

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

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**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

SUDAN

CONFLICT DRIVES MASS
REFUGEE MOVEMENT AND
FUELS HUMAN SMUGGLING

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCMSR	Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic)
DCIM	Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration
FACT	Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad)
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LYD	Libyan dinars
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SLA-AW	Sudan Liberation Army: Abdel Wahid al-Nur
SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army: Minni Minnawi
SLA-T	Sudan Liberation Army: Mustafa Tambour
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



INTRODUCTION

On 15 April 2023, Sudan erupted into war, pitting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Over the last year and a half, the fighting has proven to be tremendously destructive, devastating large swathes of Khartoum and other key economic hubs, displacing nearly 2 million refugees into neighbouring countries, displacing more than 2.2 million refugees into neighbouring countries, and leaving over 8 million people internally displaced within Sudan as of September 2024.¹ There has been little pause in the destruction, and the conflict shows no signs of ending.

The war has also started to shape broader patterns of human smuggling and mobility. Along the northern border, the Egyptian imposition of visa requirements on Sudanese refugees has driven a growing reliance on smuggling networks. This in turn has led to an expansion of smuggling operations, particularly through the Halayeb Triangle area.

Along the border with Libya, there has been a gradual increase in arrivals over the past eight months. While control of the border area has shifted from the RSF to the SAF, this has not had a significant impact on smuggling dynamics, which remain robust.

In western Sudan, the RSF's seizure of large areas of territory has been accompanied by violent attacks on the civilian population, resulting in mass displacement into Chad. Most refugees travel autonomously, but smuggling networks along the Chad–Sudan border are becoming increasingly important, either to facilitate safe passage through RSF territory or as part of the long-distance movement of Sudanese refugees to northern Niger and southern Libya.

Finally, there has been a limited resurgence of migrant and refugee arrivals from Ethiopia and Eritrea along Sudan's south-eastern border. If these movements continue and expand, they could further shape human smuggling systems through eastern Sudan to Egypt. RSF advances in the south-east – such as the capture of the city of Wad Madani – may have an impact on smuggling networks, but are unlikely to disrupt their operations significantly.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, refugees, border community members, local authorities, NGO personnel, security personnel and others.

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Sudan and the wider region.



CONFLICT DRIVES MASS REFUGEE MOVEMENT AND FUELS HUMAN SMUGGLING

Since at least the turn of the millennium, Sudan has been an important crossroads for migrant smuggling across the region.² This is largely due to its geographical position, between major origin countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia in East Africa, and key transit countries such as Chad, Libya and Egypt, from where migrants aim to reach Europe, Israel or the Gulf states. But the country's significance in the human smuggling landscape of North and East Africa is also driven by Sudanese migration due to economic need or displacement caused by insecurity.

Over the past decade, the intensity of human smuggling through Sudan has fluctuated. From around 2013, routes through the country became a major driver of human smuggling in Libya, largely fuelled by the movement of Eritreans fleeing military conscription, abusive security forces and economic challenges.³ By 2017, however, a combination of concerted security efforts in Sudan and Libya – including the withdrawal of some Libyan militias from the business of protecting human smuggling; the deployment of the RSF to counter migration; and the dismantling of transnational Eritrean smuggling networks – led to a sharp decline in movement.⁴

Between 2019 and 2022, the number of migrants and refugees moving through Sudan was broadly consistent, despite considerable instability in East Africa, including conflict in Ethiopia, ongoing repression in Eritrea and drought in Somalia. A similar stability of movement was evident among Sudanese nationals, despite significant unrest in the country. Growing economic hardship and political grievances sparked a protest movement that forced President Omar al-Bashir from power in April 2019.⁵ His successor, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok Al-Kinani, was in turn removed from office in 2021 by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, commander of the SAF, with the support of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti', head of the RSF.⁶ While Hamdok was briefly reinstated, after signing an agreement with the two men, he ultimately resigned in the early days of 2022, leaving Burhan and Hemedti at the head of a military junta.⁷ Meanwhile, the country's economic situation has been poor since 2019, and it experienced economic turmoil and exceptionally high inflation rates for most of 2021 and 2022.⁸



Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (centre) with the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (left). The two groups have been battling each other since April 2023. © Mahmoud Hjjaj/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

In 2023, however, the situation in Sudan changed dramatically. On 15 April, clashes broke out across the country between the SAF and the RSF, with the conflict ongoing as of September 2024. The fighting has proven hugely destructive, devastating large areas of Khartoum and other key economic hubs, displacing nearly a million refugees into neighbouring countries and leaving nearly five and a half million people internally displaced.

The conflict has also started to shape broader patterns of mobility throughout the Sahel and North Africa. While most Sudanese refugees remain in the countries where they initially sought safe haven – mainly Egypt and Chad – a growing number have begun to travel north to Libya and Tunisia before embarking for Europe.

It is important to stress that these figures remain low in relation to the total number of displaced Sudanese nationals. By the end December 2023, Frontex data indicated that 6 360 Sudanese migrants had disembarked in Italy from Libya and Tunisia.⁹ A further 1 280 had arrived in the EU using other routes.¹⁰ Although incomplete, this data shows that Sudanese arrivals more than tripled compared to 2022. However, these levels pale in comparison to the number of people displaced within Sudan and into neighbouring countries. Should the conflict continue, the potential for a substantial increase in the number of Sudanese refugees attempting to reach Europe is high.

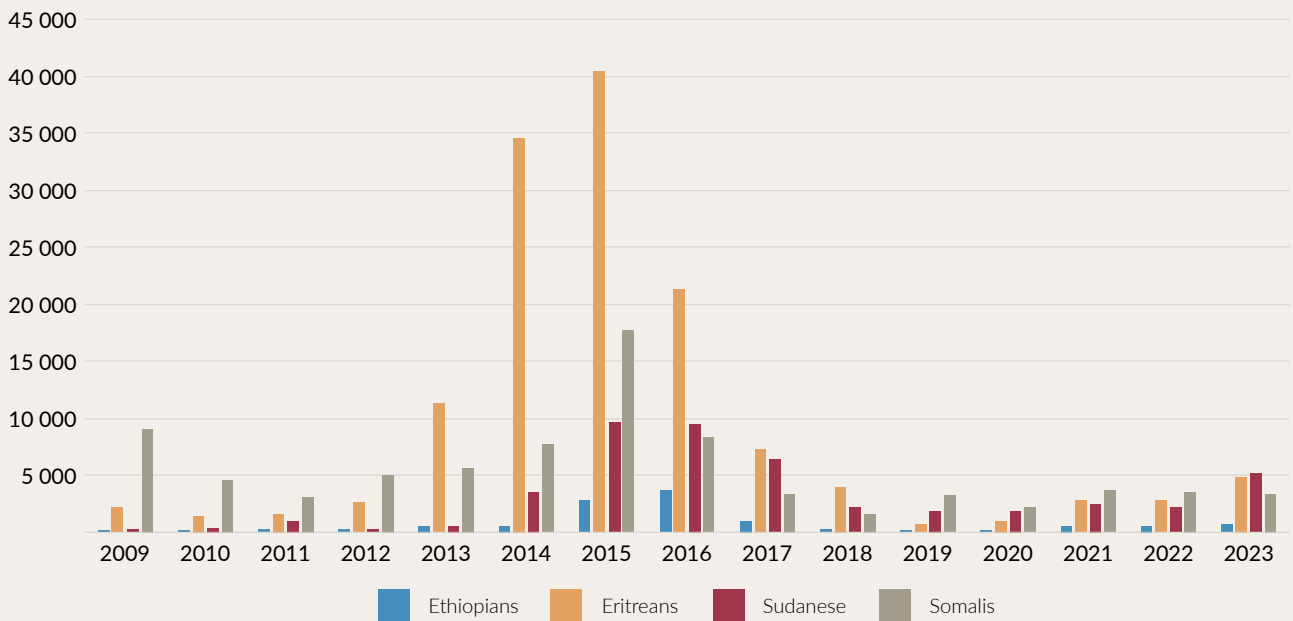


FIGURE 1 Arrivals in Europe of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Sudanese and Somali nationals, 2009–2023.

SOURCE: Frontex

The breakdown in security and governance in Sudan has destabilized the existing migration routes and hubs used by East Africans, especially hubs such as Khartoum and Omdurman. In effect, the country’s human smuggling systems are now bifurcated between areas under RSF control and those controlled by the SAF, affecting both the feasibility of movement and the routes taken. Deteriorating security may also create openings for increased movement of East African migrants through Sudan, although the potential for this and the routes used will depend heavily on territorial control and fighting between the SAF and the RSF.

This brief represents the first coverage of Sudan in the GI-TOC’s ongoing project on human smuggling and trafficking ecosystems. As such, it aims to detail the main developments salient to human smuggling – in particular, the war between the SAF and the RSF and its impact on the routes along Sudan’s northern, western and south-eastern borders. A second report, which details the movement of Sudanese refugees throughout North Africa and the Sahel, is planned for the end of 2024.



WAR ERUPTS AS FORMER COUP PARTNERS TURN ON EACH OTHER

The war between the RSF and the SAF broke out in Sudan on 15 April 2023, but tensions between the two forces had been building for some time. The SAF, long wary of the RSF's growing influence and martial power, found itself increasingly at odds with the paramilitary force. A particular point of contention involved plans for the RSF to be incorporated into the SAF as part of the Draft Political Framework Agreement agreed to in December 2022, which aimed to transition Sudan back to civilian rule. The SAF pressed for this incorporation to take place quickly, within a two-year window, while the RSF pushed for a phased incorporation over 10 years and a degree of continued autonomy.

The rising animosity in early 2023 was further fuelled by attempts by the RSF and the SAF to expand their respective forces, particularly through active recruitment in Darfur.¹¹ The SAF's enlistment of youth from the region's Arab tribes, the RSF's core communities, fuelled suspicions that it was interfering in RSF interests.¹² Relations were further strained by the SAF's attempts in late 2022 and early 2023 to reconstitute the Border Guard, a unit disbanded in 2017 and largely composed of Arab militias.¹³ It was reportedly to be commanded by Musa Hilal, a UN-sanctioned armed group leader and long-time enemy of Hemedti, who originates from the same Arab Rizeigat tribe as him.¹⁴ Attempts to reconstitute the force included efforts to recruit RSF members and officers involved in the previous iteration of the Border Guard.¹⁵

In March and early April 2023, this friction led to a major redeployment of both SAF and RSF troops into central Sudan.¹⁶ Hostilities reached boiling point on 12 April, when a large RSF force deployed to Merowe, north of Khartoum, which has an airbase on its outskirts where Egyptian military trainers were being hosted. The SAF in turn sent reinforcements to the city, and issued a statement on 13 April warning of the risk of conflict and threatening to force back the RSF if it did not withdraw.¹⁷

The RSF force did not withdraw, and on the morning of 15 April fighting broke out, starting with clashes in Khartoum and Omdurman. SAF air and artillery strikes targeted RSF bases throughout both cities. The RSF in turn moved quickly to seize or occupy a number of key locations, including the international airport, the presidential palace and some key security facilities. Further violence erupted outside Khartoum, with RSF forces seizing Merowe airfield and briefly detaining a number of Egyptian military personnel.¹⁸

In the following days, clashes also occurred in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, Sudan's largest city outside of the Khartoum–Omdurman area. More fighting took place in other parts of Darfur and in some eastern locations, including Port Sudan, Kassala and al-Qadarif.

In the north-west, near the border with Libya, clashes reportedly broke out in and around the Chevrolet base (also known as Karab al-Toum). The base housed the main RSF force in the region – the Desert Shield Mobile Force – as well as smaller SAF military intelligence units. On 20 April, the SAF announced that it had taken control of the base, although this was disputed by interviewees in the area.¹⁹

Overall, in the first days of the conflict, the RSF suffered losses in a number of areas, a dynamic that the SAF tried to publicize as a form of psychological warfare, to create the impression of a general collapse in their opponent's strength. The reality on the ground, however, was different. While the RSF was degraded in the early stages of the conflict, it nonetheless proved able to absorb these blows, reposition and sustain its forces, and hold or seize territory. Along the Libyan border, for example, the RSF largely retained control of key areas – such as al-Muthalath market, the Sudanese side of the Ain Kaziet border crossing, and the Khanagh checkpoint, which is located between al-Muthalath and Malha, a small settlement some 200 kilometres to the south-east. It also reasserted control over the Chevrolet base.

In Khartoum, the situation devolved into a grinding, attritional conflict. The RSF maintained a siege on key military facilities – including the General Staff Headquarters – and extended its control over residential areas of the city, as well as the adjacent cities of Omdurman and Khartoum North.²⁰ The SAF, for its part, continued to rely heavily on air and artillery strikes, and inflicted significant damage on RSF facilities and weapons depots, but failed to make significant territorial gains. The net result



Clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have devastated large swathes of Khartoum and other economic hubs. © AFP via Getty Images

was substantial destruction of Khartoum's residential and commercial areas, with economic losses exacerbated by reportedly high levels of looting. A significant proportion of the civilian population within the greater Khartoum area was displaced, either within Sudan or to neighbouring countries.

The conflict became particularly extensive and bloody in Darfur, where the previous war – between government forces, backed by Janjaweed militias, and rebel groups – had begun in 2003 and only ended with the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2020. The Janjaweed were implicated in widespread violence and human rights abuses, and gained notoriety for their role in attacks on and massacres of civilians. The RSF, which grew out of the Janjaweed, maintains strong links with ethnic militias in the area. It also retained significant forces in the west and, before the conflict, enjoyed functional control over most of the Chad–Sudan border region. As a result, the RSF proved to be well positioned to contest and ultimately capture a large swathe of territory in Darfur, including the cities of Nyala, Zalinguei (the capital of Central Darfur state) and al-Geneina (the capital of West Darfur state).

The RSF's increasing territorial gains in western Sudan were accompanied by widespread reports of human rights abuses, including mass killings of civilians. In Ardamata, in West Darfur, RSF attacks on civilian areas, after it had seized the town, reportedly resulted in the deaths of 800 people.²¹ Ethnic minorities, particularly the Massalit, appear to be particularly targeted, this being part of a wider pattern observed in other areas of Darfur.²²

On the way from al-Geneina to Adikon, I almost got shot, the only thing that saved me is that my complexion is fair; I look like an Arab.

Interview with a male refugee in Adre, Chad, November 2023

In the face of rising violence and targeted killings, large numbers of civilians in western Sudan fled their homes. In some instances, this displacement was reportedly fuelled by the RSF's demands that civilians leave, but even those who heeded these calls were allegedly robbed, raped and killed.

We responded to the RSF call, which asked the inhabitants of al-Geneina to leave the town. As we left, in one night, five men from our group were shot dead by unidentified armed men claiming to be RSF soldiers.

Interview with a female refugee in Arkoum, south of Adre, Chad, November 2023

By the end of December, over 484 000 refugees from Sudan had crossed into Chad, primarily in the central and southern border areas.²³ Another 2 million were internally displaced within western Sudan.

Fears of further ethnic violence and the complete domination of Darfur by the RSF triggered the emergence of a more complex conflict dynamic in North Darfur. An alliance of armed groups – centred on the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and three factions of the Sudan Liberation Army: Abdel Wahid al-Nur (SLA-AW), Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM) and Mustafa Tambour (SLA-T) – converged on the state capital of al-Fashir, in some cases bringing with them personnel and heavy equipment that had been in Libya. While this deployment was specifically intended to deter an anticipated RSF attack on al-Fashir, it followed an announcement by the SLA-MM, SLA-T and JEM on 16 November that they were abandoning their neutral positions in order to counter RSF attacks on civilians.

Throughout 2023 and into 2024, North Darfur has remained a priority for the RSF, in part because of the existence of a key transit route from the Chadian city of Amdjarass through al-Zurrug to Khartoum, along which supplies and equipment allegedly provided by the United Arab Emirates are transported.²⁴ As of September 2024, the RSF's efforts to capture al-Fashir and other areas of North Darfur were ongoing, exacerbating the worsening humanitarian crisis in the region.

In the south, the situation changed substantially in mid-December, when the RSF seized much of al-Jazirah state, including the capital Wad Madani, on the Blue Nile, 130 kilometres south-east of Khartoum. This occupation was reportedly accompanied by serious human rights violations, including the forced recruitment of youth into the ranks of the RSF. It also led to further displacement, both of local communities in al-Jazirah and of refugees who had fled there to escape the fighting in Khartoum and other areas.

Al-Jazirah hosts [many] who fled the war, and if the conflict continues, there could be a boom in migrants, refugees and people who seek human smugglers.

Communication with a Sudanese researcher, December 2023

Overall, there has been a broad consolidation and expansion of RSF control over western Sudan, including most of the Chadian and Central African Republic border areas, greater Khartoum and parts of the south. The only significant area where the RSF appears to have lost control is the Libyan border, from where it reportedly redeployed its forces to Darfur in mid-June 2023. Control of this area was initially split between the SAF and the SLA-MM. In December, however, a well-equipped SAF force arrived and took a more direct role in taxation and border security, working alongside the SLA-MM.

As of September 2024, a rough division of territorial control has emerged in Sudan, with the RSF largely in control of areas west of the Nile and, to a lesser extent, the south-centre of the country, and the SAF in control of areas east of the Nile, the northern border and the south-east. Sudanese and international actors have expressed concern that this territorial split could lead to the emergence of competing governments in eastern and western Sudan. Port Sudan is already functioning as the de facto headquarters of the SAF-affiliated government, while Hemedti has threatened to set up an alternative administration in Khartoum or Nyala for areas under RSF control.²⁵

On the surface, this echoes the bifurcated governance in Libya, leading some experts to argue that Sudan is heading towards a political scenario that could mirror that of its north-western neighbour.²⁶ However, this comparison is problematic, as the political economy of the Sudanese conflict and its ethnic dimensions are very different from the situation in Libya.

Libya's two competing governments are financially interconnected and share control of key oil resources. The Benghazi-based Government of National Stability has the ability to halt the production of oil, but cannot autonomously export it, while the Government of National Unity, based in Tripoli, controls legal exports but not the major oilfields. Finally, the Central Bank of Libya controls oil profits and their allocation to either of the two governments. Moreover, while Libya's conflict involves competition for governance, it is by and large not characterized by major disputes over land ownership or the right of people to live in a given area. This makes the conflict, while sometimes violent, less of an existential threat to the groups involved.

The above dynamics are reversed in Sudan. There is little or no interdependence between the RSF and the SAF, and the competition for economic resources is more of a zero-sum affair. In addition, the conflict in Darfur and Khartoum has taken on a significant cultural dimension, with allegations of ethnic cleansing in the west and targeted abuses in Khartoum, some of which are rooted in historical grievances between populations living in the core of the Sudanese state and those at its periphery, such as in Darfur.

While Libya's bifurcation has led to considerable fragility, the situation has remained largely stable. The division of Sudan is likely to be far more volatile, fractious and prone to political contestation, fighting and human rights abuses, both between and within the areas controlled by the RSF and the SAF.

Sahelian mercenaries drawn into the conflict

The role of mercenaries in the Sudanese conflict has become a point of contention between the RSF and the SAF, and an issue of significant concern to the international community. The SAF has repeatedly tried to portray the RSF as a force built on mercenary muscle, in order to turn public opinion against it. However, as one Sudan expert explained, this approach also reflects long-standing prejudices among the elite in Khartoum: there is a widespread belief that Darfuri ethnic groups, including the Arab tribes that form the core of the RSF's support base, are less than fully Sudanese, and accusations of mercenaries in its ranks are an attempt to reaffirm this so-called otherness. The RSF, meanwhile, has denied employing mercenaries.

Despite this refutation, the flow of foreign combatants into Sudan has increased since the beginning of the conflict. In the early weeks of the war, interviewees reported that Chadian fighters from the Fezzan region of Libya were moving into Khartoum to join the RSF in its campaign against the SAF. One group included a convoy of around 15 vehicles and some 30 to 40 men, said to be Chadian mercenaries previously associated with the Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) in Sebha. The group reportedly left Sebha at the end of April 2023 and travelled through Rebiana, 820 kilometres to the south-east, in the Kufra region, before entering Sudan.

Interviewees claimed that the LAAF reportedly allowed these fighters to join the ranks of the RSF in order to provide tacit support to Hemedti. The withdrawal of Chadian combatants from the LAAF was also not seen as a risk, according to contacts, given the relative stability of the situation in the Fezzan and the Oil Crescent.

From May, the ranks of the RSF continued to swell, with one contact estimating that between 250 and 450 combatants from the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad – FACT) and the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic – CCMSR) joined the paramilitary group



Chadian fighters have joined the Rapid Support Forces in their campaign against the Sudanese Armed Forces in Khartoum. *Photo: GI-TOC*



in Sudan in 2023. It is difficult to obtain accurate figures, as some individuals are only loosely affiliated with rebel groups. In addition to those identified as FACT and CCMSR members, it is likely that independent Libya-based Chadian fighters also joined the RSF. These developments were reportedly further fuelled by pressure from the LAAF.²⁷

According to one interviewee, many of these combatants were incorporated into a single unit. Given that many of the Chadians arrived with weapons and vehicles acquired while working as mercenaries in Libya, the force is believed to be well equipped. It is reported to be operating in North Darfur state, with unconfirmed information that it may be operating around al-Fashir.

Further RSF recruitment is reported to be taking place across a wide swath of the Sahel, particularly at gold mining sites. Unconfirmed reports from interviewees in southern Libya suggest that people from Arab tribes in southern Libya and northern Chad are also being enlisted to fight.

According to contacts with insight into these developments, the Sahelian fighters who have joined the RSF have multiple motives, including the acquisition of weapons, equipment and stolen vehicles. For young Chadian mercenaries in particular, for whom employment opportunities in Libya have collapsed since the signing of the October 2020 ceasefire, the outbreak of a large-scale conflict in a relatively familiar geographical location, involving warring parties with whom they enjoy community ties, and in an area of lucrative trafficking and smuggling activity, represents a golden opportunity. Some fighters in these Chadian rebel factions also belong to groups and communities that have been involved in intercommunal conflict in Darfur in the past, and their participation in the current fighting could further exacerbate these tensions.

It is important to stress, however, that the evolving dynamic of mercenary recruitment in Sudan broadly mirrors patterns seen in previous conflicts in the region. In earlier instances, mercenary recruitment effectively became a structured business – involving brokers, transporters and financiers – that built on established illicit economic systems in the region. During Libya's 2019–2020 war for Tripoli, there were multiple cases of young teenagers being enlisted in northern Chad and Sudan, effectively constituting a form of human trafficking.²⁸ The fundamentals that enabled this exploitative system have not changed, underscoring the importance of closely monitoring current mercenary recruitment and movements from the wider region into Sudan.



HUMAN SMUGGLING REROUTES AWAY FROM KHARTOUM

Cross-border movements from and through Sudan in 2023 overwhelmingly involved refugees fleeing conflict, rather than economic migrants seeking opportunities. As of 11 December, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had recorded the arrival of more than one and a half million people from Sudan, including refugees and returnees, in neighbouring countries.²⁹

The vast majority of these refugees travelled without the assistance of smugglers. However, restrictions on legal mobility began to tighten, with Egypt, for example, introducing visas for Sudanese nationals wishing to enter the country. As a result, human smuggling networks adapted their operations to cater for those seeking to flee. Increased smuggling was also facilitated by the focus of both the RSF and the SAF on the conflict. As one Sudanese researcher explained, ‘Law enforcement is busy with the war, and human smugglers are exploiting the lack of surveillance along the border.’

The conflict has also shaped the geographical trajectory of routes. Before the war, greater Khartoum was the main hub of human smuggling activity: a destination for migrants coming from the Horn of Africa, and a starting point for smugglers transporting people north to Libya or west to Chad. This has now changed, as the grinding conflict in greater Khartoum has displaced these networks. In effect, Sudan’s previously unitary human smuggling ecosystem has been bifurcated along conflict lines, with routes in the east and north of the country largely separated from those through the west. This has led to the development of divergent dynamics along the different routes.

Human smuggling on the Sudan–Egypt border surges

Between the start of the war and December 2023, there was a sharp increase in the movement of refugees across the country’s northern border with Egypt. By the end of the year, just over 400 000 people had crossed from Sudan.³⁰

Initially, most of this activity involved legal transit between the two countries, through the Argeen and Ashkeet ports of entry north of Wadi Halfa. While visas were required for men between the ages of 16 and 50, women, children and the elderly were able to enter without a visa. During the first month and a half of the conflict, more than 4 000 people reportedly entered Egypt per day.³¹

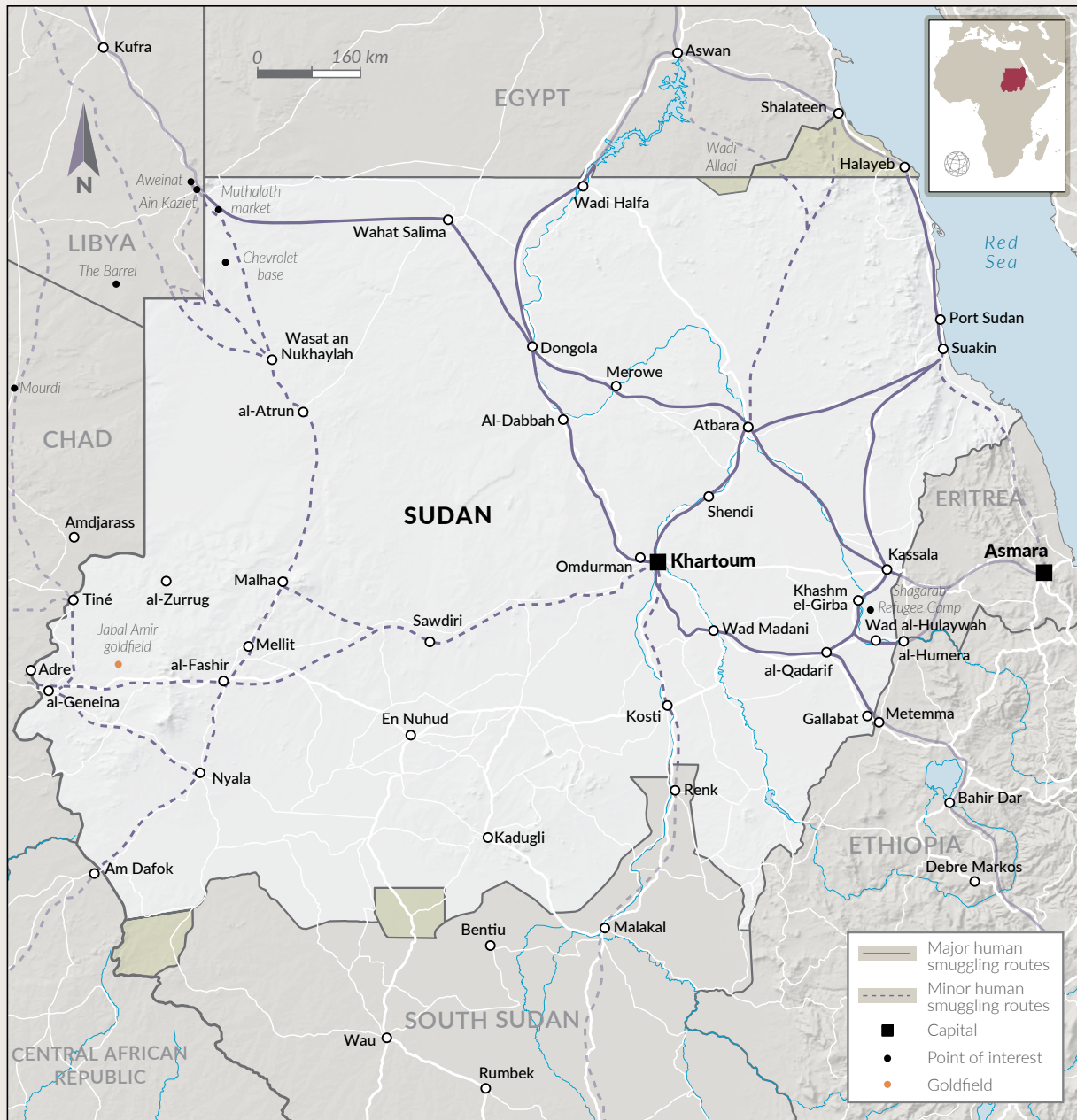


FIGURE 2 Sudan, showing main human smuggling routes, 2023.

Between late May and early June, however, Egypt changed its policy, introducing visas for all Sudanese nationals and refusing entry to those with temporary travel documents. Visas could only be obtained from the Egyptian consulates in Wadi Halfa or further east in Port Sudan. Both facilities had limited capacity, and an interviewee reported that an average of 60 visas were being issued per day in Wadi Halfa and 40 in Port Sudan, out of thousands of weekly visa applications. This led to weeks-long waiting periods and a growing number of rejections, particularly for low-income Sudanese.

A Sudanese researcher explained: 'If you have an apartment or investment in Egypt, they give you a visa blindly. If you don't, and are receiving money from relatives, you will be in a difficult situation, although it is still possible to get the visa.'

The change in policy also affected formal transit, with the number of legal arrivals dropping to 400 per day in July and falling further by September, when 400 Sudanese arrivals were recorded per week.³² Faced with the new restrictions, a growing number of Sudanese refugees turned to human smuggling networks to cross the border into Egypt.

Human smuggling networks have a long-standing presence on the Sudan–Egypt border. In the mid-2010s, they were particularly active in smuggling East Africans northwards for subsequent transit to Israel.³³ More recently, they have facilitated the clandestine movement of Syrian refugees through Khartoum to Egypt.³⁴

More broadly, smuggling networks have helped to move Sudanese nationals across the border in both directions when travel restrictions have been imposed. In 2020, for example, mobility restrictions along the border related to the COVID-19 pandemic reportedly led to an uptick in human smuggling activity, particularly in the eastern areas of the border, with 'thousands' of people, who had travelled for medical care, trade and other purposes, reportedly illicitly crossing back into Sudan.³⁵

There are four main sets of routes between Sudan and Egypt. The first keeps close to the Nile, from Wadi Halfa in Sudan northwards to Aswan in Egypt.³⁶ This mostly involves transit through desert areas, although there is a history of transport by boat and ferry along the river itself.³⁷

To the east, a second set of routes follow the Wadi Allaqi, a dry riverbed, diagonally from north-eastern Sudan to Lake Nasser in Egypt.³⁸ The Wadi is favoured by networks involved in the smuggling of commodities and people because its rugged terrain makes it difficult for security forces to access. Routes often start in Atbara or, less commonly, Dongola in Sudan and end in Aswan in Egypt.³⁹



A growing number of Sudanese nationals are attempting to cross into Egypt, using a route that goes through the Sudanese border town of Wadi Halfa. © AFP via Getty Images

A third set of routes runs through the Halayeb Triangle, a disputed area between the two countries that is administered by Egypt.⁴⁰ The region has long been a major corridor for human smuggling networks, including those transporting foreign migrants or Sudanese migrants seeking work in Egypt's south-eastern goldfields. Routes to the Halayeb Triangle mainly depart from either Atbara or Port Sudan, often crossing open desert.⁴¹ They converge near the town of Shalateen, in the north of the territory, and continue to the city of Aswan.

Finally, there are indications that maritime human smuggling is increasing north along the Red Sea coast. Vessels reportedly leave from in and around Port Sudan, but it is unclear where in Egypt the passengers are disembarked.

While 2023 saw increased activity along all of the above routes, preliminary research suggests that a significant amount of movement occurred through either the Halayeb Triangle or Wadi Allaqi.⁴²

There is considerable variation in the organization and composition of the human smuggling networks operating along these routes. One interviewee noted that while some groups are highly structured and well coordinated, involving dozens of individuals, others are relatively small, ad hoc affairs.⁴³ In addition, even within the more sophisticated networks, there has reportedly been an increase in the use of otherwise independent transporters, presumably as a means of protecting the wider network if a transporter and passengers are caught.

There has also been a shift in how potential migrants find smugglers. The intense demand for travel has reduced the need for networks to actively recruit passengers. Instead, according to one interviewee, some networks have become more reliant on independent brokers to arrange journeys.

In addition, information about human smuggling networks has proliferated on social media, with a number of public and private groups offering information on prices and routes, as well as contact details for brokers and smugglers. More specific information is usually discussed either in private chats or on messaging services such as WhatsApp.

Typically, at least two different sets of actors are involved in a single journey. Sudanese smugglers take responsibility for transporting migrants from cities such as Dongola, Atbara or Port Sudan to locations along or just across the border or, in the case of the Halayeb Triangle, to exchange points in and around Shalateen. There, migrants and refugees are transferred to vehicles operated by Egyptian nationals who take them north to Aswan. The journey usually takes an average of one and a half to two days.

Several interviewees noted that Egypt has progressively increased security along its border with Sudan in recent years, including the establishment of a major military base at Bernice, north of the Halayeb Triangle. The heightened security posture, which predates the war, was reportedly driven by growing concerns about smuggling and irregular migration from Sudan, and enabled by a decline in terrorist threats in the Sinai Peninsula, which freed up security forces for other missions. Nevertheless, there was no clear focus on curbing migration in the area before April 2023.

Before the conflict in Sudan, there was some degree of understanding, and letting immigrants cross [the border]. But pressure from the higher authorities in Egypt is increasing, leading to a tightening of their grip.

Interview with an Egyptian researcher, December 2023

Tighter security along the Sudan–Egypt border has reportedly increased the risks for smugglers. This, combined with a sharp spike in demand for movement, has reportedly pushed up the price of crossing.

Movement through Libya slowly increases

In contrast to the large numbers of Sudanese seeking refuge in Egypt, arrivals in Libya as recorded by international organizations throughout 2023 were extremely low. However, field reports suggested that the scale of refugees crossing into south-eastern Libya was far greater than had been documented. In late June – two and a half months into the conflict – the head of the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) Eastern Region in Kufra claimed that some 5 300 Sudanese had already arrived in the city. Interviews with smugglers broadly supported the claims of increased movement, noting a steady rise in departures from the summer into the autumn months. Interviewees estimated that border crossings had increased from 250 to 350 per month before the war to 2 500 per week by late autumn.

The growing surge in arrivals across this border has been even more pronounced in 2024. By the middle of the year, interviewees suggested that between 2 000 to 3 000 arrivals were occurring in an average week, with some peak periods recording over 1 000 arrivals in 48 hours.

The composition of nationalities has also changed. Before the conflict, the routes from Sudan to Libya were used by Sudanese, Ethiopians, Eritreans and, to a lesser extent, Somalis. The conflict in Sudan appears to have largely halted the movement of East Africans, with one smuggler noting that his customers were now all Sudanese, with no Eritreans attempting the journey.

Human smuggling routes to the Libyan border have only been partially affected by the conflict. Before the war, most movements began in Omdurman, at Souq Libya, with migrants being transported north to Dongola or Kerma. While some refugees continue to leave from the Khartoum area, it is unlikely that Souq Libya still serves as a major entrepôt and organizational hub for journeys. Much of the rest of the route, however, continues to function as usual. Smuggling networks transport refugees from various parts of Sudan north towards Dongola, usually in small vans or commercial buses. A transit corridor east of Khartoum, through Atbara, reportedly remains open, connecting southern cities such as Kassala and al-Qadarif to Dongola. An interviewee who travelled on this route in August 2023 noted that the SAF was maintaining control over it, with forces manning a checkpoint near Merowe in order to inspect the documents of all passing travellers.

From Dongola or Kerma, smuggling networks transport people by bus or in four-wheel-drive vehicles to Wahat Salima (also known as Wadi Salima). There, migrants and refugees are transferred to four-wheel-drive vehicles and taken to either al-Muthalath market or Saif al-Barli, some 80 kilometres from the Libyan border. Some people are also transported to al-Muthalath in commercial vehicles carrying animals, food or other goods.

At these points, most refugees are transferred to vehicles driven by Libyan Tebu or Zway smugglers and transported across the border, generally around the Aweinat Mountain area. Less commonly, some have reported being driven close to the border before being told to walk across it, and then picked up by Libyan smugglers on the other side. Others have been transported in commercial vehicles through the Ain Kaziet border crossing.

The price of passage on the Dongola–Aweinat route can vary significantly, depending on the number of passengers and the level of enforcement on either the Libyan or Sudanese side of the border. A smuggler interviewed in July 2023 claimed that the cost for Sudanese migrants typically ranged from LYD700 to LYD1 000 (€108–€154), although Sudanese refugees interviewed in Libya said that in some cases they had paid up to LYD2 500 (€384). East Africans are charged considerably more, reportedly between

LYD15 000 and LYD18 000 (€2 304–€2 765). The smuggler also noted that prices had roughly doubled since the start of the war. It is unclear whether rates have continued to rise in line with demand.

There is no indication that changes in border security in these areas have had a significant impact on movements or smuggling costs. Before the conflict, the RSF maintained a largely tolerant approach to human smuggling. Although the RSF – along with Libya’s Subul al-Salam – favoured Zway-based smugglers for much of the late 2010s, by 2022 they had begun to allow Tebu smugglers to assume a greater role in these activities. This approach tamped down tensions and created a relatively stable, profit-driven ecosystem. In the early days of the war, there were reports of RSF personnel targeting and robbing human smuggling convoys, leading to the use of alternative routes through Chad and into south-west Libya. However, these conditions have not persisted.

The assumption of control by the SAF and SLA-MM in mid-2023 seemed to do little to change the existing dynamic. Rather, Libyan interviewees reported that smuggling of all kinds increased after the conflict began, leading to fuel shortages in Kufra and traffic congestion between Kufra and Ain Kaziet. By the middle of the year, SLA-MM forces in al-Muthalath were reportedly imposing taxes in kind – taking a fraction of the fuel, food or goods being transported – although they were not collecting cash. By the end of the year, however, the SAF in al-Muthalath appeared to have taken over these duties.

It is unclear whether the SAF and SLA-MM’s profiteering extended to human smuggling. However, the lack of reports of increased enforcement when they held the area, and the broader pattern of their tendency to exploit contraband smuggling rather than restrict it, increases the likelihood that one or both forces took over the RSF’s role of managing migration along the border.

Since 2023, the flow of refugees across the Sudan–Libya border has continued to increase, with a growing number of people arriving in Kufra from the Aweinat Mountain area. This concentration of movement is largely due to impediments to mobility along other routes, as legal access to Egypt becomes more difficult and violence in Darfur intensifies.

I believe [this] is still the best route. The war in Darfur is madness; it’s impossible for migrants to pass from Sudanese al-Geneina to Chadian al-Geneina. The Muthalath remains the safest route.

Interview with a smuggler in Kufra, September 2023

Increased movement of refugees along western borders triggers rise in human smuggling

Sudan’s western region has also seen a rise in cross-border movement since the start of the conflict. In 2023, 578 700 refugees arrived in Chad, adding to the already substantial Sudanese refugee population there.⁴⁴ Some also fled to the Central African Republic, and by the end of December almost 26 000 refugees had crossed the south-western border.⁴⁵

Most of this activity involved refugees from western Sudan, with cross-border arrivals spiking in response to fighting or targeted attacks on civilians, particularly in al-Geneina and Ardamata. These pulses of displacement generally did not involve smugglers. Rather, the displaced refugees fled on their own or with community support.⁴⁶ Most of the reported transit involved refugees walking to the border or being transported by bus or private vehicle, although this varied depending on where they came from. ‘There is nothing to organize,’ explained one refugee interviewed after arriving in Koufroun in Chad. ‘Everyone is trying to escape the war.’

In general, the trajectory for those in the west – even in the interior regions – involves movement towards Chad. Refugees noted that they chose these routes either because they were more familiar or because they feared being targeted or robbed by RSF forces in central Sudan.

For many migrants, the most direct route available is the road from al-Geneina in West Darfur to Adre in the Ouaddaï region of Chad. A number of interviewees reported travelling to Adre through al-Geneina and Adikon, with some indicating that the price of transport to the border had spiked since the outbreak of the conflict in April. While Sudanese nationals need a visa to enter Chad by air, this requirement does not apply to cross-border movements, which were tolerated by the Chadian authorities even before the war.

The road between Adre and al-Geneina, however, is risky due to the heavy presence of RSF personnel in the area. Several reports and interviewees described attacks on fleeing refugees on this route, including robbery, physical violence, rape and murder. Similar observations have been made by other international organizations. The situation has reportedly led to the emergence of smugglers who can liaise with the RSF to ensure safe passage or secure the release of refugees.

On the way to the Chadian border there are a lot of RSF, and they attack people leaving. Some from the RSF also used to smuggle people, so some smugglers know people within the RSF and are able to get people released.

Interview with a Sudanese refugee in Agadez, December 2023

This dynamic builds on longer-term trends seen on the Sudan–Chad border, where security officials from both countries reportedly operate a so-called pay-to-pass system.

Increased insecurity along the Adre–al-Geneina route also appears to have diverted some cross-border movement north to Tina in North Darfur and its twin city, Tiné, in the Wadi Fira region of Chad. The Tina–Tiné axis has been a major human smuggling pathway since the middle of the last decade. For much of the 2010s, Tiné was a largely lawless haven for human smugglers from both Sudan and Chad. Smugglers there are predominantly from the Zaghawa ethnic group, like Chadian President Mahamat Déby, and enjoy the privileged ability to cross between Sudan and Chad and to move migrants north to goldfields such as Kouri Bougoudi.

Smugglers have confirmed that movement through Tiné has resumed, after dropping to a low ebb in the immediate aftermath of the conflict's emergence. Most of this activity involves the transport of young men to the goldfields.

Further inland, there is a long-established human smuggling corridor between al-Fashir and the Libyan border. The route runs from al-Fashir north to Malha, and from there either to the crossing points near the Barrel in Libya or further onwards to al-Muthalath.⁴⁷ Movement from Malha to the Barrel, once heavily used by Sudanese nationals, fell out of favour in the late 2010s, due to the risks associated with Mourdi bandits, a Tebu group living in the Mourdi oasis in Chad. As a result of bandit attacks, the RSF redirected most smuggling northward to al-Muthalath.

However, there are signs that this route may be experiencing a revival. A Sudanese migrant from Nyala, who travelled along it shortly before the war broke out, noted:

I reached al-Fashir on 4 April. From there, I went to the bus station heading to Malha [...]. [There] I paid LYD750 [€115] to get to Kufra. The RSF intercepted us, confiscated our belongings, and left us.

The withdrawal of the RSF from the Libyan border area could lead to a shift of movement to the Malha route. This could become particularly important if the conflict in al-Fashir intensifies, causing an exodus of refugees from the city.

Finally, while most of the activity in the west has involved people from the region, there also appears to be some movement westwards from central Sudan. The GI-TOC has received an increasing number of reports of transit involving refugees attempting to reach Libya or Tunisia through the Toummo crossing on the Niger–Libya border or crossing points further west on the border between Niger and Algeria.

I started my journey on 2 June. From Dongola, [I went] to Iriba, Chad, where I arrived two days later, and then to [Faya-Largeau] and through Aouzou, reaching Toummo on 9 June. It was a large convoy of up to 28 vehicles, with 377 people from Sudan and Chad.

Interview with a female Sudanese refugee, Sebha, Libya, July 2023

From Khartoum, I travelled to Omdurman on 6 June, and arrived in Chad on the 14th, where I began my journey to Aouzou and continued to Toummo. I arrived in Sebha on 5 July. Although the route is long, it is considered cheap and safe. In Sudan, it costs US\$100 to get to Chad; the payment is made to smugglers.

Interview with a male Sudanese refugee, Sebha, Libya, July 2023

These descriptions of long-distance routes are consistent with other reports received by the GI-TOC from Chad and Niger, suggesting that more structured human smuggling itineraries are opening up throughout North Darfur and the northern reaches of Chad and Niger.⁴⁸ As the conflict continues, these may become increasingly important vectors of movement and a potentially significant source of income for RSF units in the area.

Limited movement on Sudan's south-eastern borders, but some signs of an inflow

In contrast to the movements across Sudan's northern and western borders, crossings along its south-eastern frontier with Ethiopia were relatively low in 2023, totalling just under 58 000 people.⁴⁹ Activity was highest in the months immediately following the outbreak of the war, with most refugees and Ethiopian returnees entering Ethiopia through the Gallabat–Metemma border point.

There is no public information available on the movement of Sudanese refugees into Eritrea. However, following the start of the conflict between the SAF and the RSF, there were some reports of Eritrean refugees in Sudan being deported, or being caught attempting to enter Egypt.⁵⁰

Notably, there was a small but discernible increase in arrivals from Eritrea and Ethiopia in late 2023. According to the UNHCR, just over 7 000 people crossed north into Sudan between May and December, with most coming from Eritrea, followed by Ethiopia.⁵¹ While many of these arrivals were refugees, there were indications that some were planning to move further north.⁵² This resurgence of northward movement – should it continue or expand – has the potential to further reshape the wartime human smuggling situation in Sudan, both at its southern borders and overland in the east of the country.

Human smugglers have long been present on Sudan's southern borders. Historically, the most structured networks have tended to operate along the north-eastern zones of the Eritrea–Sudan border. These networks are often drawn from tribes, such as the Rashaida and Beja, whose territory extends

across the frontier. In some cases, these groups are able to facilitate movement all the way from Eritrea to Egypt, using routes from the Red Sea to Port Sudan and on to the Halayeb Triangle. Many have a poor reputation, with regular reports of extortion, trafficking and abuse.

In the central and southern reaches of the Eritrea–Sudan border, smuggling tends to be more ad hoc and localized, with many Eritreans leveraging social or ethnic ties to connect with cross-border transporters or guides. In other cases, migrants hide in commercial vehicles, generally between Teseney and Kassala. One Eritrean migrant interviewed by the GI-TOC, who had left shortly before the outbreak of the war, claimed to have paid LYD500 (€77) to be transported from Eritrea to Sudan hidden in a commercial vehicle.

A similar low-level smuggling system is the norm along the Ethiopian border. At Gallabat–Metemma, for example, people without official documentation – mainly Somalis – are able to find smugglers nearby to guide them across the border and arrange onward transport to cities in Sudan.⁵³ Routes from Gallabat–Metemma generally head north to al-Qadarif, and from there either north to Atbara or east to Port Sudan.

Another important land route connects the tri-border area between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Here, refugees from Eritrea tend to cross into Ethiopia near the town of al-Humera.⁵⁴ From there, they cross the land border into Sudan near Hamdayet, before travelling up the Tekeze River to Wad al-Hulaywah, and from there on to either Kassala or al-Qadarif.

Smuggling along the Ethiopia–Sudan border has the potential to become more structured if obstacles to movement continue to increase. Fighting in Ethiopia's northern region of Amhara, for example, prompted the governor of al-Qadarif state in Sudan to temporarily close the Gallabat–Metemma port of entry, reportedly leading to a spike in the use of smugglers.⁵⁵ Given the worsening violence in both



Sudanese nationals flee the south-eastern town of Sennar for Gedaref after an attack by the Rapid Support Forces nearby. © AFP via Getty Images

north-western Ethiopia and south-eastern Sudan, further border closures and heightened militarization are probable. While this may discourage some movement, it is unlikely to curb it completely, and may instead encourage the emergence of networks that can circumvent restrictions or partner with security and military actors to move refugees and migrants northwards.

As of September 2024, the main unknown factor with potentially significant implications for refugee flows and human smuggling is the RSF's expansion of conflict into the south-east of Sudan. As detailed previously, the RSF captured the key southern city of Wad Madani in late 2023, triggering an exodus of at least 300 000 refugees from Al-Jazirah state.⁵⁶

The impact of this development on human smuggling appears to have been limited. While Wad Madani used to be a major transit point for smuggling migrants north to Khartoum, this movement is likely to have ceased with the outbreak of war. However, since the takeover, the RSF has slowly pushed into adjacent states. In July, it partially seized Sennar state, which borders Ethiopia. This in turn positioned it to advance into al-Qadarif state, potentially cutting off land access between SAF-controlled areas and Ethiopia and bringing the Gallabat–Metemma crossing under its jurisdiction.

Any RSF move to seize al-Qadarif and the Gallabat–Metemma crossing would have a significant impact on human smuggling from the border east to Port Sudan and Egypt or north to Atbara, Dongola and Libya, affecting both routes and the intensity of movement.

However, caution should be exercised in assessing the implications of an RSF takeover of the region for human smuggling. Based on RSF actions in western Sudan and previously along the Libyan border, a harsh crackdown on migration and smuggling is unlikely. RSF personnel, particularly those in the lower and middle ranks, have long benefited financially from working with human smugglers and facilitating the movement of migrants. This is unlikely to change – and may even become more politically important. As the RSF pushes into areas in the east, far from its tribal heartlands in the west, it is likely to require a transactional approach to build support for its rule.

This, coupled with the ever-growing demand for exit, increases the likelihood that human smuggling networks catering to refugees from Sudan and people from East Africa will continue to expand their operations.





CONCLUSION

As of September 2024, the conflict in Sudan continues to rage. Despite repeated international efforts to persuade the RSF and SAF to negotiate a ceasefire, there is little apparent appetite or interest on either side to do so. The SAF, for example, chose not to send representatives to US-sponsored talks in August.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the conflict has expanded in scope in ways that make a negotiated compromise more difficult. What was largely a struggle between two armies in 2023 has devolved in 2024 into fighting between two alliance systems of formal military forces and irregular armed actors. The SAF's mass arming of civilians, known as the 'mustanfareen', is part of this, as is the heightened involvement in the conflict of former and current insurgent groups and ethnic militias on both sides.⁵⁸ There have also been repeated reports of the active recruitment of mercenaries throughout the central Sahara, although specific information on the actors involved and the number of mercenaries mobilized is unclear.

Neither side, however, appears close to defeating the other militarily. Rather, much of the fighting has been slow and grinding, with territorial control changing only marginally since the beginning of the year, mainly in and around the south-eastern state of Sennar and in Omdurman.⁵⁹

The RSF has not yet consolidated its control over North Darfur. Despite the deployment of nearly 30 000 RSF-aligned fighters around al-Fashir, the city remains held by a combination of the SAF and former Darfuri insurgent groups, with intermittent fighting also taking place around Tine and al-Zurrug throughout the summer.⁶⁰

As the conflict has dragged on, its impact on Sudanese civilians has become increasingly catastrophic. In particular, acute food insecurity has skyrocketed, threatening nearly 25.6 million people.⁶¹ Some 800 000 are reportedly at risk of famine.⁶² In August 2024, famine was officially declared in a camp for internally displaced persons near al-Fashir.⁶³ The Sudanese government, however, has dismissed claims of hunger as 'inaccurate'.⁶⁴

The conflict and food insecurity have driven both internal and external displacement.⁶⁵ While the number of newly arriving refugees seeking safety in neighbouring countries has declined in most cases this year, this is only relative to the exceptionally high numbers recorded in 2023. Between January and August, for example, almost 145 000 refugees arrived in Chad.⁶⁶

Libya is an outlier, in that it appears to be receiving more Sudanese refugees this year. Interviewees in Kufra, on the Sudan–Libya border, have reported a sharp increase in Sudanese arrivals since January 2024, with several thousand entering the country each week. Although most quickly make their way to Tripoli or Benghazi, tens of thousands now live in and around the border area. Nearly all refugees travelling to Libya are transported by smugglers. A similar dynamic now exists at the Egyptian border, where hundreds of refugees are smuggled across every day.⁶⁷

To date, the ongoing conflict has markedly shaped, expanded and entrenched the human smuggling ecosystem in Sudan. For the foreseeable future, levels of smuggling activity are likely to remain exceptionally high and could well increase, particularly if worsening hunger drives more Sudanese people to seek assistance in neighbouring countries.



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