

May 2026

War in Sudan:

Gold and Foreign Influence



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Executive Summary

Keir Fairley

On 15 April 2023, Civil war broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This happened after roughly ten nights of violent unrest in the capital, Khartoum. Despite many of the tensions between the warring parties tracing back to the removal of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, Sudan has long been fraught with instability and unrest prior to this. Since the outbreak, fighting has continued, leading to over 9 million displaced people, thousands of civilians killed and roughly 40% of the population facing food insecurity.

Currently, the war's impact is being felt throughout the country, although fighting is currently concentrated in a few key regions, namely North Darfur. The SAF controls the majority of the country's territory, including the capital Khartoum and the crucial Port of Sudan in the north-east of the country. The RSF which is a paramilitary group previously active in the Darfur conflict under President al-Bashir has a stronghold situated towards the south-west. This area is rich in artisanal gold mining. There are smaller secondary militia groups that hold small control of pockets of territory in the south.

The conflict has spread throughout Sudan and its impact has extended beyond borders. Both of the warring factions have international backers, namely Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who support the SAF and RSF respectively. This has complicated the conflict and exacerbated the impact on civilians. While all foreign actors accused of being involved have denied it, credible reports show otherwise. Key airstrips in neighbouring Chad have been used to smuggle weapons into the country. The technology used in this war has varied, although particular destruction and violence has been caused by air strikes and drones.

Information has been significantly hard to accurately come by and not only due to the chaos that comes with conflict. Journalists and newsrooms have been specifically targeted by both sides. Press freedom has come under consistent, intense attacks. Disinformation and propaganda have further complicated efforts to comprehensively understand and resolve this conflict.

One angle that allows for a clear view of the causes and direction of this conflict is to assess the financial aspects, namely gold. Sudan is incredibly rich in this precious metal, and it currently sits at the heart of what drives this war. From warring factions sparring for control of gold-rich areas, to illicit smuggling routes, and international interest, the metal is key to understanding this conflict.

1. History of the Conflict

Kwabena Osei

Sudan, officially known as the Republic of Sudan, is the [third-largest country in Africa by area](#). After it gained independence from British and Egyptian sovereignty in January 1956, the country continued to suffer from unresolved tensions, particularly between the ethnic and religiously diverse south, and the north, ruled under Gaafar Nimery's Islamist regime.

Although such tensions were not new, and in fact had been shaped during colonial rule, they were exacerbated and exposed further under the country's independent status. Even before independence was formally declared, conflict had already begun in the form of the First Sudanese Civil War, which began in 1955 and lasted 17 years. This war, fought between the northern and southern regions of the country, witnessed the rise of the Anyanya insurgency, which fought for Southern Sudanese separatism and autonomy until 1972, when Joseph Lagu, founding member of the Anyanya, signed the Addis Ababa Agreement with the north, ending the war and giving the south limited autonomy.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Sudan quickly fell into a pattern: as its internal politics destabilised, military governments took control. This happened in 1958 with the military coup led by Ibrahim Abboud, as well as with Jaafar Nimeiri in 1969, and Omar al-Bashir in 1989.

Omar al-Bashir's Regime

During al-Bashir's reign (1989-2019), dissent in the southern regions of Sudan remained constant as part of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) acted as the formal military instrument of the state, under direct command of al-Bashir and its leading generals. However, in Darfur, the state began to arm militias, known as the Janjaweed, to suppress dissent by rebel groups such as the Sudanese Liberation Movement. A sub-conflict of the wider Civil War between the State and Southern rebels, conflict in Darfur (2003-2005) culminated in a genocide, as determined by the [International Criminal Court](#), largely perpetrated by the Janjaweed against mostly non-Arab ethnic groups. [Estimated casualties](#) of the genocide range between 200,000-300,000 civilians with around 2 million civilians displaced.

In 2005, a [peace agreement](#) mediated through the US was signed ending the Second Sudanese Civil War and eventually providing a pathway to independence for South Sudan. However, Darfur was notably excluded in the peace agreement and no lasting

peace was reached, despite attempts to disarm warring militia's with the Darfur Peace agreement. The subsequent period until 2013 was marked by continual violence and the eventual formalisation of the Janjaweed into a paramilitary organisation known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under its leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as Hemedti). The RSF would subsequently act as al-Bashir's specialised military organisation, even supported the Saudi-coalition in the Yemen Civil war in 2016-2017 and the Libyan National Army in the Second Libyan Civil War in 2019.

Origins of 2019 Sudanese Revolution

In 2011, when South Sudan gained its independence through referendum, Sudan, lost [access](#) to around 75% of its previous oil reserves, which strained an economy already negatively affected by years of conflict. Over the next decade, economic hardships enhanced and social grievances deepened. This led to mass protests against the al-Bashir regime in 2018, [triggered](#) by the removal of wheat and fuel subsidies. At first these protests were met with violence from state security forces, particularly the RSF . Despite their strong allegiance to al-Bashir, in April 2019 the RSF joined with the SAF to depose al-Bashir and install a joint military-civilian transitional government

Despite the hope that the transitional government would eventually lead to a civilian government, in October 2021, the SAF under the command of Abdel Fattah al-Burhan [disbanded](#) the transitional council and took control of the government through direct military rule. In the process of ending the transitional council, the al-Burhan sidelined the RSF and Hemedti. This led to tensions between the two largest military fractions in the country reigniting strong disagreements over the integration of the RSF into the SAF and questions over command structures, which would ultimately lead to the current civil war.

2. Current Dynamics

Uzdah Jawaid

Belligerents

The conflict in Sudan is primarily between the SAF and the RSF, both formerly aligned within Sudan's transitional government following the [removal](#) of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. Tensions escalated during 2022-2023 over plans to [integrate RSF forces into the national military command](#), culminating in open conflict on [15 April 2023](#).

The SAF is led by [General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#), Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and Sudan's de facto head of state. SAF command remains structured through formal military institutions. Following the deterioration of security in Khartoum during late 2023, SAF leadership relocated key government departments, diplomatic missions and international organisations to [Port Sudan](#), which now functions as the primary administrative and military centre. The SAF retains access to conventional military assets, including artillery, armoured formations, and air power.

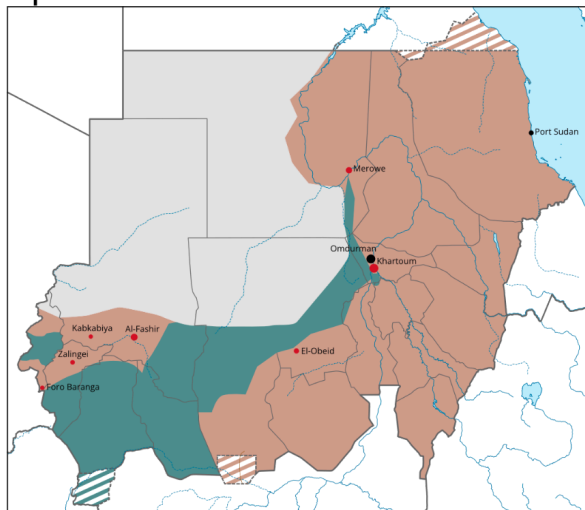
The [SAF's objectives](#) include maintaining control over national institutions, preserving territorial integrity and retaining international recognition as Sudan's official military authority. Control of ports and administrative infrastructure remains central to sustaining governance operations.

The [RSF](#) is commanded by [General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo \("Hemedti"\)](#), formerly Deputy Chairman of the Sovereignty Council. The RSF evolved from militia formations active in Darfur during the early 2000s and later developed into a formal paramilitary organisation under the al-Bashir government in 2013. By 2023, [RSF personnel strength](#) was estimated at 30,000-100,000 fighters, making it one of Sudan's largest armed forces outside the formal military.

RSF command structures rely on decentralised regional networks controlling mobile units across western and central Sudan. The group maintains a strong presence in resource-producing areas, particularly [gold extraction zones](#), which provide revenue used to sustain operations. RSF objectives include maintaining independence from SAF command integration, expanding territorial influence, and securing control of economically valuable regions.

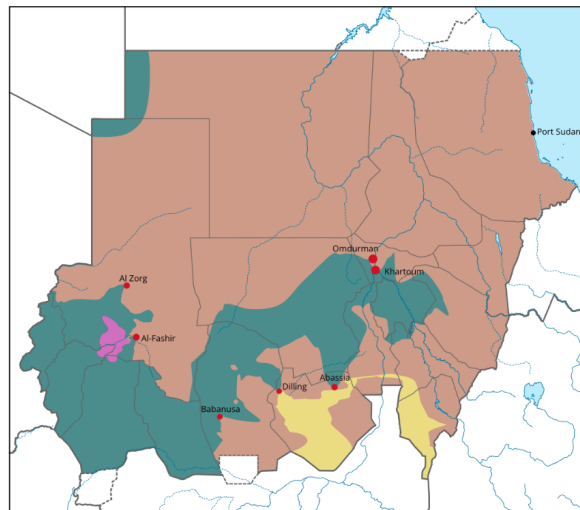
[Secondary actors](#) include tribal militias and community defence groups, particularly across Darfur and South Kordofan, often aligning with either SAF or RSF forces. External actors have also contributed equipment, funding and logistical support to both sides, enabling sustained operations despite economic collapse.

April 18 2023



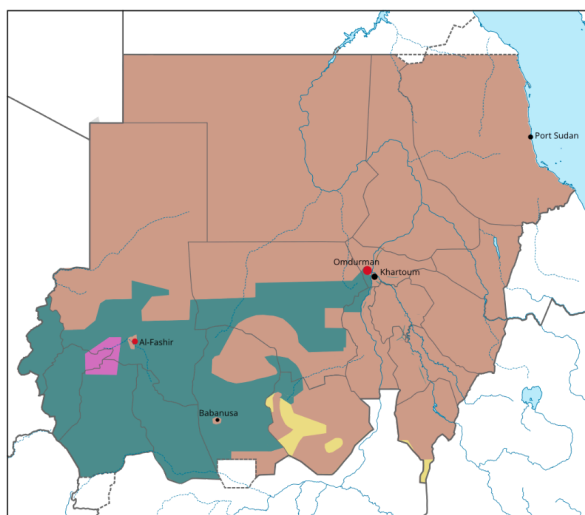
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11 March 2024



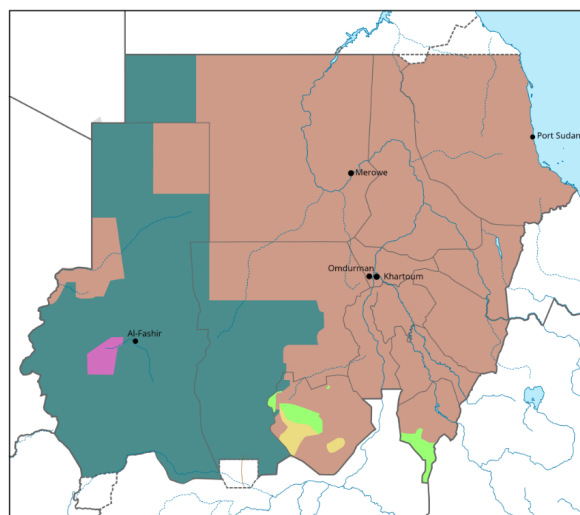
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27 March 2025



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27 March 2026



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- Controlled by Sudanese Armed Forces
- Controlled by Rapid Support Forces
- Controlled by Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (al-Hilu)
- Controlled by allied Rapid Support Forces and Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (al-Hilu)
- Controlled by Sudan Liberation Movement (al-Nur)
- Contested Cities

Frontlines

The [conflict began](#) in Khartoum State, where both SAF and RSF units were heavily concentrated. Early fighting centred on Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahri, particularly around strategic infrastructure, including Khartoum International Airport and the General Command headquarters. By mid 2023, RSF units controlled large parts of central Khartoum, while SAF forces consolidated positions in northern Omdurman.

From mid 2023, the conflict expanded westward into [Darfur](#), which became one of the most active theatres. Violence intensified in West Darfur, particularly in [El Geneina](#), during 2023, resulting in large-scale civilian displacement. By late 2023-2025, focus shifted to North Darfur, where [El Fasher](#) emerged as a major frontline due to its status as the administrative capital and one of the last major cities not fully controlled by RSF-aligned forces.

The conflict expanded further into [North Kordofan and South Kordofan](#) during 2024-2025. Cities including El Obeid, Bara and Kadugli became focal points due to their role as transport, supply and logistical hubs linking western Sudan to central regions.

Eastern Sudan, particularly Port Sudan, has remained [comparatively stable](#) and functions as the main administrative hub for SAF operations and humanitarian coordination. Since late 2023, government institutions and diplomatic missions have relocated there following the collapse of security conditions in Khartoum.

Frontlines remain fragmented rather than continuous, with zones of control shifting frequently. Fighting has concentrated in urban centres and [resource-producing regions](#) due to their infrastructure networks, administrative importance and access to revenue sources, particularly gold mining areas in western Sudan.

Overall, the conflict has shifted from capital-centred fighting (2023) to multi-regional conflict across Darfur and Kordofan (2024-2026), with western Sudan becoming increasingly central to sustained operations.

Tactics

[Urban combat](#) emerged immediately after the outbreak of fighting in April 2023, when RSF forces moved into the central districts of Khartoum, targeting government infrastructure and residential zones. In response, SAF units conducted artillery strikes and armoured counter operations, turning Khartoum State into a sustained combat zone. Throughout 2023-2024, repeated shelling by both SAF and RSF damaged residential districts, hospitals, markets, and water infrastructure across densely populated neighbourhoods.

Large-scale battlefield engagements have been limited. Instead, RSF forces relied on [rapid ground offensives to seize territory](#), particularly in Darfur and Kordofan. In West Darfur, coordinated attacks by RSF-aligned forces in El Geneina during mid 2023 resulted in extensive urban destruction and mass civilian displacement. In North Darfur, repeated RSF offensives targeting El Fasher intensified during 2024-2025, while [SAF forces regained defensive control of key administrative positions and locations](#) through sustained bombardment.

Siege tactics, primarily associated with RSF operations, became increasingly common from late 2023 onwards. Cities including El Fasher, Kadugli and El Obeid experienced prolonged encirclement by RSF forces, restricting access to food, medicine and humanitarian aid. In several areas of North Darfur, siege conditions contributed to famine declarations during 2025, as supply routes collapsed and [humanitarian access was limited](#).

Indirect fire, including artillery and mortar systems, has been used extensively by both SAF and RSF across Khartoum (2023-2024) and Darfur (2024-2025), contributing to widespread infrastructure damage and [civilian displacement](#).

Civilian casualties have remained high due to sustained fighting in populated areas. Available humanitarian reporting indicates tens of thousands of deaths since April 2023, although precise figures remain uncertain due to limited reporting. Civilian displacement has exceeded 14 million people, including approximately [11 million internally displaced](#), making Sudan the largest displacement crisis globally.

Overall, the conflict has evolved from RSF-led territorial offensives in Khartoum (2023) to multi-regional siege and attrition warfare across Darfur and Kordofan (2024-2026). The SAF has focused on retaining key administrative and military positions, while the RSF has prioritised encirclement and territorial expansion, resulting in prolonged urban destruction.

Technology

The conflict combines [conventional weapons with increasingly accessible technologies](#), particularly air power, drones, mobile weapons platforms and satellite communications, which have significantly shaped operational patterns.

[Air power](#), operated primarily by the SAF, remains one of the most decisive technological advantages. Aircraft operating from eastern Sudan have conducted repeated strikes against RSF-held positions across Khartoum, North Darfur and Kordofan, targeting supply routes and fortified positions. Air strikes have contributed to large-scale infrastructure damage and enabled SAF forces to defend key administrative centres.

[Drone systems](#) are used by both SAF and RSF, with increasing frequency across Darfur and North Kordofan. Drones are used for reconnaissance and targeted strikes, enabling remote engagement across dispersed frontlines. Sources reported approximately 198 drone strikes during the first two months of 2026, with 52 incidents causing civilian casualties and around 478 deaths.

Mobile weapon platforms (“[technicals](#)”), widely used by the RSF, consist of pickup trucks mounted with heavy weapons. These vehicles support rapid territorial seizures and operational mobility, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, where terrain favours fast-moving units.

Satellite communication systems, including commercial services such as [Starlink](#), have enabled continued command coordination following widespread telecommunications collapse. These systems are used by both armed forces and humanitarian actors to maintain connectivity across fragmented territories.

Additional equipment reported in use includes armoured vehicles, mortars, anti-materiel rifles and electronic countermeasure systems, often supplied through external procurement networks.

Overall, SAF air power and widespread drone use by both SAF and RSF have had the greatest operational impact, increasing strike capability across dispersed regions, while satellite communications have enabled sustained coordination despite infrastructure collapse.

3.Foreign Actors

Langa Cele

The prolonged conflict in Sudan's civil war can be attributed to the involvement of foreign actors who supply weapons, money, and diplomatic cover that allow both sides, that being the SAF and RSF, to fight indefinitely without winning decisively.

Foreign Supporters

The actors divide [broadly into two camps](#). On the SAF side: Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye. On the RSF side: the UAE, Russia, and Ethiopia. However, various sources have indicated these alignments are not clear, with Russia having backed both sides at different points, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are supposed allies whose Sudan policies are in open competition, and Egypt and the UAE are locked in a mutual economic dependency even while backing opposing forces.

It can be stated that the continued involvement of foreign actors in this conflict stems from two structural features. The first being that Sudan is one of Africa's largest gold producers, and control over gold assets was itself a triggering factor in the war. Gold now [finances both sides](#), flows through foreign-controlled networks, and gives external actors, especially the UAE and Egypt, direct economic incentives to sustain rather than end the conflict. The second feature is strategic corruption, as foreign actors have not merely exploited Sudan's war but weaponised access to its resources and geography against the interests of ordinary Sudanese civilians.

Foreign Involvement through Gold

The gold supply chain is the primary mechanism through which foreign actors are embedded in Sudan's war economy. For the [RSF](#), gold flows westward and southward through Darfur, across the Chad border, and ultimately to Dubai. For the SAF, gold flows northward into Egypt, and from there largely to the UAE. [Both routes](#) terminate in the same place: the UAE, which is simultaneously the world's largest importer of African gold, the RSF's primary patron, and a financial hub on which even the SAF depends for trade transactions. This gold supply chain creates a Sudan regional conflict ecosystem, which is a set of intersecting cross-border networks of economic, political, military, and ideological authority that cannot be addressed by policies focused on Sudan alone. African gold accounted for nearly 7% of the UAE's GDP in 2022. Between 2012 and 2022, the UAE [imported](#) 2,569 tonnes of gold from Africa that was not declared for export from African countries, amounting to \$115.3 billion. Sudan is central to this system, and disrupting it would require fundamental changes to how Dubai regulates its gold trade.

SAF Supporters

When we examine SAF supporters, states such as Egypt's [motivations](#) in the conflict are driven by strategic and economic factors. Cairo ultimately sees the SAF as the more stable option across its southern border. This coupled with a desire to exert regional influence, and access the lucrative gold trade has led to backing the armed forces. Whereas Iran sees its re-engagement with Sudan as a strategic rehabilitation after years of isolation. Having re-established diplomatic ties in October 2023 following an eight-year break, Tehran saw in the SAF a partner through which it could rebuild Red Sea influence, demonstrate the operational reach of its drone programme, and cultivate ties with an Islamist-adjacent military leadership.

Furthermore, Iran has sought a direct naval presence. In March 2024, Iran [petitioned](#) Sudan to establish a naval base at Port Sudan on the Red Sea. The SAF rejected the request, but the rejection did not end Iran's military support, suggesting Tehran calculated that drone supply was sufficient to maintain leverage regardless of the naval base outcome. Saudi Arabia occupies the most strategically ambiguous position of any foreign actor. Saudi Arabia is seen as a more neutral player in the war, having hosted two rounds of talks in Jeddah in 2023, which resulted in the [Jeddah Declaration](#). The Arabian country continues to be protective of the ceasefire process, seeking to ensure that it hosts and receives credit for any future agreement.

But this neutrality is strategic rather than principled. Saudi Arabia's [primary concern](#) is preventing the UAE from establishing a dominant Red Sea foothold via Sudan, a prospect that would directly threaten Saudi maritime security and undermine Riyadh's ambitions under Vision 2030, which envisions new cross-border infrastructure projects and trade corridors through Egypt and the Red Sea. There remains Saudi discomfort at the prospect of a future Emirati foothold on the Red Sea via a Sudanese port.

Whilst Türkiye's involvement flows from three converging interests: its post-2015 Africa expansion strategy, its ideological affinity with Islamist political networks linked to the al-Bashir era, and its commercial stake in Sudan's gold sector. Türkiye [offered](#) its Bayraktar drones to the SAF, situating its intervention within the broader pattern of Ankara deploying military technology to cultivate influence across Africa and the Muslim world. For Türkiye, its stake in this war is to ensure leverage over Sudan's transition, whichever faction ultimately prevails.

RSF Supporters

Turning the lens over to RSF supporters, the first being the UAE, whose [interest](#) out of all foreign actors is the most structurally embedded of any foreign actor in this conflict. It reflects a deliberate, multi-year strategy to position the UAE as a global logistics and

financial hub, a Red Sea maritime power, and a dominant force across African commodity markets. A friendly RSF-led Sudan would give the UAE port access on both sides of the Red Sea, making it the dominant maritime power in the corridor. Whereas Russia's [goals](#) in Sudan are strategic access and resource extraction, situated within its broader Africa strategy of countering Western influence and securing military footholds. Russia wants a Red Sea naval base to project force from its existing positions and Sudan's Red Sea coast is the missing link in this arc.

For Ethiopia, its involvement in Sudan's war is almost entirely a function of its conflict with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. Cairo has consistently opposed the GERD, viewing it as an existential threat to Egypt's water security. By [supporting](#) the RSF while Egypt supports SAF, Addis Ababa applies indirect pressure on Cairo without the risks of confrontation. Its involvement also shaped the UAE's broader chequebook diplomacy. Ethiopia has received substantial UAE investment and military cooperation, and this economic dependency creates aligned incentives; thus, Addis Ababa backs the RSF partly because the UAE wants it to, and the UAE compensates Ethiopia accordingly.

For states such as Egypt, it is clear that their interventions in this conflict are to ensure that there is no UAE dominance in the region, whilst their most consequential intervention has been economical. In May 2023, the Egyptian government [issued](#) a decision to exempt gold imports from any customs duties or tax, including unprocessed raw gold, regardless of the quantities or methods of obtaining it. This single policy threw open Egypt's economy to Sudanese conflict gold. With [reports](#) suggesting the amount smuggled across the border reached upward of 100 kg per day. Sudan's own Finance Minister was informed by Egyptian officials that 48 tonnes of Sudanese gold had entered Egypt in 2024 alone, a figure that substantially exceeds what Sudan officially declares as exported to Egypt. Besides its economic backing, Egypt [provides](#) military hardware, including drones and ammunition and political backing, serving as the SAF's most important diplomatic sponsor.

Iran's contribution has been primarily military-technical, centred on its Mohajer-6 and Ababil drone systems. The re-establishment of diplomatic ties with Iran has been crucial to the Port Sudan authorities, especially in terms of [providing Iranian Mohajer-6 drones](#) to the SAF in 2024, which have been crucial for the SAF's efforts to reverse the RSF's gains in the capital and central Sudan. Saudi Arabia's support for the SAF is more political and diplomatic than military. Saudi Arabia also provides financial channels for the SAF, with SAF-aligned Islamist networks maintaining connections through Saudi-linked institutions. Saudi Arabia has grown in diplomatic stature following its hosting of US-mediated Russia-Ukraine talks in 2025, which reinforces its self-image as an indispensable regional broker. Türkiye's Tahe Mining company [operates](#) the Delgo

Mining joint venture with the Sudanese government in the Northern state and the SAF has explicitly used this commercial relationship to extract war revenue. Türkiye also provides financial conduits through which the SAF channels gold sales and weapons procurement, particularly through its hosting of former Bashir-era networks.

States backing the RAF, such as the UAE, [supplied weapons](#) disguised as humanitarian aid intended for the Sudanese people sheltering in eastern Chad. The UAE also exercises influence through chequebook diplomacy across Sudan's neighbours: the UAE has sought to influence Sudan's neighbours to support its interests in the country through deals with Chad, South Sudan and Ethiopia, including investments or military cooperation agreements. Russia's support carried through the African Corps has been accused of supplying weapons to the RSF, including surface-to-air missiles, but later stepped away from the RAF. Ethiopian support is geared towards hosting an RSF military training camp with financial and military support from the UAE near the Sudan border.

4. The Role of the Gold Trade

Holly Callow

Gold is a central driver of the Sudan civil war, both funding belligerents and linking the conflict to international trade networks. Sudan is among Africa's top gold producers, with artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) accounting for roughly 80% of production. ASM relies on local workers manually digging for gold, often using dangerous chemicals, including mercury and cyanide, which pose significant health risks to workers. The militarisation of gold began in 2011, after South Sudan's independence triggered the collapse of the oil industry. Bashir's regime weaponised gold to replace lost revenues, [granting](#) concessions to companies linked to the SAF and Russia while also centralising exports through the Sudan Gold Refinery. Gold quickly became Sudan's most important and reliable commodity.

Gold Mining During the Civil War

With the outbreak of the civil war in 2023, control over and access to gold became central to the strategies of both the RSF and SAF. Gold's value as a reliable source of wealth makes it a critical source of funding for military operations and purchasing weapons. The RSF, which had previously [built](#) its financial base through the Al-Junaid Company's control of artisanal mining in Darfur, quickly captured key revenue assets such as the printing house and the Sudan Gold refinery in Khartoum, alongside raiding homes and banks for cash and gold. They also captured Jebel Armer, a key gold-producing hub in North Darfur, and the Songo mines, which later became central to RSF gold production. Meanwhile, the SAF [used](#) gold revenues from mines in the Red Sea, Northern, River Nile and West Kordofan states, cutting taxes to re-attract Russian and Chinese investors.

Securing mining operations was only part of the strategy, as control over export hubs is just as critical. The SAF controlled Port Sudan, ensuring direct access to the Red Sea, while the RSF held Nyala airport, close to the Songo mines. These mines and export hubs became strategic targets, particularly for drone strikes, placing miners and exploited citizens at increased risk. To move gold out of the country, both parties relied on a variety of methods, including illicit networks. The RSF frequently uses transnational routes: northward from North Darfur into Chad onward to the UAE; southward through South Sudan and Uganda before reaching the UAE and northwest via Libya, with exports directed to Türkiye or the UAE. Some reports suggest collaboration with the Russian-linked Africa Corps to facilitate these flows. As for the SAF, they reportedly move gold through Egypt, particularly via Aswan, sometimes using refugees or migrants

to export it. From Egypt, the gold is often re-exported to the UAE, a major hub for refining and trade. Consequently, the UAE receives gold from both belligerents while allegedly supplying the RSF with weapons in exchange, a claim they deny.

Gold Supply Chain

In 2024, the UAE [accounted](#) for around 97% of Sudan's official gold exports (\$1.52 billion) and over 53% of the country's total exports, making it Sudan's most important economic partner. Such figures do not include the amount exported via illicit networks. Once in the UAE, Sudanese gold is blended with legitimately sourced gold, making its roots back to the conflict zone nearly untraceable. This gold is then exported globally to countries such as Switzerland, Hong Kong, India and Türkiye. Switzerland, as the world's largest refinery hub, [imported](#) 316 tonnes of gold worth CHF 27 billion from the UAE between January and September 2025, almost double its previous annual volumes. Conflict gold from Sudan may therefore be entering the European market. This highlights a weakness in the global regulatory framework governing responsible sourcing. The London Bullion Market Association (LBMA) introduced due diligence audits in 2012, and the private sector introduced a data-sharing mechanism between refiners, miners and industry associations in 2024, yet both measures have failed to prevent conflict gold entering the supply chain.

Regulatory action has had a limited impact. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey-listed the UAE in 2022 due to concerns over oversight of gold trading and free zones, but [removed](#) it from the list in 2024, after the UAE introduced OECD-aligned regulations, including restrictions on gold imports from conflict zones. Despite these measures, reports indicate that the UAE imported 29 tonnes of gold directly from Sudan in 2024, illustrating the ongoing challenges of ensuring a conflict-free supply chain.

The Political Economy of Gold

Gold plays a key role in the UAE's broader economic strategy, forming part of an effort to reduce reliance on oil, especially since the global shift towards renewable energy raises concerns over the sustainability of relying on hydrocarbons. Gold offers a reliable, high-value alternative, allowing the UAE to diversify its economy. The rise of Dubai as a major global trading hub reflects this, with estimates [suggesting](#) that between 20-30% of all gold traded globally passes through the city each year, reinforcing its position as a key intermediary in the global gold trade.

Overall, Sudanese gold is both a local and global driver of conflict. For belligerents, it provides a critical source of revenue and power, enabling the purchase of weapons and

the continuation of fighting. For external backers, gold offers both economic profit and a means of influence, allowing them to support either the SAF or RSF and shape the outcome of the conflict. In this sense, gold not only sustains the war but also links it to international markets. The continued presence of conflict gold within the global gold industry highlights ongoing weaknesses in supply chain transparency and due diligence, with current measures failing to prevent it from entering the market. Addressing this will require not just stronger regulation but also more consistent enforcement and transparency at each stage of the supply chain.

5.Actionable Insights

Keir Fairley

This conflict remains fluid, intense and volatile. Here are key actions and lessons that policymakers, business leaders, and individuals should consider.

Intervention

The conflict is increasingly self-sustaining. The gold industry and the ease with which the precious metal is smuggled out of the country mean that it can finance itself. This limits the effectiveness of sanctions or economic measures to directly impact and bring this conflict to an end. The United Nations currently maintains an arms embargo on conflict factions in Darfur, but has not made it permeant, requiring annual renewal. Additionally, the embargo has been significantly more limited in scope for government forces. Focus of an international effort could in the future shift towards disruption of supply chains that underpin the conflict, such as regulation, enforcement, and grassroots activism that targets gold smuggling routes, industry refining hubs, like Dubai and transport nodes like the airstrips in Chad.

Regulation to strengthen due diligence for mineral imports have been in place for a considerable time, yet have remained ineffective targeting conflict gold in Sudan. One of these regulations has been the [2021 EU Conflict Mineral Regulation](#), which mandates due diligence for importers of tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold. Despite this new regulation, it seems to have had little effect on the profitability of the foreign actors involved in Sudan's gold trade. It is likely that economic unions such as the EU and other markets including India and China, would need to become more stringent middle actors, such as refineries and jewellery manufactures to have a knock-on effect that could reduce the profitability of the warring parties.

Secondly, while fundamentally a civil war, this conflict has increasingly taken on proxy characteristics. Despite their denials, it is being complicated and exacerbated by foreign actors. Any attempt at a ceasefire will likely require an attempt to reconcile the regional actors, including Egypt and the UAE.

Humanitarian

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan is acute and if the war continues as one of chaos and attrition, it will continue. Siege warfare and limited governance have made the humanitarian situation particularly bad. Mass humanitarian harm is not just a result of the conflict but embedded in its structure. The current three key issues are

displacement, food insecurity, and gender based violence. Safe, stable and continuous humanitarian access to the most affected areas is vital to mitigate this. Furthermore, press freedom and safety will be vital in bringing this conflict to an end. Not only to adequately report on the conflict, but to adequately record and verify the human impact.

The mass displacement of people is likely to place additional pressure on regional migration systems. This will be most keenly felt in the neighbouring countries whose infrastructure is already under strain. Chad has been a one of these countries that has experienced a high influx of refugees from Sudan, with [approximately](#) 1.3 million Sudanese refugees in the country currently. However, migration will also spill over into migration flows through Europe and the MENA region.

Food insecurity continues to have a devastating impact on civilians caught up in this conflict. As it continues, it runs the risk of being further complicated by potential environmental factors. The majority of farming activities have [ceased](#) in the country. The disruption of agricultural production will have lasting consequences on the industry and will become difficult to resume without significant effort.

Sexual violence against women and girls has been a pervasive feature of this conflict and one that has repeatedly been underreported. It has been exacerbated by displacement, lack of access to health care, and deep-rooted gender inequalities.

Future of the Conflict

The fragmentation of the country will likely continue. Especially as energy, focus, and funds turn towards other conflicts, namely Iran and Ukraine, meaning effort to end the conflict will likely remain limited in scope. The continuation of this war will likely lead to scenarios of further fragmentation of the country, with large swathes of land governed by individuals or militias. Another scenario could see a parallel government situation form, like that in Libya, where competing authorities claim legitimacy and control over different parts of the country, or potentially a more chaotic situation where a multipolar balance of power sees warlords control territories within Sudan.

The profitability of the conflict gold sector will likely not wane unless international actors significantly increase scrutiny of the foreign actors involved in Sudan. With porous borders, smuggling remains a straightforward task and with the price of gold remaining high, amidst global uncertainty, rewards for illicit groups become strong incentives.

In terms of what this conflict shows for the future of warfare, it is another example of how vulnerable civilian infrastructure is and how vital air control, primarily through drones, is increasingly salient in modern warfare. Both of these have been key features of the mechanics of how this war is fought and that falls in line with other conflicts

around the world. What is different about Sudan is that it is not only the government that has the ability to enact this style of warfare, but militias, too.

About us

Polis Analysis is a provider of high quality, succinct analysis of international political developments with teams in London, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Washington D.C., Abu Dhabi and Hong Kong. We have a global community of thousands of readers based in over 100 countries.

What we believe

In an era of twenty-four-hour news, complex political developments and disinformation, we believe individuals deserve access to fact-based, free and easy to understand analysis of the events shaping their lives.

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