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Sudan's storm of Typhon

RSF's rise and the chaos economy

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Summary

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have exploited the chaos they helped create in Sudan. Emerging from the Janjaweed militias, the RSF has transformed into a hybrid force, blending paramilitary power with a criminal economy that thrives in disorder. This report unpacks the RSF's role in Sudan's economic collapse, illicit trade and political destabilisation, exposing how its survival depends not on battlefield victories, but on turning instability into an asset. Without dismantling this war economy, Sudan's crisis will persist.

Findings

- The RSF's power is built on multiple interlocking illicit economies, including gold smuggling, extortion and war profiteering.
- External backers, including regional and global actors, have fuelled its rise.
- The RSF is not just a paramilitary force – it is a war economy in motion.
- Sanctions alone are insufficient; targeting economic enablers and illicit networks is key.
- Any path to stability must dismantle the financial and logistical lifelines, both licit and illicit, that sustain the RSF.

Introduction

Typhon, according to Greek mythology, was the ultimate embodiment of chaos and destruction – a monstrous hybrid born of desperation to challenge the established order. A fusion of raw force and calculated menace, he was conjured from the underworld to unsettle the gods and destabilise Olympus itself. For a time, Typhon's ferocity reshaped the very structures he sought to overthrow, thriving in the chaos he unleashed.¹

Sudan has long been defined by power struggles, economic decay and the legacies of war; its political landscape shaped by decades of authoritarian rule and elite competition. The RSF echoes Typhon's storm – created as a desperate tool of repression during the Bashir era, the RSF evolved into a hybrid entity that defies easy categorisation: part militia, part criminal enterprise and part political operator. It was not just born of chaos but learnt to weaponise it. Like Typhon, the RSF was summoned to suppress rebellion and enforce control, only to grow beyond the grasp of those who created it. Today, it stands as a rival to the SAF and a destabilising force in the region.

Both the RSF and SAF are products of the same kleptocratic legacy that has hollowed out Sudan's institutions

The latest conflict erupted in April 2023 when a fragile alliance between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) collapsed, turning a long-simmering rivalry into a full-scale war that has gutted state institutions and plunged the country deeper into chaos. This conflict is not a battle between order and chaos, but a contest for supremacy within a shattered system. Both the RSF and SAF are products of the same kleptocratic legacy that has hollowed out Sudan's institutions. However, the RSF's survival and strength rests on its ability to outlast and outmanoeuvre. As the formal economy crumbles under the weight of war, the RSF thrives on the criminal economies it has cultivated: gold smuggling,

illicit fuel imports and illegal taxation. These networks, far from incidental, are central to its strategy, providing resilience and adaptability in the face of institutional collapse.

This report delves into the heart of this storm, seeking to understand the nature of the RSF's power. The analysis will focus heavily on the role of the illicit economy in propelling and sustaining the RSF's meteoric rise. The RSF's deep ties to criminal markets entail partnerships and relationships with a range of networks within Sudan, across its borders in neighbouring countries and to major global financial and military power centres.

These relationships are crucial for the RSF's logistics and supply channels. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo – better known as Hemedti – rose from a Darfuran militia leader to the head of the RSF and one of the most formidable figures in Sudan's fractured state. For Hemedti's forces, the conflict has created major logistical obstacles, including lack of access to Port Sudan, restricted movement through territory contested or controlled by the SAF and the destruction of the commercial aviation sector. It has also led to expanded legal and regulatory restrictions.

Criminal market integration gives the RSF access to resources and smuggling routes that mitigate some of these challenges.² Ties with deep-pocketed foreign state-backed actors – like the Wagner Group³ and United Arab Emirates-linked networks⁴ – provide Hemedti's forces with material resources, intelligence and training, bolstering the RSF's operational capacity. These transnational networks, in turn, often provide access to and leverage global illicit trade networks, making the RSF better equipped to evade or outmanoeuvre international sanctions and money laundering measures. While some of the RSF's foreign backers may provide support for purely political reasons, other key vendors are motivated to varying degrees by profit.

The RSF's involvement in criminal markets – gold mining, poaching, black market fuel sales, weapons dealing, stolen cars, looted goods and the drug trade – provides diverse revenue opportunities. These activities, along with related smuggling operations and illegal taxation, remain beyond the reach of adversaries or oversight institutions. They gave the group the confidence to defy former president of Sudan,

Omar al-Bashir in 2019, Abdalla Hamdok's civilian government in 2021 and Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the SAF in 2023.

Immersion in criminal markets enables the RSF to operate with a decentralised organisational structure that is, in some ways, nimbler than the SAF's hierarchy. As a result, the RSF can adapt quickly to market opportunities within the underworld and exploit profitable ventures opportunistically. With decades of experience using violence to sustain operations, RSF elements can seize opportunities in real-time without waiting for approval, an advantage that has helped it expand rapidly in contested areas. This renders the paramilitary force nimbler during crises, periods of illiquidity or shortfalls of key supplies.

This report navigates the origins, evolution and entrenched power of the RSF, unpacking the dynamics that have allowed it to thrive in Sudan's fragmented landscape. It begins by tracing the RSF's roots, emerging as a force designed to suppress dissent but ultimately destabilising the balance of power. The focus then shifts to the group's integration into Sudan's black-market economies, exposing how criminal networks have become its lifeblood, enabling it to sustain operations and outmanoeuvre its adversaries. The analysis widens to examine the RSF's regional and global footprint, detailing its cross-border smuggling routes, alliances with foreign patrons and exploitation of natural resources. The closing section reflects on the broader implications of this hybrid power structure, tying the threads back to the metaphor of Typhon – a force of chaos that cannot be contained by conventional means. This leaves policymakers and stakeholders to grapple with the systemic challenges it represents.

The RSF can adapt quickly to market opportunities within the underworld and exploit profitable ventures opportunistically

Methodology

This study draws on desk research and open-source intelligence including a review of academic literature, independent media, aircraft and flight records and reports by government and international organisations. It also incorporates expert insights from interviews with regional analysts, journalists and individuals with firsthand knowledge of these networks, as well as data from primary and secondary sources including financial records, trade data, policy reports and investigative journalism.

While every effort has been made to verify claims and cross-check sources, access to ground-level data remains constrained by the realities of war. Some aspects of the RSF's financial dealings – especially those tied to illicit transactions and offshore networks – are, by nature, opaque. These limitations are mitigated by relying on multiple independent sources, forensic analysis of financial and trade data and a commitment to presenting only findings that withstand scrutiny.

The research concentrates on regions where the RSF's footprint is most pronounced – Darfur, Khartoum and the smuggling corridors linking Sudan to Chad, Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR).

The RSF's rise: join the government or become a robber

While Sudan's shifting political landscape has deeply influenced the evolution of the Janjaweed into the RSF and its involvement in criminal activities, the militias that spawned this criminalised insurgency have always had at least one foot in illicit markets. The Bashir regime's initial rise to power restructured the political economy and transformed the security sector, while diplomatic isolation and a surge in oil production in the late 1990s to early 2000s reshaped alliances and sparked insurgencies.

With South Sudan's secession in the 2010s, Sudan lost vital oil revenue, leading to a reliance on gold – largely controlled by paramilitary groups. Most recently, Sudan's revolution and ongoing conflict between the SAF and RSF have brought legal and institutional upheaval, with fleeting civilian governance and the re-emergence of Bashir-era power bases. These phases of disruption and opportunity have embedded the RSF in Sudan's criminal economy, enabling its rise as a formidable, autonomous force.

The war in Darfur

Darfur's crisis in the early 2000s arose from a complex set of long-simmering challenges facing Sudan. These included increased competition over a shrinking pool of resources, the erosion of accountability and governance structures and the polarisation and manipulation of ethnic identities. Additionally, there was the economic marginalisation of Sudan's periphery, Khartoum's growing reliance on proxies to carry out counterinsurgency operations and the support of rebel groups by adversarial foreign governments. During the post-colonial period, the rapid degradation of arable land that brought herders and farmers into territorial disputes coincided with the breakdown in traditional structures for land tenure and dispute resolution that had been modified during colonial administration.⁵ 'Arabisation' campaigns that began in the 1980s catalysed an unprecedented polarisation of ethnic identities in a region that had traditionally been fluid.

Resentment among non-Arab communities in Darfur reached a crescendo with the covert publication and widespread dissemination of *The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in the Sudan*⁶ in 2000. This book blamed Darfur's plight on neglect and marginalisation by Khartoum.

The Darfur conflict reached a boiling point in April 2003 when the SLA/M and JEM mounted an attack on the capital of North Darfur

Two prominent rebel groups – the secular Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Islamist-leaning Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – forged an alliance in 2003, reportedly receiving support from al-Bashir's political rivals.⁷ The Darfur conflict reached a boiling point in April 2003 when the SLA/M and JEM mounted an attack on al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur, inflicting significant damage to the military garrison there. This attack and the subsequent military success of the JEM and SLA/M took Khartoum by surprise. Caught on its heels and spread thin with a full-scale military conflict against the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in the south, al-Bashir's government opted for an expedient, if unwieldy, response: recruiting local militias.

This strategy instigated the rise of an unprecedented challenge to al-Bashir's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and its primary security forces, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and SAF. Within a dozen years, the militias Khartoum recruited in Darfur would have the upper hand in both control over natural resource revenue and battlefield experience. They would cultivate independent relationships with allies domestically and internationally, including upstart armed groups, mercenary forces and great power governments. All the while, they would encourage the commodification of violence, capture and shape criminal markets and engage in unspeakable atrocities.

Soldiers for hire

Even before the al-Bashir's (and Turabi's) self-styled National Salvation regime took power in 1989, the relationship between Khartoum and the proxy militias it deployed around Sudan's periphery was opportunistic and transactional. 'Many had suffered heavy losses of cattle during the 1984–85 Sahelian drought, and banditry, cattle theft, and forced grazing on farmland was widespread,' Jago Salmon, an expert on armed groups in Sudan, wrote in 2007. 'Some of the youngest and poorest of those affected had congregated in the urban centres of South Kordofan and South Darfur and were willing to seek an income through violence.'⁸

Well before the 2003 crisis, the militias deployed by Sudan's government as proxies were infamous for 'looting, burning of villages, killings and abductions of southern civilians as hostages and war captives destined for domestic enslavement.'⁹ A confidential assessment prepared for the Sudanese National Assembly's Committee on Popular Defence in 1990 praised the proxy militias' guerrilla tactics and recruitment capabilities, but also raised concerns regarding looting, poor discipline, providing unreliable information to serve their own interests, often straying from the assigned mission, undermining trust between communities and fueling resentment along ethnic lines.¹⁰

The use of proxies blurred the lines between state and non-state armed groups. 'While the militias were local formations, recruited through the native administration and operating in or around related communities, the paramilitaries, known as the Murahileen, were irregular mercenary formations integrated into the military chain of command and often alienated from tribal structures.'¹¹

The organised Arab militias were referred to as the Janjaweed, which is often colloquially used to mean 'outlaw' or 'robber.' Backed by the government, the Janjaweed conducted a systematic scorched earth campaign in Darfur from 2003 to 2005 that claimed over 200 000 lives, displaced 2.5 million people and left infrastructure in ruins and entire villages razed.¹²

Hemedti, once a prominent camel trader in Darfur, was among those hired by the government in 2003 to recruit and mobilise Arab militias in Darfur. He claimed that he joined efforts to counter the rebellion after an attack by rebels resulted in the loss of 3 400 camels and the abduction of dozens of his kin.¹³ Hemedti's forces specifically were implicated in atrocities, including a 2004 assault on the town of Adwa that has been described as a massacre.¹⁴ It resulted in more than 20 civilian fatalities, dozens of severe injuries, the detention and repeated rape of women and girls and the burning of the homes in the village.¹⁵ Hemedti reportedly claimed that the attack had been planned for months.¹⁶

Peace or power dealing?

After years of violence and atrocity, the Bashir government and several rebel groups signed the Darfur Peace Agreement in May 2006. The agreement laid out a framework for a ceasefire, power sharing and demobilisation, as well as plans for new dispute resolution mechanisms and a referendum. Disarmament and demobilisation efforts were largely unsuccessful due to a combination of Khartoum's obstinance towards the process and the perception held by Arab militias that 'looting was more profitable' than the deal offered to disarm.¹⁷

Moreover, many Arab militias and armed group leaders felt betrayed by the agreement, which called for the total dismantling of Janjaweed militias but neglected to resolve important issues like land ownership. Khartoum's strategy for appeasing the disgruntled militias leaned heavily on absorbing the rank and file into the military's payroll and offering plum posts to high-ranking fighters. These forces, still deployed around Sudan's periphery, were dubbed the 'Border Guard' and included top Janjaweed commanders as their stewards.¹⁸

Hemedti initially drifted further into the government's orbit during this period as a commander of the Border Guard. However, in 2006, he had a violent falling out with the government, deserting with thousands of troops, a cache of heavy weapons and military vehicles, altering the balance of power in Darfur. 'Hemedti's defection, with at least 70 heavily armed vehicles, was the most significant shift in the military balance in Darfur since the conflict began. It stunned Khartoum,' the Small Arms Survey reported in 2009. Hemedti's mutiny lasted only six months, however, and he rejoined the government with dwindled resources after failing to find a dependable patron. 'When his money ran out, Hemedti said, he had two choices: to rejoin the government or become a "Janjaweed".'¹⁹

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Hemedti's demands of Khartoum were fairly straightforward. He wanted to be promoted to the rank of major general, and he sought flag officer status for an additional 10 of his subordinates, allocations of farmland and upwards of US\$150 million. 'Hamdan's recent negotiations with the government are reflective of the Arab militias' pragmatic approach to the ongoing conflict, whereby they continue to adjust their loyalties to secure the best deal by playing the Sudanese government and the mostly African rebels against each other,' read the US diplomatic cable. 'These ruthless Janjaweed [...] will go with whoever offers them the best deal.'²⁰

In 2013, Hemedti's forces were rebranded the RSF and became a preferred option for quelling unrest, almost immediately drawing criticism from human rights groups for conduct reminiscent of the earlier abuses in Darfur.²¹

Hemedti ensured significant autonomy for his forces while securing the benefits of a formal relationship with the state. Successive laws theoretically governing Hemedti's troops were ambiguous and often contradictory, variously indicating that his force would fall under the NISS or report directly to the presidency. Being brought under the NISS umbrella yielded significant benefits for Hemedti and his troops: he became a brigadier-general, and the rank and file were issued official identification that enhanced their legitimacy. The quasi-official status also served to stave off accountability for past war crimes and, in some ways, rehabilitate Hemedti's reputation.²²

Other armed groups in Darfur, including elements of the Janjaweed, increasingly began to deploy beyond Sudan's borders as soldiers-for-hire. Some went north to Libya, while others deployed to the CAR. In addition to the fees collected for services rendered, soldiers returned with bounties of precious stones, ivory and looted vehicles.

Gold rush

After gold was discovered in Jebel Amer in 2012, violent battles for control erupted between various Arab militias from the region. Alienated by Hemedti's appointment as RSF commander and dissatisfied that his own political demands, including being appointed vice-president, had not been met, former Janjaweed commander Musa Hilal left the ruling party in 2014. He then formed a new armed opposition group in Darfur, the Revolutionary Awakening Council.²³

Hilal's troops established a local administration for the mines. 'SAF troops stationed in Jebel 'Amer [were] "fed-up with the harassment and provocation" by the Abbala militias, which occur especially around the busy water wells,' radio and online news service, Dabanga reported. The troops withdrew in January 2013 'to avoid confrontation with Abbala militias.'²⁴ From that point, militias composed of former Janjaweed fighters vigorously staved off attempts by the military and central government in Khartoum to impose control over the region's gold mines.

Under Hilal's de facto administration of Jebel Amer, a sophisticated protection ecosystem developed

Under Hilal's de facto administration of Jebel Amer, a sophisticated protection ecosystem developed. Artisanal miners were required to pay a one-time fee of US\$75 to US\$105 to establish a presence in one of the region's 5 000 mining wells, as well as a monthly fee of US\$150. Thousands of smaller players involved in production – washing trough and grinding mill operators, for instance – paid daily fees to Hilal's administration, as well. Eateries and market vendors paid US\$25 to US\$30 per day. 'Every butcher on the site, meanwhile, must pay \$3.28 to Hilal for every slaughtered sheep,' the Sudan Democracy First Group reported.²⁵

Largely shut out of artisanal mining in Darfur, the Bashir government sought to reap at least some benefit from the trade by monopolising the purchase and export of gold. The hope was that the sale of gold on international markets would provide desperately needed foreign currency.

To incentivise miners and traders to sell gold to the government, the Central Bank of Sudan bought gold above the official market rate. However, given that the central government lacked the hard currency needed to buy gold in the first place, it financed its mineral acquisitions by simply printing money. This, in turn, sparked rapid inflation, weakening the Sudanese pound and undermining incentives to sell to the government. Moreover, traders could fetch better prices on the black market, a report by the International Peace Information Service noted. The government's policy encouraged smuggling.²⁶

Smuggling was pervasive from the dawn of the gold rush and indeed remained so even after the Central Bank's official monopoly began. 'The gold is smuggled out in bags or underwear, to middlemen on the other

side of the Chad border,' according to a 2013 report by Reuters. 'From there it goes to the capital N'Djamena where it is loaded onto commercial flights or stashed in the baggage of courier firms, Sudanese gold sources and Darfur residents say.'²⁷ After crossing the border into Chad, much of the gold would be flown to Dubai, a preferred export market for many licit and illicit gold traders across Africa.

Land Cruiser laundromats

In 2014, foreign merchants began to arrive in the areas surrounding Darfur's gold mines, peddling – or, more precisely, driving – an increasingly popular illicit commodity. '[I]nformal miners found themselves receiving offers by persons from Niger, Benin and Nigeria to exchange unwrought gold for four-wheel-drive Toyota GXR vehicles,' the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS) reported. The vehicles reportedly entered Darfur through Chad, driven by people linked to the Nigeria-based terrorist group, Boko Haram. After that, the SUVs on offer were often referred to as 'Boko Haram cars,' even if they had nothing to do with Boko Haram.²⁸

'[C]arjacking inside Darfur's towns and cities starts as a purely commercial activity,' explained a US diplomatic cable on the issue in 2008. 'Although this criminal activity may have ties to rebel movements, those involved in the initial hijacking "are only in it for the money".'²⁹

Reports by the Sudanese media, civil society organisations and the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan identified additional sources of the stolen cars that flowed into Darfur. Trucks and SUVs looted from Libya during the instability in the years after the fall of leader Muammar Gaddafi arrived in bulk, some having been looted directly from cargo ships and transported 1 000 km south to the border with Sudan. Another major source, according to the UN Panel of Experts, was the CAR, where members of the RSF and Border Guard Forces looted thousands of vehicles while deployed as a mercenary force to help topple the regime of then president François Bozizé.

By some estimates, black market vehicles sold for a quarter of the price of legally registered cars

The gold boom greatly expanded the purchasing power of miners, state-embedded actors, gangs and armed groups in Darfur. For miners and gold dealers, bartering gold for an imported stolen vehicle was an attractive, if imperfect, option for several reasons. First, they were dirt cheap. By some estimates, black market vehicles sold for a quarter of the price of legally registered cars. In addition, the influx of 4x4s provided practical benefits to miners and criminal syndicates operating around Jebel Amer, allowing some to diversify their operations. 'These militias often attack communities in Sudan and are used as mercenaries for hire by neighbouring countries in conflict,'³⁰ an ENACT report found.

Given the constant insecurity and widespread criminality that has characterised Darfur for a quarter of a century, buying a vehicle provided gold miners with a quick and dirty option for offloading an easily looted and highly coveted resource. Retail banking options for miners were scarce, creating additional risk for those who held onto cash. The gold-for-stolen-car market began to resemble a laundromat for ill-gotten wealth. '[T]he transactions concluded between the miners and these other parties were very close in nature to money-laundering, which passes through several stages in an attempt to conceal its true origin,' the ACJPS noted.

Security forces, including the RSF, benefited disproportionately from these transactions. For example, many of the about 3 000 vehicles legalised by the government in South Darfur in July 2015 had been looted from the CAR and driven back to Sudan by members of the RSF and aligned militias. Fees were paid in person to the state government in exchange for import certificates obtained with a sworn statement of ownership, and the 10% fee for the RSF and military was substantially lower than the 25% fee collected from civilians.

As was the case before the influx of looted vehicles from abroad, a number of security services and armed groups – namely the RSF, Border Guard Forces, the JEM and the Minnawi faction of the SLM/A – dominated the 'Boko Haram' market. They control the market for Boko Haram cars by using their military influence

to protect the cars as they move around, completing procedures for them and evading payment of traffic violations,' the ACJPS reported.³¹

Meanwhile, a few dozen brokers from outside Darfur linked to the security services were the major dealers of stolen cars. These dealers, who included public officials among their ranks, eschewed al-Fashir's hotels in favour of guest houses for the armed forces, and they stored their vehicles at the local SAF headquarters. 'When they move around, they are accompanied by officers from the armed forces under the guise of security,' the ACJPS report noted. 'They travel repeatedly and regularly to Fashir, where they purchase vehicles and transport them to Khartoum without any problems.'³²

Gold and shifting alliances at home and abroad

While Arab militias in Darfur and the Bashir regime in Khartoum squabbled over control of the production and sale of gold mined in Jebel Amer, they were aligned against any foreign scrutiny over gold or other lucrative enterprises in the country. That position conflicted with UN/AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), which was the largest peacekeeping mission within Sudan's borders during the final decade of the Bashir era. Numerous UN bodies present in Darfur, including UNAMID, took an active interest in examining mining and smuggling in the region.

'The Security Council expressed "serious concern" at the involvement of Darfur armed movements in "migrant smuggling, criminal activity, banditry and mercenary activities" and encouraged regional states to cooperate on cross-border issues such as weapons smuggling,' the Stimson Center noted. However, only UNAMID was directed 'to continue to support the work of the Panel of Experts in this regard.'³³

Engagements between UNAMID leaders and Sudan's government were tense. When officials raised concerns about the surge in stolen cars, for example, their interlocutors suggested the widespread criminality in the region justified the government's brutal counterinsurgency.³⁴ Al-Bashir's government was 'overwhelmingly unwilling to accept' UNAMID's presence, and its allies, especially Russia, repeatedly obstructed and diluted UNAMID's mandate and resources. In 2014, the UNAMID's chief of staff, a Russian national was accused of 'manipulat[ing] internal reports on Darfur, censor[ing] public statements by the mission, and try[ing] to block some press releases, especially when the Sudanese government was bombing civilians.'³⁵

In addition, the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan was subject to hostility from Khartoum and persistent interference and manipulation by the Russian government. In 2016, Russia blocked the release of a report by the group that described how Hilal was making US\$54 million annually from the Jebel Amer gold mines.³⁶

Wagner operatives, via the company M Invest, provided a range of services to support al-Bashir's embattled presidency

In November 2017, the RSF arrested Hilal near his stronghold in North Darfur, and the gold mine at Jebel Amer came under the control of Hemedti and the RSF.³⁷ The RSF now controlled several lucrative revenue streams – the extraction and sale of gold, informal taxation and smuggling – that were beyond the reach of al-Bashir's government, putting Hemedti in a strong position.

The following year, 2018, marked a watershed moment in the Russia-Sudan courtship. Al-Bashir travelled to Sochi, signing agreements for Russian companies to enter

numerous industries in Sudan and for the development of a Russian naval base on the Red Sea. This meeting paved the way for the Wagner Group to enter Sudan. 'A collection of cooperation agreements were (sic) signed, including a deal with Prigozhin-owned company M Invest and the Sudanese ministry of minerals, granting M Invest concessions to explore gold mining sites,' noted a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). It added: 'Wagner operatives, via the company M Invest, provided a range of services to support al-Bashir's embattled presidency, including disinformation campaigns and advice to suppress pro-democracy protests, outlining how to conduct disinformation campaigns and hold public executions.'³⁸

Around the same time that Wagner instructors were arriving in Khartoum, Russia embarked on a 'campaign to install a Prigozhin connected operative on a UN panel charged with monitoring the arms embargo on Sudan,' the *Daily Beast* reported.³⁹ The Russian professor Nikolai Dobronravin coordinated closely with Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was successful in his bid to join the Sudan panel in March 2018. The *Daily Beast* also reported that: 'In March 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres renewed Dobronravin's term.'⁴⁰

In June 2019, despite warnings and concerns from rights groups and Sudanese civil society actors, the UN Security Council voted, under the looming threat of a Russian veto, to wind down the UNAMID mission.⁴¹

As the RSF became more integrated into the formal structures of the state, its military operations diversified significantly. Within Sudan, the RSF was deployed to the South Kordofan and Blue Nile states and later redeployed to Darfur. The commercial interests of the force and its personnel diversified too. There had also been numerous reports connecting the RSF with transnational organised crime groups.⁴² Several reports associated the RSF with illicit commercial activities, including gold smuggling, human trafficking, wildlife poaching, the illicit fuel market and the drug trade.⁴³

The RSF also became involved in conflicts beyond Sudan's borders, deploying to Yemen as a mercenary force to support the Saudi and Emirati military operations against Iran-backed Houthis. The UN Secretary-General reported in 2021 that a contingent of RSF troops deployed to Libya in support of warlord Khalifa Haftar, an assertion that has been contested by other analysts.⁴⁴ Mercenary deployments, particularly in Yemen, became a lucrative revenue stream for the RSF and its senior commanders. However, proceeds from foreign deployments account for only a slice of the paramilitary group's business portfolio.

A series of investigations by reporters and advocacy groups into the RSF's finances have revealed an increasingly sophisticated and transnational web of commercial enterprises, with operations spanning numerous business sectors and relationships across several continents. Successive investigations have revealed a cluster of companies connected to the RSF and Hemedti's family operating under the name al-Junaid. These companies are involved in mining, construction, transportation and waste management. A 2019 report by Global Witness identified a pair of RSF front companies based in Dubai: GSK, a boutique technology and security company (unrelated to GlaxoSmithKline), and holding company, Tradive General Trading LLC. The investigation also found that the RSF maintained bank accounts at the Abu Dhabi branch of Sudan El Nilein Bank and at the National Bank of Abu Dhabi.⁴⁵

In an economy marked by competition over resources, political marriages of convenience and the use of lethal force to

Several reports associated the RSF with illicit commercial activities, including gold smuggling and human trafficking

maintain power, Hemedti and his allies have cultivated a set of relationships and commercial ventures with diverse groups of actors. This has allowed Hemedti and the RSF to benefit, at times, from state legitimacy and largesse while often continuing to operate as a predatory criminal enterprise. With a few exceptions, this arrangement continued for more than a decade, and was instrumental in facilitating the RSF to emerge as a more formidable and autonomous force. It has exploited transactional and opportunistic alliances – including with criminal enterprises – to secure resilient supply channels for smuggled resources like gold and weapons, adapting quickly to shifts in the political landscape. These alliances have also facilitated the RSF's integration into Sudan's formal economy, especially through the gold trade, enabling it to legitimise profits from criminal markets and reinforce its influence.

The RSF's flexible approach to alliances allows it to navigate systemic shocks, shifting affiliations as needed to secure strategic advantages. Ultimately, these dynamics have deeply embedded the RSF within Sudan's economic and political fabric, ensuring its long-term viability and positioning it as a core player in the country's power struggles and conflict economy.

The RSF and Sudan's derailed transition

The fall of al-Bashir in April 2019 was the culmination of years of systemic decay within his regime, exacerbated by the loss of oil revenue and a fundamental shift in Sudan's economic power dynamics. For decades, al-Bashir's rule relied on a centralised system that concentrated wealth and authority in Khartoum, underpinned by oil revenue that funded the state and co-opted elites. However, the secession of South Sudan in 2011, which took with it the majority of Sudan's oil fields, caused this system to implode. Stripped of its primary source of revenue, Khartoum lost its grip on economic power, leaving the regime unable to sustain its patronage networks or address growing socio-economic grievances.

The resulting economic crisis – marked by rampant inflation, severe shortages of basic goods, and a collapsing currency – fuelled widespread discontent, undermining al-Bashir's legitimacy. By late 2018, this breakdown ignited large-scale protests, sparked by the removal of subsidies on bread and fuel but quickly escalating into a nationwide movement demanding an end to al-Bashir's 30-year rule.

Initially, the RSF acted as a key pillar of al-Bashir's security apparatus, deploying its forces to suppress protests with brute force. However, as al-Bashir's position became increasingly untenable, the RSF's deep ties to the shadow economy may have emboldened it to shift allegiances. Unlike other elements of al-Bashir's fractured state apparatus, the RSF's financial autonomy allowed it to operate with relative independence, enabling Hemedti to pivot and position himself as a central actor in the post-Bashir landscape. The RSF's entrenchment in both the formal and informal economies exacerbated tensions with the SAF.

The Khartoum massacre left over 120 people dead, hundreds injured and many others subjected to sexual violence

The RSF quickly cemented its role as a decisive, albeit ruthless, powerbroker in post-Bashir Sudan. Its most infamous act during this time was its central role in the Khartoum massacre on 3 June 2019, where RSF forces violently dispersed peaceful sit-ins calling for a civilian-led government.⁴⁶ The massacre left over 120 people dead, hundreds injured and many others subjected to sexual violence. This brutality underscored the RSF's commitment to preserving its interests, regardless of human cost. While it publicly framed its actions as necessary to restore order, the massacre revealed its underlying strategy: leveraging

fear and violence to maintain dominance in the transitional period.⁴⁷ This event not only solidified Hemedti's authority, but also signalled the RSF's readiness to suppress dissent, ensuring its economic and political survival amid the uncertainty of post-Bashir Sudan.

Financial autonomy, meanwhile, allowed the RSF to increase its military capacity and preserve, establish or expand parallel logistics and supply channels, threatening the SAF control over the country's resources and security apparatus. This set the stage for inevitable conflict, as both forces now sought to assert dominance

over Sudan's resources, security and governance. Hemedti and the RSF were well-placed to benefit from the Bashir-era kleptocracy, not to replace or reform it.

These dynamics created parallel power structures within Sudan's security services – without a central powerbroker in al-Bashir's absence – whereby the RSF emerged as an autonomous, financially robust and militarily capable force rivalling the SAF. The RSF's powerful alliances with foreign actors, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Wagner Group, provided external backing and further heightened its standing. These alliances not only granted the RSF greater military capabilities but also positioned it as a key player in regional geopolitics, compounding the pressure on Sudan's fragile political system.

The RSF's double game

During the civilian administration led by Hamdok, the RSF remained both a partner and saboteur to central authorities in Khartoum, carefully balancing its public support for the transition with behind-the-scenes efforts to consolidate its influence.

The RSF's economic empire expanded rapidly, with Hemedti securing control over lucrative gold exports and key imports of subsidised goods. These activities not only enriched the RSF but also undermined government efforts to reform the economy and reduce military dominance over state resources. Meanwhile, the RSF used its wealth and influence to circumvent civilian oversight, ensuring that its economic interests remained untouched by Hamdok's reforms. Its dual strategy of cooperation and obstruction rendered the government incapable of challenging the entrenched military-economic networks that had persisted since the al-Bashir era, perpetuating Sudan's legacy of kleptocracy and undermining the revolution's goals.

For Hemedti and the RSF, al-Bashir's ouster provided lucrative opportunities to expand commercial activities. In December 2019, a murky company called al-Fakher with reported links to Hemedti emerged from obscurity to occupy a central – and lucrative – position in Sudan's commodity import sector. When the government's foreign currency reserves ran out, it tapped al-Fakher – 'a small company with no track record in large-scale operations' – to handle the import of key commodities. 'In exchange for a deposit of 28 million dollars which enabled the government to release the cargo of stranded fuel tankers, the authorities gave the company access to Sudanese currency at parallel market rate,' reads a report by the Conflict Research Programme at the London School of Economics (LSE). 'This gave al-Fakher a competitive advantage which allowed it to purchase gold on the local market at a premium, outbidding local competitors and establishing what other traders said was a de-facto monopoly on gold exports.'⁴⁸

Its dual strategy of cooperation and obstruction rendered the government incapable of challenging the entrenched military-economic networks

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed Hemedti's amassing of significant authority over economic policymaking. 'Hemedti had, under influence from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, been appointed in April 2020 as the head of the Higher Committee on Economic Emergency,' according to the 2021 LSE study. 'Two months later he created a 'Strategic Goods Portfolio': a body bringing together gold exporters (including the Dagalo's Algunade), banks, and importers of subsidised goods, in order to finance such subsidised imports with proceeds from gold exports.'⁴⁹

Although still largely considered outsiders in Khartoum, Hemedti and the RSF's propaganda machine capitalised on this status politically by spouting rhetoric about the venality of the NCP. '[E]ven as Hemedti was accusing Bashir's people of enriching themselves at the public's expense, a company that Hemedti's family owns was flying gold bars worth millions of dollars to Dubai,' *Reuters* wrote in 2019.⁵⁰

The RSF's relationship with the Empowerment Removal Committee (ERC) exemplifies its paradoxical role as both a saviour and a saboteur of Sudan's transition. The ERC, established by Sudan's transitional government in 2019, was tasked with dismantling the entrenched networks of corruption, patronage and institutional

control built by al-Bashir's regime, recovering misappropriated assets and purging loyalists from state institutions. The RSF initially aligned itself with the transitional government and the committee's mission to dismantle the remnants of al-Bashir's regime. By doing so, it projected itself as a force for reform, positioning Hemedti as a champion of the revolution and distancing the paramilitary group from its controversial origins under al-Bashir. This alignment allowed the RSF to burnish its image domestically and internationally, gaining credibility among reformists and presenting itself as an indispensable pillar of stability in a fragile post-revolution Sudan.

In this role, it leveraged its considerable power to protect the transition – at least in appearance – while capitalising on the committee's work to weaken rivals and remove obstacles to its own ascent.

However, the RSF's deeper interest in preserving its economic and political dominance ultimately sabotaged the transitional process it claimed to support. The ERC's anti-corruption investigations and asset seizures began to encroach on the RSF's vast economic empire, revealing its entanglements with key remnants of the old regime. As these interests came under threat, the RSF turned from nominal ally to covert adversary, using its influence to undermine the committee and shield its allies.⁵¹ The RSF's duality – propping up the transition while simultaneously dismantling its most critical safeguards – highlights its role as both a stabiliser and a saboteur, exploiting the revolution to entrench its own power at the expense of genuine reform.

Profiteers and puppeteers

The UAE and Russia's Wagner Group made inroads with both the military and the RSF in the years leading up to al-Bashir's ouster. M-Invest, the Wagner Group's primary commercial vessel in Sudan, made millions of dollars in payments to Aswar for Multi Activities. Multi Activities, reporters found, was controlled by the SAF's intelligence arm in return for access to weapons and equipment as well as to help with the requisite approvals and waivers needed for Wagner personnel. 'An annex to the contract indicated Aswar would provide armored vehicles, large-caliber weapons, drones, and communications equipment, but it did not specify how many weapons would be needed, or where they would come from,' according to a report by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). 'Aswar would store, transfer and clear the weapons through ports and airports,' the report read.⁵²

'From February to June 2021, Sudanese anticorruption officials tracked 16 Russian cargo flights that landed in Port Sudan from Latakia, Syria'

'The legal department within Sudan's Ministry of Minerals took issue with the waiver in at least one case ... pointing out that the waiver could not be made since the licenses had not yet been granted and no production company had been set up, OCCRP reported, citing leaked internal documents. 'Just over a month later, however, the ministry was ordered to issue the waiver, which it did in late December 2018.'⁵³

Numerous reports indicated that Wagner and the RSF were involved in extensive gold smuggling. 'From February to June 2021, Sudanese anticorruption officials tracked 16 Russian cargo flights that landed in Port Sudan from Latakia, Syria,' according to a report by *The New York Times*.

'Some flights, operated by the Russian military's 223rd Flight Unit, originated near Moscow. The *Times* was able to verify most of those flights using flight-tracking services.'⁵⁴ At least one official attempt to interdict an illicit gold shipment was overruled at the highest level, according to the same report.

The destination of much of the gold smuggled out of Sudan remained Dubai, and the UAE consistently sought to promote the interests of the security forces at the expense of civilians and reform advocates. 'They threw their support behind the Transitional Military Council and pledged an aid package of US\$3 billion,' according to a report by the International Institute of Strategic Studies. It continued: 'From the beginning of the transition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had a clear preference for the military leadership of General al-Burhan and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti.'⁵⁵

A coup and a collision course

Al-Burhan and Hemedti, perceived these efforts not as steps towards stability but as existential threats. In a calculated move, the two generals leveraged their combined might to seize control, arguing that their intervention was necessary to stabilise Sudan – a claim that belied their underlying goal of protecting their entrenched privileges and power.

On October 25, 2021, al-Burhan and Hemedti executed their coup, detaining Hamdok and key members of his cabinet while declaring a state of emergency. The move dissolved the fragile partnership between civilians and the military, halting Sudan's transition to democracy. The ERC was suspended, signalling a rollback of the reforms that had aimed to curb corruption and promote accountability. For Sudan's pro-democracy forces, the coup was a devastating blow, extinguishing hopes for a civilian-led government and reigniting fears that the country would once again fall under the shadow of military authoritarianism.

The uneasy alliance forged in the coup was fragile from the outset. Tensions between the SAF and the RSF simmered as both factions manoeuvred to consolidate power and secure their financial and military autonomy. Hemedti's RSF leveraged its illicit networks to maintain a steady stream of revenue and influence, enabling it to recruit and equip its forces without relying on state support. Meanwhile, the SAF sought to reassert control over key industries and resources, leading to direct competition over access to Sudan's wealth. The resulting dynamic created a zero-sum game, where both the SAF and the RSF sought to expand their networks at the other's expense, undermining efforts to stabilise the country and paving the way for violent confrontations.

Tensions between the SAF and the RSF simmered as both factions manoeuvred to consolidate power and secure their financial and military autonomy

One major dispute between al-Burhan and Hemedti's camps was the timeline for formally integrating the RSF into the regular armed forces, with the SAF preferring an expedited process and the paramilitary group wanting to retain its autonomy for the next decade. Efforts were made to bridge the divide and ease tensions. The two generals held a meeting on 8 April 2023 on a farm outside Khartoum. Al-Burhan asked Hemedti to withdraw troops from an RSF stronghold in al-Fasher, Darfur, and cease the transfer of forces into the capital. Hemedti's primary request was the removal of Egyptian forces from an SAF air base in Merowe, a city in northern Sudan. 'The men also spoke privately and appeared to agree to de-escalate,' Reuters reported, citing diplomats involved in the mediations. 'But despite plans to talk again the next day, no more meetings took place.'⁵⁶

Another major sticking point was the SAF's plans to reconstitute the Border Guard Forces under Hilal's leadership. The SAF's plan was a high-stakes gamble that underscored the fragmented and opportunistic nature of Sudan's security apparatus. By leaning on Hilal – who had remained in prison until 2021 – the SAF sought to tip the scales in its favour against the RSF. However, the move risked reigniting old tribal rivalries and further destabilising Darfur, a region scarred by decades of conflict. It was a desperate play, rooted in the SAF's need to outmanoeuvre Hemedti and his financially autonomous RSF, but one that carried the potential to deepen Sudan's fractures rather than unify its forces. In essence, the SAF wasn't just mobilising fighters – it was weaponising divisions, throwing fuel on a fire that could easily burn out of control.

As tensions mounted regarding the direction of Sudan's top security services, the other Bashir-era networks were staging a comeback that quietly took on an increasingly provocative tone. Just days after the final meeting between Hemedti and al-Burhan, Mohamed Tahir Ayla – an NCP stalwart and briefly prime minister in the twilight of the Bashir era – delivered a provocative speech. He denounced the framework agreement and indicated a willingness to resort to violence to achieve the movement's political objectives. 'There is no place for the framework agreement,' Ayla said, in a video of the gathering viewed by *Reuters*. 'We are more prepared now than before to take up arms and take what is ours by our own hands.'⁵⁷

After the meeting between al-Burhan and Hemedti, each side began to prepare for war. The tension gave way to a full-scale conflict on 15 April 2023.

The RSF and the chaos economy: institutions vanish, illicit markets surge

The conflict that erupted in April 2023 has devastated every aspect of Sudan's economy and upended daily life, leaving cities in ruin, supply chains severed, and millions struggling to secure even the most basic necessities. The economic landscape in Sudan has unravelled, creating an environment where armed groups, particularly the RSF, have embedded themselves within the country's informal and illicit markets. As state institutions falter and legitimate commerce is disrupted, the RSF has leveraged its deep ties to black market networks, seizing control of smuggling routes, looting warehouses and taxing goods in transit. This economic dominance has allowed the RSF to sustain its operations independently, consolidating power through an underground economy that reaches far beyond Sudan's borders.

The RSF's reach into black-market economies has transformed them into a parallel power structure, influencing every layer of resource flow across Sudan. Gold, grain and humanitarian supplies, now move through RSF-controlled channels, providing both revenue and strategic leverage. This section examines how the RSF's links to illicit markets have allowed it to entrench its influence, sustaining a power base that thrives as the formal economy deteriorates.

Economic collapse

Widespread destruction of property, infrastructure, businesses and farmland across the country has brought public life to a standstill. Reporting out of Khartoum paints a picture of a chaotic, lawless and dangerous urban landscape, abandoned by all who had the resources and opportunity to escape. Government buildings have been reduced to rubble, and there is virtually no sign of the state or the rule of law in their wake. A series of prison breaks in late April 2023 in Khartoum resulted in the release of 17 000 former inmates. Medical workers have been attacked, robbed and killed, while hospitals and clinics have been sieged, looted and occupied by both the RSF and SAF. Reports of sexual and gender-based violence emerged within days of the onset of fighting.

Air travel in and out of almost every Sudanese city ground to a halt upon the outbreak of conflict in 2023

Apart from airstrikes and drone attacks, air travel in and out of almost every Sudanese city ground to a halt upon the outbreak of conflict. The RSF mounted attacks at key airports during the first days of the conflict to try to erode the SAF's clear aerial combat advantage. The country's airspace remained closed for four months. Passenger and freight train travel halted entirely. Road travel was dangerous and unreliable. A July 2023 report by AFP describes 'lines of parked lorries in their hundreds stretched as far as the eye can see, while drivers were playing cards and drinking tea in the small road-side cafes.'⁵⁸

Shipments into and out of Port Sudan were severely constrained by the war, coming to a complete standstill in the first weeks. As civilians fled by the thousands to the port to escape the violence, the city became 'overwhelmed by people fleeing Khartoum and other places.'⁵⁹ Major shipping companies such as Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd paused shipments to Sudan in late April, rerouting cargo to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Maersk declined to accept new bookings for shipments bound for Sudan until late May. Beyond the security challenges, Maersk reported that the main internet server for Sudan's customs agency had gone offline, creating a cascading effect on the port and shipping companies.

Banking disruptions interrupted efforts to settle payments. Challenges accumulated after goods arrived onshore. 'Partners have faced delays or denials to mobilise aid supplies from Port Sudan to other parts of the country,' according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. '[M]ultiple incidents of "operational interference" ... compromis[es] their ability to operate in a principled manner.' In the early days of the conflict, an entire container terminal in Khartoum was reportedly looted of goods awaiting clearance.⁶⁰

Banks at the brink

Controlling access to cash and the banking system was an early target of the belligerents in Sudan's conflict. On 4 May 2023, RSF troops reportedly looted the Bank of Khartoum of 'high-denomination banknotes and foreign currency' before leaving the premises open for additional looting by gangs and civilians.⁶¹ On May 15, al-Burhan issued a decree freezing the accounts held by the RSF, its leaders and companies under its control. In the following days, local media reported that 'militias reportedly looted banks, including Islamic Bank, Blue Nile Bank and Saudi Sudanese Bank in Nyala.'⁶²

The looting was accompanied by the destruction of the physical and digital infrastructure that allowed Sudan's banks to operate. 'The conflict has resulted in the damage and destruction of the banking system infrastructure, including servers, rendering the majority of banks non-functional and disrupting contact and operations between headquarters and branches,' according to a report by Bloomberg. It added: 'On 31 May, the SAF bombed the country's only currency printing press in Khartoum to prevent the RSF from taking over CBOS [the Central Bank of Sudan] facility to print money to fund their operations.'⁶³

The SAF bombed the country's only currency printing press in Khartoum to prevent the RSF from taking over the Central Bank of Sudan

Crises cascaded through Sudan's financial sector. With the closure of so many branches, the Central Bank was unable to effectively monitor currency circulation, reprint and replace the currency that had been destroyed or issue new denominations of bills into the economy. The banking system, as Sudanese banking expert Hafez Ismail put it, has 'completely collapsed by international standards.'⁶⁴ A severe cash shortage has left people paying extortionate commissions – up to 30% just to access their own – and relying on personal connections or informal networks just to complete routine transactions. 'Even in areas of the country without active fighting, formal financial services are largely unavailable – a result of data centres and operations being centralised in Khartoum, the epicentre of the fighting,' one financial inclusion-focused research agency reported.⁶⁵ In many cases, banking services' availability is dependent on access to fuel and generators.⁶⁶

The SAF has been relatively more exposed to the collapse of formal banking systems. With its reliance on centralised structures, the SAF struggled to adapt. Civil servants and SAF-aligned institutions also felt the squeeze of the banking crisis. In late July, Sudan's finance minister lamented that civil servants' salaries had been delayed because of the 'collapse of the banking network and cash liquidity issues, stemming from the conditions of war.'⁶⁷ Its inability to regulate cash flow or stabilise the currency has weakened its financial position.

This collapse of the formal economy fed the shadow economy. Smuggling thrived, as goods like sugar, fuel and gold moved across borders into Chad, South Sudan and beyond. In Darfur, foreign notes like the Chadian franc and South Sudanese pound began circulating as substitutes for Sudan's unstable currency. In areas without even those options, barter systems emerged. Currency speculation skyrocketed. As confidence in the Sudanese pound eroded, businesses and individuals started converting their wealth into US dollars or storing it in gold. This only worsened the liquidity crisis. The Central Bank estimates that before the war, more than 90% of Sudan's SDG900 trillion in cash was already circulating in the shadow economy. Today, that percentage is likely even higher.

Systematic looting

Following the onset of the war, widespread looting was reported almost daily across Sudan. Public markets were ransacked. Warehouses and convoys carrying humanitarian relief supplies were targeted and corporate offices of businesses were stripped bare. Hospitals, schools and office buildings were emptied. Museums were sieged and robbed, creating concerns about the loss or destruction of irreplaceable cultural items and their potential sale on the international black market for antiquities. Looters also targeted storage warehouses and humanitarian supplies. The repeated targeting of humanitarian organisations undermined their mobility. 'The targeting and looting of humanitarian assets, premises and warehouses throughout the

country have seriously hampered the capacity of aid partners to respond,' according to a July 2023 report by the UN Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs. 'At last count, 44 warehouses of humanitarian partners had been looted, 76 of their offices had been ransacked and at least 188 vehicles stolen.'⁶⁸

The RSF was directly involved in looting, robbery, extortion and the illegal taxation of goods in transit. Reporting out of the town of el-Obeid painted a bleak picture of pillage and plunder at the hands of the paramilitary. 'The main roads linking the city are under the control of the RSF, which is looting and sabotaging, as it has done in the past,' *Middle East Eye* reported, quoting an el-Obeid resident. 'We're being terrorised: they shoot and loot, and the army and police are nowhere to be seen,' another resident told *The New Arab*.⁶⁹

The military, for its part, was reportedly involved in the wholesale confiscation of humanitarian supplies. 'Some aid officials also described military intelligence putting padlocks on warehouses storing relief supplies in Port Sudan, while organisations have publicly criticised authorities for denying them permission to move supplies and personnel out of the city,'⁷⁰ the *New Humanitarian* reported in July 2023.

Street gangs, scapegoats and stolen goods

While the RSF and SAF account for a significant amount of looting and crime during the conflict, other factors have contributed to the surge in criminality. One challenge was the sudden release of thousands of prisoners early in the conflict. 'Hardened criminals are now on the streets, following a mass break-out from Khartoum's biggest prison early in the war,' according to one August 2023 *BBC* report. The breakdown in the formal economy also played a role. As a *BBC* report put it, '[c]rime has also soared because the conflict has forced many businesses to shut, having a knock-on effect on unemployment, while the cost of living has risen because of the scarcity of basic food items.'⁷¹ The scarcity of essentials combined with the proliferation of guns has given way to understandably desperate people – soldiers, militia, prison escapees or civilians – capable of deadly force.

Apart from military operations and shakedowns at checkpoints, the state has virtually disappeared from public life

Apart from performative arrests of thieves, security forces have been largely permissive of violence, looting and theft. In many parts of the country, apart from military operations and shakedowns at checkpoints, the state has virtually disappeared from public life. 'The armed groups involved in the conflict have been accused of committing widespread human rights abuses, including sexual violence, looting and the bombing of government infrastructure, courts, police stations, the office of the registrar and the Criminal Evidence Laboratory center in Khartoum.'⁷²

Loosely organised street gangs have popped up in urban areas countrywide, especially in Khartoum and

Omdurman. 'For us civilians, these gangs are a kind of political terror tool, appearing and disappearing suddenly when the city is going through a wave of protest or chaos,' one commentator said. Reports have claimed that both the RSF and SAF have conducted performative arrests and crackdowns against these gangs to scapegoat them for the expropriation of private property and create the impression that they support the rule of law.⁷³

Civilians in el-Obeid witnessed the RSF looting warehouses belonging to the World Food Programme at the beginning of June 2023. Their haul was then transported to one of the many Dagalo markets for stolen goods that have popped up in cities across Sudan.⁷⁴ The Dagalo markets exhibit characteristics similar to the stolen car markets in Darfur that emerged a decade ago, which are facilitated by a nebulous set of brokers who procure goods from the RSF in return for cash or commodities. Items are sold at such a significant discount that some vendors from formal markets use the Dagalo markets as a source of inventory.⁷⁵

Para-monetary force?

The war has transformed Sudan's economy into a patchwork of desperate adaptations. In some places, trade routes are clogged by RSF checkpoints; in others, roads are washed out by rain or blocked by armed groups.

Digital banking apps are functional in some towns, but useless in others. Traders who once moved goods across provinces now barter on the margins. The formal economy is broken, and what remains is a shadow economy that thrives on smuggling, speculation and survival.

For the RSF, the collapse was both a challenge and an opportunity. While it struggled with the same cash flow issues affecting the broader economy, it had long established alternative financial channels through its links to black markets, smuggling networks and regional allies. With traditional banks largely inoperative, the RSF leveraged its informal financial networks to maintain its supply chains, pay its fighters and fund operations, further entrenching its influence in Sudan's underground economy. This has also given the RSF a distinct advantage over the SAF, whose reliance on the state's shattered economic structures has left it vulnerable in the ongoing power struggle.

As Sudan's economy imploded, business boomed for Hemedti and his entourage. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan, up to 50 companies connected to the RSF were reported to be providing financial support to the group, either directly or indirectly, during the reporting period. Several of these businesses, operating largely in neighbouring countries, were owned by senior RSF leaders and their associates. The panel's analysis indicated that these companies had diversified investments spanning sectors such as mining, security, agriculture, manufacturing, real estate, construction and service industries, including consultancy and tourism.⁷⁶ This web of companies is consistent with a foundational component of the RSF's war machine: clandestine, cross-border connections.

By looting aid hubs and blocking humanitarian access, the RSF have systematically restricted food and essential supplies to areas under siege

The RSF's control over supply chains and movement across Darfur has directly linked hunger to its broader strategy of consolidating power. By looting aid hubs and blocking humanitarian access, they have systematically restricted food and essential supplies to areas under siege. In Darfur, the RSF and allied Arab militias have forcibly displaced non-Arab farming communities, preventing them from accessing their land or sustaining agricultural livelihoods. Displacement, combined with the RSF's occupation of critical agricultural regions such as Gezira and disruption of financial systems, has constrained farming activities and reduced food production. Meanwhile, control over key logistical routes has limited the distribution and driven up prices for staples and necessities.

The transnational and transactional connections maintaining the RSF's war machine

With Sudan's economy in shambles and the RSF's access to Port Sudan and other key transportation arteries severely disrupted, finding ways to reliably move personnel, supplies and sources of revenue became an existential priority for Hemedti's forces. Controlling key routes along Sudan's western and southern borders became crucial to sustaining the RSF, serving as conduits for resources, revenues and relationships that extend their reach and bolster their resilience. Through cross-border supply routes and partnerships with foreign actors, the RSF has secured access to fuel, weapons and financial support. By embedding itself in regional economies, both formal and illicit, the RSF has leveraged its control over key transit points to reinforce its operational flexibility and sustainability.

These cross-border networks reflect more than opportunism; they demonstrate the RSF's strategic use of regional alliances and economic entanglements. In areas such as Libya, Chad and the CAR, the RSF has established relationships with foreign patrons, local armed groups and smugglers that provide vital logistical and financial support. These partnerships illustrate how the RSF exploits the instability of its neighbours to access critical resources while positioning itself as a key player in a broader regional conflict economy. This interconnected web of support highlights the challenge of addressing the RSF's power without accounting for its cross-border ties.

Libya liaisons

Access to a steady supply of fuel may prove more pressing than obtaining weapons, especially for the RSF. 'Hemedti's forces are short of fuel because supplies to their main bases in Darfur have been cut by al-Burhan's supporters in Khartoum, who still control much of the oil and petrol infrastructure in Sudan,' read an April 2023 article in *The Guardian*, 'Hemedti and Haftar have also collaborated on a range of highly profitable smuggling operations, with middle-ranking commanders in both their militias forging close links as they manage the transit of valuable illicit cargos between the two countries.'⁷⁷

Reports from the weeks after the start of the conflict indicated that Libya's Haftar cautiously began supplying fuel to the RSF. Tankers sourced fuel at a refinery near al-Jawf, an oasis town in south-eastern Libya, before travelling under the protection of the Haftar-aligned Sabil al-Salam units and the 128th battalion of the Libyan National Army to meet counterparts in the RSF. As the war continued, Libyan fuel smugglers increasingly routed consignments through Chad, according to analysis published by GI-TOC in August 2023. 'Tankers enter Chad either directly via the Kouri Bougoudi area or via northern Niger [and] then pass through several Chadian villages before entering Sudan, with a significant volume ending up both in eastern Chad and Darfur.'⁷⁸

'Partly at the reported instigation of Moscow, Wagner and the UAE, Haftar began flying in planeloads of military supplies, reportedly including anti-tank weaponry, to the RSF'

Several reports have claimed that Haftar and Wagner arranged for the transit of weapons from southern Libya to the RSF. 'In late May 2023, the Soufan Center reported that, 'partly at the reported instigation of Moscow, Wagner and the UAE, Haftar began flying in planeloads of military supplies, reportedly including anti-tank weaponry, to the RSF.'⁷⁹ Images and video footage have emerged of UAE-supplied weapons, including thermobaric shells, in the RSF's possession, raising the possibility of direct support or assistance through its vast network of proxies in the region.⁸⁰

Haftar's offerings, to be sure, were not charity. 'Of course, this assistance is not freely offered, and the fuel is sold not given to the RSF, generating vast revenues for

Haftar's extended family and businesses,' according to *The Guardian* article. 'The gold goes out, the fuel comes in, all paid for in massive transfers of money.'⁸¹ 'This is a wartime expansion of a lucrative existing business partnership running for a decade or more.'⁸²

Some RSF-bound military supplies, meanwhile, have taken a circuitous route from Libya into Sudan. 'Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) is flying military supplies from its territory to the Central African Republic, from where they are driven by car across the border into the Sudanese interior,' the *Middle East Eye* reported.⁸³

CAR-Sudan border: mining, mercenaries and militia

North-eastern CAR has been a territory of strategic importance for the RSF and a critical node for its engagements with the Wagner Group. The RSF's involvement in the CAR dates back to the 2013 incursion when many within its ranks were deployed as mercenaries who helped topple Bozizé and returned with a bounty of ivory and stolen vehicles. The border has remained a crucial transportation corridor for weapons, troops, gold and diamonds.

For the Wagner Group (and later its remnants and successor organisation, Africa Corps), the CAR has been the epicentre of operations in Africa. Wagner has long relied on safe passage through the CAR-Sudan border to transport vehicles as well as military and mining equipment.⁸⁴

Both Wagner and the RSF have forged a relationship with an upstart armed group that straddles the Sudan-CAR border called the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ). Just a few years ago, the MLCJ lacked firepower. 'MLCJ had only limited weaponry until mid-2019, but acquired military materials

through the Sudanese territory,' according to the UN Panel of Experts. By 2022, senior MLCJ commanders were expert gun runners.⁸⁵

Within the CAR, despite an apparent mandate to support the CAR government's counterinsurgency, the RSF appears to have focused on settling scores with rivals from Darfur who have relocated to Sudan's south-western neighbour. 'While intended to target Central African armed groups, the RSF arrests have instead been targeted at domestic competitors,' according to the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR. In December 2022, RSF elements deployed in the CAR arrested several figures connected with the so-called 'SIRIRI coalition', which 'portrays itself as a Central African armed group but is essentially composed of disgruntled former Sudanese security and defence forces.' Among those arrested was Ahmed Abdel-Rahim Shukort Allah, described as 'a former intelligence officer involved in the establishment of the Border Guard Forces commanded by Musa Hilal.'⁸⁶

On 2 January 2023, Hemedti ordered the closure of Sudan's border with the CAR. The reason, he claimed, was the discovery of a coup plot aimed at ousting CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. A few days later, a senior RSF general received an order 'to combat illicit firearms trade, ammunition, drugs and smuggling and border security violations between the two countries.'⁸⁷ By the end of January, the RSF, the CAR's armed forces and Wagner deployed hundreds of new troops to north-eastern CAR.

On 14 February 2023, forces from the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) – an alliance of prominent anti-government militias – attacked the CAR government and Wagner troops in Sikikédé, a small town in north-eastern CAR. In June, the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR reported that troops aligned with Hilal and 'disgruntled elements of the RSF' appeared in a February 2023 video. On several occasions, Hilal was cited by the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR for his role in providing weapons to anti-government militias in the CAR.⁸⁸

By May 2023, however, the RSF had returned and captured Am Dafok, the strategically important border town, a swathe of territory that represents a key node in the RSF's supply lines. 'On 17 May, RSF captured Am Dafok, the main border post with Central African Republic. This facilitated RSF recruitment in north-eastern Central African Republic among Arab border communities, according to various sources in both countries,' according to the UN Panel of Experts on CAR.⁸⁹ By mid-2023, the RSF had intensified recruiting new soldiers from Arab communities in north-eastern Chad.

Still, in June 2024, the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR reported that the RSF's influence and presence in north-eastern CAR remained robust. 'The Rapid Support Forces of the Sudan have recruited from among armed groups in the Central African Republic and move between the two countries easily through a long-standing network,' according to the report. 'The strategic importance of Am Dafok as a key logistical hub is emphasized, with its role in the supply chain for the Rapid Support Forces and other armed actors highlighted.'⁹⁰

Sudan-Chad border: criminal opportunity and clandestine cargo

Armed groups and smuggling corridors that straddle Sudan's western border with Chad have long played a significant role in criminal markets and conflict dynamics in Darfur. For Chad's government, Sudan's conflict came at a time when the regime of Mahamat Déby was perceived unstable since the death of his father, Idriss Déby, in 2021. 'Déby's death has put the internal vulnerabilities of his authoritarian government glaringly on display,' read a report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. It added: 'In addition to the threat of intensifying insecurity, the junta has been confronted by an increasingly mobilized political opposition and civil society.'⁹¹ With Mahamat Déby's ascent to power widely perceived by Chadians as a coup d'état, his rule has been met with a series of large-scale street protests, including one that ended in the massacre of civilians at the hands of security forces in October 2022.

'While intended to target Central African armed groups, the RSF arrests have instead been targeted at domestic competitors'

The RSF-SAF conflict, like others before it, has created new criminal opportunities for violent entrepreneurs straddling the border. 'With the war in Sudan, Chadian rebels are presented with a new opportunity to profit from conflict by engaging in the war economy,' according to a May 2023 report in *War on the Rocks*. 'As these rebels grapple with how best to benefit from Sudan's unrest, the Sahel faces the potential for even greater instability.'⁹²

GI-TOC's research has indicated that armed men from Chad have begun operating within Sudan, drawn into the conflict by the opportunity to loot and benefit from criminal economies. The report notes that, 'The key incentive for this move was reportedly the opportunity to access stolen vehicles, weapons and equipment, as well as the draw of criminal opportunity, such as the drug trafficking, fuel smuggling and arms trafficking markets.'⁹³

In early June 2023, reports emerged that Chad's armed forces had engaged in clashes with RSF troops in western Darfur. On June 17, Déby deployed to Adré, a town near the border with Sudan, wearing military fatigues.

Observers report that certain drone models in Sudan are consistent with types the UAE has previously deployed in other conflicts

The UAE has cultivated a quiet but strategic relationship with Chad, presenting itself as a partner in regional stabilisation. However, according to credible reports, this partnership has also served as a covert channel for supplying arms to the RSF. In October 2024, the Sudan Conflict Observatory shone a light on an obscure component of the UAE's arms pipeline to the RSF, tracing multiple flights to Aéroport International Maréchal Idriss Déby in Amdjarass, a city in eastern Chad near the border with Darfur.

Drones deployed by the RSF that have been captured or analysed also suggest additional support from the UAE.

Observers report that certain drone models in Sudan are

consistent with types the UAE has previously deployed in other conflicts, while other reports tie drone deployments to the base in eastern Chad.

The UAE's involvement extends to financial support. By buying Sudanese gold, the UAE has allegedly provided the RSF with a steady revenue stream that bolsters its military capabilities. This dual strategy – direct military support combined with financial backing through gold purchases – enabled the RSF to sustain its campaign, entrenching its independence within Sudan's war economy and reinforcing its operational stability.

Gold, South Sudan and Uganda

The role of government officials from South Sudan and Uganda in these transfers is under intense scrutiny as well, with several reports indicating that both countries have become key components of the RSF's logistics system.

A December 2024 report by *The New York Times* provided new insights into the RSF's gold smuggling operations, claiming that a private jet, registered as T7-ABC, moved tons of looted gold from Sudan to the UAE. Ostensibly carrying 'mineral samples,' the aircraft was in reality a flying vault, funnelling wealth out of Sudan and into international markets beyond the reach of sanctions or oversight. Owned by a company with direct ties to RSF leadership, the jet made multiple trips between Khartoum and Dubai, its cargo financing the war effort while Sudan's economy collapsed. This revelation is not just about one plane but emblematic of an important feature of the conflict: the RSF's ability to operate as a transnational criminal enterprise, embedding itself within global supply chains and turning the UAE into its financial haven.⁹⁴

Cargo flights arriving in Darfur from South Sudan or Uganda have been a frequent occurrence during the war, according to a November 2024 report by *Africa Intelligence*. Publicly available data on flights operated by BAR Aviation's two C-130 planes indicate near daily trips by the aircraft registered as 5X-HBR between Uganda and South Sudan in October, according to the report.⁹⁵ 'Other flights originating in Juba head north

toward Sudan, but the aircraft's transponder (which allows it to be tracked) is routinely switched off once cruising speed and altitude is attained,' the report said.⁹⁶ Other reports found that the flights transporting weapons likely supported the RSF's efforts to control transportation routes through Sudan's interior. '[T]he plane's cargo contained weaponry – possibly Russian Katyusha rockets – destined for the RSF, which has been using the artillery in the area, as it has across the country,' reported *Middle East Eye*. 'The munitions would support the group's hold on el-Obeid as well as its attempts to control the supply lines running from Darfur to Khartoum.'⁹⁷

The same airline has been linked to the weapons trade in the past. BAR Aviation is owned by Barak Orland, a Kampala-based Israeli businessman with strong ties to members of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's inner circle, especially his son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba. Newspapers and pundits in Israel, Uganda and elsewhere have described Orland as an arms dealer or the head of a constellation of private security firms based in the country, with reports variously accusing him of serving as an intermediary with Israel's defence industries and as an agent of Mossad. '[W]hile dealing through Barak, officials in Israel got disturbing information about how weapons ordered for Uganda were ending up in the hands of rogue elements in DR Congo, Chad and South Sudan,' *The Independent* (Uganda) reported in 2015.⁹⁸

With links to neighbouring governments, foreign patrons, armed groups and private companies, these clandestine consignments underscore the complexity of illicit supply chains that support the RSF. However, the mere ability to procure these services reflects a degree of operational flexibility given the number of unscrupulous airline operators seemingly willing to take on the physical, legal and reputational risk. As long as aircraft continue to move gold unchecked, the RSF will retain the financial power to sustain its war, outmanoeuvre sanctions and entrench its grip on Sudan's resources.

With great powers comes great volatility

The downing of a Russian-piloted Ilyushin Il-76 cargo plane in North Darfur on 21 October 2024, is emblematic of the instability, complexity and opacity that define international relationships and alliances in Sudan's conflict. While the RSF claimed responsibility for shooting down the aircraft, accusing it of delivering arms to the SAF, the incident revealed the murky nature of foreign engagements and underscored a broader shift in the public's understanding of these dynamics. Competing narratives ranging from covert arms transfer accusations to speculation about the Wagner Group's evolving role reveal that alliances are driven more by pragmatism than ideological alignment, often involving contradictory calculations. This single event offered a lens into the broader landscape of shifting allegiances and transactional relationships that sustain Sudan's warring factions.

Beyond Russia's fraught involvement, the divergence between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on Sudan's conflict has further illustrated the fluidity of foreign engagement. While the UAE's support for the RSF – rooted in its economic interests in Sudanese gold and strategic alignment against Islamist factions – has been well-documented, Saudi Arabia has distanced itself from this approach. Riyadh's engagement, shaped by its broader regional security goals and desire to maintain influence over the Horn of Africa, has been focused on facilitating peace talks and humanitarian aid, as seen in its co-hosting of ceasefire negotiations in Jeddah in early 2024.

Reports of increased Iranian support for the SAF have added a new dimension to the conflict, with Tehran reportedly supplying arms and technical assistance to strengthen Sudan's military. This shift reflects Iran's broader regional ambitions and aligns with its history of supporting Islamist factions. Concurrently, the resurgence of Sudan's Islamist factions, many of whom have rallied around the SAF, has further polarised the conflict. These groups view the RSF as a threat to their vision for Sudan, complicating the RSF's efforts to secure a broader coalition of support.

The involvement of Islamist factions and Iran introduces new challenges for both the RSF and its foreign patrons. For the RSF, the growing alignment of Islamist groups with the SAF undermines its ability to position itself as a viable alternative to Sudan's traditional power structures. Iran's support for the SAF further complicates this dynamic by strengthening the RSF's primary rival while shifting the regional balance of power in a direction that could alienate other actors.

Russia, in particular, finds itself in a conflicted position. Moscow's transactional relationships with both the RSF and SAF are now strained by Iran's growing influence, which may clash with Russia's broader goals of maintaining leverage in Sudan while avoiding entanglements with Islamist ideologies. Iran's role also risks complicating Russia's engagement with the UAE, which remains deeply opposed to Tehran's influence in Sudan and the broader Middle East.

These evolving dynamics illuminate the increasingly precarious position of foreign actors in Sudan's conflict. The interplay of economic interests, ideological divides and regional rivalries has created a volatile landscape where no alliance is guaranteed to last. As the RSF seeks to maintain its footing, it faces the dual challenge of navigating these external pressures while sustaining its internal networks. The rise of Islamists aligned with the SAF and the expanding role of Iran underscore how the external dimensions of Sudan's war are not just shaping the conflict but reshaping the alliances that define it. The Russian aircraft incident reflects a broader reality: in Sudan, every move on the battlefield reverberates across borders, with implications that extend well beyond the immediate conflict.

Hemedti has adeptly adjusted his strategy and allegiances to political shifts in Darfur, Khartoum and foreign capitals and opportunistically capitalised on any leverage or comparative advantage possessed by his forces. Resilience forms the foundation of this capability, and connections to criminal markets have been key to the RSF's adaptation and survival. Its diverse portfolio and cross-border network helps it navigate the volatility of any individual alliance.

In December 2024, the UAE assured the United States (US) that it was not supplying weapons to the RSF.⁹⁹ However, in January 2025, US lawmakers expressed concerns that, despite these assurances, the UAE continued to provide arms to the RSF, thereby prolonging the conflict.¹⁰⁰ This pattern is not unprecedented; in other conflicts, such as in Libya since 2014, the UAE has been accused of covertly supporting belligerents despite public denials.¹⁰¹ In February 2025, the responses to the UAE's overtures in Sudan placed its lack of credibility in stark relief, as it proposed a humanitarian ceasefire in Sudan during the upcoming holy month of Ramadan, coupled with a pledge of US\$200 million for humanitarian efforts; the Sudanese army swiftly rejected this proposal, citing allegations that the UAE had been arming the RSF.¹⁰²

How criminal markets fuel Sudan's chaos

By embedding itself within Sudan's fractured systems, the RSF has created an economic structure that thrives on instability, blending formal and informal networks to sustain its dominance.

The RSF has dominated Sudan's gold trade, taxing miners, displacing competitors and using smuggling routes to move gold across borders into global markets. This extends beyond gold to the taxation of goods at checkpoints, profiteering from smuggling routes and extracting revenues from humanitarian aid flows. These illicit networks are not just revenue streams, but logistical lifelines, enabling the RSF to operate independently of state resources and maintain its influence across Sudan's fractured landscape.

Through these networks, the RSF has transformed economic control into political and military leverage. Its ability to dominate and adapt within the shadow economy ensures its resilience against external pressures, emboldening both Hemedti and the RSF to act with increasing autonomy and assertiveness. Hemedti has ascended to the apex of power in Sudan not as a king, but as a kingpin.

A potential vulnerability, however, is that more recently, the RSF has shifted from a structured salary model to one where recruits are compensated through licences to loot, according to a January 2025 report by the Small Arms Survey. This institutionalised plunder has transformed the war into an economic incentive system, where fighters wherever they are deployed extract value from civilians, businesses and aid organisations rather than relying on formal wages. As a result, predation is not just an outcome of RSF operations – it is a core pillar of its survival strategy.¹⁰³ This elasticity may prove a double-edged sword for the RSF, as the carving up of the economy into decentralised fiefdoms has catalysed fragmentation. While the RSF appears outwardly cohesive, its rapid expansion has fractured its internal command-and-control structure. This fragmentation makes it difficult for the RSF to enforce strategic coherence or adhere to any ceasefire, raising the risk of prolonged, localised conflicts even if national-level peace talks advance.¹⁰⁴

Obstructing the road(s) to peace

The RSF's logistical network spans multiple modes of transport – overland smuggling routes, air transport, maritime shipments and even camel caravans. Sudan's conflict is not a war waged solely with guns, but with highways, flight paths and border crossings. Those who control the movement of goods – whether it is gold smuggled in the hull of a plane, weapons transported through deserts under cover of night or the taxed sugar in a truck limping through checkpoints – have become the true power brokers. The infrastructure of trade, both legal and illicit, is the battlefield, and the entities commanding the arteries of movement are the gatekeepers of power. In this war of routes and resources, the control of movement has done more than fuel violence; it has entrenched a catastrophic peace gridlock, making traditional peacebuilding efforts as impotent as a stalled convoy.

The RSF's mastery of illicit markets underscores this grim reality. With gold as its golden goose, the RSF's operations have embedded Sudan's conflict economy deep into the veins of global trade. By controlling smuggling routes and dominating the trade of conflict gold, the RSF effectively launders war resources into the formal economy. These financial lifelines are untouchable by sanctions or international oversight because they are interwoven with global supply chains and protected by complicit foreign patrons, preserving crucial access to arms, fuel and diplomatic cover. Every bag of gold smuggled across

Sudan's porous borders or barrel of fuel driven into Darfur represents not just profit, but survival. This trade ensures the RSF's ability to pay fighters, arm convoys and sustain its brutal campaign.

In this chaos economy, the RSF and SAF exploit Sudan's geographic and economic vulnerabilities, transforming transportation corridors into battlegrounds for control. Smuggling routes once used for stolen cars and poached ivory are now lifelines for illicit arms and food supplies. Checkpoints function less as state governance tools and more as toll gates for paramilitaries. Trucks laden with goods are taxed at gunpoint by the RSF, who extort millions from traders simply trying to navigate Sudan's fractured supply chains. Meanwhile, the SAF struggles to compete, hamstrung by its dependence on centralised state systems shattered by war. What remains of Sudan's infrastructure – its ports, bridges and railways – has become the spoils of war.

The entrenchment of criminality in the RSF's power structure has profound implications for Sudan's political economy even beyond the conflict. The RSF has not sought to establish a functioning alternative government; instead, it has embedded itself atop a war economy that dismantles governance structures. In areas under its control, state institutions have been hollowed out, with RSF commanders presiding over an informal system of economic exploitation.¹⁰⁵ This means that even if the RSF were to achieve military victory, it lacks the institutional capacity to transition into a stable governing authority – in large part because it has little incentive to cultivate any such stability.

Powerbrokers and broken diplomacy

The RSF's command of networks has made it a paramilitary juggernaut, capable of defying regimes, outmanoeuvring rivals and entrenching itself as a key player in Sudan's fractured economy. As long as these elements remain intact, the RSF will continue to function as a formidable force, defying conventional efforts to curtail its influence.

Meddling by foreign powers only deepened and complicated Sudan's quagmire. Behind-the-scenes meddling by governments from within and beyond the region fuels the fighting while simultaneously sabotaging international diplomatic efforts. Mediators advocating for peace are powerless to counter the material flows that sustain the RSF and SAF. Moreover, the same nations championing ceasefires in public often enable the violence behind closed doors, trading arms and gold under the guise of diplomacy.¹⁰⁶ This interdependence of conflict and commerce has created a vicious cycle. Neither the RSF nor the SAF can

By controlling smuggling routes and dominating the trade of conflict gold, the RSF launders war resources into the formal economy

afford to back down because the resources at stake – Sudan's gold mines, fuel corridors and smuggling routes – are too valuable.

These foreign entanglements, as well as those of the SAF, have exposed fundamental and fatal flaws in traditional approaches to peacebuilding. Diplomacy is designed to mediate between negotiable interests, but here, the interests are absolute. The illicit networks that sustain both factions are too valuable to relinquish, and the foreign powers backing them have too much at stake to prioritise peace over profit. What remains is a landscape where movement, not ideology or governance, defines power. Roads, borders and ports have become the currency of war, and those who control them are not just warlords, but gatekeepers of gridlock.

In other words, these networks do not merely fuel the conflict, they entrench it. Breaking this cycle requires more than political agreements – it demands a concerted effort to dismantle the networks that fund and sustain the RSF. Without it, Sudan's future will remain trapped in, and shaped by, the shadows of its underworld.

Porous pressure, limited leverage

Hemedti's political power has been built on a calculated understanding of leverage and timing, repeatedly exploiting moments of vulnerability to secure dominance. From his early days as a camel trader turned Janjaweed commander, he navigated Sudan's volatile power struggles with precision, shifting allegiances and betraying allies when it suited his ambitions. He leveraged ties with Hilal to consolidate power in Darfur before orchestrating his arrest in 2017, seizing control of the Jebel Amer gold mines and securing his financial independence. As al-Bashir's enforcer, Hemedti suppressed protests at home while deploying his RSF fighters abroad as mercenaries, converting violence into cash and international clout.

When al-Bashir's regime faltered, Hemedti quietly backed his ouster, presenting himself as a stabilising force while his RSF massacred protesters and tightened his grip. His uneasy alliance with al-Burhan culminated in a joint coup before devolving into open war, where Hemedti turned to the Wagner Group for arms and later shot down a Russian plane to signal shifting priorities. At every turn, he exploited crises to position himself as indispensable, proving that loyalty was secondary to wealth, power and survival.

Western efforts to pressure the RSF during the transition, after the coup and during the civil war fell flat precisely because there is little threat to the wealth, power and survival of the paramilitary group's top brass.

The lack of transparency in global financial systems makes tracing and freezing assets a daunting task

Sanctions efforts have thus far fallen short of either dismantling its vast commercial operations, disrupting its logistical networks or fundamentally altering the incentive structures of the RSF's key decision-makers. The opaque and fragmented nature of corporate holdings leaves critical gaps in sanctions coverage, allowing key revenue streams to flow unimpeded. Murky trails of funds moved or parked abroad further complicate efforts, as the lack of transparency in global financial systems makes tracing and freezing assets a daunting task. The quasi-formal

structure of operations adds another layer of difficulty; leadership hierarchies and operational networks remain poorly mapped, limiting the ability of sanctions authorities and civil society organisations to compile evidence strong enough to support designations.

Strategic ambiguity compounds the challenge, as sidelining Hemedti risks shifting power to factions with comparably egregious records of human rights abuses and governance failures. Without clarity on whether the goal is punishment, deterrence or the recalibration of power dynamics, sanctions risk becoming an ineffective tool in addressing the complexities of a fractured state.

The RSF's entanglement in the illicit economy and its clandestine partnerships with foreign governments for unlawful purposes further erode the effectiveness of financial sanctions, which typically hinge on the target's reliance on major global banking systems. Unlike state entities or conventional financial networks, the RSF

operates through shadowy channels that are less vulnerable to traditional forms of economic coercion. While sanctions aimed at organised crime could, in theory, disrupt these networks, no government has yet committed the significant resources needed to enforce such a programme at a scale capable of altering the RSF's incentives. Instead, the tendency to adopt low-budget, symbolic measures risks backfiring: such efforts not only fail to disrupt illicit operations but also serve to alert the RSF and its backers to adjust their tactics, rendering future enforcement efforts even more difficult.

Compounding this issue is the absence of a coherent diplomatic strategy. Without clearly articulated objectives, sanctions remain a blunt instrument – deployed without the precision or resourcing needed to support a broader, well-coordinated international campaign. As a result, the current approach risks alienating potential allies, entrenching RSF operations further in the shadows and, ultimately, undermining the intended impact of financial pressure.

Conclusion

Through the first two months of 2025, the SAF embarked on an ambitious military offensive reclaiming key territory in Khartoum and positioning itself within striking distance of the presidential palace. The RSF, stretched thin and bleeding resources, is showing signs of exhaustion – its fighters are increasingly reliant on looting for survival, and its supply chains, once bolstered by external backers, are becoming less reliable as a result of SAF military advances. But a territorial rollback does not equate to the collapse of the RSF's economic model. The RSF was never built to hold and govern – it was built to extract, to embed itself in Sudan's crisis economy and to thrive in disorder. Even if it loses ground in Khartoum, it retains control over Sudan's gold trade, smuggling networks and extortion economies, ensuring it can persist as a destabilising force long after it is dislodged from urban centres. The SAF may take the capital, but seizing territory will not dismantle the war economy that keeps the RSF alive. If anything, the chaos economy will become even more entrenched as the RSF adapts, disperses and shifts its operations deeper into Sudan's illicit networks. For decades, he has turned war into a bargaining chip, chaos into capital and atrocities into footnotes on his way to greater influence. The cycle has played out again and again: brutality, impunity, survival, reinvention. Whether the RSF holds Khartoum or fades into the margins, Hemedti has demonstrated that he will find, or at least seek, a way to make disorder work for him.

The RSF was never built to hold and govern – it was built to extract, to embed itself in Sudan's crisis economy and to thrive in disorder

As Typhon was said to draw his strength from the underworld, so too does the RSF draw its power from the chaos of Sudan's collapsing formal economy and the shadow networks that thrive in its place. Far from being a passive force in the country's devastation, the RSF has seized upon the destruction of state institutions and commerce to entrench its control over the informal and illicit economies. These networks – spanning gold smuggling, looting, black-market taxation and transnational arms trading – have become the lifeblood of a force that is as adaptable as it is predatory.

Sudan's war has not merely disrupted legitimate systems of trade and governance; it has inverted them. The destruction of banking infrastructure, transport routes and centralised authority has paralysed much of the SAF, whose reliance on formal structures leaves it increasingly hamstrung. By contrast, the RSF has turned every rupture in the system into an opportunity. Smuggling routes across Darfur, Chad and CAR are no longer just gaps in state power – they are the arteries of the RSF's criminal empire, allowing it to sustain its operations even as Sudan's conventional economy collapses.

This integration with illicit markets is more than opportunistic; it is strategic. Gold smuggled to Dubai, fuel routed through Libya and weapons ferried from Wagner-backed networks are not only revenue streams – they are the mechanisms that sustain and expand the RSF's influence. These criminal economies provide Hemedti's forces with logistical flexibility and financial autonomy, enabling them to outlast both the SAF

and international sanctions. The RSF's resilience in the face of chaos is not a side effect of the war; it is a deliberate outcome of its structure, strategy and deep entanglement with transnational criminal networks.

The challenge, then, is not simply to suppress the RSF's immediate ambitions, but to dismantle the criminal economies that sustain it. Without addressing the economic chaos that has become the RSF's sanctuary, efforts to restore peace and stability in Sudan may merely displace the problem without solving it. The path forward must involve understanding and unravelling the intricate web of power that sustains the RSF.

Dismantling entrenched systems

Entrenched systems have allowed sidelined strongmen and former powerbrokers to resurface time and again. Efforts that focus solely on immediate threats risk leaving the underlying structures intact, ensuring the same actors – or their successors – will re-emerge opportunistically. Criminal markets have played a key role in many such comebacks, allowing violent predatory actors to strengthen by compromising or operating beyond the reach of the state. Any sustainable strategy for bringing peace, good governance and the rule of law to Sudan will require a long-term commitment to rooting out these systems.

Addressing Sudan's shadow economy requires rebuilding trust in formal systems, even as the RSF exploits the void left by the state's collapse. Efforts to restore legitimate trade and governance must begin incrementally, focusing on sectors like agriculture and small-scale mining. Corruption within state institutions remains a significant barrier, and anti-corruption mechanisms with international oversight are critical to ensuring that new structures are transparent and resistant to capture by predatory elites. Simultaneously, community-centric approaches – such as local cooperatives and microfinance initiatives – can empower those most affected by the conflict to reclaim control over their economic destinies.

Reducing the RSF's grip on Sudan will also require decades-long efforts to reconstitute local governance systems (in ways that do not incentivise the commodification of violence) and foster community resilience. Traditional leaders and grassroots organisations can serve as vital counterweights to the RSF's influence, provided they are supported with the resources and legitimacy needed to lead. Aid delivery systems must ensure help reaches those in need without inadvertently strengthening the group's grip on the population.

Addressing Sudan's crisis requires more than sanctions, military offensives or elite negotiations – it demands viable alternatives to the illicit economy that sustains the RSF and entrenches instability. Education and vocational training tailored to conflict-affected regions could offer young recruits opportunities outside the war economy, undermining both RSF recruitment and revenue streams. But training alone is insufficient without rebuilding local markets and trade infrastructure, ensuring that legal commerce can compete with smuggling networks. Community-based resource management could weaken the RSF's grip on gold mining and fuel smuggling by reinvesting wealth into local economies instead of militia-controlled trade. Expanding financial inclusion – through mobile banking and microfinance – could break dependence on RSF-controlled cash economies, while agricultural revitalisation and land reform could restore livelihoods lost to war and displacement.

None of these efforts will succeed, however, unless basic security conditions are met, local governance structures are restored and international and domestic actors commit to long-term economic stabilisation instead of short-term crisis management. Without these foundations, any economic alternative risks being another abandoned initiative overshadowed by the incentives of the war economy.

Bringing the RSF out of the shadows

Disrupting the RSF's financial and logistical networks requires a strategic focus on dismantling its dominance over Sudan's gold trade and broader shadow economy. International pressure must be applied to key trade hubs like Dubai, where Sudanese conflict gold is laundered into the global market. Diplomacy should target these chokepoints, leveraging trade relationships to push for stricter import regulations and certification standards. Meanwhile, artisanal miners need legitimate pathways to market their gold, breaking their dependency on RSF-controlled systems. Smuggling routes, vital to the RSF's operations, demand similar attention. Coordinated regional efforts must disrupt the RSF's overland and air logistics. Investments

in monitoring technologies, including satellite surveillance, will help track movement along these corridors, while sanctions on transport companies and corrupt border officials can further tighten the screws.

None of the above can be achieved, however, if the RSF or its successors remain the overlords of the shadow economy in Darfur or elsewhere in Sudan. Addressing this challenge means unpacking the RSF's business model and relationships in significantly more granular detail. Exposing the RSF's criminal networks and international backers demands a sharper, more coordinated effort that builds on existing contributions while tackling the blind spots. Government-funded monitoring programmes have already unearthed shady flights ferrying weapons, and UN Panel of Experts reports have mapped out smuggling routes with precision. Sanctions announcements, meanwhile, have provided crucial breadcrumbs – names, entities and specific roles in fuelling Sudan's violence. But these efforts, while invaluable, are piecemeal. What is missing is a systematic, collaborative approach that dismantles the RSF's shadowy infrastructure, piece by piece, by laying its entire power structure bare.

Governments and law enforcement need better tools to track the RSF's movements – whether it's money, weapons or commodities like gold. Funding programmes that monitor flights, scrutinise trade documents and analyse suspicious financial transactions would help tighten the net. These efforts should not stop at detection. Intelligence sharing among allies must be ramped up, creating a shared database of RSF-linked activities. The private sector is another key player. Logistics firms, mining companies and trading hubs such as Dubai must adopt rigorous due diligence practices to flag transactions that point back to the RSF. When they identify red flags, they should have a clear mechanism to report them, backed by protection from retaliation.

International pressure must be applied to key trade hubs like Dubai, where Sudanese conflict gold is laundered

Civil society, already a front-line actor in documenting abuses and corruption, needs more resources and protection to keep doing what governments often can't or won't. With funding and training, they could dig deeper into corporate records, trace RSF ownership structures and monitor smuggling routes in real-time. International organisations can play a unifying role, pulling together the pieces such as flight logs, sanctions data and trade documents. Together, they can paint a full picture of the RSF's sprawling networks.

The endgame is simple: map the RSF's web of power, in full. Identify the linchpins – the people connecting Hemedti's operation to illicit economies and formal markets. Name the suppliers, the intermediaries, the bureaucrats who sign off on shipments of weapons or fuel. Who are the middlemen greasing the wheels of this machine? Every document, every deal, every border crossed is another thread in the RSF's fabric. Pull enough threads, and the structure starts to unravel. The RSF thrives in the shadows, where anonymity and impunity are its greatest strengths.

Naming and shaming the RSF, however, provides only a flicker of light rather than the sustained scrutiny necessary to alter its incentive structures.

In the final weeks of then-president Joe Biden's administration, the US formally designated the violence in Sudan as genocide, citing the RSF's targeted atrocities in Darfur. While the declaration underscores the gravity of the crisis, its practical implications remain uncertain. No new enforcement mechanisms or shifts in policy accompanied the announcement, and with a new administration in office, there is no guarantee that Sudan will remain a priority. The designation places the RSF's actions in a legal and historical framework, but Sudan's long history of impunity suggests that without a fundamental reassessment of how the conflict has been sustained, the label alone is unlikely to alter the trajectory of the war.

The genocide designation is much like the categorisation of a hurricane – it describes the scale of devastation but does little to prepare for the storm or address the destruction left in its wake. Typhon was not defeated through brute force alone, but through a strategy that severed his ability to regenerate. Likewise, simply labelling the RSF's crimes will not contain the destruction it leaves behind. Without a strategy to dismantle the war economy that sustains it, the declaration of genocide will be little more than a meteorologist naming the storm as it hovers above.

Notes

- 1 Hesiod's poem *Theogony* provides one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of Typhon's birth, nature and battle with Zeus (lines 820–880), available at: <https://users.pfw.edu/flemingd/Hesiod%20Theogony.pdf>; according to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2012, Typhon was a monstrous force of chaos who sought to overthrow the Olympian gods; in *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3, www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus1.html, Apollodorus summarises Typhon's origins and his battle against Zeus.
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