



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

THE WAR OF THIEVES

ILLICIT NETWORKS, COMMODITIZED
VIOLENCE AND THE ARC OF STATE
COLLAPSE IN SUDAN

J.R. Mailey

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Africa's Development
NCP	National Congress Party
NIF	National Islamic Front
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Services
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SIM	Sudanese Islamic Movement
SPLA	Sudanese People's Liberation Army
UAE	United Arab Emirates



INTRODUCTION: STATE CAPTURE, CRIMINAL MARKETS AND CONFLICT IN SUDAN

Sudan's current conflict, which erupted in April 2023, is the latest chapter in a story of rival predatory networks competing for control over formal and illicit economies, the information environment and the use of organized violence. As the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) spread death and destruction across the country, fuelling a humanitarian crisis, their battle is driven by the desire to preserve their vast economic empires and the systems that support them.

Each of the networks fighting for control over Sudan's government has an enormous incentive to retain power. Incumbency provides continued access to wealth for both the SAF and RSF, which control multibillion-dollar business empires that straddle Sudan's most lucrative and strategically important commercial sectors.¹ The abuses and crimes committed by each force to date have, in part, helped them retain political and economic control. Simultaneously, the perpetration of crimes and abuses has strengthened their incentive for power, as the loss of legitimacy and control over the country's criminal justice system would expose them to potential punitive action.

While this competition has resulted in the unprecedented levels of violence and destruction we see today in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, the dynamics at play have been steadfast features of Sudanese politics for a generation and, in many ways, are the harvest of seeds planted more than three decades ago. Indeed, Sudan's political economy has long been defined by competition for control over the country's mineral and financial resources, the flow of information and the ability to carry out lethal violence.² By and large, relationships and alliances, both within Sudan and between its government and foreign counterparts, have been highly transactional, opportunistic and pragmatic, shifting abruptly in response to systemic shocks or new opportunities.

This report examines these historical dynamics as an introduction to a series of studies on the politico-criminal economy of Sudan. While the series unpacks the people, institutions, networks and transactions that have underpinned the enduring ecosystem of crime and corruption in Sudan that ultimately gave way to the current civil war, this initial synthesizing report sets out the competition for control of Sudan's security services, civilian bureaucracy and strategic industries. It begins with



Smoke and flames engulf part of Sudan's capital, Khartoum. The fighting that broke out in April 2023 is the latest episode in a decades-long conflict for control of the country's commercial and power interests. © Reuters

a discussion of the penetration of Sudan's civilian and military institutions by Islamists and of the policies and actions pursued that paved the way for consolidating control over the bureaucracy, lethal force, strategic industries and criminal markets.

The subsequent parts of this series comprise case studies that provide illustrative examples of the commercial interests of the four Bashir-era power centres – the Islamists' National Congress Party (NCP), the army, paramilitary groups and the intelligence services – as well as their links to illicit markets. These case studies include examinations of a prominent Islamist tycoon with close links to the Bashir family; a network of companies linked to the SAF involved in illicit cross-border transactions spanning more than a decade; the rise of the RSF and its questionable commercial operations; the role of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) in Sudan's illicit economy and protective ecosystem; and foreign state actors' use of criminal methods to advance narrow political, economic and commercial interests in Sudan and elsewhere in the region.



TRANSACTIONAL POLITICS, TRANSNATIONAL CRIMES

Well before the onset of Sudan's current conflict in April 2023, the penetration of state institutions rendered Sudan's public sector vulnerable to predation by a range of illicit actors. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC) 2021 Organized Crime Index found that 'deeply entrenched corruption, a weak rule of law and very poor transparency and accountability' provided fertile ground for illicit entrepreneurs in Sudan. 'Organized criminal actors have largely captured law enforcement and use it to repress any efforts to fight against organized crime', the Organized Crime Index's 2021 profile on Sudan states. 'Sudanese authorities lack the necessary resources to confront organized crime networks, and regularly use pro-government militias who are themselves engaged in trafficking activities.'³

The penetration of state and security institutions by the Sudanese Islamic Movement (SIM) – an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood – and the subsequent capture of the government itself through a June 1989 coup eroded the foundations of Sudan's public sector institutions. Arguably, the ensuing capture of the Sudanese state during the Bashir administration was an organized criminal conspiracy. It involved plans by a well-organized and hierarchical network to penetrate state institutions, subvert the bodies and laws that would scrutinize or constrain its activities, systematically hijack key economic sectors, distribute commercial opportunities within its ranks and use violence and intimidation to stave off threats to the enterprise.

While many of the ideologically driven actions that earned the government pariah status may have genuinely reflected the architects' political ambitions, they also had a profound impact on the country's illicit markets and often involved state-sponsored criminal conduct. With its ideology stripped away, what would remain in Khartoum by the end of the three-decade Bashir era was a criminalized bureaucracy whose upper echelons were filled with seasoned operatives with extensive experience hatching creative schemes to embezzle funds, conceal their operations, traffic weapons, launder money and kill rivals and opponents.

This report lays out how illicit networks captured, criminalized and weaponized the state in Sudan; it highlights how the hollowing-out of institutions and the use of a divide-and-rule strategy created

fertile ground for domestic and foreign criminal networks to thrive. Those networks, in turn, have not only been tolerated by Sudan's rulers but have also been instrumentalized by the various networks competing for power, influence and resources. Collaboration between criminal networks and predatory state actors in Sudan has propagated human rights abuses, facilitated the financing of terrorism, nurtured transnational criminal markets and destabilized governments throughout the region.⁴

Seizing power: Military vessel, civilian skipper

On 30 June 1989, Omar al-Bashir appeared on television as Sudan's new head of state and announced the formation of a new Revolutionary Council intended to 'save the country from rotten political parties'.⁵ Bashir, then a military officer, ascended to power in a single-day *coup d'état* that, while appearing to be a conventional military putsch, was actually a civilian coup dressed in military fatigues. 'The Islamist-military coup was designed, planned, and executed by forces outside the army, though with the use of some army officers', Sudanese scholar Atta El-Battahani wrote in 2016.⁶

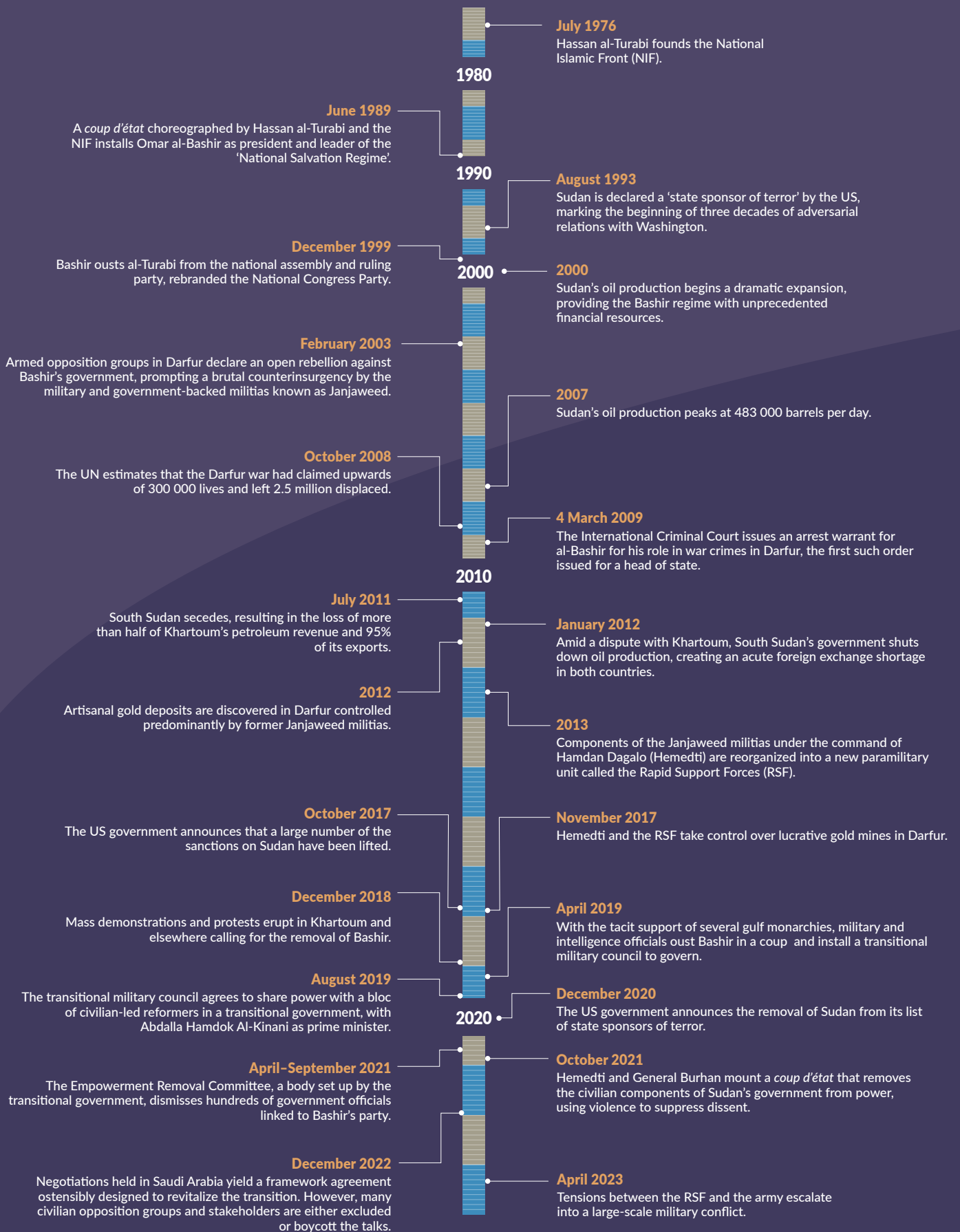


Ushered in: Omar al-Bashir came to power in 1989 in a coup that had been orchestrated by elements outside the military. © Salah Omar/AFP via Getty Images

The primary architect of the 1989 coup was Hassan al-Turabi, a staunch political Islamist, leader of the Sudanese Islamic Movement and member of the National Islamic Front (NIF) party. Turabi had spent the decade prior to the coup crafting a strategy to take and retain power in Khartoum and had built a political organization that was bent on achieving it, if not through elections then by brute military force.⁷ In 1986, the opportunity to seize power through elections came and went. In Sudan's last legitimate democratic contest for the presidency, Turabi's NIF won 18.5% of the vote, losing out to Sadiq al-Madhi.⁸ While the election loss delayed Turabi's plans, it did not stop them.

During al-Madhi's three years in office, Turabi worked to cultivate contacts within the military. A rapprochement between the Islamists and the regime of Jafaar Nimieri in 1977 had created an opening for Turabi and the SIM to engage with the military, a trend that accelerated significantly in 1983, when the government declared its intention to impose Sharia law nationwide, and that continued after the 1986 election. The NIF's alliance with the military's Islamist elements provided more than just coercive military power. For Turabi, recruiting disgruntled military officers into his camp and using them as the main vessel for seizing power 'allowed him to frame his goals as dovetailing with the mainstream project of saving the nation and SAF from tearing themselves apart'.⁹

KEY EVENTS IN THE GENESIS OF A PREDATORY POLITICAL ECONOMY



The sweeping changes carried out by the Islamists after the June 1989 coup reinforced the army's role as a vessel for the coup, rather than its captain. The 'institutionalized, traditionally meritocratic nature of the Sudanese army' was 'completely undermined' during Islamist rule, according to an April 2016 report. 'Fear of the army officers moving against the government was partly behind the systemic erosion of [the] SAF as a professional army.'¹⁰ Within four years of taking power, Bashir and Turabi's self-styled 'National Salvation Regime' dismissed some 1 500 officers and 11 000 soldiers, replacing them with 'young graduates of the pro-NIF military academy'.¹¹ The military's structure, management and mission were completely reinvented. 'With these changes, the SAF was in charge now of defending the Islamic state, not the territorially-defined nation – i.e., defending the Islamic regime rather than attending to rules and bureaucratic ethos seen as un-Islamic,' El-Battahani wrote in 2021.¹²

Deep state, grey commerce

One of the most consequential initiatives of the Bashir era happened within its first few years. The programme was called Tamkeen, and it impacted virtually every aspect of Sudan's government and economy. 'The new regime was highly suspicious of state institutions and universities, wary of their role in the downfall of former military regimes,' an expert in the political economy of markets and state-building in Africa wrote in 2014. 'It therefore pursued a harsh policy of *tamkeen* (empowerment) to capture the state for itself.'¹³ In practice, Tamkeen provided a pretext for the wholesale transformation of Sudan's public sector institutions and many components of the economy. Those changes, in turn, created an environment ripe for crime and corruption, including bribery, nepotism and cronyism.¹⁴

Under Tamkeen, the regime ensured that Islamists were installed in key positions in the government bureaucracy and had privileged access to commercial opportunities and state largesse. It also ensured that non-Islamists were purged from the military and civil service.¹⁵ As a result, the composition of civil service and state-owned enterprises was transformed. '[T]he regime fired and reshuffled a large number of disciplined employees in the public sector, parastatal corporations, and even parts of privately-owned businesses', the Economic Research Forum noted. Those employees were replaced by NIF members, who made up for their lack of experience with their fierce loyalty to the new regime.¹⁶ Universities' faculties were overhauled while non-Islamist student activism was restricted; non-governmental organizations were shuttered and sometimes replaced by NIF-approved successors. In a short time, the nepotistic appointment of individuals perceived as loyal to the Islamist movement eroded the human capital of the public sector.¹⁷

Tamkeen devastated Sudan's justice and accountability institutions, as well. Thousands of police were laid off in the early 1990s. The criminal justice system was completely overhauled, undermining independence and institutional memory; court capacity was gutted as judges were purged.¹⁸ Civilian-led accountability and dispute-resolution mechanisms in the executive branch were decimated. 'The legal system grew so politicised that international jurisdictions became routine for corporate arbitration proceedings (even when the government was a party),' noted the *Review of African Political Economy*.¹⁹

The takeover by Bashir and Turabi's network was not limited to public sector institutions, however. In the first years after the 1989 coup, neoliberal reforms were used as a pretext to transfer public assets to insiders. 'The crony practices adopted in privatizing public enterprises that the government defined as "financially unviable" coincided with the dismissal of a large number of public employees as a cunning plan hatched by the NIF to control Sudan's economy', noted the Economic Research Forum. 'Among [the] unpleasant results was the birth of a parasitic capitalist class that did not recognize

free competition in managing businesses.²⁰ Ultimately, these manoeuvres allowed regime insiders to establish dominant positions across a range of strategically important industries.

A new class of companies, meanwhile, emerged in the shadows. These firms, referred to as ‘grey companies’, blur the lines between public and private enterprise – and legitimate and illicit business – as they are typically nominally private firms that are controlled by senior military or party officials. A 2008 US Department of State cable published by Wikileaks described conversations with a party insider who stated that ‘many ministries reward loyalists in military, police, and intelligence by giving them control over semi-private companies’ and that ‘the regime then unfairly rewards these “grey companies” with government contracts’.²¹

The proliferation of grey companies – estimated to be more than 400 in number by the end of Bashir’s stay in office – created a set of entrenched economic interests aligned with the party. ‘The single most important objective of these companies is to ensure the economic and political dominance of the ruling party, through financing its operations and elections and providing jobs and businesses to its supporters,’ a report by Sudan Democracy First Group said. ‘[T]he dominance of the [party] in social and economic life will continue for some time through these grey companies, even if it is removed from government.’²²

Profiteers, proxies and pariahs

The penetration and capture of Sudan’s security institutions, civilian bureaucracies and strategic industries also created fertile ground for transnational criminal activity. Three features of Sudan’s political ecosystem created particularly significant opportunities for predatory organized criminal groups to thrive: long-standing illicit cross-border trade, a reliance on non-state armed groups and political isolation.

First, vibrant informal and criminal markets have flourished along Sudan’s entire periphery for generations, and Sudanese state-embedded actors have a long history of participating in cross-border illicit trade. Straddling Sudan’s frontiers with each of the seven countries it borders, armed groups and commercial networks alike often have extensive and long-standing connections through commercial relationships, ethnicity, intermarriage and more. These cross-border relationships have been important for the smuggling and trafficking of human beings, as well as a range of commodities including gold, fuel, weapons, stolen cars and looted goods. Certain macroeconomic policies, including subsidies of grain and fuel, only exacerbated smuggling and provided regime insiders with lucrative opportunities that sometimes entailed profiting from illicit trades they were mandated to disrupt.

In addition, the reliance on non-state armed groups, including some that had been engaged in organized criminal activities, to respond to unrest had the impact of bolstering the credibility, resource base and organization of predatory illicit networks. The use of proxy militias as the army’s de facto infantry had been an established practice in Sudan before the 1989 coup, and these criminal militias often used violence as a primary tool to advance their criminal and commercial objectives. In the mid-1980s, for example, Sudan outsourced its counterinsurgency to mostly Arab militias that it deployed aggressively to weaken support for the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) through scorched-earth attacks on communities suspected of sympathizing with this southern rebel group. The militias received no formal salary but were told that they could keep what they looted or recovered during military operations.²³ By 1986 well-armed raiding parties of 500–1000 men had begun systematically



Government-backed: a battalion of Islamist militiamen departing for the war front in southern Sudan, 2002.
 Deploying proxy militias was a strategy to advance the state's criminal and commercial objectives. © Salah Omar/AFP via Getty Images

to strip the assets of the Ngok, Abiem, Malual, and Tuic Dinka populations of North Bahr El Ghazal, and forced their displacement into pro-government territories', a Small Arms Survey working paper found.²⁴

After Bashir took power, this commoditized violence expanded significantly, manifesting in the form of mercenary deployments abroad; monetized chokepoints in the movement of goods, funds and people where rents could be extracted in the form of bribery and extortion, looted goods or protection rackets; and a collapse in the rule of law in areas under these groups' physical control. After Bashir took power, the use of loosely organized militias and paramilitary groups continued, as it allowed him to keep the SAF's influence and ambition in check while still responding to threats to the regime's security. 'Under Islamist inspired policies of popular mobilization and cultural resurgence, both the police and the military had their authority diffused between paramilitary organizations, community forces, and client militias', Small Arms Survey found.²⁵ Outsourcing military operations this way also allowed commoditized violence to expand significantly.

Finally, isolation has incubated illicit markets. From the time it took power in 1989, the NCP's ideological underpinnings played a significant role in isolating the regime both at home and abroad. The political and economic isolation that resulted from hard-line Islamist policies entrenched the regime's networks at home, catalyzed partnerships with pariah governments and transnational terrorist networks, and created strong incentives – and often an imperative – to conduct transactions underground. Meanwhile, the quarter century of pariahdom incentivized circumvention of the formal banking system for both licit and illicit businesses, left large swathes of the country excluded from the financial sector and divorced the development of Sudan's banking sector from the evolution of its counterparts abroad. The isolation of the Bashir era corresponded to the entrenchment of state-embedded illicit networks and catalyzed new criminal partnerships.

The cumulative result of these dynamics is a territory where many segments of the population, as well as foreign entities present in Sudan, have strong incentives to engage in criminal activity. On the one hand, access to economic opportunity is obstructed by the elite capture of strategic industries and the

country's isolation from the formal structures of the global economy. On the other hand, Sudan is home to vibrant criminal markets and longstanding acceptance of unregulated and informal commerce. In this ecosystem, there have been ample opportunities for personal economic gain for the thousands of armed Sudanese men with experience carrying out acts of violence.

Moreover, throughout Bashir's tenure, Sudan proved to be a safe haven or operational base for numerous terrorist groups, armed groups seeking to depose neighbouring governments and heavily sanctioned foreign government entities involved in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Osama bin Laden, for one, spent several years in Sudan, using the country as an operational base with the support of the government.²⁶ Hamas financiers have owned and operated high-profile businesses in Sudan for decades and have held influential positions in some of the most important state-owned enterprises, such as SUDATEL, the national telecommunications provider.²⁷ Hamas and Khartoum were also linked by a common patron in Tehran. For decades, the Bashir regime was a steadfast ally of Iran; throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Bashir regime and private companies closely associated with Sudan's military repeatedly served as a conduit for Iran's arms exports to Gaza and to Houthi rebels in Yemen.²⁸

Sudan's links to illicit actors, terrorist groups and pariah regimes came with a significant cost: the imposition of far-reaching and economically crippling sanctions imposed by the United States.²⁹ Those measures, in turn, had the impact of limiting the number of partners willing to do business with the regime. As many of those partners were criminal networks or pariah governments themselves, international isolation and illicit activity birthed a vicious cycle for Sudan.

Unstable cartel

The capture of strategic industries allowed the regime to instrumentalize key commercial enterprises. For example, the telecommunications sector was dominated by a small cluster of service providers with links to the ruling party, army and intelligence services. This deep penetration into the industry also facilitated the regime's surveillance, censorship and disruption of digital communications. In addition to setting up one of the most sophisticated cyber-espionage units in the region – known as the Cyber Jihad Unit – Sudan has become a hotspot for internet shutdowns during periods of political unrest. Similarly, the SAF has leveraged its control over and connections with a series of domestic airlines to advance military objectives in Sudan and beyond.³⁰ UN investigators have documented numerous instances in which companies with known links to the SAF have been involved in aerial bombardments, in weapons deliveries to Darfur in violation of a UN arms embargo, and in transferring weapons and military equipment to armed groups elsewhere in the region.³¹

Regime outsiders had little access to commercial opportunities and were subject to unfair commercial practices that gave their regime-linked competitors an overwhelming advantage. In addition, the erosion or manipulation of key public sector institutions meant to safeguard the rule of law denied disenfranchised parties the formal or legal means to challenge the status quo or advance their own



Terrorist-friendly regime: Osama bin Laden used Sudan as an operational base with the government's support. © NY Daily News archive via Getty Images

interests. For much of Bashir's tenure, the sidelined groups that amassed political clout or extracted concessions from the regime did so by taking up arms or targeting economic infrastructure vital to the regime's interests. As a result, the dominant security forces resorted to the frequent use of lethal force to take control of valuable territory, protect oil infrastructure, suppress political dissent and put down armed rebellions.



Sudan's oil reserves provided the regime with a ready source of money. © Roberto Schmidt/AFP via Getty Images

Bashir's government was not a monolithic actor with clearly defined and consistent interests. A key component of the regime's strategy for retaining power was preventing any individual institution or network from amassing too much power. Stoking competition between rival power centres may have helped Bashir coup-proof his regime, but his strategy resulted in the proliferation of security agencies and paramilitary groups, all of which required some form of payment or patronage to secure their loyalty. This divide-and-rule strategy pursued by Bashir resulted in the emergence of four major power centres – the Islamists' NCP, the army, the intelligence services and a carousel of proxy militias and paramilitary groups.

While these networks often collaborated, even if on a transactional basis, to maintain the regime's grip on power, they also competed with one another for control of commercial opportunities and political power. Crucially, control over allocation of these rent-seeking opportunities provided Bashir with the budget needed to secure the loyalty of a diverse set of political factions and armed groups. The doling out of access to and control over natural resources, key industries and lucrative criminal markets preserved the alignment, however unsteady, of these key power centres – and with them, the regime's grip on power.

Under Bashir, the SAF in particular enjoyed privileged status in Sudan, benefiting disproportionately from state largesse during the decades when easy oil money filled Sudan's state coffers. With the military's stranglehold over political power in Khartoum, the ever-present security threat posed by armed groups along Sudan's periphery allowed the SAF to dominate public spending. This left the military awash in resources compared to other agencies and civilian entrepreneurs, and this cash propelled a rapid expansion of the military's business interests. While its investments in the manufacturing and export of weapons certainly boomed,³² SAF-linked commercial operations were not limited to the defence sector. Military-linked companies set up shop in virtually every lucrative economic sector in



A mural depicting Ahmed Al-Kheir, a teacher who died in detention after his arrest by members of the National Intelligence and Security Services, deployed by the regime to crush dissent. © Ebrahim Hamid/AFP via Getty Images

Sudan, with some Sudanese economists estimating that the military controlled more than four-fifths of the economy.³³

In terms of capability to deploy coercive violence, the most significant counterbalance to the SAF for much of Bashir's reign was the NISS, whose commanders largely had strong Islamist bona fides. In the early 2000s, the NISS operated like a prototypical secret police force. It engaged in arbitrary detentions without warrants, held detainees incommunicado without charges, attacked protesters, targeted dissidents, infiltrated newspapers and civic groups, disappeared opponents and tortured detainees. The NISS was heavily militarized, with surveillance and cyber offensive capabilities, and access to tanks, helicopters and heavy weaponry, plus its senior leaders were major players in Sudan's economy.³⁴ The NISS became a primary 'agent of fear', even as it became 'a super-agency that can respond to any political, economic or social threat', according to Amnesty International.³⁵

While the use of proxies gave rise to a number of semi-autonomous militias and paramilitary groups, the RSF emerged as the most potent and well-resourced of these. The RSF traces its origins to the government-backed Janjaweed militias that conducted a systematic scorched earth campaign in Darfur from 2003 to 2005 that claimed over 200 000 lives, displaced 2.5 million people and left infrastructure in ruins and entire villages razed.³⁶ After the Darfur conflict began to recede, many elements of the Janjaweed were partly integrated into Sudan's security sector, though they largely maintained autonomy and continued to engage in widespread criminality, controlling independent revenue streams and significant firepower. Backed by revenue from gold production and more experienced in ground combat than any other military force in Sudan, the RSF emerged as one of the most potent armed entities in Sudan, and its military might and commercial operations were mutually reinforcing.³⁷

The ecosystem that emerged under Bashir was thus dominated by an unstable cartel that sought – and often achieved – tight control over three political commodities: money, violence and information. Money was both a means and an end, as the ultimate goal of self-enrichment was made possible only by maintaining control over the very same riches. Financial might, in turn, begot military might, and violence was a primary tool for defending commercial interests and silencing critics. The regime also leveraged its commercial dominance to penetrate the media and telecommunications sector and acquire sophisticated and intrusive surveillance technology from foreign vendors. Control over the flow of information shielded the cartel's murky business ventures from public scrutiny, weakened and compromised dissidents and created numerous tactical advantages for targeted attacks on political opponents and military confrontations on the battlefield.



A CAPTURED STATE AND CRIMINAL MARKETS AMID CRISES

Bashir's divide-and-rule strategy provided a means for extending his stay in power, but it did not result in greater political stability per se. On the contrary, the system was highly vulnerable to economic and security shocks, three of which resulted in tectonic shifts in Sudan's political, economic and criminal ecosystems.

The first major shock to Bashir's ruling system was a schism with Turabi in the late 1990s. Although he had been installed largely as a figurehead for Turabi's Islamist movement, Bashir amassed wealth and power in his own right throughout the 1990s. Nevertheless, there was growing resentment within his clique and the SAF that they were taking a back seat to Turabi. These tensions came to a head in 1999, when Turabi took steps to marginalize key Bashir allies and restrict the power of the executive. Turabi put forward a bill in the National Assembly that would have circumscribed the powers of the presidency. In response, Bashir sidestepped the constitution altogether, declaring a state of emergency, suspending Parliament and expelling Turabi from government.³⁸ After purging Turabi and other prominent Islamists, Bashir continued to wield influence through the NIF's successor, the rebranded NCP, which proved more of a political and commercial coalition than an ideological movement.



The high-profile expulsion, however, did not translate to increased regime security or stability. Once banished from the government, Turabi and his acolytes were instrumental in stoking the unrest in Darfur that led to the rebellion in 2002. This rebellion ignited one of the costliest and most

Unstable alliance: Hassan al-Turabi (second left) was expelled from government by Bashir. © Salah Omar/AFP via Getty Images

internationally condemned counterinsurgencies in Sudan's history; it was also significant because it gave rise to the Janjaweed, predecessor of the RSF.

The second major shock to Bashir's ruling system was a seismic shift in the regime's sources of income and the relative power of the networks controlling Sudan's resource-rich territory in the early 2010s. In addition to losing most of its oil revenue when South Sudan seceded, disputes over territory and transit fees resulted in a violent conflict over the Heglig Oil Fields and the financially devastating shutdown of oil production. The loss of oil revenue following South Sudan's secession, combined with the shutdown of 2012, wreaked havoc on Sudan's economy and threatened its patronage regime as the pool of resources available to disseminate contracted. This, in turn, provoked popular dissent as commodity prices spiked.

Incidentally, Sudan's oil bust coincided with a boom in the country's gold production, which resulted in a major shift in the geographic and institutional balance of power, given that the lion's share of artisanal production was controlled by para-military groups from Darfur. The RSF, led by former Janjaweed commander General Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo, benefited from both the oil bust and the gold boom. As Hemedti's forces were deployed across Sudan to quell unrest, strengthening their resource base and experience, RSF-linked companies and networks controlled much of Sudan's gold production, especially after the arrest of Musa Hilal, one of Hemedti's main rivals. In effect, Hemedti's forces grew wealthier and were desperately needed by the Bashir regime, greatly increasing their leverage over Khartoum within just a few years.



Veteran of conflict: General Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo, head of the Rapid Support Forces, was the former commander of the Janjaweed militias in Darfur. © Mahmoud Hjjaj/Andalou Agency via Getty Images

The third major shock – the final blow for the Bashir regime – was the revolution that began in December 2019. This catalyzed the implosion of the president's ruling coalition, with the strongest armed components, the SAF and the RSF, taking the reins after his ouster. During this period, there was a brief and incomplete introduction of civilians into government. However, there were also sustained efforts by a range of illiberal forces within and outside the country to subvert a transition to civilian-led democracy and compete for control over the state. Despite some progress, a fundamental imbalance of power between civilian and military elements of the transitional government both hindered progress towards reform and rendered some of the civilians' goals dangerous. Rather than be subjected to civilian oversight, the SAF and RSF retained control over processes and decisions surrounding reform of the security services. In short, the SAF and RSF controlled the guns and thus called the shots.

Revolution, reaction and a return to war

On the surface, the revolution in Sudan initially seemed to yield a major redistribution of power and wealth. The year following Bashir's ouster saw the inauguration of a power-sharing government with a civilian prime minister, the forfeiture of billions of dollars in the hands of prominent Islamist figures



Short-lived freedom: demonstrators call for Sudan's military leaders to cede control to the citizenry, May 2019. © David Degner via Getty Images

and organizations, the reorganization of the intelligence services and the redistribution of its assets, and promises from the military that it would open its books and disclose details about its commercial operations.

However, throughout the transition, elements of the Bashir regime – including the NCP and the NISS – maintained a level of disruptive influence on the transition. Members of the NISS, for example, remained potential spoilers even after the force was restructured. Many demobilized NISS officers were not disarmed by the government, and one contingent mounted a short-lived but disruptive mutiny in early 2021.³⁹

Many of the efforts to undermine Sudan's transition, however, have been more insidious. NCP allies demonstrated a capability for economic disruption. A tribal leader who was also a long-time NCP member, for example, orchestrated a series of blockades in Port Sudan that created significant economic and commercial disruptions and, in turn, placed immense pressure on the civilian government. On the surface, the unrest at the port reflected a sense of marginalization by the Beja, an ethnic group concentrated in eastern Sudan. The Empowerment Removal Committee – an anti-corruption body set up by the civilian elements of the transitional government to investigate crimes and abuses committed during the Bashir era – had expelled officials, and the long history of political purges disguised as anti-corruption drives lent some credence to arguments that the removals were unjust and politically motivated, particularly as other groups along Sudan's periphery had gained clout through peace negotiations. However, numerous analysts have raised concerns that the military may have covertly supported the blockade to destabilize the civilian regime, a suspicion that only grew following the blockade organizer's endorsement of the coup that would push civilians out of the government in October 2021.⁴⁰

In addition, the duo of military forces, the SAF and RSF, ceded minor concessions, but none fundamentally shifted the balance of power or constrained their authority. Push came to shove as Abdalla Hamdok, then prime minister, became more outspoken and the Empowerment Removal Committee's attention drew closer to the military's interests. On 25 October 2021, the leader of the SAF, General

Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF's General Hemedti ousted their civilian counterparts. Progress toward accountability and reform was reversed in an instant. Members of the Empowerment Removal Committee were detained, and a new body was established to appeal the decisions made by the committee. The coup disrupted the brief period of expanded freedom of expression and reporting ushered in by Bashir's ouster, and the raids on news outlets and attacks and threats to journalists that were so common during the Bashir era swiftly resumed.

Malign intervention

From the outset of Sudan's revolution, malign foreign actors sought to impede progress towards a democratic transition. These foreign actors were motivated by both profit and geopolitics, seeking to limit the influence of great power adversaries while cultivating commercial opportunities for companies linked to their own rulers and security forces.

One example of this is the Wagner Group, which initially deployed 'instructors' to Sudan following a series of commercial and security agreements between Bashir and Putin in Sochi in 2017. Wagner won a series of mining concessions and deployed hundreds of these instructors to advise elements of Sudan's military and senior political leadership. After the revolution broke out, Wagner instructors were developing an elaborate strategy to discredit protestors and keep Bashir's regime in power. One document from early January 2019 'proposes spreading claims that protesters were attacking mosques and hospitals,' a CNN report stated, drawing from a cache of leaked Wagner Group files. Public messaging would, according to the report, attempt to paint demonstrators as 'enemies of Islam and traditional values', who supported stronger relations with Israel and LGBT rights.⁴¹ Throughout the transition, Wagner remained ardently supportive of Sudan's military and the RSF, at the expense of civilian elements of the transition.

For their part, external powers ostensibly favouring a transition to civilian rule failed to impose any consequences for obstructing or undermining the transition. While foreign governments showered praise on Sudan's protestors and highlighted their persistence, bravery and creativity, few imposed any meaningful consequences on those responsible for the coup.

Despite Washington's substantial investment in Sudan's transition, the putsch passed without the US government imposing any retributive penalties on its architects. US assistance funds and programmes were severely disrupted, if not altogether halted, by the October 2021 coup. However, the only US sanctions related to Sudan imposed during the period between the coup and the onset of fighting in 2023 was the March 2022 designation of the Central Reserve Police, a paramilitary force that was responsible for violent crackdowns against anti-coup protestors but that ultimately lacks the political clout of the SAF or RSF. According to several people familiar with the discussions, senior diplomats in the US Department of State's Africa Bureau were concerned that the baggage surrounding sanctions would undermine diplomatic channels.⁴²

US inaction was more than offset by the aggressive engagement of the gulf monarchies, and American diplomats ultimately took a backseat to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In November 2021, the US and UK began issuing statements and coordinating as part of the 'Quad', a new bloc that also included Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In its first statement, which came in the aftermath of the October 2021 coup, the Quad touted the four governments' support for the 'aspirations for a democratic and peaceful nation' of the Sudanese people. In other words, the primary proponents of a transition to democratic civilian rule were taking their cues from a pair of monarchies that had quite visibly worked against that objective since the fall of Bashir more than two years earlier.

Failure to avert war

In 2022, the UN and AU, together with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an East African regional body that has engaged in responses to crises in the region, formed a 'tripartite mechanism' to try to end gridlock in post-coup discussions about Sudan's transition. However, many civilian elements refused to participate because of concerns about legitimizing the coup.⁴³ What remained, then, were international talks aimed at reform that excluded many of the primary catalysts of the revolution.

Through the tripartite mechanism, on 5 December 2022, a collection of representatives from the SAF, RSF and several pro-democracy movements and opposition groups crafted a framework agreement that would ostensibly put Sudan on the path to a civilian-led government. The agreement was heralded by some as Sudan's 'best hope' for a democratic transition, but it was condemned by many interested in resisting it, some of whom boycotted the process and took to the streets in protest after the deal was announced.⁴⁴

The major dispute trigger between Burhan and Hemedti's camps was the timeline for formally integrating the RSF into the regular armed forces, with the SAF preferring an expedited process and the paramilitary group wanting to retain its autonomy for the next decade. Efforts were made to bridge the divide and ease tensions. The two generals held a meeting on 8 April 2023 on a farm just outside Khartoum, at which Burhan requested that Hemedti withdraw troops from an RSF stronghold in El-Fasher, Darfur, and cease the transfer of forces into the capital. Hemedti's primary request was the removal of Egyptian forces from an SAF air base in Merowe, a city in northern Sudan. 'The men also spoke privately and appeared to agree to de-escalate', Reuters reported, citing diplomats involved in the mediations. 'But despite plans to talk again the next day, no more meetings took place.'⁴⁵

As tensions mounted regarding the direction of Sudan's top security services, other Bashir-era networks were staging a comeback that began quietly but took on an increasingly provocative tone. Just days after the final meeting between Hemedti and Burhan, Mohamed Tahir Ayla – an NCP stalwart who briefly served as prime minister in the twilight of the Bashir era – delivered a provocative speech, denouncing the framework agreement and indicating a willingness to resort to violence to achieve the movement's political objectives. 'There is no place for the framework agreement,' Ayla said, in a video viewed by Reuters. 'We are more prepared now than before to take up arms, and take what is ours by our own hands.'⁴⁶

Networks linked to the NISS also resurged at the outset of conflict, according to media reports. 'Thousands of men who worked as intelligence operatives under former president Omar al-Bashir and have ties to his Islamist movement are fighting alongside the army in Sudan's war [...] complicating efforts to end the bloodshed', Reuters reported, citing military and intelligence sources. '[F]ormer NISS officers also help the military by collecting intelligence on its enemies in the latest conflict.'⁴⁷

Following the meeting between Burhan and Hemedti, each side began to prepare for war, carefully studying one another's troop movements and waiting for an opportunity to strike.⁴⁸ Their actions reflected an enduring dynamic: for Hemedti and Burhan, official negotiations were – in reality – superficial. The formal levers of the state and the official orders handed down to their troops reflected only part of their political arsenal. Each leveraged significant power through unofficial channels, drawing resources from illicit revenue streams and engaging in criminal partnerships with a range of domestic and foreign networks. The attention devoted to formal diplomatic efforts tragically came at the expense of efforts to identify, analyze and disrupt the illicit networks and activities that underpin Hemedti and Burhan's war machines.



CONFRONTING THE VIOLENT CRIMINAL ECOSYSTEM HEAD-ON

As a result of the decades-long penetration of state institutions and strategic industries by predatory networks, Sudan emerged as a criminal ecosystem both controlling and beset by violence, dominated by armed actors entangled with mafia groups and patronized by a web of foreign governments with shifting and competing interests. Spoilers lurk throughout the country's government and security institutions. Traffickers, war profiteers and predatory investors who opportunistically seek to turn Sudan's troubles into a payday provide financial resources, military equipment and technology to the combatants, strengthening their lethality and emboldening their ambitions. Censorship, disinformation campaigns and internet and telecom blackouts have allowed the fog of war to seep into the digital realm.

This ecosystem has been shaped both by the incentives of the predatory actors that thrive within it, as well as by several major economic and geopolitical shocks that altered the relative resource bases, incentives and constraints faced by the dominant networks. The revolution that began in 2019 with the deposition of Bashir highlighted key impediments to addressing and transforming this ecosystem. Three challenges stand out: the pernicious impact of illicit markets on the incentives and capabilities of predatory illicit networks vying for power; the opportunistic and cynical role of foreign autocratic governments in the transition; and the enduring, fundamental imbalance of power between civilians and the security sector.

The vibrancy of criminal markets, importantly, is not only a challenge unto itself but also a complicating factor for addressing other challenges. Both domestic and foreign predatory networks depend on criminal tactics and partnerships with criminal enterprises in order to advance their political, economic and security objectives. Those in control of the formal bureaucracy and strategic industries have deployed them for violent and criminal purposes, while those who lack formal control over Sudan's state resources and institutions often sustain their operations through engagement in criminal activities.

Accordingly, to be effective, strategies for building peace in Sudan must include plans for dealing with predatory networks and organized criminal groups. Analysis by the GI-TOC has found that thorny issues like organized crime and trafficking are often left off the agenda during peace processes. 'The general approach to illicit flows within a peacekeeping, peacebuilding scenario is that it is an issue



Any strategy for post-conflict reconstruction in Sudan must include plans for tackling organized criminal groups and predatory networks. © AFP via Getty Images

that can be left “till later”, once the state is stabilised and the political issues resolved,’ Mark Shaw and Tuesday Reitano wrote in a May 2017 study: ‘However, case studies almost always suggest that the relationship between illicit markets and conflict deepens over time, and serves as a centrifugal force to state consolidation.’⁴⁹

There are numerous options for disrupting the illicit networks that underpin Sudan’s ecosystem of crime, corruption and violence, but destabilizing these networks is dangerous in the absence of a coherent and coordinated strategy or a commitment to enact systemic change. However, all of the effort and resources devoted to ending Sudan’s conflict and revitalizing reforms will be squandered if policymakers fail to account for the role of illicit networks and criminal markets.

In order to mitigate the corrosive impact of predatory criminal networks on peace, human rights and the rule of law, the following initiatives should be considered.

First, peacebuilding and reform strategies in Sudan must acknowledge that Burhan and Hemedti – the leaders of the warring factions in Sudan – are kingpins, not kings. Affording them the legitimacy of statesmen in peace talks or any future power-sharing arrangement is particularly harmful when those arrangements fail to include key constituencies within Sudanese civil society.

Secondly, relying on certain governments as intermediaries or power brokers when they actively participate in and stoke illicit markets only strengthens the predatory networks responsible for crime, corruption and war. Leaning on partners because of their access to or influence with the warring parties risks allowing those governments the opportunity to manipulate the process to advance their own objectives and the interests of their allies. A past record of participation in or permissiveness of organized crime, illicit trafficking or violation of arms embargoes in the region, for example, should disqualify foreign governments from playing a leading role in peace talks or shaping the transition.

Thirdly, strategies should not overlook the penetration and criminalization of key strategic industries such as banking, extractives, aviation and telecommunications. Many peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction strategies focus on the role of public sector institutions, but the case of Sudan shows how state-embedded predatory networks often rely on commercial actors to do their bidding. While armed groups and illicit networks thrive in the underground economy, war profiteers and their networks often seek access to the mainstream financial system, as well as to luxury goods and services abroad. Disabling the machinery that allows violent entrepreneurs to sustain their business models will make their operations more difficult, less profitable and inherently riskier.

Fourth, whether facilitating dialogue, carrying out targeted measures aimed at disrupting networks, providing humanitarian aid or engaging in post-conflict programming to promote good governance and accountability, practitioners must assess the risk that predatory networks could obstruct or roll back their progress.

Finally, international actors should not make compromises on behalf of Sudanese citizens when it comes to access to justice or the provision of amnesty for crimes committed under Bashir, during the transition or since the outbreak of the conflict. Issues such as justice, accountability and compensation for damages inflicted during the conflict must be made by legitimate and credible representation from a broad cross-section of civil society actors.

The reports in this series that will follow will show how the dynamics discussed here unfolded with respect to the various networks competing for resources and political power in Sudan. They will delve into how each of these networks – the Islamists, the Sudan Armed Forces, the Rapid Support Forces and the intelligence services – have each leveraged control over the state to expand or protect their involvement in criminal markets and, in turn, relied on cross-border criminal activity to strengthen or seize control over state institutions. The case studies will also show that, throughout the post-Bashir period, external policies and interventions in Sudan have neglected to account for the role of illicit markets and criminal conduct carried out by state-embedded actors, an omission that has undermined the effectiveness of those very interventions.



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