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### Checkpoints, not territory: rethinking conflict

When conflict is fought over roads, not territory – and what that means for policy

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When conflict is fought over roads, not territory  
– and what that means for policy

## CHECKPOINTS, NOT TERRITORY: RETHINKING CONFLICT

**The conventional image of war is of armies contesting territory. But from Afghanistan to Congo, Somalia to Myanmar, the real frontlines of conflict run from checkpoint to checkpoint, along roads.**

The Taliban took over Afghanistan one border post at a time. The Congolese rebel group M23 built its financial base by sitting on a single crossing point between eastern DRC and Uganda, extracting tens of thousands of dollars a month without controlling significant territory. Yemen's Houthis outperform the Yemeni Government by offering a more predictable experience at precisely the checkpoints that matter most to traders. This brief draws on a multi-country comparative research

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Shifts in checkpoint control should be mapped as a useful heuristic for tracking rapidly changing conflict dynamics.
- Trade corridors and commodity chains should be mapped before designing stabilisation or security programmes.
- Checkpoint proliferation should not automatically be read as governance failure; moreover, crackdowns can displace violence rather than ending it.
- Apply a regional lens: neighbours' trade interests can outlast any political settlement.

project – covering Yemen, Afghanistan, DR Congo, South Sudan, Myanmar, and countries in the Sahel and West Africa – to argue that checkpoints shine a light on conflict dynamics in ways that policymakers have barely begun to explore.

### **WARS OVER TRANSIT ROUTES**

In many conflict-affected settings, transport networks are sparse, forcing significant volumes of goods through a handful of chokepoints. Those points inevitably become sites of armed competition because the rents from controlling passage outstrip those available elsewhere. Control over crucial border crossings and transshipment points allows those in control to sustain their war efforts, to bargain with enemies, and to finance local proxies. Transport corridors therefore attract disproportionate militarisation relative to the surrounding landscape – and conventional conflict maps, which shade in whole territories as ‘controlled’ or ‘contested’, often fail to account for this.

If we accept that checkpoints aren’t simply epiphenomena of conflict but, rather, are the frontline,

for regimes and rebels to lean harder on roadblocking. Conversely, when alternative revenues expand – or become centralised as violence recedes – checkpoint regimes tend to consolidate or get replaced. The checkpoint landscape is, in this sense, a living register of how armed and political actors finance their rule and buy loyalty by allowing selected actors to extract value from movement along road networks.

### **ARMED GROUPS OUTPERFORM STATES**

International logistics requires receipts, standardised fees, and legible paperwork. More broadly, traders and transporters across conflict zones value predictability and ease of movement over cost, and gravitate towards whichever armed actor can provide it, irrespective of ideological affiliation. For armed actors seeking to capture valuable trade flows, control over high-density cross-border routes therefore imposes constraints on how extraction is organised. It creates a ‘golden straitjacket’: predation must become sufficiently predictable, standardised, and legible to keep commerce moving.

“ The checkpoint landscape is a living register of how armed and political actors finance their rule and buy loyalty by allowing select actors to extract value from movement. ”

the implication is that understanding a conflict requires understanding its transport geography: *where* flows move, *which* routes are indispensable, and *who* sits astride them. Such an exercise reveals that wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are increasingly wars over circulation and over the checkpoints that form the material expression of efforts to profit from controlling it.

### **CHECKPOINTS AS EARLY WARNING**

Shifts in checkpoint regimes – who controls them, how they are run, and where they multiply or consolidate – are a leading indicator of deeper changes in conflicts, such as revenue dependence, coalition politics and the balance of power. Across ongoing conflicts, rising and falling checkpoint numbers mark both adaptation to external constraints and the negotiation of shifting alliances. This makes checkpoint data – from remote sensing and fieldwork – a uniquely valuable measure of how armed actors finance themselves and how power is shifting.

When the number of sources of oil revenues contracted in South Sudan, the number of checkpoints exploded. Such a rise in checkpoints may signal fragmentation of authority, pressure to appease restive proxies, seasonal stress, siege-building, or a shift in where taxable flows move. The current combination of aid withdrawal and war-induced trade disruption creates a perfect situation

Strikingly, armed groups routinely exploit this demand more effectively than government forces. Al-Shabaab, M23, the Houthis and the Taliban all offer traders a more predictable, standardised checkpoint experience than government-associated roadblock operators, and have consequently won over key constituencies of trade elites. When insurgents outperform incumbents at the very practice that road users and traders experience most routinely as day-to-day governance, the practical meaning and legitimacy of ‘the state’ dissolves at the roadside. As is evident across aforementioned conflicts, this creates a challenge that isn’t easily addressed through territorial gains alone.

### **HINTERLAND PIRACY**

Regional powers are rarely passive bystanders to checkpoint landscapes in neighbouring countries. Some actively back armed groups that control movement through corridors, some build roads in neighbouring territory and compete to divert trade flows towards their own logistical networks – a dynamic that can usefully be labelled ‘hinterland piracy’, a term borrowed from maritime trade and port development.

Eastern DRC offers the clearest illustration. Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi all depend on eastern DRC as an export market for their goods, and as a source of minerals for taxes and foreign earnings. Uganda

launched joint military operations with DRC that included road rehabilitation projects designed to channel Congolese trade across its borders and, within months, M23 re-emerged and seized the Bunagana border crossing through which those roads run. Rwanda, meanwhile, has seen its mineral exports sourced from – and exports of manufactured goods to – DRC rise exponentially since M23 occupied Goma and Bukavu, providing a lifeline as sanctions and aid cuts squeeze its revenue base. What appears on the surface to be armed rebellion is, simultaneously, a regional trade war over access to crucial economic hinterlands, conducted by proxy. Beyond Central Africa, trade relations between neighbouring countries across conflict-affected regions are also increasingly inflected by a zero-sum geopolitical logic.

### RE-EVALUATING ASSUMPTIONS

Policy discourse understandably treats checkpoint proliferation as a governance failure, and unpredictable negotiated passage as harmful to populations. Both assumptions need revision.

First, a fragmented checkpoint landscape can reflect a functioning, if predatory, political system rather than its breakdown. Checkpoint rights are often distributed deliberately as a form of tax farming that buys loyalty and manages coalitions. In Afghanistan, prior to the Taliban's return in 2021, the proliferation of roadblocks served as a glue that held the political system together. The central government co-opted regional warlords by tolerating their control over checkpoints along the country's corridors. In South Sudan, profitable checkpoint locations are allocated to loyal generals and affiliated militia as a political form of compensation. In West Africa, hundreds of informal checkpoints help buy off army and police factions that might otherwise revolt. In all these cases, removing checkpoints without replacing the political settlement they sustain risks destabilisation.

Second, and more counterintuitively, negotiated and unpredictable checkpoints may signal something other than harm. Along informal footpaths and dirt tracks that connect rural communities to local markets, checkpoint interactions are often embedded in local moral economies: customary authority, clan reciprocity, or community protection. A farmer paying a modest and locally negotiated toll to a familiar militia may view the payment as closer to a tribute – reflecting established social norms – than to predatory extraction. Case-study research has found that communities along such routes sometimes *prefer* being taxed by known local actors to the heavier toll regimes of unfamiliar, more heavily

armed actors – including state authorities – controlling main roads. The well-organised, standardised regime that looks like more consistent, formal governance may in fact mask deeper internal colonisation, with rents channelled upward to armed hierarchies distant from local communities.

Third, checkpoint landscapes in multi-actor conflicts may operate according to different logics, with varying impacts on trade and community welfare. The same corridor or commodity chain may be subjected to a centralised checkpoint regime, only for the rents to pass through a range of factions nominally banded together in a fragile alliance, with each of them seeking to balance localised agendas of protection and survival. Thus, before supporting 'formalisation' or 'standardisation' of checkpoint regimes, donors and policymakers should ask whose interests they serve, and what they are replacing.

In sum, checkpoints are not a peripheral nuisance to be cleared but a key register of how armed actors finance themselves and bind coalitions. Before any reflexive push to formalise, standardise, or eradicate them is initiated, the task is to read them: to distinguish predatory roadblock regimes that feed war chests and raise prices from those embedded in local coping mechanisms, and to ask who benefits. If these questions go unasked, intervention risks substituting visible roadblocks for less legible violence.

### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

*This brief draws on [Wars over Checkpoints: Nine Theses on Roadblocks and the Politics of Circulation in Conflict-affected Borderlands](#) (DIIS Working Paper 2026, Roadblocks and Revenues #11), and on case-study research for the TRACE project (Trade, Rents, and Authority in Borderland Checkpoint Economies). TRACE is supported by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, in order to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit [www.xcept-research.org](http://www.xcept-research.org). The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the UK Government.*

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