

Where Is Sudan's Gold Headed?



Prime Minister Khamis Idris, in a tweet posted on his official “X” account on 5 September, stressed the necessity of safeguarding Sudan’s wealth from looting and smuggling, and of supporting anti-corruption forces in pursuing those involved, particularly in gold smuggling.

Idris approved what he called the recommendations of the Supreme Committee for the Economic Emergency, which are aimed at reforming the national economy and controlling its resources, and which he considered an urgent priority.

He pointed to the need to regulate import activity and prevent the entry of goods failing to meet standards, and to establish a digital platform to monitor exports and imports from the point of departure until arrival in Sudan.

These recommendations come at a time when the African country is facing a systematic erosion of its resources and wealth at the hands of militias, gangs and internal and external forces resources which, if properly managed, could have placed it on an entirely different economic map among African and global economies.

Sudan is the third-largest gold producer in Africa after South Africa and Ghana, and ninth in the world in terms of production.

In addition to gold, the country that stretches from the shores of the Red Sea to the heart of Africa holds a long and rich list of mining resources considered by mineral experts to be strategic for the near future copper, iron, chromium, manganese, marble, limestone, uranium and mica among them.

While Sudan's subsoil is rich in all these resources unparalleled even among major economies more than half its population around 24.6 million people live in a state of acute hunger according to UN reports, and roughly 638,000 people are suffering from real famine that places their lives on a slow death list.

This stark contradiction between the abundant precious mining resources Sudan holds and the dire economic and living conditions its people endure raises many questions about the gold system in particular, the routes of its smuggling, and how it transformed from an economic resource to fuel in a struggle between generals over the cake of power and influence.

First Resource

For Sudan, gold has not been simply another important economic resource generating returns for the national treasury alongside other sectors agricultural, industrial, water, tourism and so on but has come to form the lifeline of the economy and the main resource of the country, the only guarantee of its continued survival, even if on respirators.

The secession of South Sudan in 2011 was a severe blow to the Sudanese economy, since Khartoum lost about 70% of its oil reserves estimated at around six billion barrels most of which were located in the south, and it also lost a large part of its export map. In 2011 oil exports represented 75.6% of Sudan's total exports, bringing in 7.3 billion USD of a total 9.7 billion USD in exports.

Just one year after secession, Sudan's export revenues dropped from 9.7 billion USD to 3.4 billion USD, due to the loss of oil which the new southern state took over.

This pushed the country to search for alternatives to make up the huge shortfall, turning attention to the mining sector, especially gold, which many viewed as the "ready, prospective saviour" of the Sudanese economy.

Indeed, Sudan's gold production began to experience successive production surges, peaking in 2015 with output reaching 107.3 tonnes placing it third in Africa but production quickly collapsed at the start of 2018, reaching its lowest point since 2011 at 35.7 tonnes in 2020 roughly two-thirds less than five years earlier.

In that period the issue of gold smuggling entered official and unofficial discussion and research, after the Ministry of Minerals revealed that the loss

(unaccounted-for gold) in the first half of 2018 amounted to 48.8 tonnes almost larger than total officially declared production.

With the eruption of the generals' war in April 2023, the economic situation worsened drastically due to currency collapse, frozen investment, and heightened political-security turmoil. The economic growth rate shrank to minus 18.3% in 2023 versus minus 2.5% in 2022, while gold exploration and use of gold to escape that nightmare accelerated.

Indeed, data soon indicated that early in 2025 production had reached around 64 tonnes, a surge some took as a first step to halt the decline and an important building block for awakening despite the vast gap between that figure and what it had been years earlier.

On the opposite side, however, the government acknowledged the continuation of the smuggling hemorrhage: the general manager of the Sudan Mineral Resources Company, Mohamed Tahir Omar, said that about 48% of gold exports still proceed outside official channels.

Thus, gold smuggling represents one of Sudan's most prominent economic challenges: the state loses about seven billion USD annually in smuggled gold value, money that could have boosted the country's treasury if properly captured via official channels affecting the budget and leaving the government unable to meet its obligations prompting calls for strict curbs to stop the smuggling bleed or at least reduce its risks.

A Complex Map

Estimates vary on Sudan's annual gold output. While official statistics for 2011 record production at about 41.8 tonnes, last year's numbers swing between 64–80 tonnes, due to expanded artisanal mining and rising global gold prices reflecting measurement difficulties, smuggling and registration issues.

As for documented reserves, there is no transparent, integrated international database, but government and review statistics suggest large figures of confirmed and probable reserves: estimates range between 533–1,550 tonnes which facilitates smuggling and complicates regulatory efforts.

Sudan has more than 40,000 sites dedicated to gold mining, operating through around 60 refining companies distributed across 13 states among them 15 companies just in South Kordofan.

Recently the government granted licences to over 85 companies for gold exploration and production, part of the state's drive to boost its extractive output and obtain new revenue and foreign currency to finance imports.

Hassai Mine

The Hassai mine in north-east Sudan is one of the country's most important gold production sites and the only functioning mine in that mineral-rich region.

Discovered in 1993, by 2011 its output reached about 2.3 million ounces extracted from 18 open pits. Located about 50 km from Khartoum, it is owned by Ariab Mining (60%) and La-Mancha Resources (40%).

Confirmed and probable reserves are estimated at about 14.09 million tonnes at average grade 2.4 g/tonne; measured and indicated resources at 16.06 million tonnes at 2.77 g/tonne; inferred resources at 4.3 million tonnes at the same grade.

Block 15 Mine

The area of Qubqaba north of Abu Hamad in River Nile state is among Sudan's major gold mining zones, where artisanal mining dominates and is the country's top source of gold.

In March 2021 the Moroccan company Managem acquired 65% of the expansion programme of the Qubqaba mine via a strategic deal with Chinese company Wanbao, costing about 250 million USD, with the goal of raising production to about 200,000 ounces annually part of the firm's drive to expand in Sudan and Africa.

Managem also expanded into Block 15 in partnership with Norein Mining; their intensive exploration since 2008 discovered world-class gold deposits. In 2011 the company established a full production unit operated by its subsidiary Manoub, and built a processing plant to international standards, strengthening the project's status as one of Sudan's strategic mining investments.

Jebel Amer Mine

Located in Al Sarif locality north of Al Fashir (North Darfur state), the Jebel Amer mine has annual output estimated around 50 tonnes of gold and hosts other minerals such as iron, aluminum and platinum.

After South Sudan's secession in 2011 and loss of Khartoum's oil resources, in April 2012 large quantities of gold were discovered at Jebel Amer, turning the region into a strategic and legendary destination for prospectors inside and outside Sudan.

The area soon became a source of wealth but also a bloody arena of conflict between the Beni Hussein tribe and the Janjaweed militia led by Musa Hilar, which seized the mines before the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (known as "Hemedti") wrested control.

By 2017 gold had altered the map of conflict in Darfur from an ethnic/political

clash to a resources war: the RSF and Russian networks (notably the Wagner Group) shared influence. Through the company Al-Junaid (linked to Hemedti), gold operations were run, with a portion of gold used to fund an independent operation enabling the RSF to bolster its political and military power.

Block 14 Mine

The Mi'As Sand gold project in the Nubian Desert north Sudan near Egypt's border, covering 2,170 km² within Block 14 and located ~900 km from Khartoum, is operated via a partnership between Perseus (Australian, 70%), the Sudanese government (20%) and Mi'As Nub (local, 10%). Work began in 2012 with Orca Gold (Canadian) and included broad drilling in "Galat Sufar South" and "Wadi Dum".

A first economic assessment appeared in 2016, followed by discovery of a strategic water resource in 2017 supporting possible operation in a harsh desert environment.

A feasibility study in November 2018 estimated a reserve of about 79.9 million tonnes at 1.11 g/tonne (≈ 2.85 million ounces of gold). In 2022 Perseus acquired Orca Gold and funded updated estimates and an advanced engineering study (FFED) in 2023 ahead of a final investment decision.

Songo Mines

The Songo mines in the Radom area of South Darfur, some 360 km south of Nyala, have since 2016 become a major centre for artisanal mining, drawing tens of thousands of workers and traders, making Radom among the richest parts of the state in gold. Before the war in Sudan about 100,000 labourers worked in prominent sites such as Aghbash, Doraba and Thoria.

With the outbreak of conflict in 2023, security collapse and fuel shortages, mining nearly halted; many labourers joined the RSF. Al-Junaid remains the only operating company there but it severely cut production due to the fuel shortage, with monthly output falling to less than one tonne.

Nonetheless, operations resumed in October 2023 after the rainy season, and the region gradually returned as a labour source despite continued security risks.

Four Routes of Smuggling

There are four main smuggling routes for Sudanese gold:

Darfur (West):

With the start of the war in Sudan, the RSF took control of most of Darfur's areas and thus of gold production, smuggling and trade. Its activity concentrates around Jebel Amer in North Darfur and the Songo area in South Darfur. Gold is smuggled along local paths into Chad and South Sudan, before typically ending

up in the United Arab Emirates.

At Jebel Amer, gold is extracted by citizens and then transferred to Al Junaid company, which processes it using cyanide. Routes include Libya and Chad, using motorbikes and night transport to avoid controls. The Chadian authorities turn a blind eye.

In South Darfur the militia controls major mines in Songo and Kafia Kingi near the South Sudan border. Gold is purchased by traders and then smuggled via intermediaries and companies registered in Chad, which issue official documents making it appear as Chadian gold. This highlights the government's inability to control one of its strategic resources.

South:

The South Sudan route is less active than that via Chad, due to weak security and high transaction costs. Some Somali traders buy smuggled gold and re-export via Kenya to the UAE; small seizures travel via Uganda. According to Al Junaid sources, one route through Raja in South Sudan moves at least 150kg monthly by air into Uganda and Kenya before reaching the UAE.

Profits during the war were estimated at over one billion USD annually, based on production volumes and world prices. Meanwhile Nyala in South Darfur has become a major gold market where sales occur in unannounced sites before being smuggled.

The dangers extend beyond economic loss to serious environmental damage from toxic chemicals used in extraction, especially in the Radom nature reserve.

North and East Sudan:

Government-controlled gold mines are in the Red Sea, River Nile and Northern states, yet smuggling continues, especially after the war began. The Egyptian border is the main destination for gold smuggled over land and by river, especially through Abu Hamad in River Nile state, which hosts gold mills and markets.

Smugglers use desert routes formerly used for irregular migration and arms trafficking, driving 4x4 vehicles and operating in small units. Many official controls exist, but some shipments travel from Port Sudan to Aswan relying on trusted networks.

Who Controls the "Yellow Metal"?

Three main actors dominate Sudan's gold mines:

The official state and its institutions.

These include the central bank and the minerals company. They hold an official share of the precious metal, but a small one compared to other actors reducing

export returns and depriving the state of hundreds of billions obtained illicitly.

The military forces and armed factions.

The army and RSF and their companies control the largest share of gold reserves in Sudan, forcing control over mining regions, processing facilities and smuggling routes. They are joined by local militias that impose power over tonnes and sometimes storehouses of gold.

Companies and intermediaries.

Private companies and networks linked to military or political figures manage processing and trade (for example companies that handle tailings and “Tilang”). The local private sector and trader networks serve as intermediaries, channeling the metal to export markets. Monitoring reports reveal internal commercial entities linked to regional smuggling routes.

UAE: Main Destination

The United Arab Emirates is regarded as the largest destination for smuggled Sudanese gold, importing large quantities in 2023–2024 and playing a key role in recycling the metal and integrating it into global markets. International reports and independent research indicated huge flows to the UAE, pointing out that much of Sudan's gold passes through there.

Official data show a clear drop in Sudan's recorded gold exports in 2023/24, while neighbouring countries' exports especially Egypt, Uganda and Chad rose, reinforcing the hypothesis that these nations function as alternative smuggling routes. Figures suggest the UAE was virtually the exclusive destination of gold from Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Chad until recently.

A 2022 report by the NGO SwissAid estimated that two-thirds of the UAE's African gold imports (about 40 tons) were illegal smuggled making Abu Dhabi a hub of “gold laundering” and raising concerns about money laundering and conflict financing.

A 2019 investigation by Reuters found massive financial gaps between African countries' export numbers and the UAE's import numbers, sometimes as high as 1.3 billion USD evidence of illicit trade.

Russia Enters the Frame

Since the outbreak of Sudan's war, several indicators and analyses confirm that gold flows reached Russia or entities linked to it. The RSF's control of Sudan's gold sector engaged the commodity in a complex network of regional and international interests.

Reports including one by the Financial Times linked RSF and Wagner via the company M Invest which operated in mining in exchange for weapons and

training.

Via this partnership Hemedti played a key role enabling Russia to circumvent official channels and obtain billions of USD worth of Sudanese gold whether by direct import or via the UAE which facilitated its entry into global markets. In return, Wagner provided advanced weaponry such as surface-to-air missiles to the RSF.

Russia's involvement in Sudan's gold sector dates back to 2014 after Western sanctions following its annexation of Crimea, and in 2023 the British Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee revealed that Russia used Sudan to fund its war in Ukraine via gold smuggling, in collusion with local military leaders and in support of the 2021 coup thus consolidating its presence in Sudan's strategic resources.

Fuel for the Conflict

Gold has shifted from being an economic logistic resource and substitute for oil (lost after the South's secession) into fuel for Sudan's internal conflict, with smuggling and exploitation surging since the war began and revenues channelled into military spending for both sides.

In an investigation by the organisation Global Witness, supported by a United Nations expert team, evidence documented how gold became a principal tool for financing Sudan's war: the RSF relied almost entirely on it to procure weapons, pay payrolls and equip itself; the same applied to Wagner, which operated within the arms-for-gold model.

All estimations suggest that without the gold revenues that Hemedti's RSF and its networks laundered to the UAE, the war would not have lasted over two years at its current ferocity, prompting the Sudanese government to accuse the UAE directly of war crimes by supporting the armed militia.

RSF's control of the gold map in Darfur and specifically Jebel Amer facilitated smuggling into Chad and from there into the Gulf state, which did not hesitate to provide Hemedti and his forces with military, logistical and political backing a situation repeatedly highlighted by the United Nations despite Abu Dhabi's official denials.

In Conclusion

Gold in Sudan is a strategic resource with dual importance: it is meant to be a pillar for reviving the national economy after the loss of oil revenue following secession, but in practice it has become fuel for internal war and regional and international influence networks.

While Sudan's reserves are estimated in the hundreds of tonnes, the state

continues to lose billions annually through smuggling denying it the opportunity to convert this wealth into genuine development.

The war in Sudan revealed an unprecedented intertwining of gold, politics and security: the RSF seized major mines and used them to finance its military operations via smuggling networks to the UAE and Russia, while other routes to Egypt, Chad and Uganda were also active. This link between natural resources and war-financing established a dangerous equation: the more the illicit gold trade flourishes, the longer the war drags on and the deeper the humanitarian crisis becomes.

Therefore, rescuing Sudan from this vicious cycle requires more than stepped-up oversight or anti-smuggling campaigns; it demands comprehensive reform in resource governance, full transparency in the mining sector, and a national agreement to protect the country's wealth from internal plunder and external exploitation otherwise the gold, instead of being a lever for economic recovery, will remain a curse that inflames conflict and deepens human misery.

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