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Checkpoints and the political economy of trans-Saharan trade around Kufrah

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GOVERNING ROUTES ACROSS THE CONTESTED SAHARA

Checkpoints and the political economy of trans-Saharan trade around Kufrah

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Abubaker Lndi

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GOVERNING ROUTES ACROSS THE CONTESTED SAHARA

Abubaker Lndi

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract **2**

Introduction **3**

Methodology and structure 4

Kinetocratic geographies: a conceptual and historical frame **5**

Kinetocracy, moral economies and desert political form 5

Kufrah as trans-Saharan node 6

Pre-Sanusiyya contestation: Tazirbu and the Karamanli expeditions 7

The Sanusiyya system: zawiyas, caravans and tax-for-passage 8

Colonial conquest and the fall of the *zawiya* network 10

The Gaddafi era: resources, citizenship and Toubou marginalisation 10

2011 and its aftermath: Toubou ascendancy and the checkpoint system 11

Checkpoint-based order **14**

The rise of Subul al-Salam 14

Trade governance and the mobile patrol compensation mechanism 17

The moral economy of the checkpoint 19

Checkpoint-based local development 19

The Chadian business era 20

Between refuge and rearguard support: Kufrah's role in Sudan's civil war **25**

Kufrah and the al-Bashir regime 25

Kufrah as logistical hub: the fuel-smuggling scheme 26

Kinetocracy in action 27

Conclusion **29**

References **31**

ABSTRACT

The city of Kufrah, in Libya's southernmost reaches, is the country's foremost trans-Saharan chokepoint: widely cast as a hub of human smuggling and organised crime and, since 2023, a pivotal node in Sudan's civil war. This paper looks past that reputation to ask how political authority is actually exercised along the routes that converge on the city. Drawing on two phases of fieldwork and on the region's nineteenth-century history, it argues that authority here rests not on the control of territory or productive assets but on the governance of movement itself — what has been termed a 'kinetocracy': rule through the governance of movement. In local usage, a consignment becomes 'smuggling' (*tahrib*) only when it evades the armed group that holds sway, Subul al-Salam (SAS); once SAS has been paid, the same truck and cargo count as trade (*tijara*). 'Smuggling' is thus not a legal category imposed from the centre, but a political one produced at the checkpoint.

The paper traces a close continuity between the tax-for-passage order of the nineteenth-century Sanusiyya — the Sufi network whose lodges governed and provisioned the caravan trade — and the contemporary checkpoint regime of SAS, both shaped by a desert geography in which viable routes are scarce and distances vast. In each case the authority to license trade is inseparable from the authority to license movement, and the checkpoint performs a crucial epistemic function, rendering an otherwise illegible territory governable by accumulating intelligence on routes, conditions and counterparts. This logic cannot be reduced to economic rationality: SAS has repeatedly forgone revenue to deny rivals passage, a pattern explicable only through the moral economy of passage that decides whose trucks may proceed and whose must turn back. The same logic has structured Kufrah's role in Sudan's war, where the sheltering of refugees and the arming of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are best understood not as moral opposites but as two forms of passage governed at the same gate. Where routes are few and assets cannot be enclosed, the authority to license movement is ultimately the only authority that matters — and it is the very harshness of the terrain that secures it.

INTRODUCTION

In his nineteenth-century travel journal, English journalist Herbert Vivian described the Sahara Desert as an inland sea of sand, mountains and rocks, dotted by island oases (Medici, 2019: 14): 'it has ports, islands, storms, pirates, loneliness and almost every other characteristic of the sea' (Vivian, 1899: 258–259). Also comparable in many ways to the maritime realm, the Sahara Desert has numerous chokepoints through which people and goods must pass.

The city of Kufrah, situated in Libya's southernmost region, is the country's most prominent trans-Saharan trading chokepoint. It is frequently cited as one of North Africa's foremost human smuggling hubs, a focus for organised criminality in the area, and more recently has played a pivotal role in the Sudanese civil war (see Badi, 2025; Dziadosz and Paravicini, 2025). While most of the recent literature reduces economic activity in Kufrah to 'smuggling', this paper adopts a broader scope by tracing the historical evolution of trade in the city. In doing so, it seeks to unpack the politics of circulation in the region. Rather than treating Kufrah as a frontier of 'smuggling' or 'illicit' activity to be policed, the paper argues that political authority here is exercised through the governance of movement itself and the checkpoint is the infrastructure of rule, with the very line between 'licit' and 'illicit' drawn locally by whoever controls passage, not imported from statute.

For the local communities, traders, drivers and armed actors who make their living along the routes operating via Kufrah, 'smuggling' falls short as a term describing their day-to-day activities, implying as it does a clearly defined legal–illegal binary. In local parlance, a truck is only engaged in 'smuggling' (*tahrib*) when it fails to comply with the tax regime of the armed group that holds sway here, namely Subul al-Salam (SAS). This may occur when a truck bypasses SAS checkpoints, or alternatively because it is carrying goods reserved for certain SAS commanders and their commercial clients. If SAS has indeed been paid, however, then the same truck carrying the same cargo is seen as conducting *tijara* (trade). Thus, while SAS's transportation of subsidised diesel across the border into Sudan and Chad — almost a million litres per day at its peak (The Sentry, 2025: 15) — technically constitutes smuggling under Libya's statutes, no one locally describes it as such.

In other words, rather than a legal category imposed by the central state, 'smuggling' in this geography is better understood as a political category produced from within: it is the condition of moving goods outside the locally prevailing order, irrespective of who it is that has imposed that order. As anthropological work on Saharan and borderlands trade has demonstrated (Brachet and Scheele, 2019; Roitman, 2005; Scheele, 2012; van Schendel and Abraham, 2005): what counts as licit, illicit or criminal depends on whose moral and political authority counts.

The established literature on Kufrah has for the most part displayed a narrow preoccupation with various forms of 'smuggling' (especially 'human smuggling'), conflating visibility in European policy debates with analytical importance on the ground. As a consequence, 'smuggling' (and associated 'organised criminal activities') is treated as the primary organising principle driving Kufrah's political, economic and social life, rather than merely one element making up the city's status as a historically embedded trading hub. This Eurocentric lens ensures local dynamics are only recognised as relevant insofar as they intersect with European concerns around migration and

(in)security. In reality, such concerns can only be properly addressed by understanding the full scope of what is taking place in Kufrah and its surrounds.

This paper seeks to address these shortcomings by analysing the historical parallels between 'the politics of passage' (Schouten et al., 2026) under the Sanusiyya (a Sufi religious order) — particularly the role played by the Sufi lodges (*zawiyas*) in governing and facilitating trade between North Africa and the Sahel — and the contemporary checkpoint regime established by SAS. Three key arguments arise from this approach.

First, in desert geographies where viable routes are scarce and distances between nodes vast, checkpoints are not simply sites of rent extraction. Rather, they form the critical infrastructure of political authority itself, or what Rossi (2015) calls a 'kinetocracy': rule through the governance of movement.

Second, the logic of this kinetocratic order cannot be reduced to economic rationality: armed groups in Kufrah have repeatedly foregone revenue in order to deny access to rivals, a pattern explainable by the moral economies of passage, which determine who counts as a 'legitimate' route user.

Third, this logic is recurrent rather than politically contingent: despite profound ideological differences, the nineteenth-century Sanusiyya tax-for-passage system and the twenty-first-century SAS checkpoint regime feature strikingly similar mechanisms shaped in large part by the area's geography.

Methodology and structure

Methodologically, the paper draws on two phases of fieldwork in Kufrah: January–February 2023 and December 2025–March 2026. Interlocutors included traders and heavy-truck owners; current and former SAS fighters; municipal officials; Toubou elders and oral historians; Sudanese refugees who arrived in Kufrah after the outbreak of war in Sudan; and northern Libyan logistics operators. Given the ongoing capacity of armed groups to identify and punish those who speak openly about them, interview references are deliberately masked: the text indicates broadly who is speaking and, where necessary, an approximate date, but withholds sub-group affiliation, specific location or any other detail that might aid identification.

The ethnographic material is triangulated against Libyan-, Sudanese- and Chadian-language press and archives, commissioned satellite imagery, historical sources on the Sanusiyya period, and reporting by human rights and conflict-monitoring organisations.

In terms of the paper's structure, the remaining sections unfold as follows. The next section provides a conceptual and historical overview explaining how the region's kinetocratic geography has developed over time, from the nineteenth century all the way up to the post-Gaddafi era. The following section then hones in on the checkpoint-based order imposed by SAS over the past decade or so, detailing the approach taken to governing the movement of people and goods, as well as the moral economy underpinning it. The next section turns to the crucial role played by SAS and Kufrah's trade routes in Sudan's catastrophic civil war, both in terms of refugees fleeing into Libya and assistance to one of the war's two main conflict parties flowing the other way. Finally, the paper's conclusion draws these threads together by setting out the paper's key findings and what they imply.

KINETOCRATIC GEOGRAPHIES: A CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL FRAME

Kinetocracy, moral economies and desert political form

> The transport of goods from lands that are far distant, or whose routes are beset with great danger, yields greater benefit to merchants, brings larger profits, and more reliably ensures the turning of markets. For the goods conveyed under such conditions are scarce and in short supply, due either to the remoteness of their source or to the severity of risk along their route; thus, their carriers are few and their availability rare. And when goods are few and rare, their prices rise.
>
> But when the land is near at hand and the road is open and secure, the number of those who transport such goods increases; they become abundant, and their prices fall.
>
> From this you may observe that merchants who are drawn to travel to the lands of the Sudan are among the most affluent of people and the richest in wealth, because of the remoteness and hardship of the journey, the crossing of perilous deserts fraught with fear and thirst. Water is found there only in known places, to which the guides of caravans alone can lead. None but a few people undertake the danger and length of this route; hence the goods of the Sudan are scarce among us and therefore characterised by high prices, just as our goods are scarce among them.
>
> (Ibn Khaldun [ed. Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Darwīsh] (1377 [2004]). Part 1, Chapter 12: On the merchant's transportation of goods. In Muqaddimah. Damascus: Dar Ya'rub. Translation by the author)

Ibn Khaldun's words — reproduced above — are not merely an observation on the economics of trade in desert landscapes, but a theory of political form (Scheele, 2025). More specifically, the distinction made between *al-badu* (inhabitants of the *badiya*, or desert) and *al-hadar* (city dwellers) is no mere typology of livelihoods — beyond that, it casts useful theoretical light on the mechanisms of authority. In Scheele's reading, *al-badiya* occupies a register comparable to what European political philosophy would later abstract as an anarchic 'state of nature'. *Al-badu,* however*,* are not lawless in this account; they are not less political than *al-hadar*, just tougher and more austerely disciplined by the desert. Put simply, they govern themselves differently. Crucially, where productive assets cannot easily be enclosed, authority relies instead on the capacity to grant/deny movement through nodes scattered across a vast terrain.

This is the key insight captured by Rossi (2015) in the concept of 'kinetocracy': rule through the governance of movement.[1] In desert geographies such as Kufrah and its surrounds, the resources and economic opportunities that matter are dispersed across distant sites. Authority is therefore exercised by granting allies' safe passage between these sites, while blocking enemies from doing the same. The Saharan checkpoint is, in this sense, not simply a site of rent extraction, but a critical infrastructure of political authority itself. Here, friend and foe are distinguished; historical grievances are

[1] While this working paper takes its cue from Rossi's formulation of the argument, it is a widely recognised point among students of the Sahel and the Sahara (see, for instance, McNeill, 2026; Retaillé and Walther, 2011, 2012).

translated into operational rules; and the category of legitimate trading partner is (un)made.

The concept of moral economies of passage — as suggested by Roitman (2005) and developed by Scheele (2012) and Brachet and Scheele (2019) — provides a helpful starting point for studying Sahelian and Saharan contexts. The decision to admit, tax, confiscate or turn back a truck travelling along a trans-Saharan route is not an impersonal one, made on the basis of legal status. Rather, it incorporates past enmities, collective identity and the anticipated political consequences of letting certain people pass through. Commerce is therefore not incidentally political — it is the essential medium by which regional balances of power are confirmed or tilted. Similarly, the *tahrib/tijara* (smuggling/trade) distinction set out in the introduction is not merely a folk simplification of a legal distinction, it is the emic vocabulary through which a moral economy of passage is administered at checkpoints on a daily basis.

Evans-Pritchard (1949), who served as Political Officer to the British Military Administration of Cyrenaica in what is now eastern Libya, supplies an ethnographic vocabulary for what this looks like from the inside. The Arabic Bedouin society he encountered in Cyrenaica, as well as the Toubou and other populations his interlocutors described across the Saharan interior, lived outside the direct administrative reach of any government. Instead, they organised their political life around segmentary kinship, shared descent and the practical autonomy that comes with mobility. The Sanusiyya, whose history occupies the remainder of this section, did not arrive on a mission of Islamic conversion. Rather, its adherents sought to model Islam in everyday life, exercising spiritual authority rather than coercion. Evans-Pritchard (1949: 44–6) read such restraint as structural, not tactical: where a segmentary society is subject to a single political authority from above, it will inevitably lead to dispersal, which the authority will in turn seek to govern. The Sanusiyya's strategic insight was to govern *along* rather than against the grain of this logic. In practical terms, this meant placing *zawiyas* along routes rather than in administrative centres; recruiting shaykhs whose authority was moral rather than coercive; and treating tribute as a recognition of custodianship rather than taxation extracted by force. The result was a sovereignty that the *al-badu* could accept without fear of being unmade. In this sense, the order's success was in this sense a kinetocratic success: establishing an authority that moved with its subjects and recognised, rather than overrode, the desert's prevalent moral order.

The three elements touched on above — kinetocracy; moral economies of passage; and the political form specific to mobile desert societies — are crucial to understanding not only Kufrah's historical development as a pre-eminent trans-Saharan node, but how it currently operates under SAS's auspices.

Kufrah as trans-Saharan node

Kufrah is part of a dense set of nodes that sits within wider connective networks spanning the Sahara. The city's urbanity is the result of long-distance circulation (migratory, commercial, religious, political), rather than proximity to metropolitan centres (Pliez, 2003). This is evidenced by the fact that Kufrah — southeast Libya's only city — is connected to the country's north by just a single paved road, constructed in the 1950s by the Libyan kingdom, and is separated by more than 1,500 kilometres of arid desert from Murzuq, the historical capital of Fezzan in southwest Libya. In fact, one can travel 900 kilometres in any direction from Kufrah without reaching another major Libyan

settlement, with the exception of a few small Saharan oases. As such, the city is an obligatory point of passage on trans-Saharan trade routes between northern Libya, Sudan and Chad.

The ancient trans-Saharan trade network constituted a vital economic and cultural exchange system, connecting sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa and, eventually, Europe and the Middle East. The network facilitated the movement of goods such as gold, salt, ivory and slaves, as well as exchanges of ideas, technologies and religious beliefs (Scheele, 2024). Kufrah's strategic location along the caravan routes made it a key stop for merchants and travellers crossing the desert, ensuring it thrived as a centre of commerce and culture (Braun and Passon, 2020). The region's topographical formation meant there was no alternative transit hub for goods passing from coastal Libya to Sudan and northeast Chad. This region's two main communities — the Toubou and the Zuwaya — have both sought to exploit this geographical necessity over the years, manipulating mobility and trade-route access to their respective advantage.

Here, it should be pointed out that although the paper employs the categories 'Toubou' and 'Zuwaya' (this is how the study's interlocutors themselves organise their claims to routes, alliances and enmities), such boundaries may be somewhat fluid in practice. For instance, the Toubou are internally differentiated — Teda, Daza and multiple sub-lineages on both sides of the Libya–Chad border — while the Zuwaya (or Zuwayya) have absorbed and intermarried with Majabra, Sherifa and other Arab lineages in Kufrah. As such, these ethnonyms represent currently active political categories rather than sociological givens.

Pre-Sanusiyya contestation: Tazirbu and the Karamanli expeditions

There is scarce written documentation on trade and movement between Kufrah and its southern neighbours during the years preceding the Sanusiyya's late-nineteenth-century arrival in Cyrenaica. Egyptian explorer and diplomat Ahmed Hassanein Bey (1924) recorded, based on his 1921 and 1923 expeditions to Kufrah, that in the late eighteenth century the Toubou were pushed out of both their main stronghold in Tazirbu (400 kilometres north of Kufrah) and Kufrah itself, following which the city fell under the control of the Zuwaya.

Toubou oral historians provide additional detail. Yusuf Karamanli (also known as Yusuf Pasha or Qaramanli) was the longest reigning and most powerful ruler of the Karamanli dynasty, which governed Ottoman Tripolitania (modern-day Libya) with significant autonomy from 1711 to 1835. Yusuf sought to take control of routes then under Toubou influence, specifically those connecting Murzuq (in Fezzan) to Tazirbu, and Benghazi to Wadai.[2] Fighters were assembled from several Arabic tribes in Cyrenaica — most notably the Jawazi tribe and the Zuwaya of Jikharra. An attack was launched on the Tazirbu oasis and subsequently on Tazir itself (later renamed Kufrah). A memorial submitted by Libya in 1991 to the International Court of Justice concerning the territorial dispute with Chad over the Aouzou Strip confirmed — albeit in passing — that Karamanli forces organised expeditions to southern Libya and pushed the Toubou to Tibesti.[3]

[2] Interviewed elders and Toubou historians share similar accounts that, in the late eighteenth century, a coalition of Jawazi aided by Pasha and enforced by Zuwaya displaced the Toubou from their historical towns.

[3] The Memorial states on page 42 that: 'during the 18th Century, the Karamanli in Tripoli organised expeditions to recover control of Fezzan; and Toubou raiding parties into Fezzan were forced back by the Karamanli, who in turn were repulsed by the Toubou when the Karamanli forces attempted to occupy Tibesti in 1805'. See: www.icj-cij.org/case/83 (accessed 15 March 2026).

The conflict provoked an enmity that would shape the region's politics for the next two-and-a-half centuries — up to and including the present. Despite the Toubou in Chad inhabiting the entire belt bordering Libya, it is the Zuwaya who remain the largest, most influential community in the strategic node of Kufrah.

The Sanusiyya system: zawiyas, caravans and tax-for-passage

During the nineteenth century, Kufrah proved vital for trans-Saharan trade along the Benghazi–Wadai route. It was largely controlled by two Arabic communities: the Majabra, who hailed from the small Saharan town of Jalu (700 kilometres north of Kufrah), and the Zuwaya from Jikharra, Kufrah and Ajdabiya. Members of the two tribes worked as caravan guides or rented their camels to traders, as well as transporting their own goods (that they bought from northern Libya) to Wadai (Ahmida 2009: 32). Braun and Passon (2020: 158) summarise the system in place at the time as follows:

On the way from Benghazi to Wadai [today Chad], caravans always rested in Kufra for some weeks to one month to refill their water and food supplies or to change camels and guides in the oasis. Some of the traders exchanged their commodities in Kufra and returned straightway to Benghazi. The Zuwaya in Kufra became agents of the trans-regional trade, their camels and their expertise enabled them to control the profitable economy. The Majabra from Jalu and the Zuwaya from Kufra controlled the routes in the second half of the nineteenth century. As guides, they led many caravans to Wadai, worked as carriers and rented their camels to merchants.

The Sanusiyya leaders were fully aware of Kufrah's strategic geographical position when they moved their headquarters from al-Jaghbub to the city in 1895, seeking refuge from Ottoman dominance in northern Libya (Anderson, 1984). The Sanusiyya was a Sufi Islamic reform movement founded in al-Hijaz in 1837 by Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi, who subsequently established his base in Cyrenaica, northeast Libya. Over what would prove to be a long period of struggle, the movement transformed Libyan society, spawning intellectual and social movements whose impacts can still be felt to this day. Idris, grandson of Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi, would become the first king of Libya after independence in 1951.

The kinetocratic puzzle soon to be solved by the Sanusiyya was already a longstanding issue when ibn al-Sanusi first began preaching. In an attempt to extend the movement's reach, the Sanusiyya constructed a vast network of Sufi lodges (*zawiyas*) between coastal Libya and the Sahara. *Zawiyas* — the cornerstone of the movement's system and the practical application of al-Sanusi's ideas (al-Sallabi, 2019) — primarily serve as places where adherents come together to listen to lectures about Sanusiyya's underlying rationale, as well as Islamic teachings more generally.

In addition to their religious function, the *zawiyas* held considerable commercial and economic importance. They were established along three main caravan routes between Libya, Sudan and Chad: the first ran south from the Libyan coast through the Fezzan oasis to Lake Chad; the second turned southwest through Ghadames and Ghat to Timbuktu; and the third ran southeast through Kufrah to Wadai and Darfur. Voyagers and traders were encouraged by the Sanusiyya to stay in its *zawiyas* for up to three days without charge. In return, the voyagers were questioned about trade routes and commercial conditions in their home regions (Cordell, 1977). In this way, the Sanusiyya made use of the lodges to govern and encourage trade (al-Sallabi, 2019).

Al-Sanusi used intelligence gathering, correspondence and inspection committees to forge a strong network among the movement's *zawiyas*. Reports on commerce, trade and route condition were gathered by camel-riders from each *zawiya* and taken to the central lodge in al-Jaghbub in northeast Libya, on the border with Egypt. Relevant information was then circulated across the *zawiya* network by the same means (al-Sallabi, 2019; al-Qurayd, 2024). This postal system along the trans-Saharan routes between Libya, Chad and Sudan enabled traders to make well-informed decisions and transmit commercial conditions swiftly across the vast, disconnected Sahara (Cordell, 1977).

The Sanusiyya also created a taxation system enabling safe passage for caravans travelling between contemporary Libya, Chad, Niger and Sudan, thereby improving the security of the trade routes (Braun and Passon, 2020). As Egyptian historian Mohamed Fouad Shukri (1948: 63–4) observes:

> Trade caravans crossing the Sahara in the lands of Toubou and Tuareg were taxed by the Sanusiyya for a safe crossing, in lands where earlier no caravans could feel safe with their goods, money and men. Before the caravans set out into the desert, 'Muhrrarat' from the sheikhs of the Sanussi would be issued upon payment. These letters served as 'passports', allowing the caravan to cross the lands of the Toubou and Tuareg safely and peacefully, as these tribes respected the Sanussi sheikhs' 'Muhrrarat'. Thus, the roads between Central and North Africa became secure, and the tribes that had once been most daring in plunder and robbery became the force maintaining security in those vast deserts.[4]

In an attempt to expand his movement's reach south of Kufrah, al-Sanusi sought to strike a political bargain with the Toubou concerning safe passage on trade routes to Wadai. In a lengthy letter dated 16 November 1849 to an influential figure named 'Faraj al-Ouniangi', al-Sanusi offered to mediate between the Toubou in Ounianga Kebir and the Zuwaya in Kufrah (al-Tayyib al-Ashhab, 1956: 150–3):

> Now, our followers, the Zuwaya group, who are the people of Tazir [Kufrah's historical name in the Toubou language, red.],[5] a city known to you, have come to us and repented at our hands. They asked us to build a Sanussi zawiya at Tazir. Our intentions are to live near you and teach you and your children the Book of Allah and practices of his Prophet, and to reconcile the differences between you and those Bedouins who raid you and take your children and your wealth. We are acting in accordance with Allah's words: 'And if two factions among the believers should fight, then make peace between them'.[6]

Al-Sanusi passed away in 1863. His son Muhammad al-Mahdi ibn Muhammad al-Sanusi, who was 14 at the time, was placed under the care of Sanusiyya sheikhs until he reached the age of 18. Under al-Mahdi's rule, the *zawiyas* expanded throughout Central and North Africa, reaching as far as Fez in Morocco, and even into India. In many

[4] Translated by the author from Arabic.
[5] While local historians agree that Kufrah's original name was 'Tazir' — a term from the Tudaga language spoken by the Teda (a sub-lineage of the Toubou), which appears in various Sanusiyya correspondence — the etymology of 'Kufrah' remains a subject of debate. Toubou historians suggest the name is derived from the Arabic word *Kuffar* (infidels), asserting that the region was labelled 'the land of the heathens' by Ottoman and Karamanli authorities that viewed the Toubou as non-believers. Conversely, Arab researchers and local historians have suggested the name stems from the Arabic root *Kufr*, referring to low-lying fertile lands or depressions nestled between sand dunes.
[6] Translated by the author from Arabic.

of the countries where the Sanusiyya maintained a presence, they wielded no more political power than the other Islamic orders. In Central and North Africa, however, a vast territory of arid, remote, yet networked Saharan towns and oases — from Siwa in today's Egypt to Kufrah in today's Libya and Faya in today's Chad — fell under al-Mahdi's supreme authority. Trade with Tripoli and Benghazi, in particular, formed the backbone of Sanusiyya economic prosperity during al-Mahdi's reign (Cana, 1911; see the map at the end of this chapter).

Evans-Pritchard's (1949: 63) interviews in Cyrenaica capture the character of this authority in the Bedouin's own words: they describe the *zakat* (tithe) paid to the Sanusiyya not as the discharging of a religious obligation, but a gift. As this implies, the *al-badu* voluntarily recognised Sanusiyya custodianship rather than being forced to submit to extraction. The Sanusiyya understood that in a society where political coherence rests on movement and '*asabiyya* (a concept encompassing a deep sense of social solidarity, group consciousness and tribal cohesion), forceful domination does not consolidate authority. On the contrary, it provokes precisely the resistance, dispersal and withdrawal of recognition that leads such authority to collapse. Spiritual authority, by contrast, travelled with the caravan and was reaffirmed at each *zawiya* stop.

Colonial conquest and the fall of the *zawiya* network

Al-Mahdi died in 1902, whereupon he was succeeded by his nephew Ahmed Sharif al-Sanusi. Under the latter's leadership, the Sanusiyya took up arms against the European colonial powers then attempting to expand into areas under the order's influence: the French in Chad, the British in Egypt and the Italians in Libya (see Ahmida 2011, 103ff). Towards this end, the *zawiyas* were progressively transformed into fortified military sites, each backed by another *zawiya* constructed a relatively short distance away. Thus, if one *zawiya* was attacked, followers could move to another, allowing the Sanusiyya to establish successive lines of defence (al-Sallabi, 2019).

This, also, however, turned the *zawiyas* into legitimate military targets. Beginning in 1901, various *zawiyas* in the Sahara saw violent military confrontations, especially with the French in Chad. Following an initial attack by French forces on the Bir Alali *zawiya* in Kanem, intermittent clashes flared across northern Chad until 1913, when the French conquered the area's remaining Sanusiyya *zawiyas* of Faya, Gouro and, finally, Ounianga. Faya's *zawiya* was subsequently transformed into a fortified French military post (Brachet and Scheele, 2019: 61).

The Sanusiyya system did not survive the French conquest of the Saharan *zawiyas*, and its networked geography was progressively undone. Even so, the underlying geographical conditions that had made the system possible — a scarcity of viable routes; the vast distances between oases; the dependence of caravan traffic on known water points and local knowledge — remained in place.

The Gaddafi era: resources, citizenship and Toubou marginalisation

In 1951, Libya gained independence from joint British and French administration, with Idris al-Sanusi crowned the first monarch of the new Kingdom of Libya. Eighteen years later, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi launched a successful coup, ascending to power in 1969. Gaddafi proceeded to dismantle the Sanusiyya order as a school of thought, presenting these 'reactionary systems' as a threat to the al-Fateh Revolution (Assafir Newspaper Archive, 1976). The Sanusiyya headquarters at the largest *zawiya* in al-Jaghbub — originally constructed in 1855 — were eventually bulldozed to the ground in

1984. As part of this act of erasure, the graves of the early Sanusiyya were exhumed and hidden elsewhere, while large quantities of books and letters documenting the order's history were destroyed (Libya al-Ahrar, 2025).[7]

Under Gaddafi, governance in northern Libya operated through shifting networks of clientelism and patronage, with access granted to clients favoured by the regime (Lacher, 2020). At stake were the rents of a hydrocarbon state: oil and gas furnished over 95% of national income, making control over those revenues the logical first move in any state-building project (St John, 2013). Southeast Libya, however, is not dependent on oil revenues, as Kufrah's location on the border with landlocked Chad and fragmented Sudan has allowed it to thrive on transit trade between coastal Libya and the Sahel.

Gaddafi's adventurist policy in Chad between the 1970s and 1990s would also shape future contestations in southern Libya. In 1973, Gaddafi annexed the 115,000 km^2 Aouzou Strip, which extends the full length of the Chad–Libya border from Niger in the west to Sudan in the east (Hansen, 2020). The regime not only incentivised Toubou in southern Libya to migrate to Aouzou in order to populate the area, but provided substantial military and financial assistance to Goukouni Weddaye, an influential Toubou politician from Chad who would later become that country's president.[8] The *quid pro quo* for this support was a regime in Chad that would serve Libyan interests, particularly regarding the Aouzou Strip.

Aouzou was occupied by the Libyan army until 1994, when the International Court of Justice ruled that it should be handed over to Chad. Not long after this, in 1998, Gaddafi issued Decision No. 13, which revoked Libyan citizenship for the Aouzou Toubou. This was justified on the basis that they were 'traitors' responsible for Libya losing control over the strip (Lacher, 2014). Post-1994, Gaddafi largely denied the Toubou access to the lucrative cross-border trading around Kufrah, instead favouring the Arab Zuwaya. This enabled the Zuwaya, who controlled the local oil businesses and trade routes, to transport gasoline and subsidised goods such as semolina, sugar and cooking oil into Chad.

The stateless Toubou, by contrast, were forced to dwell in metal shacks with thatched roofs, their mobility and trading systems harshly securitised and framed as illicit economies — mostly involving the 'smuggling' of goods such as tobacco and drugs, as well as people (Boisbouvier, 2012; Wehrey, 2017). This situation cemented the bitter relationship between the Gaddafi regime and the Toubou of Libya. In 2007, the Toubou Front for the Salvation of Libya was formed in exile, leading to a rebellion in Kufrah the following year that was swiftly crushed by Gaddafi's regime, further entrenching existing enmities (Al-Nilin, 2008).

2011 and its aftermath: Toubou ascendancy and the checkpoint system

In February 2011, the Arab Spring reached Libya, with the Toubou — unsurprisingly — joining the revolution in its early stages. They subsequently rejected Gaddafi's mid-May attempt to bring them on-side by cancelling Decision No. 13 and by October 2011 had come to dominate southern Libya, including the entirety of the country's borders with Chad, Sudan and Niger (Wehrey, 2017).

[7] According to Evans-Pritchard (1949), al-Jaghbub library held the second-largest volume of Islamic manuscripts in Africa, after al-Azhar.
[8] Interviews with two families who migrated from Kufrah to Aouzou in the 1980s, December 2025.

From 2011 until 2019, the Toubou's large, decentralised system of checkpoints allowed them to dominate the transit trade between Libya and its southern neighbours (Murray, 2015; Tubiana and Gramizzi, 2017; Wehrey, 2017). Not only were the Toubou's checkpoints more numerous than the centralised checkpoints utilised by Arab-affiliated armed groups, they did not exhibit a singular form of command — although they mobilised in support of each other if attacked by an outside actor. As Schouten et al. (2026: 13) note: 'when the Tubu mobilise, it is to be seen as an expression of deeply rooted values fundamental to local social ordering. Of course, to acknowledge that roadblocks reflect a local political culture doesn't make them 'nice' or beneficial'.

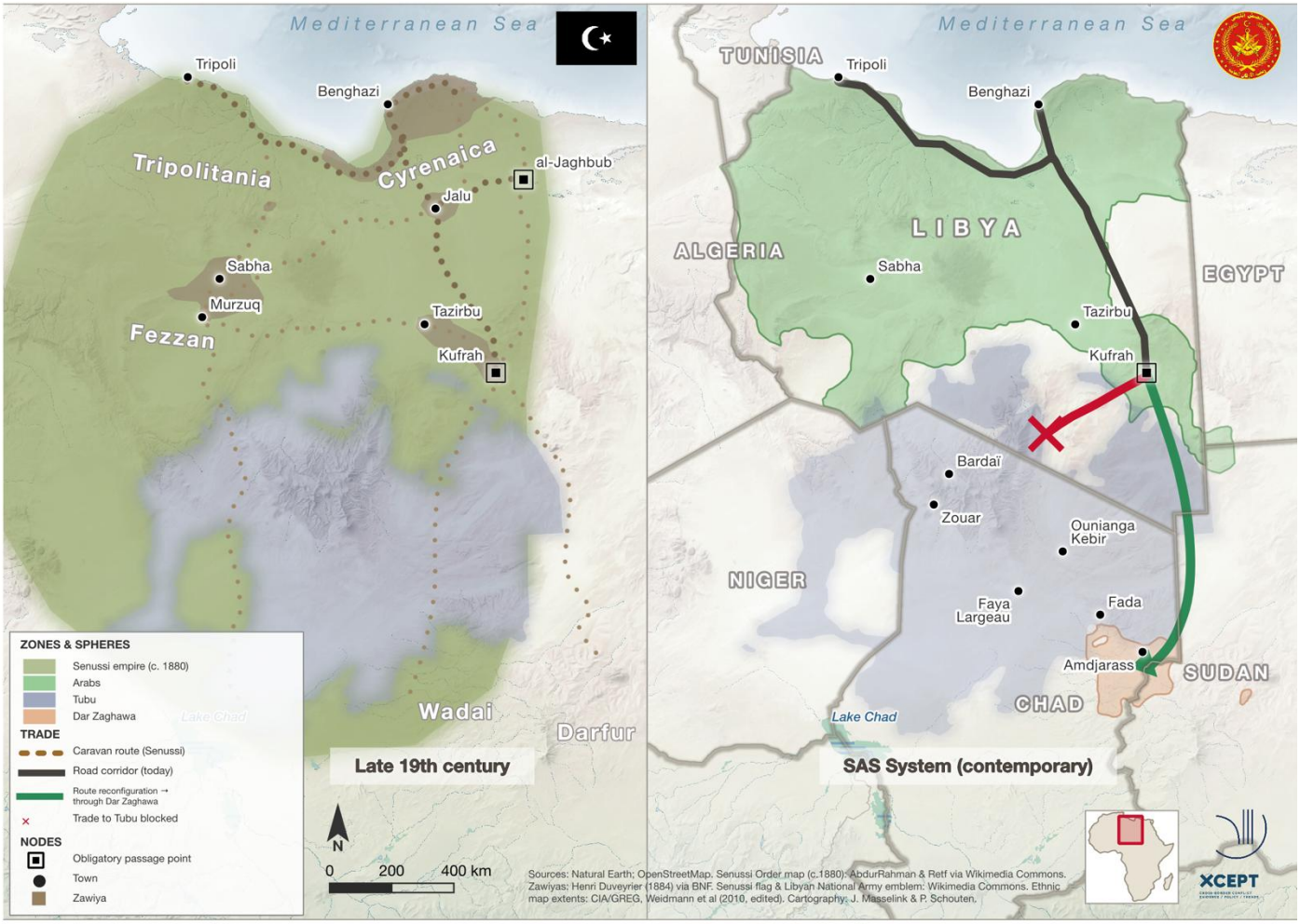
The Toubou's networked checkpoints connected Fezzan to southern Cyrenaica. Almost 1,300 kilometres of extremely harsh desert lies between Kufrah and the nearest town in Fezzan (Um al-Aranab), with at least ten different Toubou-aligned armed groups manning checkpoints along the way. Prior to 2014, voyagers taking routes across this terrain were mainly traders from south-eastern Libya transporting goods to Niger and Tibesti in northern Chad. Since 2014, when gold was discovered in the region, the routes have primarily been used to transport goods required at mining sites, from soft commodities to heavy machinery (Tubiana and Gramizzi, 2017).

These are the very same routes the Toubou used to raid caravans before Karamanli's attack in the eighteenth century. Their more recent revival can largely be ascribed to the Toubou checkpoints providing navigational support and predictability for route users — an explanation frequently overlooked by security and migration scholars (see Micallef, Horsley and Bish, 2019; Tubiana and Gramizzi, 2017). In this environment, checkpoints are far more than taxation points: as well as being the only reliable nodes at which information on wind conditions, shifting hazards or shorter routes discovered by returning drivers can be accessed, they are also the only points where drivers lost in the desert can find assistance. As such, the checkpoints can be seen as a hybrid institution — simultaneously tax office, news exchange, dispatch board and search-and-rescue node — its governance value deriving as much from its epistemic function as from its revenue. The alternative, for traders, was uncertainty — which in the desert often proves lethal.

In the aftermath of Gaddafi's fall, the region was plagued by a deadly but under-documented ethnic war between the Toubou and Zuwaya.[9] By the end of 2016, although the Toubou still dominated much of southern Libya, the Zuwaya Salafist group Subul al-Salam (SAS) had managed to establish control over trade routes and checkpoints linking Kufrah with Sudan, as well as — eventually in the same year — Chad (Eaton, 2023). Thus, a century after the fall of the Sanusiyya *zawiyas*, SAS was in a position to impose a tax-for-passage order on essentially the same corridor. As the next section shows, it would turn to — albeit under radically different political and technological conditions — a governance logic that this geography has long rewarded (see Figure 1 below).

[9] The two functioning clinics in Toubou areas in Kufrah documented around 600 Toubou deaths in the city — around 10% of the city's Toubou population. The main hospital in the Zuwaya neighbourhood also reported over 350 deaths, including civilians killed by shelling.

Figure 1. Trade-based order in the 19th century and today



Source: Cartography by J. Masselink and P. Schouten.

CHECKPOINT-BASED ORDER

The rise of Subul al-Salam

Intermittent conflicts between the Toubou and Zuwaya persisted until October 2015, when a truce mediated by tribal leaders from eastern Libya was established in Kufrah. As part of this truce, Kufrah's main checkpoints were to be handed over to a supposedly neutral force consisting of Madkhali-Salafi fighters from the city.[10]

Shortly thereafter, however, a militia calling itself Subul al-Salam (SAS) was formed in Kufrah,[11] comprised mainly of Zuwaya Salafist fighters, along with others from Arab communities in the city, such as the al-Majabara and al-Sherifa (Akhbar Libya 24, 2015). SAS's founders were fully aware of the name's significance — it translates as 'the paths to peace' — in terms of presenting the group as leading the city's war-weary population towards a more peaceful future. Over the ensuing years, SAS invested heavily in securing the routes running through Kufrah, ensuring the city could thrive as a vibrant trans-Saharan trade hub.

In a bid to boost its legitimacy and distinguish itself from the ethnic militias that had previously dominated the city, SAS initially presented itself as having a religious (that is, Salafist) rather than ethnic or military orientation.[12] In particular, it was careful to employ neutral rhetoric concerning Arabs and Toubou, and focused its attention on dominating the Saharan trade routes around Kufrah. Even so, SAS's founder, Abdul Rahman Hashem, was a Zuwaya warlord who had played an important role in Kufrah's intra-communal war following the fall of Gaddafi. Despite being a pragmatic leader, by mid-2016 Hashem had begun to assert a clear Zuwaya agenda. This included mobilising Zuwaya fighters and convincing Zuwaya elites that it would be best for the other armed factions to be absorbed into SAS, forming a 'Southeast Special Protection Force' under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Hashem.

SAS proceeded to expand its control over the Kufrah–Sudan trade routes, which were not as popular with Toubou traders. The latter tended instead to favour Chadian routes, where cross-border trade was made easier by the fact that most of the merchant cities in Chad bordering Libya are dominated by the Toubou.

Once SAS gained control of Kufrah's two main checkpoints — checkpoint 2.2 on the southern outskirts, and the northern post, which acts as the main gate between the city and coastal Libya (see Figure 2 and 3 below) — trade flows between the city and Sudan increased significantly. These growing transit flows can be attributed to, firstly, the poor roads connecting western Sudan to Port Sudan on the coast (World Bank, 2011), and, secondly, the lucrative legislative and tax-rate differences between Libya and Sudan. Sudan's customs duty rates are among the highest in the region, averaging 21.6% — indeed, machinery and automobiles are subject to 100% of the total cost (International Trade Administration, 2022). By contrast, Libya's customs tariff on imported goods averages only 5%, with consumer goods such as sugar, semolina and cooking oils exempt altogether. Thus, importing vehicles to Libya and then driving them into Sudan is

[10] For more on the truce terms between the Zuwaya and Toubou, see the 15 October 2015 televised interview with meditation team member Adam Gadi: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKxtP3uqc3E (accessed 15 January 2026).
[11] The term is derived from a Quranic verse (Al-Maeeda, verse 16): 'God guides those who follow His orders to the paths of peace and brings them out of darkness into light by His permission and guides them to a straight path'.
[12] It should be noted that Salafists have, up to this day, continued to dominate SAS's leadership.

potentially twice as cheap as shipping them directly to Sudan through Port Sudan. This lucrative business led many Zuwaya and other Arabs to invest and work in the sector.

Figure 2. Kufrah's main checkpoint, named '2.2', 2018 (left) and 2025 (right)



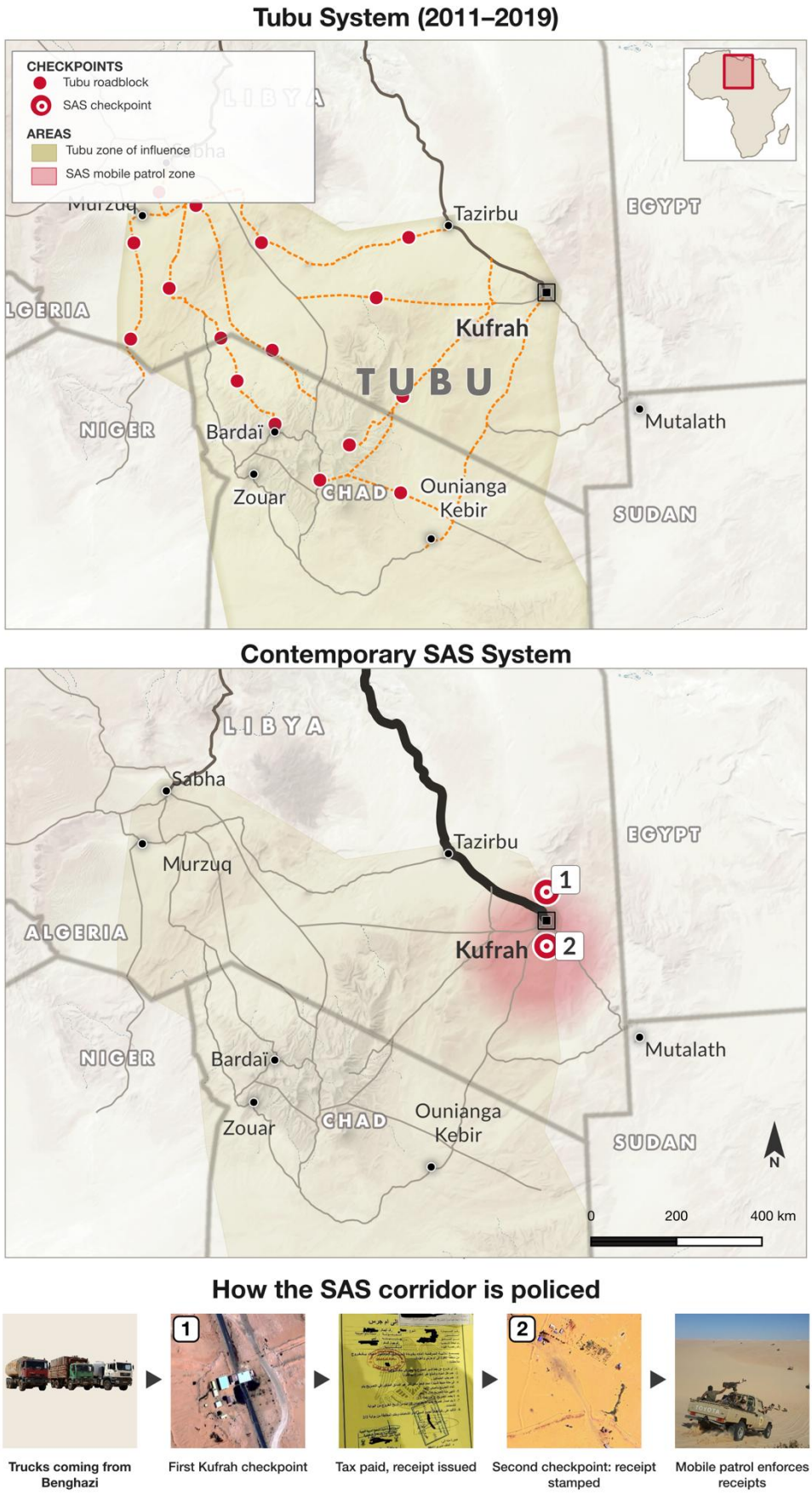
Source: Pléiades © CNES (2026), distribution Airbus DS. Note that the 2018 image shows no physical installation, consistent with the checkpoint's role at that date, when cross-border trade from Kufrah moved only towards Sudan and had not yet consolidated into a high-volume corridor. The 2025 image shows the same location after the opening of the Chadian corridor: the built footprint has visibly expanded, a formed vehicle yard is in use, and a line of heavy trucks is queuing for clearance.

SAS also took firm control of the route connecting Kufrah to the Sudanese 'Mutalath' market, established close to an artisanal gold mining site on the tri-border area linking Sudan, Libya and Egypt (see Figure 4). As part of this, SAS opened an office on Kufrah's main street where Zuwaya (and other Arab) traders pay taxes on goods intended for onward transport to Sudan. After payment, each trader receives a QR or numerical code, to be validated at checkpoint 2.2 (see Figures 2, 3) prior to travel.

This code-based validation system allows the militia's leaders to track taxes and transactions through a structured system, thereby avoiding the misappropriation of revenue by lower-ranking soldiers.[13] Crucially, the system was also used to prevent Toubou truck owners moving their goods into Sudan – between 2017 and 2020, they were reportedly unable to gain the requisite permission.[14]

[13] Interview with official from Kufrah familiar with KCF and SAS's taxation mechanisms, December 2025.
[14] Interviews with Toubou truck owners, Kufrah, December 2025–February 2026.

Figure 3. Dispersed versus centralised checkpoint geographies



Sources: boundaries — Large-Scale International Boundaries; roads — OpenStreetMap & Natural Earth (modified); basemap — Natural Earth, OpenStreetMap contributors, Google Maps. Cartography: J. Masselink & P. Schouten. Images: author & Google Earth.

Figure 4. Mutalath market on the border between Sudan and Libya, 2017 (left) and 2024 (right)



Source: Pléiades © CNES (2026), distribution Airbus DS.
The 2017 image shows Mutalath as a barely existent, sparsely built cross-border node, consistent with the small trade volumes then moving between Kufrah and northern Sudan. The 2024 image shows the same site after years of sustained growth: new stalls, storage structures and vehicle areas have spread outward around the original core, while the spatial organisation of the market has thickened to accommodate the rising tonnage of goods arriving from Kufrah.

Trade governance and the mobile patrol compensation mechanism

The vastness of the desert means it is still possible for truck owners — especially the Toubou — to bypass SAS checkpoints, instead taking more difficult routes from small Libyan oasis towns such as Rebiyana and Tazirbu.[15] In order to counter this, SAS has established high-speed mobile patrols across the Kufrah–Sudan routes tasked with checking the issued codes to ensure trucks are engaged in 'trade' rather than 'smuggling'. Trucks that can prove they have paid the requisite 'taxes' are allowed on their way, while those that can't are seized.

This is not without complications. Militia members tasked with patrol work are not well compensated compared to their seniors, receiving a monthly stipend of US$350–500. Thus, in order to continue their journey, the owners of 'smuggler' trucks often end up paying generous remuneration to the apprehending patrol members. Such transactions make sense for both parties: the truck owner prefers to pay a bribe rather than lose their 'smuggled' goods, while the militia member receives a pay-off of up to ten times their monthly salary (the average bribe is estimated to range between US$1,600–4,900).[16]

Negotiations around passage are at the core of SAS's trade governance mechanisms in the Saharan borderlands. Here, the fact that cross-border routes are not limited to paved roads means patrol personnel can impose their own 'taxes' and, in effect, exert political authority autonomously from SAS in Kufrah. SAS leaders sought to address this by establishing a compensation mechanism for the patrol groups: for each confiscated 'smuggler' truck returned to Kufrah, the group in question receives a percentage of the value of the goods inside — sometimes up to 100%. According to interlocutors, many of

[15] Interviews with drivers operating the Kufrah–Rebiyana–Tazirbu corridor, January 2026.
[16] Interviews with Toubou drivers and SAS patrol members, Kufrah, January–February 2026.

the vehicles that are confiscated from drivers accused of *tahrib* are redeployed by SAS commanders to conduct *tijara* (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Subul al-Salam's military headquarters on Kufrah's outskirts, 2017 (left) and 2024 (right)



Source: Google Earth. The compound's expansion is visible in new barracks, extended perimeters and vehicle yards. According to interlocutors, many of the trucks parked inside are vehicles confiscated from drivers accused of *tahrib* (smuggling) and redeployed by SAS commanders to conduct *tijara* (trade).

The compensation mechanism proved to be a powerful motivator for the mobile patrols, which within a few months managed to choke the vast desert area connecting Kufrah to Sudan. For SAS militia members, the driving logic was primarily transactional: fulfil the assigned task and receive generous compensation. As one SAS member who served on mobile patrols for two years observed:

> Sometimes I want to pay my superior so he assigns me, because everyone wants to be on patrol, and there is not enough space for everyone. And if I catch a truck, what's inside is mine — sometimes the whole load. A load can be worth ten times my salary, twenty times.[17]

The mobile patrols and compensation mechanism are not incidental to the checkpoint order. Rather, they are the key means by which the vast Saharan periphery is made governable, with the emerging order relying on what Lombard (2020) calls 'raiding sovereignty': a form of rule that relies on mobility, unpredictability and expropriation rather than permanent territorial control or predictable taxes. Problematically, the compensation mechanism's financial inducements also incentivise violence. NGOs such as Amnesty International (2025) have documented many cases in which SAS patrols have opened fire on trucks, killing their drivers (often young Toubou). In many cases, this was because the vehicle in question was speeding away from patrol members unwilling to let the promised compensation slip through their fingers.

[17] Interview with Zuwaya SAS patrol member, Kufrah, December 2025.

The moral economy of the checkpoint

The sheer gap between the tax revenues collected by SAS as the ruling authority and the total value of the goods seized from 'smuggler' trucks — with the latter sometimes a hundredfold more than the former— points to the logic underpinning the system. While this data is not publicly available, one can estimate through interviews how much tax is generated for each truck, or the goods loaded onto them, which includes 'smuggler' trucks. A regime oriented solely to centralised revenue maximisation would simply not allow that amount of wealth to escape its grasp. Here, SAS's route-governing logic only becomes fully legible when we apply a moral economy of passage lens. From this perspective, decisions to admit, tax, confiscate or turn back are made on the basis of remembered enmity, collective identity and the anticipated political consequences of letting particular people move. Put another way, what travels on a trans-Saharan route is never only cargo — it is a relationship.

This inversion (mobility rather than property as the pivot of power) is a structural feature of Saharan desert political economies. Where resources are scattered and precarious, and where productive assets cannot easily be enclosed, authority rests instead in the capacity to grant or deny movement via desert-spanning nodes (Rossi, 2015). The Saharan checkpoint is in this sense a site of political enactment: friend and enemy are distinguished; historical grievances are translated into operational rules; and the category of 'legitimate' trading partner is continuously (un)made.

For SAS, this calculus is organised around the longstanding Zuwaya–Toubou rivalry: severing the Toubou connection to Sudan by denying them passage was, despite its potentially negative economic repercussions, consistent with the group's prevailing political-moral order. The same logic underlies SAS's preference for working with Zaghawa traders in northern Chad, discussed later in this section. SAS views these traders as politically and morally safer counterparts precisely because it regards the Zaghawa as antagonistic to Toubou dominance. Thus, a Zaghawa truck arriving in Kufrah brings more than cargo: it carries a form of alignment.

As all this implies, commerce is never 'incidentally' political — it is the main medium by which regional balances of power are confirmed or tilted.

Checkpoint-based local development

By the end of 2016, a year into SAS's consolidation of power over the Libya–Sudan border and creation of a 'trade-attractive' environment, Kufrah was thriving. The city's Zuwaya areas had been transformed into vibrant transit hubs for goods — including mobile phones, electronics, cars, machinery and livestock — circulating between Kufrah and Sudan. The more trade flourished, the more SAS was able to tax trucks. Other Zuwaya elites, however, were dissatisfied with a purely extractive arrangement. Backed by Zuwaya public opinion, they pressured SAS into establishing a framework whereby the wider Zuwaya population could benefit from the collected taxes. Thus, the extractive checkpoint monopoly was reconfigured into a narrowly redistributive system: the Kufrah Construction Fund (KCF).

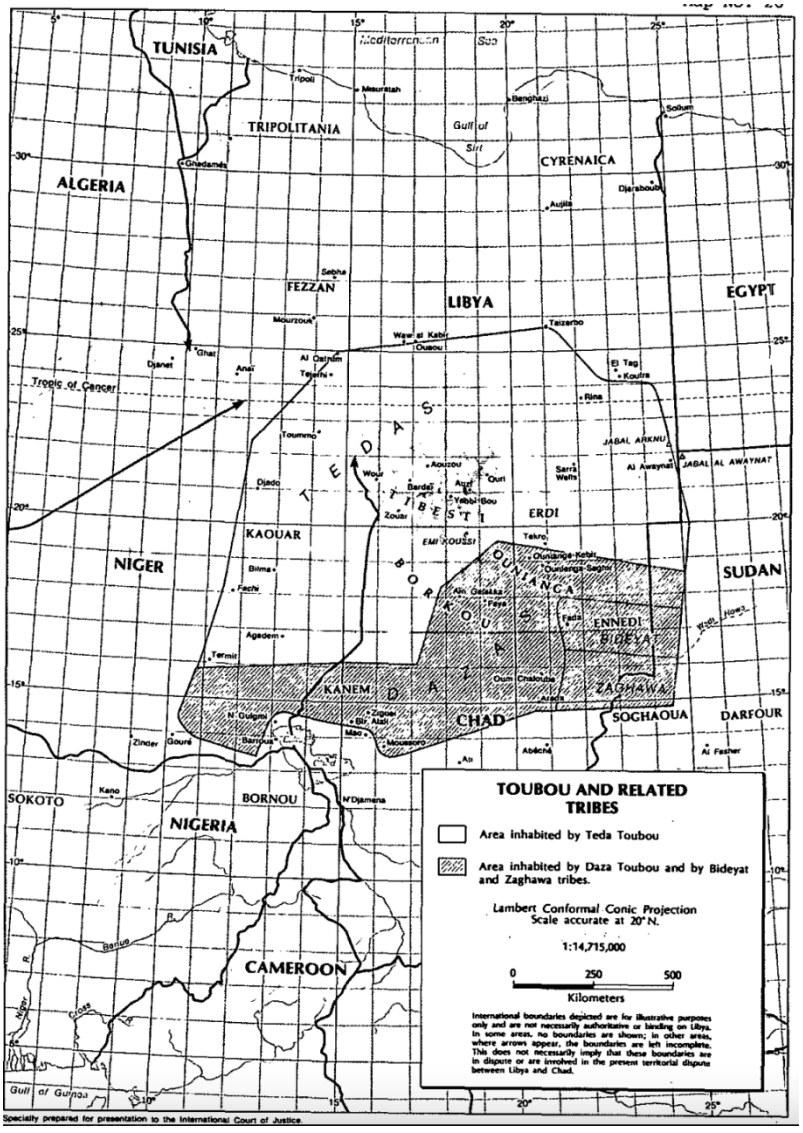
Municipalities in Libya do not have powers to impose or collect taxes, meaning the KCF operates without any legal standing in Libyan law (Eaton, 2023). Despite this, from 2017 to 2023 the KCF spent millions of dinars on infrastructure projects addressing issues neglected for decades by central government. In Zuwaya neighbourhoods, existing roads were expanded and new ones built, while considerable funds were lavished on

healthcare and education.[18] Thus far, most of the KCF's focus has been on the post-war reconstruction of Zuwaya neighbourhoods, where banners displaying projects and contractor information can be seen in different parts of the city.

The Chadian business era

Although SAS had by 2016 consolidated its control over the corridor between Kufrah and the Sudanese border — a geographical area inhabited by Zuwaya — the Toubou's longstanding dominance across the wider belt remained largely intact for several years (see Figure 6). Between 2019 and 2021, however, swathes of Toubou-held land between Sabha in the west of Libya and Rebiyana in the east was ceded to the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) — a coalition of armed groups with which SAS was affiliated. In the face of LAAF's advanced drones, which had already exacted a severe civilian toll when deployed in the Murzuq Basin (UN News, 2019), the Toubou groups became increasingly reluctant to engage in armed action against the LAAF. As a consequence, the Toubou lost control over many of the routes they had monopolised in the decade following Gaddafi's fall.

Figure 6. Demographic map of Libya, Chad and Sudan



Source: Memorial submitted by Libya to the ICJ for Case 83 (1991). www.icj-cij.org/case/83 (public domain, accessed 15 March 2026).

[18] A 6 June 2017 Facebook post by Abdel-Hamid Alzway, a journalist close to SAS, claims to show contracts worth LYD 11 million (US$2.75 million in 2017) being signed by SAS commanders and Kufrah municipality: www.facebook.com/share/p/1Br5kPzCrX/.

In Chad, meanwhile, the Daza — a Toubou sub-group — succeeded in killing the country's president Idriss Deby in April 2021, but failed to convert this into political gains and were soon pushed back by the Chadian army (Powell, 2021). Subsequently, the Teda sub-group of the Tibesti-affiliated Toubou armed groups signed various peace agreements with Chad's new ruler, Mahamat Idriss Deby (Wall Africa Journal, 2025).

Without any imminent threat to its authority from the Toubou, SAS found itself in a strong position across the Saharan areas surrounding Kufrah. During this time, Hashem made efforts to strengthen his relationship with the LAAF — as the only civilian-led armed group under LAAF's flag, he managed to secure ongoing supplies of military equipment and ammunition (Libya Al-Hadath, 2022). Over time, SAS opened trade links with Chad, allowing Toubou truck owners from Kufrah and the Chadian merchant cities of Ounianga Kebir, Mourdi and elsewhere to transport goods over the border.

During 2021–2025, most of the trade circulating between Kufrah and Chad entered through the Toubou-dominated city of Ounianga Kebir, and to a lesser extent through the Zaghawa-dominated city of Amdjarass. SAS's decision to permit this trade was mainly driven by the pursuit of economic gain: Chad is a landlocked country, its northern regions dependent on Libya for their soft commodities. During the era of trade closure between Kufrah and Chad, truck caravans were forced to transport these goods from distant cities in Libya, such as Um al-Aranab and Qatron in Fezzan. Although trade with Sudan yields high returns, northern Chad has always been more dependent on Libya for its imports. Thus, Libya–Chad trade is far higher in terms of volume compared to Libya–Sudan, thereby yielding higher taxation at SAS checkpoints.

In the wake of SAS's decision to open up trade with Chad, import business owners and logistics companies in northern Libya — especially from Misrata and Zliten — began importing semolina, flour, sugar and other commodities from global markets via Misrata port and, to a lesser extent, Benghazi. Drivers from coastal Libya transfer the goods to Kufrah and sell them to local merchants, who in turn transport them to northern Chad. Having concluded their sales, the Kufrah merchants proceed to buy livestock — mainly camels — in Chad, which they then go on to sell in Kufrah to merchants and truck owners from coastal Libya. The purchased animals are ultimately destined to be sold in bulk in Zliten and Misrata to meat wholesalers and butcher retailers.

The coastal Libyan merchants involved in this circular economy prefer using futures transactions due to the higher commodity prices this yields. For instance, the spot price of a 50 kg bag of sugar is LYD 280 (US$33) in cash paid upfront in Kufrah (as of December 2025), whereas the futures price — paid after the truck driver completes their trip to Chad — is 320 Libyan dinar (US$37). On average, each truck carries 1,400 bags of sugar, meaning a loan-based futures transaction yields an additional US$5,600 for the coastal merchant. Meanwhile, the Kufrah truck owners benefit from paying for the transported goods at a later date: rather than being tied to a business cycle that may take three weeks or more to yield returns, they can invest their capital in farming, real estate or refurbishing their trucks. This circular business forms the backbone of both Kufrah's economy and, arguably, Libya's wider livestock market.

SAS's decision to open the Chadian routes was not without repercussions. Frequent confrontations between Toubou traders — both Chadian and Libyan — and SAS have occurred, with one particular incident escalating into a serious diplomatic crisis between

Libya and Chad.[19] When SAS initiated trade between Kufrah and Chad, it did so by pragmatically exploiting the disparity between de facto and de jure relations. On the one hand, trade exchanges with Chad required the tacit permission of Toubou traders operating from the Chadian town closest to Kufrah, Ounianga Kebir, which provides a more accommodating route for heavy trucks than the lengthy, sandy route to Amdjarass. On the other hand, SAS had consolidated formal alliances with the Zaghawa of Amdjarass, granting them the status of preferred trading and political partners.[20] This favouring of the Zaghawa is driven not only by the limited threat they pose to SAS interests in Libya, but the broader Chadian political landscape, which frequently sees the Toubou positioned as competitors to Zaghawa power.

Toubou traders do now have access to Libyan–Chadian routes, operating under what Lund (2006) calls the 'twilight' authority of SAS. In other words, if they utilise a trade route, they must pay the requisite toll to SAS — given these also apply to the Zuwaya, this could be read as authority rather than coercion. For the Toubou, however, paying tax to SAS is seen as a temporary obligation submitting to for the purposes of survival, rather than recognition of a legitimate claim.[21] To pay taxes to their 'traditional enemies' breaks a historical pact, analogous with what Scheele (2012) observed on the Algeria–Mali border, where fuel smugglers were willing to sacrifice profit by refusing to sell to their 'historical enemies'. From the Toubou perspective, losing further control over their 'natural habitat' between southern Libya and northern Chad to the very same enemies who have weakened them historically is a bitter pill to swallow. As a Toubou trader from Kufrah observed: 'We pay, yes. We have no choice. But paying them is not business. It is a wound. These are our lands, our routes'.[22]

Toubou interviewees view SAS's success over the past decade as something they need to replicate for themselves — in other words, SAS has shown that in order to ensure your community's prosperity, you must first establish control over the trans-Saharan routes. One prominent Toubou interlocutor put it thus: 'Although we are smaller in number, in one way or another, we have to do what these Salafists [SAS] are doing'.[23]

In November 2025, the Chadian army and LAAF commissioned SAS to form the Libyan–Chadian Joint Military Force. SAS immediately restructured the taxation system, banning trucks from travelling via Ounianga Kebir and instead mandating that all goods vehicles must enter Chad via Amdjarass. This imposes a longer route on Toubou traders (see Figure 7), provoking growing calls within Chad to resist what inhabitants describe as a blockade on Ounianga (Toumai Web Medias, 2025). The decision cannot be justified geographically or economically — rather, it has clearly been taken to sideline the Toubou-dominated areas of Ennedi in favour of the Zaghawa-dominated cities. From an SAS perspective, ensuring Zaghawa traders have easier access to Saharan trade routes than the Toubou represents the safer political option (APA News, 2025).

[19] The incident unfolded when Zuwaya officers arrested Chadian Toubou traders and subsequently posted videos on social media of officers beating the traders. The families of the detainees retaliated by abducting and beating Zuwaya traders in Ennedi in northern Chad, again posting the videos online. The parallel government in Eastern Libya and LAAF's chief issued a strongly worded statement demanding the Chadian government take immediate action to free the Zuwaya hostages. The Chadian foreign ministry in turn issued a statement demanding the release of its citizens. The situation led to Kufrah municipality and SAS temporarily halting trade between Libya and Chad. A few days later, however, the hostages in both countries were released (Al-Wasat News, 2026).

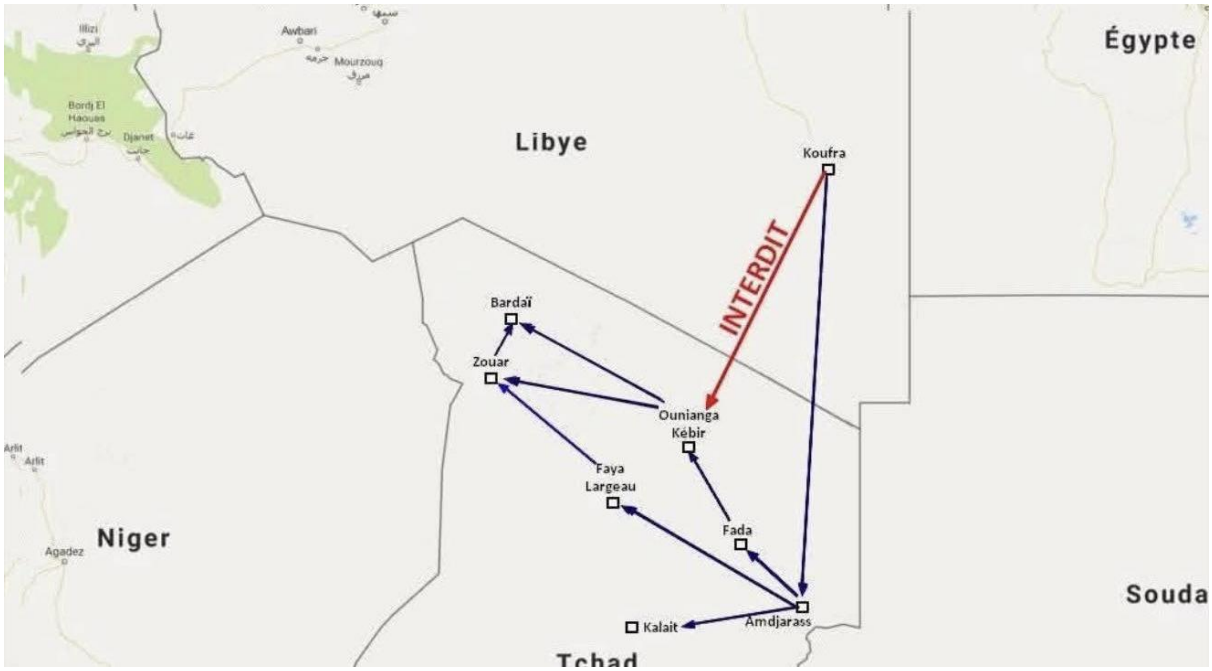
[20] Interviews with politician from Kufrah and two Zaghawa traders who have relocated to Kufrah since the end of 2024, December 2025–January 2026.

[21] Interviews with Toubou truck owners and traders in Kufrah, December 2025–March 2026.

[22] Interview with Toubou trader, Kufrah, February 2026.

[23] Interview with Toubou trader, Kufrah, January 2026.

Figure 7. Map of the new route imposed by the Chadian army and SAS



Source: Courtesy of Tchad One. 'Interdit' means 'prohibited'.

By the end of 2025, Kufrah had settled into a kind of equilibrium. The Chad trade corridor was open, though selectively; the Zaghawa–Zuwaya commercial axis now formed the backbone of the region's trans-Saharan trade; and the Toubou were, for now, biding their time. Fattened by the differential between Libyan prices and growing Chadian purchasing power, SAS's taxation regime had begun to inscribe itself on the landscape in the form of the group's expanded headquarters (see Figure 8); the KCF's construction portfolio; and new neighbourhoods visible in the satellite record.

In effect, the authority to license trade has become indivisible from the authority to license movement. Both now rest on the moral-political distinctions in this section: whose trucks are *tijara*, whose *tahrib*, who can pass, who is forced to turn back. In this sense, the Chadian business era has seen SAS's kinetocracy — encompassing preferred partners, excluded rivals, opened/closed routes and physical footprint scored into the desert itself — become fully legible as a regime. Essentially, the circulation in Kufrah is not a market taxed from outside, but a privilege that the checkpoint grants, with the line between the *tijara* and *tahrib* drawn administratively and revocably at the gate. Because that authority is exercised over movement rather than territory, SAS can weaponise access — opening routes to allies and closing them to rivals even against its own fiscal interest — while folding extraction, communal redistribution and physical development into a single order that performs the functions of a state without being one.

Figure 8. Subul al-Salam headquarters within Kufrah before and after the Chadian trade boom, 2017 (left) and 2025 (right)



Source: Satellite image © Vantor 2026 (left) and Pléiades Neo © Airbus DS 2026 (right). The 2017 image shows the compound as a small, isolated installation with only a handful of low structures and minimal traffic. The 2025 image, by contrast, shows the site transformed: the headquarters has expanded into a larger walled compound with multiple buildings, storage areas and vehicle spaces, while the surrounding ground has filled in around it. New roads, auxiliary compounds and built structures have accreted outward along the axis toward the city, so that what was once a lone outpost in the desert now sits at the head of a consistently growing built area.

BETWEEN REFUGE AND REARGUARD SUPPORT: KUFRAH'S ROLE IN SUDAN'S CIVIL WAR

Since Sudan's civil war erupted in 2023 — fought primarily between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — an estimated 350,000–1,000,000 Sudanese refugees have fled to Libya, crossing through the single city that connects the two countries: Kufrah (Gasteli, 2026). While many continued on their way to northern Libya, others — mainly those who could not afford to travel to the coast — settled in the city. The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) describes conditions in Kufrah — which has seen its population more than double since the arrival of the Sudanese refugees — as extremely challenging, with both local communities and the newly arrived struggling to access services. At present, the majority of the displaced Sudanese live in 'overcrowded informal settlements with inadequate shelter, limited access to clean water, scarce livelihood opportunities and dire health conditions' (DG ECHO, 2025).

The arrival of the first wave of Sudanese refugees prompted widespread mobilisation among Kufrah's residents: a group of businessmen and traders rushed to provide food and non-food items; a local farmer donated his entire farm to create a camp; and local NGOs, mosques and community groups leapt into action to offer support.[24] This humanitarian response was organised entirely outside SAS's authority. On the contrary, the group played an important role in exacerbating Sudan's humanitarian crisis by providing arms and logistical shipments to the RSF.

Against the above backdrop, this section reveals how kinetocracy operates when the stakes are at their highest. As will be seen, not only does authority over circulation apply to cross-border trade, it has proved central to the conduct of a catastrophic regional war. Throughout, SAS has had to navigate a difficult path between shoring up its gatekeeping position in Kufrah while satisfying the LAAF leadership in Benghazi, on whose fuel allocations, military order letters and diplomatic cover SAS's checkpoint economy depends. In this light, the group's war-related decisions are perhaps best seen as a strategy aimed at accommodating this dependence, rather than being fully autonomous.

Nevertheless, given the scale of the disaster in Sudan, neither Port Sudan nor any future authority in Khartoum is likely to forget the part SAS and Kufrah played in sustaining the RSF. Such memories will inevitably play a major role in shaping the region's future kinetocracy. The alignment that has solidified as a result of the war — SAS, the Zuwaya, the LAAF and a Chadian government that also facilitated RSF resupply — is collectively set against the Toubou. As the common adversary of these four elements, the Toubou emerge as the most likely agents of any future realignment of the routes pursued by the SAF and its allies, potentially benefitting from a logic of 'the enemy of my enemies is my friend'.

Kufrah and the al-Bashir regime

Here, it should be pointed out that the relationship between Kufrah's armed factions and Sudanese state actors long predates the 2023 war. Omar al-Bashir's regime aided

[24] Further information on initiatives by local communities aiding Sudanese can be found in the following Facebook post from 28 November 2024: www.facebook.com/lananewspage/posts/pfbid0ZrnB42gFrJDhHAzb3FevQ37NVjKZgKwDgpffuxP9dUfSDQMKnj58awHs5KytvPz6l?__cft__[0]=AZYH639NqezeQUNZA0C7sNjcwfH8art1N6UrY-6XnpmqBjdkre0p90c1A6z2kYlPPcbDC2DGuYq8d2QoKEatTiSmk13Fk0-sB-iSHwkJvo90-Flaf1Cgtr9eoOxKhL5dwlpUjnGCn-mA1ikN_PpLi1RAIZW3uAkLF_u0as4Xz-kizA&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R

the Libyan rebels during the early years of the 2011 revolution, with Kufrah providing the necessary transit zone. Al-Bashir himself, a few days after Gaddafi was killed in October 2011, celebrated in front of supporters in Khartoum, thanking the Libyans for 'gifting the Sudanese people the greatest gift ever' by overthrowing the regime (BBC Arabic, 2011). A few weeks later, al-Bashir bragged that 'in 2008 rebels raided Khartoum with Libyan arms and today we are celebrating because Tripoli was liberated by Sudanese arms' (Al Arabiya, 2011).

According to officials and former rebels from the city, al-Bashir's regime initially delivered arms — via its National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) — to both the Toubou and Zuwaya.[25] Once the Toubou had established control over southern Libya, however, the NISS focused its support on Zuwaya factions. The Toubou's subsequent forging of closer relationships with then-active Darfuri rebel groups only served to cement the Zuwaya–Khartoum relationship. These earlier alignments came to structure who could and could not use the Kufrah corridor when war returned to the region in 2023.

Kufrah as logistical hub: the fuel-smuggling scheme

After al-Bashir's regime fell in 2019, Sudan entered a period of structural change that lasted until 2023. Al-Bashir's immediate successor, Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok, only lasted until October 2021, when he was ousted by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, backed by RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as 'Hemedti') — a move that entrenched the RSF and Hemedti as decisive players on the Sudanese political scene. Around the same time, SAS was able to expand its territorial control, consolidating Kufrah as Libya's key trading hub with Sudan.

A terminological note is warranted here. Under Libya's statutes, the cross-border movement of subsidised fuel is illegal, something the subsequent use of the word 'smuggling' signals to readers outside the region.[26] However, the term does not reflect how the fuel-smuggling scheme described below was understood locally. For the traders, drivers and SAS personnel who organised and sustained it, the cross-border transporting of fuel was not *tahrib* but *tijara*: openly conducted, authorised by SAS and taxed at its checkpoint. As per the kinetocratic order set out in the preceding sections, it is authorisation by SAS that de facto designates the movement of goods as *tijara*, regardless of what the law says.

From the end of 2022 onwards, Kufrah emerged as a frontier of subsidised fuel smuggling, with the movement of diesel to Sudan in particular mushrooming. Libya's National Oil Company recently claimed that more than 1.2 million litres of fuel was being sent to Kufrah each day (The Sentry, 2025: 47). Having been sold to truck owners in Kufrah, the fuel was granted passage approval order letters from LAAF's Military Investment Authority as intended for military use.[27] This was in marked contrast to smuggling schemes from Fezzan, where civilian fuel supplies were (and are) frequently diverted, causing fuel shortages.

The dramatic increase in fuel smuggling between Kufrah and Sudan was also driven by a political logic. SAS turned Kufrah into a leading logistical hub for the RSF (Dziadosz and

[25] Interviews with officials and former rebels from Kufrah.
[26] Fuel in Libya has been subsidised since the 1970s, with the current price sitting at US$0.03 per litre of refined petroleum product (mainly diesel and gasoline).
[27] A newspaper published the passage approval orders obtained from LAAF. See this 26 July 2022 Facebook post: www.facebook.com/share/p/15VLLFLwhQS/

Paravicini, 2025). In the months preceding Sudan's civil war, supply networks between the RSF and the LAAF had already been established (Badi, 2025). Five days after the war began, the SAF managed to capture the 'Chevrolet' base near the Libya–Sudan–Egypt border triangle, thereby dominating the border area between Sudan and Kufrah (Herbert and Badi, 2024). The fuel smuggling between Kufrah and Sudan was therefore established as a means of solving the RSF's logistical dilemma during the early stages of the war. The semi-formalised scheme was essentially open to anyone from Kufrah who could afford to buy a fuel truck. The trucks would first head towards Mutalath market, then, having paid hefty taxes at the SAF's checkpoint, continue on to RSF-controlled areas in Darfur.[28]

It should be noted that the SAF was fully capable of identifying the trucks passing through its checkpoint as heading onwards to RSF-controlled areas. That the SAF allowed the trucks to pass through highlights SAS's capacity to broker complex arrangements between warring parties. These mechanisms provided a lifeline for RSF camps in Darfur prior to the emergence of alternative logistical supply hubs in late 2023 (Badi, 2025). By mid-2024, civilian assistance along the Kufrah supply route was no longer needed, prompting SAS to ban fuel smuggling among the city's inhabitants, although the smuggling of other goods and logistics destined for the RSF persisted until early 2025.[29] Meanwhile, SAS and LAAF commanders continue to engage in fuel smuggling up to the present day.

Kinetocracy in action

SAS's capacity to supervise logistics in this context is unsurprising given its many years of cooperation and negotiation with the Sudanese security apparatus. This deep level of understanding is something that northern Libyan actors, lacking extensive interactions with the country's southern neighbours, do not possess. The 2021 appointment of Fawzi Boumrez, a Zuwaya and cousin to SAS commander Abdul Rahman Hashem, as Libya's ambassador to Sudan further illustrates this integration of kinetocratic authority with diplomatic position.

What makes Kufrah's position in the Sudanese war analytically striking is not simply that it has played a key role in sheltering refugees on one side of the border while arming one of the conflict parties on the other — in fact, this combination is fairly commonplace in borderland wars. Rather, what stands out is that both elements in this seeming paradox are produced by the same kinetocratic logic set out in this paper. SAS's authority is exercised via the governance of who and what may move: Toubou traders out of the Sudan route; Zaghawa trucks into the Chad corridor; subsidised fuel south to RSF-held Darfur; Sudanese refugees north to coastal Libya. Rather than being moral opposites, refugee flows and rearguard support go together as comparable forms of passage through the same checkpoints, subject to the same discretionary arithmetic of access.

The importance of this is that it relocates the question of the war from who holds territory to who licenses movement: because one armed actor governs both the arming of a party to the conflict and the flight of civilians from it, Sudan's conflict is shaped, at this node, by a checkpoint hundreds of kilometres from any front line.

[28] Earlier interviews conducted by the author in 2023 for a paper presented at the workshop: Roadblocks and revenues: New geographies of taxation in conflict, organised by DIIS, ICTD and the Centre on Armed Groups.
[29] Interview in Kufrah with truck owners formerly operating in this zone, December 2025.

The fuel-smuggling scheme commenced when alignment with the RSF served SAS's wider position and ceased in mid-2024 when this was no longer the case — a recalibration rather than a reckoning. By contrast, the humanitarian response by Kufrah's residents to arriving Sudanese refugees was organised entirely outside SAS's authority. In this way, the city's moral generosity and its armed group's logistical complicity ran on parallel tracks. This is what kinetocracy looks like in wartime: the same gate that allows goods to enter a war simultaneously decides which people can escape from the same conflict. Understanding these complex, seemingly contradictory dynamics is crucial to understanding how borderland cities such as Kufrah operate during times of war.

CONCLUSION

The *tahrib/tijara* distinction highlighted at the start of the paper is more than mere terminological curiosity. Once unpacked, it reveals what is at stake when authority is exercised through the governance of circulation rather than the ownership of territory or productive assets. In such circumstances, the line between licit and illicit is drawn by whoever holds the chokepoint, whether this be the state or some other actor. The Sahara is not, in this account, a space of absence: whether absent state, absent law or absent order. Instead, it is a densely governed space in which political authority rests primarily on the geography itself, rather than more abstract factors such as ideology or religion.

In demonstrating this, the preceding sections highlight three key analytic points. First, checkpoints in desert geographies such as those seen in the Sahara are not simply sites of rent extraction, but the infrastructure of political authority itself. The Sanusiyya *zawiya* and the SAS checkpoint are, structurally, the same institution: a node within a network of routes that allows access to be granted to allies and denied to rivals; where the movement of goods, people and information is simultaneously taxed, regulated and monitored. In both cases, their role extends well beyond revenue collection, encompassing what this paper refers to as their epistemic function: enabling the governance of a vast, largely inaccessible territory by accumulating intelligence on routes, conditions and counterparts.

Second, the logic of kinetocratic authority cannot be reduced to economic rationality. SAS has repeatedly foregone potential revenue in order to deny access to rivals. In practice, this has meant imposing longer, more costly routes on Toubou traders, and accepting diminished overall revenues by structuring its checkpoint order around Zuwaya–Toubou rivalry. Thus, the operative logic underlying the checkpoint is the moral economy of passage: whose trucks are *tijara*, whose *tahrib*, who can go on their way, who is blocked. In this way, commerce becomes integral to regional balances of power.

Third, the reach of this kinetocratic logic is not limited to borderland peripheries. Power brokerage via the control of circulation often extends to the centre. Here, prominent examples include growing discontent among Chadian Toubou at the Chadian army's decision to redirect trade through Zaghawa-dominated Amdjarass; rebel groups forming around Libya's borders with Niger (mainly) and Chad, alleging discriminatory access to checkpoints; and, most dramatically, the role of Kufrah's checkpoint regime in shaping the logistics of Sudan's catastrophic civil war. In the latter case, the same authority that decides whether trucks are *tijara* or *tahrib* was also able to determine which conflict party in the neighbouring country received fuel and which refugees fleeing the war were allowed across the border into Libya.

Ultimately, what the Sanusiyya long understood, and what SAS has more recently found, is that the authority to license movement is the only authority that truly matters in a geography where viable routes are scarce, distances between nodes are vast, and productive assets cannot easily be enclosed. The words of the Toubou trader quoted earlier in this paper — 'paying them is not business. It is a wound' — point to both the main achievement and cost of kinetocratic order. For the group that holds the checkpoint, it is a legitimate regime. For those who must pass through land historically claimed as theirs on terms they did not choose, it is a deep-seated affront.

Schouten (2026) outlines five recurring configurations of armed authority in conflict-affected borderlands. One of these is the 'gatekeeper state'*:* a single actor controlling a single chokepoint, taking its cut from everything that has to pass through, building political settlements with the traders it favours, and investing only minimally in territorial administration. Schouten observes that armed groups operating in such conditions can 'carve out gatekeeper states writ little' (2026: 5). This is certainly the case for SAS in Kufrah, which takes full advantage of its control over the Saharan corridor between southeastern Libya, Sudan and Chad.

Rather than posing a problem for the group, it is the very harshness of the surrounding terrain that enables SAS to act as a gatekeeper state. This typology expects political settlements with privileged traders: such is the case for SAS with the Zaghawa of Amdjarass in Chad and the RSF in Sudan. This typology expects rent centralisation without territorial transformation: Kufrah delivers exactly this, as money flows through the city without meaningfully changing it. This typology expects the gatekeeper to be recognised by outsiders as vested with authority: SAS is treated in just such a manner by neighbours, mediators, Chadian army commanders, RSF logisticians and UN investigators alike.

In Schouten's framework, the gatekeeper state is a structural relation, filled by cultural and historical material that varies according to setting. The Kufrah case therefore casts light on the *content* of the political settlement in a Saharan borderland context. For instance, the paper has highlighted how custodianship — rather than just possession — of trade routes is used to justify the taxation of movement. Also crucial is the line drawn between *tijara* and *tahrib*, which has emerged from genealogies, histories and moral vocabularies that long predate SAS.

This matters for how the region is engaged with from outside. As European migration, counter-smuggling and stabilisation programmes increasingly turn to Kufrah, they bring with them a fixed line between licit trade and illicit smuggling and a presumption that the state defines it. Yet here that line is drawn daily through reversible measures at the checkpoint itself. Therefore, a policy built on the Western template risks misreading the order it means to govern and lending resources and legitimacy to the gatekeeper who polices the distinction. Engaging the Libyan state or any other borderland actors effectively must begin from where they themselves draw the boundary between *tijara* and *tahrib*, and on what authority they claim the right to draw it.

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