

The war that yields gold: How does the Rapid Support Forces finance its project?



In May 2026, announced the parallel government formed by the Sudan Founding Alliance, which is dominated by the RSF, the appointment of ministers for finance, transport, information, and urban development. For many observers of the course of Sudan's war, this raises a more important question related to financing, or put differently: Where does the money come from that enables this entity to fund itself?

Establishing a parallel authority requires resources capable of covering administrative expenses, financing civilian bodies, and maintaining the network of influence that allows control on the ground to continue. In the RSF's case, the answer appears to be tied above all to the economy that emerged within the war itself.

Over the past three years, while the world was preoccupied with tracking front lines and troop movements, a parallel economic network took shape in the background, based on the extraction of gold and its smuggling, control over trade routes, collection of local fees, and the use of war revenues to build new governing structures. That is why it is difficult to understand the project of a parallel state without understanding the economy that finances it.

Gold first: The treasury that kept the war alive

Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, gold has become the most important resource in the economy run by the RSF militia. As the Sudanese state lost control over vast areas of Darfur and parts of Kordofan, control over a number of the country's most important mining areas shifted with them.

According to estimates cited by the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan and later relayed by specialized research centers, the RSF militia managed to consolidate its influence around a number of major gold production sites in Darfur, benefiting from trade and security networks that existed before the war and expanded further afterward. Estimates cited in the report indicate that areas under RSF control in Darfur produced around 10 tons of gold in 2024, worth more than \$800 million at global market prices at the time.

Gold's importance lies in the scale of its returns, in addition to how easy it is to transport, conceal, and convert into cash outside the formal banking system. Gold does not require major ports or complex infrastructure, and it can be shipped in relatively small quantities with extremely high value, making it an ideal resource for a war economy.

Satellite images and open-source investigations published in 2024 and 2025 reveal the existence of air corridors and dirt airstrips in areas near mining sites within the RSF's sphere of influence in Darfur and Kordofan. Researchers specializing in tracking Sudan's war economy indicate that these airstrips played a role in linking production areas to regional transport networks that transport gold out of the country beyond official oversight.

At the end of this chain, the United Arab Emirates emerges as the most important destination for Sudanese gold. According to international trade data, the UAE has accounted in recent years for the largest share of Sudan's official gold exports, while UN reports and specialized studies indicate that part of the gold produced in conflict zones leaves the country through unofficial channels before later being absorbed into regional and global markets.

For the RSF, gold forms the backbone of the economy on which both its military and political movement depend. Its revenues can be used to buy fuel, vehicles, and weapons, finance local patronage networks, and maintain the operational capacity of a force fighting a prolonged war on multiple fronts. Yet gold alone does not explain the scale of resources that have become available to the RSF during the war years. Alongside it, a broader revenue system emerged, relying on control over trade and local resources and the imposition of various forms of levies within areas of influence.

The war's parallel economy

If gold represents the main treasury of the RSF economy, it is not the only source of money. Over the years of war, a broader network of resources took shape, relying on control over local trade, looting strategic goods, and imposing fees and levies on the movement of goods and people within areas of influence.

Gum arabic stands out as the clearest example of this transformation. Sudan produces the largest share of the world's gum arabic, and its production belts are concentrated in Kordofan and Darfur, areas of which large parts have come under RSF control since the outbreak of war.

According to a report by the UN Panel of Experts submitted to the Security Council in 2025, RSF commanders in Darfur turned a blind eye to widespread looting of gum arabic as a way to preserve fighters' loyalty and ensure they kept fighting. Local traders in East and South Darfur estimated that around 3,700 tons of gum arabic were looted between January and June 2024 alone. UN estimates also indicated that the war led to the loss or smuggling of at least 90,000 tons of gum arabic, valued at around \$200 million.

The matter was not limited to direct looting. In May 2025, after the RSF took control of the city of Al-Nahud, one of Sudan's most important gum arabic trading centers, trade reports said that more than 10,000 tons of gum stored in over 400 trucks had been seized. Traders estimated the value of the looted quantities at around \$75 million.

Trade sources said that part of these quantities later appeared in markets in Chad, South Sudan, and Libya through smuggling networks that became active during the war.

But more important than the looting itself is the integrated economic system that grew up around it. Journalistic reports and testimonies from traders and truck drivers documented the imposition of unofficial fees and taxes on goods passing through areas under RSF control, including gum arabic, agricultural crops, and livestock. At some crossings and trade routes, checkpoints turned into steady sources of income, imposing charges on the movement of goods in exchange for allowing them to pass out of Sudan or into other areas within Sudan.

During the war, there were also signs that the RSF was seeking to benefit from oil resources in areas into which its influence had expanded, especially in East Darfur and West Kordofan. Local reports spoke of quantities of crude oil being transported from some fields under the control of the force or its allies, but the economic significance of these activities remained limited compared with the revenues from gold and gum arabic.

In cities that remained under RSF control for long periods, especially in Khartoum and parts of Al-Jazirah and Sennar, another picture of the war

economy emerged. With the collapse of state institutions and the withdrawal of official bodies, large-scale government and private facilities were subjected to looting and dismantling. Seizures included commercial warehouses, factories, workshops, government vehicles, and property belonging to universities, hospitals, and service institutions.

Rights groups and local reports also documented the theft of electrical transformer oils, copper cables, and equipment from water and electricity stations in Khartoum assets that cannot be sold or moved except through organized networks that go beyond the notion of random individual looting.

These facts show that the economy that emerged in areas under RSF control relied on redirecting existing assets and turning them into new sources of financing. Looted goods can be sold or smuggled, trade routes can be taxed, and local resources can be converted into steady revenues.

As these resources accumulated, the RSF came to possess a financial base that allows it to think about administering vast areas of population and territory — a step that opens the door to the next question: Are these resources being used only to prolong the war, or are they also being deployed to build the institutions of a parallel state?

From war economy to parallel state institutions

Possessing resources does not necessarily mean building a state, but it does provide the ability to try. That is what the RSF appears to be gradually pursuing in areas under its influence. Over the past two years, its moves have extended to establishing local civilian administrations and appointing officials to manage services and executive affairs in a number of states and regions.

The announcement of the parallel government in May 2026 gave these efforts a clearer dimension. The presence of ministers for finance, economic planning, transport, and urban development reflects an attempt to move from administering military zones of influence to administering a political entity seeking to exercise some functions of the state.

In this context, the RSF's announcement at the beginning of 2026 that it had begun establishing the "Future Bank" stood out as the first banking project announced within areas under RSF control. Although sufficient information is not yet available about the scale of its operations, the number of its clients, or its actual ability to provide financial services, the significance of this step lies in the political and economic meaning carried by the announcement itself, not in whether it succeeds or fails.

Although these steps do not yet mean the existence of stable state institutions,

they do reflect a growing attempt to turn war resources into tools of governance and administration. Still, most of the RSF's resources continue to depend heavily on external financing.

Why aren't these arteries being cut off?

Although financing routes linked to Sudanese gold have come under increasing scrutiny from the United Nations, Western governments, and research centers, the networks feeding the war economy are still operating largely without fundamental disruption. The question that arises here is: If the smuggling routes are known, and the destination markets are known, why does the flow of money continue?

Part of the answer has to do with the nature of the gold trade itself. Gold is one of the commodities most easily smuggled, re-exported, and remelted, which makes tracing its original source a complicated process. Once it leaves conflict zones and enters regional markets, it becomes difficult to distinguish between gold extracted from a mine under the control of an armed group and gold coming from other legitimate sources.

RSF forces inspect gold seized at Khartoum airport (Reuters)

Despite the central role of the UAE in the Sudanese gold trade, the international sanctions imposed so far have focused primarily on individuals and companies linked to the conflict, more than on the markets and trade networks that absorb the gold after it leaves war zones. Global markets also continue to absorb large quantities of gold coming from high-risk areas after it passes through a long chain of intermediaries and traders.

The result is that Sudan's war economy does not operate outside the global economic system, but within it. Gold extracted from conflict zones ultimately enters international supply chains and the markets for jewelry, electronics, and investment. That is why the continuation of the war is also tied to the existence of sustained global demand for the resources produced by conflict zones.

A closed circle

Sudan's experience over the past three years shows that war has become an integrated economic system that makes continued fighting possible. Gold, gum arabic, local levies, and looted assets have not only turned into sources of income for fighters, but also into a financial base that has allowed the emergence of governing structures, civilian administrations, and parallel institutional projects seeking to perform some functions of the state.

For the RSF, control of territory has become a military objective as well as a means of controlling the resources that generate money and the money that

makes it possible to maintain control. Thus a closed circle has taken shape, in which the economy feeds the war, and the war feeds the economy.

That is why perhaps the most important question in Sudan today is who can break this circle. As long as resources continue to flow from conflict zones to regional and global markets, and as long as the war economy remains more profitable than peace, any political settlement will face a basic reality: The war continues because it is still generating profits for many parties inside Sudan and beyond.

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