

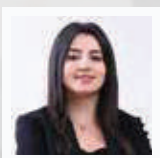


AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Blood, Gold, and Power: Drivers of UAE's Alleged Support for Sudan's RSF and Its Implications



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1. Summary

Sudan's political transition, once a source of cautious optimism following the 2019 ouster of President Omar al-Bashir, has descended into a devastating civil war. The conflict, fueled by a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has displaced millions, shattered an already fragile economy, and destabilized the region. Central to this crisis is the alleged role of external actors, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), whose financial and logistical support for the RSF has been documented by UN monitors, investigative journalists, and regional experts.

This study examines the political and economic interests that allegedly drive the UAE's backing of the RSF. Politically, the UAE's geostrategic agenda includes thwarting Islamist movements, projecting influence along the Red Sea corridor, and shaping Sudan's transition. Economically, the UAE is Sudan's largest gold trading partner, with a significant portion of its imports allegedly sourced from RSF-controlled mines and smuggled through informal networks. This illicit gold trade provides the RSF with substantial off-budget revenue, complicating efforts to disarm the force and integrate it into a civilian-led framework.

The implications of this alleged support have been profound. It has enhanced the RSF's military strength and economic autonomy, making cease-

fire talks more difficult and exacerbating an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Over eight million people have been displaced, and Sudan's GDP has contracted by over 15% since the conflict began in 2023. The war has also eroded investor confidence, stalled debt relief negotiations, and entrenched a war economy based on illicit trade.

Regionally, the UAE's actions have strained alliances. Egypt, a key supporter of the SAF, increasingly views the RSF's rise as a destabilizing factor. Saudi Arabia, while brokering mediation talks, has struggled to maintain a delicate balance to prevent wider conflict. Meanwhile, Western donors have been stymied, unable to hold external actors accountable or halt the worsening humanitarian catastrophe.

This paper contends that the UAE's dual-track approach—publicly supporting stability while covertly backing a paramilitary force—is indicative of its transactional foreign policy in fragile states. This strategy poses a significant obstacle to a sustainable political settlement and economic recovery in Sudan. The report concludes with policy recommendations, including the creation of a verifiable gold export certification system and a Red Sea Security Compact to mitigate the risks of proxy wars. Without such collaborative efforts, Sudan risks being trapped in a conflict fueled by lucrative parallel economies and competing external interests.

2. Introduction

Once described as the "keystone state" linking the Arab world with sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan is now engulfed in a brutal internal conflict. The 2019 removal of President Omar al-Bashir initiated a turbulent transition that culminated in open warfare between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023. In this volatile environment, investigative reports suggest that the UAE has emerged as a key external sponsor of the RSF, allegedly providing clandestine logistical support and facilitating the illicit gold trade that forms the group's financial backbone.

While the RSF's evolution from a state-sponsored counterinsurgency force to a semi-autonomous military-economic actor is well-documented, the motives and implications of the UAE's involvement remain under-examined. This research analyzes the political and economic drivers of the UAE's alleged support for the RSF and its impact on Sudan's fragile transition, its ailing economy, and its place in a competitive

regional order.

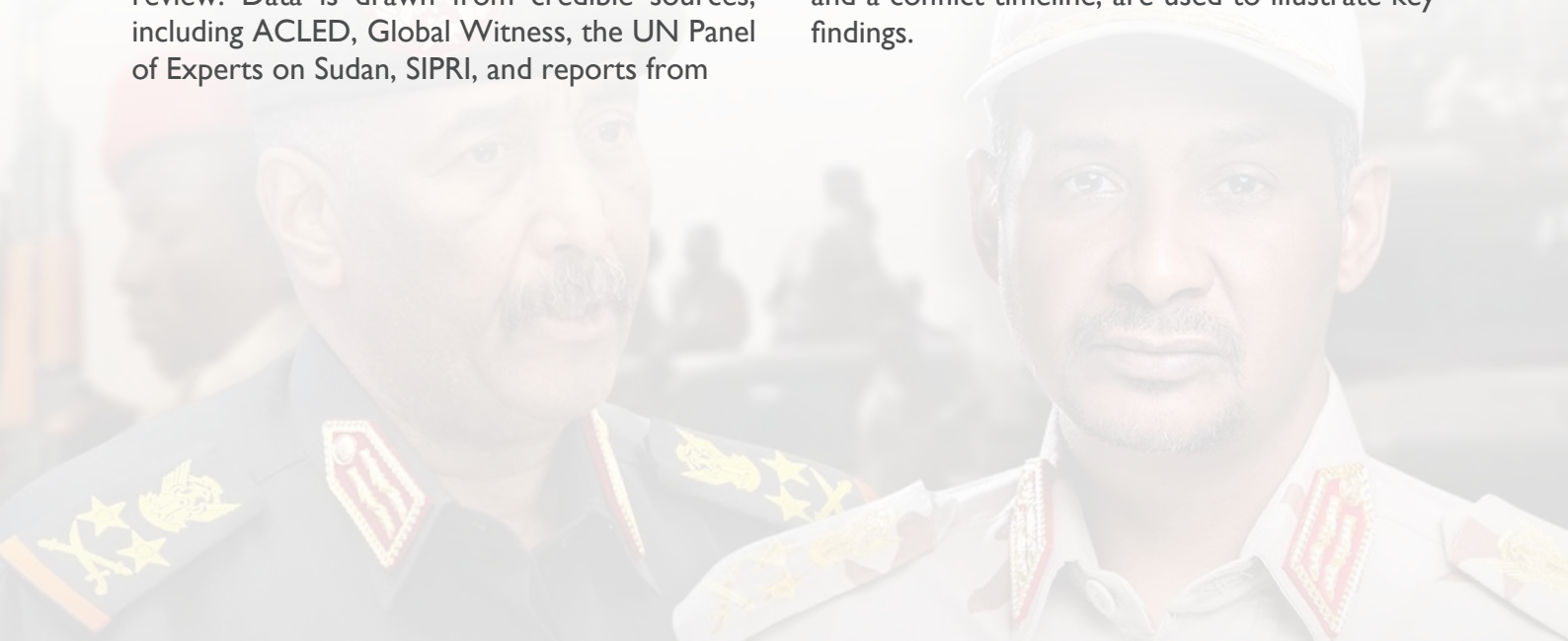
The central research question is: **What are the political and economic drivers of the UAE's alleged support for the RSF, and how has this engagement impacted Sudan's domestic conflict, economic prospects, and regional relations?**

This paper hypothesizes that the UAE's policy is guided by a dual strategy: first, to counter Islamist influence and secure control over the Red Sea corridor; and second, to gain access to Sudan's lucrative gold market. This approach has bolstered the RSF's military assertiveness, diminished incentives for a peaceful transition to civilian rule, and heightened regional tensions, particularly with Egypt. The UAE's alleged support for the RSF exemplifies its broader strategy of "transactional regionalism"—exerting influence in volatile states through elite ties and economic leverage while publicly positioning itself as a force for stability.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative conflict analysis, financial flows research, and a comparative regional policy review. Data is drawn from credible sources, including ACLED, Global Witness, the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan, SIPRI, and reports from

leading think tanks such as Carnegie, Chatham House, and the International Crisis Group (ICG). Visual aids, including a gold export flow diagram and a conflict timeline, are used to illustrate key findings.



4. Political and Economic Drivers of the UAE's Alleged Support for the RSF

4.1 Political Drivers: Countering Islamism and Projecting Regional Influence

The UAE's strategic interests in Sudan are rooted in its broader regional strategy of counter-revolutionary pragmatism, anti-Islamist security, and maritime power projection. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, the UAE has actively used economic and military tools to shape political outcomes in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa.

In Sudan, the UAE viewed the RSF as a bulwark against the potential resurgence of Islamist factions within the SAF and political forces linked to al-Bashir's regime. The RSF's commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), positioned himself as a reliable ally to Gulf states by providing mercenaries for the war in Yemen and offering unregulated access to gold revenues. Sudan's strategic location on the Red Sea has also made it a focal point for Gulf states seeking to secure maritime shipping routes and counter the influence of rivals like Turkey and Qatar, which have historically supported Islamist groups in the region.

4.2 Economic Drivers: The RSF, Sudan's Gold Trade, and the Dubai Market

Economic interests are a primary driver of the UAE-RSF relationship. Sudan is Africa's third-largest gold producer, but a significant portion of its output is smuggled through parallel channels, bypassing the Central Bank. The UAE is the destination for 70–80% of Sudan's annual gold production, making the Dubai market a key node in this informal economic network.

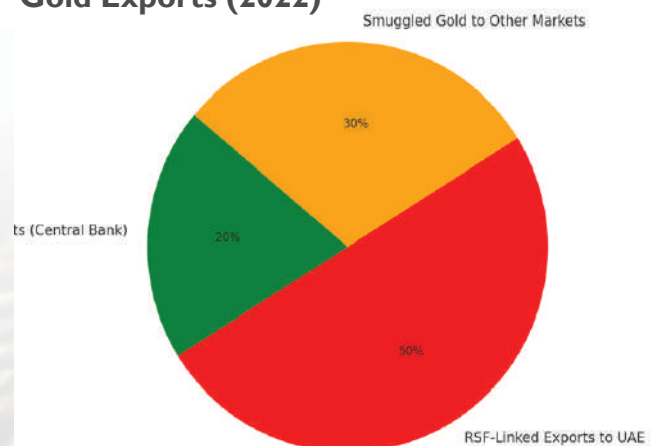
The RSF has seized control of key gold mining sites in Darfur and South Kordofan, using the proceeds to build a vast patronage network, purchase arms, and operate with significant financial independence from the state. Investigative reports have revealed that UAE-based trading

companies systematically buy gold through RSF-linked intermediaries, exploiting Dubai's weak verification and traceability systems. This illicit trade generates tens of millions of dollars in monthly revenue for the RSF and gives the UAE significant leverage over its leadership.

4.3 The Contradiction of Official Aid and Shadow Revenues

The UAE's alleged support for the RSF highlights a contradiction in its foreign policy: publicly supporting Sudan's civilian transition while covertly backing a militarized force that resists integration into a unified command structure. This dual-track approach mirrors the UAE's strategy in Libya, where it has endorsed UN mediation while simultaneously arming the Libyan National Army. Anti-corruption organizations argue that this "gold-for-influence" dynamic undermines international mediation, erodes Sudan's formal financial institutions, and hinders the development of a legitimate power-sharing agreement.

Figure 4.1: Estimated Breakdown of Sudan's Gold Exports (2022)



To give an idea of the size of this parallel economy, the following figure gives an approximate breakdown of Sudan's gold exports in 2022: around 70–80% going to the United Arab Emirates, up to fifty percent of that amount reportedly being controlled by Rapid Support Forces-associated individuals (Global Witness, 2020; UNSC, 2023).

5. Impacts on Sudan's Internal Conflict

5.1 The RSF's Battlefield Leverage

The war that erupted in April 2023 quickly saw the RSF gain control of key territories in Khartoum and Darfur, a success largely attributed to its sustained military and economic strengthening through the illicit gold trade and alleged Gulf support. Unlike the SAF, which is hampered by bureaucratic inertia, the RSF operates as a flexible and highly mobile force with direct access to unregulated financing. Reports from the UN and investigative journalists suggest that arms and logistical support have been funneled to the RSF through UAE-affiliated commercial networks, although Abu Dhabi denies these allegations.

5.2 Undermining Ceasefire Incentives

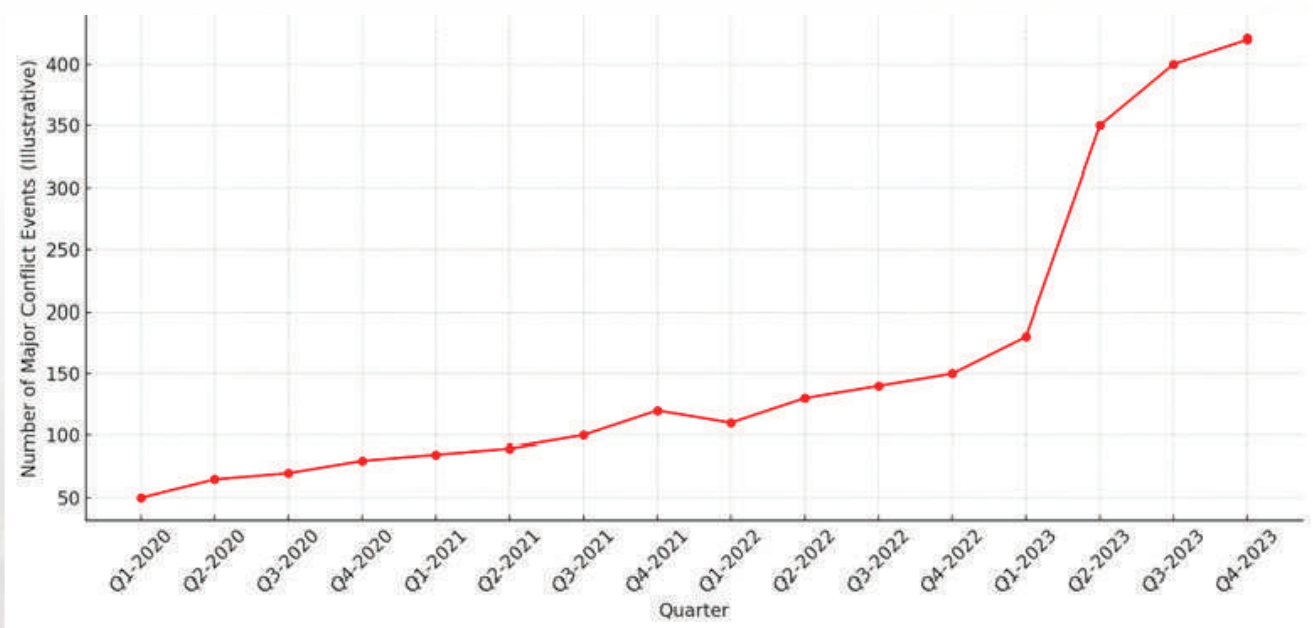
The RSF's financial independence makes it less susceptible to international pressure to disarm or integrate into a unified command. With its control over gold mining generating millions in

monthly revenue, the RSF can pay its fighters and procure arms despite international sanctions. This financial autonomy renders power-sharing arrangements, such as those outlined in the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, largely unworkable. Experts warn that as long as the RSF maintains independent foreign sponsorship, ceasefires will remain temporary lulls rather than steps toward a lasting political settlement.

5.3 Humanitarian Consequences

The war's impact on civilians has been catastrophic. The UN estimates that over 8 million people have been displaced since April 2023, with large numbers fleeing to neighboring countries. RSF-affiliated militias have been implicated in widespread atrocities, particularly in Darfur, mirroring the violence of the Janjaweed in the early 2000s. The collapse of state authority has also left humanitarian corridors vulnerable to looting and exploitation.

Figure 5.1: Sudan Conflict Escalation Timeline



(Timeline graphic illustrating major conflict events involving the RSF and SAF from 2020 to 2023, with annotations linking peaks in violence to alleged resource flows. Source: ACLED, Global Witness, Rift Valley Institute)



6. Prospects for Economic Recovery

6.1 A War Economy Entrenched

The conflict has plunged Sudan into a war economy, making a formal recovery nearly impossible in the short term. State revenue collection has collapsed, particularly in Khartoum, the former commercial and banking hub. Meanwhile, the RSF's control over gold mining and informal trade routes has created a "state within a state" financial system that operates outside the central treasury.

6.2 Macroeconomic Collapse and Food Insecurity

According to the IMF, Sudan's GDP contracted by over 15% in 2023, the sharpest decline since the secession of South Sudan. Inflation remains

rampant, and the Sudanese pound has lost over half its value on the parallel market. Agricultural production, once a pillar of the economy, has been severely disrupted, particularly in Gezira State. The UN World Food Programme reports that over 20 million people—nearly half of Sudan's population—now face acute food insecurity.

6.3 Remittances as a Lifeline

With the formal financial system in tatters, remittances from the Sudanese diaspora have become a critical lifeline. However, most of these transfers flow through informal hawala networks, bypassing the Central Bank and further weakening the state's fiscal authority.

Figure 6.1: Sudan's GDP Decline and Rising Remittance Inflows (2020–2023)



(Graph showing the sharp decline of Sudan's GDP alongside the corresponding increase in remittances, illustrating the collapse of the formal economy. Source: IMF, World Bank)

6.4 Obstacles to Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Post-conflict economic stabilization will hinge on controlling illicit revenue streams. As long as the RSF maintains autonomous control over gold routes and its foreign patrons remain unaccount-

ble, Sudan's prospects for debt restructuring and IMF programs will be bleak. Without the cooperation of regional partners—particularly the UAE, the primary hub for Sudan's gold trade—initiatives like gold certification programs will lack the incentives needed to dismantle the war economy.

7. Diplomatic and Regional Repercussions

7.1 Fractured Regional Alignments

The conflict has exposed and deepened the divergent interests of key regional players. Egypt, with its strong institutional ties to the SAF, views the RSF's consolidation as a threat to its influence in the Nile Basin. The UAE, in contrast, has allegedly backed the RSF as a counterweight to Islamist influence, creating a diplomatic rift with Cairo.

7.2 Saudi Arabia's Balancing Act

Saudi Arabia has adopted a more cautious approach, positioning itself as a mediator through the Jeddah talks. Riyadh's primary goal is to prevent instability in the Red Sea corridor, a key component of its Vision 2030 plan. This careful balancing act—maintaining ties with both SAF and RSF-aligned elites—highlights the complex and often overlapping agendas of Gulf states in Sudan.

7.3 Ineffective Western and Multilateral Responses

The US and EU have relied on diplomatic pressure and targeted sanctions, but these measures have had limited impact without a concerted effort to hold external facilitators accountable. Western officials have privately acknowledged that sanctions alone cannot sever the RSF's illicit revenue streams without greater transparency in Dubai's commodity markets. Meanwhile, the African Union and IGAD have been hampered by internal divisions and a lack of enforcement capacity.

6.4 The Proxy Risk

The result is a dangerous stalemate that risks turning Sudan into a "Libya on the Nile," with rival factions sustained by external patrons, illicit economies, and perpetually collapsing ceasefires. Without greater coordination among regional and international actors to curb illicit revenue streams, the root drivers of the conflict are likely to remain deeply entrenched.

Table 7.1: Comparative Snapshot of External Actors' Roles

External Actor	Key Interests	Alleged or Documented Actions	Impact on Sudan
UAE	Counter Islamist networks; secure gold trade; project power along Red Sea	Alleged covert support to RSF via gold trade, logistics, financial networks	Strengthens RSF autonomy; undermines ceasefire incentives; fuels war economy (Global Witness, 2020; UNSC, 2023)
Egypt	Maintain SAF dominance; protect Nile Basin influence	Supports SAF with logistics and diplomatic backing	Competes with UAE's RSF ties; heightens proxy risk (ICG, 2023)
Saudi Arabia	Red Sea corridor stability; Vision 2030 ports and trade	Mediates Jeddah talks; pragmatic ties with SAF and RSF elites	Limited leverage; conflict persists despite mediation (Ulrichsen, 2021)
US / EU	Regional stability; human rights; limit proxy wars	Targeted sanctions on RSF/SAF; frozen direct budget aid	Limited impact; struggle to pressure Gulf partners (NYT, 2023; HRW, 2023)
AU / IGAD	Regional order; peacemaking mandate	Mediation frameworks, peace monitoring	Constrained by internal divisions; lacks enforcement capacity (African Peacebuilding Network, 2023)



8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The UAE's alleged support for the RSF has been a critical factor in prolonging the Sudanese conflict, entrenching a war economy, and undermining efforts toward a sustainable peace. This transactional approach poses a significant obstacle to Sudan's recovery. To address this, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish a Verifiable Gold Export Certification System:

Modeled on the Kimberley Process for diamonds, this system should be developed in cooperation with regional and international partners, including the UAE, to increase transparency and cut off the RSF's illicit revenues.

2. Create Meaningful Disarmament Incentives:

Link financial aid and debt relief to verifiable milestones in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), as well as transitional justice.

3. Form a Red Sea Security Compact:

Regional actors, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the AU, should establish a security framework to mitigate the risks of cross-border proxy wars and coordinate responses to regional instability.

4. Apply Coordinated International Pressure:

The US, EU, and other international partners must apply consistent and coordinated pressure on external actors fueling the conflict, using targeted sanctions and diplomatic leverage to ensure accountability.

Without such collaborative efforts, Sudan risks becoming trapped in a perpetual cycle of conflict, driven by lucrative parallel economies and competing external interests.

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