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The era of checkpoint governance in South Sudan

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DIIS WORKING PAPER SERIES ROADBLOCKS AND REVENUES #16

MAKING MARKETS, CONTESTING STATES

The era of checkpoint governance in South Sudan

Joshua Craze & Ferenc Dávid Markó

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MAKING MARKETS, CONTESTING STATES

Joshua Craze & Ferenc Dávid Markó

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ABSTRACT

This report examines the paradoxical place of the checkpoint in the political economy of South Sudan. It argues that in the context of the state's economic abandonment of the country, checkpoints have emerged as a principal means of marketisation: in South Sudan's rural peripheries, settlements cluster around checkpoints to take advantage of the hard currency they provide. Yet the blockades strewn across the country's rivers and roads are also instruments of state predation. The South Sudanese government provides neither wages nor development, but rather functions as a 'robber-in-chief' that uses the legal affordances offered by the formal fiction of the nation-state to enable illicit revenue capture. One of its fundamental instruments of predation is the checkpoint. Over the last decade, as state revenue has collapsed, the number of checkpoints has exploded. This proliferation has three sources: (1) political and military elites use them to capture revenue; (2) armed young men, no longer paid to serve in the security services, rely on them to survive; (3) communities increasingly set up their own checkpoints, in a mimicry of state function that is also a contestation of elite control of the economy. As much as the state uses checkpoints to predate upon populations, they have also emerged as a means of resisting it. At community checkpoints, commodities are not the socially neutral, easily fungible objects imagined by theorists of the free market, but are coloured by where they are from and where they are going. The putatively impersonal market is viscerally personalised at the checkpoint, which is at once a form of marketisation and a re-embedding of exchange within communitarian logics. This re-embedding is a way of resisting the state, but only by echoing its own logic of predation.

SUMMARY FOR POLICY-MAKERS

- South Sudan is undergoing a major transformation in its political economy. Whereas households once organised production through kinship networks and distributed surpluses through institutions such as marriage, the majority of the country's population now purchases what it needs to survive. Without markets, people cannot feed their families. These markets bear the stamp of militarised forms of control that emerged during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005). Since then, commercial and military power have worked in tandem. The checkpoint is a critical expression of this entanglement. It is at checkpoints that local communities acquire sorely needed currency. Markets are created at checkpoints, while checkpoints create markets.
- The checkpoint in South Sudan is neither a pathology that can be reformed away, nor the relic of a time before the state held a monopoly of violence. Rather, it is one of the central forms through which power is exercised, resources distributed and political claims articulated. This report advances three main arguments about the centrality of the checkpoint: 1) the checkpoint has become the principal engine of marketisation in a country largely abandoned by both the state and the humanitarian sector; 2) community-run checkpoints resist state predation only by mimicking it; and 3) these developments belong to a *longue durée* history of the state in southern Sudan as a fundamentally predatory form.
- From South Sudanese independence in 2011 through 2025, the number of checkpoints roughly doubled along many of the country's main thoroughfares. This explosion has three sources: 1) political and military elites use checkpoints to capture revenue; 2) armed young men, no longer paid to serve in the security services, rely on checkpoints to survive; and 3) communities increasingly set up their own checkpoints.
- Contemporary conflict in South Sudan is fought over circulation rather than territory. These struggles largely occur at checkpoints. Contestations over roads, rivers and border crossings are central to the country's conflicts. Checkpoints function as the infrastructure of war, enabling resource extraction, the financing of armed groups and the selective starvation or displacement of civilian populations. They also shape settlement and urbanisation patterns, as communities cluster around checkpoints, as it is through such blockades that currency enters local economies.
- Government promises to remove checkpoints – often applauded by representatives of the international community –are best understood as tactical manoeuvres within an ongoing struggle over who controls the means of predation. The removal of checkpoints is often a prelude to their reappearance in the hands of government-affiliated actors.
- Checkpoints pose dilemmas that cannot be resolved through appeals to humanitarian exceptionalism. Aid agency demands for checkpoint tax exemptions seek to create a special class of untaxed humanitarian commodities, thereby distorting commercial trade and raising the prices of other goods (a particular problem for humanitarians increasingly reliant on cash assistance). All too often, humanitarianism exacerbates the dynamics it seeks to mitigate.
- In South Sudan, conflicts are being fought *for* and *over* humanitarian access. Denials of humanitarian access are a means of waging war, creating siege conditions that cause famine and population displacement from rebel-held areas. Conversely, the government's granting of humanitarian access to areas under its control enables it to accumulate resources, while pushing the immiserated into towns controlled by the regime of South Sudanese President Salva Kiir.

ABBREVIATIONS

CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement

NCP – National Congress Party

NRA – National Revenue Authority

R-ARCSS – Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan

SAF – Sudanese Armed Forces

SPLM/A – Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army

SPLM/A-IO – Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition

SPLA-IGU – Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Gu (the militia of the prophet Makuach Tut)

SRA – State Revenue Authority

SSDF – South Sudan Defence Forces

SSP – South Sudanese pounds

SSPDF – South Sudan People's Defence Forces

WFP – World Food Programme

INTRODUCTION

Almost no one in Juba seems to have a good word to say about checkpoints. According to the World Bank, they increase companies' transportation and logistical costs, impeding the establishment of a functioning market economy (World Bank, 2025b). For aid workers, checkpoints are the means by which the government and rebel forces illegally restrict humanitarian access and tax and loot supplies intended for South Sudan's hungriest people (Craze, 2021c). Development actors criticise checkpoints for contributing to the country's acute economic crisis (World Bank, 2025a). The South Sudanese government holds that checkpoints – at least those controlled by rebels – constitute an unacceptable breach of national sovereignty. Yet despite repeated pleas by humanitarian agencies to remove them, and notwithstanding the South Sudanese government's frequent commitments to do so, checkpoints have proliferated across the country (Schouten, Matthysen and Müller, 2021).

The function of a checkpoint is to control the passage of people and things through a geographical node within a network.[1] In South Sudan, political and military elites have seized hold of checkpoints both as a means of waging war and as a way of extracting capital from the circulation of people and commodities.[2] In South Sudan today, except in vanishingly few instances, the government provides neither services to its citizens nor wages to its employees (Craze, 2023b). It is at the checkpoint that citizens encounter the state. The checkpoint is at once a predatory zone of state power and a place where citizens can negotiate with it (Agbiboa, 2022).

From South Sudanese independence in 2011 through 2025, the number of checkpoints roughly doubled along many of the country's main thoroughfares. This explosion has three sources:

1. Political and military elites use checkpoints to capture revenue in a post-oil economy.
2. Armed young men, no longer paid to serve in the security services, rely on checkpoints to survive.
3. Communities increasingly set up their own checkpoints to acquire hard currency for local economies.

The elite's deepening dependence on checkpoints is due to a transformation in the country's political economy over the past twenty years.[3] The members of the elite currently contesting control over the country's checkpoints initially accumulated capital during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005). In this period, commanders – often from families with positions of customary authority (Leonardi, 2019) – used access to external flows (aid from Oslo, guns from Addis Ababa or Khartoum) to place themselves atop wartime economies (Pinaud, 2014). The checkpoint emerged as one of the principal means by which commanders taxed and predated on trade in livestock and sorghum, and on the circulation of cattle in systems of customary exchange (Hutchinson, 1996; Keen, 1994).

[1] This definition builds upon that given by Schouten et al. (2021).
[2] This echoes studies in Cameroon (Orock, 2022), Jordan and Iraq (Martínez and Sirri, 2020) and Chad (Iocchi, 2019).
[3] The 'elite' referred to in this report is a set of military commanders who rose to prominence during the second Sudanese civil war, along with the political class that emerged around them following the signing of the CPA in 2005. Other elements of South Sudan's elites, including its commercial class – which is nonetheless parasitic on this military class – are not included in this restricted definition of the elite.

The war functioned as an enormous wealth transfer from southern Sudan's poorest to an emergent military class (D'Agoôt, 2020). The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 saw this elite take charge of the southern Sudanese regional government, supplementing wartime means of predation with free-flowing oil revenues and donor funds. The inputs changed, but the core patrimonial and predatory system established by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) during the second Sudanese civil war (Craze, 2021a; De Waal, 2014) intensified, with the movement using its new revenue streams to purchase the loyalty of previously hostile militia commanders (Young, 2006; Craze, 2020). This liquidity enabled the creation of a political marketplace in which violence could be leveraged for political power (De Waal, 2017).

After South Sudanese independence in 2011, oil flows were greatly reduced, following a stand-off with Sudan over transit fees that led to a prolonged pipeline shutdown (De Waal, 2014). The petrodollars that did enter the country went to a small clique around President Salva Kiir (Craze, 2023b, 2024c; OHCHR, 2025). In response to the pipeline shutdown, Kiir shifted the structure of his patrimonial politics (Craze, 2024d). Rather than disbursing his now-limited petrodollars, he distributed licences through which his supporters could tax and predate upon the populations under their control, effectively franchising out the state's monopoly of violence. Checkpoints became the primary means through which these actors captured resources. As South Sudan's economy has continued to crater– under the pressure of one of the world's worst rates of inflation, climate change-induced displacement and renewed conflict – checkpoints have proliferated as vehicles for capital accumulation (Craze, 2025b).

Checkpoints cannot be reduced to a mere means of elite economic dominance. Soldiers, rebels and civilians control them on the ground, and they have increasingly become the way those bound up in *le métier des armes* (living by the gun) gain enough resources to survive (Debos, 2016). After the signing of the CPA, an oil-soaked expansion of security sector wages brought an unstable peace to parts of South Sudan (Craze, 2020). The outbreak of the first South Sudanese civil war in 2013 saw the state almost entirely stop paying those salaries. As of 2026, large parts of the South Sudanese army – now called the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) after the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) changed its name in 2018 – have not been paid in several years.[4] Even when individuals are paid, inflation means their wages are worth little. Though the state's withdrawal from the payment of salaries was partly due to scarce government funds, the real rationale was political. Instead of funding a hierarchical army, which would have meant diluting his own power, Kiir paid off individual commanders and encouraged them to derive their income from looting and checkpoints. This form of private indirect government (Mbembe, 2001) particularised political control, eroded the power of the army as an institution, and made commanders more amenable to transactional forms of patrimonial politics.

Rather than become an autonomous Weberian bureaucracy, independent of particular commanders, the South Sudanese army was turned into a personalised network beholden to Kiir's dispensations, composed of military leaders reliant on finding their own material resources within territories allotted them by Juba. Over the following years,

[4] The SPLM/A will be referred to by this acronym in reference to activities prior to the change in nomenclature that occurred in 2018; the South Sudanese army will be referred to as the SSPDF in reference to activities from 2018 onwards.

generals and politicians were frequently cycled through – alternately empowered and dispossessed – so they would be unable to establish a secure footing from which to challenge Kiir's rule (Craze, 2024a). For these leaders, checkpoints constituted an important source of capital. Accumulation required men to man the roadblocks. Soldiers, without wages, but in an economy that was increasingly marketised and reliant on purchases for daily supplies (Thomas, 2019), used checkpoints as a way to survive.

Checkpoints run the gamut. Since the outbreak of South Sudan's second civil war in November 2024–, SSPDF troops in hostile territory – such as Dinka soldiers stationed in Nuer areas – have used checkpoints to impose a form of predatory government.[5] The SPLA behaved in similar fashion during the second Sudanese civil war, treating the territory it controlled as an occupying army might (Nyaba, 1997).[6] Many of the military checkpoints used in South Sudan's second civil war, however, are run by troops drawn from the areas in which they reside, and some of the funds from those checkpoints return to the surrounding communities.

Military checkpoints thus shade into a third manifestation of South Sudan's political economy: community checkpoints. South Sudan's communities have long complained about the onerous, opaque levels of taxation extracted at military checkpoints, and have increasingly come to seize hold of blockades themselves. Community checkpoints have proliferated over the past decade, often run by community self-defence forces, such as the Nuer white armies (Craze, 2025g; Young, 2007) and the Dinka *gelweng* and *titweng* (Pendle, 2017). At these checkpoints, traders from the community are taxed differently from strangers from Juba. Some profits go to specific community members. The community checkpoint, just like the elite checkpoint, has a particularising function: flows of goods are shaped not simply by market forces, but by extant social networks. Elite checkpoints enable capital accumulation by particular commanders; community checkpoints produce desperately needed currency for community members. The latter are a form of resistance to the predatory practices of the state that mimics their logic.

It would be a relief if one could simply work out which checkpoint is run by which sort of actor, and create a map showing the relative importance of each of these three types of checkpoint. Unfortunately, these three modes of ownership often co-exist in the same place. For instance, in Tock – a small town that hugs the Jonglei Canal in Ayod County, Jonglei State – the checkpoint is manned not only by members of communitarian self-defence militias (known as white armies), but also by soldiers from South Sudan's principal opposition group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO). The destination of the funds accumulated at the town's checkpoint is debated each evening, then divvied up among community members, white army fighters, SPLA-IO soldiers and opposition county officials.[7]

A bewildering heterogeneity of actors operate checkpoints in South Sudan. At national checkpoints, perched on the country's borders, officials from South Sudan's National Revenue Authority (NRA) stand alongside state and local security organs. At state-level checkpoints governing inter-state passage, national security services negotiate their cut with local politicians. New sites of revenue extraction – a gold mine, for instance, or a

[5] There is a widening consensus among South Sudan experts that the country descended into a state of civil war although the designation has yet to be acknowledged formally in diplomatic circles or by the UN (Craze, 2025c; Craze and Falzetta, 2026; ICG, 2026; Pospisil, 2025).
[6] The Dinka – to which Kiir belongs – are South Sudan's largest ethnic group. The Nuer, the country's second-largest group, have borne the brunt of the government's current counterinsurgency (Craze, 2025c).
[7] In this report, SPLM-IO will refer to the opposition's political wing and SPLA-IO to its military wing.

murram excavation pit – produce private checkpoints run by politicians connected to Kiir's regime, from which communities demand a share.

Efforts to typologize checkpoints (national, state, community, etc.) falter when confronted with the material actuality of any given checkpoint, which is always an admixture of types. Attempting to designate the ownership of a checkpoint is useful, and enables one to sketch out the various social forms that lay claim to checkpoints, but it is foolhardy to think that pure types can be found in the world. In reality, checkpoints are always zones of negotiation between different levels of government and different forms of social organisation, as is the case elsewhere in the world (Muzalia et al., 2021). If they are the principal sites of actual governance in South Sudan, it should come as little surprise that they are also places in which the state itself is rigorously debated, and the finer distinctions between public and private goods discussed with an analytic precision that would be the envy of any graduate seminar.

Rather than offer a typology, this report traces the historical dynamics of the relationship between communities and the state in southern Sudan, as expressed through the checkpoint and the forms of societal militarisation this relationship has produced. Contentions over checkpoints are not a novel phenomenon in southern Sudan, but bound up in the history of the state in the region. This report advances three main arguments:

1. The checkpoint has become the principal engine of marketisation in a country largely abandoned by both the state and the humanitarian sector.[8]
2. Community-run checkpoints resist state predation only by mimicking it.
3. These developments belong to a *longue durée* history of the state in southern Sudan as a fundamentally predatory form.

Methodology and structure

The report is based on fieldwork conducted in Jonglei, Upper Nile, Western Bahr el Ghazal and Warrap states between July and October 2025, supported by a team of four South Sudanese researchers, as well as interviews with politicians, donors, development practitioners, diplomats, humanitarians and security actors in Addis Ababa, Juba, Kampala and Nairobi conducted between June 2025 and May 2026.

The first part of this report explores how checkpoints were used as a technology by British colonial officers, who empowered some communities at the expense of others. It then traces the history of checkpoints through the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005) on to their proliferation in the aftermath of South Sudan's first civil war (2013–2018). Each period produced different configurations of the relationship between elites, communities and militarisation. The current proliferation of community checkpoints, for instance, is not due to a Rousseauian recapturing of self-determination by South Sudan's ethnic groups, but the recurrence of a pattern found throughout the region's history. As armed groups fragment and their legitimacy wanes, the communities come to have more independence from the very groups that militarised them.

Part two of this report focuses on the period following South Sudanese independence in 2011, and analyses the reasons for the state's recent reliance on the checkpoint. It outlines how the South Sudanese state is increasingly found at the roadblock, which has

[8] Following Polanyi's (1944) work, this report takes 'marketisation' to mean the simultaneous disembedding of non-market-based forms of exchange and production (in southern Sudan's case, kin or sectionally-based forms) and the embedding of market systems of exchange predicated on access to currency.

become a central technology of governance. During South Sudan's current civil war (2024–), one can find both a war *for* checkpoints (kinetic battles waged for control of crucial riparian nodes on the White Nile) and a war *within* checkpoints, as different political and military actors vie for control of their revenue streams. This part of the report concludes by investigating the other side of the elite checkpoint: the soldier's blockade. These two forms of the checkpoint are co-constitutive. As the South Sudanese military and political elite accumulated more wealth from 2005 to 2011 and grew increasingly independent of its social base, conflict and displacement produced ever more 'surplus' labour (Ali and Brassier, 2024), in the form of young men whose only chance of getting ahead – or simply maintaining life – was through the craft of the checkpoint.[9] The diminution of elite revenue streams after 2012, following the oil pipeline shutdown, made the politicians in Kiir's coterie ever more reliant on checkpoints for the accumulation of capital. The dispossessions and dislocations of war and economic collapse furnish the forces that man the checkpoints on which the elite rely.

The third part of this report places the proliferation of checkpoints in political-economic relief. South Sudan is in the midst of a profound political-economic transformation. During the 1970s, most households organised production through kinship networks. Surpluses were distributed through societal institutions (Thomas, 2019). Although such institutions continue to organise much of productive life, they now exist within a market economy. The majority of the South Sudanese population purchases what it needs to live from markets deeply structured by militarised forms of control that emerged during the second Sudanese civil war (Thomas, 2019, 7). Markets became central to survival strategies at the same time as conflict disrupted people's access to land and enabled the commodification of agriculture within a system of military patrimonialism (Anei and Pendle, 2018; Pinaud, 2014). These markets have often emerged at checkpoints; the history of southern Sudanese capitalism cannot be separated from an increase in the number of blockades across the country.

During the CPA period (2005–2011), disruptions to customary forms of production were ameliorated by an expansion of salaries, especially in the security sector, amid hopes – shared by southern Sudanese and international development actors alike – that South Sudan might become a developmental state. At the outset of the first South Sudanese civil war, however, the provision of government wages largely collapsed, leaving aid agencies as the principal providers of salaries. More recently, following massive drops in humanitarian funding from the Global North, even these salaries have vanished (Craze, 2025a; Falzetta, 2025). In the ruins of the twin projects of the developmental state and humanitarianism stands the checkpoint.

This political-economic shift allows us to understand the specificity of the contemporary growth of community checkpoints, as the third part of this report will analyse. At these checkpoints, commodities are not socially neutral objects.[10] Rather, they are coloured by where they are from, who is in possession of them, and where they are going. By re-embedding commodity chains in local social networks, community checkpoints reveal that there were never any goods from nowhere: commodity flows have always sustained a predatory elite that supported some ethnic groups at the expense of others. The

[9] One of the authors of this report had suggested to Marielle Debos, when she was exploring possibilities for the English translation of her book's title, that it be called 'The Craft of Arms'.
[10] Author interviews in Juba, August–October 2025.

community checkpoint thus functions as a check on the extractive designs of the state apparatus, but one that bargains for a share of the spoils rather than articulating an alternative to Kiir's patrimonialism.

Diplomats in Juba frequently refer to the checkpoint economy as an atavism – a leftover from a more unruly time. With the coming of elections and the finalisation of a unified army, ambassadors have assured us, the South Sudanese state will have a monopoly over violence, and checkpoints – at least those run by communities and rebel groups – will vanish from the land. *Au contraire*. The checkpoint constitutes a contemporary form of political life in South Sudan. If one sits down in one of the many tea shops that have sprouted up next to the country's blockades, one might be lucky enough to hear debates over the morality of taxation and the nature of commodities. The checkpoint, we argue, is the crucible of the contemporary in South Sudan: it is where the actuality of life is articulated and discussed.[11] At the checkpoint, one sees not the past, but a future being debated, in the aftermath of the state-building project that has cursed South Sudan since its independence in 2011.

[11] The term 'crucible of the contemporary' is Rabinow's (2017).

TRACING THE LINEAMENTS OF THE PREDATORY STATE

An emissary from elsewhere

The state in southern Sudan has always been an emissary from elsewhere. Far from being created by the southern Sudanese people, it has been a Turkish slaver (Jok, 2010), a British officer looking for conscripts (O'Brien, 2010) and a *murahilin* militia member (De Waal, 1993). Whatever its guise, the state has been primarily concerned with extracting resources from the region, rather than developing it – a pattern true of other areas of the Horn and Central Africa (Schouten, 2022). The state is thus not only predatory but, from the perspective of local communities, fundamentally aleatory: it is unclear when it will arrive or how long it will stay. In the stories related to the report's authors in Jonglei in July 2025, the relationship to the state that emerged was not one of authorship (as if the South Sudanese people had created it) but of endurance and opacity. In one story, a dozen spirits – the same spirits that would later come to reside in contemporary prophet Makuach Tut – possess a young woman in Old Fangak (in current Jonglei State), warning her not to attack soldiers recently stationed in her area, for they would 'leave soon'.[12] The state was something to be endured. In another, spirits advise a community to destroy the roads along which soldiers will come. Given the state's predatory nature in southern Sudan, it is often better not to be seen by it (Bachmann, Pendle and Moro, 2022; Schouten, Stepputat and Bachmann, 2019). The state's demands are determined by the priorities of faraway capitals – of which Juba is only the most recent iteration – rather than the needs of local communities.

The state has two fundamental practices in the region: the checkpoint and the raid.[13] The checkpoint is the physical manifestation of the predatory state. It extracts, sees, controls and limits, without being beholden to the communities on which it preys. The study of the checkpoint is therefore also an inquiry into the state writ large. This is as true of the regime created after Sudanese independence in 1956 as it is of the preceding Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government, which used checkpoints to extract levies – of both men and money – and enforce racialised boundaries.

The post-independence Sudanese state also employed checkpoints as a means of extracting resources and regulating movement, from displacing populations from around oil fields – discovered in the 1970s (Ryle and Gagnon, 2001) – to dominating transport corridors. It has thus functioned as a gatekeeper state (Cooper, 2002), whereby the process of governance is understood as one of controlling flows of people and things over strategic points of passage, and extracting levies from such passage.[14] Such a state is far more dependent on controlling networks of circulation than it is on popular legitimacy. In southern Sudan, it is these networks, rather than territory, that are the prizes checkpoints claim.

State power, state weakness

This history of state power is also one of state weakness. All too often, it is local enforcers or militias that assume control of checkpoints on behalf of the state, accruing power locally thanks to the state's putatively national agenda. This ultimately leads to the further fragmentation of power at the national level, as the state becomes beholden to autochthonous forces. The checkpoint is thus a form of paradoxical state power that

[12] Interview with community elder, Ayod County, July 2025. Makuach Tut is a prophet from the Gawaar Nuer community. See Craze 2025g. More information on his possession and rise can be seen in Footnote 44. of this report.
[13] A genealogy of the raid, while fascinating, is beyond the remit of this report.
[14] This process of state-making has obvious analogies in Europe, see Foucault (2009).

fractures authority as it appears to enforce it.[15] The root of this paradox lies in the nature of the weak state apparatus in southern Sudan. As Edward Thomas (2013, 2015, 2019) has shown, the state apparatus has always been hamstrung by a lack of both external support and internal popular legitimacy. Rather than invest in the region, the state has attempted to rule by setting local political actors against each other. The checkpoint has proved ground zero for these contestations.

In the nineteenth century, the fundamental form of accumulation in southern Sudan was the raid. This was as true of community leaders (Simonse, 2018) as it was of slavers – there was little trade to be taxed and few markets, so military leaders used raids to acquire resources. The era also saw a flourishing of checkpoints across the Horn of Africa, as communities took advantage of colonial forms of violent extraction (dependent on long supply chains along uncertain roads) by erecting blockades at nodes in key transport corridors. Each colonial power brought with it a particular flavour of checkpoint, affording communities opportunities to raid and install roadblocks. The Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan (1820–1824) by Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, was motivated by his need to find slaves to serve as soldiers in his army. The slavers who raided southern Sudan attempted to divide and rule, striking deals with some local communities, who would then attack others. They also established fortified slave-trading bases called *zaribas* (Johnson, 1992; Jok, 2001). These helped the slave-traders regulate passage over land and river, allowing them to move ivory and slaves through southern Sudan (Johnson, 1992). As remains the case today, checkpoints emerged alongside routes determined by the region's subsidiary insertion into global commodity markets (Bayart and Ellis, 2000).

The British, who took control of Sudan in 1898, acted similarly. Despite abolishing slavery, they demanded conscripts to form what were effectively militias, which could then fight against hostile groups in southern Sudan during punitive campaigns at the beginning of the twentieth century.[16] The British intended the region to be a world apart from their colonial possessions to the north. In the wake of the First World War, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government issued the Passports and Permits Ordinance (1922). This insulated the south from the rest of Sudan, creating an enclosed district. Traders, merchants and hunters required permits to enter or leave the territory. The ordinance also restricted the movement of the southern Sudanese population. What became known as the 'Southern Policy' prevented movement between a putatively Islamised north and a south that was to be preserved in aspic (Craze, 2025e).

In January 1930, Sir Harold MacMichael, Civil Secretary of the colonial government, explained the policy as follows (Ruay, 1994: 41):

> The policy of the government in the Southern Sudan is to build up a series of self-contained racial or tribal units with structure and organisation based to whatever extent the requirement of equity and good government permit, upon indigenous customs, traditional usage, and beliefs.

The Southern Policy imagined the region as a series of self-contained, clearly defined ethnic groups governing themselves through 'traditional authority' based on customary

[15] A similarly paradoxical situation can be observed in many borderlands in Central and North-East Africa, see Stogdon (2025).
[16] In April 2025, the South Sudanese government declared many of the same areas 'hostile counties' at the beginning of a counterinsurgency, which has seen – just as a hundred years ago – British pilots, this time as mercenaries, bomb Nuer communities.

law (Leonardi, 2013). Viewing the plethora of governmental forms in southern Sudan with suspicion, it sought to allot easy-to-control chiefs to the structurally anarchic Nuer and monarchical Shilluk. What horrified the British most of all was the thought of southern subjects intermingling in towns without the oversight of customary authorities (Kurita, 2003). This insistence on self-contained ethnic groups remains the basis upon which South Sudan's political organisation operates today, written into land and nationality acts passed some 80 years after the Southern Policy came into effect (Markó, 2015, 2016). In retrospect, perhaps no other policy in southern Sudanese history has contributed more to the fragmentation and ethnicisation of politics in the region.

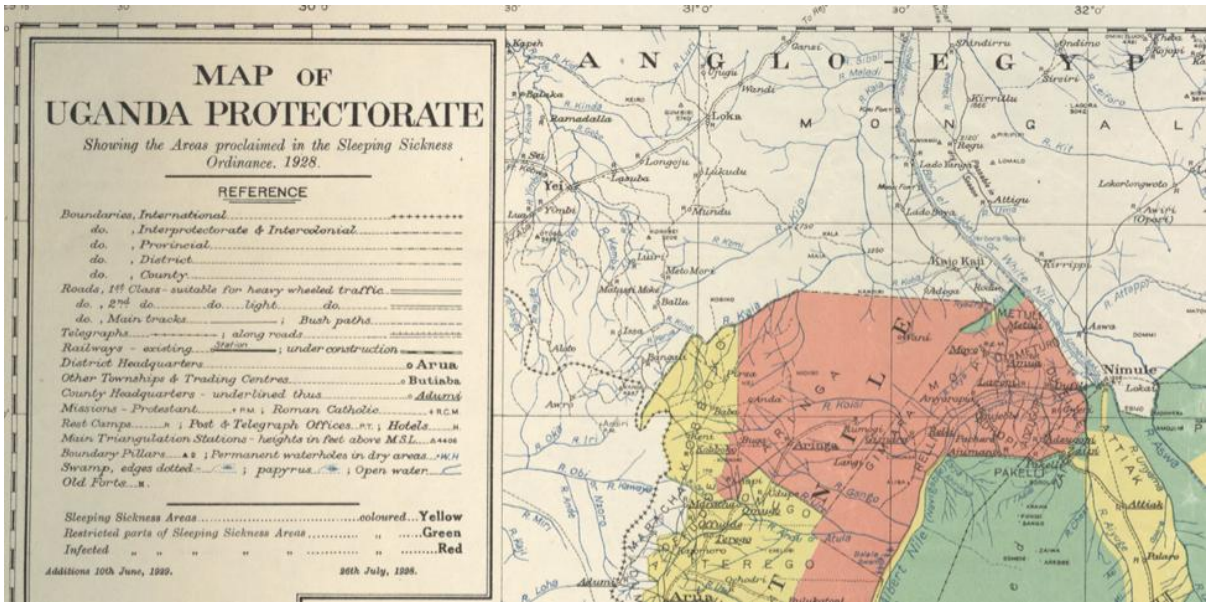
Given how minimally administered southern Sudan was under British colonial rule, the system of population control dictated by the Southern Policy required checkpoints. In order to illustrate this point, the report focuses on the situation in the borderland between Uganda and southern Sudan.

In 1911, the colonial administration decided that the boundary between the Protectorate of Uganda and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 'should be a tribal one',[17] separating the Ma'di people of Moyo district, Uganda, from the Kuku of Kajo Keji, Sudan. This was a difficult endeavour. The Ma'di also lived in Sudan (near Nimule) and there were no accurate maps, either of the geographic area or the two ethnic groups' respective territories (Ali Taha, 1978). One British administrator called it 'the world's most idiotic' border, posing the question: 'If the Kuku tribe decide to move, do they carry the international boundary with them?' (Leonardi, 2020: 216).[18]

In 1935, 24 years after the boundary decision and five years after the Southern Policy was introduced, Ma'di chiefs petitioned the colonial commissioner of Masindi Province, Uganda, to retain fishing rights on the western bank of the White Nile, which lay inside what was thought to be Sudan. The following year, colonial officers from both countries met in Juba to discuss the issue.

[17] Viscount Kitchener to Edward Grey, Cairo, 27 Oct. 1911, The National Archives, London, WO 181/236, cited in Leonardi, 2020.
[18] The quote is from Walter R. Bazley, 'Reminiscences as District Officer in Uganda' (n.d.), Bodleian Libraries Commonwealth and African Collections, Oxford, MSS.Afr.s.924, cited in Leonardi, 2020.

Figure 1. Map of Uganda Protectorate showing the areas proclaimed in the Sleeping Sickness Ordinance, 1928 (detail)



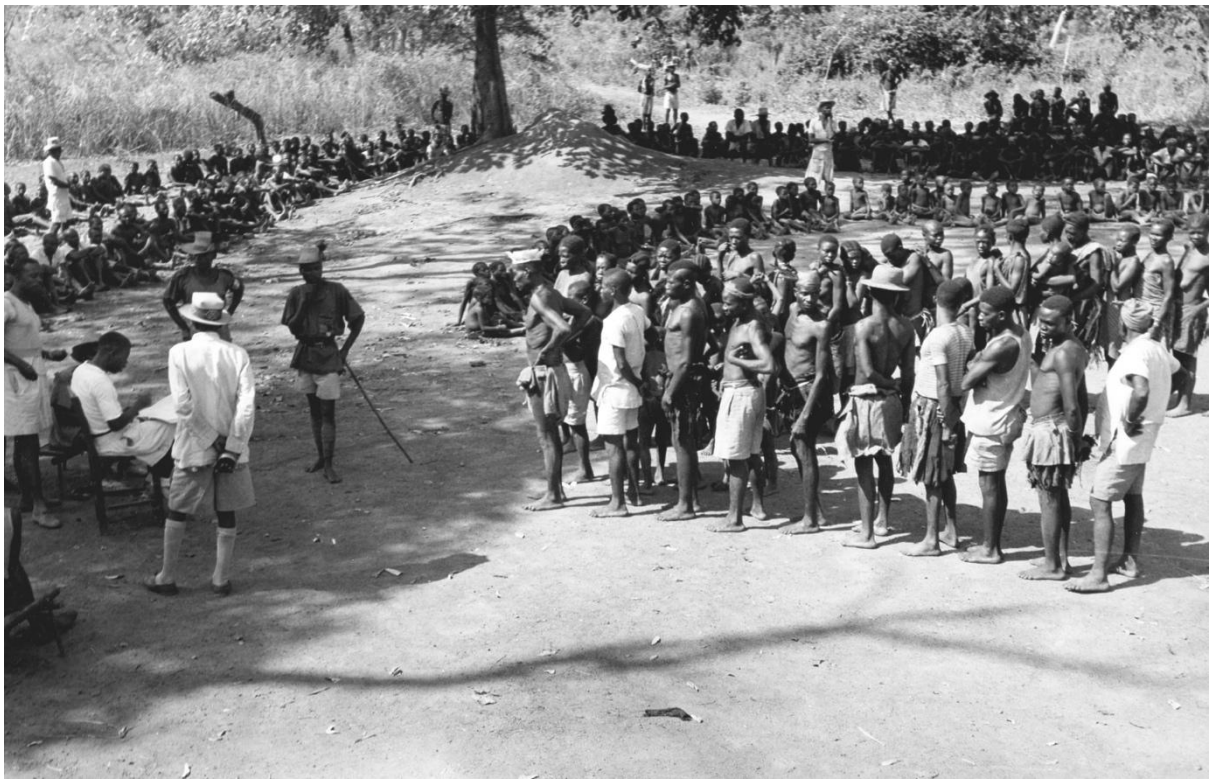
Source: Uganda Protectorate Survey Department (1929).

Uganda's colonialists feared the spread of 'sleeping sickness' (or African trypanosomiasis), while southern Sudan's administrators worried about 'detribalisation' and 'unnecessary intermingling'. It was Uganda's colonialists who had the more grounded claim. Between 1900 and 1920, a sleeping sickness epidemic in Uganda had claimed some 200,000 lives (Morris, 1962). A pass system was introduced for Ma'di from both sides of the border wishing to fish on the western bank of the White Nile. The Ugandan Ma'di would undergo a medical inspection and receive a red pass, while the Sudanese Ma'di would receive a green pass. This was the first time in southern Sudanese history that non-urban colonial subjects received personal identification papers. The colonial administrations of the two countries adopted these measures reluctantly, believing that people would, in any event, go and fish.

The pass system led to the establishment of medical checkpoints along designated walking routes. Previously ignored laws concerning 'illicit border crossings' began to be enforced by the officers of the customary chiefs, with Ma'di receiving six-month sentences for contravening the pass system. The so-called 'dispensaries' were effectively checkpoints, manned by armed men, who demanded fines and fees from local people. The customary authorities received colonial inducements to fine illicit travellers, but this only served to create a shadow economy in which official fines were transformed – via the alchemy of the decentralised state – into bribes that went straight into the chiefs' pockets. The chiefs, like contemporary militias, were at once executors of a distant state and cunning deployers of such authority for their own ends. People began to resist their designs. By 1936, people travelled the long way round through Congo to reach Uganda, just to avoid the pass system and the checkpoints, and by 1940, the first reports of forged passes reached the central government.[19]

[19] Source: South Sudan National Archive, Equatoria Province Files, 35.C.3/1.

Figure 2. Roadside sleeping sickness inspection among the Zande



Source: Photograph taken between 1932 and 1942 by British Senior Medical Inspector John Francis Bloss, Durham University Sudan Archive, REF 884/1/44. Note that a chief wearing a pith helmet overlooks a clerk and some armed policemen, indicating the early militarisation of the checkpoint.

As with contemporary roadblocks, colonial checkpoints swiftly accumulated uses far beyond their official remit. Dispensaries quickly turned into checkpoints along a border between two colonies, later to become an international frontier. In 1936, the Sudanese authorities used these checkpoints to regulate labour migration from Sudan to Uganda, where a construction boom was ongoing. Attempts by Sudanese people to avoid restrictions on their movement led to the extension of these checkpoints across the entire southern border zone, taking in Zandeland by 1938, and shortly thereafter the rest of the Sudanese frontier shared with Congo, Kenya and Uganda.

New checkpoints, new chiefs: the legacy of the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005)

Many of South Sudan's currently active checkpoints emerged during the second Sudanese civil war, a period that shaped the region's military geography in ways that persist to this day and established the contours of unequal development that determine the country's current political-economic structure. For much of the war, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) controlled the region's towns, while the SPLA controlled its rural areas. Both sides attempted to starve each other out by besieging their opponent's territory and trying to control the flow of people and goods. In the 1980s and 1990s, the SAF and its associated militias taxed or forcibly recruited those fleeing into Kordofan from politically created famines in Abyei and Northern Bahr el Ghazal (Craze, 2018; Keen, 1994). For its part, the SPLA recruited troops – forcibly and otherwise – in territories under its control, and diverted humanitarian resources to feed its soldiers. The SPLA checkpoints mirrored the SAF's, and were focused on key nodes in logistical networks.

Checkpoints served a double function during the second Sudanese civil war, allowing the SAF and SPLA to monitor their opponents and restrict their movements, while also controlling flows of people. These flows constituted opportunities for both sides to predate and levy taxes on populations under their control. Checkpoints were a constitutive part of a war economy that produced an enormous wealth transfer to an emergent class of military leaders and merchants well placed to take advantage of the conflict. Keen (1994, 2008), for instance, has shown how the SAF used checkpoints to ring SPLA territories in the 1980s, inducing famine and forcing impoverished pastoralists to sell off their livestock to northern merchants.

Military leaders, much like the British and Sudanese state emissaries before them, used their control over resource flows to dominate local communities. Just as with the British dispensaries on the border, the elite's schemes often led a double life at the roadblocks, where local military figures enriched themselves, to the chagrin of those affected. A famous song referencing the Wakabil checkpoint in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, which operated during the second Sudanese civil war and still functions today, suggests how locals viewed such checkpoints:

> The hyena, the son of Deng Alakyou (taxation official),
> has destroyed Wakabil with his hard anus.
> He sits under the ngaap tree to tax people with money,
> and spends it on alcohol.
> He pours alcohol into a glass,
> hands a full glass to Ater (military taxation officer)
> and looks at the bottle [to check the content],
> pours it again and hands it to Yor (his other colleague),
> and again looks at the bottle.
> Swallows it at once and flashes his ugly teeth in a funny way.
> The hyenas, without mercy, are taxing people under the ngaap tree.
> The hyenas with ugly teeth are playing with people's money.[20]

During the second Sudanese civil war, what is now Northern Bahr el Ghazal state saw the emergence of several key military families, partly thanks to the checkpoint economy (Boswell, 2019; Craze, 2024b; Kindersley and Majok, 2019, 2020). Today, the lattice of roadblocks across Northern Bahr el Ghazal not only tracks the ongoing contestation among these families over the state's political economy, but points to the very nature of that political economy.

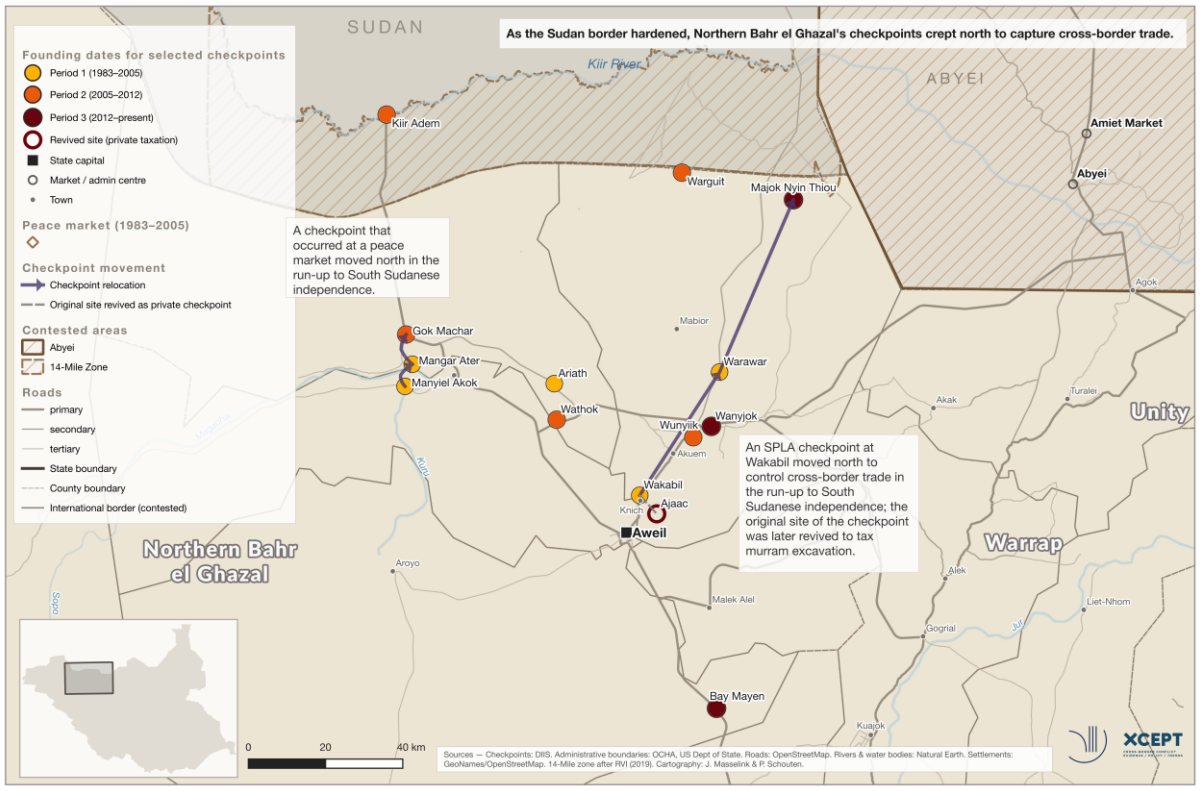
As well as being a key tool for establishing control over people and territory, the checkpoints that emerged during the second Sudanese civil war enabled a specific type of territorial order: to wit, stabilised, relatively peaceful areas in which markets could emerge. The Manyiel Akok 'peace market' was established by the Malual Dinka (Northern Bahr el Ghazal's majority population), together with the Rizeigat and Misseriya

[20] This song, sung in Dinka, was collected by a field researcher in Aweil in 2025.

(Darfuri and Kordofani pastoralist groups). Despite the latter groups' participation in SAF-backed militia raids on Northern Bahr el Ghazal during the war (D'Agoôt, 2013), the markets – which emerged at the interstices of contested zones of control – facilitated contact between northern nomads and southern pastoralists. The heavy security presence at these sites allowed trade to flourish, with similar markets emerging at the border zone in Amiet, Abyei (Furukawa and Deng, 2019; Rolandsen, 2019) and in Warrap (Anei and Pendle, 2018). Thus, much like the *zaribas* of yesteryear, the new checkpoints birthed by the war constituted a nexus of commercial and military functions.

The signing of the CPA in 2005 brought a relative diminution of clashes on the Northern Bahr el Ghazal–Darfur frontier, but also a hardening of the border, as state officials in southern Sudan prepared for the region's referendum on secession in 2011. Kiir's administration wanted to ensure former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's regime did not repeat its playbook from the second Sudanese civil war by using local militias to disrupt the referendum (Craze, 2013). The status of the Rizeigat and Misseriya pastoralists who annually migrated into Northern Bahr el Ghazal was now in question: their seasonal movement was potentially that of foreign citizens (Craze, 2014). Henceforth, checkpoints would stand on national borders.

Figure 3. Checkpoints creeping north in Northern Bahr el Ghazal (1983 – present)



Source: Data by authors, cartography by J. Masselink & P. Schouten (2026).

Such anticipatory nationalism was reflected in the changing placement of checkpoints. For instance, a checkpoint at Manyiel Akok was moved to Mangar Ater in the early 2000s after negotiations between Malual and Rizeigat communities. It was later moved again, to Gok Machar on the Sudanese border, within the contested 14-Mile Zone between the two countries (Craze, 2014), thereby creating a 'fact on the ground' – a *de facto* material reality that could ground a *de jure* political claim. The hardening of the border also occasioned clashes between the SAF and the SPLA, including at Kiir Adem

and Warguit in 2008. Both were villages in the border region that became the sites of checkpoints which enabled the SPLA to take advantage of revitalised trade between southern Sudan and its northern neighbour after the second civil war. Increased militarisation was thus not incompatible with increased cross-border movement – in fact, the two processes developed hand in hand. Changing national demarcations did not fundamentally alter the economic function fulfilled by checkpoints; they simply made them more expensive for Sudanese citizens. As is so often the case, formal legal shifts occasioned more intense forms of illicit accumulation.[21]

The taxation officials stationed at Wakabil, along with their "hard anuses", also moved towards the border. Wakabil sat at the edge of the *toic* – the dry-season grazing land – that separates Aweil East from Aweil town. During the second Sudanese civil war, it had been one of the largest SPLA checkpoints, serving both a security function (alerting the SPLA to the movements of the SAF battalion in Aweil) and allowing the SPLA to tax trade. In the early 2000s, the checkpoint was moved to Warawar, where an SPLA checkpoint already existed, reflecting the growing importance of what was to become a national border. In 2012, the checkpoint was moved again, to Majok Nyin Thiou, to better capture the arrival of supplies from Sudan. The illicit, extra-legal process of revenue capture that occurs at checkpoints thus moved – along with its licit justification – to take advantage of changing trade routes.

The stickiness of checkpoints can be ascribed to the enduring appeal of the revenues derived from them – an appeal that outlasts the ostensible administrative reasons for their establishment. During the first South Sudanese civil war, Northern Bahr el Ghazal was divided into two states as a consequence of Salva Kiir's 2015 decree, which turned the country's ten existing states into 28 new states – a number that grew to 32 in 2017 (Pritchard, 2021). These shifts involved the creation of new county administrations, which were not allocated money from Juba, prompting them to levy their own taxes through the establishment of revenue-raising roadblocks. When South Sudan returned to ten states in 2020, these roadblocks were reinvented as security checkpoints, though the levies and taxes remained.

Checkpoints cannot, however, be reduced to purely economic nodes. As Cormack (2016) has shown, they provide a means of expressing, and sometimes attempting to resolve, moral claims to the South Sudanese landscape. The new county borders imposed during the first South Sudanese civil war were not simply attempts by Juba to consecrate its power over the country. Rather, they also expressed – and gave rise to – feelings of community empowerment, reflecting genuine distinctions between ethnic groups that were given material form by the checkpoints that came to pockmark the country.

Contentions over these checkpoints lie at the heart of an ongoing struggle for power in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. From 2008, the state was dominated by its governor, Paul Malong Awan, who set up private checkpoints while also seizing control of national- and state-level ones.[22] The difference between these forms is largely rhetorical: whereas

[21] As Deleuze notes in his useful book on Foucault (1988: 14): 'Law is always a structure of illegalisms, which are differentiated by being formalised. We need only look at the law of commercial societies to see that laws are not contrasted with illegality, but that some are actually used to find loopholes in others. Law administers illegalisms: some it allows, makes possible or invents as the privilege of the dominating class; others it tolerates as a compensation for the dominated classes, or even uses in the service of the dominating class; others again it forbids, isolates and takes as both its object and its means of domination'.

[22] Interview with Paul Malong Awan, Nairobi, May 2026.

private checkpoints collect illicit revenue for Malong, state checkpoints collect licit revenue for the governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal. In both cases, some of the revenue goes into Malong's pockets, and some to state politicians and local military and political figures. Following Malong's rebellion against Kiir (Boswell, 2019), his successor, Kuel Aguer, attempted to integrate the checkpoint economy into the state revenue system, particularly the SPLA checkpoint at Warawar, which had been the fulcrum of Malong's revenue collection. In Malong's absence, other powerful actors in the state also attempted to seize control of checkpoints. The Abdel Bagi and Deng Akuei families, which had become rich during the second Sudanese civil war (Craze, 2024b; Kindersley and Majok, 2019, 2020; Majok, 2024), tried to capture existing roadblocks and insulate them from Kuel Aguer's efforts to exert dominion over the state.

During this period, the checkpoint economy itself became the primary arena for battles over political power and economic resources. The fragmentation of Northern Bahr el Ghazal's political elite was partly down to the rise and fall of an enterprising Malual Dinka politician, Benjamin Bol Mel (Craze, 2025f; Radio Tamazuj, 2025c). A businessman who made his money during the CPA period, Bol Mel quickly rose to become a vice-president thanks to his role in funnelling petrodollars off-book and into Kiir's pockets (Craze, 2023b). During his ascent, Bol Mel seized control of checkpoints around sites of resource production, including *murram* pits. Thanks to him, Wakabil has received no rest from the tax collector. Although the principal border checkpoint in the settlement had fallen into disuse in 2012, after this checkpoint was moved to Majok Nyin Thiou, Bol Mel revived a blockade in Wakabil itself. It served as a private taxation point after the Ajaac riverbank began to be used more intensively for the production of red bricks and export of sand. This example is further testament to the flexibility of the checkpoint system in expanding its reach to resource production sites and key nodes. As the history detailed in this section demonstrates, its logic is relative and predatory, rather than territorial: it aims to capture networks, not delimited territories.

THE STATE AS CHECKPOINT

The SPLM/A that took over the southern Sudanese regional government in 2005 was a rebel movement that had – despite its ideological commitments, first to Marxism and then to Christianity (Craze, 2025e; Roque, 2024; Tounsel, 2021) – modelled itself on the Sudanese army and used figures with customary authority to recruit men and organise the territory under its control (Pinaud, 2014, 2016). External support was provided by Ethiopia – before the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991 – and Norway. The former offered materiel; the latter, aid supplies that were diverted (Scroggins, 2002). These flows enabled a class of military leaders to seize control of the means of predation in southern Sudan. This class, largely derived from customary authority figures (Leonardi, 2013; Pinaud, 2014), set about militarising community self-defence groups (Jok and Hutchinson, 1999) among pastoralists and ethnicising conflict. The checkpoint was a pre-existing technology, honed by British colonialists and the Sudanese army. It proved well suited to the needs of the southern Sudanese military elite that fought the second Sudanese civil war. Nuer militia commanders, such as Paulino Matiep (Craze and Tubiana, 2016), were empowered by weapons from Khartoum and fought against the SPLA, enriching themselves along the way by taxing commodities in areas under their control. The opposing SPLA acted in similar fashion, using checkpoints to tax and predate.

It is this militarised 'gun class' that seized control of Juba (D'Agoôt, 2020), a city soon to be buoyed by the oil revenues flowing from the fields once secured by Matiep. It was these petrodollars – along with donor funds – that turned South Sudan, shortly after independence, into a regional economy the size of Uganda's (Thomas, 2015). Dollars arrived in Juba only to leave on the return flight to Nairobi, bound for foreign bank accounts and gated properties owned by South Sudan's *nouveau riche.* It is easy to make these flows into a moral fable about corruption, but in truth, much of the graft was simply a cost of doing business. Kiir had to ensure Khartoum could not pry away the militias it had once used – which despite being formally integrated into the SPLA in 2006 (Young, 2006) remained substantively loyal to their old commanders – while maintaining some degree of peace among a plethora of fractious generals. Payments to political and military leaders were the cost of holding the system together (Craze, 2024d).

Funds flowing to commanders gave rise to a political marketplace (De Waal, 2015) in which violence was leveraged to gain access to money and positions guaranteeing commanders control over the areas they had once policed with checkpoints. During the CPA period, there was a notable fall in the number of checkpoints: wages were paid to troops, while commanders largely shifted to other forms of capital accumulation, such as adding ghost soldiers to the military payroll, or constructing illusory barracks from donor funds (Breitung, Paes and Vondervoort, 2016; Craze, 2020). South Sudan became a gatekeeper state, in which forces within the state machinery – most notably Kiir and his coterie – controlled external flows, largely from donors and oil, and used the revenues so gained to pay off rivals. The entire state apparatus was effectively a checkpoint, perched over the country's inflows, controlling the international community's contact with southern Sudan. The consolidation of control of these revenue streams by Kiir's family and its close associates is one of the most important economic stories in the history of independent South Sudan. As of 2026, the family controls the fees from visa and import services (OHCHR, 2025); the Ugandan trucking companies that import

commodities into Juba (Craze, 2018); the flows of gold and timber illicitly leaving the country (Craze, 2024e; Swissaid, 2024); and, of course, the country's border checkpoints.

The state's attempt to capture these revenue flows intensified after the 2012 oil shutdown. State capture increasingly occurred off-book as government functions were privatised and money flowed directly into Kiir's patrimonial system (Craze, 2023b). This informalisation of the state led to commanders outside the SPLA/SSPDF's bureaucratic structures receiving direct payments. They were also given licences and encouraged to tax and predate on the populations under their control (Craze, 2024d). At this point, the number of checkpoints in the country increased markedly. This was not an 'informal economy' in the sense of an economy delinked from state oversight – rather, it was the very means by which the state survived. As Roitman notes of Chad: 'such activities are fundamentally linked to the state and are even essential to the very recomposition of the state in conditions of extreme austerity' (Roitman, 2004: 193). This franchise model of politics has parallels elsewhere in the Horn of Africa and the broader region.

In this context, newly appointed commanders and county commissioners are *expected* to set up their own checkpoints or take over those controlled by other political figures. Even after a commissioner is dismissed, they may try to maintain control over checkpoints in their county. This reliance on informal methods of resource extraction creates political and military tensions after commissioners are changed, exposing the gap between the licit and the illicit (and their co-constitutive relationship).[23]

The state effect

The creation of private indirect government did not mean that the state was absent from the checkpoints that proliferated across the country after South Sudan's independence in 2011. Rather, private forms of revenue extraction relied upon the existence of state institutions. This is the 'state effect' (Mitchell, 1999): the modes of practice and governance enabled by the ideological and legal actuality of the state, regardless of the fact that such practices may be at variance with the state's own normative and legal injunctions. This is most clearly seen at South Sudan's national checkpoints, which tend to sit at the country's international borders and are distinguished by the presence of the NRA. Other 'national' checkpoints occur at entrances to key cities such as Juba and Wau.

Nadapal, in Eastern Equatoria State, is one of South Sudan's busiest border-crossing points.[24] Here, one finds constant tension between state and national actors. The NRA has blocked the account of the state customs office in Kapoeta in order to ensure revenue is deposited directly in its account in Juba. Money from the NRA account, it should be noted, does not go to the state, but to private actors around Kiir. State and local tax personnel have found ways to work around the NRA. Vehicles' cargoes are routinely underweighted, with their 'official' weight taxed by the NRA and the remainder charged off-book by local customs officers. Other officers and agencies – including the border police, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and a variety of security services – also levy fees in Nadapal. The net result is a bewildering array of licit and illicit charges, including (among the licit charges): 5,000 Kenyan shillings for 'road use'; 10,000 South Sudanese pounds (SSP) for the registration of a large truck; SSP 5,000 for the

[23] For a full account of this phenomenon, along with extensive examples, see Craze (2024d).
[24] Information for this section on Nadapal was provided by interviews and a local field researcher, September–December 2025.

registration of a small car; SSP 2,000 for passage with a South Sudanese permit; and an SSP 1,000 penalty for not having a Yellow Fever Certificate. The licit and the illicit combine, with the very existence of a licit requirement being merely the formal precondition for an illicit payment. As one police officer explained to the authors in Juba, the more licit requirements there are, the greater the opportunity for illicit payments.[25] Traders often complain of regulations invented on the spot, aimed at inducing bribes from drivers anxious about not having the necessary paperwork.[26]

Similar tensions between national and state-level government can be found elsewhere in South Sudan. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, for instance, there is a theoretical 75:25 split between the NRA and the State Revenue Authority (SRA) at border-crossing points such as Kiir Adem. Mirroring the situation in Nadapal, this is consistently undermined by the widespread underweighting of cargo.

The exact structure of taxes at the border remains opaque, not simply to traders, but to the tax officials themselves. Many officials interviewed for this report could not state with certainty exactly how much should be paid at national border-crossing points, nor to whom it should be paid. This opacity is intentional, allowing various security and political actors to make claims on checkpoint income. The pricing model's flexibility means it is continually evolving in response to the changing military and political strength of the actors involved. In the simplest example of the consequences of such productive ambiguity, multiple traders informed us that to have more officers on duty on a given day means to pay higher taxes, as revenue must be split among all the officers in question. Such processes occur within the frame of the state, and are rhetorically justified by reference to national statehood (for comparative examples, see Martínez and Sirri, 2020).

The state effect filters down. State-level governments maintain checkpoints along routes connecting states, which are only distinguishable from national checkpoints insofar as it is the SRA rather than the NRA that acts as the official collection agency. Otherwise, these state-level checkpoints benefit from the same degree of opacity and uncertainty as their national counterparts. One trader plying the Torit–Kapoeta and Torit–Juba roads said that frequent travellers are charged less, while those less known to the security forces are charged more. Thus, the checkpoint embeds the market within a set of personal relations, in this case with the security services. Drivers end up paying what is demanded of them partly to ensure they get their goods to market, and partly because they may be in an insecure area and do not wish to negotiate with armed men who could confiscate their cargo *in toto*. The checkpoint is a place where violence is leveraged to produce something approximating popular acceptance of the government's designs.

As the level of state justification for a checkpoint shifts downward, the relationship between roadblock actors and the surrounding community tends to become more proximate. County-level checkpoints often sit on feeder roads that run into county headquarters, and serve to channel funds to county-level administrations. Some of these checkpoints stand at the turn-off from main roads to a given town, only stopping cargo destined for the local market. This is an essential part of county governance given that national and state funds rarely reach commissioners.

[25] Interview with a policeman, Juba, October 2025.
[26] Interviews with traders in Jonglei state, July 2025.

Unlike at national- and state-level checkpoints, some of the money obtained at county-level checkpoints actually finds its way to local communities. Across much of South Sudan, the county commissioner is the effective face of government, and county commissioners are far more beholden to their communities than national- or state-level elites. While some checkpoint income goes into the pockets of county and *payam* (the next level down in South Sudan's governmental structure) administrators, some is also distributed to communities in the form of personalised gifts or intermittent development projects. Such projects are seen by the community as personal initiatives launched by a given commissioner, rather than the work of an impersonal bureaucratic state.[27] The expectation that checkpoint-generated funds will be spent by individual commissioners (rather than the county-level administration) is part of the reason that politicians have accepted Kiir's often dizzying circulation of elites through administrative positions. Each politician knows they have only a limited period to obtain as much as they can in the way of funds – for themselves and their community – before they are circulated out, leaving another politician (and their community) to step up to the trough.

The decrees increasing the number of states to 28 in 2015 and then 32 in 2017 led to the creation of numerous new counties, usually through the elevation of what had been *payams* (administrative divisions below the county level). In many areas of South Sudan, this development was greeted with celebrations (Cormack, 2016; Craze, 2022c). Constituents view even state government as remote from their everyday lives, with governors and state officials spending much of their time in Juba (Craze, 2022a). In contrast, county commissioners usually maintain a presence in the places they are supposed to govern. The new counties were saddled with high expectations but no funds for their nascent administrations. Checkpoints once again offered a solution, alongside taxes at local markets. In what is now Northern Bahr el Ghazal (which was divided into Aweil and Aweil East by Kiir's decree, with part of its territory also going to Lol State), county checkpoints were created at Wanyjok and Bay Mayen. Other, pre-existing checkpoints were reassigned to the new counties, despite continuing to host national officials and a variety of security services.

These admixtures underline a point made in the introduction. Despite the claims of the South Sudanese state to a monopoly on violence, at any given checkpoint, there is a negotiation over the constituent forces present, and the share of revenue they should receive. At the county level, tensions between senior officials and security personnel frequently result in high levels of taxation, which help ease divisions between contending forces.

All of South Sudan's checkpoints are in effect private checkpoints, as all the funds derived from them are intended for one actor or another. Even checkpoint revenues heading for the NRA account are destined to end up in the hands of Juba's political elite, with a similar story applying to tax collection outsourced to private companies (OHCHR, 2025). The country's checkpoints are thus forms of what Achille Mbembe calls private indirect government (Mbembe, 2001: 66–101), producing revenue flows via the entitlements of the state (i.e. the formal right of state entities to control movement and levy taxes), which, rather than finding their way into state coffers, are directed into the pockets of individual state actors. This strengthens a shadow political and economic

[27] This is paralleled at the state level by the big-ticket development projects that each state governor leaves unfinished, for their successor to abandon them in favour of their own personal, big-ticket projects.

elite that lives in and through formal governmental structures, eroding the substantive presence of the state while parasitically feeding from it.

The first South Sudanese civil war (2013–2018)

The vast majority of checkpoints currently in operation in South Sudan emerged during the first South Sudanese civil war. For many commanders, this was a return to gatekeeping without the state. Most SPLM/A-IO commanders at the war's outset in 2013 were former members of Matiep's South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), which had fought the SPLA during the second Sudanese civil war (Craze and Tubiana, 2016; Young, 2015) and now occupied much of the same territory. The SPLM/A-IO attempted to formalise its control over these areas by creating its own administrations, controlling flows of humanitarian resources and establishing checkpoints. Unlike during the second Sudanese civil war, a regional realignment meant Khartoum did not back the opposition with materiel. The inclusion of former members of Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) in Kiir's government facilitated a compact between Juba and Khartoum, with a share in oil revenues sufficient for both sides to agree to limit their support for rebel groups in the other's territory. Discontent among the SPLM/A-IO's rank and file soon led to fractures in the movement, with Kiir's coalition successfully inducing many opposition commanders to defect. Others, meanwhile, formed their own rebel groups.

Anger at the SPLM/A-IO, together with the fragmentation of military authority, prompted an increasing number of communities to become independent armed actors and form their own checkpoints, both to defend against encroachment and to obtain their own sources of revenue. With the political compact underlying South Sudan's secession steadily disintegrating, each ethnic group (and often, each sub-group within an ethnic group) made maximalist claims to territory (Craze, 2020, 2022b). The number of checkpoints mushroomed as each community began to act like a state. In 2011, there were only 22 recognised riparian checkpoints along the White Nile between Juba and Renk (a town at the northernmost tip of Upper Nile state). There was not a significant increase in the number of checkpoints until the outbreak of the civil war in December 2013. By 2020 there were more than 40 riparian checkpoints, and as of 2025, there were over 150 checkpoints during the rainy season.

The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018 brought the first South Sudanese civil war to an end, though violence continued in new, mediated forms (Craze, 2021b). Debates conducted between belligerent parties over checkpoints became a central means of achieving (relative) peace in some areas of South Sudan. As a consequence of these discussions, the number of checkpoints on the White Nile kept growing, and the issue prompted government action.

In 2020, 2021 and early 2025, successive riverine missions were conducted by the government and the opposition in order to work out how to diminish the number of checkpoints on the river. In theory, the number of checkpoints was reduced to 82 between February 2021 and April 2024, with the SPLA-IO and the SSPDF sharing them out. That reduction was not realistic: some 60% of the checkpoints along the White Nile were managed by individual commanders or community representatives, and as a result were re-established soon after they were taken down (Radio Tamazuj, 2021). The data collected for this report in late 2025 counted 156 riparian checkpoints on the White Nile, managed by a plethora of security agents and communities, showing the aspirational nature of promises.

At least formally, riverine checkpoints were largely either state-run, with security services providing protection, and the community providing labour (for the on- and off-loading of supplies, for instance), or else run by the SPLM/A-IO, but with the same division of labour (and concomitant divisions of revenue) as government-run checkpoints. Despite the lack of centralised control over revenue, there was – prior to the November 2024 outbreak of the second South Sudanese civil war – a mutual understanding regarding the boundaries and extents of different administrative areas. For instance, stamps were required for a riverine convoy at each checkpoint, whether government or opposition-held. If a convoy was found to have evaded a checkpoint, a call would be made and the boats either told to return to the prior checkpoint or made to pay their fees at the current blockade. Although the SPLM/A-IO had been returned to government in Juba by this point, it was largely blocked from access to government resources, meaning checkpoints constituted a valuable revenue source. The same was true for Kiir's commanders, now given licences to predate and tax.

Ambulant checkpoints

While many checkpoints are sticky they are also often mobile. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the dry season brings the return of checkpoints made possible by December's firmer ground. Larger climatic events have also determined the placement of checkpoints. In Ayod County, Jonglei State, a series of floods from 2019 to 2022 forced much of the population off the White Nile and onto the Jonglei Canal's elevated banks, where displaced communities took advantage of road and canal traffic to set up checkpoints.

Politics, too, has its seasons. Checkpoints expand to capture new sites of material extraction – such as *murram* and stone – and provide opportunities for ambitious politicians. The fragmentation of political authority in South Sudan has led to political authorities fighting within checkpoints over who controls revenue streams (Craze and Markó, 2022). Our research revealed that this intra-group fighting has led to increased costs at many checkpoints, with the additional revenues gained from heightened fees used to mollify rival political cartels.

In the nineteenth century, checkpoints emerged in southern Sudan at nodes in global commodity networks, including those for ivory and slaves. Twenty-first-century checkpoints have similarly studded the routes along which certain commodities flow, with extractive operations now focused on timber and gold (the spatial organisation of oil makes checkpoints less useful for extracting value: see Craze, 2025d). Checkpoints have also emerged along South Sudan's key transportation corridors, aimed at taxing flows of basic commodities and humanitarian supplies. Such checkpoints – whether erected by communities or armed groups – always have the dual function of protecting these commodity flows (as did the slavers' *zaribas* in the nineteenth century) and taking advantage of them. Their recent proliferation can partly be explained by South Sudan's subsidiary insertion into global commodity chains, and partly by the collapse of alternative forms of income for communities and soldiers alike following the beginning of the first South Sudanese civil war. This collapse was not primarily economically determined, but the result of a conscious decision by Kiir's regime to hollow out the state and enable a more private, indirect form of governance.

As our research demonstrates (see Table 1), the number of checkpoints on South Sudan's main roads and waterways grew dramatically between the country gaining its independence in 2011 and the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018.

Table 1. Checkpoint proliferation along South Sudan's main trade corridors (2011–2025)

		Nadapal (Kenya)–Juba	Nimule (Uganda)–Juba	Juba–Wau (via Yirol)	Juba–Renk waterway
	Length of the route	338 km	163 km	619 km	N/A
2011	Number of checkpoints	11	7	27	22
	Checkpoints per 100 km	3.3	4.3	4.4	–
2020	Number of checkpoints	21	15	45	48
	Checkpoints per 100 km	6.2	9.2	7.3	–
	Increase since 2011 (%)	91%	114%	67%	118%
2025	Number of checkpoints	22	18	49	156
	Checkpoints per 100 km	6.5	11.0	7.9	–
	Increase since 2020 (%)	5%	20%	9%	225%

Sources: 2011 – National Bureau of Statistics (2011); 2020 – Schouten et al. (2021); 2025 – authors' field data collection.

On major roads linking South Sudan with Kenya (the Nadapal road) and Uganda (the Nimule road), the number of checkpoints roughly doubled between 2011 and 2020 (increasing by 91% and 114%, respectively). Between 2020 and 2025, the growth in checkpoints along these roads slowed markedly (to 5% and 20%, respectively). Too many checkpoints kill the trade on which they depend. Comparative research has shown that while prices and *modi operandi* vary greatly, in the most pronounced 'checkpoint economies' (Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Sudan) the checkpoint/100 km ratio rarely exceeds 6.0 (Schouten, 2025: 8). Both the Nadapal–Juba and the Nimule–Juba roads reached this density by 2020.

These are also the roads on which the international and humanitarian communities focus, repeatedly calling for the removal of checkpoints. The government in Juba responded, at least publicly, with concern about the proliferation of roadblocks. Since 2020, however, it is mostly the complexity of checkpoints and the prices charged at them that have increased, rather than the actual number of sites. Rather than a single agency – such as the NRA – or armed group controlling a given checkpoint, it is manned

by a bewildering array of actors, including tax collectors from county and state revenue authorities, traffic police, SSPDF military intelligence and local army divisions. A 2020 study counted seven checkpoints manned by a total of 65 people along the Nimule–Juba road between Jebel Gordon (located just after Nimule) and Nesitu town (Schouten et al., 2021). According to our interviews, while the number of checkpoints along this section of road barely rose from 2020 to 2025, the number of personnel working at them skyrocketed. As the state stopped paying salaries, so income gained from checkpoints has become a primary means of survival for increasing numbers of people.

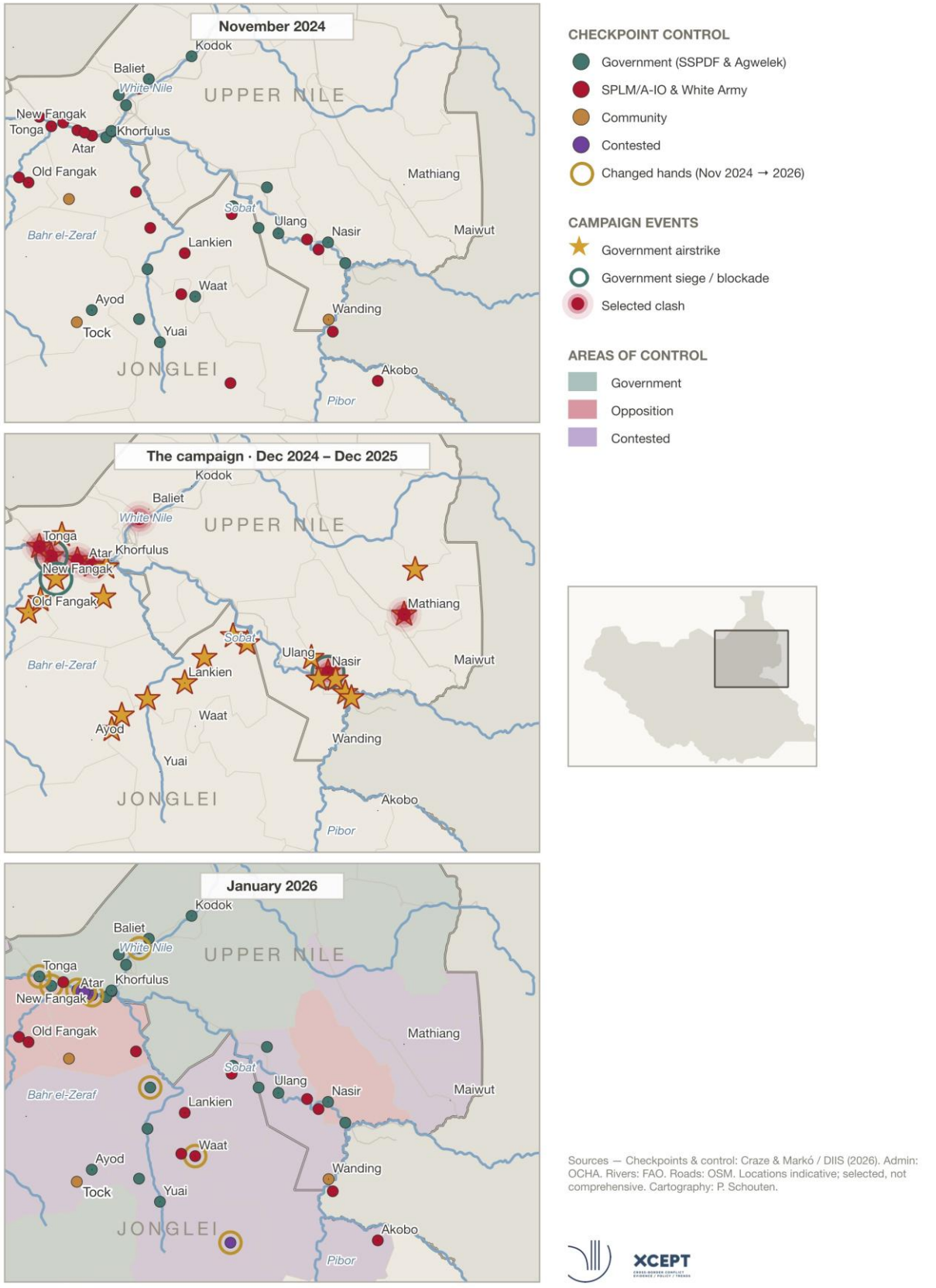
While the number of checkpoints on main roads may have reached a limit, the same cannot be said for those on secondary highways, feeder roads and footpaths. According to our interviews with traders, travellers and checkpoint personnel, significant numbers of checkpoint – mostly established and operated by rebel groups or local self-defence militias – have sprung up on previously unblockaded roads since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018.

In the Ikotos mountains of Eastern Equatoria, for instance, some villages can only be accessed via footpaths. As the state and the economy collapsed, community checkpoints started to appear along these routes. Produce (charcoal, sorghum, honey, maize, vegetables) intended for markets at nearby towns is taxed. These checkpoints are seasonal, follow patterns of insecurity and local production, and are manned by a delicate arrangement of communities and social classes.[28] In this fashion, the checkpoint economy has started to swallow the countryside, traditionally outside the scope of roadblocks and far removed from the central nodes of South Sudan's extractive economies.

Although rivers tend to be more difficult for communities to control, there has been a significant increase in riparian community checkpoints, particularly on the Zeraf and Sobat rivers (which are not navigable by the armoured barges used by the SSPDF and its allied militias), since the signing of the R-ARCSS. Table 1 highlights the exponential growth of checkpoints on the route from Juba to Renk, from 22 in 2011, to 48 in 2020, to 156 in 2025 – a more than sevenfold increase from 2011.[29] Most of the checkpoints on this route, our interviews indicated, are found on the Zeraf.

[28] Interviews in the Ikotos mountains and Torit, September 2022.
[29] Discussion with high-level politician, Juba, July 2025.

Figure 4. The war on checkpoints in Upper Nile, 2024-2026



Source: Author data, cartography by P. Schouten.

The second South Sudanese civil war (November 2024–)

Despite the formation of a unity government in 2020, Kiir's regime never allowed the SPLM/A-IO to operate checkpoints on the country's main roads. Instead, the SPLM/A-IO and other opposition groups had to set up checkpoints on feeder, county and state-level roads in areas under their jurisdiction, most visibly in the three states whose governors were supposed, under the terms of the peace agreement, to be drawn from the SPLM/A-IO: Western Equatoria, Western Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile. For instance, checkpoints on the Tambura–Wau road – often used by empty lorries leaving Wau on their way to Juba – brought in significant revenue for the opposition movement. The fees at opposition checkpoints were typically lower than on the main, government-controlled road.

When the opposition attempted to establish control of major transport corridors, conflict soon broke out. In 2022, disputes over riparian checkpoints on the Zeraf and White Nile led to confrontations between the SPLM/A-IO and allied Nuer self-defence groups, and the SSPDF and its associated militias (Craze, 2023a). When the SPLM/A-IO mobilised forces to respond to a government-backed militia's seizure of riparian checkpoints, its rhetorical gambit was to argue that the Nuer must fight for control of the checkpoints, and thus the capacity to allow humanitarian supplies into their communities. It was a war fought for access, and it was fought over checkpoints (Craze, 2025g).

The second South Sudanese civil war broke out in November 2024 in the three states with SPLM/A-IO governors, as a war to seize control of the means of predation. The conflict was announced by Kiir's regime as a campaign to remove *illegal* checkpoints.[30] In reality, it was not designed to remove checkpoints, but to arrogate ownership of these road and river blockades to government actors. The current conflict began as a war *for* checkpoints – not for territory, not to defeat a hostile population, but to seize lucrative sources of revenue collection.

The regime's justification for attacking co-signatories to the peace agreement was an invocation of national sovereignty: surely one cannot, or so the government's argument went, have non-state armed actors controlling checkpoints in South Sudan. Yet the forces deployed to assert these claims have been foreign mercenaries, such as the pilots employed by BAR Aviation, an Israeli-Ugandan company, which operates some of the attack helicopters in South Sudan, and which may have assaulted SPLM/A-IO checkpoints on the Zeraf and the White Nile.[31] Given the Kiir regime's lack of popular legitimacy and a demoralised, largely unpaid national army, foreign forces have proved more reliable partners for Juba than the South Sudanese people. The exception to this rule is the militia forces the government employs, which are in a relationship of mutual instrumentalisation with Juba. Kiir's regime uses them to fight its wars – much as Bashir utilised militias before him (Craze, 2024c) – and the militias employ the means and materiel provided by Juba to pursue their own local concerns. To exercise national sovereignty, in other words, the state has needed to fragment it, by outsourcing its monopoly on violence.

From November 2024 to April 2025, the government used airstrikes and militia assaults to push the SPLM/A-IO off its checkpoints and disrupt community mobilisations (Craze, 2025b). This was a precursor to a political war subsequently waged in Juba, which saw

[30] See for example Radio Tamazuj (2025a, 2025b).
[31] Interviews with pilots and individuals with knowledge of BAR Aviation operations, Nairobi and Kampala, December 2025. See the UN Panel of Experts report from May 2026 for details of BAR Aviation operations in South Sudan.

the arrest and detention of the SPLM/A-IO's leader, Riek Machar (Craze, 2025c). International focus has since been on the political impasse into which the country has been plunged. While understandable, it has diverted attention from the character of the war, which is being waged for control of the country's central commodity corridors. Road networks offer up chokepoints. In the west, this translates into a struggle for the routes into Wau and Tambura. As part of its military strategy, the opposition has engaged in kidnapping and ambushes on roads from Uganda, whence most of Juba's supplies come. In Upper Nile and northern Jonglei, meanwhile, the struggle has centred on riparian transport corridors, particularly into Ethiopia. The government does not aim to defeat a hostile population, but to maintain control of transport corridors: checkpoints are central to this military aim.

In 2025, having retaken Nasir and Ulang towns around the middle of the year, the government conducted intermittent ground and aerial assaults against Nuer communitarian self-defence forces in Longochuk, Nasir and Ulang counties, including at Jikmir and Burebeiy on the Ethiopian border. Despite these successes, the SSPDF remained militarily weak, and its forces were consigned to their barracks, hamstrung by low morale and a lack of wages, food and ammunition. Tensions between the SSPDF in Nasir town and the local community ran high in June 2025, after troops appropriated livestock. Conditions in southern Upper Nile were so bad that SSPDF soldiers from the Murle ethnic group deserted and returned to Greater Pibor. While the SSPDF held garrison towns such as Jikmir and Nasir, its presence in Upper Nile was that of an occupying army.

There is no possibility of the Nuer white armies being eliminated: these are community self-defence forces, derived from sectional logics (Craze, 2025g), held by Nuer communities to be the principal means by which they defend themselves.[32] Instead, government forces have limited themselves to erecting checkpoints and controlling commodity flows. This extends to issuing blanket refusals of humanitarian access to opposition-held areas. Checkpoints enable siege-like conditions.

The government's counterinsurgency ran into problems in northern Jonglei. There, the Agwelek, a government-aligned Shilluk militia, took New Fangak in mid-May 2025 and contested some of the ports along the White Nile, including Adok and Diel, using barges to dominate the riverbanks. Despite the Agwelek's riparian superiority, the group struggled to retain territory, only intermittently managing to stay in control of New Fangak and unable to break the SPLM/A-IO's hold over Tonga. At the end of June 2025, the SPLM/A-IO forces in Diel succeeded in detaining commercial barges bound for Malakal.

As in southern Upper Nile, the conflict in northern Jonglei is not a battle for territorial control, but a campaign of pacification, in which the SSPDF and the Agwelek attempt to retain control of checkpoints and ports, while ensuring that the Nuer population of northern Jonglei remains displaced, starving and fragmented, and thus unable to carry out an effective insurgency against the government. There are, as in Upper Nile, no achievable end goals for this operation. Current government strategy effectively amounts to a permanent counterinsurgency; the only conceivable victory would be the

[32] The Nuer are a segmentary society in which patrilineal units are organised by affinal sections.

total elimination of the Nuer population, a mission that would require military capacities outside the government's means and entail too many adverse political consequences.

Humanitarian dilemmas

A full discussion of the government's counterinsurgency strategy in 2024–2026 lies outside the scope of this report, and can be found elsewhere (Craze, 2025b, 2025g). What matters here is the way the checkpoint has once again become a central technology for controlling the rhythms of humanitarian access.

The first South Sudanese civil war saw aid agencies contend with blanket access denials. Although these blockades eased during the inter-war period (2018–2024), they have returned during the current civil war (2024–). During the previous civil war – as is the case now – denials of access would often occur not in Juba, where humanitarian permits are processed, but on the ground. This allowed Kiir's regime to construct a narrative in which individual commanders and generic command-and-control issues could be blamed for blocking humanitarian access. These excuses occluded the fact that such blockages were part of a broader war strategy, agreed at the highest levels of Kiir's regime. The central aim of this strategy was to cut supply lines – of both humanitarian and commercial goods – into opposition-held areas. By imposing siege-like conditions, people would be forced out of these areas, preventing potential mobilisations and pushing people (and the humanitarians drawn to them) into government-held territories, where aid could be diverted and populations taxed (Craze, 2019; Craze and Tubiana, 2016).

In August 2015, for instance, during an offensive by government-aligned militias into the south of Unity State, Kiir's regime declared the village of Dablual, in Mayendit, a safe zone. The remainder of the county was, by contrast, designated a wild zone in which civilian protection could not be guaranteed. Civilians fled to Dablual, which was ringed with checkpoints set up to process those arriving and ensure no one was armed. Government militia fighters proceeded to raze and rape their way across the rest of Mayendit, by now relatively unpopulated, seizing livestock and resources as they went (Craze and Tubiana, 2016, 99-100; 142-144). Meanwhile, Kiir's regime encouraged humanitarian agencies to distribute supplies in Dablual. Many acquiesced – the village was, after all, where the hungry were to be found, and considerations of the politics of the situation were deemed outside the humanitarian ken (Craze, 2023c). Having watched the World Food Programme (WFP) air-drop some 270 tonnes of food aid into Dablual, the government's militias leapt into action, stealing all the food, along with what remained of the local population's livestock. With the civilians' role as a lure now exhausted, the militias went on to slaughter many of those present (Craze and Tubiana 2016).

The goal of the government's counterinsurgency effort is to remove the conditions under which life is maintainable for opposition-supporting populations, while enacting a wealth transfer from those populations to government militias (Craze and Tubiana 2016). The humanitarian resources that can be wrung from such populations are a boon to government forces, which effectively attempt to extract as much capital as possible from each individual, before abandoning them, ideally at a level below which it is possible to sustain life.

Checkpoints are the means by which this strategy is articulated, creating the absolute blocks on movement that allow siege-like conditions to be established. As the example

of Dablual shows, such blockades are not simply ways to halt movement, but act as on/off switches that allow people and things to be channelled to the rhythm of the conflict. The cadences of humanitarian access are poorly understood by aid workers, who tend to treat each permission as a triumph, regardless of context and despite the political implications of such access (Craze, 2018; Craze and Falzetta, 2026).

The ongoing South Sudanese civil war has the same tempo. Checkpoints are being used to create blockages, which result in siege-like conditions in northern Jonglei and southeast Upper Nile, and are employed to try to force humanitarian aid into embattled government-held garrison towns, which are – once again – used as lures to bring populations under government control and undermine opposition support (Craze and Falzetta, 2026). Often, these lures are set by recently appointed government commissioners, chosen from one of the main Nuer sections within a given group in a bid to split the segmentary system and turn the Nuer against each other (Craze, 2025g). Checkpoints are the contact zones in which armed actors enter into relations of negotiation with humanitarians over passage and taxation. They are where the material actuality of the current war is articulated.

The outright theft of humanitarian resources is part of a negotiatory continuum rather than its interruption. During the current conflict, government militias, with the support of their communities, have looted hundreds of tonnes of food aid from WFP along the White Nile and Zeraf river corridors after the agency's barges were stopped at checkpoints (Craze and Falzetta, 2026). In August 2025, the Agwelek militia looted supplies intended for opposition-held areas in northern Jonglei. WFP responded by suspending movements along the river and sought to renegotiate access. At the same time, it put pressure on Juba, which eventually returned an equivalent amount of food to that which had been looted – though this food was distributed in Juba, and Kiir's regime did not assist WFP in getting the aid into opposition-held areas.[33]

In February 2026, the Ngok Lual Yak subsection of the Padang Dinka, aggrieved that they were not receiving food aid, looted barges detained at checkpoints in their home county of Baliet. The community was food insecure, albeit not as hungry as the opposition-held areas in Nasir County that were the intended destination of the looted supplies. The seizure of the food was rhetorically proclaimed to be a redistributive gesture. Under conditions of scarcity, humanitarian aid is a political resource, and its diversion part of a game played by both the humanitarians and South Sudanese communities over where and how assistance should be delivered.

The humanitarian response to checkpoint diversions – one mirrored by donor governments – is to insist on absolute freedom of movement for humanitarian supplies, arguing they should be exempt not just from diversion but from taxation.[34] This insistence ultimately creates two forms of commodity circulation: humanitarian resources, which are exempt from taxation, and market goods, which, implicitly, can be taxed as the government sees fit. This approach works at cross-purposes with a more holistic understanding of food insecurity. When humanitarian goods are allowed to go freely, the prices at checkpoints for commercial goods often increase. Despite supposed

[33] This paragraph, and the next paragraph, are based on interviews with South Sudanese government officials, humanitarian officials, and residents of the areas in question, from July 2025 to March 2026.
[34] Interviews with humanitarians in Juba and by telephone, July 2025-March 2026.

humanitarian dependence in South Sudan, it is market goods – along with the proceeds from subsistence agriculture – that provide most of what communities need to survive.

Furthermore, humanitarian goods are not the non-fungible items that agencies hold them to be. After the Baliet looting, WFP food aid appeared for sale in the markets of Malakal, Upper Nile's capital, alongside previously distributed food aid that was being resold. Regardless of the aid agencies' technocratic formulas, upon distribution, aid is immediately redistributed according to communities' political and economic needs. In Ayod County, for instance, a powerful local prophet (spiritual leader) takes a 10% tax on all distributions, which he then allocates among his followers. All humanitarian resources are taxed in such a way: from the salaries of aid workers to the internet connections and cars they bring with them. Forcing humanitarian agencies into their respective territories has become an important part of the war effort for both belligerent parties (Craze and Falzetta, 2026).

The humanitarian sector's wilful blindness to how its decisions and resources form part of a war economy is partly due to an instrumental application of humanitarian principles (Craze, 2023c). Although in theory these principles provide a means for humanitarians to remain apolitical, in reality they allow aid agencies to avoid any acceptance of their own politicisation. Most fundamentally, this means refusing to acknowledge that humanitarianism has become a functional part of South Sudan's war economy. Until 2025, other than government salaries, the principal means by which hard currency entered communities in South Sudan was via wages for humanitarian sector work. These wages served to support extended family networks and, far more than the commodities handed out by aid agencies, were the humanitarian sector's real contribution to life in South Sudan.[35]

While donor funding for humanitarian activities has been falling for some time (Craze, 2025a), the cancellation of USAID in 2025, coming on the heels of massive cuts by European donors, decimated South Sudan's humanitarian industry. The rounds of redundancies that followed left the checkpoints as the only means of marketisation across much of the country. If, in South Sudan today, there is almost no way of surviving without being connected to markets, then the only way to get access to them is at checkpoints.

Both humanitarianism and checkpoints are profoundly paradoxical examples of marketisation. Humanitarian agencies understand themselves to be distributors of aid to the needy, not agents of capitalism, despite being one of the principal forms of marketisation in South Sudan. But even if one considers humanitarian agencies simply as 'capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will' (Marx, 2011), which create markets for logistics contractors, the system that humanitarian agencies produce is stratified. Job opportunities are differentiated by race and nationality, with refugees – relegated to the bottom of the ladder – given only 'incentives' to work. South Sudanese staff can at least hope for temporary employment, while international employees sit atop the scale, often with well-paid permanent positions.

Humanitarianism is at once a means of marketisation and a deeply racialised labour market stratified by nationality. While it may introduce currency into communities, it does not produce market dynamics that lead to growth, but rather creates forms of

[35] This claim is based on interviews with communities receiving humanitarian assistance in South Sudan from 2011 to 2025 in Warrap, Upper Nile, Unity, Jonglei, Western Bahr el Ghazal and Western Equatoria states.

dependence by reorientating local economies around the control and redistribution of external resources. It thus forms a part of South Sudan's gatekeeper state, rather than constituting an exception to it. Those who loot humanitarian resources are responding rationally to the world the aid agencies have made, in which power comes from elsewhere, and depends on the resources and legitimacy conferred by others.

The humanitarian sector in effect functions as a particular form of what Jean-François Bayart calls 'extraversion' (Bayart, 1993; Bayart and Ellis, 2000). The ways in which local elites manipulate humanitarian aid – including trying to determine the allocation of waged positions and the distribution and taxation of salaries – is analogous to how elites in Juba manipulate flows of oil and gold revenue. Extraversion is the process by which elites, put in an unequal, subsidiary place within the global economy, subvert the terms of their domination to their own ends. While humanitarianism creates markets, it does so only through South Sudanese people struggling against the fundamentally anti-egalitarian terms of the industry, redistributing aid supplies and humanitarian salaries according to their own priorities rather than those of the sector itself, which is prey to elite manipulation (both in Juba and donor capitals).

The humanitarian sector, far from running contrary to the checkpoint economy, is complementary to it. For instance, the sector drives the market for logistics subcontracting in Juba, with many a trucking company having grown rich on humanitarian contracts. On the road or river, however, WFP insists the trucks and barges it employs are humanitarian, not private, and so should not be taxed. From 2018 to the beginning of the second South Sudanese civil war in 2024, WFP was largely successful in this endeavour, though some taxation was simply hidden in the rates charged by the commercial shipping and road agents used by humanitarian agencies. Furthermore, even if the humanitarian agencies are able to remove humanitarian goods from taxation, this creates a special form of commodity that not only puts pressure on other commodity flows through checkpoints, but also sustains a form of humanitarian exceptionalism in which the aid sector refuses to see the way its own flows fundamentally play a role in shaping South Sudan's political economy.

In the wake of the recent humanitarian funding cuts, many UN agencies are moving to cheaper direct cash transfers. For such transfers to be effective, there must be food available at markets for people to purchase. At present, however, although humanitarians are exempt from taxation at the riparian checkpoints of Upper Nile and Jonglei, commercial movements have almost entirely ceased due to conflict and the multiple checkpoint taxation regimes at play. In this way, aid agency demands to be made exempt from the very forms of capitalism they enable are proving destructive for humanitarianism itself.[36]

The war within the checkpoints

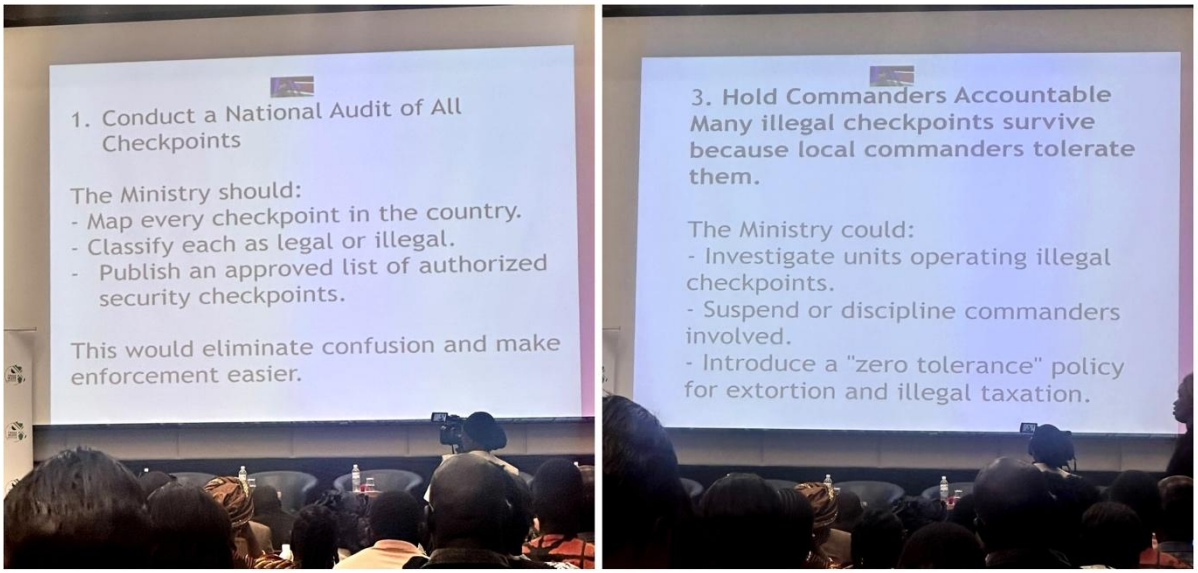
The current civil war has pitted the SPLM/A-IO and Kiir's regime against each other in a conflict *over* checkpoints, and it is a conflict often waged *through* checkpoints, which create siege-like conditions for opposing communities. Alongside this, however, there are wars taking place *within* each checkpoint, with various state entities fighting over their share of the proceeds. Such struggles are analogous to what is happening in South Sudan more generally, as Kiir privatises state functions. Military and political actors invested with legitimacy by the state use the masquerade of state power to accrue

[36] For similar cases found elsewhere, see Ripamonti et al. (2024).

private resources (Craze, 2023b). In South Sudan, it is thus not only that the state now needs non-state actors such as militias to achieve its ends (and thus requires the fragmentation of sovereignty to enable the appearance of its preservation), but that state sovereignty was, from the beginning, a façade.

The struggle between state entities for checkpoint proceeds is overlaid by a struggle between different social forms for legitimacy (and also a share of the spoils). Checkpoints are almost always admixtures of political entities (from county commissioners to rebel officials), military forces (from the SSPDF to white army fighters) and communities. As such, they are the loci of struggles *within* the state, as well as *with* the state. Having thus far focused on the checkpoint as a tool of predation and social control, the report now turns to the other side of the ledger: how checkpoints sustain the South Sudanese people and help them resist encroachment by both the state and state capitalism.

Figure 5. Government's official view of checkpoints



Source: Government's official point of view about checkpoints for the international audience delivered by the Ministry of Defence during the Second South Sudan National Trade Forum held between 19-20 June at the Radisson Blu Hotel under the theme 'From Potential to Prosperity: Harnessing South Sudan's Competitiveness for Regional Trade Integration'.

Economic collapse in South Sudan has been politically driven. As set out previously, the Kiir regime's decision to stop paying the security services' wages was driven by an attempt to fragment the SSPDF and personalise Kiir's control over the country's military forces. This has created huge numbers of young men unable to find a productive place in South Sudan's economy (Kindersley, 2022, 2025). These young men join those already unable to get work due to the collapse of customary agricultural production, urbanisation, and the displacements and dislocations of conflict. This surplus labour force is either forced abroad in search of employment (an opportunity radically curtailed since the outbreak of war in Sudan) (see Kindersley and Majok, 2020; Majok, 2024) or pressed into service in a regime-affiliated militia or one of the communitarian defence forces contesting Kiir's government. The formal opposition between these two sides overlooks their substantive unity: Kiir's militias often desert or abandon the government, while opposition forces can often be bribed or otherwise induced to join the regime. Moreover, whichever side of the divide one might (temporarily) find oneself on, the means of reproduction remain the same: the checkpoint. It is here that, in the absence

of government wages, young men find ways to survive. Checkpoints, by mimicking state functions, provide a source of resources in the space left by the state. Goods and money intended for elites are diverted by young armed men, who also provide supplies to the communities whence they hail.

The South Sudanese checkpoint has three key functions. Firstly, there is a *security function*, as checkpoints are fundamental to the war strategies of both the opposition and Kiir's regime. Secondly, enabled by military control of a given checkpoint, there is an *economic function*: resources go to elites accumulating capital, as well as to young men and their communities trying to survive abandonment by the elite. Thirdly, checkpoints have a *communitarian function*, insofar as they work as a form of welfare state, redistributing wealth according to the priorities of communities, which must make a bid for resources alongside military and political actors.

THE COMMUNITY AT THE CHECKPOINT

A combination of war and flooding has driven population displacement in South Sudan since 2013. As of May 2026, some 2.3 million have fled the country as refugees and around 2 million are displaced internally. These numbers only capture those recently displaced – many of our informants had been displaced multiple times since 2013.[37] South Sudan's habitation patterns have shifted accordingly. The country's wars have contributed to its quickening urbanisation (Thomas, 2019), with people fleeing insecure and flooded rural areas (greatly reducing South Sudan's capacity for agricultural production) for towns and urban internally displaced people (IDP) camps (Kang, 2019). These urban locations host functioning markets, where there is at least the possibility of acquiring some cash.

Checkpoints spring up around towns for both security and economic reasons. Just as often, however, towns themselves emerge at checkpoints. In Ayod County, repeated 'once-in-a-century' floods from 2020 onwards, coupled with the government's counterinsurgency, pushed the Gawaar Nuer away from areas around the White Nile where they would customarily graze their cattle. This interrupted patterns of subsistence agriculture and livestock management. Many of the displaced went to places such as Tock, which in 2022 was no more than a small settlement abutting the Jonglei Canal. While it possessed no schools or other signs of the state, it was in possession of a checkpoint, as it lay along both the canal and the road from Bor, the capital of Jonglei State. Income from the checkpoint brought hard currency into an area denuded of it by government blockades, enabling the creation of a market. Restaurants and shops emerged to take advantage of these inflows of currency, with humanitarian aid also sold at Tock's market.[38]

Evidence from Tock indicates that the World Bank (2026) has it precisely backwards. In its recent publications, checkpoints are portrayed as a blight on South Sudan: they drive up transport costs, thereby reducing production and exchange and impinging on market-generating activity. This in turn prevents investment in South Sudan, disrupts supply chains and impacts rural production (World Bank, 2026: 7, 38). From such a perspective, checkpoints are little more than an anti-market force.

What the World Bank's normative analysis effaces is that under conditions of economic scarcity, and following the collapse of both government and humanitarian salaries, it is checkpoints that have become the principal means of introducing hard currency into communities otherwise abandoned by the state and the form of capitalism it propagates. Little wonder, then, that communities cling to checkpoints as a means of survival, or that checkpoints have been central to South Sudan's rapidly accelerating urbanisation.

The formation of community checkpoints

'Everything here started with the rope', Ezekiel, an SPLA-IO national security officer, told us, pointing towards the main road between Ayod and Bor.[39] We were in Tock, sitting in a small tea shop – one of many surrounding the checkpoint – with several armed men. A sturdy hemp rope lay across the road, between two poles, offering a nominal suggestion of the checkpoint as a blockade. We spent a week in Tock, trying to understand the

[37] See the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix: South Sudan: https://dtm.iom.int/south-sudan.
[38] Interviews and research observations, Tock, July 2025.
[39] Interview with SPLA-IO national security officer, July 2025.

social life of community checkpoints, and never once was the rope put up. Despite the cord acting as no more than a symbolic stoppage, its consequences, and the community it creates, are very real. In 2022, there was very little in Tock. By 2025, the town contained several thousand head of cattle, a number of large *luaks* (byres), roadside shops, restaurants and tea shops, a solar-powered phone-charging station and a large Pentecostal church. Thousands of people lived in its vicinity.

Figure 6. Fish donated by community members for the youth militia operating Tock checkpoint

Source: Photo taken by the authors, July 2025.

Tock is located at an intersection where the highway from Bor turns away from the canal and towards Ayod town, which aside from being the county's administrative headquarters is the only place in the county – other than a small barracks – under government control. Ayod town, with its airstrip and market, also acts as the base for humanitarian agencies. As we were finishing our early morning tea, six local women walked past us, heading to town, carrying large buckets of fish on their heads (one of the benefits of the recent flooding has been the growth of fish stocks). The fish had been caught the day before, and needed to reach the town's market before the midday heat arrived. One young man sitting with us, a member of the SPLA-I-GU (a Gawaar Nuer militia run by a local spiritual leader called Makuach Tut), asked the women if they had paid taxes on the fish.[40] They shouted back that they would pay on their return, after they had sold them.

A whole fish sells for SSP 1,500 (0.25 USD) in Tock and for SSP 3,000 in the county headquarters.[41] Each fish is taxed in Tock at SSP 1,000. Despite these fees, the fish provide local families with both an affordable source of protein and a means of making a

[40] The government army is colloquially known as the SPLA-IG, or 'in government', while Riek Machar's force is known as the SPLA-IO, or 'in opposition'. Makuach Tut's force has taken the name of Gu, one of the spirits possessing Tut. Gu is the spirit of the bees, and thus the SPLA-IGU is the army with a buzzing component.
[41] These prices were correct as of July 2025.

living. In addition, they provide an income for those manning the checkpoints, which is then spent in Tock's market, generating further economic activity. Each woman bound for Ayod carries 10–20 fish, approximately the daily catch of a very experienced local fisherman. (Some of the fish that are caught are donated and used to feed the armed men at the checkpoint, see Figure 6). Checkpoints thus constitute an interface between cash- and commodity-based systems. Without trust between the local tax collectors and the fish sellers, the entire system would collapse. Trust is secured by the relatively low level of taxation, as well as the armed men's protection of the fishing sites from raiders and neighbouring communities. Women also carry messages, news and gossip between the government-controlled town and the rebel-held countryside. In this way, the checkpoint connects the town to the rest of the world.

The notion that everything started with a rope at Tock is not shared by the entire community. Kueth, an elder, offered an alternative history:

> Nobody lived here. The area belonged to the Bhang community [section] of Pajiek [payam], but we came from all sections of Gawaar [Nuer] when the floods reached us year after year. Some even came from Fangak after the fighting [in 2025]. The canal is the only elevated point, and everything else around us remains flooded. The water is too high and does not recede.[42]

Satellite imagery shows that the full length of the canal bank in Ayod and Pigi counties, spanning roughly 140 kilometres, only began to be populated in 2022 (see Figure 7). Towns that already existed, such as Pagun and Mogok, also became ambulant in response to the flooding, moving closer to the canal's elevated banks.

Figure 7. Tock checkpoint in April 2021 (left) and November 2024 (right)

Source: Google, 2021-2024 CNES / Airbus, Maxar Technologies. On the left we see that in 2021 the turn in the road is not populated, while by 2024 it is dotted with homesteads, cattle byres and shops. Green rectangles depict newly constructed, tin-roofed structures (administrative buildings, shops, NGO compounds), while red circles show newly constructed homesteads and cattle byres.

[42] Interview with Kueth, Tock, July 2025.

The two narratives are not mutually exclusive. As people fled the floods, so checkpoints emerged along rivers and pathways, taxing local produce and regulating movement. This is most evident on the Zeraf river, where the number of riparian community checkpoints mushroomed.

The military origins of the Tock checkpoint can be found in the R-ARCSS. After the agreement was signed, SPLM/A-IO commanders demanded checkpoints to access revenue. In Ayod, the county commissioner, who represented Kiir's regime, engaged in lengthy negotiations with the SPLM/A-IO over the locations of these new checkpoints. The opposition was granted the right to operate some blockades on the Zeraf and Nile rivers, as well as 'to open new checkpoints on the road, corresponding to the river checkpoints'.[43]

Tock became one of these new sites, although it cannot simply be reduced to an opposition checkpoint. Climate change-induced flooding brought with it not only displacement, but new forms of spiritual authority. Makuach Tut, a local Nuer prophet, was possessed by a dozen spirits in 2019.[44] He subsequently established himself as an important political actor in northern Jonglei, following two successful raids in 2020 and 2022 (Craze, 2025g). As his power grew, the prophet demanded control over some of the checkpoints in his home *payam* of Pajiek. In response, a weakened SPLM/A-IO granted him a checkpoint at Wicdiar, one of the most lucrative on the Zeraf river.

A simple transfer of power to Makuach Tut was, however, deemed overly humiliating by the county commissioner. After months of intense negotiations, the parties involved resolved to stage a public performance of sovereignty without a sovereign. The SPLM/A-IO forces lowered their flags, put away their stamps and abandoned the checkpoint, which was then to be taken over by the county commissioner's tax collectors. Government representatives raised the county flag – a jumping cheetah on a white field – over the checkpoint for a single day, before ceding the checkpoint to Makuach Tut's tax collectors. Shortly after this transfer of control over the riverine checkpoint on the Zeraf, the 'corresponding' checkpoints on the main road followed suit. Tock, the last checkpoint on the road before Ayod, changed hands as well.

Community checkpoints as spaces of negotiation and resistance

Though the Tock checkpoint is 'owned' by the prophet, a plethora of actors collect revenue in both competition and collaboration with each other. Income generated at the roadblock is collected in a large iron crate and redistributed among these actors following lengthy evening meetings. It is not simply a question of dividing the spoils, however, but of articulating which commodities are proper to whom, and therefore which areas of Tock's economy 'belong' to which actor. Members of Makuach Tut's militia tax local produce, including fish and cereals, destined for the market in Ayod town. Subsections of the Bhang section of the Gawaar Nuer – to which the prophet belongs – alternate revenue collection among themselves, thereby guaranteeing an income for

[43] Interview with Ayod County executive administrators, July 2025.

[44] Makuach Tut is the latest among a series of powerful Nuer prophets, who first emerged in the 19th century. Prophets usually serve both as moral and political leaders of Nuer communities in turbulent times. A prophet is possessed by on – or in the case of Makuach, a dozen – spirits. The spirits, when they are not actively possessing someone, wander in the air, rivers, or beneath the earth, between divine and human worlds. The spirits guide the action of the prophet. Prophets in the past led rebellions and resisted state encroachment, like colonial road (and checkpoint) construction. Dak Kueth, a Lou Nuer prophet, resisted disarmament exercises following the signing of the CPA in 2005 (Young, 2016). Evans-Pritchard was the first anthropologist to describe and analyse Nuer prophets (Evans-Pritchard, 1956), and Dougles Johnson wrote the definite historical account of Nuer prophets (Johnson, 1994). For the role of spirituality and prophecy in peace processes, see Pendle (2023), while specifically on Makuach Tut's role in contemporary South Sudan, see Craze (2025g).

each subsection. SPLM/A-IO administrative officials, also present at the checkpoint, tax inter-state traders and humanitarian convoys. They are backed by soldiers and national security officials, further militarising the locality. Some items are taxed by everyone, such as cows taken to the small livestock market in Ayod. The checkpoint in Tock has become an important space of negotiation.

The checkpoint can also be seen as a space of resistance, given that goods are taxed by non-state actors arrogating revenue that will be used to contest the state during the current civil war. The story is, however, rather more complicated. Even if the SPLM/A-IO and Kiir's regime are now on a war footing, the fact remains that the South Sudanese government agreed to the present dispensation of checkpoints. Kiir's distribution of licences cuts across rebel/non-rebel lines, and is also subject to local pressures: government officials, such as the county commissioner, must come up with a formula that prevents the return of outright conflict. Given that the state is effectively a checkpoint, it should come as little surprise that each checkpoint functions like a miniature state, providing a space of negotiation among and with state actors, as well as between different South Sudanese social forms.

'Community checkpoints' are ideal types. In reality, all checkpoints are admixtures of various forms, with community checkpoints often incorporating military and political actors. While there are no purely communitarian checkpoints in South Sudan, the fracturing of military authority over the past decade has allowed some communities to become stronger participants in the checkpoint economy. Community checkpoints resist the encroachment of both state and non-state security actors. Even where government-affiliated traders are blocked from accessing putatively opposition-loyalist areas, there is not necessarily any homology between the political opposition and communities on the ground. For instance, the Cieng Kuek of the Jikany Nuer, who control the Wanding checkpoint (Nasir County, Upper Nile state), refuse to divert income to the SPLM/A-IO, despite their nominal loyalty to the opposition. Nuer subsections in northern Jonglei rotate control of checkpoints on a weekly basis, thereby ensuring, in a roughly democratic manner, that each community has the chance to obtain resources.[45] These developments appear relatively new if one compares the current situation to that of 2011. Opening the historical aperture a little further, however, reveals that these variations in checkpoint control are historically recurrent. During the British colonial period, it was communities – or at least, their chiefs – that ran checkpoints. This changed with the establishment of the SPLM/A. With the movement's disintegration, the communities militarised by southern Sudan's wars have once again taken control of the roadblocks.

Communitarian checkpoints shape the market. They particularise trade, ensuring that commerce does not remain neutral. Traders pay according to what they are carrying, but even more importantly, relative to the final destination of the goods and the identity of the trader. If traders are heading to rebel-held territories and are from the local community, their tax rates are significantly lower than those levied on goods carried by outsiders to government-controlled Ayod town. Trade is constantly politicised.

Low prices in Tock have turned it into a special economic zone, creating a pull factor for people in government-controlled areas who wish to purchase cheaper items. Wait times for traders passing through the checkpoint are graded, with the process taking longer if

[45] This and the prior sentence Is based on interviews with opposition officials and traders in Jonglei and Juba, July 2025.

one is unknown to the community. These delays bring yet more cash into the local economy courtesy of the waiting traders drinking tea and eating meals. Far from being a byproduct of inefficiency, the aleatory aspect of pricing at checkpoints is a function of these social relations. Here, the community checkpoint can be seen as a form of personalisation, and its very inefficiency providing a means of resisting encroachment by the state and reasserting communitarian ownership. Nevertheless, it reproduces many of the extractive forms characteristic of government in South Sudan.

Community checkpoints further militarise societies, as each location – Tock included – requires armed enforcers for its symbolic cord. Even so, considerable horizontal solidarity can be found at Tock. The bank of the canal hosts tens of thousands of displaced people who, as well as finding a new home, now have access to goods whose availability is due to the checkpoint. Another form of solidarity visible in Tock involves the members of the SPLA-IGU militia, who parade down the main road as part of their military training. Every morning, they are joined by a young man with learning disabilities wielding a gun lacking both ammunition and trigger. This ceremonial gun was presented to him by militia members after he was sent to the checkpoint by his family, who were unable to feed him or cater for his needs. At the end of each day, he receives a small salary from the checkpoint operators, sufficient for him to live a dignified life.[46] Despite there being no economic rationale for this act of solidarity, one can find instances of such collective feeling at almost every community checkpoint.

Checkpoints are thus creative crucibles of political life in which putatively neutral flows of commodities are re-embedded within forms of communal control, even if this comes at the cost of the commodities needed to sustain those very communities. South Sudan's community checkpoints expose the fact that commodity flows via the private and donor-driven humanitarian sectors have always been partial and determined by elites – whether in Juba or Washington, D.C. – rather than communities. At both communitarian and elite-run checkpoints, the market is personalised, albeit to different ends.

The community checkpoint is a means of resisting the state, but this resistance is achieved only by echoing the state's own logic of predation and setting up checkpoints to extract value from flows of people and things. Each community ends up acting like the state, in an effort to wrest control away from the state. In Greater Upper Nile (Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states), the number of riverine checkpoints managed by communities has mushroomed since the outbreak of the current civil war in 2024. In an echo of the state, each of these communitarian checkpoints stamps the manifests of passing barges. These stamps not only prove to other checkpoints that tax has been paid, but also invoke the ghostly authority of the absent state, and put the all-too-human presence of the community in its place.

[46] Personal observations by the authors, and interviews with opposition fighters, Tock, July 2025.

CONCLUSION

The forms of marketisation one sees at South Sudan's checkpoints are not pathways to a market economy as understood by economists – rather, they offer a means of survival. In South Sudan today, there is marketisation without a market economy. The country's political economy is not based on struggles over production, but on contentions over the control of extraction and circulation. Checkpoints allow communities to channel currency to themselves amid economic collapse. If we regard the checkpoint as the principal economic form taken by militia rule, then the entirety of contemporary South Sudan increasingly resembles a patchwork of militias – a claim that can be made for the government as much as for communities (Craze, 2024c).

This report has argued that checkpoints are neither an incidental pathology of South Sudan's political economy, nor a temporary aberration that can be removed through technical reform. Instead, they are a central means by which power is exercised, resources distributed and political claims articulated. In a context defined by the withdrawal of the state as provider of wages and services, the collapse of humanitarian marketisation, and the erosion of productive economic activity, the checkpoint has emerged as the primary site at which state presence is felt, negotiated and resisted.

Checkpoints persist because they perform multiple, overlapping functions. They are simultaneously a means of elite accumulation in a post-oil political economy, a survival strategy for unpaid soldiers and a mechanism through which communities can access currency in an otherwise cash-starved environment. They are also instruments of extraction and sites of market creation, facilitating the circulation of money even as they impede the circulation of goods. In addition, they are tools of war, used to besiege populations and starve opposition-held areas, as well as technologies of resistance through which communities contest state predation by reasserting control over flows of people and commodities. These various functions are not accidental or contradictory – they are constitutive of the checkpoint form itself.

Checkpoints cannot meaningfully be divided into licit and illicit, or state and non-state. National, state, county, military, private and community checkpoints overlap, and are often operated by shifting coalitions of security personnel, administrators, politicians and local actors. Revenue flows are opaque by design, enabling multiple claims on checkpoint income and insulating elites from accountability.

Contemporary conflict in South Sudan is fought over circulation rather than territory. These struggles occur at the checkpoint. Control of roads, rivers and border crossings is more consequential than control over territory. In this context, checkpoints function as the infrastructure of war, enabling resource extraction, the financing of armed groups and the selective starvation or displacement of civilian populations. They also shape settlement and urbanisation patterns, as communities cluster around sites where cash enters local economies.

The persistence of checkpoints thus reveals a deeper reality: chokepoints play a greater role in the governance of South Sudan than institutions. Authorities do not provide services; they control movement, their legitimacy asserted through the ability to tax circulation rather than through the consent of the South Sudanese people. Communities, armed groups and political elites all participate in this system, even as they contest it. In doing so, they reproduce the very logics of predation some of these

forces seek to resist. Each checkpoint, whether run by the state or a community, rests on the same basic principle: power lies in the capacity to insert oneself between people and the resources on which they depend.

This report does not argue for the desirability of checkpoints. It simply calls on the international community to recognise their durability and the structural reasons for their continued existence. As long as South Sudan's economy is organised around the capture of rents from scarce flows of commodities, checkpoints will remain central to political life. Arguments over the nature and extent of checkpoints, and how the revenue they generate should be divided, are ultimately conversations about the legitimacy of South Sudan's political economy. As such, they have far more rigour and reality than many of the discussions currently taking place among humanitarians and donors in Juba.

Implications for donors and humanitarian actors

Many humanitarian practitioners and representatives of the international community continue to demand the removal of checkpoints, applauding commitments made by the South Sudanese government to do so.[47] Government announcements about checkpoint elimination are, however, best understood as tactical manoeuvring amid an ongoing struggle over who controls the means of predation. In fact, the removal of checkpoints is often a prelude to their reappearance in the hands of government-affiliated actors.

More generally, checkpoints pose dilemmas that cannot be resolved through appeals to humanitarian exceptionalism. This is because humanitarian resources are not external to South Sudan's political economy but embedded within it, controlled and modulated at checkpoints. All too often, humanitarianism exacerbates the dynamics it seeks to mitigate. For instance, humanitarian demands for checkpoint tax exemptions seek to create a special class of untaxed commodities, thereby distorting commercial trade and raising the prices of other goods (a particular problem for humanitarians increasingly reliant on cash assistance).

In some parts of South Sudan, conflicts are being fought *for* and *over* humanitarian access. Denials of humanitarian access are a means of waging war, creating siege conditions that cause famine and population displacement from rebel-held areas. Conversely, the government's granting of humanitarian access to areas under its control enables aid to be diverted, while pushing the immiserated into towns controlled by Kiir's regime. Given all this, to treat checkpoints as anomalies that can be negotiated away is to misunderstand their centrality to the systems within which humanitarians operate.

[47] See for example Radio Tamazuj, 2018; 2025b; Voice of America, 2022; U.S. Embassy in South Sudan, 2023.

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