



Militias' Manifestation and Security Contests in the Major East Sudan Region

Sudan Scope Media and Research

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1. Introduction:

A community's social cohesion, political stability, and security are all heavily influenced by political and economic neglect and their interactions. Particularly in a fragile state, disparities in economics, resources, and power can worsen social unrest and tensions, potentially leading to instability and insecurity. In East Sudan, a geopolitical region with a complex history of marginalization and isolation, escalating ethnic conflicts over wealth, livestock, and authority have created uncertainty. The region hosts numerous ethnic groups; besides the dominant Beja, there are Nuba, Husa, Darfurians, and other immigrants. However, relations and social harmony among these groups remain fragile. The area is rich in natural resources, including an 853-kilometer coastline along the Red Sea (WHO, 2025), vast arable land, pastures, and gold deposits. The diverse sources of income encompass port activities, agriculture, grazing, and illicit enterprises, many involving trafficking. Despite its natural wealth, the region has been neglected and underdeveloped. The situation in East Sudan is further complicated by the interplay of national and regional politics and threats, as well as the region's relatively low levels of wealth, power, and human development. Recently, the spread of ethnic militias, increased arms proliferation, ongoing conflict in Sudan, and regional and international influences have worsened the scenario. For example, the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on April 15, 2023, introduced new challenges to East Sudan.

¹ This paper is a part of a series on war and peace in Sudan conducted by the Sudan Scope Platform. It is an inductive examination of the rise and proliferation of local militias in the eastern Sudan region and their effects on the region's security, as well as the paths of war and peace in Sudan. In addition to available literature from media reports, research papers, and individual works published online, the researcher included primary survey information sources (interviews, observations, and field reports). The primary and secondary sources, organized, classified, and presented in a methodical way to analyze the issue. For reference and credibility, the identities and locations of several interview participants have been omitted due to current security concerns and the benefit of some individuals.

These challenges highlight the growing presence of militias, paramilitary groups, and the widespread trafficking of arms, significant problems that fuel armed conflict, organized crime, and violence. This proliferation is worsened by weak border controls, illicit trafficking, military mobilization, and ethnic rivalries. Such issues threaten regional security and political stability, and in extreme cases, they may jeopardize national unity.

This article will look at how local/national politics, interethnic relations (enmity-amity), and the existence of local militias can all contribute to political instability and possible insecurity on a local and national level. Therefore, its objectives are to:

- a) Analyze the impact of socioeconomic factors on interethnic relations and security.
- b) Investigate how localized conflict, the fragmentation of state authority, and the creation of competing territorial control in the region may be exacerbated by economic and political factors, as well as the rise of militias in the region.
- c) Look into how rising militias can support and benefit from illegal economies (such as smuggling and gold), which provide funding for more violence in the region and beyond.
- d) Analyze how the presence of militias and their alliances, both internal and external, may disrupt the region's security, internationalize the conflict, and increase tensions across borders.

2. Contextual: East Sudan: Land, People, and Political Economy

The country's northeast forms the East Sudan Region, which is slightly bigger than Poland, covering 336,480 square kilometers, and shares borders with Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (Assal & Ali, 2007). Its advantageous location with a view of the Red Sea, which is vitally important for the federal government (International Crisis Group, 2006). "It includes Port- Sudan, the country's economic lifeline, through which most of its foreign trade passes, including the oil exportation

pipeline, many irrigated and semi-mechanized agricultural schemes" (International Crisis Group, 2006). The region is divided into three states: Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedaraif, with a population of over six million people, nearly half of whom are members of the Beja tribes that live between the Nile River and the Red Sea (Arab Wall, 2023). These include the Hadandwa, Amarar tribes mostly in Red Sea State, the Beni Amer, divided between Sudan and Eritrea, and the Bishariyyin, who are divided between Sudan and Egypt (Institute for Security Studies, 2007). Along with the Beja tribe, the territory is home to a variety of other communities. These include the Shukriyas of Gedarif state. Other groups, such as the Shaiqiya and Ja'aliyin, form the main economic and administrative class in the East. The Rashaida (nomads) of Kassala state and the areas around the Eritrean border, as well as West African tribes such as the Husa, Zabarma, and Bargo, account for 30 to 40% of Gedarif's population. Darfurians, Nuba, and southern Sudanese people are also concentrated in Port Sudan and the Kassala region in Eastern Sudan (Assal & Ali, 2007). Bedawiye (Cushitic), Tigre (Semitic), Arabic, and a few other African tongues are among the most widely spoken in the region.

The region is rich in natural resources and has a thriving economy. Its resources include seaports, water, arable land, grazing areas, and gold mining, which have all determined the distribution of resources and influenced the region's economic activity and people's lifestyles (Manzo, 2017). Representing these resources, seaport and wide-ranging agriculture provide the region's economic activities and revenues. Both contribute significantly to the region's income, making East Sudan one of the richest areas of the country (World Bank, 2001). Yet, the region's population distribution and geographical factors have historically affected economic activity and livelihoods, including agriculture, trade, and grazing, resulting in different economic structures and ethnic economic activities.

Table 1: Ethnicity-Related Economic Activities

	Ethnic Group	Site	Production Style/ Economic Activity/s
Main Tribes	Hadandwa	Red Sea, Kassala	Pastoralists
	Beni Amer	South Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedraif	Trade, Agriculture, and Pastoralists
	Bishariyyin	Red Sea	Pastoralists
	Amarar	Central Red Sea	Pastoralists
	Shukriya	Gedarif	Farmers, Pastoralists
	Rashaida	Kassala, Red Sea	Trade, Pastoralism
	Halanga	Kassala	Mixed
	Ababdah	Gedarif, Red Sea	Mixed
Migrants Tribes (West Sudan)	Nuba	Gedarif, Kassala, Red Sea	Seasonal workers in the port
	Husa	Gedarif, Kassala	Season workers, Artisans
	Zaghawa	Gedarif, New Halfa, Kassala, Red Sea	Trade
	Berti	Gedarif	Agriculture
	Ta'isha	Gedarif	Agriculture
	Massalit	Gedarif	Agriculture
Migrants Tribes (North Sudan)	Shaiqiyya	Gedarif, Kassala, Red Sea	Agriculture, Trade, administrative positions, Artisans
	Jaaliyin	Gedarif, Kassala, Red Sea	Agriculture, Trade, administrative positions, Artisans
	Nubians	Gedarif, Kassala, New Halfa	Agriculture, Trade

Source: Adapted from (Abdul Rahman, 2025)

Production modes, tribal membership, and occupation have all contributed to the formation of a regional social and economic hierarchy. However, tribal affiliation and economic pursuits, particularly agriculture, commercial activity, and governmental positions, have a considerable impact on social structures and economic domination. For example, some tribes, such as the Shukriya, have traditionally wielded economic and administrative influence, whilst others, such as the Rashaida, are more nomadic and less incorporated into the established agricultural economy. Over time, as a result of migrations from within and outside Sudan (groups of northern, central Sudanese (e.g, Jaaliyin, Shaiqiya, and Yemenis), they grew as distinct administrative, economic, and commercial groups, giving rise to more present economic and social elites of indigenous peoples, Sudanese migrants from western Sudan, and those with whispering and seasonal jobs

(Nuba, Hausa, etc.). This socioeconomic structure and the influence of some groups from outside the region, (except the Shukriya), on the productive tracts related to the accumulation of wealth (large agricultural sectors and port activities), contributed to the creation of social and economic differences between tribal groups such as the Shukriya, the North Sudanese and immigrants from outside Sudan, Greeks, Indians, Yemenis, and the rest of the populations. It is important to note that in the Eastern Sudan region, the majority of the rural population has relied on agricultural and animal breeding, trade for their livelihoods for decades, but climate change has threatened both sources of income, potentially complicating matters. During the 1980s droughts, the region's populace, particularly the Beja tribes, lost a large amount of cattle, forcing some of its sub-tribes to work in marginal jobs in cities, like Port Sudan (Assal & Samia Ali, 2007).

This condition has caused rural inhabitants in both Red Sea State and Kassala to suffer as their traditional livelihood methods have eroded. Environmental, political, and economic forces have conspired to cause a periodic food security crisis as well as chronic structural poverty for many rural households. Droughts have ravaged grasslands and cattle herds, risking the viability of pastoral livelihoods (International Crisis Group, 2006). This has resulted in a variety of social and economic problems; while some benefit from accessible economic activities, such as seaports and agriculture, others, such as Bedouins and small farmers in remote places, receive little benefit, leading to augmented poverty in the cities and ranking the region's states (especially the rich Red state) among the poorest in the country. In this issue, the UNDP underlined the region's continued high levels of poverty in rural areas, as well as the decline in income rates between 2023 and 2024, with income levels in the Red Sea State falling by 12.8%, Kassala by 21.5%, and Gedarif by 11.75% (Abdul Rahman, 2025).

These ongoing precarious conditions, the historical and general development imbalance, and the lack of a fair division of the wealth of natural resource revenues between the center and the regions, particularly the Eastern Sudan region, have historically led to the peoples of the region demanding a fair distribution of wealth and balanced economic and human development based on the region's physical and natural capacities. Despite these demands, which began in 1958, and an armed struggle that resulted in the signing of the 2006 Eastern Sudan Agreement, the reality has remained unchanged, threatening to worsen the situation in the region. Militarization, societal stress, and a multiplicity of military manifestations are all occurring in the current political setting; largely, they threaten the security and coexistence of local communities, as well as the region and the city.

3. The Rise of Militias and Their Ethnic Origins in Eastern Sudan:

The local military presence and armed actions in the Eastern Sudan have a long history and aims, having been deployed as armed struggle forces against authoritarian regimes (the Salvation regime) in Sudan from 1994 to 2006, the time when the National Democratic Alliance was present in the region, also known as the "Eastern Front" (Abdul Rahman, 2025). During this time, the states of Eastern Sudan (Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedarif) saw low-level military operations that did not result in decisive military confrontations but did involve a high level of violence, as did other conflict areas in the south and the west (formerly), including South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur. The current steady growth and proliferation of militias in the region resulted from the expansion of the war that broke out on April 15, 2023, and the call to mobilize Sudanese civilians to fight against the RSF, driven by local, ethnic, and political goals, which met with a declared military aim of establishing several local paramilitary formations with the deployment of other military groups from outside the region (e.g., Darfur Joint Forces and Sudan Shield Forces). Their

presence posed security challenges in light of the political and social constraints in its national and local dimensions. Most of the local armed groups have been trained in Eritrea, under the auspices, support, and supervision of the Sudanese army and the Eritrean government. The following is an explanation of the armed militias, their origins, ethnicity, and relationship with the SAF:

Table 2: Tribal Militias and Paramilitary in East Sudan

Militias/Paramilitary allied with SAF		
Militia	Ethnic group	Realization
Eastern Battalion Forces, the Military faction of (Popular Front for Liberation and Justice in Eastern Sudan, led by Al-Amin Daoud)	Most of its fighters are from the Beni Amer tribe	2023
Eastern Sudan Liberation Forces,” under the command of Ibrahim Dunia	Most of its fighters are from the Beni Amer tribe	2023
National Movement for Construction and Development, led by Mohamed Tahir Suleiman Betay	Most of the fighters from Hadandwa-Jamilab in Kassala State	2024
Beja Congress Forces- Struggle forces. led by Musa Mohamed Ahmed	Most of the fighters from Hadandwa in Kassala State and neighboring areas	1994
Beja Congress Forces, led by Omer Mohamed Tahir	Most of the fighters from Hadandwa-Jamilab in Kassala State	2006
Eastern Sudan Parties and Movements Alliance, led by Shiba Dirar	Most of the fighters from Hadandwa in the Red Sea	2021
Sudanese Youth Movement for Change and Justice Forces, led by Khalid Abakar	Most of the fighters from Husa tribe in East Sudan	2024
Free Lion Forces (A new splinter faction from Mabrouk, Salim, led by Salim Ali)	Fighters from Rashaïda tribe	2024
The Mustanfrin Brigades and the Popular Resistance (most of them are Islamic battalions under the supervision of the army, the security apparatus, and the Special Labor Agency)	Multi-ethnic groups	2024
Sudan Shield Forces, led by Abu Aqla Kikal	Multiple tribes, mainly Shukriyya, Masalmya	2024
El Baraa Ibn Malik Brigade	Multi-ethnic groups (Islamists)	2024

Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)	Most of the fighters from Zaghawa, Massalit in East Sudan	Present in East Sudan since 2006
Sudan Liberation Movement- Minnawi Faction	Most of the fighters from Zaghawa, Massalit	Present in East Sudan since 2006
Sudan Liberation Movement- Tambor Faction	Most of the fighters from Massalit in East Sudan	2022
The Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council (SLM-TC), led Salah Tor	Most of the fighters from Darfur	n.d (no date)
Militia allied with RSF		
Free Lions Movement Force, led by Mabrouk Salim	Most of the fighters from Rashaida tribe	1998

Source: Adapted from (Abdul Rahman, 2025)

According to the information provided above, the East Sudan region is characterized by a complex web of militias, the bulk of which are structured along ethnic lines. Almost all of these militias have allied with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), some with the RSF, such as the Free Lions Movement Forces, and some continue to operate independently, pursuing their own goals, including territorial dominance (Saad, 2025). This situation has led to the militarization of local communities and the rise of ethnic militias, both of which have had a significant impact on the region's social and political landscape. Nonetheless, divisions have evolved at numerous levels, both across tribes and within individual tribal groups. This is evidenced by the presence of various armed groups within a single ethnic community. The same is true for militias from outside the region (such as Darfurian movements); all have contributed significantly to the militarization of the territory and its residents (including Beja and migrant groups), as well as the widespread distribution of weapons among communal groupings. Furthermore, Eritrea has most likely been involved in the training and organization of many of these militias, some of which have been recruited from communities on both sides of the border and deployed to support the SAF, raising concerns about potential future interference in local politics and security (Musso, 2025).

In this setting, deep-seated ethnic and political rivalries centered on competing for political power, natural resources, and livelihoods have coupled with the ongoing conflict and regional factors to intensify the situation in the region. Furthermore, the presence of armed local communities, the lack of peaceful conflict resolution methods, the involvement of regional players (particularly Eritrea), and the risk of escalation of conflict all add to the region's complexity, potentially endangering East Sudan's security and social stability.

4. Militia Presence and Insecurity Threats in East Sudan:

Regional ethnic militias have grown in prominence in East Sudan, posing a threat to security and social stability. Nonetheless, border control, illicit trafficking, military mobilization, and ethnic rivalry have all contributed to tensions among communities and the region's relations with the de facto government and neighboring countries. Such a situation could result in growing waves of political turmoil and insecurity in the region and beyond, both nationally and internationally. The following is an overview of militia presence, proliferation, and security influence in the East Sudan region.

4.1 Militias can cause and exacerbate localized violent conflicts:

The rising number of armed groups with tribal ties in eastern Sudan has prompted serious concerns about the region's security and stability, which is already volatile owing to political conflicts and tribal rivalries. The region is populated by indigenous cultural and ethnic groups, as well as newcomers from other regions of the country, with historical tensions and conflicts. These are exacerbated by grievances and demands for justice in the distribution of power and wealth, threatening to use tribal weapons to reclaim rights through force and violence, or, in other cases, militarizing competitive relations between ethnic groups in the region. We determine that the militias in the region arose from fractured and conflicting tribal groupings seeking dominance and

wealth. They appeared in their current shape after the signing of the Eastern Sudan Agreement in 2006 and later the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020. The growing military threats to the region, combined with the state's weakness and lack of control, aided in the expansion and proliferation of these militias' activities. This enabled them to develop their own controlled territory outside the state's jurisdiction, governed by traditional administrations and tribe chiefs.

In reality, the presence of ethnically based military groups elevates the possibility of the militarization of repeated local conflicts, exacerbating the threat of militia spread in the region. This is evident in incidents such as the tribal fight in Port Sudan in 2019 between the Beni Amer and Amarar tribes, the violent clash in the same year between the Beni Amer and the Nuba, and other bloody conflicts in Port Sudan, Gedarif, and Kassala in recent years (The Independent, 2024). However, militias constitute a threat because of their role in intensifying local conflicts, which are fueled by the struggle for resources and power. As official authority has weakened, militias have competed for control over agricultural lands, natural resources like gold, and trade routes, culminating in armed confrontations. Additionally, the emergence of militias along ethnic and tribal lines exacerbates tensions among the region's ethnic groupings (Ali and Altayeb, 2024). On the other hand, the spread of militias poses a serious threat to future political solutions, as these militias represent diverse social forces whose relationships are sometimes marked by intense rivalry and hostility, stemming from disagreements over a variety of issues, most notably the identity of some region residents and the legitimacy of the East's representation in power structures (Ali, 2025).

In short, many observers and inquirers believe that the presence and growth of militias in the Eastern Sudan region, combined with its history of local conflicts, marginalization, and uneven relations with the central government, pose a risk because militias have the potential to exacerbate

conflicts arising from competition for power and natural resources. Weak state authority, ethnic tensions, identity problems, and external intrusions, particularly Eritrea's engagement in regional internal affairs. The combination of these elements results in a conflictual, competitive, and unstable atmosphere that impedes peace efforts and regional security.

4.2 Militias can profit from Illicit Gold Mining and Smuggling across borders:

In eastern Sudan, cross-border trade, including illegal smuggling with neighboring countries (especially Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt), has been a long-standing practice in the region for decades. This activity primarily involves the bilateral trade of goods and commodities that violate the law, such as illicit drugs. Additionally, networks engaged in smuggling, human trafficking, and migration are operating in the region. Meanwhile, the growth of smuggling valuable goods and materials, such as gold and weapons, indicates a more advanced level of illegal activity. The fragile security situation, liquidity issues, weak government authorities, and widespread corruption have all contributed to the expansion of this type of illicit trade. This is evident in many militia movements, particularly the Rapid Support Forces' efforts to control gold reserves and production sites in the northern and eastern regions to fund their costly military operations (Said, 2024).

According to official reports, the estimated unused strategic reserves of gold are about 1,550 tons, along with other minerals such as silver and copper. However, only around 1% of these reserves have been utilized. Currently, the Red Sea state is the leading region in gold production, unlike other mineral-rich areas where production has stopped due to ongoing conflicts (Said, 2024). Eastern Sudan's strategic location provides large, shared, and adaptable borders with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt, which may facilitate militias in conducting smuggling operations with neighboring countries. Reference to experts and observers “while the region particularly

states like Kassala, Gedarif, and the Red Sea is not as rich in gold as Darfur or the Nile River basin, militias can profit by controlling smuggling routes and networks that transport gold from producing areas such as the Northern region, the Nile River, and Darfur to ports and collection centers in border towns and regional markets”². Observers also report that militias impose taxes and levies on traditional miners traveling through their areas to move gold and equipment or establish covert partnerships with gold traders and black-market networks, taking a percentage in exchange for protection and facilitation. These organized smuggling networks operate both within Sudan and across borders with Ethiopia and Eritrea. Militias can gain political and economic advantages by enhancing their military strength. The smuggling involves exchanging firearms or hard currency with intermediaries in neighboring countries. In all cases, this allows militias and other armed groups to benefit from gold revenues, which are often exported through covering companies or front businesses to evade legal regulations.

The fact is that all military parties, most notably the two sides of the conflict (the SAF and the RSF), engaged in legitimate and illegitimate gold-related activities and transactions, particularly the RSF militia and its leadership's involvement. Furthermore, the need to fund ongoing military operations, this situation resulted in gold becoming one of everyone's military and economic objectives (Soliman and Baldo, 2025), reflecting the scramble and acceleration to control its production areas, as well as the illegal export of a large portion of it across borders to neighboring countries via agents and international brokers (e.g., Wagner) to global markets (ADDO, 2025). Accordingly, this highlights the importance of resources in the ongoing conflict,

² For more information and details see: Ahmed Soliman, A. and Suileman Baldo Suilaman. Gold and the war in Sudan. 2025. Omnia Saed and Fred Pearce, In War-Torn Sudan, a Gold Mining Boom Takes a Human Toll. 2025 & rift valley Institute report. 2019. Security elites and gold mining in Sudan’s economic transition.

as well as the extent of heavy foreign intervention, both regional and international, in the proxy war currently taking place. According to many observers and analysts' views, "gold goes to Russia and the UAE, agricultural and livestock products cross the border north to Egypt, and agreements signed during the war with China, Turkey, Russia, and Iran target Sudanese lands, ports, and resources."

Borders, on the other hand, emerge as a source of power for militias, as well as revenues from war economies and military financing. According to some respondents and those interested, "the relevance of borders for militias resides in their supportive role in smuggling necessary items (fuel, flour, pharmaceuticals). Controlling weapons smuggling networks from the Horn of Africa into Sudan's interior, as well as being tied to migrant trade and human trafficking, which regional gangs actively engage in through ports and Kassala State. Furthermore, controlling border outlets allows the militias to generate additional revenue by levying unofficial fees on every smuggling operation that passes through their areas of influence, as well as using their tribal and clan networks in eastern Sudan to secure roads and monitor movements. To do this, observers identified that "militias can use a variety of border-control methods, helped by the region's low security liquidity, corruption, and terrible economic position. These options include: "First, use armed force to dissuade any competition (whether government forces or other militias). Second, infiltrating local state institutions by buying loyalty in customs, police, and border guards. Third, create a shadow economy that forces inhabitants to rely on smuggling networks and gold for a living, giving militants a social incubator and security cover".

In short, the militias' involvement in the war economy and their pursuit of profit from economic rents (gold) and smuggling activities have resulted in security, economic, and political problems for the region and the Sudanese state. The rise of illicit cross-border traffic in minerals

and weaponry increases the likelihood of conflict escalation and social and political fragmentation, while decreasing the likelihood of peaceful solutions and social peace. This could aid in converting historical grievances among the region's inhabitants into weapons of armed violence against the state or intensifying the intensity of historical internal conflicts. Furthermore, the establishment of parallel war economies alongside the collapsed state economy exacerbates the state's failure to supply the resources needed to battle security threats, create development opportunities, and manage its responsibilities. This may lead to competition with militias for control of mining sites and other rent-seeking income sources, especially given the halt in production in other sectors such as agriculture and cattle, as well as a dearth of investment opportunities in an unsafe and unstable environment.

4.3 Militias can increase regional influence and drive cross-border conflicts:

The Eastern Sudan region's location on the Red Sea coast, which shares borders with countries in East and North Africa, has geopolitical, security, and economic ramifications for the bordering countries (Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Eritrea) (Abdul Rahman, 2025) and adjacent countries (Egypt and Ethiopia). This has caused these countries, as well as other major countries in Sudanese affairs, including Russia, Iran, and the UAE, to compete for a foothold in the region and capitalize on its geographical location, resources, and coastlines. As a result of this circumstance, these countries have become inextricably linked to the course of political events and the ongoing war in Sudan, which has been defined as a proxy war and a rivalry between the Sudanese in general and the eastern region in particular.

Given East Sudan's contemporary complexity, the issue of militia proliferation and spread occurs as a result of the interplay of political, military-security, ethnic, and regional tensions, which have intensified the risks to social peace. From here, the significance of the Eastern Sudan

region became clear, as did the growing threats to border security and the consequences of the Sudanese conflict on countries such as Ethiopia, Egypt, and Eritrea, on the one hand, and the potential scenarios of the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict and their ambitions, as well as Egypt's interests in Sudan's resources and land, on the other (Ali, 2025). Overall, this identifies the primary motivators for intervention in the region's politics and the Sudanese issue in general. This also explains, in many ways, Eritrea's expanding engagement in the issue of rising local militias in eastern Sudan, and also Eritrea's support for the Sudanese army in its struggle against the RSF, though the border disputes between Sudan and Ethiopia in "Fashaqa" and Sudan and Egypt in "Halayeb" continue to be a contributing element to the region's growing security risks and tension.

When we look at the links between the rise and development of militias in eastern Sudan and their relationship to external interventions and potential regional issues, Eritrea has a significant and direct role. According to many commentators and interested individuals, this can be viewed from a range of perspectives, including Eritrean security, the impact on Sudanese politics, particularly local politics in eastern Sudan, and achieving a balance in regional policy. Eritrea has collaborated with the Sudanese army and played an important role in hosting, training, and supporting many local militias, in addition to maintaining strong ties with some Darfur organizations. Driven by fears that the war may spread to eastern Sudan and constitute a threat to its security, as well as ethnic links and geographical proximity to western Eritrea (Plaut, 2024)

Despite Eritrea's security strategy being aligned with its fear of the war's potential consequences extending beyond its borders, which has driven it to support the Sudanese army and train its militias, we discover that Eritrea has a set of goals through its intervention in Sudanese politics and its explicit support for the Sudanese army. This highlights its significance in eastern Sudan, particularly given the region's "fragile" social structure, characterized by divisions among

the ethnic and cultural groups that comprise it, as well as Sudan's ongoing political instability. Thus, Eritrea's approach in Sudan was motivated by a desire to secure and win over Sudanese support for its aim to become a major regional actor. This was accomplished by forming alliance networks with local actors in the region's countries, allowing it to shape the course of events. In this regard, Eritrea's ties to various forces in eastern and western Sudan, as well as the Amhara in Ethiopia, stand out. Eritrea's influence in eastern Sudan offers Asmara leverage over both the Khartoum government and foreign parties concerned with the region's stability. It is also influencing East Sudan policies in a way that benefits Eritrea, as well as obstructing Sudan's democratic transition for fear that the latter will become an environment in which Eritrean opposition thrives and a model for achieving a similar feat across the border (Ali, 2023). One argument has been that supporting and mobilizing local militias in eastern Sudan, particularly those with direct ties to Eritrea, is linked to Eritrean ambitions in the region, particularly in Kassala State, which borders Eritrea, and the expansion into Sudanese territory amidst the Sudanese state's weakness (Eira, 2024).

This is clear from the establishment of these tribal militias, their geographical foundation (except for the Beja Congress and the Supreme Council of Independent Chiefdoms), and their spread in the region under the pretext of support, sponsorship, and training by a foreign state with its own aims in the region (Ali, 2023) poses a security threat to the Sudanese state's safety and unity because it contains the majority of the factors that lead to its dissolution. Thus, the growth of militias in eastern Sudan remains a concern, potentially leading to proxy conflicts aligned with the interests and policies of the region's supporting countries and Sudan as a whole. It is especially clear that the history of the establishment of these tribal militias, their geographical origin in

Eritrea, and their deployment in the region under the army's banner and cover of support, despite their "affiliation" with a foreign government tied to the war.

In addition to foreign factors such as Eritrea's funding and monitoring of local militia training, there is a desire to have a tangible and direct impact on Eastern Sudanese politics. The rise of militias worsens the security situation because they can play direct and indirect roles in border and ethnic conflicts at various levels and types. Ethnic divides, border fluidity and volatility, the fragility of Sudan's government security systems, and an increase in illegal economic activity all contribute to this. Militias often control smuggling routes for "weapons and gold" across the border into Eritrea and Ethiopia, making them significant players in power battles between border populations. Furthermore, clashes and mutual attacks across the border, the involvement of local militias, and their cooperation or alliance with some border groups between Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea can undermine state sovereignty and intensify tensions or violent conflicts between Sudan and its neighbors (Rift Valley Institute, 2024). This suggests that the link between militias in eastern Sudan and external entities such as regional and international smuggling networks or ethnic and tribal ties leads to the internationalization of conflict, strife, and competition, transforming the local conflict into a broader struggle in the Horn of Africa region amidst tensions between countries, internal conflicts, and international ambitions.

Table 3 depicts and examines the possible effects of militia interactions and border wars in Sudan (Eastern Sudan) and its neighbors.

Table 3: Analysis of the relationship between East Sudanese militias, their nature, activities, and their likely impact on border and ethnic disputes.

Character of the Militia	Field of Activity	Influence Across Borders	The Impact on Ethnic Groups and Tribes	Potential Outcomes
Local tribal militia	They are composed of members of a specific tribe and are armed to protect resources.	Smuggling activities across the border with Eritrea and Ethiopia were coordinated with border tribes.	Tribes became increasingly divided (for example, between the Beja, Rashida, Beni Amer, and Nuba)	Local ethnic conflicts, long-term armed clashes.
Militias supported by the state/military	Used as a supplementary force to maintain security and safeguard certain resources.	It is used in military operations against groups crossing borders, escalating diplomatic difficulties.	favor one group over another, producing a sense of exclusion.	Leads to the breakdown of the social fabric and the possibility of violence between neighbors.
Militias engage in smuggling and illegal trading.	Smuggling gold, weapons, people, and goods.	Border breaches and potential collaborations with Eritrean or Ethiopian groups.	Use some border tribes in smuggling networks while excluding others.	Conflicts over control of smuggling routes lead to increased violence.
Militias with Foreign Ties	Supported by regional powers (Ethiopia, Eritrea, or even non-state entities)	Used as a tool of regional influence, border tensions rise.	An external entity may influence some ethnicities with cultural or racial ties to it.	The internationalization of the conflict may result in a long-running struggle across countries.
Gold and resource militias	oversees the mining areas (south of Tokar and Halayeb/Shalateen).	Smuggling gold across Eritrea's border or through the Red Sea.	Granting benefits to one tribe or group while excluding others.	Resource conflicts, state weakening, and increased conflict intensity.

Source: (Survey, 2025)

Based on an examination of the relationship between local militias in eastern Sudan, external interventions, and the prospects for internationalizing the conflict and its impact on the Sudanese state, we conclude that the militias in eastern Sudan are more than just a local military force; they catalyze conflicts, linking illicit economies, ethnic divisions, and border fragility.

Because of this relationship, it serves as a vital fuel source for both border and ethnic wars. Furthermore, continued external support and operations in the region to seek their own goals in Sudan have resulted in regional expansion and proxy wars, threatening the country's security and stability.

5. The Militias' Complex Web and the Future of Security and Peace in East Sudan:

Militias in eastern Sudan have become a key security issue, directly affecting the region's stability, unity, and social peace, as well as the region's relationship with the state. The region is currently at a critical historical juncture, with a number of external and internal variables determining its political course and prospects, notwithstanding Sudan's overall stability. Especially because the ongoing conflict in Sudan has evolved from an internal political struggle to a complicated international and regional competition and conflict involving neighboring countries' interests. Sudan's strategic location has made it a hotspot for countries looking to protect their security, economic interests, and influence over Sudan's future governance. As a result, countries have rushed to intervene in the conflict by assisting the warring parties (the SAF and the RSF) along complex political, military, and logistical axes, securing their positions, particularly those of East Sudan's neighbors (Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Egypt), in the ongoing conflict and its future. Ethnic intermingling, border conflicts between Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia (Fashaga, Halayeb, and Shalateen), competition, polarization, and the pursuit of regional influence and impact in the Horn of Africa and the African coast have all had varying degrees of influence on the Sudanese conflict. This circumstance underlined the expansion of militias in eastern Sudan as a local and national security concern inside the intricate web of internal and regional relations aimed at fulfilling political, security, and geopolitical goals throughout the region.

The development of militias, with their ethnic-tribal, political, and security components, has become a key issue in Sudan's war and peace courses.

From the standpoint of coexistence and social peace, we see that the region is a "fragile" heterogeneous plurality and competition, with moderate levels of violence among its ethnic and tribal components, a condition aggravated by marginalization and political and social hierarchies. The region has seen historical conflicts over citizenship, "identity", land ownership, and political influence among its indigenous and immigrant components, particularly between the Beja groups (Hadandwa-Beni Amer) and between the Beja and immigrant groups from within and outside Sudan (Hadandwa and Beni Amer against the Shukriya and Hadandwa against the Rashaida and Husa) (Abudl Rahman, 2025), as well as conflicts within the components of a single tribe. In this context, militias and tribal-based mobilization arise as new factors intensifying divisions, as does competition for key natural resources and economic activity (gold, agricultural areas, and seaports). The exploitation of these resources by militias for the advantage of specific ethnic groups raises the possibility of violence. Another feature that creates conflict among the region's components, with the presence of militias, is marginalization and discrimination, particularly if the militias associate tribal identification with political or military allegiance. In addition to the central government's strategy and the use of militias by some regional governments to weaken a specific tribe or political group, this generates a state of "ethnic alignment," which leads to long-term conflicts, increases instability, and becomes a national security danger.

The relationship of local militias to ethnic conflicts, rivalry for power and riches, and their impact on regional security and stability necessitates integrating economic-social elements to conflict and peace issues in eastern Sudan. The paradox between the size and nature of the region's natural resources (minerals, agricultural lands, and seaports) and the levels of development,

services, and social disparities causes tensions among its components, as well as between the region and the central government. This contributed to the escalation of tribal and ethnic conflicts, as well as the development of a sense of grievance among the various components. Despite the signing of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement in 2006 and the Juba Agreement in 2020 (Eastern Route), issues of marginalization and economic injustice remain unresolved, resulting in an escalation of conflicts between 2019 and 2020, as well as the formation of new militias and armed movements amidst the war in 2023.

This reality presents serious challenges, manifested in the absence of justice and transparency regarding the region's resources and wealth at both the regional and national levels, leading to the concentration of wealth in the center and a limited elite, resulting in a gap between the region's components: The Beja, the Beni Amer, the Rashaida, and the Shukriya... etc., which has become fuel for conflicts. Tribal battles in Kassala, Port Sudan, and Suakin erupted between 2019 and 2022, fueled mostly by rivalry for resources and political representation (Haydar, 2025). According to many perspectives, "the formation of new armed militias during the ongoing war indicates that the developmental and political vacuum continues to produce organized violence". Some factions have discovered that weapons are a tool of asserting their presence in the equation of power and wealth distribution, confirming that economic justice and resource management are not only development issues, but also national security concerns. Fair policies for resource redistribution and the economic and social gap must exist in the future as part of the mechanisms for dealing with militias and their relationship to the region's rising conflicts (Haydar, 2025).

Concluding:

To end with, we reach that the foundation and presence of local and armed militias in the East Sudan are linked to intertwined political, military, and security paths and interactions,

affecting many political directions as well as the relationships between the region's social components. Internal and external forces are carting the region, aiming to secure their interests and political, security weighing scale through the development of these militias, exploiting the state of diversity and conflict among its ethnic components, and mobilizing and militarizing societies in the midst of the ongoing war and Sudan's fragile situation. As a result, the region has become an area of international competition and proxy wars, fueled by political goals and the economic interests of supporting countries, via a complex network of relationships that includes the support and training of armed militias, complicating the prospects for peaceful solutions. The rise of militias as political, financial, and military forces, as evidenced by their illicit economic activities, relationships with specific countries, and mobilization of local communities against the state, creates conflicting and opposing political authorities and administrations, undermining Sudan's political and geographical unity in light of the escalating conflict and the adoption of military solutions to the issue.

Addressing the issue of militias as a functional tool for external intervention that threatens security, stability, and state unity necessitates the development of peaceful political tools and solutions, as well as a comprehensive approach to the Sudanese issue as a whole, particularly in Sudan's eastern region. This demands the establishment of a political process, agreements, and practical policies that address the underlying causes of Sudan's major challenges, particularly in East Sudan. Such policies aim at restoring an adequate share and justice in wealth and power distribution, as well as issues of transitional justice. At the local level, it emphasizes fair political involvement, competent natural resource management to close the economic and social divide and transforming resources into tools for peace and harmony rather than war.

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Interviews and Reports

Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Amwi, a Sudanese financial and economic expert from Eastern Sudan, based in the UAE, on August 10, 2025.

Mr. Omar Mahmoud, a researcher in Eastern Sudan affairs and a Civil Society activist, based in Qatar, August 7, 2025.

Mr. Hossam El-Din Haydar, journalist and former Secretary-General of the National Council of Press and Publications, August 7, 2025.

Mr. Ali, a civil Society activist, is based in the UK. August 3, 2025.