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THE REPUBLIC OF KADAMOL

A Portrait of the Rapid Support Forces at War

Joshua Craze and Raga Makawi



Credits and contributors

Editor:

Khristopher Carlson

Production and communications coordinators:

Olivia Denonville, Katie Lazaro, and Lionel Kosirnik

Fact-checker:

François Fabry

Copy-editor:

Alessandra Allen

Proofreader:

Stephanie Huitson

Design and layout:

Rick Jones

Cartography:

Jillian Luff, MAPgrafix

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About the authors

Joshua Craze is a writer with more than a decade of experience conducting research in Sudan and South Sudan. His essays are published in the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Left Review*, among many other publications. He is finishing a book for Fitzcarraldo Editions on war and bureaucracy in South Sudan.

Raga Makawi is a Sudanese editor and researcher at the London School of Economics. She is an affiliate at the Alameda Institute. Her work has been published by *Africa is a Country* and *1843* magazine.

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Front cover photo

Rapid Support Forces (RSF) soldiers guard a desert water station where RSF leader Hemetti's own camels are said to be watered, North Darfur, 2020. Source: Jérôme Tubiana.

Overview

This Briefing Paper surveys the state of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) after 19 months of war in Sudan. It focuses on the recruitment strategies of the RSF and the fragmentation of its command-and-control structure. This process of fragmentation is driven by the RSF's political economy, which is predicated on the licensing of plunder. Understanding how the RSF's maintenance of its fragile coalition necessitates a predatory political economy is critical if one is to comprehend current military dynamics in Sudan. This paper finds that, rather than creating functional institutions of government, the RSF has positioned itself atop a war economy, trading in scarce commodities and exploiting vulnerable populations in territories under its control. The paper concludes by sketching out some practical consequences for the international community.

Key findings

- Recruitment by the RSF since 2022 has exacerbated socio-ethnic cleavages in Sudan. This fracturing of the social fabric has also fractured the RSF, which struggles with command-and-control issues.
- Even if the terms for a ceasefire could be agreed, the RSF would have little ability to adhere to such an agreement. Conflicts in Darfur and South Kordofan have increasingly taken on ethnic dynamics.
- The RSF's previously lucrative salary payments have been reduced since 2023. Instead, initial cash payments to newly integrated forces have been supplemented by licences to loot. The RSF presides over a political economic machine predicated on plunder.
- The RSF's war machine works to destroy the very possibility of a Sudanese state. RSF claims to have created formal government institutions belie the reality. A war-time system of governance has been established in RSF-held areas, in which commanders sit atop a class of smugglers and militarized brokers.
- The collapse of Sudan's economy has benefited the RSF. In RSF-controlled areas of Khartoum, it has created work structures that make an immiserated population dependent on the militia. This political economy is part of the RSF's transformation from an irregular fighting force into an entrepreneurial system of predatory accumulation.

Introduction

In 2006, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as 'Hemeti'—now the leader of the RSF, but then an emerging Arab militia leader in Darfur—was tasked by the Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir with responding to a rebel offensive in North Darfur. Characteristically, Hemeti took the opportunity afforded him by the state to settle a score of his own—hunting for a Zaghawa commander who had stolen some of his camels in 2003. When he could find no trace of his herd, he called in military airstrikes (Flint, 2009, pp. 34–40). This combination of government support and private enterprise is exemplary of Hemeti's reign as the leader of the RSF, in what some Sudanese have taken to calling the 'Republic of Kadamol', after the scarves that cover the faces of Sahelian nomads (see Map 1).

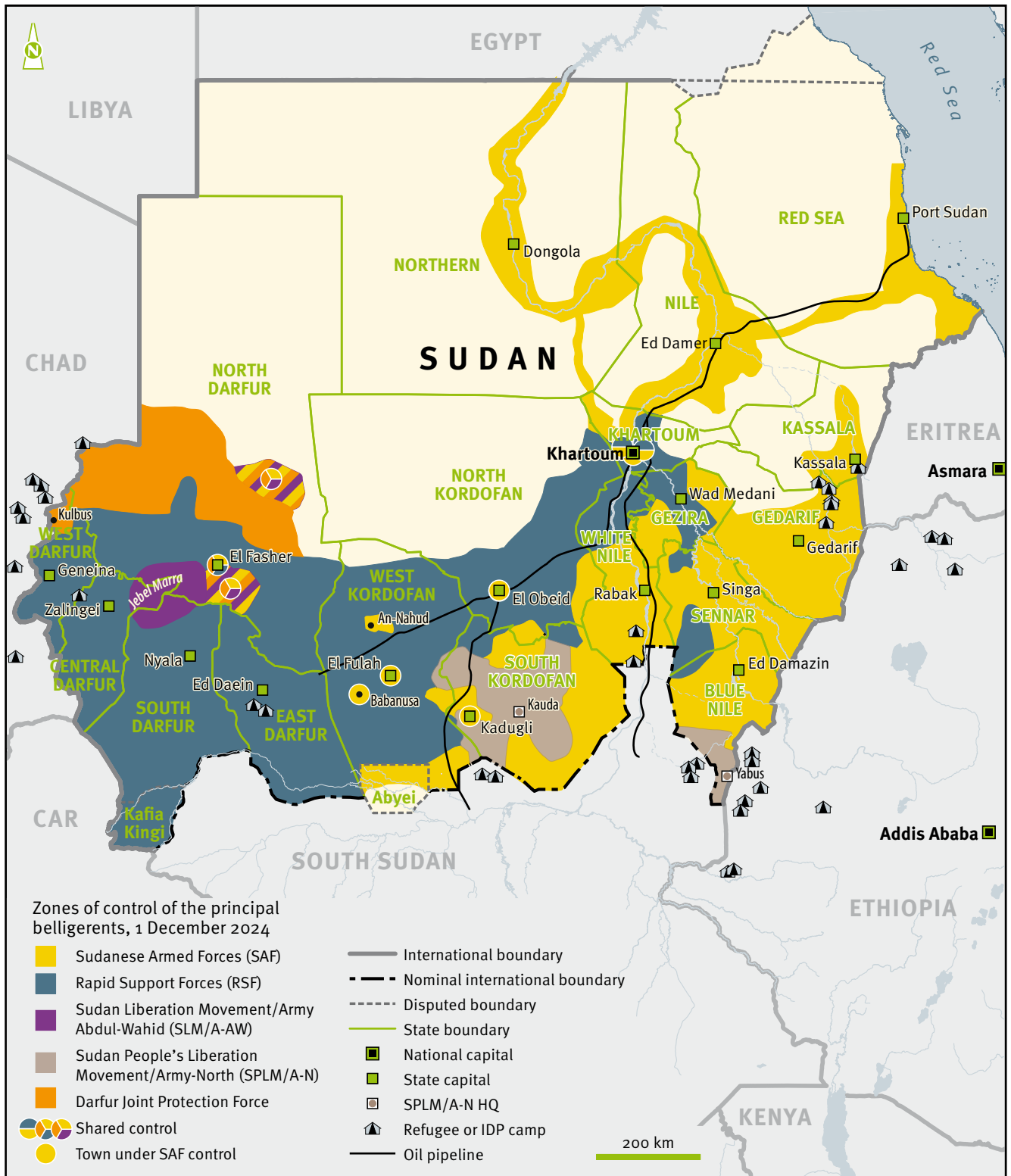
In 2006, there was little inkling that Hemeti's forces would lay waste to the Sudanese state, or that the former furniture store owner would be rapturously received on a regional tour befitting a president (Malik, 2023; Nashed, 2024b). That Hemeti and the RSF became what they are today was not inevitable, but rather the fortuitous convergence of five historical currents.

Five historical currents

The political instrumentalization of marginalization

Conflict in Darfur has deep roots, including environmental degradation and the political marginalization of its diverse ethnic groups by the central state. Clashes over land between agricultural and pastoralist populations developed an ethnic tenor in the 1990s. On the ground, the categories involved in this ideological mapping—African and Arab; pastoralist and farmer—were much more fluid than they have appeared in the Western imaginary (O'Fahey, 2008). The essentialization of these categories resulted from political instrumentalization by Khartoum, as well as self-interested mobilizations by local elites. Low-intensity clashes between agricultural and pastoralist groups over land and political rights were transformed in 2003, after non-Arab groups launched a rebellion to protest their marginalization at the hands of the central state (Flint and de Waal, 2008). Rather than using the army to suppress

Map 1 The Republic of Kadamol



Source: Author interviews (2024); UN OCHA (2024); Sudan War Monitor (2024); van Linge (2024). Base map data source: OpenStreetMap.

the rebellion, Bashir's government outsourced the fighting to largely landless Abbala camel herders, some of the most marginalized people in Darfur.

The use of militias to fight conflicts in the peripheries has a long history in Sudan, dating back to at least the reign of Gaafar Nimeiry, and to Sadiq el-Mahdi's

employment of *murahaleen* forces during Sudan's second civil war (de Waal, 1993).¹ Given the immense financial cost of mobilizing the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which was composed of foot soldiers from the periphery largely uninterested in fighting for a sclerotic officer corps from the Nile Valley, militias

became a way for successive Sudanese governments to wage 'counterinsurgency on the cheap' (de Waal, 2004). Rather than pay the militias, successive Sudanese governments encouraged them to pillage the villages of their opponents. In Darfur, this strategy transposed a political conflict—between Khartoum and the

Darfuri rebels—onto an ethnic divide between Arab and non-Arab groups, essentializing these categories. The militias became known as the ‘Janjaweed’.

Among their number was a young commander from the Awlad Mansour branch of the Mahariya Rizeigat—Hemeti—at that time under the charge of his more famous uncle, Juma Dagalo. Hemeti’s 2006 raids across North Darfur were brutal: his forces raped women and tortured men (HRW, 2024; Tubiana, 2019). These tactics were typical of the Janjaweed. In Darfur, the period from 2003 to 2005 saw 300,000 dead, due to violence, hunger, and disease, and many more displaced (Tubiana and Craze, 2024). While the Janjaweed were in theory fighting for the government, their campaigns also consolidated their territorial control of parts of Darfur, forcing non-Arab populations into enormous camps for internally displaced people (IDP), which instilled deep divisions within the region.

Bashir’s rule by militia

Counter-insurgency on the cheap turned out to be very expensive (Tubiana, 2017). Militia leaders, promised positions and payments, soon became disaffected with Khartoum. They would sometimes fight against each other, as well as against the government. Bashir worried that the militias were impossible to control.² He also feared that he would soon face the threat of a coup d’état from within the ranks of his own military high command (Craze, 2023b). Bashir dealt with both problems at the same time by creating the RSF, which was conceived as a counter-insurgency force, composed of former Janjaweed, that would come directly under the authority of the National Security and Intelligence Service (NISS) rather than SAF. Hemeti, initially an operations commander for the RSF, would soon come to control it (Tubiana, 2017).³

In some ways, the RSF appeared to be a continuation of previous militia formations. It was just as brutal as the Janjaweed, burning villages, raping children, and destroying farm land in two campaigns in 2014–15; although putatively intended to combat Darfuri rebels, the campaigns also focused on attacking and displacing non-Arab civilian populations (HRW, 2015). From the beginning, however, the RSF served not only as a counter-insurgency force, but also as Bashir’s enforcers, bringing Darfur’s violence from the peripheries to the centre.

In 2013, the RSF violently repressed demonstrations in Khartoum (HRW, 2014). Such was the RSF’s utility to Bashir that it became his praetorian guard, designed to coup-proof his regime against would-be challengers. Bashir placed the RSF directly under the Office of the President in 2017, removing it from the oversight of the intelligence service, and appointed Hemeti as its commander. Sudanese intelligence officers date the unspooling of the regime’s control of the RSF to this decision: previously, militias had been tools of the regime, rather than directly constituting part of it.⁴ The interlopers from the periphery found themselves, formally at least, on an equal footing with SAF and the NISS.

A productive crisis

With South Sudanese independence in 2011, Sudan lost 75 per cent of the value of its oil exports, which constituted the vast majority of its dollar exports, in one fell swoop (Craze, 2024b; IMF, 2020, p. 28). Bashir frantically tried to reorientate the economy. In 2012, gold was fortuitously found in Darfur and rapidly became Sudan’s principal source of hard currency (de Waal, 2019). The most productive seams were discovered around Jebel Amer, territory soon violently acquired by Rizeigat militias, including those under the command of Musa Hilal, the Janjaweed leader and Hemeti’s principal rival. After Hilal’s fall from grace, Hemeti defeated his opponent, imprisoned him, and took over the Jebel Amer gold mines.⁵ It should be noted that Hemeti earns less from actual mines under his control than from taxes and levies on prospectors and mining businesses. As with militias in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the RSF does not produce resources, but exercises a mode of predation by taxing economic flows at crucial nodes of global commodity chains (Craze, 2024a; Schouten, 2022).

Gold mining’s importance to the RSF has been much overstated. The UN Panel of Experts estimated that the mining sites, from 2010 to 2014, brought USD 123 million annually to Arab militias (UNSC, 2016, p. 42). This number is almost certainly an overestimate. Revenue from artisanal gold mining is extremely difficult to calculate: thousands of prospectors, miners, and middlemen all take a cut. Furthermore, even if Arab militias received all this money, such

income is in no way comparable to the amounts garnered from SAF’s business empire in real estate, land, banking, and manufacturing. Furthermore, once Hemeti and Al-Junaid—the Dagalo family holding company—took over control of these mines, the income they did provide went to the Dagalo family, rather than to the RSF. The RSF’s budget was overwhelmingly provided by mercenary activities abroad and the Sudanese state. Rather than viewing the RSF as an independent economic actor, it is crucial to understand that the RSF’s rise is unimaginable without state backing.

Bashir’s attempt to reorientate Sudan’s economy towards gold after the precipitous loss of South Sudanese oil reserves had more political than economic importance for the RSF. The need to control territories where artisanal gold mining occurred accentuated the RSF’s importance for the state, and enabled the RSF to expand territorial control in Darfur by functioning as the protectors of gold mining territory. The state’s investment in gold backfired, weakening Bashir’s regime just as it was strengthening the RSF. In order to stop gold being smuggled—artisanal gold can quickly disappear across borders—the Central Bank of Sudan (CBOS) had to pay over the odds to be Sudan’s exclusive exporter. The CBOS ended up losing money by purchasing gold, often through murky deals with Al-Junaid (Elbadawi and Suliman, 2018). The state’s loss was the smuggler’s gain, as Hemeti’s family became one of the main traffickers in illegal gold.⁶ The state’s reorientation towards gold weakened it economically, and empowered the RSF politically.

Hemeti became Sudan’s principal border guard, controlling the country’s lucrative northern and western frontiers, where he could tax flows of people and goods. In 2016, when the European Union began cooperating with Sudan to curb migrant passage to the Mediterranean, the RSF intercepted refugees on their way to Libya, showing cars full of migrants to foreign television cameras to demonstrate that Hemeti was upholding the European order. Less discussed were the migrants he trafficked across the border and sold to Libyan traffickers, who ransomed them (Baldo, 2017; Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen, 2018). Becoming Sudan’s border guard in chief, it turns out, was a fine way to become a successful smuggler, which was, lest we forget, Hemeti’s original profession on the Chadian border.

Geopolitical alliance

The gold trade was also important because it enabled the firming up of Hemeti's relationship to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a major global gold-importing hub, and now the RSF's main patron. Gold imported by the UAE is mostly sourced from Africa, and mostly smuggled (Ndoricimpa, 2024). The UAE's relationship with Hemeti was formed in 2015, after Saudi Arabia and the UAE jointly contracted Bashir's regime to provide soldiers for their war in Yemen against the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah). Bashir willingly took part in this conflict, under the auspices of a Saudi-led coalition, as part of his regime's reorientation towards Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, rather than seeking support from Iran (which backed the Houthis) and Qatar. As part of his regime's reorientation, Bashir sent forces drawn from both SAF and the RSF to Yemen, with the Sudanese army's contingent commanded by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and Hemeti taking command of the RSF's forces. Both men made a case to the Emiratis that they were the non-Islamist future rulers of Sudan that would suit the UAE.

The mercenary force that the RSF dispatched to Yemen proved a useful recruiting tool. The salaries paid to the RSF soldiers (USD 22,000 for a six-month deployment) vastly exceeded those paid to SAF soldiers in Sudan (Abbas, 2023). Upon their return from Yemen, RSF soldiers were then paid a further one-time lump sum of approximately USD 10,000. This was a core appeal for those joining the RSF, which effectively functioned as an employment bureau for lucrative mercenary missions abroad.⁷ The RSF's rapid economic expansion meant that by 2017 it was exporting three commodities from the peripheries—gold, mercenaries, and livestock—all of them destined for the Gulf.⁸ The RSF's growing role in the gold trade required large amounts of manpower to police mining sites and border checkpoints, which enabled it to absorb the fighters who returned from Yemen in 2019–20, when the RSF's services there came to an end. Those fighters who did return came back with not only lump-sum payments, but also Saudi-issued weapons and valuable experience from fighting the Houthis, unlike SAF forces in Yemen, who deployed to the border with Saudi Arabia and did not experience combat.

By 2018, from Bashir's perspective, the RSF was still functioning as his praetorian guard. By then, however, the militia force had accumulated all the trappings of a rentier state, albeit masked through private business holdings (Craze, 2024a).⁹ The RSF had external backing from a foreign power (the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia), and an export driven economy (gold, livestock, labour) that allowed it relative autonomy from the Sudanese military establishment. While, like the Janjaweed before it, the RSF began as an ethnically orientated militia, the coincidence of the RSF's interests with those of the UAE, and its ability to insert itself into global commodity markets predicated on opacity (Blas and Farchy, 2021), enabled the RSF to transform itself into a transnational security firm with a profitable side business in commodities (Phenomenal World, 2023). It always remained, however, a parastatal, dependent on support from Khartoum. When the Sudanese state that initially backed the RSF's rise turned against the militia, Hemeti was able to substitute Khartoum with Abu Dhabi.

The politician rises

In April 2019, Hemeti allied with SAF in toppling Bashir, beginning his political career. In the following months, he played a lead role in preventing Salah Gosh, the powerful head of the NISS, from taking over the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that ran the state after Bashir's fall (Tubiana, 2022). Many Islamists and intelligence officials have never forgiven him for these actions.¹⁰ The military, despite its suspicion of the RSF, empowered Hemeti by abrogating a 2019 law that placed the RSF under the command of the SAF joint chief of staff, and instead made it answerable only to the presidency—a position that, following Bashir's fall, was empty. Hemeti's position was further strengthened after Burhan made him the deputy chairperson of the Sovereign Council under the terms of the August 2019 power-sharing agreement between the TMC and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the coalition of political parties and civil society organizations that had played a role in the uprising against Bashir (Craze, 2023b).

Hemeti was nonetheless regarded with suspicion by both the military establishment and the civilian politicians of the FFC. He was considered an unlearned militia leader from the periph-

ery (or, some said, a foreigner from Chad), and a threat to SAF's political-economic empire, as well as to the civilian politicians' myopic focus on the Khartoum metropolitan area at the expense of the country's peripheries. In an attempt to turn himself into a national politician, Hemeti tried on several masks, none of which quite took. During the revolution, Hemeti had endeavoured to find support from civil society, protesters, and revolutionary groups, with very limited success. Immediately after the coup that felled Bashir, Hemeti positioned himself as a future leader of the state: he convened customary authorities, paid the civil service, and tried to build a political constituency. Reactions to the RSF's alleged role in the massacre of protesters on 3 June 2019 undermined these efforts (HRW, 2019). Hemeti then pivoted to attempting to establish a Darfuri political bloc in Khartoum through the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), which brought many of the Darfuri rebel groups into the transitional government (Craze and Khair, 2023b). This scheme also went awry: some Darfuri leaders sided with SAF, while others went their own way. Hemeti claimed he was assailed from all sides (Tubiana and Craze, 2024), and chose the path of least resistance, allying with SAF in the October 2021 autogolpe that brought down the transitional government and instituted a military junta (Craze, 2023a). Soon, though, Hemeti was backtracking once again. He publicly declared the coup a mistake and, during negotiations for the Framework Agreement in December 2023, made common cause with parts of the FFC, which saw in Hemeti the possibility of acquiring the military forces that it otherwise lacked (Craze and Khair, 2023a).

For all his twists and turns, Hemeti was unable to get purchase on politics in the capital. He remained an outsider, blocked, most fundamentally, by SAF and remnants of the NISS and the old regime, who saw him as a threat to their power. Bashir had created a hydra-headed set of security organs as a means of coup-proofing his regime. With Bashir gone, it was perhaps inevitable that they would turn on each other. The Framework Agreement, overly formal and underthought, became the mechanism through which both SAF and the RSF attempted to build coalitions—of militia groups, politicians, and foreign powers—in anticipation of conflict (Craze and Khair, 2023a). In negotiations for the agreement, during a

workshop on security sector reform, SAF demanded the quick absorption of the RSF into the army. This would be the death knell for the RSF, and Hemeti knew it. Far from leading to a return to a civilian transition, the Framework Agreement set the two main military forces in the country against each other.

Who exactly started the war remains contested (Craze, 2023a). In the run-up to the beginning of clashes, former stalwarts of the Bashir regime, along with hardline Islamists, were calling for an end to the Framework Agreement. Tensions between the RSF and SAF had also increased. What is clear is that on 16 April 2023 Youssef Izzat, then an adviser to Hemeti, stood in a Sudanese television studio ready to announce a successful autogolpe and a temporary military council that would lead to a civilian-led (and RSF-dominated) government and future elections.¹¹ Taking over control of the Sudanese state was, for the RSF, both a survival measure—a precautionary strike against SAF—and a means of further enrichment, through the lucrative government contracts and backroom deals that had profited a litany of previous regimes (Craze, Khair, and Makawi, 2024). Rather than be bankrolled by the Sudanese state, the RSF would be the bank. It was not to be.

The politics of the war machine

While it is tempting to attribute the rise of the RSF to a Napoleonic interloper—Hemeti—coming from the periphery to challenge the capital, it is important to underline that this process was not solely dependent either on Hemeti’s vision or on the internal workings of the RSF. From the beginning, Bashir’s regime and SAF were the principal movers in the expansion of the RSF; if the RSF now challenges its former backers, this is only because Khartoum enabled its rise. It was Bashir’s regime that initially bankrolled the RSF and provided it with the means to expand—including paying its wage bill and providing instructors for its forces. At the beginning of the war, there were around 500 SAF officers within the command structures of the RSF. For all the stark dichotomies that are supposed to characterize the two forces, they are far more interconnected than commonly believed—as illustrated by the number

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of personnel that have switched sides since the war began.

Hemeti’s successful juggling of multiple roles enabled the RSF to rapidly recruit after its founding. In 2013, the RSF was a force of approximately 6,000 men, with almost all of its leadership drawn from Hemeti’s family members. By March 2023, just before the beginning of the war, RSF members claimed that the organization had 300,000 soldiers. While others estimated around 70,000 RSF soldiers at this time, this seems likely to be an under-estimate.¹² The RSF had been able to expand due to its support from the Sudanese state, and thanks to the salaries offered to the mercenaries who had gone to Yemen, which attracted young men from across Sudan and the broader region (Chad, in particular).

The RSF estimates that some 20,000 soldiers have been killed since the war began.¹³ It is difficult to count the current number of RSF soldiers because, since the beginning of the war, mobilizations have tended to be conducted among particular communities, rather than the RSF designing recruitment campaigns that would draw new soldiers into formally organized RSF fighting forces. Darfuri Arab communities so recruited are answerable to their own customary leadership, rather than to the RSF command. This has produced a pattern of mobilization in which fighters assemble for local political goals and to take advantage of the war to accumulate resources, before dispersing back to their home

areas. As one former resident of Nyala said: ‘Even Hemeti himself didn’t always know the number of militants fighting with his forces because every morning some were leaving and others joining, including residents of the cities that the RSF captured.’¹⁴

The beginning of the war has seen a change in the organization of the RSF. During the period of the transitional government (2019–21), the RSF attempted to use relatively well-paid salaries to lure communities from outside its principal Arab constituencies. Particularly among Darfuri and Fellata communities in Khartoum and Gedaref, and non-Darfuri communities in Blue Nile and South Kordofan, there was sympathy for Hemeti’s anti-elite politics. The RSF was partly successful in these recruitment campaigns: by 2023, it estimated that non-Darfuri Arabs constituted roughly 20 per cent of its fighting forces.¹⁵

After the coup in October 2021, as the lineaments of the coming conflict became clearer, both sides began recruitment drives in Darfur. The RSF was more successful; using generous state budgetary allocations, it was able to offer incentives (such as cars, ranks, and money) to customary authorities in South and West Darfur, among other areas, which sent forces to RSF training camps in the Khartoum area from 2022 to 2023 (UNSC, 2024).¹⁶ Other commanders, from a variety of militia groups, were bought off and joined the RSF, including Ali Rizeigallah ‘Savanna’, who now plays

an important role in the organization's military operations.

After the war began on 15 April 2023, the RSF expanded its recruitment in Darfur. It appealed to a sense of Arab identity, invoking the threat of elimination by SAF. Military executions and the torture of young Darfuri Arab men in areas such as River Nile state intensified the RSF's rhetorical claim that this was an existential war for the survival of the Darfuri Arab communities (Nashed, 2023b).¹⁷ By July 2023, almost all of the major Arab communities with land in Darfur had declared their loyalty to the RSF. These groups tend to be mobilized as communities, rather than incorporated into the RSF's formal command structure. Such martial mobilizations in Darfur (*faza'a*) are customarily time-delimited events, set in motion for specific purposes (such as the recovery of stolen livestock or to avenge a killing). The *agid* (the military leader of a group) is responsible for both recruitment and logistics. For RSF-allied communities, such mobilization has been carried out in coordination with the militia's commanders, without those commanders being able to entirely determine the pattern of such recruitment. The dynamics of mobilization do not easily lend themselves to the creation of a standing army: such forces assemble for specific purposes, and then tend to disperse.

Darfuri Arab sentiment towards the RSF is complicated. While the RSF's rise has enabled communities to take advantage of its strength to occupy land, Hemeti's attempts to reposition himself nationally have also caused disquiet. His decision to form the Sudanese Alliance—an additional rebel coalition that unified various, mostly Masalit and Arab, rebel and militia factions under the Masalit rebel leader Khamis Abbakar, which Hemeti then integrated into the JPA so as to have Masalit representation in the agreement—threatened West Darfuri Arab groups that had profited from Masalit displacement. Hemeti's attempted alliances with FFC politicians also unnerved many Arab militia leaders. Was Hemeti the leader of a pan-Darfuri Arab confederation, or a politician who would exploit Darfur's Arab groups for his own ends, much as Bashir had done?

As the war continued, the RSF experienced increasing difficulties in holding together its coalition. In August 2023, conflict erupted between the Beni Halba and the Salamat, with both sides using weapons provided to them by the RSF, in

an obvious echo of the sort of intra-Arab conflicts that marked the Bashir regime. Clashes continued through November, with RSF personnel stationed elsewhere (Khartoum, Nyala, and Zalingei) leaving their posts to join the clashes (UNSC, 2024).¹⁸ In November, a separate conflict broke out between the Salamat and the Habbaniya. The causes of these conflicts are complex and include contentions over land, as well as competition over positions within the RSF. The materials and materiel provided by the RSF to fight a national war have thus triggered conflicts in Darfur, as groups compete for the resources and positions offered by the militia force. Sudanese military intelligence has also reportedly tried to sow discord as a means of undermining the RSF.¹⁹ The conflict between the Salamat and the Habbaniya—one of the Darfuri Arab groups least supportive of the RSF—was partly due to Salamat accusations that the Habbaniya had backed SAF, though the conflict's origins lie in disputes over land and customary authority that date back to the 1970s. It has proved difficult for the RSF to intervene in these conflicts while maintaining a 'neutral' position and not being seen to back one side over the other.

Disquiet among the RSF's newer coalition members is also due to the privileged positions given to members of Hemeti's Awlad Mansour clan within the organization's leadership. Hemeti cannot be seen to be 'betraying' his own clan by appointing outside figures to top leadership positions. Nor can he entirely satisfy the leadership of his new forces with the proceeds from looting alone.²⁰ This leaves Hemeti in a structurally similar position to Bashir. Both men found themselves as umpires, contending with rivalrous subordinates. Bashir was constantly trying to mediate between rivalrous security forces within his coalition. Hemeti's decision to create a ruling RSF group from within his own family and clan has led other Arab coalition partners to feel excluded from the organization's higher ranks, and to demand better positions. This sense of exclusion has generated tensions between RSF commanders and customary authorities in places such as Nyala.²¹ Simultaneously, Hemeti has positioned himself, like his mentor, as the supernumerary agent: the only man able to mediate between rivalrous groups. SAF's bet is that he cannot maintain this delicate tightrope walk.

As much as the RSF has tried to mobilize Arab communities in Darfur to

enable it to take Khartoum, these communities have also instrumentalized the RSF to carry out far more local political projects. Exemplary in this regard is the assault on El Geneina, West Darfur. Lacking sufficient manpower in the area, mobilization for the assault on the city was largely in the hands of Arab leaders—including Tijani Karshom, once Abbakar's deputy, and a Mahamid *amir* (leader), Masar Abdurahman Asseel—some, but not all, of whom also had ranks within the RSF. (Many militia leaders also hid their ranks within the RSF, which enabled the RSF to subsequently claim that it could not control the 'militias'.)

Much of the coverage of the subsequent massacres in El Geneina and Ardamatta has been dominated by questions of international humanitarian law, and has attempted to show that the RSF, for instance, directly gave the commands that led to the killing of the governor, Abbakar, in June 2023 (Raoul Wallenberg Centre For Human Rights, 2024). What these approaches occlude is the way that RSF decisions are shaped by the demands of the communities upon which the organization relies to wage its war. For the Arab militias that fought in West Darfur, the assault was unfinished business with the Masalit, whom they thought had used Abbakar's place in the JPA to empower self-defence forces that threatened their dominance (Tubiana and Craze, 2024)—attacks on the Masalit had already begun before the onset of war.

The RSF was nonetheless involved. While, on 21 August 2023, the Mahamid *amir*, Asseel, described the campaign as a 'purely tribal conflict' and denied that the RSF had played any role, this is not credible (HRW, 2024). RSF commanders—including Abdulrahim Dagalo—were involved at the highest levels of decision-making in El Geneina and Ardamatta, and supplied materiel to the attacking forces (HRW, 2024). Despite the fact that the RSF enabled the assaults on West Darfur, there is a clear division between the goals of the Arab militias and those of Hemeti. From the perspective of the Arab militias, the ethnic cleansing of the Masalit was a success: the systematic killing of the Masalit forced them out of the city and its surrounding area, securing West Darfur for its Arab groups. For the RSF high command, however, the campaign was a political failure.²² Mass ethnic cleansing further antagonized an international community already unwilling to accept a militia

commander as a viable head of state. More importantly, the massacres in West Darfur hardened the attitudes of Zaghawa, Fur, and other non-Arab groups against the RSF; they became fearful of what would happen if the RSF were to take El Fasher.

A similar scenario was playing out in North Darfur as this paper was being finalized. During the first nine months of the war, an uneasy *détente* had prevailed between the RSF and the largely Zaghawa JPA signatory forces in El Fasher. The RSF was eager to take Khartoum and push into SAF-held territory in the centre and south-east of the country, and much—but not all—of its high command was reluctant to open up another front within Darfur, in what would likely be a drawn-out conflict. Sudanese military intelligence, in contrast, was focused on proliferating the frontlines to which the RSF is committed, weakening its focus on the SAF heartlands. SAF is only too happy for war to occur in Darfur, once again, far from the Nile Valley.

Despite the RSF's focus on the centre of the country, when some of the JPA signatories swung behind SAF—having previously remained neutral—and engaged the RSF in Khartoum in early 2024, the sentiment of some RSF leaders shifted, and they began pushing for an assault on El Fasher. The decision by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minawi (SLM-MM) to support SAF had been actively sought by SAF military intelligence (SAF-MI), partly as a means of ethnicizing conflict in North Darfur by transposing a political distinction (SAF vs. RSF) onto an Arab-Zaghawa social distinction. SAF-MI was almost wholly successful in this regard: the decision by JEM and SLM-MM to back Burhan ended the relative calm that had prevailed in El Fasher. The RSF commanders who did not want a war in El Fasher have proved unable to prevent the conflict in El Fasher from unfolding, and so, rather than lose the battle, the RSF have moved troops to North Darfur, many of which came from other locations in Darfur, including El Geneina.²³

Even if the RSF wins the war for control of El Fasher (which remains uncertain), they will lose yet another political battle, and find themselves embroiled in a drawn-out conflict with the Zaghawa; such a conflict would also have an uncertain effect on the political situation in Chad.²⁴ Already, the violence in El Fasher has seen non-Arab civilians targeted,

“ Even if the RSF wins the war for control of El Fasher (which remains uncertain), they will lose yet another political battle, and find themselves embroiled in a drawn-out conflict with the Zaghawa; such a conflict would also have an uncertain effect on the political situation in Chad.”

homes razed, and hospitals destroyed (Conflict Observatory, 2024b; 2024c). Further assaults on El Fasher may bring worse ethnic atrocities, which will antagonize both the international community and, more importantly, the non-Arab populations of Darfur. For the RSF, military victory increasingly means national fragmentation and the creation of ethnic conflict delinked from the struggle for Khartoum. The RSF leadership's hope is that by weakening the positions of the JPA signatories that came out in support of SAF, it can force them to cut a deal, effectively neutralizing the threat in North Darfur and enabling the RSF to continue its campaign in Sudan's breadbasket.²⁵ This still remains a possibility for, despite the RSF's rhetoric and international alarm about further massacres, the ethnic politics of North Darfur is complicated. The RSF has several Zaghawa commanders in the state and has continued to collaborate with JPA signatories in cross-border commercial trade. Continuing violence in El Fasher, however, has meant that the chances of such a rapprochement are increasingly slim.

In the centre and east of Sudan, the calculation of mutual instrumentalization between the RSF and its allied militias is different. For the RSF leadership, military targets in Sudan's breadbasket states remain its main strategic priorities. For many of its commanders, however, these states are not political priorities but opportunities for enrichment. During the December 2023 assault on Wad Medani,

the RSF looted vehicles, factories, homes, and warehouses, effectively stripping the city for parts. The assault was a propaganda boon to SAF, which raised local militias by conjuring the spectre of future RSF assaults.

The RSF's focus on plunder has given a particular dynamic to its campaigns. After an area has been seized, it is stripped, necessitating a pause in the RSF's advance. The resulting loot then has to be moved, either back to Darfur, or to markets, causing an ebb and flow of fighters from the frontline.²⁶ Economic motives frequently trump political considerations. One commander, Jalaha Rahamtalla Mahdi (aka Abu Jalha)—a former Tamazuj leader stationed in Libya, who has served in both SAF and the RSF—moved into Gezira simply to loot, causing a conflict with Aqila Abu Kikal, then an RSF commander, until Abu Jalha was withdrawn to southern Khartoum.²⁷ Many of the RSF commanders in Sennar and around Gezira are opportunistic members of the RSF, and coordination between them—inter alia Ahmed Guja, the former Tamazuj commander; Abu Shottal, the Hamaj commander from Blue Nile; and Abdel Rahman al-Bishi—has proven difficult. RSF command and control has accordingly fragmented.²⁸ The Republic of Kadamol is a coalition of opportunists, militia leaders, and ethnic forces that participate in a political-economic machine predicated on plunder.

The RSF's assaults in June–July 2024 are exemplary of its broader political-

economic strategy. At the end of June 2024, RSF forces, commanded by al-Bishi and Kikal, overran SAF forces on the Gezira–Sennar border and rapidly advanced into Sennar state, taking the state capital, Sinja, on 29 June. While it aims to capture Sennar and Kosti-Rabak in the future, its primary aim at the end of June was to capture Dinder and secure a land corridor to Ethiopia—a goal that it fulfilled on 5 July. Capturing Dinder enabled cross-border resupply from Ethiopia during the rainy season, though such supply was short-lived: in October 2024, SAF recaptured Dinder as part of a successful campaign against the RSF in Sennar and Gezira states partly enabled by Kikal’s defection to the army.

In order to control cross-border routes, the RSF has tried to garner support among local communities in border areas: effectively offering them more freedom, and less intrusive taxation, than SAF, in a competition for low-intervention government. Prior to its positions being overrun, the RSF had successfully obtained the support of some communities in the Dinder area that are hostile to SAF militia forces in the area. A similar strategy has been employed in Meiram, West Kordofan, where the RSF has cut a deal with prominent Misseriya businessmen in order to push out SAF and gain control of the cross-border trade with South Sudan. Achieving these objectives depends on the acquiescence of its field commanders, not all of whom have signed up to the overall strategic plan. Abu Shottal has been agitating for an intervention into Blue Nile, his home state; by July 2024, he had allegedly already attempted to negotiate with SAF’s 4th Division, in the state capital of Ed Damazin, for its withdrawal. While these negotiations were not successful, the danger of RSF fragmentation into a series of different militias is very real.

The political economy of the war machine

Much about the current state of the RSF’s finances remains publicly mysterious. In 2019, Hemeti, via Al-Junaid, had purchased tracts of agricultural land in the states of Khartoum and River Nile, with the intention of playing a larger role in Sudan’s livestock export business. While Hemeti lost control of this land in 2023, the livestock trade has only increased since the war began, with large numbers

of animals being exported to the Gulf despite Sudan’s famine (Craze, Khair, and Makawi, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Though the export routes for this livestock are in north and east Sudan, the majority of the herds are within Darfur and Kordofan, suggesting at least some degree of collusion between the belligerent parties in maintaining—and indeed expanding—this trade. The extent of such commerce, and Hemeti’s involvement in it, is unclear.

Much is also unknown about the state of the RSF’s control of Sudan’s gold mines. Formally, gold mines are not owned by the RSF, but rather the private businesses of the Dagalo family—controlled by the Al-Junaid holding company and its subsidiaries—for which the RSF provides security. Nevertheless, these companies and the RSF cannot be thought of as independent; they remain deeply entangled at both the personnel and organizational levels. While Al-Junaid did manage to send 50 kg of gold to Dubai in May 2023, it lost control of mines in the north and east of the country at the onset of the war (though it was unclear how active the RSF was at those mining sites) (UNSC, 2024). Gold mining activity by companies controlled by the RSF has instead been limited to Hofrat al-Nahas and the Kafia Kingi area bordering Western Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan—where the RSF also has mining concerns—along with mining sites on the border with CAR, including in Songo, South Darfur, where the subsidiary of the Dagalo holding company—Al-Junaid Company for the Treatment of Mineral Waste—owns a production facility.²⁹

Quantifying the amount of gold still smuggled out of Sudan by the RSF is almost impossible: the vast majority of Sudanese gold is not declared for export, and only acquires a legal existence when it enters the UAE (Swissaid, 2024). The amount of resources that the RSF receives from the UAE is also unclear. More than 120 flights arrived at the Emirati field hospital in Amdjarass in the second half of 2023, allegedly bringing in military materiel (Conflict Observatory, 2024a). Small amounts of materiel have also arrived via CAR, along with what one observer described as ‘industrial amounts’ of fuel from Libya, facilitated by Khalifa Haftar.³⁰

While the RSF’s income remains publicly unclear, there has been a shift in the structure of payments to its forces, which indicates that sanctions, even if they managed to target external income

streams for the RSF, would be unlikely to significantly affect the course of the war. While RSF rank-and-file are still receiving wages, mainly as cash, partly thanks to the looting of Khartoum’s banks at the war’s outset, newer recruits are paid small lump sums, with the promise of rations and future rewards from looting. These lump sums are often paid in bulk to the commander responsible for bringing in his men, for that commander to distribute as he sees fit³¹—a repetition of how the Sudanese government paid the Janjaweed a decade earlier. Pillage is thus not an accidental by-product of the war, but a necessary part of the RSF’s wage structure. Revenue generation and the maintenance of the RSF’s coalition is obtained by the continuous appropriation of the resources of the Sudanese people. Such acquisitions are unaffected by sanctions.

A shared narrative of lawless, anarchic RSF marauders has suited all parties. For SAF, such a narrative is a way of creating racialized fear about plunderers from the west, who are caricatured as foreigners from Chad and further afield—building on class-based sentiments that see only the riverine elite as ‘truly Sudanese’, and Darfuri Arabs as foreigners. For the RSF, the idea that plunder is carried out by uncontrollable recruits means that it can blame its rank-and-file for its conduct during the war. In reality, looting is regulated. In Wad Medani, the raid on the World Food Programme warehouse in December 2023, which according to the UN agency contained enough stocks to feed 1.5 million people for a month, was not carried out by ‘hungry residents deprived of humanitarian aid’, despite what the RSF claimed, but was instead organized by the RSF commanders in charge of the assault. The looted aid was reserved as rations for RSF troops. The raids on Khartoum’s banks at the beginning of the war were organized at the highest levels of the RSF. Other raiding is more chaotic, but nonetheless regulated: newer recruits are encouraged to raid houses and villages as payment for their role in the fighting.

The result has been the wholesale immiseration of entire areas of Sudan. RSF members took boxes of cash and gold from Khartoum to Darfur in June 2023, two months into the conflict. Markets in weapons and stolen goods blossomed in Nyala and El Geneina, as well as around Khartoum. Looted vehicles are exported to Benin, CAR, Chad, Mali, and South Sudan. RSF assaults follow a similar

pattern in each city that it captures: shops and businesses are ransacked, while state institutions—including hospitals and schools—are vandalized. Many RSF members defend these actions as acts of revenge for the marginalization they experienced following Sudan's independence in 1956. They claim they were excluded by a '1956' state that continues to dominate them. In this rhetoric, the goods looted from Khartoum are returning to Darfur what the centre stole from the periphery. This rhetoric does not match the actuality; Nyala and Zalingei were also looted. In reality, the political economy created by the RSF generalizes the structure of Bashir's rule. While Bashir—following in the footsteps of many Nilotic elites—exploited the resources of the peripheries of the country to enrich the centre, the RSF has treated the entire country as a depot from which value can be withdrawn.

Such an approach has the advantage of throwing off fresh waves of potential new recruits. In Gezira, those whose fields have been despoiled have little available to them except flight or conscription. When the residents of Gezira complain to the RSF about their actions, they are told that their young men should enlist and, in so doing, both protect their villages, and acquire the capacity to pillage goods elsewhere.

Thus, while the war has been destructive for Sudan, it has been eminently profitable for the RSF, which has positioned itself atop an emergent war economy. In Gezira, thanks to the telecommunications blackout imposed by SAF, the RSF controls the internet (via Starlink), and charges locals to access it, including for bank transfer services, of which it also takes a cut. At the roadblocks that dissect RSF territory, commanders and conscripts charge onerous levies, which do not filter up to the RSF higher command, but function—along with looting—in place of wages.

As economically profitable as this system is, it creates a political crisis for the RSF. The cost of keeping the RSF coalition together is a sort of infinite expansion—one that is necessary to produce the looted goods and checkpoint taxes that sustain its payment system. This expansion means that the RSF is forever in crisis—always in need of new territory to conquer, and always at risk of its coalition falling apart. While such relentless expansion threatens to undercut the possibility of a ceasefire, the development of such an

“The RSF represents not a centre exploiting a periphery, but a peripheral actor that has repurposed, by emulation, the same political system that Bashir employed—only this time without a centre.”

agreement, as of December 2024, in any case remains purely theoretical: SAF is committed to a long war, and believes that, over time, it can successfully fragment Hemeti's coalition.

An end to the war would also throw the RSF into crisis. Hemeti has a clear plan: to install a civilian government, ideally under former prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, as a façade for his substantive control of the country's economy and security. In order to carry out this plan, Hemeti needs to ensure sufficient political and economic rewards flow to his coalition partners. The danger posed by this plan is that the impoverished position of the Sudanese state, and the extractive forces of the global commodity markets in which it is enmeshed, means that a future RSF ruling political elite will be able to survive only on the basis of capital accumulation, to be disbursed to its coalition partners, that is predicated on sovereign rents, asset transfers from an eviscerated peasantry, and primary resource exploitation. This will ensure a fractious, competitive security arena predicated on the immiseration of the Sudanese people.

This is already clear in the territory under the RSF's control. The political economy of looting has meant that the RSF's efforts to create civilian administrations have largely come to naught. The RSF leadership started to think about civilian administrations shortly after the beginning of the war. It created a Civilian Support Authority in July 2023. This remains an undeveloped institution, however, and has little acceptance in RSF-controlled territories: it is principally a means to give positions to Hemeti's 57 advisers. On the ground, commanders

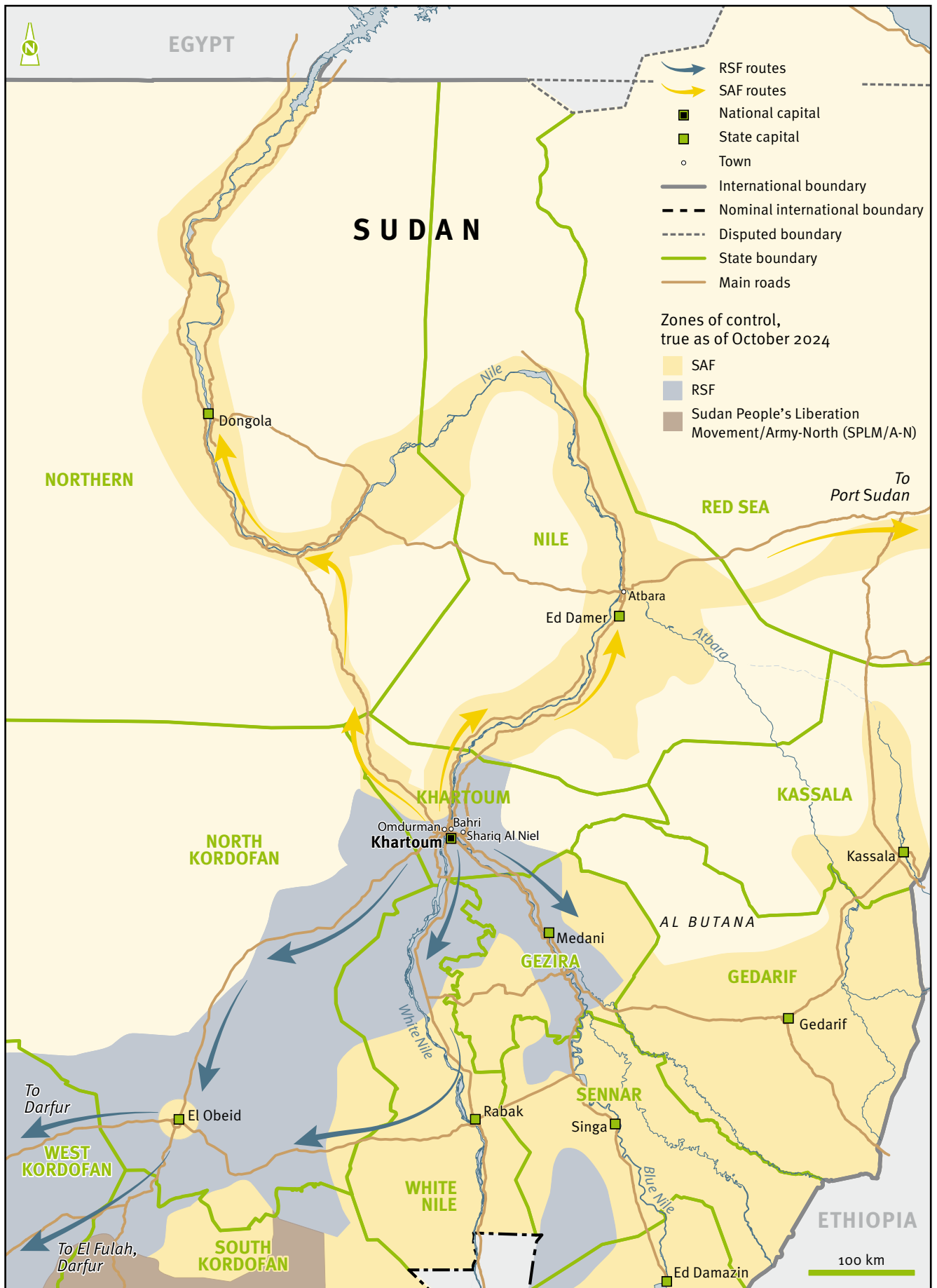
remain the functional rulers. In Geneina, customary Arab leaders act relatively independently of the governor of West Darfur, Karshom, and there were tensions between the governor and Abdel Rahman Juma, the commander of the RSF's 15th Division. There is little trust, across Darfur, in RSF attempts to revitalize institutions of governance, given that it was the RSF that so thoroughly ransacked those same institutions.

Regardless of civilian appointments made in Gezira and Darfur, political power rests firmly in the hands of the RSF's commanders. One former resident of Nyala interviewed for this paper commented: 'This was no different from how responsibility was dealt with by the National Islamic Front during the al-Bashir era.'³² It is perhaps unsurprising that a force created by Bashir's security establishment would reproduce the DNA of his regime, but it indicates that, at best, the RSF is a reiteration of a previous project: a militarized political economy built on exploitation and displacement, whose rulers are this time not from the Nile Valley, but Rizeigat from Darfur. The RSF represents not a centre exploiting a periphery, but a peripheral actor that has repurposed, by emulation, the same political system that Bashir employed—only this time without a centre.

The political economy of RSF operations in Khartoum

The war between the RSF and SAF first broke out in Khartoum, which has

Map 2 RSF-controlled areas in Khartoum



Source: Author interviews (2024). Base map data source: OpenStreetMap.

remained one of seven active war fronts and, as fighting continues, the RSF further establishes a method governance—that is, an organized structure through which power is distributed and organized.

Mapping the presence of the RSF in the greater Khartoum area is difficult (see Map 2). A sample of several localities across its three sub-centres—Omdurman, Bahri, and Khartoum—provides some understanding of the prevailing modalities of RSF governance and operational structures. Overall, the style and approach of the RSF's management of territory shows a political economy of violence where production is dependent on predation for survival.

Central to its governance is the public. Sudan has suffered prolonged waves of displacement since the beginning of the conflict due to a combination of polycrises involving fighting and rainy season-related flooding in July 2024. According to the International Organization for Migration's IDP tracking system, displacement figures have climbed from 7.7 million in September 2023 to 11.2 million as a result of the uptick in fighting in Gezeira state since October 2024 (IOM, 2024). For the many who have remained, the cost and logistical challenges of moving preclude the possibility of relocation, while economic hardship elsewhere continues to push displaced people back to Khartoum (AFP, 2024), many of whom find themselves forcefully integrated into the war economy in order to survive.

In Khartoum state, the RSF's security-based order serves as a microcosm of its governance approach and logic elsewhere in Sudan. This order is enforced through a web of security measures to drive and manage productivity. Contrary to widespread claims that describe RSF territories as lawless wastelands (Nashed, 2024a), crisis and war create opportunities for governance and wealth extraction in Khartoum (Brachet and Scheele, 2019).

Governance

Differentiation between territories is key to the RSF's governance strategy. Throughout the tri-city area of Khartoum, the RSF's notable presence, albeit with distinctive dynamics, shapes its occupation and interaction with civilians.

The most intensive fighting has happened in Omdurman, which, as a result, has the least discernible governance structure.³³ Home to the majority of SAF's

military installations—Al-Mohandesien military camp, Wadi Sayidna air base, the Fatasha crossing linking Omdurman to Kordofan in the west, and the El Jeili oil refinery in Bahri—Omdurman boasts some of the state's most important public buildings, such as the national radio and TV broadcasters (Abdelaziz, 2024).

The RSF maintains a presence in the centre and north sections of the city, away from an SAF airbase to the east. These areas under RSF control include the city's two largest markets: Libya and Qandahar, from which roads extend west to Darfur.

Both the territorialization and the de-territorialization of the city are reflected in the RSF's governance of its enclaves. Assaults on unarmed civilians in RSF-held territory have been explicit from April 2023, and people report excessive surveillance, interrogation, and the confiscation of mobile phones,³⁴ under the pretext of protecting RSF fighters from any possible compromise. This method of control has doubled as a form of looting civilians, mimicking the actions of NISS and General Intelligence Services agents against political activists prior to the war (CIPEA, 2023).

Khartoum, in contrast, serves as a buffer zone between Omdurman and the relative tranquillity of Shariq Al Niel, where the RSF has a base. The city is mostly occupied by the RSF, while SAF holds areas that include its military bases. One area, Al-Shajarah, is completely cordoned off as it is situated between SAF's Armoured Corps (to the north) and the Weapons Ammunition Stocks (to the south).

From the outset, the RSF set out to isolate SAF by sequestering its army command centrals from each other. One by one, the Central Reserve, the Military Industry Cooperation, and the Yarmouk camp, home to Sudan's largest defence industry and its main fuel stockpile, fell to the RSF, cementing the militia's control over the city (Sky News Arabia, 2023). The fall of SAF's Air Defence Headquarters opened up the territory from Khartoum's downtown business centre to its external market zones on the city's outskirts: Almarkazi to the south; Saad Gishra in the north; and Omdurman's historic souq in the west (Elbagir, 2024). The RSF's policy of expanding frontiers through the capturing of territory and the looting of assets left behind by the fleeing middle class facilitated the accumulation of sufficient wealth to reconfigure the socio-economic order of the city.

The famed post-war Dagalo markets speak to the reordering of economic relations and, with it, possibly Sudan's political future. Contrary to common belief, the new economic centres have no connection to Hemeti or his vast economic empire. Instead, the designation reflects the disorderly and violent transactional politics that govern the process of acquiring and trading in goods. The Dagalo markets themselves are not new, utilizing the existing public infrastructure. A new trading system operating a predatory logic, however, greases its wheels. At its helm, a new hierarchy of traders, favourable to RSF soldiers and their allies, took the lead. Goods are sourced at a low cost, mostly by looting the unmanned assets of the public who have deserted their homes and property. The merchandise list includes various items raided from both private and public facilities. These include hospitals, warehouses, stores, markets, and household pantries. Looted items include food, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, furniture as well as personal valuables such as gold, cash, cars and electronics.³⁵ Looted cash from banks and personal safes, as well as from the pockets of the general public robbed at gunpoint and from taxation at checkpoints, helped RSF soldiers expand their enterprises. Weapons, pickup trucks, and recruits secure the movement of goods.

Examining the spread of markets in RSF territory provides insight into its governance model (see Map 3). In Khartoum and Omdurman, the RSF controls large markets while restricting outlets within boroughs, going against the pre-war model of neighbourhood-based trading. This is done with intent to divert trade movement and exchange to RSF economic centres. In Khartoum, three main markets were retained by the RSF and allowed to flourish: Almarkazi, Mayo, and Al Kalkla Alafa. Almarkazi is Khartoum's largest produce outlet at the crossroad connecting the sub-city's affluent neighbourhoods of Amarat and Riyadh to the shanty towns of Mayo at its southern outskirts. East of Almarkazi lies RSF territory all the way to their base in Shariq Al Niel. Mayo—with its mostly war-displaced population from southern Sudan and Darfur, and historically a peripheral community that occupies financial, ethnic, and overall distant relations to power (Abdel Aziz, 2021)—had emerged as another major economic centre during the war.³⁶ Mayo, in particular, is an ample source of RSF recruits. Lacking

Map 3 RSF war economy in Khartoum



Source: Author interviews (2024). Base map data source: OpenStreetMap.

the means to leave Khartoum, many in Mayo are now integral to the functioning of RSF supply frontiers and centres. Mayo's new market, a distribution point to other economic hubs, is also an important RSF command centre. Its rise as the centrum of RSF governance highlights the shifting of centres and peripheries in response to, and in line with, the exigencies of conflict and predation. Al Kalkla Alafa market in southern Khartoum, and the city's new land port, is run by RSF intelligence monitoring the city's departures and arrivals.

Omdurman boasts even fewer markets, with Souq Libya being the most strategically situated on the western route connecting Omdurman to the west—a vital RSF route moving weapons and fighters between Khartoum and Darfur. In both areas, all economic activity is controlled by an intricate system of permits and taxation.

Shariq Al Niel on the other hand, RSF's base, employs a governance model that is markedly different to the rest of its territory. Situated on the north-east side of the capital, it is one of Khartoum's largest localities with easy access to the expansive hinterland (Al Butana). Shariq Al Niel has experienced no fighting since the start of the war,³⁷ and is under the complete control of the RSF as it has had a long-standing RSF social base who own property and were active members of Khartoum's urban life before the war.³⁸ Its location and access to Al Butana—Sudan's southern, east, and central hinterlands—help facilitate easy movement of troops and supplies. Inhabitants of Shariq Al Niel are offered a measure of governance unlike other RSF territories. Informants in Shariq Al Niel count 13 markets, five of which have expanded significantly during the war: Helet Koko, Haj Yousif Al-Wihda, Al Telal, Alwady Al Akhdar, and Soba Shariq. The other eight are new markets that have emerged since April 2023, further breathing economic life into the area.³⁹ There, the RSF exerted substantial effort to blunt the effects of violence that undergird its predatory system elsewhere.

In Shariq Al Niel, RSF commanders oversee the borough's everyday governance needs. Here, the RSF has appropriated state institutions, including police stations, prosecutor offices, and courts, and filled them with RSF personnel—adjudicating acts of theft and unruly behaviour among its recruits and soldiers. It has also promoted a distributive economy where all members of the

community are allowed to trade without restriction. Unlike the rest of Khartoum, people are not required to pay an income tax and permits are given for free at checkpoints.⁴⁰ Traders, women, and out-of-school children now peddle goods in the RSF's loot-based economy.

Security and supply

The RSF's control over territory is organized to direct supply chains to its Dagalo market economic centres, with checkpoints being the main tool to achieve this objective. Checkpoints, therefore, serve as a key political technique to shape mobile economies (Schouten, 2022, p. 3). The RSF is dependent, to a large degree, on its ability to establish modes of production to replenish its troops, and stave off disruptions or depletions in the fighters' income streams. The communities that live in RSF areas are compelled to enter and operate within this new political economy of predation as productive players either out of fear of retaliation or due to their need for an income.

Merchandise in Dagalo markets is sourced mostly from looting. Early in the war, civilians and RSF fighters alike burgled private homes.⁴¹ Later on in the war, looting doubled as a form of intimidation and a means for RSF troops to sustain themselves. RSF fighters went from asking residents for food and water to forcefully evicting them from their homes, and converting these into military command posts (Nashed, 2023a). The evolution of looting into an enterprise was shaped by the RSF's predisposition to finance its troops through predation, as well as the public's need to access food and other lifesaving items. According to one interviewee still residing in RSF-held territory, one of the earliest features of Dagalo markets was the availability of vast amounts of consumer goods stolen from factories and warehouses across Khartoum's ransacked industrial zones and moved through RSF checkpoint-controlled corridors. These included foodstuff, furniture, medical supplies, and many other unimaginable products that were being sold at exceptionally cheap prices. Wheat and fuel, on the other hand, are considered strategic commodities, sold to the public only through RSF-controlled outlets at exorbitant prices of SDG 45,000 (USD 74) per gallon of diesel and up to SDG 100,000 (USD 165) for petrol.⁴² Their scarcity exposes an enervate market system cut from global commodity chains.

Dagalo markets underpin RSF governance and drive its expansionist logic.⁴³ Today, the RSF outsources, for a cut, the raiding of entire neighbourhoods to new recruits, who empty houses of anything of value and move them to various Dagalo markets.

A survey examining the inner workings of the RSF's logistical management of Khartoum's new supply-chain frontiers explains how it leverages violence to capture power through infrastructure. As described above, the RSF's road-blocks tax and facilitate the movement of loot to outlets. Goods moving through RSF territory are taxed randomly and frequently at the countless checkpoints littered across the routes within their territory leading to and from markets. RSF soldiers and their recruits manning the two-tier checkpoints take a cut against each vehicle moving either consumer goods or members of the public in their pursuit of a livelihood. Taxes are determined based on the value of the merchandise being moved—the higher the value, the higher the tax. At the market, merchants are required to pay a daily protection tax to trade. These amounts are negotiable and range from SDG 500 to 1,000 (USD 0.83 to 1.65).⁴⁴ At times, protection taxes are extorted by multiple RSF actors in the same day. Grievances over high and frequent taxation are seldom reported out of fear of RSF soldiers and recruits' retaliation. Arbitrary taxation under the guise of security is a legacy and hangover from centralized state authority, appropriated by the RSF for control and gain. Up until it was abolished, following the 2018 revolution, the Public Order Law served to replenish the dwindling revenues of state coffers by targeting minorities and day traders (Thomas, 2017). Beyond marketplace and checkpoint taxation, and the issuance of permits, the RSF does not espouse any meaningful governance logic. No legal code regulates market pricing or income distribution. RSF governance presence in markets through its military intelligence offices is restricted to issuing permits, collecting tax, and surveillance.

Through its use of various forms of violence and disorder, the RSF leverages security to direct supply routes within Khartoum's deserted metropolis towards its market centres. Its control of key routes has developed into a vital source of power that further augments its military standing. The RSF's success in withstanding SAF's offensives and a prolonged conflict is a mix of its strategic claim of

territory with the purpose of isolating SAF while expanding its supply frontiers to integrate the public. Their productive governance model is predicated on the control of important nodes of access and exit to regulate the circulation and flow of people and goods towards Dagalo markets. While based on predation, it is not chaotic and has served well the purpose of instituting a new political order to counterweigh and undercut SAF and the state's authority.

In Khartoum, the RSF has also restricted supplies to SAF territory, at times cutting it off completely. The 14-month siege of Al-Shajarah, south of Khartoum and home to SAF's Armoured Corps, induced a humanitarian crisis among its inhabitants. 'Nothing enters, and no one leaves,' one resident said.⁴⁵ Civilians in Al-Shajarah are faced with either starving in conditions of relative security under SAF or relocating at the cost of becoming active members in the RSF predation machine. In any event, what is clear is that the political economy of Khartoum's conflict presents an important case for revisiting the logic of military control—not as a zero game of wins and losses on the battleground with the aim of holding on to or conceding territory, but through the prism of logistics and supply. The RSF's decentralized approach to managing its economic centres through a vast logistics network of security actors and recruits manning its supply chains challenges the claim that the state or SAF has ultimate control over the flow of goods necessary to govern the territory (de Waal, 2024).

Recruitment and labour hierarchies

The RSF's new distributive economy in Khartoum is a network of subcontractors and entrepreneurs, with recruits and their tasks reflecting a two-way needs-based labour system. For the RSF, the exigencies of war dictate the style and intensity of recruitment and the placement of workers within a hierarchy of labour to manage productivity. When the war first started, the promise of loot underpinned popular RSF mobilization drives known as *faza'a* (Halfawy, 2024).

The first wave of RSF fighters to leave Khartoum hastily departed back to their places of origin loaded with goods stolen from raided homes (Kanu, 2024). The resultant decrease in RSF fighters in Khartoum fostered a two-tier employment

system of conscription and enlistment. The RSF, as reported in many places, used forceful tactics to coerce men and boys to join its ranks, including intimidation and starvation (Munsi et al., 2024). The primacy of combat in the context of dwindling fighters meant that all recruits, regardless of background, training, or age, were required to join battles. A few interviewees reported that children as young as eight and nine years old, initially recruited as informants, were tasked with driving vehicles during offensives, some tied to steering wheels to prevent escape (New Arab, 2024). So, while voluntary enrolment is reportedly dominant, allocated tasks are not voluntary to execute.

The distorted logic of voluntary versus forced recruitment does not discourage people from joining the RSF predation machinery, despite the high risk. People have reportedly joined the RSF to protect themselves and their families from the ongoing violence and looting. In the absence of standard forms of income generation, most recruits are motivated by the probability of RSF connections facilitating trade and access to capital, even if loot based. When the war broke out, 89 per cent of informal labour was situated within the private sector, which no longer exists (Krafft et al., 2023). The precarity of their working conditions left them without the savings or benefits necessary to withstand inflation and other unanticipated costs.

Five types of jobs shape the RSF's labour hierarchy: soldiers, informants, drivers, thieves, and day labourers. Hemeti's Rizeigat and Mahariya recruits are at the top of the chain, serving as field commanders and economic entrepreneurs overseeing the overall management and running of markets and supply chains.⁴⁶ A tribal-based grading system encouraged recruitment on the basis of social and political connections to the RSF, either to pre-emptively self-protect against SAF retaliations (ADF, 2024) or as a path to enrichment following the state's failure to address historical grievances.⁴⁷ The extent to which RSF troops and recruits are on regular payrolls is unclear. Of note, recruitment incentives of SDG 600,000 to 800,000 (USD 1,000–1,300) for combatants, plus a percentage of loot, reinforces labour divisions and signals a preference for combat skills over all else.⁴⁸

The merging of warfare and the market is made attractive through labour hierarchies that reward mercenaryism.

RSF soldiers-turned-traders make use of the overlapping systems of predation and production from influential positions that allow them to broker—for a lucrative cut—the smooth running of the RSF's new economic frontiers. A new hierarchy of social relations gives an advantage to the RSF by allowing them to form external alliances through the labour system, either as merchants selling to the public or as brokers facilitating the movement of goods to and within markets. Other jobs also found a tether to the logic of predation and production. For example, informants are given the added advantage of operating kiosks or mobile vending carts. The double income of tying their livelihoods to surveillance makes them economically dependent on the smooth running of RSF systems, while day labourers cooperate with RSF field commanders to earmark the location of houses with the most valuable assets for a cut while thieves execute loot operations. According to one interviewee residing within RSF territory, a marked improvement in the financial situation of RSF recruits and their families was noted only a few months into the war.⁴⁹

The simplicity of recruitment is another factor driving the RSF's economic expansion. Even before the war, the process of joining the RSF ranks facilitated military access of usually excluded groups. This contradicts the SAF recruitment model where strict organizational rules dictate the limits of membership. Aspiring recruits, of any age or background, can apply anywhere at checkpoints and wait for a security check to be completed. Once the clearance comes through, it is up to them to make themselves useful in a competitive and needs-based system. Unburdened by the politics of a salariat class, the RSF operates a much more effective market where violence and the spectre of starvation drive competition and compensation (Craze, Khair, and Makawi, 2024).

Conclusion

Since his arrival on the political stage, Hemeti has tried to play four roles at once: a military leader who heads a war machine; the CEO of a transnational business empire reliant on the control of external flows of resources from Sudan; the vassal of an Emirati regime intent on securing a port, agricultural land, and resources from Sudan; and a would-be nationalist politician seeking acceptance

at home and abroad. These roles have often been at cross-purposes. The abuses meted out by his forces undermine his claims to national unity, while his political plans—and his usefulness to the Emiratis—have frequently been eroded by the conflicts his allies have drawn him into. Nevertheless, he cannot abandon any of his roles. Without his military forces, he loses political credibility and his businesses go broke. Without Emirati support, he loses regional acceptance and flows of materiel. Without his political platform, his war machine becomes just that.

The Republic of Kadamol has no government. Instead, it is predicated on the exploitation and destruction of state institutions in a way that makes the very idea of a new government structure in Sudan, rebuilt from the ravages of the civil war, difficult to envisage. Even in Khartoum, where the RSF has gone to great lengths to establish governance mechanisms to ensure its control over the territory, such mechanisms are part of a logic of predatory exploitation. As the conflict continues, the RSF is likely to fracture. Spiralling violence between the Hawazma, heavily recruited into the RSF, and the Nuba in South Kordofan augurs Sudan's likely future: a series of more locally inflected conflicts, as the RSF continues to exacerbate social and ethnic cleavages as a means of recruiting forces and enabling its war machine to continue to function. It is deeply unlikely that Sudan can be put back together again.

Policy observations for the international community

- The fragmentation of the RSF's command structure, and the fact that the motivations of particular commanders are untethered from the ambitions of the RSF's high command, means that the Dagalo family is now incapable of enforcing a ceasefire in Sudan. If ceasefire negotiations are not broad and inclusive, and fail to involve all the actors on the ground—civilian and military—that are actually responsible for the war, they will not be successful. The current Jeddah/Geneva model of negotiations is unworkable.
- Humanitarian planning in Sudan cannot be predicated on the absence of looting, checkpoints, and aid diversion, given the centrality of

these practices to the RSF's political economy. Instead, humanitarian operations must be based on measures to mitigate and organize diversion, through local engagement with the RSF commanders and forces active on the ground.

- Diplomatic and humanitarian planning must begin from an acknowledgement that both main belligerent parties have a vested interest in this being a protracted war: SAF hopes that it can further fragment the RSF over time; the RSF war machine is predicated on a form of continual expansion. In such circumstances, long-term planning, which foregrounds the efforts of the real democratic forces in Sudan, is necessary. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

CAR	Central African Republic
CBS	Central Bank of Sudan
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
IDP	Internally displaced people
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NISS	National Security and Intelligence Service
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SAF-MI	SAF military intelligence
SDG	Sudanese pound
SLM-MM	Sudan Liberation Movement-Minni Minawi
TMC	Transitional Military Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
USD	United States dollar

Endnotes

- 1 A longer history would trace these militias to the indentured armies recruited by Zubayr Pasha in the 1870s to unseat the Darfuri Sultanate.
- 2 Most fundamentally, Bashir feared the threat of Musa Hilal and his Border Guards. Since the beginning of the war in Darfur in 2003, there had been piecemeal integration of the Janjaweed into paramilitary forces, including the Popular Defence Forces, the Border Guards, and the Central Reserve Police—the latter falling under the control of the Ministry of the Interior rather than SAF. By 2013, Arab communi-

ties fought each other in Darfur, and these paramilitary forces participated in such conflicts. Hilal's Border Guards proved particularly rebellious. The creation of the RSF was partly intended as a counterweight to these forces (Tubiana, 2017, pp. 4–5).

- 3 The RSF, the Quwat al-Da'm al-Seri', was initially placed under the control of the NISS, and commanded by the NISS major general Abbas Abdelaziz, with Hemeti being the RSF's operations commander. Hemeti acceded to power within the RSF in 2017, shortly after the RSF was placed directly under the president's control.
- 4 Interviews with Sudanese intelligence officers, names withheld, Khartoum, Juba, and Nairobi, 2021–24.
- 5 Hilal was pardoned by the military in March 2021. Upon his release, SAF Military Intelligence began to proposition him, in the hope he could become a counterweight to Hemeti. In June 2022, under the auspices of Promediation, a French non-governmental organization, his Sudan Awakening Revolutionary Council participated in talks with SAF. Hilal made his support for the army official in April 2024. See UNSC (2023).
- 6 It is rumoured that Bashir still enabled older associates to participate in profitable gold exports—a continuous source of tension between Bashir and the Dagalo family.
- 7 Telephone interview with a member of RSF intelligence, April 2023. The formulation of the RSF as an employment bureau is taken from an interview with Magdi el Gizouli (Phenomenal World, 2023).
- 8 Much more than gold, massively increased livestock exports to the Gulf, from 2012, took on the burden of foreign currency earnings. In 2012, livestock exports constituted 25 per cent of Sudan's total foreign currency earning (Thomas, 2024); by 2017, Somalia and Sudan accounted for 80 per cent of all Gulf imports of livestock (Duffield and Stockton, 2023).
- 9 Strictly speaking, the RSF does not own businesses. Instead, RSF commanders control companies via partners in the private sector, or via holding companies in which these commanders are the sole or majority shareholders. This formal distinction conceals more than it reveals.
- 10 Interviews with Sudanese intelligence officers, names withheld, Khartoum, Juba, and Nairobi, 2021–24.
- 11 Images on file with author. Interviews with RSF personnel, Nairobi, 2023–24. Izzat was dismissed as the RSF spokesperson in July 2024.
- 12 Telephone interview with a former RSF recruiter, March 2024.
- 13 Interview with RSF security intelligence, March 2024.
- 14 Telephone interview, December 2023.
- 15 Interview with RSF security intelligence, March 2024.
- 16 It is unclear how much the UAE—and Saudi Arabia—paid the RSF for the provision of mercenaries in Yemen. In 2019, the RSF

was rich enough to pledge more than USD 1 billion to the Sudanese central bank after the ousting of Bashir, to enable the purchase of essential commodities. When asked where the RSF had acquired such funds, Hemeti stated: 'People ask where do we [the RSF] bring this money from? We have the salaries of our troops fighting outside [abroad] and our gold investments, money from gold, and other investments' (Global Witness, 2019).

17 It should be noted, however, that this is principally a rhetorical gesture, despite the harassment and killing of suspected RSF members by SAF in eastern and northern Darfur—many high-ranking members of SAF, after all, are from Darfur, including the head of the General Intelligence Service.

18 Telephone interview with former RSF recruiter, January 2024.

19 Telephone interview with RSF security intelligence, March 2024.

20 Telephone interviews with Darfuri politicians, January–March 2024.

21 Interview with former resident of Nyala, location withheld, February 2024.

22 See Tubiana and Craze (2024).

23 The RSF leadership is divided on the issue. Abdulrahim Dagalo has always insisted that taking El Fasher was a fundamental goal of the war, as did the late Ali Yacoub, former RSF commander for operations in North Darfur state.

24 Jérôme Tubiana, personal correspondence, May 2024. See also Khair (2024).

25 Some of the JPA signatory groups have remained more ambiguously neutral, including Al-Tahir Hajar's Sudan Liberation Forces, and Al-Hadi Idriss' Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council.

26 Looted humanitarian vehicles have been found for sale in Chad and CAR.

27 Kikal defected to SAF in October 2024.

28 The Tamazuj movement was a late signatories to the JPA, and was accused of being an invention of Sudanese military intelligence. It declared its loyalty to the RSF in August 2023.

29 Telephone interview with RSF intelligence, April 2024. Interview with informants in Western Bahr el Ghazal and Western Equatoria, October–January 2024.

30 Telephone interview with a Libyan source, January 2024.

31 Telephone interviews with an RSF personnel member, May–July 2024.

32 Telephone interview, location withheld, June 2024.

33 Interview with Omdurman resident, Greater Khartoum, Sudan, March 2024.

34 Interview with Omdurman resident, Greater Khartoum, Sudan, March 2024.

35 Interview with Khartoum resident, March 2024.

36 Interview with Khartoum resident, March 2024.

37 Interview with Haj Yousif resident, April 2024.

38 Interview with Soba resident, April 2024.

39 Interview with Mohamed Jamal, Cairo, Egypt, April 2024.

40 Interview with Haj Yousif resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

41 Interview with Arkaweet resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

42 Interview with Omdurman resident, Greater Khartoum, Sudan, March 2024.

43 Interview with Khartoum resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

44 Interview with Khartoum resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

45 Interview with Khartoum resident Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

46 Interview with Omdurman resident, Greater Khartoum, Sudan, March 2024.

47 Interview with Khartoum resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

48 Interview with Khartoum resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

49 Interview with Khartoum resident, Khartoum, Sudan, April 2024.

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Contact details

Small Arms Survey
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777

e info@smallarmssurvey.org

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