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**Gold mining in Darfur:
Its role in the general economy, political conflicts and the current war**

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Darfur has been shattered by a long chain of violent escalations, and numerous interpretations of reasons and recommendations for solutions have been put forward. Since the early 2010s, gold mining appeared as an additional element in ongoing conflicts and became a dominant aspect, not just as one of the financial pillars of the upcoming Rapid Support Forces under Dagalo family leadership, but also as a source of environmental pollution. Nevertheless, gold mining made its way only slowly into political analyses, and although its substantial role in Sudan's recent history, including the current war, has now more often been recognized, it is often treated only for its broad geopolitical implications. We trace in this essay the development of gold mining in Darfur in more detail, show its impact on existing and new conflicts in the region, and give an outlook on its continuation under conditions of war. Based on our analysis, we also formulate an assessment of long-term consequences of these extractive activities.

Introduction

Artisanal gold mining in Sudan began to flourish in the 2000s, emerging within a distinctive political economic context. During this period, oil revenues had driven significant developments, which were notably uneven across the country. The 1990s were marked by a lack of productive and infrastructural development, entangled with an economic crisis inherited from the 1980s and entrenched by National Congress Party (NCP) rule. However, the exploitation of oil from 1999 onwards, marked by the commencement of operations at the Port Sudan oil terminal, resulted in a sudden surge in revenues for those involved in the sector.

Despite the potential for oil revenues to address regional injustices, they instead exacerbated economic disparities between socio-economic classes and regions. The regime's new financial capabilities allowed for increased loyalty incentives within political spheres and major investments in infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and dams. However, these investments were primarily concentrated in the capital and central regions of the country (Woodward 2008; Gadkarim 2010; Nour 2011; Suliman 2016; Thomas 2017: 28-32).

In the central regions, individuals with close ties to the government directly benefited from the oil revenues, particularly through public investment contracts and service agreements. The oil sector adopted a typical structure of enclave economies, characterized by direct control exercised by national authorities and specific power circles linked to security services. The strategic partnership with Chinese and other foreign companies in the oil sector, which demanded little financial transparency, further encouraged the monopolization of oil revenues. This reinforced the unchallenged dominance of a closed circle of individuals, a pattern that was later replicated in newly independent South Sudan (Patey 2010; Patey 2014).

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Nevertheless, the scale of the economic upturn and the resulting structural benefits, such as electrification, internet development, and improved transportation, extended economic development beyond the immediate circles of those close to the regime. This entrenchment of regional inequalities was also facilitated by the relative stability of the central regions compared to conflict-ridden areas such as Darfur.

The gold rush in Sudan, beginning in the 2000s, marked a significant turning point for the entire country and catalyzed a profound economic transition, shifting the country's primary official export revenues from oil to gold. However, the economic impact was just one facet of this transformation, as newfound wealth from gold mining also had far-reaching political implications. As different factions vied for control over lucrative mining sites, the resulting conflicts and alliances partially confirmed and partially redefined the inner workings of Sudan's political landscapes.

On this background, we explore in this essay the relationship between gold mining, economic policies, and conflict in Sudan, with a specific focus on Darfur. We trace the most salient developments around the gold rush in that region, reaching a peak after 2012 in the mining sites of Jebel Amir, subsequent economic and political power shifts, and how they impacted the ongoing conflicts in the region. We indicate possible long-term economic and political dynamics in the wake of the gold rush, highlighting its ambiguous but consequential influence on the power struggles within Sudan and beyond, especially considering the outbreak of full-scale war in April 2023. We conclude with a short reflection on what an exclusive focus on the most conflictual aspects of gold mining could mean in terms of imagining political futures.

Darfur's Economy Before the Gold Rush

War broke out in the Darfur region in the early 2000s when numerous previous political and economic tensions escalated. The fighting displaced large numbers of people, reducing their economic strategies to modes of survival. The shortcomings of the limited market exchange that existed were reinforced, such as the disadvantages of dependence on connections to Khartoum, particularly in administrative and commercial terms. While livestock and agricultural crops were still produced, partly in sizable and tradable numbers, Darfur's public economy was essentially based on the income generated by the 'peace dividends' defined in the 2006 Abuja Accords: international aid and public contracts obtained by mutual agreement for the reconstruction of the country. Arguably, since most of the fighters of the movement led by Mini Minnawi, for instance, came from the middle or lower classes, the need to access state revenues after years of war was a reason for them to sign the agreement in 2006 (Chevillon-Guibert 2013).¹

The Darfur context was therefore much more problematic in terms of elite wealth accumulation and distribution, and many Darfuran businessmen preferred to invest elsewhere than the region during this period. In the end, the only ones who did so were those with a direct link to the NCP regime or those whose business depended mainly on Darfuran customers, such as commodities traders, or on Darfuran production, such as livestock exporters. The end of large-scale fighting in the late 2000s had enabled livestock farming to be revived, but the industry stayed closely linked to the center of the country, where livestock export permits were issued and regulated. New first-level markets were established closer to producer areas, notably El-Khuwei (*al-huway*) in Western Kordofan. However, Darfur did not obtain such a market, despite the region's long history with trade and historical routes operating far from the confluence of the Niles, particularly the Darb Al-'Arba'in (Mohamed 2014). The absence of a more balanced

distributive network also encouraged alternative trading of livestock and 4x4 vehicles across Darfur's international borders, reaching northward towards the Sahara and westward as far as Nigeria.

The importance of border trade routes was well established in Darfur, particularly since the remarkable success in trading of Zaghawa merchants from the 1960s until their downfall in the 2000s due to their proximity to Hassan al-Turabi and their involvement, partly linked to this proximity, in the rebellions of the 2000s (Chevillon-Guibert 2016). The strong demand of the Darfuri armed groups during the Abuja negotiations to regain its sovereignty over the area on the borders of Libya, Egypt, and Chad, near the Jebel Uweinat, was also linked to this, the area being known as a commercial crossroads opening onto the Libyan town of Kufra. However, for a variety of reasons, not least the rapid development of small-scale mining in Saharan areas of Sudan with the use of metal detectors at that time, these negotiations were unsuccessful. The Northern State retained this territory under the jurisdiction of Halfa locality, several hundred kilometers away, along the Nile.

From an economic point of view, the 2000s largely maintained Darfur's dependence on the center but also encouraged developing other trajectories for trade and mobility. Paradoxically, the development of gold mining in the region was to both confirm and challenge this state of affairs, as it provided the Khartoum-based regime with new instruments of control, or at least of preventing political and economic alternatives, but also enabled some to question the post-1989 establishments' dominance over the political economy, with artisanal gold mining spreading rapidly, and new supra-regional military leaders emerging.

Sudan's Gold Rush

The gold mining boom in the early 2010s was not specific to Darfur, as it affected large parts of Sudan, the African continent, and even other regions of the world. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Africa has witnessed an unprecedented level of mining development, whether in terms of capital through globalized industrial investment or in terms of human resources mobilized through artisanal forms of exploitation. In Sahelo-Saharan Africa,² gold is at the heart of this mining boom, and Sudan was one of the first instances because the contributing factors were brought together here very early on: rising international gold prices, a difficult economic situation with high youth unemployment, and the spread of certain techniques thanks to the availability of relatively cheap equipment—initially metal detectors, followed by other small machines such as mechanized sieves, crushers, and mills. The development of a partnership with China due to oil exploitation and Sudan's position vis-à-vis Dubai, a globalized marketplace where Asian products circulate, encouraged the arrival of low-cost material and commodities in the country, with Dubai becoming the largest entry point of gold from Sudan into global circulation. At the same time, existing pathways of non-official circulation of goods facilitated and were enhanced by prospects of the low volume/high-value mineral, such as metal detectors and their distribution by Rashayda intermediaries and gold seekers (Calkins 2016).

Before delving deeper into the development in Darfur, it is important to consider the national context of that gold rush. Following South Sudan's independence in 2011, the Khartoum regime lost control of almost two-thirds of the country's exploited oil fields, largely located in the South, and therefore of the associated oil revenues. Given the concomitant collapse in oil prices, the government suffered a considerable loss of revenue. The loss of this precious commodity was catastrophic for the regime, which could no longer assert itself as a 'developmental state' or secure various forms of support. Since the regime had constantly tried

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to force out alternative investment and support structures, and largely failed to diversify the revenues the short-lived oil boom had created, it had little to offer in the subsequent economic crisis. This foreshadowed the collapse of NCP's power apparatus that had been militarily secured but organized through civil administration, a collapse that left the remainders of that apparatus as a constant source of conflict escalation as the only means of maintaining a claimed purpose, leading to a military coup and ultimately Sudan's first full-scale war since the 1890s. Left only with NCP's extractive economy, both its beneficiaries and those merely living at and off its fringes were forced to look for alternatives, from the now unemployed worker to the national capitalist hoping to find a remedy for a failing business.

To maintain the developmentalist myth of the 2000s and to emerge from the crisis, the Sudanese government has undertaken several steps to encourage the agricultural and mining export sectors. In the latter sector, like most countries in the region, the government has sought to encourage industrialization by reviving its mining code, seeking both to encourage investment and to establish as much control over profits as possible (Ille & Calkins 2013; 'Abd Al-Rahmān 2018). Perceiving limits to such control, the Sudanese government has neither encouraged nor generally opposed the parallel development of artisanal mining, leaving miners to evolve according to the discovery of deposits and local exploitation possibilities, despite a legal situation that outlawed such practices without a license.

The initial laissez-faire approach, leaving management of mining to the local segments of the state apparatus, gave way in the mid-2010s to more regulation with the rapid development of small-scale activities at a time when the industrial sector was struggling to establish itself and the economic crisis was worsening. Henceforth, affiliates were actively supported in their efforts to take control of the craft and semi-industrial sectors, which had initially been given priority over the industrial sector, especially as the tailing business, the reprocessing of ore extracted by the artisanal miners, became the most dominant model, with full-scale industrial mines remaining a rare instance (e.g., Ariab, see Ille 2018). This was reflected in the granting of special roles in the industry, whether in marketing or in the levying of taxes on behalf of the state, or in the granting of licenses for the reprocessing of mining waste or the semi-artisanal exploitation of rich mining areas (Chevrillon-Guibert et al. 2020).

The tension between a regulatory regime that was designed to be selectively enabling, and the power dynamics developing around specific mining sites speaks not just to the heterogeneous practices that ultimately emerged at those sites. There were also instances when such dynamics were carried back to or even rearranged the political theater in Khartoum. The Jebel Amir mining area in Darfur is a most obvious case in point.

Gold Mining's Rising Political Importance

While other gold mining areas in western Sudan, such as Sango in South Darfur and Jebel Uweinat in the Northern State, also saw militarily secured wealth accumulation, Jebel Amir stands out as a decisive scene for this shift in power relations both within Darfur and beyond (Chevrillon-Guibert 2018).

Interest in Jebel Amir as a source of gold began around 2012, spurred by the region's ample water sources. During the initial months of this gold rush, production soared, coinciding with a period when gold mining across Sudan was fueling a transition from oil to gold as the country's primary mineral export after South Sudan's independence. The influx of miners soon led to violent clashes over control of the area, which was under the local administrative

authority of Beni Hussein, who were in conflict with Rizeigat and other groups often summarized as camel herders, or *'Abbālah*. After ultimately futile attempts to establish central governmental oversight, proxy forces mobilized to seize control of the mines, forming an oppositional administrative apparatus under Rizeigat leader Musa Hilal, who had established extensive control over Jebel Amir by December 2014 (Tubiana 2014; Ille 2016). A 2016 UN Panel of Experts report for the Sanctions Committee noted that armed groups, including Hilal's forces, were extracting about US\$54 million from levies and sales, reflecting the control armed groups had over most artisanal mining in Darfur.³

Local power elites had cemented their status through violent excesses in the 2000s. One notable figure was the militia leader Musa Hilal, whose troops operated as auxiliaries for the government's counter-insurgency, using the older term *janjawīd* for mobile groups of men engaging in robberies and other attacks. They, along with other militias, benefited greatly from the new precious income. At Jebel Amir, Musa Hilal's troops and allies controlled not only the production of some of the mine's shafts but also the taxation of the mining site, functioning as the local governmental authority. The earnings financed the militia and other loyalty structures, which were institutionalized as Border Guards, part of the regime's security apparatus and border control.

The central government had defined a concession on Jebel Amir, initially awarded to the MAM Group. However, the group was unable to benefit significantly as long as Musa Hilal's forces-controlled operations. At this point, the distinction between center and periphery in mining operations became blurred, as these militias claimed greater autonomy as the so-called Sudanese Revolutionary Awakening Council, *al-majlis al-tawrī al-sāḥwī al-sūdāni*, formed in January 2014.

In response to its lack of physical control over Jebel Amir, the central government shifted its support to the then-informal Rapid Support Forces (RSF),⁴ who started incursions resisted by Musa Hilal's council. Gaining control over the gold artisanal sector had become a focus across Sudan's most productive areas, marked by legal regulations issued in 2015. However, few sites were easily 'taken.' At Jebel Amir, numerous clashes occurred, with Musa Hilal's troops and the RSF controlling parts of the area side-by-side until early 2017, when the temporary alliance between Musa Hilal and Beni Hussein started to break down. Beni Hussein residents and leaders began publicly complaining about the breakdown of order due to thousands of militant 'foreigners' controlling and smuggling produced gold, calling for a clear government response.

In February 2017, then-Minister of Interior General 'Asmat 'Abd al-Rahmān proposed sending a joint force of police and regular military to Jebel Amir to eliminate the threat posed by, as he claimed, 3000 heavily armed foreigners mining there. This initiative was repudiated by RSF commander Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, known as *Hemeidti*, and apparently cost the minister his post, highlighting the conventional military's failing resistance to the RSF's empowerment.⁵ The RSF troops themselves eventually re-established 'law and order,' culminating in Musa Hilal's arrest in November 2017 (Baldo 2017).⁶

This takeover primarily benefited Hemeidti, one of Musa Hilal's direct rivals within the Rizeigat clans and formerly part of his militia. A few years later, Hemeidti played a key role in toppling President Al-Bashir and became 'Vice-Chairman' of the Sovereignty Council during the transitional period (April 2019 to October 2021). He later participated in or condoned the overthrow of the transitional civilian government in October 2021, in collusion with other

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armed forces and remainders of the NCP regime, an alliance whose breakdown plunged Sudan into war in April 2023.

Hemeidti and his family, under the name *Dagalo*, began extending their network of businesses, starting in the gold sector by taking control of what remained of the Jebel Amir mines, a control legalized already in 2016 with a license to exploit the mining waste there.⁷ Their company, Al-Junaid, chaired by Hemeidti's brother Abd Al-Rahmān, established full productive activities once the RSF asserted control. Al-Junaid held the only concession for the tailing business in North Darfur, with production becoming noticeable to the public by January 2017, marking it as the first "RSF company." Al-Junaid conducted both explorations, employing a technical, geological approach, and processing of tailings. They reportedly cooperated with Russia-linked *Meroe Gold*, which, according to Sudanese geologists working with Al-Junaid, focused exclusively on placer gold (i.e., the separation of eroded gold from sand and sediment).⁸

Gradually, Hemeidti and the forces he commanded gained influence in the state apparatus.⁹ The Dagalo family business expanded into other regions, obtaining new licenses for waste processing and direct control of certain production areas, notably in the Jebel Uweinat region. Hemeidti also acted as an intermediary for certain international private investments in the sector, such as those by the Russian Wagner Group, which invested in mining waste processing in Nile State and South Darfur.

Other Darfurian armed groups followed a similar path in the region.¹⁰ Numerous companies linked to the Sudanese security apparatus also invested in this lucrative sector, primarily in the industrial branch or the reprocessing of mining waste. Members of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) or the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) registered companies in their own names or under front names, while Darfurian forces (whether rebel or affiliated with the regime) largely invested in the artisanal sector.

The Transitional Period in Darfur¹¹

The conflicts and shifts in power in Jebel Amir were a precursor to the broader political upheavals that would follow. With the fall of Al-Bashir in April 2019, the transitional period in Darfur saw an even more pronounced militarization of the economy. Contrary to the revolutionary movement's demands for a civilian government, which included the removal of military influence from politics and the economy, the military's control expanded after Al-Bashir's fall. This expansion was particularly evident in the extractive industries.

During the transitional period, there was a significant increase in mining activities by companies that were not officially registered but were militarily protected through affiliations with militia groups. Key areas in Darfur, such as Al-Malha, Al-Hashaba, Abdel Shakour, and Kidnīr/Kijnīr, saw notable expansions of such illegal mining operations; other regions experienced similar developments. Some of these areas, rich in gold, produced 12-15 grams per bag, translating to a high yield of 150-187 grams per ton, and the production remained exempt from official taxes, which typically reached 33% of total production, making it highly profitable. Consequently, wealth accumulated, forming military economic enclaves in areas where civil state control bodies had no authority.

In Darfur, this expansion continued to be strongly associated with *Al-Junaid Company* and the Dagalo clan, which now even gained control over gold export operations through their dominant position in the Economic Emergency Committee. Gold was mainly exported to the

UAE, and this trade exchange was the most profitable part in the gold value chain in Sudan. Concurrently, the Mining Services Company, newly affiliated with the RSF, entered the market to provide various services and import production inputs, creating an integrated loop of import, export, and production which enjoyed political protection and tax exemption. This formed only part of a wider network of enterprises that would later give a financial basis to RSF's war business.¹²

Jebel Amir became a blatant example of the failure to establish a new kind of governance in the transitional period and to stem the flow of empowering wealth to Sudan's militant forces. Artisanal mining had declined following the RSF takeover, probably as a result of the violent takeover process and depleted near-surface reserves. At the same time, a few mechanical sieve shakers, loaders and other more capital-intensive tools were introduced by Rashayda investors. Overall, by the end of 2020 only low-level operations were ongoing; about 10 sieve shakers were still operational. There were then around 6,000 workers operating, including those providing secondary services in a slow-moving market, a shadow of the 80,000 miners who operated at Jebel Amir's heyday.¹³ In the following years, after the mine had been nominally 'given back' to the civilian government, only about 22 kg were officially produced and most operations had come to a halt at the end of 2022.

The first announcements of an imminent transfer of Jebel Amir's gold mining areas to 'the government' appeared in December 2019, claimed by Hemedti to go back to an offer he made in mid-October of the same year.¹⁴ His statements established him concomitantly as a private investor and public officeholder, symbolic of the overlapping positions in the political economy he was embedded in (Chevillon-Guibert et al. 2020). But he also confirmed Al-Junaid's control over the mines, and his leadership role in the company, a link still denied by his PR office during the same year.¹⁵

There was no legal basis for the role he thus assumed in this transaction, but it was still widely accepted. This constituted more than a technicality and was, implicitly, a confirmation of the positions he claimed: Hemedti leveraged proceeds gained as a gold producer and trader and as supplier of soldiers for hire in the war in Yemen, to reportedly extend life-saving loans to the Central Bank of Sudan and the Ministry of Finance when the civilian-led government was starved for foreign currency. He very likely used the economic leverage that he gained over the civilian government to bargain for more money than he had 'lent' to the government as evidenced by the compensation Al-Junaid received for merely giving the government a mining concession it no longer wanted to exploit and two idle treatment factories in the area. In fact, the 'compensation' for a mine taken control of under NCP leadership direction and with military means of a – legally seen – regular force had been calculated as a private investment based on inflated estimates put forward by the company, rather than technical advice of experts of the Ministry of Mining. This indicates that the calculation was politically motivated and the transitional government's effort to assess the concession's actual economic value was limited, highlighting its political exchange value.

Still, when the actual 'handing over' of the mining site took place in late October 2020 in a ceremony on-site, then Minister of Finance Heba Mohamed was present and promised local economic benefits and "a constructive partnership with Al Junaid."¹⁶ Even the NGO *Global Witness*, which published several critical reports on RSF's involvement in the gold sector (GW 2019), announced that "[t]his move to hand a large chunk of the gold market back to Sudan's government is a positive step in the right direction."¹⁷ But buying a governmental concession from a de facto RSF company for an amount greater than its value and then being unable to

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actually establish productivity, cannot be argued to have been a success, neither as a financial transaction nor as a step in countering military control over the economy. It rather constituted appeasement where defiance was due and emboldened beneficiaries of structures grown under NCP rule.

War and gold in Darfur

War spread swiftly to the Darfur regions after it had erupted and escalated in the capital on April 15, 2023. Almost all of Darfur has experienced widespread brutalities since then, similar to those witnessed two decades earlier. This included not only active attempts to displace entire populations but also systematic exploitation such as sexual slavery and human trafficking.¹⁸

The RSF seized control first in Seraif and Kebkabiya,¹⁹ swiftly followed by asserting dominance over the mining operations in Jebel Amir and numerous active artisanal mining sites. These developments underscored the critical importance of gold, particularly for the RSF, as a strategic asset worth fighting over and firmly controlling.

The RSF quickly expanded their control to peripheral mining areas in the Al-Malha locality in North Darfur and Radom locality in South Darfur. This was followed by expansion into gold smuggling and trading areas through Um Dafuq and then to Central Africa in May 2023 to secure supply routes and gold, a process documented in several reports (Abdelrahman, 2023).²⁰ The expansion did not stop there but spread to control over the gold-rich locality of Kutum in June and the mines of Naim and Abu Odam in Um Kadadah locality, which almost completely halted production due to the violence and instability. The RSF's control over mining sites had expanded all over Darfur by October / November 2023, which made it a defining characteristic of the war, here and elsewhere: when the gold refinery in the center of Khartoum was taken by RSF, they seized more than 5 tons of gold and 9 tons of silver.²¹ Gold was a primary target for robberies involving homes, banks, and some mining sites like the markets of Wadi Ushar. Darfur also served as a passage for gold towards global markets, and the arrival of gold stamped with the refinery's mark at the Chadian borders was documented by Mujo Press,²² in addition to the recorded quantities of gold in local markets in Darfur at less than half the global market price as reported from the markets in Nyala.

The role of gold in the war was not limited to military operations, territorial expansion, or targeting storage locations, but manipulation of the gold market was utilized in the preparation stage before the war. It is thus important to see here not only a war dynamic but part of a general treatment of resources as a mere function of RSF's and other military forces' continued existence and otherwise aimless dominance. This already precedes the war, which can be seen in the pre-war distribution of military influence over sites and the dominance over mining operation outside official state frameworks, going back to the early years of the gold rush. But then, just before the war, in March 2023, the RSF delegate withdrew the share of the Al-Junaid Company from the Strategic Commodities Portfolio, which had been formed in 2020 under the – again Dagalo-dominated – Economic Emergency Committee. The share had amounted to more than 50% of the portfolio, so its withdrawal led to the latter's practical collapse.²³

While this last decision might have been part of the steps towards preparing for war, it was preceded by the other developments that actually brought the RSF-linked company into such a predominant position, starting from its build-up during the NCP regime, its protection by the military leadership still in power after Al-Bashir' fall, but also including policies and concessions made during the transitional period by the then civilian government.

In general, control over mining operations had already been associated with 'protecting' the sites and distributing Sudan's states among different military forces long before they started the present war. Apart from using military zones for ore processing, troops and companies of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) had assumed control over gold mining in Blue Nile through the Advanced Mining Works Company and other enterprises; in Kassala, the Northern State, and South Kordofan, the NISS-affiliated International Group Company had done the same. This happened parallel to them dominating numerous other economic sectors, and armed groups relied on returns from the grains sector, timber trade, car trade, and generally border trade, with gold being one of those profitable commodities.

What has been said here about Darfur, and specifically Al-Junaid Company and the sites in Jebel Amir, describes thus a model where the gold extraction and distribution is substantially linked with and 'allowed' in exchange for security operations, a model that was popularized and even normalized by military state actors until Al-Bashir's fall, with little hindering its further extension after that.

Wartime Gold Policies

Numerous statements and reports describe gold as a crucial resource that significantly enhanced the capabilities of the RSF. The SAF leadership claimed that Hemediti controlled 70 tons of gold outside 'the state's purview', meaning their own control.²⁴ Some reports linked Sudan's gold to how Russia's government financed its war against Ukraine²⁵ and even to Hamas' warfare against Israel.²⁶ This connection between war finance and the gold sector led to international sanctions by the United States and the European Union, targeting gold mining and trade companies associated with the conflict, particularly Al-Junaid Company, regional trade companies affiliated with it and other RSF-related operations. At the same time, traceable gold production has declined significantly across Sudan. The director of the Sudanese Mineral Resources Company in May 2023 indicated a near-collapse of the mining sector, suggesting that the economic significance of gold during the war was due to recirculation rather than new production.²⁷ These statements, though, primarily referred to the 'officially' controlled gold sector under the SAF leadership, leaving the true output unclear.²⁸

In Darfur, the decline of gold production in 2023 – as far as it can be traced – was due to several factors.²⁹ The onset of the rainy season complicated movement, especially in South Darfur's savanna areas. Amid military operations and general supply crises, these areas suffered from a severe fuel shortage to the point that the price of a fuel barrel rose from 160,000 SDG to 800,000 SDG, almost completely halting mining operations. In North Darfur areas, fuel was one factor, but the absence of security, widespread theft, checkpoints, and arbitrary fees led to a significant migration among miners towards Chad and more stable areas in northern Sudan. Despite the gradual influx of fuel from Libya, the absence of security remained a significant factor in weak production.³⁰ Although the gold company in Jebel Amir had resumed operations under RSF control by the end of 2023, its impact was minimal due to the rise of an array of fees and the absence of security, both of which dejected those on whose manual labor mining lastly rested.

The civilian authority of the SAF-dominated state, from its new position in Port Sudan and, increasingly, Cairo, treated gold in Darfur as an activity outside its control. When thinking of alternative trade centers, after the official trade point, the Gold Building in Khartoum, had been lost, five new trade points in capitals of northern and eastern states were announced, completely excluding Darfur, although the army controlled military garrisons in the five states at the time

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of those decisions. In addition, these states were excluded from federal taxes due to weak control over mining sites.

It is noteworthy that this exclusion did not cover all resources. While excluding gold, livestock continuously flowed from areas under RSF control towards army-controlled areas to be exported through seaports, reaching 5 million heads as the highest rate of livestock export in Sudan's history.³¹ This meant that livestock moved east towards army-controlled areas, and gold moved west through RSF areas to cross the borders towards Chad, Central Africa, and Libya.

Unlike the flexible policies for livestock and some grains, gold became a target for destructive military operations by the army, which used aviation as a primary weapon, bombing, among other targets, mining markets in South Darfur's Daraba. These markets were far from the RSF-profiting companies, and the attacks demonstrate an exclusively militarized and politicized view of gold as an 'RSF resource' and thus a legitimate military target. While gold has been and remains an important part of RSF finances, they are not the only beneficiaries from this resource, and treating it as an 'RSF resource' confirms implicit claims to be not only the superior but also the only relevant actor group in that regard. In addition, it is still an open question why such specific targeting takes place while there is permeability of military boundaries for other commodities - and military personnel, for that matter. In any case, the attacks on civilian markets also indicated the extent to which those ordering the aerial attacks disregard civilian lives and livelihoods when choosing military targets.³²

Conclusion

We conclude this essay with a more general thought, intended to reflect a concern we have after studying gold mining in Sudan for many years.

The damage done by Sudan's current war does not just lie in the loss of life, of destruction to built and grown environments, in the seemingly irreparable disruptions to a whole generation's growing up, a disruption shared now by most of the population with those who had already endured it through the relentless political violence of the last decades. What is being done to prospects of living in Sudan as well, however, is the deepening normalization of an exploitative relation between those wielding power to inflict physical harm and those who don't. In many areas, the idea that both humans and nature are merely resources to maintain and strengthen military forces is becoming increasingly entrenched, bolstered by rhetoric promising repetitively "victory" to be near, claimed to be the result of a dignified struggle by "the people," the same people who are continuously slaughtered and bombed.

Examining gold mining in Darfur within this context, as we did here, might, on the one hand, confirm the impression that it constitutes a prime example for that dynamic. Didn't it just bring another layer of suffering to an already battered region? Wasn't the principal or at least one dominant outcome of the first – documented – large-scale extraction of that mineral in this region the rule of militias, domestic and foreign, over populations that had to either arrange with them or suffer the consequences of defiance?

But the specific way in which gold has been – or even must be – extracted in Darfur due to the physical characteristics of its occurrences adds another aspect to that seemingly obvious situation. Most of the gold that has been extracted here comes either – in the initial period – from the tedious work of moving back and forth with metal detectors or from the even more

tedious work of digging up rocks manually or panning alluvial sands. Nothing that the militias – or the governments that backed them – brought into the situation made a qualitative difference to that: they used labor and technologies other than their own, being, in a sense, merely a parasitic presence. The few infrastructural additions that were made – such as roads built by Al-Junaid Company in southern Darfur between villages and the mining areas – had no other function than to enhance this parasitic presence.³³

It is thus important to note the seeming contradiction between military dominance and the lack of a labor force in the mining areas, especially during the war. This constitutes only then a contradiction if coercive presence is equated with availability of a ‘willing’ workforce. The ‘escapes’ that characterized the reaction of a sizable part of the population to such presence is of eminent meaning: escape from violent ‘mine owners’ by moving elsewhere, escape from what is perceived as illegitimate taxation through alternative pathways of distribution – ‘smuggling’ to the powers that be – escape to other economic activities. Each of these escapes marks the limits of coercion; and the fact that no burgeoning, stable industry developed anywhere these forces put their hand on marks them not only as an inapt but a damaging presence, even for an activity that is already physically and environmentally damaging in itself.

There are numerous ways in which mining as a social encounter between humans, and between humans and the environments their mining affects, can play out. There can be more or less detrimental consequences, more or less contribution to general well-being, more or less hostility involved. Even a conflict-prone country such as Sudan has experienced very different kinds of mining, which we still consider significant to be documented. We opted here for recounting the worst instance of its impact on Sudan’s political development. But we also want to point out the overarching danger of limiting attention to such an instance for envisioning political futures: whether mining, of gold or other minerals, will continue to play a role in Darfur’s economy or will be just a fleeting, though haunting experience, it remains crucial to see that the encounters described here are only one of several ways that were and are possible. These particular encounters were brought to the fore by forcing out alternatives, and treating them as inevitable might prevent the possibility of even imagining alternatives. Paying attention to those alternatives that already materialized will be an essential task if an end to a state of war and of placating warlords is not to be accepted as unimaginable.

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Endnotes

¹ Mineral extraction had played a peripheral role in Darfur's economic history, apart from significant copper deposits in Hufrat al-Nahās and small-scale iron mining on Jebel Marra and elsewhere, but oil had already started to play a political role as imagined rich to be secured, before any actual extraction took place (Behrends 2008).

² We define this as a quadrilateral between Sudan and Guinea, encompassing part of the Sahara and the Sahel, as well as the more Southern regions of the Gulf of Guinea.

³ United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 1591 (2005)," S/2016/805, September 22, 2016, pp. 4-5, 36-41, available at: <https://www.undocs.org/S/2016/805>.

⁴ Formed around 2013, the Rapid Support Forces were formalized by law only in January 2017.

⁵ This confrontation was reported in the press at that time (e.g. Al-‘Arabī Al-Jadīd, 21 February 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/>; "وفير للداخلية ملوك ودول عربية يدعون لدعم مواجهة قوى إثيوبيا-الخرقى"; Sudan Tribune, "Minister calls for military intervention in N. Darfur gold mines", 5 January 2017, <https://sudantribune.com/article59531/>). The RSF were already before protected from public criticism; in May 2014, the leader of the National Umma Party Sadiq Al-Mahdī was arrested for speaking about abuses committed by these troops (Tubiana 2017).

⁶ See also Radio Dabanga, "North Darfur's Jebel Amer gold mine to be 'reorganised'", 30 October 2017, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/north-darfur-s-jebel-amer-gold-mine-to-be-reorganised>; BBC, "Sudan says militia leader Musa Hilal arrested," November 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42141938>.

⁷ According to the listing of tailing business licenses held by the Sudanese Mineral Resources Company, the license was given to Al-Junayd on 18 February 2016; the same license for Sango in South Darfur was issued on 30 January 2017.

⁸ Interview with Ministry of Mining official, November 2022.

⁹ Tom Collins, "Sudan's Gold: Hemedti's Untold Power," *African Business*, 8 July 2019, available at: <https://africanbusinessmagazine.com/sectors/commodities/sudanese-gold-hemedtis-untold-power>.

¹⁰ For example, SLA Abdel Wahid Nur on Jebel Marra, reported in UN Security Council, "Letter dated 13 January 2021 from the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", 13 January 2021, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_40.pdf.

¹¹ The information in this section is based on public and semi-public documents that were collected during desk research, in addition to field research that included interviews conducted

in North and South Darfur in the second half of 2022 with former and present officials, residents and miners in these areas. For security reasons, all sources have been anonymized and specific references to place and time of interview omitted.

¹² See details in United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 1591 (2005)," S/2024/65, 15 January 2024, pp. 32-35. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2024/65>.

¹⁴ Radio Dabanga, “Hemeti 'set to hand Jebel Amer gold mines to Sudan govt”, 16 December 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/hemeti-set-to-hand-jebel-amer-gold-mines-to-sudan-govt>; Bloomberg, “Warlord-Linked Sudanese Firm Hands Over Gold Mines to Government,” 5 May 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-05/warlord-linked-sudanese-firm-hands-over-gold-mines-to-government>.

¹⁶ Radio Dabanga, “Sudan govt takes control of Darfur’s Jebel Amer gold mines”, 29 October 2020. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-govt-takes-control-of-darfurs-jebel-amer-gold-mines>.

¹⁷ Global Witness, “Global Witness response to news that head of Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces preparing to hand over gold mining areas to Hamdouk government”, 16 December 2019. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-response-to-news-that-head-of-sudans-rapid-support-forces-preparing-to-hand-over-gold-mining-areas-to-hamdouk-government/>.

¹⁸ These have been reported widely among Sudanese via social media; an example from global media is the CNN report “Witness testimony exposes alleged RSF-led campaign to enslave men and women in Sudan”, 20 November 2023 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/16/africa/sudan-investigation-rsf-enslavement-intl-cmd/index.html>).

¹⁹ Al-Mashhad, 15 April 2023, <https://almashhad.com/article/773112298002792-News/375887178602966>

²⁰ See also about claimed connections to the Wagner Group in Al-Jazeera, 25 August 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2023/8/25/ولست-في-عمر-الذيع-فما-غير-حصل-قبل>. Based on Wall Street Journal, “The last days of Wagner’s Prigozhin”, 24 August 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/prigozhin-wagner-plane-crash-last-days-2c44dd5c>.

²¹ While substantiated by proud RSF social media posts at the time, this incident was also described, with different numbers, by the Minister of Minerals, Mohamed Bashir Abu Namm (Sudan Tribune, 20 February 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article282483/>) and the Minister of Finance, Jibril Ibrahim (Masrawy, 14 March 2024, www.masrawy.com/news/news_publicaffairs/details/2024/3/14/2552664/).

22 Mujo Press (Facebook), 21 July 2023.
<https://www.facebook.com/MujoPress/posts/pfbid03297mey8KvvbHBnUvHMjooo3vjM7EdKOJAq1Etx4SSX62gV4hnV7VkhXSdk5oB2oXl>.

²³ Mujo Press (Facebook), 21 July 2023.

<https://www.facebook.com/MujoPress/posts/pfbid03297mey8KvvbHBnUvHMjooo3vjM7EdKQJAq1EtX4SSX62gV4hnV7VkJHSdk5oB2oX1>.

²⁴ Sudan Tribune, 11 May 2023. <https://sudantribune.net/article273788/>.

²⁵ This claim has been put forward most clearly by CNN (“Russia is plundering gold in Sudan to boost Putin’s war effort in Ukraine”, 29 July 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>).

²⁶ Circulated in several media outlets after a New York Times report (“Israel found the Hamas money machine years ago”, 16 December 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/16/world/europe/israel-hamas-money-finance-turkey-intelligence-attacks.html>), and related to the arrest of ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Ḥamza in Cairo in January 2024 (BBC, 19 January 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cp3181xp562o>).

²⁷ Al-Arabiya, 17 May 2023. <https://www.alarabiya.net/aswaq/special-stories/2023/05/17/الصراع-على-فوت-جار-تل-ذيل-لars-في-السودان/>

²⁸ Observations that gold from Sudan continued to be traded in the United Arab Emirates and, increasingly, Egypt, do also not say much about how ‘fresh’ this gold was, given the prevalence of theft all over the country (see United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 1591 (2005),” S/2024/65, 15 January 2024, p. 35. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2024/65>). See a more detailed discussion in Abdelrahman 2023.

²⁹ The UN Panel report estimated gold from Darfur to represent 30% of total gold production in Sudan, which appears to be an overestimate, given the vast mining districts in Red Sea State and numerous production areas in the Northern State, River Nile, Kordofan and Blue Nile. The statement that about 30% of gold produced in Sudan came from artisanal mining is also most probably a miscalculation, as the industrial sector had never been even close to producing as much as the artisanal one, though boundaries between both are fluid, especially in the tailing business (see United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 1591 (2005),” S/2024/65, 15 January 2024, p. 35. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2024/65>).

³⁰ Darfur24, 12 October 2023. <https://www.darfur24.com/2023/10/12/فاجمل-ذهب-حرب-آخرى-أعفونى-على-جيش-السودان/>.

³¹ Al-Sudani, 21 January 2024. <https://alsudaninews.com/?p=177276>.

³² This is not a new pattern and has been experienced by other war areas, such as the Nuba Mountains, for decades (see documentation by Nuba Reports, Eric Reeves, the Satellite Sentinel Project and others). In fact, schools and similar civilian institutions have been targeted, once again, by the Sudan Air Force during the current war as well (e.g. Radio Dabanga, 18 March 2024. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/splm-n-condemns-sudanese-air-force-bombing-of-nuba-village-school>).

³³ The same goes for more ambitious projects, such as a kind of RSF town, Zuruq in North Darfur (mentioned in United Nations Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 1591 (2005),” S/2019/34, 10 January 2019, pp. 45-46. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2019/34>; followed up in Klaas van Dijken, “Blood, sand and gold: victor’s city rises from ashes of Sudan’s civil war”, *The Guardian*, 29 February 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/29/darfur-towns-rise-out-of-ashes-of-sudan-war>.