



Contested borderlands: Rapid Support Forces governance and negotiated sovereignty in Sudan

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Authorship

This report was authored by a team of expert researchers using a mixed-methods approach that included field research in the Sudan–South Sudan borderlands. The names of the authors have been withheld to respect their preference for anonymity.

About XCEPT

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Executive summary

- The conflict that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has had profound impacts on those resident in Sudan's conflict-affected borderlands. This report draws on three case studies to examine how RSF commanders, traditional authorities, and local intermediaries assert legitimacy in borderland areas. The research draws on field and geospatial data from Sudan's West Kordofan region along the border with South Sudan; the tri-border area between Sudan, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR); and the border area between eastern Chad and West Darfur.
- The RSF's approach to governance is opportunistic and adaptive, driven by a combination of military objectives, revenue generation, and efforts to build geopolitical legitimacy. Stability in RSF-held territories is often transactional, achieved through ad hoc agreements with local intermediaries and managed economic flows. This stability sits alongside widespread predation, as RSF commanders vary in their ability or willingness to restrain abuses by RSF soldiers or associated militias. Thus, the RSF asserts control over trade routes, taxation systems, and cross-border movement through governance structures that mix formal administrative mechanisms with informal and coercive practices.
- The three cases demonstrate how this approach varies between regions. In West Darfur, the RSF has expanded its control by blending inherited formal structures with community influence, relying on kinship ties and cross-border arrangements with Chadian authorities to secure markets and local support. In West Kordofan, RSF authority depends heavily on the kinship networks shaping cross-border trade with South Sudan, reinforcing the supremacy of informal local governance over centralised state structures. In the tri-border area, the RSF combines more formal administrative controls with informal local arrangements, balancing revenue collection with community acceptance.
- Community leverage within these governance arrangements remains highly uneven. Groups with strong kinship ties to RSF leaders are often able to secure favourable terms or limit exploitative practices, while communities in more remote or diverse areas lack similar influence. These dynamics highlight how informal systems of regulation, community agency, and access to power networks shape the lived experience of governance in Sudan's borderlands.
- The RSF's ability to manage cross-border trade, regulate mobility, and contain rebel activity has compelled neighbouring states – Chad, South Sudan, and CAR – to engage with it as a de facto authority. It has also enabled the RSF to embed itself within transnational political economies. The ability of the SAF to re-assert sovereignty and govern these regions will be challenged by deepening RSF entrenchment and the involvement of neighbouring states.
- The RSF is likely to remain the dominant actor in Sudan's southern and western borderlands for the foreseeable future. Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors will therefore need flexible strategies that respond to informal governance arrangements, work with existing local power structures, and adapt to the evolving ways authority is organised. The report offers practical advice on engaging RSF-aligned civil authorities, managing checkpoint taxation and informal fee systems, and designing conflict-sensitive programming that minimises unintended harm.

Abbreviations

CAR	Central African Republic
GoS	Government of Sudan
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NCP	National Congress Party
PSA	Port Sudan Authorities
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army–North

Introduction

Since April 2023, Sudan's southern and western borderlands have become arenas of contested authority, continuing a longstanding pattern of fragmentation shaped by local and regional actors.¹ The RSF's expanded territorial control has directly challenged the SAF's claim to sovereignty, upending formal governance and border management. As a consequence, the country is experiencing an unprecedented degree of fragmented governance, involving emergent powerbrokers and competing efforts to regulate mobility, trade, and access to resources.

Sudan's peripheries have long operated as hybrid spaces where state institutions, armed groups, and local intermediaries share and contest authority through patronage and informal arrangements.² The ongoing civil war between the SAF and RSF has intensified these dynamics, forcing borderland residents to navigate changing governance systems in order to manage the conflict's impacts. These realities also pose significant challenges for policymakers, diplomats, and humanitarian actors working across Sudan and the wider region.

This report investigates how the RSF exercises governance in Sudan's western and southern borderlands, and the impacts on those living there. Drawing on case studies, the paper analyses how RSF power is organised, legitimised, and exercised, particularly in terms of replacing formal state structures and challenging SAF claims to sovereignty. The report explores how everyday governance – including trade, mobility, and security – is negotiated among armed actors, community leaders, and neighbouring states at the local, national, and regional levels. This approach sheds light on how the RSF's de facto governance links local arrangements to broader struggles over power and legitimacy in Sudan's border regions.

Methodology

Research was conducted between February and April 2025 using a mixed-method research design. Field research informed remote sensing and desk-based inquiries. Satellite imagery and mobility data helped validate and expand field insights, revealing previously undocumented sites, economic activity, and patterns of life. Collection methods included:

- Researchers with access to the selected border communities conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants identified via a stakeholder mapping process designed to ensure a diversity of perspectives. Interviewees included community leaders, traders, local administrators, and others with direct knowledge of border governance. Information was graded for reliability, triangulated, and analysed, with findings used to guide the focus of remote sensing research requests.
- Geospatial and mobility data was provided by Satellite Applications Catapult (SAC), which delivered high-resolution multispectral imagery capable of detecting patterns of infrastructural change, border

1 A.M. Lesch, *The Sudan: Contested National Identities*, Oxford: James Currey, 1998; Tubiana, J., "The dangerous fiction of Darfur's peace," *The New Humanitarian*, 2 August 2017; J. Tubiana, C. Warin and G. M. Saeneen, "Multilateral Damage: The Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes," *Clingendael*, September 2018.

2 A. de Waal, "Sudan: The Turbulent State" in *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*, ed. Alex de Waal (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).

post activity, and settlement expansion. EMDYN supplied commercially available mobility data. This data offered insights into movement patterns across key corridors, and was employed both to validate field findings and identify areas requiring further investigation. This included visual cross-referencing of satellite imagery with field reports to verify key observations, hotspot mapping of events and mobility patterns to detect anomalies, and the use of temporal analysis to highlight emerging trends warranting additional inquiry.

- A comprehensive literature review was conducted in parallel with open-source intelligence collection, encompassing media analysis, social media monitoring, image verification, and reviews of academic and policy literature. This desk-based work was used to contextualise field findings, corroborate spatial analysis, and trace historical trends in border governance and conflict dynamics.

The study was guided by ‘do no harm’ principles. Ethical standards included obtaining informed consent, protecting source confidentiality, ensuring stakeholder diversity, and verifying information through rigorous verification and triangulation. Special care was taken to safeguard the anonymity of informants from vulnerable groups, such as displaced persons and cross-border traders operating in informal markets. Remote sensing served as a complementary method and risk mitigation tool – all personally identifiable information was removed, and data was handled according to institutional data privacy policies.

Several limitations shaped the scope of the research. Data availability is a constant challenge in conflict-affected border regions with information-poor environments, and remote sensing datasets were sometimes incomplete due to limited connectivity or cloud cover. The short research cycle allowed for only one primary round of field collection and a brief confirmation phase, limiting opportunities for greater triangulation. Coverage across the three methodological pillars also varied by location, at times limiting comparability between case studies. Despite these limitations, the data collection produced meaningful insights into Sudan’s evolving border governance and lays groundwork for further inquiry.

Structure of the report

Section 1 details the socio-historical context of Sudan’s contested borderlands and offers background on the three case studies examined in this report. The following three sections cover each of the three case studies: the South Sudan–Sudan border in West Kordofan (Section 2), the South Sudan–Sudan–Central African Republic (CAR) tri-border area (Section 3), and the eastern Chad–West Darfur border (Section 4). The concluding section brings the three case studies together to present key insights and implications for policy and practice.

1. Context and case study selection

Sudan's contested borderlands: fragmentation and hybrid authority

Sovereignty in Sudan has often been contested and negotiated,³ as reflected in the country's long history of civil wars and South Sudan's secession in 2011.⁴ The insurgency pursued by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) created a border that was never fully demarcated. As a result, communities were split, and markets, migration routes, and livelihoods disrupted. The Abyei area that lies along the Sudan–South Sudan border, given “special administrative status” under the peace agreement between the SPLM/A and Khartoum in 2004,⁵ remains in limbo after a promised referendum never took place. Since then, it has been subject to an uneasy governance arrangement between Khartoum and Juba.

South Sudan's independence failed to resolve the grievances fuelling conflict in what remained of Sudan. Some communities that backed the SPLM/A continued to fight as the SPLM/A-North (SPLM/A-N), relying on cross-border support from South Sudan, Ethiopia, and border communities. Khartoum, in response, utilised local proxy forces to contain them. The SPLM/A-N went on to split in 2017: the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, continues to fight against the SAF, which it views as embodying the Sudanese political order it has long fought against, while its rival faction, led by Sovereignty Council⁶ Vice Chairman Malik Agar, has played a key role in mobilising support for the SAF against the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).

Similar dynamics persist in Darfur. The Darfur conflict, which began in 2003, spawned numerous rebel groups and militias, many of which were reorganised as the RSF in 2013. Initially created outside of SAF control, the RSF formally joined the SAF in 2017, but retained direct ties to former President Omar al-Bashir as its commander-in-chief.⁷ After the National Congress Party (NCP) regime fell in 2019, SAF and RSF leaders came together to oust al-Bashir, preserving RSF autonomy. Many Darfuri rebel groups joined the transitional government under the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), later siding with the SAF and RSF in the 2021 coup. When the SAF–RSF conflict broke out in 2023, most of these JPA signatories banded together as the Joint Forces to back the SAF, reviving old rivalries among Zaghawa, Fur, Masalit, and Arab pastoralist communities.

3 A. de Waal, “Sudan: What Kind Of State? What Kind Of Crisis?”, Occasional Paper No. 2, LSE Crisis States Research Centre, April 2007.

4 Sudan's first civil war started in 1955, one year ahead of its independence, and lasted until 1972. A decade of peace was then followed by the outbreak of new civil war in 1983, which eventually led to South Sudan's independence in 2011. Meanwhile, the war that flared in Darfur in 2003 has never been fully resolved. Elsewhere, long-term violent conflict has been seen in eastern Sudan during 1995–2006, as well as in South Kordofan and Blue Nile after 2011.

5 See: Government of the Sudan and Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, “Sudan: Protocol On The Resolution Of Abyei Conflict”, 26 May 2004.

6 The Transitional Sovereignty Council, also called the Sovereignty or Sovereign Council, has been the executive entity of Sudan since the overthrow of former President Omar al-Bashir in 2019.

7 The NCP regime formed the RSF in 2013 as part of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), before it became part of the SAF having been codified into Sudanese law in 2017. See: Republic of the Sudan, “Rapid Support Forces Act. 2017”, 19 February 2018.

In many ways, the current dynamics seen in Sudan's borderlands mirror earlier patterns of contested authority and conflict, with armed actors competing to co-opt local support, build legitimacy, generate revenue, and establish political authority. The RSF has sought to frame itself as responding to Sudan's entrenched marginalisation, mobilising support among sympathetic borderland communities and neighbouring states in order to build its political legitimacy. Meanwhile, the SAF continues to assert control over Sudan's sovereignty, while attempting to secure military and political support from local allies. This includes providing incentives for Joint Forces members to support the SAF, bringing them into conflict with the RSF.

Current dynamics echo past decades of negotiated power-sharing and hybrid governance at Sudan's peripheries.⁸ Both the SAF and RSF are looking to secure local military support while simultaneously building social bases to bolster their political support. One key difference now, however, is the sheer scale of this contested authority, in both geographic and military arenas.

The fragmented governance arrangements that precipitated the latest round of civil conflict could lead to severe political fragmentation. Initially, this could resemble the situation in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, where the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) has controlled significant territory since 2011, administering a civil government. Longer term, it has the potential to take on a Libyan dynamic, in which large areas lie outside the internationally recognised government's control.

Changes to the western and southern borderlands during the SAF–RSF conflict

Since April 2023, fighting has spread from Khartoum across much of western, central, and southern Sudan. The RSF seized Nyala, South Darfur, in October 2023, consolidating its hold over Darfur, except for al-Fashir and parts of North Darfur. Victories over the SAF in Gezira in December 2023, and Sennar and West Kordofan in June 2024, left the latter with only scattered pockets of control.

The RSF's advance slowed by mid-2024, due to its reliance on supply lines through Darfur from Chad and the CAR. The SAF took this opportunity to regroup, and by May 2025 had retaken much of central Sudan and Khartoum. In doing so, it sought to sever RSF supply routes. As frontlines have shifted westward, the RSF remains entrenched in border regions where it is socially embedded and maintains friendly relations with neighbouring governments.

As areas of control solidify, RSF leaders are expanding their governance mechanisms in the territories they hold – establishing civil administrations, tax collection, border management, and judicial functions that stretch from West Kordofan's border with South Sudan to Darfur's border with CAR and north along the border with Chad to Libya. This patchwork of de facto control means that as much as a third of Sudan's borders now lie outside the SAF's authority.

8 Ø.H. Rolandsen, "Trade, peace-building and hybrid governance in the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands," *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 1 (2019): pp. 79-97.

Implications for Sudan's sovereignty

Since April 2023, the SAF has sought to retain sovereignty through control of state institutions (e.g. the Sovereignty Council and government ministries) and international recognition for its authority. In reality, Sudan's peripheries and borderlands have never been fully controlled by the centre.⁹ Sovereignty in Sudan has also been contested through more subtle methods than violence.

Previous Sudanese governments struggled to assert full control over the country's border regions due to distance, the resources required to administer such remote regions, and the interference of neighbouring countries. The central government has historically relied on negotiated authority, proxy forces, and local self-governance to manage its peripheries – strategies that sustained borderland economies and power structures.¹⁰ While this often provided local populations with relative freedom, it also allowed security actors to profit from the local economy, whether licit or illicit, in areas they control.¹¹ Past Sudanese regimes tended to make pragmatic decisions about where and how to enforce control. Today, the SAF faces an entirely different constraint: it is not choosing to step back, but is actively being prevented from governing by RSF dominance and the complicity or engagement of neighbouring states. This state of affairs undermines the SAF's ability to assert authority and severely weakens its capacity to govern.

The RSF's expansive control over southern and western Sudan, combined with its growing geopolitical alliances and efforts to establish governance mechanisms, poses an unprecedented challenge to the SAF's claims to sovereignty. Pre-April 2023 regulations on trade, security, and humanitarian access are now frequently unenforced, bypassed, or reinterpreted by local actors in areas once under state control. In their place, informal, adaptive governance arrangements are emerging, shaped by a mix of armed group authority, customary structures, and transactional relationships with political, security, and commercial actors. These mechanisms are often deployed strategically by the RSF both to assert control and gain local and regional legitimacy, and their functioning remains poorly understood.

Case study selection

The three case study areas selected (see Figure 1) were chosen to show how local governance, national-level politics, and regional engagements intersect in Sudan's conflict-affected borderlands.

The first case study focuses on the borderlands between West Kordofan and South Sudan. Since the RSF gained control over significant parts of the state in mid-July 2024, the area has seen almost constant fighting between the SAF and RSF. This is somewhat different from the other two case study areas, which have experienced much less fighting following the first months of the SAF–RSF conflict.

The Misseriya, who enjoyed close connections with the NCP regime, constitute the largest community in the West Kordofan borderland. As a result, they have often asserted political dominance in West Kordofan state. During the current conflict, prominent Misseriya figures within the RSF have enabled their community to maintain considerable control over local affairs. This extends to the RSF's new civil administration, which relies on Misseriya civil servants who served under previous NCP governments.

9 J Tubiana, "The dangerous fiction of Darfur's peace."

10 J. Craze and R. Makawi, "The Republic of Kadamol: A Portrait of the Rapid Support Forces at War", Small Arms Survey, January 2025.

11 J. R. Mailey, "The War of Thieves: Illicit Networks, Commoditized Violence and the Arc of State Collapse in Sudan", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2024, 4.

Local community leaders have used this leverage and their kinship connections with RSF commanders to influence the RSF’s behaviour and governance practices. Across the border in South Sudan, RSF connections with communities and actors are growing, but at present remains limited.

The second case study analyses the tri-border area where Sudan, South Sudan, and CAR meet. The region’s remote location in the far southwest of Sudan, far from the SAF’s main areas of dominance, allowed the RSF to swiftly secure control over the territory with minimal fighting. Since then, the area has seen much less conflict than other parts of Sudan. RSF commanders have proven responsive to community demands, taking steps to reduce insecurity and create conditions supportive of a range of livelihoods, including cultivation, pastoralism, trading, and artisanal gold mining.

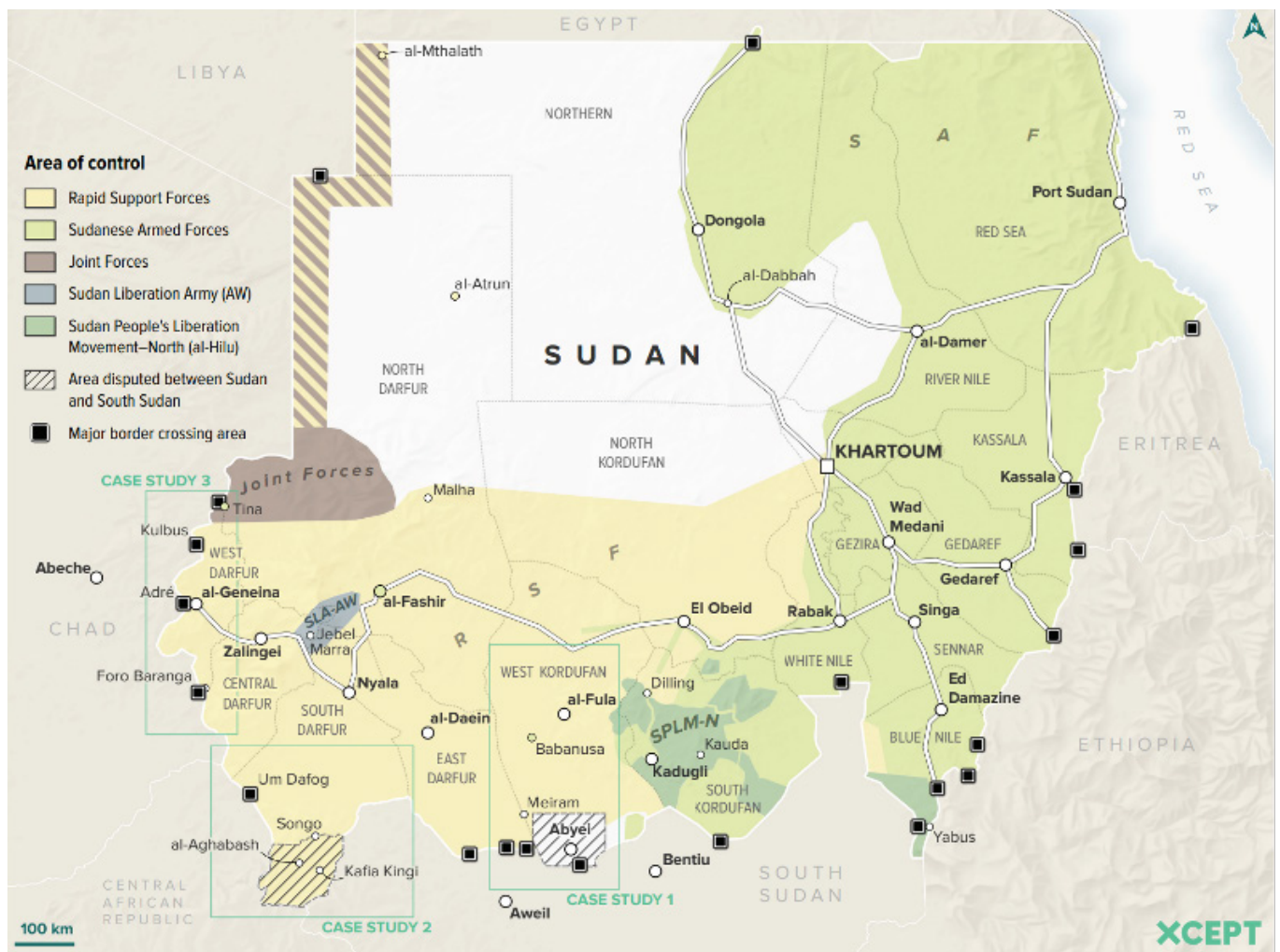


Figure 1 - Overview of case study selection

In the area of case study 2, the decision-making of commanders is influenced by the fact that local stability supports the RSF’s own objectives concerning resource extraction, recruitment, and security in areas near key rear bases. Another key dynamic is the relative absence – at least for the time being – of community-based tensions in this part of Sudan, as well as the unwillingness of the RSF to violently pursue communal interests, as has been the case in West Darfur. Of the three case studies, the dynamic of overlapping interests producing relative stability is most evident in the tri-border area.

RSF leaders in the tri-border area have sought to expand their influence into neighbouring South Sudan and CAR by involving local elites in RSF gold mining operations. This has helped cement the RSF's status as a regionally important geopolitical actor.

The final case study examines the borderlands between West Darfur and Chad. RSF commanders in West Darfur assumed control over most of the state during the initial months of the SAF–RSF conflict. During this time, RSF members from various northern Rizeigat communities attacked people from the Masalit community, driving many from their homes as part of efforts to claim Masalit land that date back to the 1990s.¹² The targeting of the Masalit by the RSF – which RSF leaders were either unable or unwilling to halt, and which the US government labelled genocide – illustrates lax RSF governance under certain conditions, and the potential for future deterioration.¹³

Over time, RSF leaders have sought to establish a civil administration in West Darfur and pursue formal border management frameworks with their national and local counterparts in Chad. Such actions are driven both by a desire to meet local demands around access to market goods and livelihood opportunities, and the knowledge that stability in rear areas supports the RSF's broader military objectives. The RSF's governance efforts in West Darfur have been the most robust of the three areas reviewed, buttressing efforts to cement relations with neighbouring countries.¹⁴

Together, the cases illustrate not only common patterns – such as transactional authority, negotiated mobility, and cross-border trade – but important differences in how the RSF seeks political legitimacy, controls cross-border trade and movement, and consolidates local authority through formal and informal administrative structures. Comparing these contexts provides insight into how border governance is being reconfigured, and what this means for communities, external actors, and the future of the Sudanese state. For instance, in West Kordofan and West Darfur, communities with strong kinship links to the RSF have been allowed to pursue their own interests – in the latter case, through violent means. By contrast, in the tri-border area, where communal interests are less tied to key RSF interests, it has been easier for commanders to recognise the benefits of stability and to foster conditions conducive to this.

12 The northern Rizeigat are an Arabic speaking camel herding (abbala) nomadic community in northern Darfur, and are made up of the Mahamid, Mahariya, Ereigat, and Nuwaiba subsections. They are one of the largest Arab communities in Darfur. Unlike other large communities in Darfur, most northern Rizeigat do not have a historical homeland. They rely instead on customary rights along north-south migration corridors and seasonal settlements. As those customary arrangements eroded from the 1980s onward, the landless northern Rizeigat were disadvantaged in political representation and access to grazing and water, which later fed militia mobilisation. The Masalit are a non-Arab, largely agrarian community whose homeland, Dar Masalit, centres on Al-Geneina and runs along the Sudan-Chad border in West Darfur. In the 1990s, Khartoum restructured West Darfur's native administration and elevated Arab leaders alongside the Masalit sultan, and armed Arab militias. These shifts contributed to conflicts between the Masalit and Arab communities throughout the 1990s, during which time many Masalit villages were burned, and many areas were occupied or resettled during the Darfur War of 2003. These dynamics underpin later claims to Masalit land by Arab communities, such as the northern Rizeigat. See: J. Tubiana, V. Tanner, and M. Abdul-Jalil, *Traditional Authorities' Peacemaking Role in Darfur*, Washington D.C.: United States Institute for Peace, 2012, 15; J. Flint, *Beyond "Janjaweed": Understanding the Militias of Darfur*, HSBA Working Paper 17, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2009, 13, 24; R.S. O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 17-18; J. Flint and A. de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*, London: Zed Books, 2008, pp.56-63.

13 A. J. Blinken, "Genocide determination in Sudan and imposing accountability measures", Press Statement, U.S. Department of State, 7 January 2025.

14 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

2. The South Sudan–Sudan border in West Kordofan

Evolution of border governance in West Kordofan

Historically, the Sudanese and South Sudanese governments have approached their shared border – particularly along West Kordofan – through a national security lens, prioritising control over facilitating the movement of people or goods.¹⁵ The region was a key frontline in the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), and in 2011 became the focus of tensions between Juba and Khartoum during the acrimonious parting of ways between Sudan and South Sudan. Following the latter’s independence, West Kordofan state has formed part of Sudan’s border with its neighbouring country.¹⁶ The Abyei area bordering South Sudan is surrounded by West Kordofan in Sudan. Given that Abyei has its own distinct historical, political, conflict, and economic dynamics, it lies largely outside the scope of this case study.

Neither the peace agreement signed between the SPLM/A and Khartoum in 2005 nor South Sudan’s independence in July 2011 completely resolved the grievances of those who had supported the SPLM/A rebellion. Anger among supporters living in Khartoum and other areas of Sudan not destined to be part of the independent South Sudan led to the formation of the SPLM/A-North, which declared war against the Sudanese government just before independence was officially declared. This renewed conflict in South Kordofan led to heavy militarisation of the border, including the area that is now West Kordofan’s border with South Sudan.

Both Khartoum and Juba supported proxy forces in their new shared borderlands. In an effort to ease tensions, the two governments eventually signed the Four Freedoms Agreement in 2012, intended to promote trade and the free movement of people. The agreement was, however, never fully implemented due to mutual distrust, with war between the SPLM/A-N and Khartoum continuing until the NCP regime’s eventual collapse in 2019. In the absence of peace, border securitisation suppressed formal economic activity and cross-border mobility, creating incentives for informal trade and unregulated movement.¹⁷

Despite formal trade restrictions and intermittent border closures, key market hubs continue to operate informally in the South Sudan, West Kordofan, and Abyei borderlands, playing a vital role in sustaining local economies and inter-community relations. The main markets are Amiet (Naam in Arabic) in Abyei,

15 The emphasis on national security along the Sudan–South Sudan border arises from a combination of historical conflicts, unresolved territorial disputes, intercommunal tensions, and the ongoing presence of armed groups in the border regions. The legacy of Sudan’s civil wars and the disputed status of areas such as Abyei have fostered deep, enduring distrust between the two governments. The porous nature of the border facilitates the movement of armed actors and smuggling networks, prompting both governments to view these regions as potential hotspots for broader instability. At various points, each government has provided material or logistical support to armed opposition groups across the border (e.g. providing refuge, permitting the passage of fighters and goods, or facilitating the supply of weapons). These actions have intensified mutual suspicions, contributing to the security-focused approach both countries have adopted towards the border. Control over strategic economic assets, particularly oil-rich regions, places further emphasis on border governance as a matter of national interest and sovereignty.

16 In August 2005, as part of the peace process between the SPLM/A and Khartoum, West Kordofan state was split into North and South Kordofan. In July 2013, Khartoum re-established West Kordofan state.

17 For instance, despite Sudanese government statements in March 2019 that crossings would reopen, key access points near Abyei remained closed, disrupting trade and mobility for local populations. See: Dabanga, “Sudan-South Sudan border crossings remain closed”, 26 March 2019.

Warawar in South Sudan, and Meriam in West Kordofan. Aweil market, in the capital of Northern Bahr al-Ghazal, serves as a regional hub for these borderland markets.

The Amiet Peace Market, established in 2016 through peace agreements between Abyei's neighbouring Misseriya and Dinka Ngok communities, is an important economic and social hub, with its continued operation providing incentives for the two communities to pursue peaceful dialogue.¹⁸ The market not only serves as a means for moving goods between communities in South Sudan and Abyei, but also for transporting goods further north to important markets in West Kordofan.¹⁹

Elsewhere, Warawar Market in Northern Bahr al-Ghazal's Aweil East County and Meriam market, just over the border in West Kordofan, support the neighbouring Dinka Malual and Misseriya communities from South Sudan and Sudan respectively.²⁰ Cross-border trade and population movement increased across West Kordofan's border in the lead-up to the NCP regime's collapse, which saw tensions with South Sudan ease after 2018. Restrictions on cross-border trade and movement remained relatively relaxed during Sudan's transitional governance and even after the October 2021 coup.

The Sudan–South Sudan border has regained prominence since the outbreak of the SAF–RSF conflict, with both the warring parties seeking international recognition. Like the Chadian government, Juba initially tried to remain neutral between the SAF and RSF. The latter's control over South Sudan's western border with Sudan has, however, compelled Juba to engage with the RSF in order to safeguard its own border security. Under these arrangements, the RSF has agreed to prevent anti-Juba rebels from operating within its territory and to allow cross-border trade, which supports South Sudanese communities. In return, RSF forces have been allowed relatively free movement in the area.²¹ As well as moving forces through South Sudan, the RSF has been able to procure important stocks of food and fuel for its forces.²²

More broadly, the border – which remained relatively open after the fall of the NCP in 2019 – has become even more permissive when it comes to the movement of people and goods. The RSF has sought to benefit financially through taxation of cross-border movement, which local traders and community leaders have sought to moderate. The RSF's evolving arrangements with Juba have allowed it to establish its own border management frameworks in West Kordofan, as part of an effort to build parallel civil governance structures. This has direct implications for how local communities experience mobility, trade, and civil authority.

18 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025. See also: Concordis, “The importance of the Amiet Peace Market”, 12 October 2024.

19 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025.

20 The market plays a critical role in fostering peaceful coexistence between groups that have historically been rivals, enabling – despite governance challenges and occasional insecurity – commerce across the Sudan–South Sudan divide. See: M. O. Lino, “Local Peace Agreement in Abyei: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities”, LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2020.

21 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025.

22 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025. See also: J. Majok, “War and the Borderland: Northern Bahr El-Ghazal During the Sudan Conflict”, Rift Valley Institute, March 2024, 16.

Dynamics of changing governance

Since its takeover of most of West Kordofan in June 2024, the RSF has controlled nearly all of the state's border with South Sudan, with the SAF maintaining a limited presence east of Abyei (see Figure 1).²³ In Abyei, the RSF controls the northern areas, while Juba-aligned security forces and government officials control the southern areas. These forces are joined by the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), which carries out a peacekeeping and civil affairs function.²⁴

In an effort to form a civil administration in West Kordofan, the area's RSF leaders have sought to co-opt and rebrand some of the pre-existing state bureaucracy, announcing the formation of a civil administration, legislative council, and judiciary.²⁵ While the previous administrative system operated through established legal frameworks, RSF governance often involves more informal practices that rely on loyalty, kinship, and economic pragmatism, engendering more ad hoc and uneven governance processes. For instance, RSF appointment of loyal military commanders to leadership roles in governance has introduced asymmetries of power in civil administration, in which established civil servants often are overruled. This has undermined the effectiveness of RSF governance, with many administrative functions remaining largely symbolic.²⁶ Rank-and-file soldiers frequently prioritise clan and community interests over formal directives, while both RSF commanders and lower-ranking members personally profit from informal border trade by engaging in smuggling and imposing arbitrary taxes.²⁷

Attempts at establishing more formal governance structures in West Kordofan have been hindered by the local RSF leadership, which predominantly consists of Misseriya commanders.²⁸ Rivalries between Misseriya clans have impacted broader military and political coordination, leading to limited centralised authority in the state.²⁹ Additionally, appointments to administrative positions are typically driven by a candidate's loyalty and willingness to follow orders, although this can partly be attributed to the limited availability of qualified administrators.³⁰ Much of the civil administration is composed of civil servants from Misseriya communities with closer ties to the RSF.

Given that RSF leaders have struggled to establish formal governance structures in West Kordofan, the civil service currently plays a marginal role in governing. The exception is trade regulation, which remains an important function.³¹ The RSF taxes key sectors in the West Kordofan borderlands, including exports to South Sudan (e.g. sorghum, sesame, gum arabic, and looted goods from Khartoum, such as cars and gold), and imports such as medicine, sugar, fuel, and vehicle parts. Border fees are often negotiated on-

23 Al Jazeera, "Sudan's RSF captures key army stronghold of El Fula", 20 June 2024. Note: SAF still controls the garrisons in Babanusa and Heglig.

24 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025.

25 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025.

26 ACAPS, "Sub-region Profile: South Kordofan, West Kordofan & Blue Nile", 3 January 2025, 8; World Health Organization, "Sudan Conflict & Refugee Crisis External Sitrep #2", 17 July 2024.

27 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2024. See also: Craze and Makawi, "The Republic of Kadamol", p.12.

28 Key Misseriya RSF officials in West Kordofan include General Commander Taj al-Tijani, Head of Civil Administration Yussef Awad-Alla, and the Head of Judiciary Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed.

29 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2025.

30 Key informant interview, eastern Sudan, April 2025.

31 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2025. See also: Craze and Makawi, "The Republic of Kadamol", p.16.

site – a practice consistent with pre-war norms.³² The RSF also sources part of its fuel supply from South Sudanese traders, demonstrating their integration into wider cross-border informal economies.³³

Most of the revenue collected through fees goes towards expenditures related to RSF military operations (e.g. fuel, food, and spare parts), especially remote deployments. Beyond trade regulation, public services are largely non-functional. Local justice is handled through customary conflict-resolution mechanisms led by mid-level administrators in the Native Administration,³⁴ referred to as an *omda*, as was largely the case under the NCP regime and Sudan's transitional government.³⁵

The RSF balances revenue generation efforts with the need to establish local legitimacy and maintain stability, ensuring its taxation does not prevent continued access to community resources such as food and recruits. While trade taxation is a key revenue stream, RSF commanders in West Kordofan have pursued a calibrated approach whereby community cooperation is prioritised over the strict enforcement of revenue collection. The RSF is keen to preserve the goodwill of its core Misseriya constituency, which is why they tax merchants through informal checkpoint fees and markets, but avoid taxing pastoralists and their herds.

This restraint is pragmatic rather than philanthropic. RSF leaders view West Kordofan as part of their heartland and seek to moderate predation on 'their own' communities in order to secure manpower, cultivate legitimacy, and preserve steady revenue flow. This approach limits the risk of community push-back, sustains trade, and reinforces the clan loyalties underpinning the RSF's manpower.³⁶

Impact of changing governance on communities in West Kordofan

The evolving relationship between the RSF and local community actors has created uneven impacts for West Kordofan communities. For example, many within the Misseriya community have welcomed the RSF's presence in West Kordofan. Strong kinship ties with RSF commanders have given Misseriya leaders disproportionate influence over governance arrangements and access to military resources.³⁷ In contrast to the heavily securitised border governance of the NCP era, RSF control has allowed more flexible cross-border movement. This has benefited local livelihoods in West Kordofan, as people are free to seek grazing and trading opportunities in South Sudan.³⁸ On the other hand, key informants from

32 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2025.

33 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

34 In Sudan, Native Administrations are local authorities, often traditional or tribal governance groups, that have been empowered by the government to handle various administrative functions.

35 The lack of public services available to many communities in peripheral areas extends back well before the current conflict. Historically, communities have relied heavily on traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and customary courts, as formal judiciary systems were not fully functional.

36 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2024.

37 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, February–April 2025.

38 As Juba's relationship deteriorated with Khartoum during the run-up to South Sudan's independence in 2011, Khartoum closed and militarised the shared border. This reduced Misseriya migratory access to South Sudan's grazing areas and negatively impacted the business revenues of Misseriya traders long accustomed to trading goods between Sudan and what was to become South Sudan.

other communities – such as the Nuba, Hamar, and South Sudanese Dinka and Nuer – have expressed concerns about marginalisation if RSF leaders continue to prioritise Misseriya interests.³⁹

The April 2023 war fractured Sudan’s administrative map. Now, a new centre of governance is emerging in West Kordofan. Although the Misseriya currently hold the most influence among local actors, this dominance is contested. Key informants from various communities describe ongoing efforts to influence RSF leaders in West Kordofan, particularly on decision-making related to trade, migration, and security. This situation highlights the informal power dynamics and complex political economy present in the West Kordofan borderlands, where authority structures are mainly shaped by local agency.

The ability of certain communities, such as the Misseriya, to influence RSF behaviour through kinship ties illustrates the negotiated nature of governance in RSF-controlled areas – shaped by access, relationships, and shared interests. New, localised centres of power are emerging, arising from ad hoc arrangements between the RSF and local leaders on trade and taxation.⁴⁰ Despite the increased space for local negotiation, these arrangements remain fragile and are highly dependent on specific individuals maintaining them. As such, they can easily break down when these individuals are replaced.

Over time, this governance model may have ripple effects across the border. Historically, mutual economic interdependence has helped stabilise relations between the Misseriya and South Sudan’s Dinka and Nuer communities.⁴¹ Shared border markets and complementary livelihood activities are vital to supporting this interdependence. The RSF’s militarisation of the Misseriya – particularly through access to arms via kinship ties – risks disrupting this equilibrium.⁴² Although there has yet to be any significant increase in violence, further militarisation of borderland communities, coupled with grievances over unfulfilled revenue-sharing agreements, could escalate tensions.⁴³

In consolidating control over the West Kordofan border, the RSF has also deepened its relations with regional actors. Informal coordination with the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) has increased in areas of mutual trade interest. In March 2025, a hospital operated by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) opened in Madol, in South Sudan’s Northern Bahr al-Ghazal state (shown in Figure 2), prompting concerns that it may be used to support the RSF’s war effort by treating wounded soldiers or serving as a logistical hub.⁴⁴ While no evidence has emerged to confirm such suspicions, they highlight how international actors can indirectly influence borderland dynamics by supporting RSF infrastructure in neighbouring countries.

One key dynamic resulting from RSF-SAF conflict in West Kordofan has been a reconfiguration of trade routes. Traditional supply routes from northern and eastern Sudan were disrupted and the region has become increasingly dependent on cross-border trade with South Sudan. This includes goods imported from Uganda, Kenya, and Somalia, often transported to the border by non-local traders.⁴⁵

The territorial changes seen since mid-2024 have shifted the region’s commercial map. The RSF’s capture of Meriam helped it secure a southern supply line connecting West Kordofan to Northern Bahr al-Ghazal

39 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, April 2024.

40 Craze and Makawi, “The Republic of Kadamol”, p.16.

41 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

42 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

43 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

44 ARN News Centre, “UAE inaugurates Madhol Field Hospital in South Sudan”, Dubai Eye 103.8, 10 March 2025.

45 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

in South Sudan. Market towns such as Warawar and Meriam, as well as larger cities such as Aweil, have since emerged as trade hubs, although they have not fully replaced old trade routes. This is partly due to some of the transported goods being sold in South Sudanese markets, meaning the total volume of goods reaching West Kordofan falls far below pre-conflict levels. As a result, interior centres such as al Fula – the capital of West Kordofan – have stock shortages, reducing market activity.



Figure 2 - Aweil in South Sudan and Meriam in West Kordofan: migration routes and cross-border markets

Satellite imagery and information from key informants further highlight how the corridor between South Sudan and West Kordofan has become a lifeline for local economies.⁴⁶ This is especially true of the regional market hubs of Aweil and Meriam. While the latter's local market has contracted, the Aweil market – in the regional hub serving the border area – has increased in size. The red arrow in Figure 2 indicates where there appears to have been a notable increase in the bi-directional flow of goods and people since mid-2024.

Ad hoc approaches to border management, especially unclear trade taxation practices and the presence of irregular checkpoints by RSF soldiers, have likely reduced trade and restricted the movement of people. In response, traders and community leaders often employ a dual approach to keep commerce moving: traders seek out alternative routes that bypass RSF-run checkpoints (whether formal or informal),

⁴⁶ Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

while community leaders mediate with RSF leaders to reduce civil administration fees and curtail irregular checkpoints. When it comes to sustaining trade flows and maintaining community support, key community leaders, especially from the Misseriya-dominated Native Administration, frequently act as intermediaries between traders and RSF personnel.⁴⁷ These leaders help negotiate taxation and checkpoint practices, functioning as administrators who repurpose authority to serve localised interests. This reflects a broader pattern in which militarised RSF-aligned actors and community leaders adopt state-like roles in the absence of central oversight.⁴⁸

Not all communities benefit equally from these arrangements. Nuba communities near Lagawa, for example, have reported discrimination and restricted market access under RSF governance, driven and exacerbated by historical grievances.⁴⁹ Despite relations between the RSF and SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) leaders reportedly improving in recent months – which may in turn have eased tensions between the Misseriya and Nuba around Lagawa – inequities remain. Moreover, although trade and population movements may have increased since mid-2024, this does not necessarily mean the expanded trade is flowing through official RSF Civil Administration checkpoints.

Overall, kinship ties and local leverage have allowed Misseriya communities in West Kordofan to resist some of the RSF's more exploitative practices and shape how border management functions in practice. Nevertheless, this influence – which depends on social networks rather than formal guarantees – remains fragile.

47 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

48 de Waal, "Sudan: What kind of state."

49 Key informant interviews, West Kordofan, March 2025.

3. The South Sudan–Sudan–CAR tri-border area

Evolution of border governance in the tri-border area

The historically fluid and politically sensitive ‘tri-border area’ encompasses parts of South Sudan’s Western Bahr al-Ghazal, Sudan’s South Darfur, and CAR’s Vakaga and Haute-Kotto prefectures. At its centre lies the sparsely populated and resource-rich Kafia Kingi enclave. Communities from all three countries have historically moved through or settled in these borderlands, either in search of livelihoods or to seek refuge during crises. In Sudan, these include Arab pastoralist groups such as the Salamat, Habbaniya, Beni Halba, Rizeigat, and Taaisha, and non-Arab communities such as the Fellata, Zaghawa, Masalit, and Fur. The Gula and Runga from CAR regularly cross the area, while the Fertit in South Sudan have long inhabited the region.⁵⁰

Like West Kordofan, the tri-border area demonstrates how Sudan, South Sudan, and CAR approach shared borders through a security and economic lens characterised by mutual suspicion and competition for resource-rich areas. Concerns over porous borders providing safe haven for rebel groups have led all three governments to adopt militarised border management strategies, often relying on armed proxy forces. These border areas also serve as bargaining chips in broader political negotiations. Such approaches have greatly limited the movement of people and goods, with negative impacts on local livelihoods.

The Kafia Kingi enclave serves as a microcosm of these dynamics. Roughly bounded by Biki River to the east, CAR to the south and west, and Rugaba Umbelacha River to the north, the enclave has long been shaped by patterns of movement, displacement, and contested governance.⁵¹ Historically, Fertit communities – an umbrella term for non-Arab and non-Fur communities with origins in Darfur – populated much of the territory, and now live across the tri-border area.⁵² These communities were targeted by slave raiders during the Turkiyya period (1821–1885) and the final years of the Darfur Sultanate (1898–1915), prompting movement westward into CAR and southward from Darfur into the enclave.⁵³ The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium’s Southern Policy (1898–1956) sought to place ‘northern’ populations in Darfur and ‘southern’ populations in Raja, further displacing groups.⁵⁴

Although provincial boundaries established at Sudan’s independence in 1956 placed the enclave within the Bahr al-Ghazal region of southern Sudan, it was administratively transferred to Darfur in 1960.⁵⁵ Khartoum continued to regard the enclave as part of Sudan, seeking to govern it after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. This was despite the area’s remoteness and limited state presence, which allowed Fertit communities to resettle, and provided cover for rebels and illicit activities such as poaching and cannabis cultivation.

50 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, Kafia Kingi Enclave, and Western Bahr al-Ghazal, February–April 2025.

51 See map in D. H. Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders: The Impact of Boundary-making in Southern Sudan’s Frontier Zones*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010. p.54.

52 E. Thomas, *The Kafia Kingi Enclave: People, Politics and History in the North–South Boundary Zone of Western Sudan*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010. p. 39, 160.

53 Thomas, *The Kafia Kingi Enclave*, p. 26-27.

54 Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders*. p.52.

55 Thomas, *The Kafia Kingi Enclave*, p.160.

The relative freedom of movement in the region diminished following South Sudan's independence in 2011, when both Juba and Khartoum further militarised the border. Between 2012 and 2015, Darfuri rebel groups and the SPLM/A-N operated from the South Sudanese side, while Khartoum supported proxy forces in the tri-border area.⁵⁶ These tactics not only increased tensions, but caused cross-border trade and mobility to decline, negatively impacting the livelihoods of local communities.⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the tri-border region, similar patterns persisted until 2019, with border management oscillating between increased militarisation and relaxed informal cross-border flows.

The April 2019 collapse of the NCP regime and subsequent formation of Sudan's transitional government marked a turning point. Limited state capacity and improved relations with neighbours, especially South Sudan, enabled greater cross-border movement. Formal crossings at Um Dafog (Sudan–CAR), Buram (Sudan), and Raja (South Sudan), as well as through the Kafia Kingi enclave, remained operational, though many travellers continued using informal tracks to bypass customs requirements. Nevertheless, the Sudanese state maintained partial authority by installing checkpoints helmed by civil servants at major markets to tax goods.⁵⁸

Dynamics of changing governance

Following the outbreak of civil conflict in 2023, the RSF quickly dislodged SAF forces from the tri-border area, with troops in Um Dafog, Songo, and Buram along the Sudan-CAR border, as well as other areas of Sudan along the South Sudanese border forced to flee into South Sudan, often with the tacit knowledge or implicit support of local authorities.⁵⁹ Most made their way east through South Sudan to SAF garrisons in West and South Kordofan or further along the border, before crossing through Upper Nile State back into Sudan.

Having expelled the SAF from the tri-border area by mid-2023, RSF leaders moved quickly to assert military dominance and establish the region as a strategic rear base supporting operations in other areas of Sudan. In September 2024, the RSF began using Nyala airport in South Darfur, now a key logistical hub, to import and stage military materiel.⁶⁰ The RSF has also used the tri-border area as a recruitment area and a transit corridor for bringing in military equipment by road from CAR.⁶¹

Since then, the RSF has moved to formalise military and administrative control in the tri-border area, while exploiting the region's abundant natural resources, particularly gold. RSF leaders have drawn heavily on former NCP personnel to establish a civil administration. According to key informant interviews, roughly 60-70% of local administrators now serve under RSF-controlled local authorities.⁶² As in other

56 Between 2014 and 2019, it was not uncommon for members of the SPLM/A-N, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), various Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) groups, the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO), the SAF, the RSF, various rebel groups from CAR, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), to operate within the broader tri-border area. Some used the area for staging attacks, while others sought safe haven or engaged in ivory trafficking, artisanal gold mining, and cannabis production. Key informant interviews, Juba and South Darfur, March 2025.

57 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, March 2025.

58 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, March 2025.

59 The SAF remained in some of its barracks – such as Buram (South Darfur) and al-Dein (East Darfur) towns – for most of 2023, but were eventually forced to leave these areas.

60 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, March 2025.

61 Sudan Tribune, "UN Report: Sudan's RSF uses CAR border town as strategic hub for recruitment and supplies", 15 June 2024.

62 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, March 2025.

RSF-controlled areas, attempts to build legitimacy through formal governance structures have been disorganised and inconsistently applied, with real power concentrated in the hands of RSF military commanders. The RSF has prioritised maintaining stability around key economic and military hubs, alongside revenue collection focused on border checkpoints and gold mining fees. The surrounding areas, meanwhile, have been left largely ungoverned.

In parallel, the RSF has allowed cross-border trade and movement, establishing mechanisms to regulate and profit from these economies. This strategy appears motivated not only by revenue generation, but a recognition that stability is needed to limit threats to its control. Key informants in South Darfur report that conditions remain relatively stable, indicating RSF leaders understand that purely extractive governance in this 'rear guard' region could undermine broader political and military objectives.⁶³

RSF forces maintain direct control over key segments of Sudan's international borders in this region, including the Kafia Kingi enclave and crossings between South Darfur and South Sudan and CAR. RSF soldiers and civil administrators levy informal fees on goods and people at multiple crossing points, replacing formal customs or immigration charges. These fees are typically negotiated directly with RSF personnel at each border post and can vary significantly depending on tribal or ethnic affiliation. For example, many RSF soldiers in the tri-border area hail from the Salamat community. Recent tensions between the Salamat and the Rizeigat have reportedly led Salamat RSF personnel to impose higher fees on Rizeigat travellers. Masalit community members are viewed as especially susceptible to exploitation at border crossings due to their limited representation within the RSF and consequent lack of kinship ties. Aside from targeted exploitation and some community-based variations, most fees charged for transporting market goods remain broadly consistent with those levied under previous governments. Charges for people crossing the border are generally nominal.⁶⁴

The RSF also adapts its management practices in order to maintain key geopolitical relationships. This arises from a recognition that its long-term operational capacity in the tri-border area rests on strong ties with neighbouring countries. For example, the RSF maintains cooperative relationships with the government in Bangui and its ally, the Wagner Group (now Afrika Corps), which are involved in gold mining operations in the Kafia Kingi enclave.⁶⁵ This arrangement likely facilitates RSF recruitment, as well as the movement of military supplies through CAR.

In addition, RSF leaders in Darfur purchase large quantities of fuel and market goods from South Sudanese traders, while instructing RSF border checkpoint personnel to allow goods to move into South Sudan with minimal interference.⁶⁶ RSF leaders have also engaged senior officials in Juba directly. This relationship is likely helped by the transporting of gold from the Kafia Kingi enclave through South Sudan, reportedly with the collusion of security forces.⁶⁷

63 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, March 2025.

64 Several key informants state the fees are generally the equivalent of US\$ 10–20.

65 A. Soliman and S. Baldo, "[Gold and the War in Sudan: How Regional Solutions Can Support an End to Conflict](#)", Chatham House, 2025, 5. Furthermore, in May 2023, the US government accused the Wagner Group of supplying the RSF with military material via Libya, see: Al Jazeera, "[US accuses Wagner Group of supplying missiles to Sudan's RSF](#)", 25 May 2025.

66 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–March 2025.

67 Key informant interviews, South Darfur and Juba, February–March 2025. See also Soliman and Baldo, "Gold and the War", 25.

Impact of changing governance on communities in the tri-border area

The RSF's approach to governance in the tri-border area stands in contrast to its practices in other parts of Sudan, particularly Khartoum, Gezira, and West Darfur. There, RSF commanders have at the very least tolerated, and sometimes encouraged, more predatory and destructive behaviours.⁶⁸ In the tri-border region, especially within the Kafia Kingi enclave, RSF leaders have paid close attention to managing communal dynamics, curtailing crime and banditry, supporting access to trade and market goods, and promoting natural resource extraction. This focus appears driven by the area's strategic importance, both as a centre for gold mining – particularly by RSF personnel and the family of RSF commander Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti' – and as a hub for cross-border trade with South Sudan.⁶⁹

Central to this strategy is the Al-Junaid Company for Multiple Activities Ltd., a holding company established by the Dagalo family around 2014, with RSF deputy commander Abdel-Rahim Dagalo – brother of Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti' – formally holding the largest stake (40%).⁷⁰ Having launched initial operations in Jebel Amer (North Darfur) around 2015, the Al-Junaid Company expanded into the Kafia Kingi enclave in 2017, where it now runs a large processing plant in al-Aghbash.⁷¹ Since April 2023, this site has become the company's primary gold production centre in Darfur.⁷²

The economic importance of the al-Aghbash processing centre has incentivised RSF leaders to maintain order in the Kafia Kingi enclave and its surrounding areas, thereby ensuring continued revenue generation with minimal security requirements. Communal violence or dissatisfaction with RSF-imposed border governance structures could jeopardise mining operations, threatening both a vital revenue source and the RSF's broader economic control in the region.

In addition to directly processing gold, RSF leaders in South Darfur and the Al-Junaid Company profit from the region's widespread artisanal mining sector. Revenue is extracted through checkpoint fees, licences, and other charges managed by the RSF's civil administration.⁷³ RSF and Al-Junaid Company leaders/key managers also purchase gold from artisanal miners to export and resell for a profit, while some RSF personnel engage in mining themselves in lieu of receiving a formal salary. Furthermore, RSF soldiers are paid to protect gold traders authorised to export gold into Chad, CAR, and South Sudan.⁷⁴

The region around Songo and the Kafia Kingi enclave is both prime agricultural land and an essential corridor for seasonal pastoralists migrating from the north in search of pasture and watering areas during the dry season. Crop production has increased in the Kafia Kingi enclave due to the wider economic and

68 Recent reports have documented the RSF's likely war crimes and genocide in these areas. See: Human Rights Watch, "The Massalit will not come home": Ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan", 9 May 2024; and Amnesty International, "They Raped All of Us": Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Sudan", 9 April 2025.

69 Key informant interviews, South Darfur and Juba, February–April 2025.

70 A. Hoffmann and G. Lanfranchi, "Kleptocracy Versus Democracy: How Security–Business Networks Hold Hostage Sudan's Private Sector and the Democratic Transition", Clingendael, October 2023, 20.

71 Key informant interviews, North and South Darfur, February–April 2025. See also: Soliman and Baldo, "Gold and the War", 23.

72 Soliman and Baldo, "Gold and the War", 23. Since April 2023, the Al-Junaid Company has lost access to its gold production sites in River Nile and Red Sea states.

73 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

74 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

trade orientation shifts seen across western and southern Sudan since April 2023. Farmers have begun cultivating more staple foods and vegetables to supply South Darfur markets.⁷⁵ Initially, increased farming exacerbated land use tensions between farmers and pastoralists. This was compounded by increased criminality in 2023, with the area's remote location attracting criminal elements from across and beyond the tri-border region, many of whom were looking to both avoid the conflict and exploit traders and gold miners.

By early 2025, these converging pressures and frustrations had provoked concern within the RSF leadership that instability could destabilise its control over this key strategic region, thereby disrupting revenue collection. In January 2025, RSF General al-Jazouli Abdalla – who hails from the Salamat community and is commander of the sector around Um Dafog – was deployed to the Songo area to oversee mediation of communal tensions stemming primarily from land use disputes and criminality. The decision to assign this task to General al-Jazouli, known as relatively impartial and possessing a degree of local legitimacy, is a strong indicator that the RSF leadership takes any threat to the region's stability seriously.⁷⁶

These engagements provided for some redress of grievances, particularly related to trespassing livestock, road banditry, and intercommunal tensions. RSF leaders also took the opportunity to formalise artisanal mining regulations through stricter licensing requirements, while at the same time agreeing to provide enhanced security. The mediation measures have contributed to a reduction in local tensions and led to greater stability in the area, reinforcing the RSF's desired protection of revenue schemes tied to gold production, processing, and checkpoint fee collection.⁷⁷

In addition, General al-Jazouli instituted structures designed to facilitate local recruitment into the RSF, working through incentivised community leaders. In effect, the RSF has developed a transactional governance model in which stability and protection are offered in exchange for local recruitment and compliance with taxation and mining regulations. This quid pro quo reinforces RSF control while maintaining relative order.⁷⁸ By framing its actions as stabilising, the RSF simultaneously expands its territory, facilitates resource extraction, and enhances its relationships with local and regional actors – all without needing to establish formal governance institutions.

Traders and gold miners in South Darfur note the relative stability and increased economic activity in the area, citing the ease of movement when bringing goods to markets, a relatively stable border-crossing fee scheme, and reduced criminal activity on routes in and out of market areas.⁷⁹

Geospatial analysis based on satellite and mobile phone data indicates the expansion of artisanal gold mining into new areas across the region (see Figure 3). The emergence of new sites – and expansion of existing ones – likewise suggests a measure of stability in the region, allowing increased settlement and activity in these remote areas.

A functional equilibrium appears to have been reached whereby key actors are incentivised to maintain a degree of mutual accommodation. Traders, farmers, and artisanal miners seek stability to sustain their livelihoods, while RSF leaders and the Al-Junaid Company prioritise conditions that secure revenue

75 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

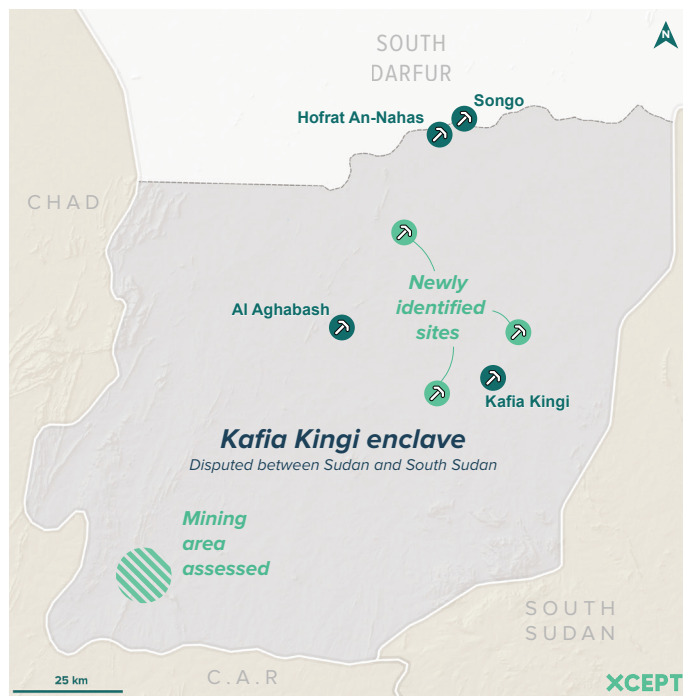
76 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

77 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

78 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

79 Key informant interviews, South Darfur, February–April 2025.

generation and enable local recruitment. As long as the balance holds, this relative stability will likely be maintained, allowing those living there to benefit from current arrangements.



On the other hand, if the RSF reverts to predatory behaviour, or loses control over its rank and file, local stability could quickly unravel. Meanwhile, the SAF is seeking allies in Darfur and putting pressure on neighbouring countries to help contain RSF operations. Should the RSF's cost-benefit calculus change, or the SAF succeed in mobilising anti-RSF partners, the tri-border area risks becoming more exploitative and insecure – mirroring patterns seen in other areas under RSF control.

Figure 3 - Overview of gold mining activity in Kafia Kingi

4. The eastern Chad–West Darfur border

Evolution of border governance in West Darfur

The eastern Chad–West Darfur borderlands have long been a contested space, shaped by competition between Khartoum and N'djamena for influence along their shared border. When relations between the two capitals were strained, each supported rebel movements in the other country. Conversely, when relations improved, the respective governments limited insurgent activity and facilitated trade and movement. At the same time, various armed actors – rebel groups and local militias – have sought to project influence, exploiting kinship ties and neighbouring state alliances to maintain operations in the borderlands.

Since the mid-1990s, the area has experienced repeated cycles of insurgency and identity-based violence. During the Darfur conflict, anti-Khartoum rebels from non-Arab communities operated partly from the eastern Chad–West Darfur borderlands, making use of kin and governmental allies in Chad. Khartoum countered by backing local militias referred to as the 'Janjaweed', some of which reorganised into the RSF in 2013 and through a reinvigorated counter-insurgency campaign pushed many of the Darfuri rebels out of Sudan, with most finding safe haven in Libya or South Sudan.⁸⁰

Following Sudan's 2019 revolution and the JPA, many Darfuri rebels groups joined the new government in Khartoum and built closer ties with its armed forces, including the SAF and RSF. Most Darfuri JPA signatories went on to support the October 2021 coup staged by the military leadership, viewing it as the best way to protect the political gains they had made under the agreement.⁸¹

The SAF–RSF conflict disrupted this uneasy alignment. Darfuri JPA signatories, now the Joint Forces, sided with the SAF, reigniting communal tensions between, on the one side, the Zaghawa, Fur, and Masalit, and, on the other, the largely Arab communities that form the backbone of the RSF.⁸² Fighting in Geneina city in West Darfur and its surrounding areas, including the US-labelled genocide committed by RSF fighters against the Masalit,⁸³ can be seen as the continuation of longstanding confrontations between Masalit and Arab pastoralist communities over land, identity, and political power.⁸⁴ These attacks were part of broader RSF efforts to assert physical and administrative control over the Masalit homeland.⁸⁵ As a result, RSF leaders have faced little entrenched resistance when introducing new governance structures in the area.

80 J. Tubiana, C. Warin, and M. S. Mangare, "Diaspora in Despair: Darfurian Mobility at a Time of International Disengagement", *Small Arms Survey*, 2020, 20–28.

81 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, February–March 2025. See also: J. Craze and K. Khair, "The Remains of the JPA: The Unlearned Lessons of the Juba Peace Agreement", *Rift Valley Institute*, 2023. p. 25-32.

82 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, February–March 2025.

83 Blinken, "Genocide determination".

84 Flint and de Waal, *Darfur: A New History*. p.56–63.

85 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

Dynamics of changing governance

The RSF's consolidation along the eastern Chad–West Darfur border has reshaped local governance and regional relationships. Chad's government, balancing security interests and economic ties, coordinates with both the SAF-backed Port Sudan Authorities (PSA) and the RSF, depending on their respective ability to deliver tangible cooperation outcomes.⁸⁶ Having prioritised the containment of conflict spillover and protection of cross-border trade, N'djamena increasingly views the RSF as the main security guarantor along its eastern border.⁸⁷

By November 2023, the PSA had lost territorial control over the eastern Chad–West Darfur border, severely limiting its ability to dictate and enforce policy in the region.⁸⁸ As a result, N'djamena moved closer to the RSF, incentivised by the latter's military position in western Sudan and fears that the SAF could not support Chadian attempts to confront the RSF. A UAE-brokered arrangement led to a reconciliation between N'djamena and the RSF, enabling the continued resupply of military equipment through Chad into Sudan.⁸⁹ Since then, although both the RSF and SAF have invested heavily in securing Chadian support, the RSF has retained the advantage, helped by UAE backing, the cultivation of ties with senior Chadian officials, and N'djamena's lingering distrust of the SAF as a reliable geopolitical ally.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, the Chadian government and other international actors have shown some deference to the PSA's sovereign legitimacy in recognising a limited number of its post-April 2023 border policies.⁹¹ This has enabled the PSA to assert certain rights at the national level, including filing diplomatic and legal complaints about the use of the eastern Chad–West Darfur border by Chad and other regional and private actors to supply RSF forces.⁹² At the state level, the PSA's regional government ministries for Darfur – including those responsible for education, health, livestock, and social welfare – are continuing their official duties from eastern Chad and receive salary disbursements from Port Sudan.⁹³

For its part, the RSF leadership has sought to formalise its newly established governance institutions in western Sudan, aiming to cultivate political legitimacy with both local populations and the Chadian government. Central to this strategy is its control of cross-border trade routes and influence on regional economic flows and security dynamics. The RSF anticipates that its control over key stretches of the Sudan–Chad border, including along the border with Chad's Ouaddai province, coupled with the establishment of border management frameworks, will incentivise the Chadian government to extend state recognition to a prospective RSF-backed parallel government.⁹⁴

The RSF has established governance bodies tasked with implementing border policy and acting as state-level counterparts to the Ouaddai provincial government. Although the RSF promotes its model as

86 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

87 Key informant interviews with Chadian and Western officials, September–November 2024. See also: R. Marchal, “The Implications of the Current War for the Sudan-Chad Relationship”, Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, March 2014.

88 Key informant interview with a SAF officer serving in West Darfur, November 2023.

89 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025. See also: D. Walsh and C. Koettl, “How a U.S. ally uses aid as a cover in war”, *New York Times*, 21 September 2024.

90 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

91 Additionally, the UN remains legally bound to seek PSA authorisation when using the border to supply humanitarian aid or move personnel.

92 Key informant interviews with two Sudanese diplomats, September–October 2024.

93 Key informant interview with two former Darfur regional government ministry employees, November 2024 and March 2025.

94 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

more efficient and equitable than any prior Sudanese governments since independence,⁹⁵ its structures largely replicate the old Government of Sudan (GoS) architecture. On the other hand, reusing existing governance structures enables continuity with pre-existing Sudan–Chad agreements and allows the RSF to absorb experienced civil servants, who are often the only available administrators in these areas. For example, the RSF West Darfur Civil Administration, formed in 2024, has replaced the former state government and now issues movement permits similar to the old travel permit system.⁹⁶ The RSF also appears to be honouring earlier development agreements with Chad’s Ministry of Transport to link border regions via roads and bridges, with each side responsible for work within its respective territory.⁹⁷

N’djamena depends on the Ouaddai provincial government to enforce restrictions within border refugee camps – including limits on civil and political activities, as well as on Sudanese NGOs – while national security forces manage broader threats and monitor weapons proliferation along the border.⁹⁸ The Ouaddai provincial government coordinates with the RSF West Darfur Area Command, police, and intelligence on border security, and works with the RSF Civil Administration and Chambers of Commerce on economic issues.⁹⁹ In early 2025, the RSF announced plans for a joint border force with Chad to protect livestock and trade, although this has yet to materialise.¹⁰⁰

The RSF has also formed national and state-level branches of the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO), which grants humanitarian access permissions and signs technical agreements. Its recognition among the international community remains disputed, however.¹⁰¹ In addition, as a response to growing instability in late 2024, the RSF established state-level Committees to Combat Negative Phenomena – replicating the GoS State Security Committees – bringing together the state heads of the RSF Area Command, Civil Administration, police, intelligence, and other local entities. In West Darfur, the committee has helped coordinate checkpoint oversight, deploy tax collectors (notably to the Adre-Geneina border crossing between Chad and Sudan), and deployed its Joint Security Force to enforce decisions and respond to threats.

Impact of changing governance on Chad–Darfur border communities

Local governance changes under the RSF have significantly affected trade, livelihoods, and local politics. The RSF has supplanted GoS institutions with its own structures, and negotiates directly with Chadian

95 The Republic of Sudan, a sovereign nation formed in 1956 following the end of joint Sudanese–British rule. It was succeeded by the Democratic Republic of Sudan in 1969 following a military coup. During its lifetime, the Republic of Sudan was troubled by political and ethnic divisions and corruption.

96 Mirroring GoS visas, customs duties, and travel permits, the three levels are: 1) entry permit for UN and NGO staff, valid for six months subject to extension, allowing entry and movement within al-Geneina city from eastern Chad; 2) commodity permit for goods and commercial vehicles valid for 15 days; and 3) travel permit allowing individual movement across al-Geneina city and other West Darfur localities, valid for 15 days.

97 These agreements were originally reached in March 2017 and then updated in February 2023, covering land, maritime, and rail transport trade exchanges, as well as transit trade to neighbouring countries, which the RSF has likewise committed to maintain. Key informant interviews, West Darfur, February–March 2025.

98 Key informant interviews with Sudanese civilians residing in or frequently traveling to eastern Chad, February–March 2025.

99 Key informant interviews with RSF West Darfur state officials and three Sudanese civilians residing in the borderlands, February–March 2025.

100 Key informant interview with an RSF security official and three Sudanese civilians residing in the borderlands, February 2025.

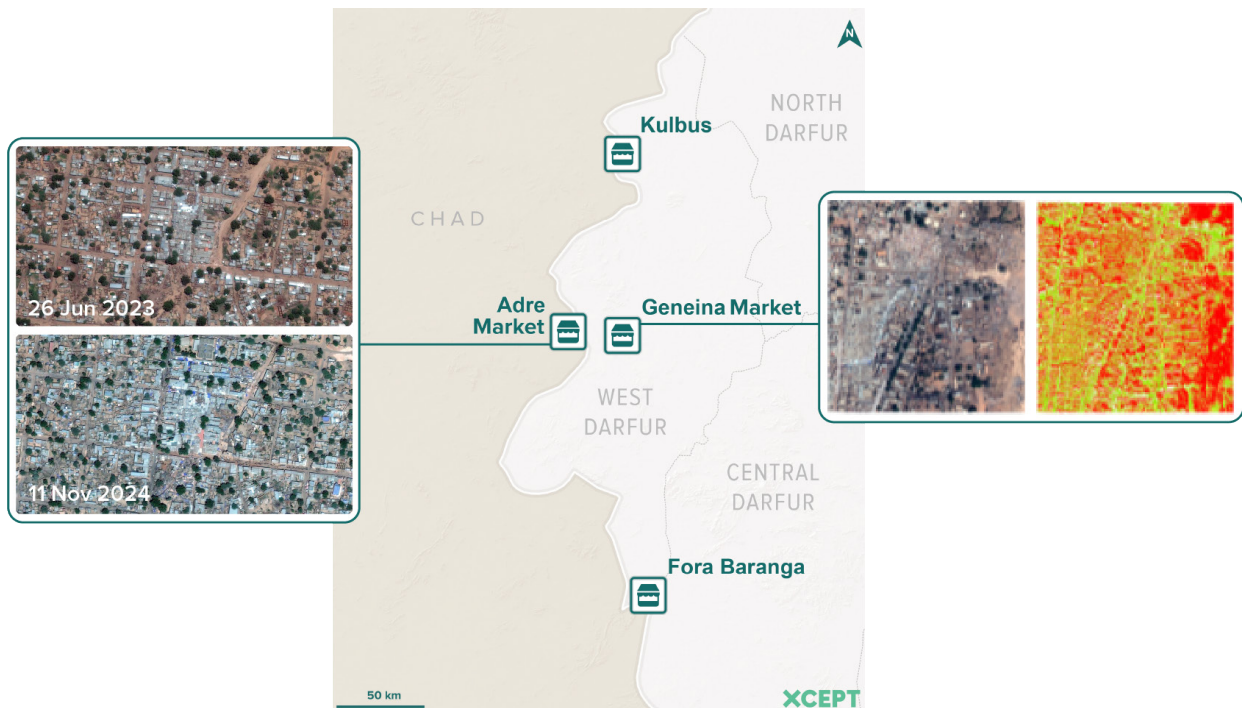
101 Key informant interviews with RSF West Darfur state officials and three Sudanese civilians residing in the borderlands, February–March 2025.

authorities on trade, migration, and security. It also restricts trade with SAF-held areas and Egypt in order to weaken the SAF's legitimacy and retaliate against Egyptian support. Despite these consolidation efforts, informal checkpoints and undisciplined militia behaviour continue to undermine governance efforts. Nevertheless, RSF leaders remain incentivised to address basic livelihood needs as a means of maintaining stability and local support in Darfur. In response to lobbying by borderland communities, RSF authorities have sometimes adopted governance measures that align with local interests.

Sudanese traders have historically viewed the Chadian capital, N'djamena, as one of the region's largest commercial markets and a major gateway for exports to West Africa. Regional trade is typically funnelled through border markets in towns such as Abéché and Adre in eastern Chad, with key routes traversing four primary border crossings:¹⁰²

1. Between Adre and Geneina at Adikong, West Darfur.
2. Between Abéché and Tendelti at Koufroun, eastern Chad.
3. Between Goz Beida and Foro Baranga at Mongororo, eastern Chad.
4. Between eastern Chad and Kulbus, West Darfur.

Although trade volumes initially declined after April 2023, market activity has rebounded in the Chad–Darfur borderlands since October 2024. Figure 4 shows the location of the markets, with satellite photography showing increased activity in Adre market between June 2023 and November 2024.



Source: Map by XCEPT; satellite imagery © Pleiades Nero/Airbus D5 2025.

Figure 4 - Comparison of market activity along the eastern Chad–West Darfur border

102 Key informant interviews with Sudanese and Chadian traders, February–March 2025.

The satellite photograph of Geneina market was taken in 2024, and is accompanied by another image comparing the 2024 image with one taken in 2023, and using a change detection algorithm to highlight increased activity, shown in red. Now, the key markets exhibit a commensurate, if not greater, level of activity. Sudanese exports to Chad include gum arabic, sesame, various peanut products, hibiscus, and livestock, while imports from Chad revolve around refined goods such as sugar, flour, juices, and – especially – fuel.¹⁰³ Transactions are conducted in Chadian francs, Sudanese pounds, and occasionally US dollars.¹⁰⁴

The resurgence of market activity was partly driven by the RSF’s imposition of a trade blockade against SAF-controlled parts of Sudan and Egypt, instead reorienting trade towards Chad. The strategy sought to satisfy the economic needs of those living in Darfur, while also supporting the business interests of the Dagalo family-owned Al-Junaid Company.¹⁰⁵

In late 2024, Abdel-Rahim Dagalo – the RSF’s second-in-command – travelled to N’djamena to secure buyers for export products and discuss cooperation with senior Chadian officials and business elites.¹⁰⁶ Goods imported from Chad, particularly fuel, not only satisfy the basic livelihood needs of communities residing in RSF-controlled Darfur, but also provide critical support to RSF military operations as far afield as central Sudan. Drawing on aggregated mobility data indicating general and routine patterns of movement between mid-2024 and early 2025, Figure 5 shows the assessed West Darfur–Chad supply chain. Parts of the route follow historic trade corridors between western Sudan and Khartoum, now re-purposed for military resupply.¹⁰⁷

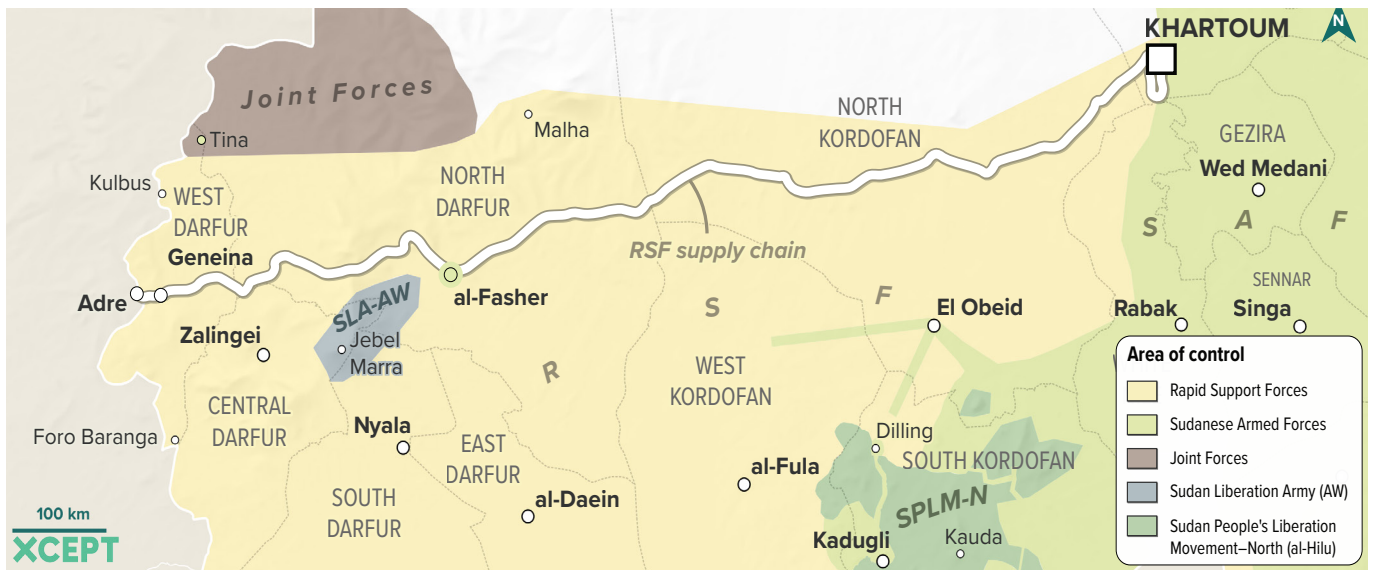


Figure 5 - RSF-controlled supply route between eastern Chad and Khartoum

103 Key informant interviews with Sudanese and Chadian traders, February–March 2025.

104 Key informant interview with two market vendors in West Darfur, March 2025.

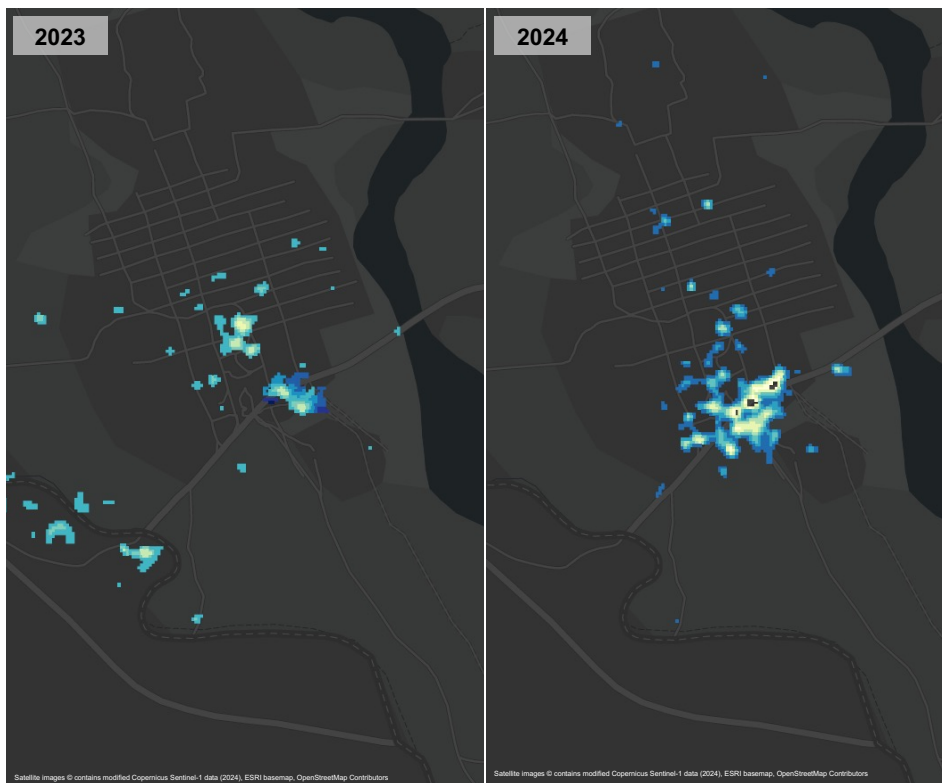
105 The Al-Junaid Company has engaged in on-the-ground operations throughout Darfur estimated to be worth millions of US dollars per month. Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

106 Key informant interviews with a senior RSF official, other state-level RSF officials, and community-based sources in N’djamena, February–March 2025.

107 Key informant interviews with a western Sudanese trader currently residing in Darfur and a SAF security official, March 2025.

The RSF West Darfur Civil Administration, led by Tijani Karshom,¹⁰⁸ and the Ouaddai provincial government share an interest in maintaining strong cross-border trade, which both rely on to generate tax revenue. They have coordinated to streamline border-crossing procedures, align customs and clearance fees, and secure routes for traders and businesses. Between late 2024 and early 2025, representatives of these provincial governments met monthly in Abéché, Chad, with additional joint visits to N'djamena, while the RSF West Darfur Chamber of Commerce is in regular contact with its Ouaddai counterpart.¹⁰⁹

RSF and Chadian authorities at both the national and provincial levels have prioritised maintaining flows through the border town of Adikong, between Adre in Chad and Geneina in Western Darfur. Analysis of Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) shows changes in the levels of human activity in Adikong between 2023 and 2024, with a significant increase in the number of vehicles operating in the area over time.



Source: Satellite images © contain modified Copernicus Sentinel-1 data (2024)

Figure 6 - Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) imagery showing human activity levels in the Sudanese border town of Adikong

The RSF has expanded administrative facilities at the Adikong crossing, and invested in paved roads, formal checkpoints, and economic infrastructure along the main road running from Geneina to Zalingei (Central Darfur), Nyala (South Darfur), and al-Daein (East Darfur).¹¹⁰ The primary beneficiaries of these arrangements appear to be large-scale businesses able to navigate patronage networks, as well as mid-

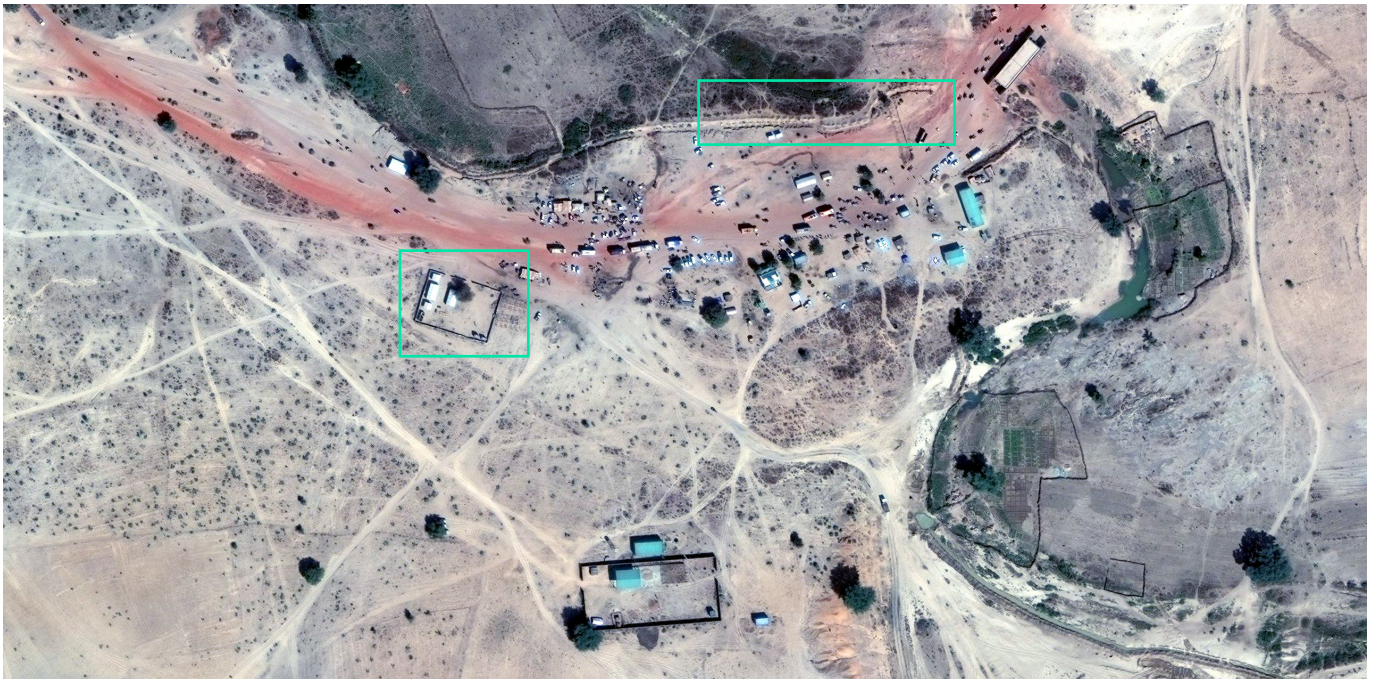
108 Tijani Karshom was the deputy governor of West Darfur and became governor after the death, while in RSF custody, of former governor Khamis Abbaker in 2023. Karshom inherited de facto leadership of the West Darfur civil administration when it was established in 2024.

109 Key informant interviews with RSF West Darfur officials and Sudanese civilians residing on both sides of eastern Chad–West Darfur border, February–March 2025.

110 Key informant interviews with Darfur-based Sudanese civilians and a Sudanese trader, February–March 2025.

to-senior RSF figures running personal businesses.¹¹¹ The trade in stolen vehicles, for example, is often cited as being heavily controlled by the RSF for the benefit of its business affiliates.¹¹²

The Adre–Geneina border crossing has long been a vital gateway for trade, humanitarian operations, and the movement of people fleeing fighting in Darfur. In February 2024, the PSA closed it over concerns it was being used as an RSF supply line. In August 2024, however, mounting pressure caused by the looming humanitarian crisis led to the crossing being reopened for three months.¹¹³ Since then, extensions have been granted quarterly. In Figure 7, the green highlighted boxes display a newly constructed RSF customs office and structures housing an RSF border checkpoint, including additional earthworks and security measures, constructed between February and August 2025.



Source: Plant C Planet Labs PBS, dated 27 February 2025. Analysis by SAC Catapult

Figure 7 - Increased presence at the RSF-controlled Adre-Geneina border crossing

The eastern Chad–West Darfur border illustrates how PSA and RSF policies compete in practice. After the RSF captured large parts of the border and expelled SAF officials in 2023, formal administration shifted to PSA-controlled territories such as White Nile, West Kordofan, and Northern State, with officials issuing permissions and liaising with their Chadian counterparts remotely. In practice, however, the RSF has effectively assumed border management through parallel structures such as the RSF Civil Administration, formed in 2024.

PSA officials still present in RSF-controlled territories are increasingly being prevented from performing their roles and pressured by the RSF leadership to forego their salaries from Port Sudan. This duality does

111 Key informant interviews two Sudanese traders and a Sudanese driver transporting goods, February–March 2025.

112 Key informant interviews with a Sudanese trader and a Sudanese civilian residing on the eastern Chad–West Darfur border, March 2025.

113 See: D. Walsh, “Closed for Months, a Gateway for Aid to Famine-Stricken Sudan Swings Open”, *New York Times*, 15 August 2024.

not apply to all crossings: for example, the Tina crossing in North Darfur remains under SAF control on the Sudanese side, and is monitored by the SAF-aligned Joint Forces.

Regulating movement across the Chad–Darfur border remains difficult. Since April 2023, Chadian authorities have imposed tighter restrictions on human mobility, citing security concerns around military-age men. Civilian key informants report close surveillance by Chadian security forces at the Chad–West Darfur border between 2024 and 2025. This includes Chadian border police on the lookout for political and military activities at official crossings,¹¹⁴ refugee camps, border towns such as Adre and Abéché, the capital of Ouaddai province.¹¹⁵ Despite increased monitoring, border enforcement remains inconsistent: checkpoint personnel, including RSF and Chadian officials, are often easily bribed or inattentive, while some travellers simply bypass border controls.¹¹⁶ Both Chadian government and RSF officials acknowledge their limited capacity to secure this expansive, porous stretch of border.¹¹⁷

RSF wariness of PSF-aligned informants entering Geneina has prompted greater scrutiny of certain tribal or ethnic groups seeking to cross the border, with travellers detained or refused entry at certain checkpoints.¹¹⁸ RSF leaders have also restricted the departure of military-age men from West Darfur, concerned they could join the PSA or deplete RSF's local recruitment base. Instead, men are pressured to remain in West Darfur and join the RSF's ranks.¹¹⁹

The RSF must navigate entrenched local interests among communities residing in the Chad–Darfur borderlands, including Masalit and Arab groups. Although the RSF initially relied on military force, especially against the Masalit, its governance capacity now depends on negotiating with local leaders, in apparent recognition of the material and political costs of sustained violence. With its dominance over Masalit territories largely secured, the RSF has eased pressure on the community – imposed through its allies in the competing Mahariya tribe – and is not focused on active frontlines.¹²⁰ Reconciliation measures have seen displaced Masalit encouraged to return to Geneina and other areas. By doing so, RSF leaders are attempting to build local legitimacy while weakening organised dissent.

These various efforts are evidenced by the RSF's reliance on the Native Administration and other prominent local actors. A Peace and Reconciliation Committee, formed in 2025, includes community leaders, extending the reach of an otherwise limited command structure and military presence across Darfur's hinterlands.¹²¹ In order to formalise these relationships, the RSF has expanded the involvement of community leaders. Whereas previously they were largely restricted to positions in the state-level

114 Since early 2025, the Ouaddai provincial government has issued transit permits for vehicles crossing from Adre to al-Geneina, recording the full names of the driver and passengers, as well as the vehicle number and type. Key informant interviews with Sudanese civilians transiting the border between 2024–2025, February–March 2025.

115 Chadian security at the Ouaddai provincial level maintains active cooperation with RSF West Darfur Area Command, police, and intelligence. This dates back to pre-April 2023 reciprocal arrangements on the extradition of wanted suspects, allowing for citizens from the respective countries to be detained on request. Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

116 Key informant interviews with Sudanese civilians residing in West Darfur and eastern Chad, February–March 2025.

117 Key informant interviews with two Chadian border officials (security and civilian), an RSF West Darfur official, and two RSF political officials, January–March 2025.

118 Key informant interviews with Sudanese civilians transiting the border during 2024–2025, February–March 2025.

119 Key informant interviews with an RSF state-level official and two Sudanese civilians detained by the RSF at an exit-point over the past year, March 2025.

120 Key informant interviews, West Darfur, April 2025.

121 See Centre on Armed Groups, “Islands in the Storm: Civilian Survival Deals With the Warring Parties in Sudan”, November 2024 (closed circulation briefing note, available on request).

Security Committees, the RSF has granted them roles in a variety of additional governance bodies. For example, the West Darfur Committee to Combat Negative Phenomena includes Native Administration representatives deployed to mediate during periods of unrest, particularly over intercommunal or economic disputes, avoiding the need to rely on security forces.¹²² Likewise, the RSF West Darfur Chamber of Commerce works with the Native Administration to negotiate business deals, collect taxes, and manage checkpoints with local communities along trade routes, including areas with little direct RSF military presence.¹²³ Meanwhile, leaders of the Bargo community, whose members live on both sides of the border, accompany RSF West Darfur Civil Administration leadership to meetings with the Ouaddai provincial leadership.¹²⁴

However, the RSF approach to inclusive governance remains inconsistent. Some communities feel excluded from decision-making or pressured into symbolic roles. Key informants in West Darfur claim the RSF co-opts community leaders under threat of violence. In Kreinik in West Darfur, for example, RSF resettlement of Masalit refugees from eastern Chad was presented as voluntary. However, members of the Masalit community who had moved into the area cited pressure from the RSF and aligned community members to avoid publicly criticising RSF governance, including threats of arrest or harassment.¹²⁵ The RSF has also instrumentalised local leaders to recruit fighters from cross-border communities. While some new recruits gain status or compensation, others feel deceived when they end up serving RSF interests over their own communities.¹²⁶

RSF governance remains limited in the more remote stretches of the eastern Chad–West Darfur border, where pre-existing trade agreements, informal border crossings, and community-managed routes continue largely unchanged.¹²⁷ Small-scale merchants and smugglers frequently use donkey carts or travel on foot when transporting goods into Chad, often avoiding official crossings.¹²⁸ Key informants also report using local roads away from the RSF and Chadian government’s officially designated crossings, thereby avoiding checkpoints and RSF scrutiny entirely. This involves using local knowledge to reach towns such as Adre, before continuing onward by bus.¹²⁹

In West Darfur, the RSF’s ability to embed its governance structures relies not only on military dominance, but pragmatic cross-border ties with Chadian authorities, community bargaining, and control over trade routes. Although these arrangements help sustain local stability and revenue, they remain fragile, shaped by the RSF’s need to balance coercion with negotiated legitimacy, as well as the shifting interests of borderland communities and elites on both sides of the border. This approach is central to the RSF’s strategy for sustaining ties with N’djamena, particularly among Chad’s military elites. Conversely, the SAF’s limited presence in the Darfur borderlands weakens its leverage with Chad, further undermining its claims to sovereignty as RSF governance becomes more entrenched.

122 Key informant interview with an RSF West Darfur official and two West Darfur local community leaders, March 2025.

123 Key informant interview with community-based sources in West Darfur, February–March 2025.

124 Key informant interview with a West Darfur local community leader, March 2025.

125 Key informant interview with two individuals originally from Kereinik, living outside Sudan, August 2024.

126 Key informant interview with community-based sources in West and South Darfur, recruitment structures periodically examined during 2024–2025.

127 Key informant interview with community-based sources in West and Central Darfur, February–March 2025.

128 Key informant interview with a Sudanese trader based in South Darfur, March 2025.

129 Key informant interview with a Sudanese civilian who recently crossed the West Darfur–eastern Chad border, March 2025.

Conclusion

This report's central finding is that RSF leaders use civil administration not only to secure territory for rear military bases and short-term revenue generation, but to build local legitimacy as a foundation for longer-term political influence. These strategies directly challenge the SAF's claim to sovereignty, and as such present perhaps the most significant challenge to centralised state authority since Sudan's independence in 1956.

RSF efforts remain fluid and uneven, often relying on violence and coercion. In general, local authority is more often grounded in social ties than in formal directives. These ties sometimes allow community leaders to negotiate with RSF actors, meaning legitimacy is rarely granted uniformly, but rather must be bargained for, or imposed. RSF leaders also tolerate predatory behaviour by rank-and-file fighters and local commanders, which undermines efforts to stabilise governance.

Taken together, the cases show that RSF rule is not monolithic; it is shaped by local communities and regional influence, and often constrained by internal predation and opportunism. The following section draws out key considerations from the three case studies and implications for policy and practice.

Features of RSF governance

Hybrid governance structures and incentivised stability

In order to secure territory, revenue, and rear bases to fuel its war effort, the RSF has developed hybrid governance structures that blend civil administration with informal, locally negotiated arrangements. Across the cases, RSF leaders have incorporated former civil administrators, imposed localised taxation systems, and adapted pre-existing travel and trade permit frameworks. Hybrid frameworks derive authority not from codified rules but rather perceived legitimacy, relational power, and negotiated tolerance by local actors. These formal structures coexist with varying degrees of military oversight and opportunistic revenue extraction.

The RSF has managed to establish some semblance of regulated border management in each of the regions explored, creating conditions conducive to the movement of goods. Along the Darfur–Chad border, RSF leaders have established formal agreements with Chadian authorities regulating and promoting cross-border trade. In the other case studies, RSF approaches are less formal. While local commanders ostensibly allow trade, they are sometimes unable or unwilling to crack down on predatory behaviour by local RSF members. This can lead to chaotic approaches to border governance, as seen along the West Kordofan border, where RSF attempts at governance are arguably weakest.

Sustaining the flow of trade helps meet community needs for access to basic commodities, while also generating revenue for the RSF. The dual demand to meet community need and advance RSF interests propels RSF efforts to improve security in areas under their control. In the tri-border area, for instance, the RSF has cracked down on local criminality disrupting gold mining and other livelihood practices, and has worked to manage pastoralist–farmer disputes. Although primarily propelled by RSF interest in safeguarding its own resource extraction, it has nevertheless increased local stability and security. This in turn has opened up access to mining areas for artisanal miners, while boosting both market and agricultural activity.

In West Darfur, however, RSF leaders have tolerated – and in some cases supported – violence against the Masalit community, which reached such an extent that the US government labelled it genocide.¹³⁰ Core RSF constituencies, such as northern Rizeigat communities, took advantage of the chaos and confusion in the early period of fighting between the RSF and SAF to drive out the Masalit and lay claim to Masalit territory. As this demonstrates, although RSF leaders may seek stability, it does not necessarily override the demands of core supporters.

Legitimacy through kinship and local alliances

Despite attempts to formalise governance, real authority in RSF-held areas remains decentralised, often hinging on personal or kinship ties between RSF area commanders and local community leaders. Thus, the extent of community influence varies considerably: where RSF leaders maintain kinship ties with larger communities in the area, governance tends to be more stable and responsive to community needs.

In West Kordofan, for example, Misseriya communities have used their relationship with the RSF to curb irregular checkpoints and shape border management practices. Strong Misseriya representation within the RSF ranks further entrenches their influence, with the potential to shift intercommunal relations in the region. By contrast, in more ethnically diverse or remote regions, where such kinship ties are weaker, RSF governance is more fragmented, extractive, and less accountable.

Widespread predation

The RSF's tolerance for predation by its forces has contributed to uneven, often exploitative local governance, which undermines its attempts to build legitimacy in some areas. The result is a fragile equilibrium in which relative stability coexists with extractive practices, undermining local trust and eroding long-term legitimacy.

As with governance and taxation, the ability of community leaders to mitigate predatory practices is often dictated by the degree of personal or kinship relations. In West Kordofan, for example, substantial representation within the RSF has given Misseriya community leaders some leverage to influence behaviour.

Emerging regional legitimacy

In positioning itself as a broker of trade, security, and cross-border cooperation, the RSF has embedded itself in regional political economies, using access and stability to build regional legitimacy and secure material support. Having established control over large parts of the borderlands, the RSF is now in a position to compel Chad and South Sudan to engage with it directly.

In West Darfur, the RSF's control of the border has allowed it to secure deals with Chadian authorities in N'djamena and Abéché, benefiting local traders and political elites. The RSF had already been transiting military supplies through Chad since mid-2023, but the RSF's relative freedom of mobility became even more apparent over the course of 2024, allowing it to procure food and fuel for its troops. At the same

¹³⁰ Blinken, "Genocide determination".

time, it was able to use South Sudan to export gold to world markets.¹³¹ RSF constraints on the activity of Chadian and South Sudanese rebels in areas of its control has added to its appeal as a geopolitical ally for N'djamena and Juba.

Redefining sovereignty

RSF governance frameworks challenge conventional definitions of sovereignty, revealing a wartime political economy based on transactional engagements with both domestic and international actors. Over time, the RSF will likely expand its formal governance structures, further consolidating its authority.

This shift signals a deeper transformation: what began as a military confrontation now increasingly revolves around competing claims to political legitimacy. If sustained, this divided governance will almost certainly deepen social and identity-based fault-lines in Sudan. Resurgent social and ethnic tensions could outlast any ceasefire, posing fundamental questions about Sudan's viability as a unified state.

Implications for policy and practice

The dynamics outlined above present complex challenges for policymakers, diplomats, and humanitarian actors seeking to navigate the shifting local governance arrangements in Sudan's border regions. Engagement in RSF-controlled areas requires conflict-sensitive approaches that are responsive to evolving local power structures. The case studies raise a number of implications for practitioners tasked with designing peacebuilding and humanitarian delivery policy responses, as well as for those negotiating access, implementing programmes, and managing operational risk.

Diversifying engagement with RSF-aligned civil authorities to facilitate access

Alongside the creation of new governance bodies, the RSF has replicated and adapted civil administrative structures from previous governments. With negotiations around humanitarian access increasingly reliant on RSF-aligned institutions, external actors face a key dilemma: how best to engage these authorities without conferring undue recognition or legitimacy. In many areas, especially where other governance structures have collapsed or withdrawn, there may be little alternative. RSF administrative capacity remains fragmented and often lacks clear leverage over armed actors. This carries the risk of ambiguous authority and unpredictable enforcement.

One way to navigate variable RSF administrative capacity, and avoid conferring undue legitimacy, is to work through reliable local leaders who can mediate between communities and RSF authorities. Some incentives exist to encourage positive RSF responses to local demands, with community-based engagement most likely to succeed when – as in the West Kordofan case – there are shared kinship relationships between community leaders and RSF commanders. More broadly, community-led or supported negotiations help ensure that needs are well understood and assistance reaches the intended beneficiaries, while also reducing the extent to which engagement legitimises RSF bodies.

¹³¹ Key informant interviews in South Darfur and Western Bahr al-Ghazal (South Sudan), January–March 2025. On the case of exporting gold through South Sudan, see also: D. Walsh, "The gold rush at the heart of a civil war", *New York Times*, 11 December 2024.

Ensuring coordination occurs through the right local leaders and corresponding RSF commanders requires strong local knowledge. Accurate, up-to-date information is essential to anticipate shifts in power dynamics, especially where the chain of command is unclear or local RSF commanders sideline civil authorities. Building this understanding will enable practitioners to identify the right RSF or community powerbrokers, negotiate realistic terms, and ensure that agreements are respected across the operating environment.

Navigating checkpoint taxation and informal RSF fee systems

The RSF has established – or at least tolerates – multiple checkpoints along key trade and humanitarian access corridors. These checkpoints represent an important means of revenue generation for RSF operations. Whereas some are formalised through permits and documented fees, others are more informal and opportunistic. In a number of cases, the arrangements in place reflect the outcome of local negotiations. As a result, trade routes are made more predictable, stabilising the availability of market goods.

Understanding the different types of checkpoints and fee systems is essential for mitigating negative impacts on programme operations. For instance, negotiations over informal or irregular checkpoints may require engagement with RSF-aligned armed actors, whereas formal checkpoints are largely run by RSF-aligned governance bodies. Given that formalised fees are often embedded in the local political economy – including deals struck between communities and RSF leaders – it may be difficult for outside actors to escape such fees altogether. Here, working with the community leaders who helped negotiate these arrangements may provide leverage for reducing or waiving certain fees, or alternatively developing workarounds for maintaining predictable aid delivery.

Ensuring conflict-sensitive programming

For both policymakers and humanitarian actors, understanding how RSF military activity and governance shape community relations – and how these dynamics intersect with external aid and engagement – is key to ensuring conflict-sensitive policy and programming. RSF engagement with communities is highly uneven.

On the one hand, some communities benefit from significant representation within the RSF command structure, such as the Misseriya in West Kordofan. In this instance, local RSF support risks emboldening some Misseriya to pursue their interests through non-peaceful means. By contrast, other communities, especially those who have experienced historic tensions with RSF-aligned groups – for example, the Masalit in West Darfur – face marginalisation or violence. Patterns such as these threaten to exacerbate existing grievances or fuel new ones as the RSF embeds itself deeper into local governance. Programming that channels resources through RSF-aligned groups or favoured intermediaries can unintentionally reinforce these dynamics.

A strong understanding of local community and conflict dynamics, coupled with implementation mechanisms that increase transparency and reduce bias, can support conflict-sensitive programming. Here, community-led oversight mechanisms can help monitor and report on incidences of bias. The implementation of such mechanisms can also be used to signal fairness, encourage community buy-in, and limit the risk of programming becoming politicised. Finally, supporting existing forms of intercommunal collaboration and working through locally recognised structures to coordinate aid delivery – especially in rural areas where livelihoods cross community lines – can further reduce the risk of programming inadvertently entrenching divisions.

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