



Security, Fragmentation, and Civic Futures: Rethinking Reform in Sudan's Militarised Political Economy

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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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Acknowledgements:

We thank Kholood Khair, Aida Abbashar, and Tim Eppele for their thoughtful reviews and constructive feedback on earlier drafts. We are grateful to the PeaceRep editorial team for their support in preparing this brief. We also acknowledge, with deep respect, the Sudanese interviewees and civic actors who shared their experiences in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

Design: Smith Design Agency

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/6647>

Contents

Executive Summary	01
Policy Recommendations	02
Introduction: Beyond the Security Sector Reform Template	03
Research Context and Methodology	03
Context: Sudan's Security Arena in Historical and Political Perspective	05
The Political Economy of Militarisation and Fiscal Fragmentation	08
Civic Alternatives and the Governance-Security Nexus	09
Why Reform Failed: Lessons from the 2019–2021 Transition	10
Post-War Risks: Fragmentation, Foreign Influence, and Civic Collapse	11
Conclusion	12
Endnotes	13

Executive Summary

Sudan's security sector has long functioned not merely as a military institution but as a mechanism of authoritarian governance and economic extraction. Since independence, successive regimes have maintained power through coercive force and the dispersal of fiscal authority to unaccountable military, paramilitary, and commercial actors.

This brief contends that any serious approach to security sector reform (SSR) in Sudan must reckon with the political economy that sustains militarised rule. It focuses on Sudan's colonial military legacies, the political economy of security financing, and the emergence of civic resistance as both a political and fiscal counter-power. Drawing from archival, civic, and interview-based sources, the brief provides a grounded account of how popular actors have theorised and contested militarised governance. We argue that SSR has repeatedly failed not because of technical deficiencies, but because of exclusionary settlements, donor complicity, and a refusal to confront the core structures of military-fiscal rule.

A future reform agenda must centre civic actors, address fiscal fragmentation, and challenge the transnational architecture that has enabled elite impunity. The insights presented here aim to inform humanitarian and development interventions by the United Kingdom government and other partners who are seeking to forge an enduring peace once the opportunity arises.

Policy Recommendations

For Donors and External Actors:

- ▶ Confront fiscal opacity: Integrate revenue reform into peace and SSR agendas from the outset.
- ▶ Reject elite pacts without civic grounding: No more agreements entered without broad popular consultation, that exclude local actors, or that entrench military autonomy.
- ▶ Support civic fiscal knowledge: Fund Sudanese-led research, audit initiatives, and community-based fiscal oversight mechanisms, as well as information sharing between these bodies.
- ▶ Condition aid on demilitarisation: Tie economic support to concrete steps toward dissolving parastatal militarised enterprises.

For Sudanese Civic Actors:

- ▶ Rebuild cross-regional coalitions: Link resistance committees, trade unions, and marginalised regions around a consultation process geared to produce a shared security vision.
- ▶ Engage in continuous communication and consultation with the constituencies that support various resistance groups to prevent anti-reform forces from sowing distrust and misinformation intended to weaken leadership-community ties.
- ▶ Continue theorising security reform: Treat SSR as a civic, economic, and moral project rather than a technical fix.
- ▶ Assert ownership over the future: Demand inclusion in any negotiation process and reject models that treat the military as a permanent stakeholder.

Introduction: Beyond the Security Sector Reform Template

Standard SSR models treat security institutions as discrete domains for technical reform. Yet in Sudan, the security arena is woven into the state's political economy, its labour markets, and its social hierarchies. The army and paramilitary forces are not neutral guardians of sovereignty but central actors in sustaining authoritarian rule, extracting resources, and shaping the contours of political life.

Since the 2019 revolution, Sudanese civic actors have articulated sharp critiques of militarisation. Resistance committees, professional associations, and activist platforms have proposed alternative security visions rooted in civiness (*medania*), accountability, and economic justice. This brief builds on those critiques. It brings together the historical trajectory of the security sector, the evolution of its financing, and the civic responses to militarised governance. We ask: What are the political, economic, and civic conditions under which security reform in Sudan might become viable?

Research Context and Methodology

This policy brief expands on over a decade of collaborative research by the authors, including archival work on Sudan's military and fiscal history, analysis of peace agreements in the University of Edinburgh's [Peace Agreements Database \(PA-X\)](#) and related reform attempts, and interviews with Sudanese civic actors and resistance committees.¹ It is grounded in primary source materials, which range from budget speeches and civic charters to interview transcripts and policy documents, rather than abstract models. While conceptually informed, the analysis reflects lived experiences of militarised governance and civic resistance. Our aim is to present a historically and empirically anchored account of Sudan's security arena that challenges both technocratic assumptions and elite-centred narratives.

The findings are informed by a stakeholder mapping exercise conducted between October 2022 and April 2023, interrupted by the outbreak of war, and later completed from research bases in Uganda and Cairo.

Seven Sudanese researchers from our network conducted 10-12 semi-structured interviews each, focusing on emergent civic actors, resistance committees, and neighbourhood associations in Khartoum and key peripheral regions. This process was complemented by workshops and collaborative analysis sessions, including a research synthesis workshop in Cairo in October 2024. Over 70 respondents participated in the study.

The research received ethics approval through the LSE ethics committee in 2022. All interviews followed updated consent procedures reflecting participants' preferences and security considerations. The mapping exercise has fed into other outputs. These include this joint SSR policy brief and Matthew Benson-Strohmayer's research on Sudan and South Sudan's predatory revenue complex, which examines how peace agreements have embedded rather than disrupted the war economy.² The authors have also drawn upon numerous UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office briefings they have provided on Sudan's anticipated post-war recovery.

Context: Sudan's Security Arena in Historical and Political Perspective

Sudan's security order reflects the legacy of conquest armies deployed under Turco-Egyptian and the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Unlike states shaped by liberation struggles, Sudan's independence retained the hierarchies and logics of colonial coercion. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) has primarily functioned to pacify internal threats, often targeting marginalised peripheries while maintaining elite control from the centre.³ This continuity matters: the SAF inherited much of its organisational logic from the Egyptian military model.

From the Sudan Defence Force's regional segmentation under British indirect rule, to the Janjaweed and Rapid Support Forces' (RSF), a tribal based fighting force armed by the state to fight its peripheral wars, the security sector has evolved through hybrid, often extra-legal instruments. Militia contracting, racialised recruitment, and military-led business networks became tools for managing rebellion, co-opting dissent, and enriching insiders. This trajectory culminated in the post-2019 period with the uneasy coexistence of the SAF and RSF, whose institutional rivalry exploded in the on-going war, perpetuated by support from outside powers on all sides, that commenced in 2023.⁴

Across Sudan's postcolonial history, peacemaking was the preferred tool for the few fragile attempts at state building. Sudan has had numerous peace agreements that failed to end conflict or bring about any notion of prosperity or a sense of national unity. The [2020 Juba Peace Agreement](#) is central to understanding how armed actors weaponised the security agenda contributing to the post Bashir's state fragility and fostering social fragmentation underway since the 2023 war.

A timeline of key security sector-related moments:

- 1972: Addis Ababa Agreement integrates Anyanya into SAF, which established a precedent for future failed integration. Anyanya was the southern Sudanese separatist rebel army formed during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972 which later became the core from within which the current Sudan People Liberation Army – South Sudan's governing authority – emerged.

- ▶ 2003: Darfur war begins; emergence of Janjaweed, armed, organised, and mobilised initially under the intelligence services, alongside commanders including Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), who now respectively lead the warring SAF and the RSF. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who would later lead the 2019 Transitional Military Council and the 2021 coup, played an operational role during the early 2000s Darfur war.⁵ As a regional SAF commander in Darfur, he coordinated joint operations with Janjaweed militias, which is a history that deepens the institutional entanglement between formal military structures and outsourced violence.
- ▶ 2005: [The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement \(CPA\)](#) reconfigured political mechanisms away from the state, its institutions and civil society by allowing the regime operating through SAF to redraw the rules of governance along security lines. A security based political/governance system emerged from the CPA with a wealth and power sharing model giving prominence to security/armed actors.⁶
- ▶ 2006: Abuja Agreement brought Minni Minawi into the centre, splintering the SLA and weakening the Fur–Zaghawa alliance. Minawi's recruitment post-Abuja, funded through the wealth-sharing provisions, ultimately fuelled renewed rebellion in 2010, which illustrates how poorly designed DDR/SSR provisions can produce further conflict.
- ▶ 2018–19: Nationwide civic uprising calling for 'freedom, peace, justice', culminating in the sit-in and subsequent massacre; transition period follows.
- ▶ 2020: [The 2020 Juba Peace Agreement](#) undermined the transition and civic movement that underpinned it by enabling armed actors like Burhan and Hemedti together with the remnants of the Islamists security cabal to take the lead in shaping the post-Bashir transition period. The agreement propelled select armed rebel groups into positions of power to end the Darfur war without addressing social issues that fuelled the crisis.
- ▶ 2022: Political Framework Agreement signed by SAF, RSF, intelligence bodies, Islamist networks, and civilian forces. RSF backed the agreement; SAF later resisted because the PFA elevated Hemedti to parity with Burhan. Integration timelines (SAF: two years; RSF: ten years) deadlocked Phase 2 negotiations. War broke out the day after the final deadline passed on 11 April 2023, when Hemedti moved forces to Merowe air base.

- 2023: Outbreak of SAF-RSF war, entrenching fragmentation and foreign patronage.

These moments reflect a deeper pattern, in which the security sector has been reshaped not by reform, but by elite competition, external interests fuelling external financing, and internal coercion.

The Political Economy of Militarisation and Fiscal Fragmentation

The security sector cannot be understood in isolation from Sudan's deliberately fragmented fiscal order. From the 1980s onward, off-budget networks, parastatal military companies, and security-linked banks displaced the Ministry of Finance as the core site of economic governance.⁷ Military and paramilitary actors came to dominate gold exports, fuel contracts, and border trade, often with foreign support, including SAF-linked companies such as GIAD and RSF-linked trading networks.⁸

This is a case of what Benson-Strohmayer has elsewhere characterised as fiscal fragmentation: deliberate dispersal of revenue authority across unaccountable actors.⁹ Between 2019 and 2023, Sudanese civic actors responded with unprecedented clarity. Resistance committees launched the Just Mining campaign,¹⁰ and popular charters demanded audits and the end of fiscal opacity. Meanwhile, the civilians in the transitional government established a Regime Dismantling Committee to reverse the former regime's domination of the economy and state apparatus, which identified over 260 military-owned companies.¹¹ These efforts constitute a form of what Benson-Strohmayer conceptualises as civic fiscal resistance: popular efforts to reconstruct the fiscal core of the state around public accountability and justice.¹²

Yet historically, peace processes and donor strategies have ignored such demands. Of over 120 peace agreements since 1990, only 25 mention revenue and none address military-commercial networks.¹³ The international financial institutions (IFIs) focused narrowly on inflation and subsidy reform, sidelining the off-budget militarised economy. The result is a fictive fiscal order, which is legible to donors, but disconnected from actual political power.

Civic Alternatives and the Governance-Security Nexus

Security in Sudan is not simply a matter of the state. It is a social relation, a site of labour, and a terrain of contestation. Sudanese youth have been mobilised as combatants for decades, in the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), RSF, SAF, and now in self-defence militias. Yet they have also been theorists of resistance.

For instance, from 2018 onward, protestors advanced a vision of '*medania*': civic governance free from military domination. Slogans like '*Alʒaskar li'lthankanat aljajaweed yithal*' ('we demand the army return to the barracks and the RSF to be dissolved') captured a deep rejection of military rule. Resistance committee charters explicitly addressed the role of the army, RSF, and armed groups, calling for a unified civilian-led security framework grounded in justice and oversight.¹⁴

Interviews with fighters and civic actors reveal a popular understanding of the security-governance nexus. As one RSF recruit from the Hawazma, which is one of the principle social groups from which Hemedti draws his forces, noted in a 2023 video:

'We are the ones who fought all of Sudan's wars for the state, South Sudan's rebels included. Yet our intake in the military industry, official recruitment and enrolment in the army and all of that of non-northern Sudan is less than 10%'.¹⁵

Such testimonies demonstrate a widespread awareness that violence has been used to uphold a centralised, extractive state and that peace requires more than elite agreement. It demands the reconstitution of legitimacy from below.

Why Reform Failed: Lessons from the 2019–2021 Transition

Successful post-conflict SSR requires three conditions: a democratic opening, a unified pro-reform coalition, and the rapid implementation of reforms before backlash consolidates.¹⁶ As in other transitions, Sudanese elites and international actors often pursued technical solutions to fundamentally political problems. While the first condition was clearly present, Sudan's pro-reform coalition never achieved the broad reach and coherence necessary to push through key structural, difficult to reverse reforms (such as the limiting the military's economic role) before a substantial backlash commenced. The 2019 Constitutional Arrangement reimagined poorly through the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement left security portfolios in military hands, with international support.¹⁷ Civilian reformers were sidelined.

The Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the civilian collation representing the 2018 uprising, though broad-based at first, quickly fragmented, in part due to long standing distrust between peripheries and urban centres. Key decisions, such as the power-sharing formula and engagement with the Juba Peace Agreement, were made without wide consultation.¹⁸ Meanwhile, resistance committees, distinct from the transitional government, continued to mobilise, but their demands were not translated into policy.

The dismantling committee faced obstruction and by 2021, the SAF reasserted control through a coup. Unlike cases elsewhere on the continent, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, Sudan had no international security guarantor to blunt this resurgence, and donors failed to impose consequences for military overreach. Reformers ran out of time.

Post-War Risks: Fragmentation, Foreign Influence, and Civic Collapse

The 2023 war has fractured both SAF and RSF. New armed factions are emerging, many backed by regional powers, and this has resulted in the priorities of these external powers being privileged over the needs and demands of ordinary Sudanese people across many policy areas. Foreign influence in Sudan is not confined to arms flows and regional lobbying.¹⁹ The 2019-2021 transition design was led by external economic policies that favoured standardised notions of reform over social welfare, shaped heavily by IMF and World Bank frameworks emphasising subsidy removal, exchange rate liberalisation, and fiscal austerity.²⁰ The direction and leverage of Sudan's foreign policy was also tied to joining the Abraham Accords. The security pact with autocratic states imposed no requirements for domestic security sector reform and offered Sudanese elites yet another avenue to avoid structural change.

Domestic economic pressures, coupled with a security oriented foreign policy fostered further fragmentation within the transitional structure which extends to the current war context. As the historical timeline shows, Sudan has a long history of fragmentation following failed integration that was historically limited to the country's economic and social peripheries and has now extended to the centre. Today, the risk is a contemporary Somalia-like scenario: a patchwork of warlord fiefdoms rented by foreign sponsors.

Widespread recruitment, conscription, and the parcelling out of command are eroding any possibility of coherent national security governance. The public, meanwhile, is exhausted, demobilised, and facing humanitarian catastrophe. Without a civic resurgence and strategic support, the security arena will become fully decoupled from public accountability.

Conclusion

Security reform in Sudan is not merely about integration plans or police retraining. It is about reconstituting the state's foundations toward broad-based domestic accountability, including how power is held, how resources are allocated, and who counts as sovereign.

This brief is grounded in primary research, including over 70 interviews with Sudanese civic actors, and aligns with other PeaceRep outputs on Sudan's revenue complex, SSR, and civic networks.²¹ Sudanese civic actors have offered some of the clearest, most grounded visions of a just and accountable security order. The task now is to amplify those visions, bolster the consultations that can produce clear shared reform priorities amongst a broad and durable coalition, support the material foundations of civic actors, and confront the international interference and complicity that has enabled militarised rule. SSR in Sudan will succeed only when it is understood not as a technical process, but as a civic project of collective emancipation.

Endnotes

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PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.



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