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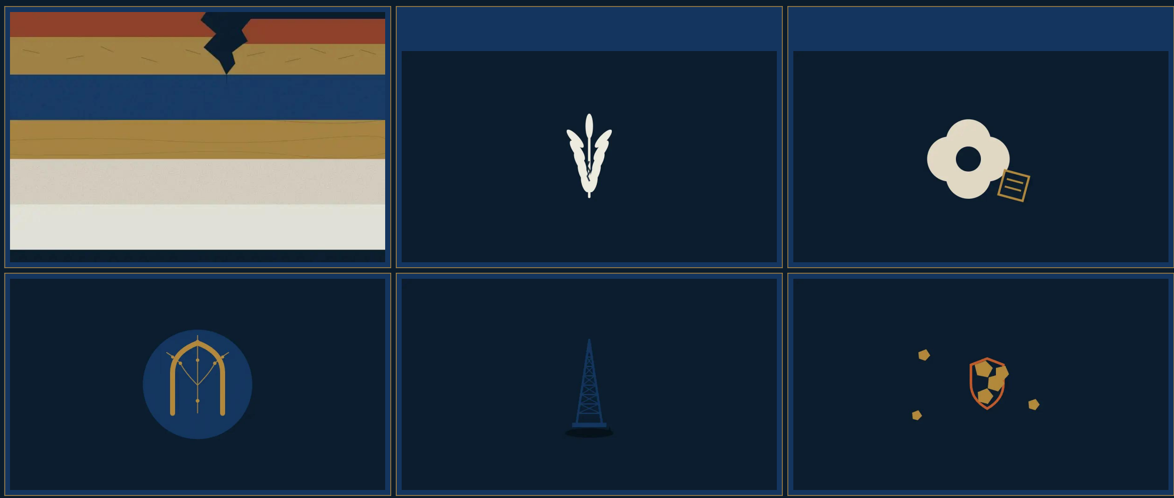

Pax to Bellum: Economic Shifts and Military Power in Sudan, 1956–2021

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The October 2021 military coup in Sudan wasn't just another authoritarian relapse; it was the predictable outcome of a pattern that began at independence. When Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti" seized power from Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's transitional government, they weren't simply grabbing for power. They were responding to the same structural logic that has driven every major political transformation in Sudan's history: **when economic models collapse or shift, military force restructures politics to align with new revenue sources**.

I spent years working within the Sudanese civil spaces during multiple crises: COVID-19, the 2020 floods, and the post-2019 transition. What struck me wasn't just the regime's brutality or incompetence, but how each crisis revealed the same underlying pattern: power flows toward whoever controls revenue. During the floods, we watched the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a militia that began as Janjaweed raiders in Darfur, leverage their control over gold-mining areas to gain political dominance. By 2021, they were constitutional actors with their own foreign policy bankrolling. The regular military couldn't compete economically, so they staged a coup.

This article traces that pattern across six economic eras, each punctuated by military intervention: wheat dependency (1956–1969), cotton agriculture (1969–1989), Islamic finance (1989–1999), petroleum (1999–2011), gold mining (2011–2015), and competitive Gulf patronage (2015–2021). The progression reveals how Sudan moved from a centralized state with a military monopoly on violence to today's militia-state hybrid where multiple armed groups control discrete revenue sources and answer to different foreign patrons.

The story begins with bread, or more precisely, with American wheat.

The Wheat Era: Building Dependency (1956–1969)

In 1958, two years after independence, Sudan's first democratic government faced a choice that would establish patterns that would last for decades: accept US Public Law 480 wheat shipments or maintain agricultural self-sufficiency. The government was paralyzed by the decision. Urban populations in Khartoum needed food. But PL-480 wasn't just humanitarian aid; it was Cold War leverage packaged as charity, designed to create permanent market dependency while disposing of American grain surpluses (Friedmann, 1982).

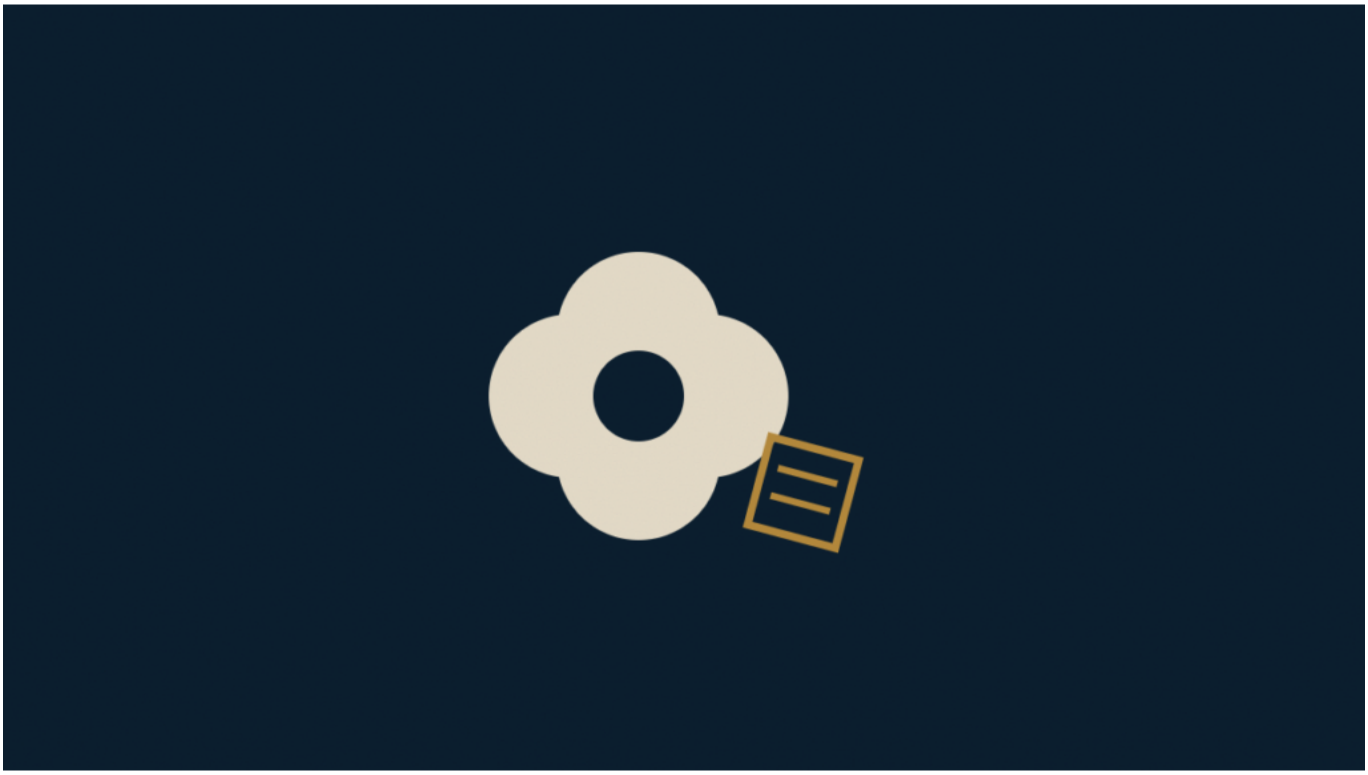
The parliamentary debate over accepting wheat provided General Ibrahim Abboud with the justification for Sudan's first military coup on November 17, 1958. His rhetoric emphasized sovereignty and resisting external dictation. Then, after seizing power on a platform of rejecting American influence, he accepted the wheat shipments anyway. The pattern was set: **military coups opposed to external economic influence deepen those very dependencies while restructuring, which elites benefit** (Johnson, 2003).

The wheat decision transformed Sudan permanently. Urban populations adapted to bread rather than traditional sorghum-based foods like *kisra* and *asida*. Once dietary patterns shifted, Sudan became vulnerable to supply interruptions from wheat-exporting nations. Food dependency created channels for external leverage that persist to this day. During the current war, bread prices have been a weapon, just as they sparked the 2018 protests that ultimately toppled Omar al-Bashir.

But wheat dependency alone didn't fragment state authority. Throughout the 1960s, the military maintained its monopoly on violence. Abboud's regime had no rivals, no autonomous armed groups, no parallel security structures. When civilians overthrew him in October 1964 through a popular uprising, power returned to parliament. The state remained intact: centralized, bureaucratic, corrupt perhaps, but unified.

That would change with cotton.

The Cotton Economy: Patronage Emerges (1969–1989)



When Jaafar Nimeiri seized power in May 1969, Sudan's economy centered on the Gezira Scheme, one of the world's largest irrigation projects, which produced cotton for export across over 2 million acres between the Blue and White Niles. Unlike wheat (imported), cotton was domestically produced. Unlike later extractive economies, it required settled populations, agricultural expertise, and state management. The Sudan Gezira Board coordinated production; the state-controlled marketing. Revenue was centralized, geographic, and controllable.

Nimeiri initially aligned with Sudan's Communist Party and Nasserist Egypt, proclaiming socialist transformation. But cotton prices were falling globally. The Gezira Scheme deteriorated due to aging infrastructure, soil degradation, and management failures. By the mid-1970s, cotton revenues couldn't sustain Nimeiri's ambitions. He needed alternative financing but had systematically alienated potential supporters.

In July 1971, communist officers attempted their own coup. Nimeiri crushed it brutally, executing the entire Communist Party leadership. Having destroyed his leftist base, he had no organized domestic support beyond personal military loyalists. More problematically, he had no money. Socialist rhetoric didn't generate revenues. Cotton was failing. Western loans from the World Bank and IMF came with austerity demands that sparked urban unrest (Woodward, 1990).

The solution came from the Islamic right. Nimeiri reconciled with Hassan al-Turabi's Islamic

Movement and, in 1977, permitted the establishment of Faisal Islamic Bank, Sudan’s first Islamic financial institution, backed by Saudi capital. The bank's purpose wasn't primarily religious but political: it channeled Gulf petrodollars and Sudanese diaspora remittances through networks the state couldn't fully monitor or control. Unlike cotton revenues that flowed through the Gezira Board and state budgets, Islamic banking created a parallel financial infrastructure outside formal institutions (de Waal, 2015).

This was the birth of Sudan's "political marketplace”: the system in which loyalty is purchased with cash and positions rather than mobilized through ideology or institutions. The Faisal Islamic Bank and subsequent Islamic banks allowed Nimeiri to access patronage resources without legislative appropriations or bureaucratic oversight. Money could be deployed discretionally to buy off opponents, reward supporters, and fragment resistance.

Nimeiri's 1983 imposition of Sharia law completed the transformation. While framed as an Islamic commitment, it alienated the predominantly Christian and animist south, reigniting civil war. More significantly, it further embedded Islamic finance in Sudan's political economy. By the mid-1980s, formal state institutions, ministries, civil service, and parliament were weakening while informal networks tied to Islamic banking flourished.

The pattern had consequences. When drought struck in 1983–1985, and cotton revenues collapsed further, Nimeiri's regime lacked institutional resilience. The World Bank and the IMF demanded cuts to fuel subsidies. Bread prices spiked. Massive protests erupted in Khartoum in March–April 1985. The military, recognizing Nimeiri's isolation, facilitated his removal rather than defending him. The Third Democracy (1985–1989) attempted to restore civilian governance, but the economic foundations had shifted permanently.

Once established, Islamic finance networks couldn't be dismantled. The Third Democracy sought to reassert civilian control over these parallel financial flows and to negotiate with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM) to end the civil war. But for the Islamic Movement, these negotiations were existential threats. A peace agreement recognizing southern autonomy and secular governance would foreclose their vision of an Islamic state. They needed to act before the Third Democracy consolidated.

Islamic Finance Triumphant (1989–1999)

The June 30, 1989, coup was different from its predecessors. General Ibrahim Abboud and Jaafar Nimeiri had been military officers who later adopted ideological coloring. Omar al-Bashir was a proxy. The coup was orchestrated by Hassan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front (NIF), using sympathetic officers as executors. This was **an ideological movement capturing state power to implement a comprehensive transformation**.

The NIF proclaimed a "Civilization Project": an Islamic state governed by Sharia, Islamic identity cultivation, and resistance to Western imperialism. In practice, this meant ideological purges (civil servants, officers, and academics replaced with loyalists), security-state expansion (multiple agencies with detention authority), economic Islamization (cooperatives and investment companies as mechanisms of elite enrichment), and educational indoctrination (universities transformed, curricula rewritten).

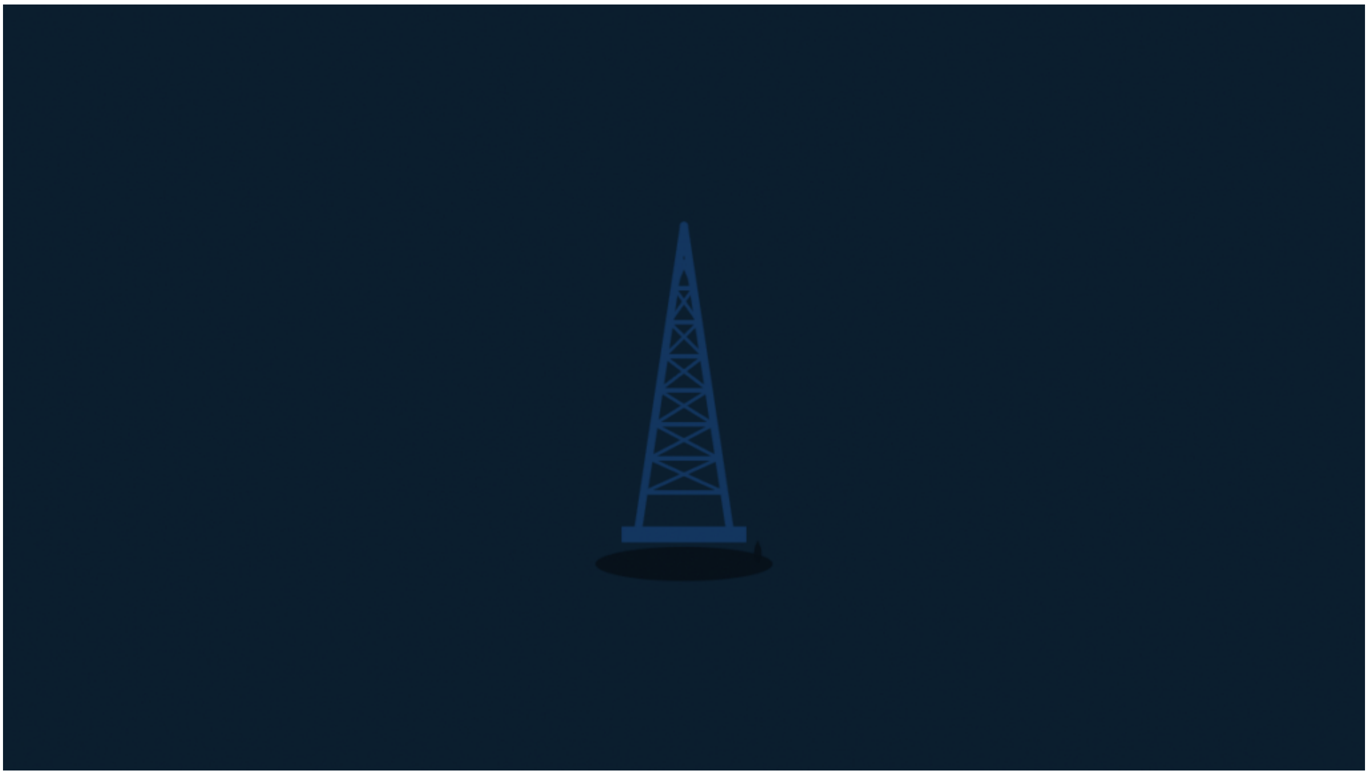
But beneath Islamic rhetoric, the political marketplace intensified. The regime operated through straightforward patronage: loyalty purchased through cash, business licenses, government contracts, import permits, and positions; not earned through ideological commitment. Many "Islamists" were opportunists following money. Senior NIF figures accumulated vast wealth through privileged access to contracts and licenses. The "Islamic economy" functioned as crony capitalism with religious branding (Burr & Collins, 2003).

The regime's strategy toward opposition was systematic infiltration using cash, buying off faction leaders, splitting movements, and creating dependencies. This would become the template for later "peace agreements." Violence was also outsourced. The Popular Defense Forces (PDF), paramilitary units mobilized through mosques and beyond, provided additional forces for the civil war without expanding the regular army. PDF positions became patronage rewards, creating armed dependents outside formal military structures. The precedent was set: **the regime was willing to create parallel armed forces when politically useful**.

The NIF's economic model depended on the Gulf states. Diaspora remittances from Sudanese working in oil-rich Arab countries flowed through Islamic banks. Saudi and Emirati capital-funded investments. But this created vulnerability. When Sudan backed Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states cut financing. Sudan became internationally isolated, with US sanctions (for hosting Osama bin Laden), estranged from Gulf backers, and civil war intensified.

By the late 1990s, the regime desperately needed alternative sources of revenue. Islamic finance networks, absent Gulf capital, couldn't sustain the war and the patronage system. Cotton was negligible. Agriculture was declining. Then oil production began.

The Oil Years: Pragmatism and Militia Innovation (1999–2011)



Commercial oil production, starting in 1999, transformed everything. Fields in southern Sudan and border regions produced hundreds of thousands of barrels daily, generating revenues that dwarfed cotton, remittances, or any previous source. Western oil companies refused to become involved due to sanctions and the risk of civil war. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) became the dominant partner, investing billions in infrastructure and purchasing most Sudanese crude. Beijing's "non-interference" policy meant no demands for democratic reform or improvements in human rights; just oil (Large & Patey, 2011).

Oil revenues enabled Bashir's most significant restructuring: removing Hassan al-Turabi in

1999–2000. The architect of the 1989 coup was stripped of positions, the National Assembly was dissolved when his faction controlled it, and he was eventually imprisoned. Why could Bashir move against Turabi now? **Because oil provided independent financing;** no longer dependent on Turabi's Islamic networks or Gulf connections. The regime rebranded as the National Congress Party (NCP), signaling the shift from ideological Islamism to pragmatic authoritarianism. Money, specifically oil money, became the exclusive political currency.

Paradoxically, oil wealth enabled buying peace in some conflicts while waging war in others. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) promised the south 50% of oil revenues, a self-determination referendum, and power-sharing. The CPA was fundamentally a patronage distribution mechanism: oil revenues would finance both northern and southern elite networks (Young, 2012). Neither side committed to genuine transformation.

Similar agreements bought off eastern Sudan rebels (2006) and attempted to pacify Darfur. But Darfur was where the regime perfected the militia model that would ultimately transform Sudan's political landscape.

When rebellion erupted in Darfur in 2003, the regime responded by arming Arab nomadic tribes, primarily Abbala camel herders and Baggara cattle herders, as irregular forces called Janjaweed (roughly "devils on horseback"). Rather than only deploying regular army units, the government coordinated with these militias in counterinsurgency operations. The Janjaweed offered multiple advantages: cost-effectiveness (less training and equipment than conventional troops), ethnic cleansing efficiency (terrorizing civilian populations through village burning, mass rape, displacement), political deniability (the government claimed they were uncontrolled "bandits"), and exploitation of local conflicts (weaponizing existing Arab pastoralist vs. African farmer tensions exacerbated by environmental degradation) (Flint & de Waal, 2008).

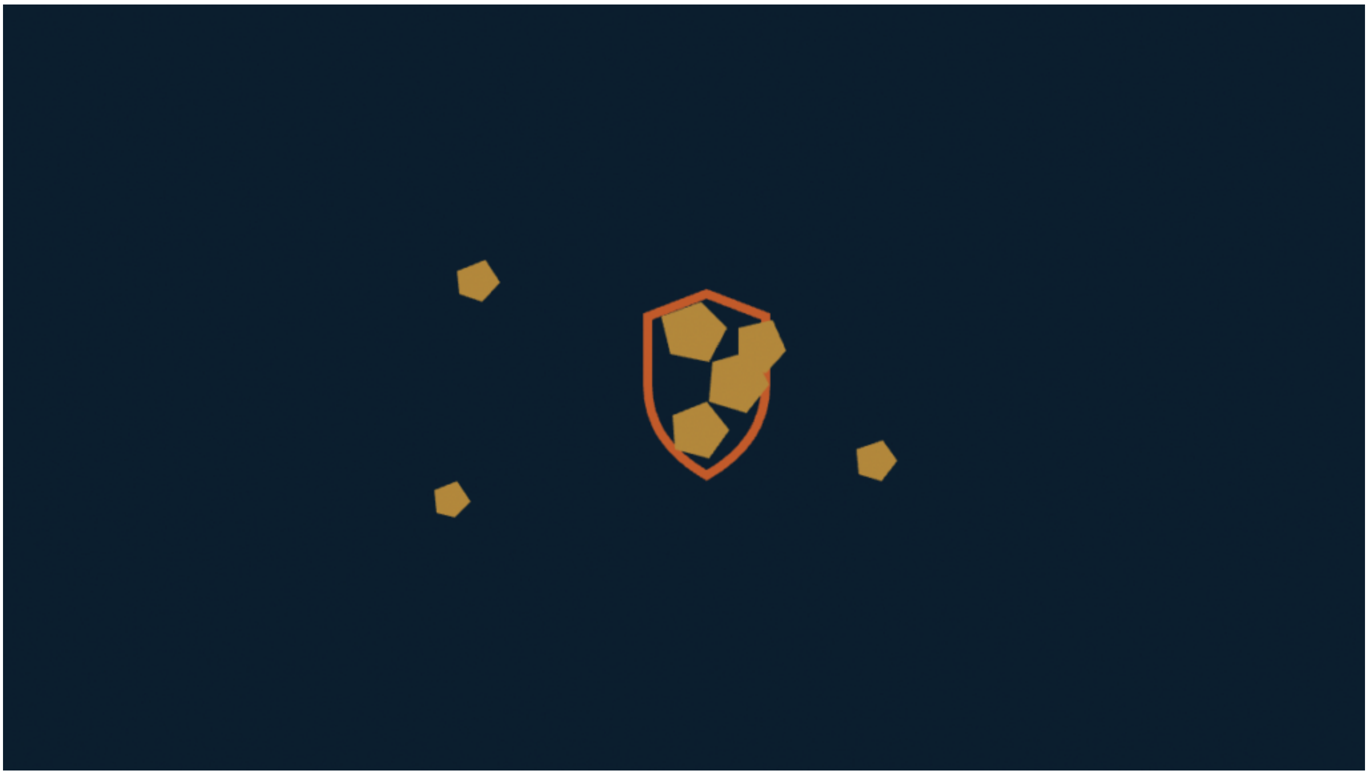
Darfur became the laboratory where the regime demonstrated that **effective violence could be outsourced to armed groups motivated by ethnic ideology, resource competition, and modest payment**. No need for ideological commitment like the Popular Defense Forces (PDF) or a professional military organization. The Janjaweed model showed that militias could be reliable, brutal, and cheap.

Then on January 9, 2011, South Sudan voted overwhelmingly for independence (98.83%). On July 9, South Sudan became a separate state, taking 70–75% of Sudan's oil production. Overnight, the revenue source that had financed the regime for a decade vanished. The patronage networks built on oil rent distribution faced collapse. The political marketplace couldn't function without cash. Security forces went unpaid. The regime needed urgent alternatives.

Gold mining had existed for decades in Sudan's periphery, particularly in Darfur, River Nile State, and eastern regions. But with oil revenues flowing, the regime hadn't prioritized it. Post-partition, gold became strategic. The government implemented policies encouraging mining: new regulations simplifying licensing, central bank purchases at competitive rates, and infrastructure investment. By 2013–2014, gold had replaced oil as Sudan's primary export.

But gold differed from oil in ways that would permanently fragment state authority.

Gold and the Militia Problem (2011–2015)



Oil extraction, despite being in peripheral regions, was industrial: pipelines, processing facilities, and export terminals. The state could control these chokepoints. A centralized parastatal managed production and marketing. Gold mining was fundamentally different: geographically dispersed across multiple regions, labor-intensive with artisanal methods (thousands of small operations, minimal capital, basic tools), located in peripheral areas of weak state presence, and difficult to monitor (informal trading networks, smuggling, militia taxation bypassing state coffers).

Most critically, **an estimated 80% of gold production occurred in Darfur,** precisely where the Janjaweed militias controlled territory after years of conflict. The regime faced an inescapable reality: it could not access gold revenues without accommodating the militias controlling extraction zones. Unlike in previous eras, when the state could monopolize revenue collection, gold's geography made **militia cooperation essential rather than optional**.

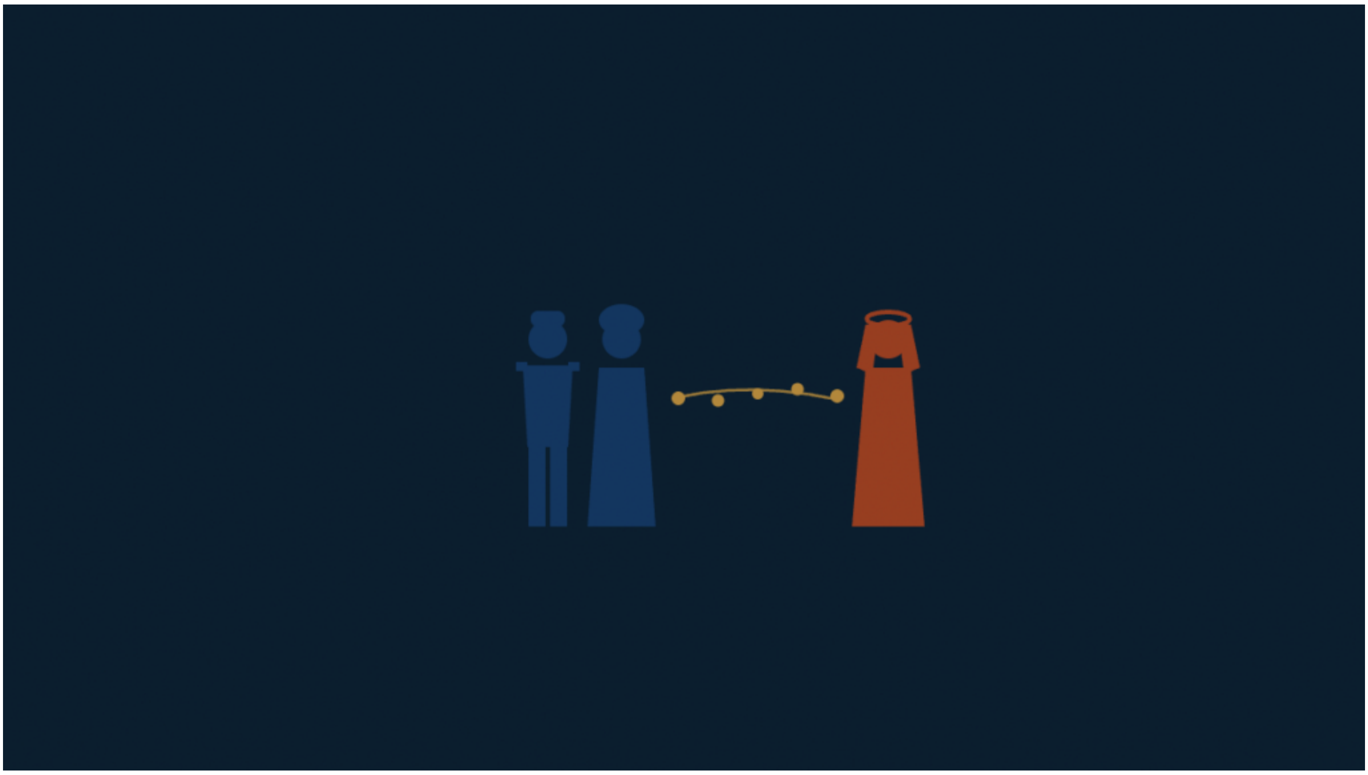
The post-partition years (2011–2015) were characterized by an acute crisis: GDP contraction, hyperinflation, currency devaluation, fuel subsidy cuts (demanded by the IMF), sparking major protests in September 2013, government salary delays, and international isolation. Gold exports grew rapidly, but they couldn't immediately fill the oil-sized revenue hole. More fundamentally, accessing gold required dealing with the Janjaweed.

In 2013, the government formalized the Janjaweed into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as "Hemedti." The official narrative claimed this brought irregular forces under state control and professionalized them for border security and counterinsurgency. The reality was more complex. The RSF received legal status and constitutional legitimation but maintained separate command structures (Hemedti reported nominally to the National Intelligence and Security Service, later directly to the president, but operated independently of SAF command), independent recruitment (primarily Arab tribes in Darfur and Chad, not national military service), and autonomous financing (direct control of gold mines with revenues never entering state budgets).

Hemedti's rise exemplified the transformation. A camel trader from the Mahariya Rizeigat Arab tribe in South Darfur with no formal education, he became one of Sudan's most powerful figures. His forces dominated Darfur's richest mining areas, particularly Jebel Amer in North Darfur. Gold revenues financed rapid RSF expansion; estimates ranged from 40,000 to over 100,000 fighters by 2019. Hemedti invested profits in businesses across Sudan and the region, including transportation, agriculture, and trade. Wealth translated to political influence as he cultivated relationships with regime figures and foreign governments.

But the RSF's formalization and gold wealth alone didn't make the 2021 coup inevitable. What created the structural impossibility of integration, and thus the necessity of eventual confrontation, was the next phase: **violence export and competitive Gulf patronage**.

Violence Export: The Gulf Patronage Model (2015–2021)



In March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm against Houthi forces in Yemen, assembling an Arab coalition. Sudan, despite economic crisis and isolation, was invited to participate. More specifically, the RSF was invited. This represented an economic innovation: **Sudan could export violence as a commodity**, renting its coercive capacity to Gulf patrons in exchange for direct financial transfers.

Thousands of RSF fighters were deployed to Yemen's Saudi border and internal conflict zones. The Sudanese Armed Forces also deployed, but RSF forces were more numerous and operationally active. The revenue flows were transformative: direct payments to the RSF from the UAE (estimates range from hundreds of millions to over a billion dollars across the deployment), Saudi payments to the government for the SAF deployment, and additional Gulf investments and aid to Sudan.

The political benefits were equally significant. Sudan's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE improved after years of isolation during the Islamist era. Gulf lobbying helped partially lift US sanctions in 2017. But the most consequential outcome was for Hemedti personally: international recognition as a military leader and political figure, **direct relationships with UAE leadership** (especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed), and **independent financing outside state control or SAF oversight,** the critical point.

The pattern was unprecedented: **the RSF received direct external financing that bypassed state budgets, ministries, and institutions**. This created economic autonomy unknown in Sudanese political history. The RSF could sustain itself independently of both the state and domestic revenue sources. Oil revenues had gone through state accounts (however corrupt). Gold revenues were partly captured by the state (however inefficiently). Gulf payments to the RSF bypassed the state entirely.

In 2016, the European Union (EU) initiated the "Khartoum Process": a partnership with African states to intercept migrants before they reach the Mediterranean. The RSF, controlling Sudan's borders with Libya, Chad, and the Central African Republic, became the principal EU partner. Brussels provided millions of euros for border control and migration management programs. European governments treated the RSF as a legitimate state security actor, hosting Hemedti in European capitals despite extensive documentation of RSF abuses against migrants; arbitrary detention, extortion, torture, and deaths in custody. But European priorities were migration control over accountability (Yohannes, 2017).

The EU funds supplemented Yemen deployment income and gold revenues, creating **multiple independent financing sources** for the RSF. Border operations expanded RSF presence across Sudan's periphery. The RSF could present itself to Khartoum as an internationally engaged partner with external backing, not merely a domestic militia.

By 2017–2019, Sudan's political economy operated on a model fundamentally different from all previous eras. Not domestic extraction (though gold continued) but competitive Gulf patronage: multiple Gulf actors providing financial and political support to different Sudanese factions with no unified coordination.

The structure was straightforward:

UAE → RSF: Direct payments for Yemen deployment, gold trade partnerships (UAE became a major destination for Sudanese gold), political backing and international legitimacy, intelligence sharing, implicit autonomy support.

Saudi Arabia → Sudanese Government: Payments for the SAF Yemen deployment (channeled through the state), economic support and investments, diplomatic normalization and sanctions-relief lobbying, and a preference for regime stability over factional dominance.

Egypt → SAF specifically: Intelligence cooperation and political alignment (deep historical ties), military equipment and training, fear of border instability, **opposition to RSF independence** (Egypt viewed autonomous RSF as a threat to regional order).

This fragmented patronage meant no single actor controlled Sudan, but multiple actors sustained different factions. The UAE-Egypt divergence would prove decisive. While both were Gulf-aligned authoritarian states, their Sudanese interests diverged: the UAE cultivated the RSF as an autonomous partner and saw Hemedti as a pragmatic, non-Muslim Brotherhood ally, while Egypt supported the military establishment, feared border instability, and opposed militia independence.

When massive protests erupted in December 2018, Gulf states faced a dilemma. Bashir was weakening, but the risk of total collapse was chaos. The UAE preferred a managed transition, supporting the generals (including Hemedti) in overthrowing Bashir while maintaining stability. Saudi Arabia coordinated. Egypt demanded military control to prevent democratic transitions that might inspire Egyptian opposition.

The 2019 Revolution and Transitional Failure

The December 2018 protests began over bread prices, with fuel subsidy cuts that tripled wheat costs, but escalated into demands for Bashir's removal. After months of demonstrations, SAF and RSF jointly determined that Bashir was a liability. On April 11, 2019, they overthrew him and established a Transitional Military Council (TMC). General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan became chairman. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo became vice-chairman.

The militia commander held Sudan's second-highest position, revealing transformed power realities.

Gulf states immediately pledged $3 billion: a $500 million joint cash deposit from Saudi Arabia and the UAE (deposited in Sudan's central bank within weeks) and $2.5 billion in additional aid, deposits, and investments over the transition period. This Gulf financing served multiple functions: economic stabilization (preventing immediate collapse), legitimation (regional backing signaled support for a military takeover), a control mechanism (financial dependency gave leverage), and an incentive for the SAF-RSF partnership (shared financing encouraged cooperation rather than fighting).

After months of negotiations between the TMC and civilian protest coalition (Forces of Freedom and Chang "FFC"), a power-sharing agreement emerged: a joint military-civilian Sovereignty Council with rotating chairmanship, civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok leading the cabinet, and a 39-month transition to elections. But real power remained with SAF and RSF; security forces under military control, economic policy constrained by military interests, key decisions requiring military approval.

Hemedti's position was unprecedented: member of the Sovereignty Council (effectively vice-president), commander of an autonomous military force (RSF not integrated into SAF), independent international relationships (Gulf, EU, others), and direct control of gold revenues. The arrangement was inherently unstable: two separate armies with distinct command structures, competing external patrons, incompatible visions (RSF autonomy vs. SAF integration demands), and a civilian government lacking real authority over security matters.

The arrangement could only hold if Gulf financing continued as promised and neither side attempted to subordinate the other. Both conditions failed.

The $2.5 billion additional financing never fully materialized. Why? Conditionality disputes (Gulf states demanded reforms difficult to meet during chaotic transition), competing priorities (COVID-19, oil price volatility, Yemen costs strained Gulf budgets by 2020–2021), reduced urgency (initial collapse risk passed), and factional hedging (UAE-Saudi coordination weakening, each pursuing separate Sudanese partnerships).

Without the financing, the fiscal crisis intensified: government salaries were delayed for months (civil servants and security forces were unpaid), the economic crisis deepened (triple-digit inflation, currency devaluation, and services collapsing), and the political marketplace failed (the transitional government couldn't buy loyalty without cash). SAF-RSF tensions escalated as they competed for limited resources and blamed each other for failures.

Critically, the RSF weathered this crisis better than the SAF-led government. Independent financing and gold revenues provided resilience. This **asymmetric economic sustainability** would prove decisive.

The October 2021 Coup: When Patronage Systems Collapse

In September–October 2021, multiple crises converged. The promised Gulf financing hadn't arrived. Protests in Eastern Sudan demanding the implementation of the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) escalated into a blockade of Port Sudan, Sudan's main port, cutting off the government's access to customs revenues. Civilian-led negotiations (the Constitutional Declaration, facilitated by the UN, AU, and IGAD) proposed security sector reform, specifically **RSF integration into SAF**. For Hemedti, integration meant losing autonomy, control over revenue, and foreign partnerships. For SAF, continued RSF autonomy meant permanent military division and the loss of gold revenues.

On October 25, 2021, SAF and RSF jointly executed a coup against Prime Minister Hamdok. The logic was clear:

For SAF: The civilian government was failing to secure financing, couldn't pay the military, and integration negotiations threatened to legitimize permanent RSF autonomy. Better to seize direct control.

For RSF: Integration plans threatened autonomy and revenue control. The civilian government was weak—better to coup now and negotiate favorable terms. Opportunity to formalize RSF autonomy in post-coup arrangements.

For both: The only way to access remaining state resources was to eliminate civilian intermediaries. They could blame civilians for economic failures while seizing control.

Gulf patron response was revealing: neither strongly supported nor opposed the coup. They accepted the fait accompli while maintaining relationships with both SAF and RSF. No financial penalty materialized. No integration pressure followed. The message was clear: Gulf states would sustain both factions regardless of their domestic political arrangements.

After October 2021, competitive Gulf patronage became increasingly zero-sum. UAE-RSF relations strengthened (direct support increased, gold trade expanded, military equipment supplied, and political backing). Egyptian-SAF coordination intensified (equipment, intelligence, Egypt increasingly viewing RSF as a threat). Saudi Arabia reduced engagement amid tensions with allies. The divergence sharpened: one side betting on RSF as an autonomous force; the other demanding that SAF restore its military monopoly.

International mediation produced the December 2022 Framework Agreement (FA), another attempt at democratic transition. The core issue remained **the integration of RSF into SAF**. Proposed timelines varied: SAF wanted integration within 2 years, RSF demanded 10 years or never, international mediators suggested 5–7 years. Neither side trusted the other. Both prepared for war.

The October 2021 coup thus represented **the political marketplace's failure mode**: when external financing is promised but not delivered, and domestic revenues are inaccessible or insufficient, competing armed factions seize direct control rather than operate through civilian intermediaries. More fundamentally, it demonstrated that **competitive external patronage had made peaceful integration impossible**. As long as the partons' vision differed, no compromise could hold.

The coup set Sudan on an inevitable trajectory toward the April 2023 war, but that story extends beyond this article's scope. What the October 2021 coup confirmed was the pattern established across six economic eras: **economic structure determines political possibility**. When revenues are centralized (cotton, oil), the state can maintain a violent monopoly. When revenues are dispersed (as in gold), militias become necessary. When armed groups gain independent external financing (Gulf patronage), integration becomes impossible without the use of force.

Conclusion: Economics as Destiny?

The progression from Pax Triticum to the October 2021 coup reveals a coherent pattern:

External dependencies (wheat, Islamic finance, Gulf patronage) established leverage architectures constraining sovereignty. **Centralized revenues** (cotton and oil) temporarily allowed the state a monopoly on violence. **Patronage networks** (Islamic banking) weakened formal institutions. **Distributed extraction** (gold) necessitated militia formalization. **Competitive external patronage** (Gulf) made militia independence permanent.

Each transition weakened state institutions while empowering armed groups. Military coups enabled these transitions by overcoming institutional resistance, but the coups themselves followed economic logic rather than creating it. Abboud seized power when wheat politics paralyzed parliament. Nimeiri acted as cotton revenues collapsed. The NIF intervened when Islamic finance networks provided alternative bases. The RSF formalized when gold geography demanded it. The 2021 coup occurred when promised Gulf money didn't materialize.

Three mechanisms operated consistently:

First: New revenue sources empower new elite networks; when institutions resist restructuring, force overcomes resistance.

Second: Revenue geography determines violence organization: centralized revenues enable state monopoly; dispersed extraction requires militia accommodation; external financing makes militia independence permanent.

Third: External dependencies follow economic models, with competitive patronage proving uniquely destabilizing (unlike unified dependencies that can impose order).

Climate change has accelerated this trajectory. Desertification undermined cotton and subsistence agriculture, driving "distress diversification" toward mining. Agricultural economies require population welfare; extractive economies need only territorial control. This explains the humanitarian catastrophe; militias sustained by gold and Gulf money don't need population consent, removing economic pressure to protect civilians.

Nevertheless, describing economics as destiny overstates the case. Human agency shaped each transition. Nimeiri chose Islamic finance over other options. The NIF orchestrated the 1989 coup; it wasn't economically inevitable. Gulf states chose to back/oppose the RSF's independence. These were strategic decisions, not mechanical responses to economic forces.

But the agency operated within structural constraints. Once populations adapted to wheat, dietary patterns couldn't be reversed. Once Islamic finance networks established, dismantling them failed. Once militias controlled gold zones, subordinating them grew progressively harder. Once external patrons established direct relationships with armed groups, state intermediation became irrelevant. **Path dependency limited available choices at each stage**.

The October 2021 coup represented not Sudan's failure but its adaptation to economic realities. Two military organizations, SAF and RSF, both with independent financing, comparable military capacity, irreconcilable objectives (integration vs. autonomy), and external backing that sustains their maximalist positions, could not coexist peacefully. Integration was economically impossible, given the RSF's Gulf-EU financing, which provided autonomy. Continued RSF autonomy was politically impossible because SAF's institutional identity required violence monopoly and access to gold revenues.

For those working in Sudan's grassroots crisis response, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRS), Resistance Committees RCs), and civil society organizations, understanding this pattern is crucial. The militia-state isn't a temporary dysfunction awaiting restoration. It may represent a durable equilibrium adapted to a dispersed extractive economy, fragmented external patronage, and climate constraints on agriculture. Standard development frameworks assuming unified state authority and institutional capacity don't match Sudan's reality.

What would enable different trajectories? **Economic transformation**: If climate intervention reversed agricultural decline, if new economic models favored centralization, if massive international reconstruction created unified revenues, then political recentralization might become possible. But in the near term (5–10 years), these seem unlikely. Climate trends point toward continued desertification. No major resource discoveries have occurred. International commitment to reconstruction is absent while conflict continues.

The question isn't whether Sudan will return to its previous state forms; those economic bases no longer exist. The question is whether competitive external patronage will sustain indefinite military confrontation, whether new economic models might emerge enabling different political configurations, or whether the militia-state represents Sudan's adaptation to 21st-century realities.

That question remains open. But answering it requires first understanding the pattern: **from Pax Economica through competitive patronage to military coup, Sudan's transformation has been economically determined, politically expressed, and tragically realized**. The October 2021 coup was not an aberration but a culmination: the predictable result when revenue geography, climate change, and fragmented external patronage create conditions where integration becomes impossible without force, and force becomes inevitable.

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