior and communicating information regarding perceived norm violations. Families do not operate as isolated units. They exist within broader systems of social observation in which reputation is collectively constructed and evaluated. The effectiveness of honor enforcement derives from social visibility. Individuals become vulnerable because their behavior is observed, interpreted, and communicated through networks of relatives, neighbors, and community members. The family simultaneously functions as a source of protection and a mechanism of coercion. Social capital becomes social liability.

Religious persecution frequently follows similar patterns. Research on apostasy, religious conversion, and minority faith communities demonstrates that vulnerability often emerges through social relationships rather than through formal legal institutions alone. Family members, community leaders, neighbors, and religious networks frequently serve as the first mechanisms of enforcement. Information regarding religious deviation circulates through existing social ties. Social embeddedness generates exposure. Individuals become vulnerable because they remain connected to communities capable of identifying and sanctioning nonconformity.

The persecution of LGBTQ individuals likewise illustrates the operation of social liability. Across many societies, the most immediate threats frequently originate from families, communities, and social networks rather than solely from state institutions. Disclosure, suspicion, rumor, and perceived nonconformity spread through existing relationships. Networks that ordinarily provide belonging become mechanisms of exclusion. Visibility becomes vulnerability because social relationships create knowledge about identity.

Forced migration and displacement provide another example. As demonstrated in the Sudanese case, relocation often alters geography without fundamentally altering social structure. Refugees and displaced persons continue to depend upon networks of family, ethnicity, religion, and community. These relationships provide resources and protection while simultaneously maintaining visibility. Social liability persists because networks survive movement across space.

Across these diverse contexts, a common pattern emerges. Institutional weakness, social polarization, and political conflict increase dependence upon social networks. Dependence generates visibility. Visibility creates opportunities for monitoring, categorization, and

control. Political and social actors activate existing relationships in pursuit of particular objectives. Vulnerability emerges not despite social embeddedness but because of it.

The process can be summarized as follows:

Institutional Decline
Increased Dependence on Social Networks
Greater Social Visibility
Identity Activation and Political Polarization
Network Mobilization
Social Liability
Coercion, Targeting, Exclusion, or Violence

The significance of this framework lies in its ability to bridge previously disconnected areas of scholarship. Social capital theory explains why networks matter. Conflict studies explain how violence operates. Social liability explains how social relationships themselves become transformed under conditions of instability and conflict. The concept therefore provides a common analytical language for understanding phenomena that are often studied separately.

8.1 Social Liability and the Dark Side of Social Capital

The concept of social liability differs from Portes' (1998) influential discussion of the "dark side of social capital" in both scope and theoretical focus. Portes emphasized how social networks may generate negative consequences for members, including excessive obligations, restrictions on individual freedom, exclusion of outsiders, and downward leveling norms. These outcomes emerge from the operation of social capital itself and represent costs associated with participation in otherwise functional networks.

Social liability identifies a different sociological process. Rather than focusing on negative outcomes generated by network membership, it examines circumstances in which the primary function of social relationships undergoes transformation. Under conditions of institutional decline, political polarization, violent conflict, or authoritarian control, networks cease functioning primarily as mechanisms of support and increasingly become mechanisms of surveillance, categorization, coercion, targeting, and vulnerability.

The distinction is therefore one of degree and function. In Portes' framework, networks continue to operate primarily as supportive structures despite generating certain costs. In the social liability framework, the dominant function of the network itself shifts. The network is no longer merely a source of obligations or exclusion; it becomes an instrument through which power is exercised and vulnerability is produced.

This distinction is particularly important in conflict settings. Individuals targeted during civil wars, ethnic violence, political repression, religious persecution, or honor-based violence often become vulnerable not because they lack social connections, but because their social connections render them visible and identifiable. Social liability therefore extends beyond the dark side of social capital by explaining how networks themselves become embedded within systems of coercion and violence. The concept focuses not simply on the costs of belonging but on the transformation of social embeddedness into a mechanism of exposure.

At the same time, social liability is not intended to explain all forms of violence. Some forms of coercion emerge primarily through state institutions, economic incentives, criminal organizations, or ideological movements that operate with limited dependence upon local social networks. The framework is therefore most applicable to environments in which social relationships remain important sources of information, identity, and collective organization. Future comparative research

should examine the conditions under which social liability becomes more or less significant relative to alternative mechanisms of violence.

Furthermore, the applicability of the social liability framework is bounded by the technological and organizational nature of the conflict environment. In highly centralized authoritarian states characterized by digital surveillance, biometrics, and algorithmic tracking, the relational, face-to-face visibility described here may play a secondary role. In such high-technology settings, exposure is produced through state-controlled data infrastructure rather than local community relations. Consequently, the social liability model is most powerful in low-technology, network-dependent civil conflicts where state capacity is weak or fragmented, and where armed actors must rely on the co-optation of existing local relationships to identify, categorize, and target individuals.

In addition, the mechanisms of social liability operate differently across urban and rural environments due to variations in network density and stability. In rural, tribal settings, social networks are typically dense, overlapping, and highly stable, which facilitates deep social monitoring and renders individual identities highly visible and hard to obscure. In contrast, urban conflict settings present more transient, fragmented, and anonymous social structures. In these urban environments, while the lack of dense networks may reduce the immediate visibility of traditional affiliations, the fragmentation of networks can lead to alternative forms of categorization based on neighborhood residence, occupational groups, or ad-hoc security committees. The transformation of social capital into social liability in urban spaces is thus less reliant on deep kinship ties and more dependent on temporary coalition building and spatial segregation.

Similarly, strong social capital does not inevitably produce social liability. In many contexts social networks generate resilience, trust, cooperation, conflict resolution, and collective efficacy (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000; Woolcock 1998; Aldrich 2012). The framework developed here therefore does not suggest that dense networks are inherently dangerous. Rather, it argues that changing political and institutional conditions alter the functions of those networks. Social liability emerges not because social capital is absent but because the social environment transforms how networks operate.

Sudan provides an especially clear illustration of this process because multiple forms of social liability operate simultaneously. Yet the theoretical implications extend far beyond a single conflict. The framework developed here suggests that violence is often rooted not in the breakdown of social structure but in its persistence. Networks endure. Relationships endure. Identities endure. Under certain conditions, these enduring structures become pathways through which power and violence operate.

More broadly, the concept of social liability suggests that sociologists should pay greater attention to the changing functions of social relationships rather than treating networks as inherently beneficial or harmful. Social relationships are dynamic structures whose consequences depend upon political, institutional, and historical context. The same network may generate trust under one set of conditions and vulnerability under another. Understanding these transformations remains essential for explaining not only conflict but also resilience, social control, political mobilization, and collective action.

The question that follows is therefore not only how social liability emerges, but how societies can reverse the process. If conflict transforms social capital into social liability, what conditions are necessary for transforming liability back into social capital? This question is particularly important for societies emerging from prolonged violence and institutional collapse. The final substantive section addresses this challenge by examining social liability, reconstruction, reconciliation, and state building.

9 Social Liability, Reconstruction, and State Building

If social liability helps explain how conflict emerges and persists, an equally important question concerns how societies move beyond it. Understanding the transformation of social capital into social liability is only part of the story. Post-conflict societies must also confront the challenge of rebuilding trust, restoring institutional legitimacy, and transforming relationships that have become associated with coercion and vulnerability.

Conventional approaches to post-conflict reconstruction frequently emphasize security sector reform, constitutional development, elections, economic recovery, and state capacity. These objectives are unquestionably important. Stable institutions provide predictability, reduce uncertainty, and create mechanisms through which disputes can be managed peacefully. Yet the Sudanese case suggests that reconstruction involves more than rebuilding institutions. Conflict alters the social foundations upon which institutions depend. Relationships that once generated trust become associated with fear. Communities become divided by experiences of violence, displacement, collaboration, and victimization. Social networks themselves are transformed.

One of the central lessons of Sudan is that conflict reshapes the meaning of social relationships. Individuals learn to view social visibility as a source of risk. Trust becomes increasingly restricted to narrow circles of kinship and community. Informal networks become mechanisms of protection because formal institutions are unable or unwilling to provide security. While such adaptations may be necessary during conflict, they can become obstacles to long-term stability after violence subsides.

The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital provides a useful framework for understanding this challenge (Putnam 2000; Woolcock 1998). Bonding social capital strengthens relationships within groups and communities. During periods of conflict, bonding ties often become stronger because survival depends upon trusted networks. These relationships provide emotional support, information, and material assistance. However, they may also reinforce social boundaries and deepen divisions between groups.

Bridging social capital, by contrast, connects individuals across ethnic, tribal, religious, regional, and political boundaries. Such relationships are particularly important in post-conflict societies because they create opportunities for cooperation among communities that may have experienced prolonged periods of hostility. Reconstruction therefore requires not only the preservation of social capital but also its transformation. Networks must become less exclusive and more inclusive. Relationships must become mechanisms of cooperation rather than mechanisms of surveillance and coercion.

This argument is consistent with Varshney's (2002) research on ethnic conflict, which demonstrates that sustained intercommunal relationships can reduce the likelihood of violence even in highly polarized environments. Networks that connect communities across social boundaries may therefore serve as important safeguards against the emergence of social liability. Reconstruction requires not only rebuilding trust within communities but also rebuilding trust between communities.

Research on peacebuilding similarly emphasizes the importance of restoring social relationships. Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable peace requires rebuilding the relational foundations of society rather than merely negotiating political settlements. Likewise, studies of social capital and community resilience suggest that long-term stability depends upon the capacity of communities to generate trust, reciprocity, and cooperation across social divisions (Putnam 2000; Woolcock 1998; Aldrich 2012). From the perspective of social liability, reconstruction

requires reversing the processes through which visibility became vulnerability and social relationships became mechanisms of coercion.

Seen from this perspective, reconstruction can be understood as the inverse of the social liability process. If institutional decline increased dependence upon informal networks, reconstruction seeks to expand institutional capacity. If dependence produced vulnerability through excessive visibility, reconstruction seeks to create neutral institutional protections that reduce the risks associated with social exposure. If political polarization transformed identities into mechanisms of conflict, reconstruction seeks to create conditions under which identities become less politically threatening. The restoration of peace therefore requires more than ending violence. It requires reversing the social processes through which liability emerged.

Institutional development plays a critical role in this process. Effective institutions reduce dependence upon narrow systems of patronage and communal protection by providing more universal access to security, justice, education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. When individuals can rely upon institutions, they become less dependent upon potentially coercive social networks. Strong institutions therefore reduce the conditions under which social liability emerges.

However, this institutional approach must be qualified by recognizing that post-conflict state institutions are rarely neutral or benevolent. In many transition contexts, formal state structures—such as judiciaries, police forces, and administrative bodies—are captured by dominant factions or partisan actors. When captured, these institutions do not reduce social liability; instead, they weaponize it, utilizing formal state authority to reinforce surveillance, carry out identity-based targeting, and entrench sectarian patronage systems. Consequently, institutional reconstruction can only avoid reproducing social liability if it incorporates robust horizontal accountability, decentralization of administrative power, and inclusive oversight mechanisms. Rather than merely rebuilding state capacity, peacebuilding must prioritize the democratization and impartiality of public administration to ensure that formal institutions do not simply become modernized instruments of factional coercion.

This observation highlights an important feature of the social liability framework. Social liability does not emerge because social networks exist. Networks are universal features of human society. Rather, social liability emerges when networks become the primary mechanisms through which individuals access security and resources in environments characterized by institutional weakness and political polarization. Strengthening institutions therefore reduces the likelihood that social relationships will become coercive.

Reconciliation efforts are equally important. Societies emerging from conflict frequently confront deep reservoirs of mistrust that cannot be resolved through institutional reforms alone. Truth commissions, local dialogue initiatives, community reconciliation programs, and mechanisms of accountability may help rebuild relationships across social divides. While such efforts are often imperfect, they address the relational dimensions of conflict that traditional reconstruction strategies sometimes overlook.

This observation highlights an often-overlooked challenge of post-conflict recovery. Reconstruction efforts frequently focus upon restoring institutions while assuming that social relationships will recover naturally. Yet communities emerging from prolonged violence may continue to interpret visibility as dangerous and trust as risky. Rebuilding infrastructure may therefore prove easier than rebuilding social confidence. Post-conflict reconstruction must address both institutional capacity and the relational consequences of social liability if sustainable peace is to emerge.

Displacement presents an additional challenge. Millions of displaced persons may eventually return to communities transformed by violence

or establish new lives elsewhere. Their ability to rebuild livelihoods and develop stable social relationships depends heavily upon the availability of inclusive institutions and opportunities for integration. Reconstruction therefore requires attention not only to physical infrastructure but also to the social conditions that enable displaced populations to develop new forms of belonging.

The concept of social liability also suggests that reconstruction should be evaluated differently than it often is. Success should not be measured solely by the absence of violence or the presence of formal institutions. Equally important is whether social relationships are becoming less coercive and more supportive. Are individuals increasingly able to rely upon institutions rather than patronage networks? Are communities developing connections across social divides? Are social identities becoming less politically threatening? These questions provide important indicators of whether social liability is being transformed back into social capital.

Ultimately, the challenge facing Sudan and other post-conflict societies is not simply to end violence but to alter the social conditions that allow violence to travel through networks of belonging. Civil wars damage roads, buildings, economies, and institutions. Yet they also reshape trust, identity, and social relationships. Reconstruction therefore requires rebuilding the social foundations of collective life.

The broader implication of this analysis is that peace is not merely the absence of conflict. Peace is a condition in which social relationships function primarily as sources of support rather than sources of vulnerability. Societies achieve durable stability not when networks disappear, but when networks cease operating as mechanisms of surveillance, exclusion, and coercion. The ultimate goal of reconstruction is therefore not the elimination of social capital but its restoration.

From this perspective, the long-term challenge for Sudan is fundamentally sociological. The future stability of the country will depend not only upon political settlements, constitutional arrangements, or military outcomes but also upon whether social relationships can once again become foundations of trust rather than instruments of fear. Lasting peace requires rebuilding both institutions and relationships. The central lesson of the social liability framework is that conflict transforms the functions of social networks. Sustainable reconstruction requires transforming them once again. Understanding this process is essential not only for Sudan but for any society seeking to move from violence toward durable peace.

10 Conclusion

The Sudanese conflict reveals a fundamental sociological reality that is frequently overlooked in both conflict studies and social capital theory: violence is not simply imposed upon society by states, armies, militias, or political elites. Rather, violence often operates through the very social relationships that ordinarily sustain collective life. Family ties, tribal affiliations, community networks, patronage systems, and local identities provide belonging, trust, cooperation, and resilience under ordinary circumstances. Yet under conditions of institutional decline, political polarization, and violent conflict, these same relationships may become mechanisms of surveillance, coercion, exclusion, and victimization. The central argument of this paper has been that understanding this transformation is essential for understanding both the dynamics of conflict and the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction.

Building upon earlier work on corporate social capital and liability (Leenders and Gabbay 1999), this study has extended the concept of liability beyond organizational settings and into the analysis of civil war, state fragility, and political violence. The concept of social liability developed here refers to a condition in which social relationships

cease functioning primarily as sources of support and instead become mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced. Individuals become exposed not because they are socially isolated, but because they are socially embedded. Their relationships generate visibility. Their identities become legible. Their affiliations become politically meaningful. The very networks that provide security under one set of conditions may become pathways of exposure under another.

The Sudanese case demonstrates this process with unusual clarity. Historically, weak and uneven state formation encouraged reliance upon tribal, kinship, religious, and patronage networks. These structures often compensated for the limitations of formal institutions and provided important forms of governance, security, and social organization. Yet as political competition intensified and institutional capacity weakened, these same networks became increasingly politicized. Social identities acquired heightened political significance. Informal systems of authority became intertwined with systems of conflict. The social foundations of collective life became incorporated into broader structures of violence.

The Darfur conflict illustrated how communal identities could be transformed into mechanisms of mobilization and targeting. Violence frequently depended upon local knowledge embedded within existing social relationships. Communities became vulnerable because they were visible. Social networks generated the information necessary to identify populations, distinguish loyalties, and organize coercion. The rise of the Rapid Support Forces demonstrated how these dynamics could become institutionalized. Emerging from localized networks of kinship, patronage, and tribal affiliation, the RSF transformed social relationships into organizational infrastructure. The mechanisms that social capital theory traditionally associates with cooperation and collective action became foundations for military and political power.

The displacement crisis generated by the current conflict extends this argument further. Millions of Sudanese have been uprooted from their homes, creating one of the largest displacement emergencies in the contemporary world. Yet displacement demonstrates that social liability is not confined to specific places. Individuals frequently carry their networks with them. Family relationships, communal affiliations, and transnational connections continue to shape opportunities and vulnerabilities long after movement occurs. Displacement changes geography but often leaves social structure intact. The liabilities associated with social embeddedness therefore persist across borders and across time.

The broader significance of these findings extends well beyond Sudan. Similar dynamics appear across diverse forms of political violence and social control, including ethnic conflict, militant recruitment, authoritarian repression, honor-based violence, religious persecution, clan conflict, identity-based targeting, and forced migration. Across these cases, vulnerability frequently emerges through social relationships rather than despite them. Individuals become exposed because they are known. Their identities become visible through networks. Their communities become mechanisms through which power is exercised. Sudan provides a particularly clear illustration of this process, but the underlying mechanisms are not unique to Sudan.

The concept of social liability contributes to several bodies of scholarship simultaneously. First, it extends social capital theory by identifying the conditions under which supportive social relationships become sources of vulnerability. Second, it bridges social capital scholarship and conflict studies by explaining how violence travels through social structures rather than operating independently of them. Third, it contributes to the sociology of power by highlighting the relational foundations of coercion. Violence is not merely imposed through institutions; it frequently operates through ordinary social relationships.

Importantly, social liability should not be understood simply as another expression of what has often been called the "dark side" of social capital. Existing discussions of social capital's negative consequences typically focus on exclusion, excessive obligations, conformity pressures, or restricted opportunities (Portes 1998; Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi 2017). While these insights remain valuable, the concept developed here addresses a different phenomenon. Social liability does not merely describe negative outcomes associated with network membership. Rather, it identifies a transformation in the primary function of social relationships themselves. Under conditions of institutional decline and political conflict, networks may cease functioning primarily as mechanisms of support and instead become mechanisms through which information is gathered, identities are categorized, loyalties are evaluated, and violence is organized.

The theoretical framework developed in this paper identifies a recurring sequence through which this transformation occurs. Institutional weakness increases dependence upon informal social networks. Dependence generates visibility. Visibility becomes politically consequential as identities are activated and polarized. Existing relationships are mobilized by political, military, or communal actors. The result is the emergence of social liability, a condition in which social embeddedness itself becomes a source of vulnerability. This process provides a common analytical framework for understanding forms of violence and social control that are often studied separately.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of social liability as a distinct analytical framework for understanding the transformation of social relationships under conditions of conflict and institutional decline. Whereas existing social capital scholarship has generally emphasized either the benefits of networks or their negative side effects, the concept of social liability focuses on a different phenomenon: the conversion of social relationships themselves into mechanisms of vulnerability. The framework therefore shifts attention from the resources embedded within networks to the changing functions of networks under different political and institutional conditions. In doing so, it offers a process-oriented explanation linking social capital, identity formation, information flows, social visibility, and political violence within a single theoretical model.

This distinction has important implications for both scholarship and policy. For scholars, it suggests that social networks should be analyzed not only in terms of the resources they generate but also in terms of the vulnerabilities they may produce. The same network structures that facilitate cooperation may also facilitate coercion. For policymakers and practitioners, the findings suggest that post-conflict reconstruction involves more than rebuilding institutions, infrastructure, and economies. Sustainable peace requires rebuilding trust and transforming social relationships that have become associated with surveillance, exclusion, and violence. Reconstruction is therefore not only a political and economic project but also a profoundly social one.

Future research should examine the operation of social liability across different regions, political systems, and forms of conflict. Comparative studies may help identify the conditions under which social liability becomes more or less significant relative to alternative explanations of violence. Additional research may also explore how social liability operates within digital networks, transnational communities, refugee populations, and emerging forms of political mobilization. Such investigations would contribute to a broader understanding of how social relationships simultaneously generate both resilience and vulnerability.

At its broadest level, this study argues for a reconsideration of how social scientists understand the relationship between social structure and violence. Social networks are among the most important resources available to individuals and communities. They generate belonging,

resilience, identity, cooperation, and collective action. Yet these same relationships may also become instruments of power, control, and victimization. The distinction lies not in the networks themselves but in the political and institutional environments within which they operate.

Civil wars do not merely destroy societies. They reorganize the social relationships through which societies function. The central insight of this paper is that violence often succeeds not because social networks collapse, but because they endure. The persistence of social structure provides the informational and relational foundations through which coercion becomes possible. Sudan demonstrates this process with particular clarity, but the implications extend far beyond a single country or conflict. Understanding how social capital becomes social liability is therefore essential not only for understanding Sudan, but for understanding the broader relationship between social structure, power, vulnerability, and violence in the contemporary world. More broadly, it invites scholars to reconsider one of sociology's most enduring assumptions: that social embeddedness is inherently protective. Under certain conditions, the very relationships that sustain collective life may become the mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced and violence is organized.

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