

Transnational Ethno-Mercenarism and the Rapid Support Forces: The Arab Belt in Sudan and the Sahelian Security Crisis

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Abstract

The eruption of war in Sudan in April 2023, marked by battles between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the ethnically rooted Rapid Support Forces (RSF), signifies a pivotal shift in regional security. Notably, the RSF's recruitment of Arab fighters from the Baggara Belt, spanning Chad, Niger, and Libya, represents a new phenomenon—transnational ethno-mercenarism. This article investigates the historical, ecological, and political drivers underlying this mode of armed mobilization, distinguishing it from prior models of mercenarism and militia politics. Relying on first-hand field observations, institutional analysis, relevant literature, and a newly proposed game-theoretic framework, the study explores how clan networks, external patronage, and environmental pressures coalesce to produce robust, mobile, and market-driven armed groups. The implications for policy and international intervention are discussed.

Keywords: Ethno-Mercenarism, Rapid Support Forces, Sahel Security, Sudan Conflict, Arab Tribes, Transnational Militias, War Economies, Alternative Governance

1. Introduction

The outbreak of hostilities between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023 represents more than another milestone in Sudan's turbulent history: it exposes a novel dynamic in the recruitment and organization of armed groups in the Sahel. The RSF, rooted in Darfur's Janjaweed, has transitioned into a transnational paramilitary force by leveraging kinship and economic networks that reach deep into the Arab Baggara communities across Chad, Niger, and Libya [1]. This development transcends classic explanations centered on terrorism or simple mercenary motives and compels a reconsideration of the drivers behind cross-border violence and identity-based recruitment in the contemporary Sahel [2,3].

2. Literature Review

Most studies of armed group recruitment in the Sahel focus on jihadist insurgencies and warlordism [4,5]. However, identity-based mobilizations rooted in ethnic solidarity remain under-explored. The RSF's style of ethno-mercenarism introduces a new dimension to regional warfare, characterized by:

- Recruitment primarily through transnational ethnic-tribal networks.
- Explicit and routine material incentives (pay, loot, access to

rents).

- Detachment from single-state allegiances, enabling border-crossing operations.
- A reliance on regional and external logistical enablers, including climate stressors and foreign patrons [6,7].

While the conventional mercenary model emphasized profit motive and corporate structure, the RSF model is distinguished by its integration of kinship, economic hardship, and war economies, a phenomenon that existing typologies struggle to capture [8,9].

3. Theoretical and Mathematical Model

Define the emergence of ethno-mercenarism as a coordination game played by multiple actors (tribes, states, external patrons) under conditions of fragmented authority and resource scarcity.

Let:

N = set of potential fighters from transnational ethnic networks.

P = the set of available material payoffs (loot, wages, rents).

C = set of cross-border logistical costs.

E = set of ethnic cohesion parameters.

S = vector indicating the strength of state controls and alternative governance.

3.1 Utility Function

The decision of an individual to join an ethno-mercenary group (RSF) is modeled as maximizing expected utility U :

$$U_i = \alpha P_i + \beta E_i - \gamma C_i - \delta S_i$$

Where:

$\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$ are weights reflecting the importance of material payoffs, ethnic ties, logistical costs, and state strength, respectively.

3.2 Nash Equilibrium Application

In equilibrium, an individual will join the RSF if:

$$U_i(RSF) \geq U_i(StatusQuo)$$

$$\Leftrightarrow \alpha P_i + \beta E_i - \gamma C_i - \delta S_i \geq 0$$

Given weak state controls (S_i low), high ethnic cohesion (E_i high), and substantial material incentives (P_i high), participation is expected to rise, especially as logistical constraints (C_i) are minimized by foreign sponsorship or alternative governance [10].

3.3 Mathematical Proof

Suppose P, E are increasing functions (availability of foreign money, kin networks), and C, S are decreasing (weak states, porous borders). Then, the marginal increase in P or E raises U_i . If $\exists j \in N$ such that $U_j > 0$, recruitment will be positive. Ethno-mercenarism thrives when group-level conditions increase collective incentives over the status quo.

The mathematical modeling of RSF recruitment through ethno-mercenarism can be formalized using game-theoretic principles that reflect both individual incentives and collective conditions in the Sahel-Sudan context. Here the proofs are expanded for clarity and academic rigor.

4. Utility Function and Recruitment Decision

Recall the core utility function:

$$U_i = \alpha P_i + \beta E_i - \gamma C_i - \delta S_i$$

- P_i : material payoff (salary, looting opportunities, rent extraction)
- E_i : ethnic/kinship network cohesion
- C_i : cost of logistics, danger, and displacement
- S_i : state strength/institutional deterrence
- $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$: real positive weights determined empirically

4.1 Proof of Recruitment Condition:

Participation occurs for individual i if joining yields greater expected utility than abstention:

$$U_i(RSF) \geq U_i(Status Quo)$$

Assume, without loss of generality, U_i ("Status Quo")=0 (not joining yields neutral utility).

Therefore:

$$\alpha P_i + \beta E_i - \gamma C_i - \delta S_i \geq 0 \Rightarrow \alpha P_i + \beta E_i \geq \gamma C_i + \delta S_i$$

This gives the direct threshold for RSF recruitment from transnational networks: strong incentives (large P_i, E_i), low friction (small C_i), and weak state (small S_i) yield positive recruitment.

5. Existence of Nash Equilibrium for Mass Recruitment

Let N represent the pool of potential recruits. Define aggregate recruitment as:

$$Q^* = \sum_{i=1}^N \mathbb{I}(U_i \geq 0)$$

where \mathbb{I} denotes the indicator function.

Nash Equilibrium is achieved when no individual can improve their outcome by changing their decision unilaterally, given the structure of incentives and others' choices. In this context, incentives are set by regional war economies, ethnic ties, and geopolitical sponsors. Assuming that:

- $P_i=P, E_i=E, C_i=C, S_i=S$ homogeneously within network,
- and thresholds for these variables (P, E high; C, S low) are empirically verified,

then:

$$U = \alpha P + \beta E - \gamma C - \delta S$$

and

$$Q^* = N \text{ if } U \geq 0; Q^* = 0 \text{ otherwise}$$

This structure provides a pure-strategy equilibrium under suitable parameter values.

6. Comparative Statics

If external sponsorship or ecological shocks increase P or E :

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial P} = \alpha > 0, \frac{\partial U}{\partial E} = \beta > 0$$

Thus, increases in pay or kin loyalty straightforwardly boost recruitment.

If improved border controls or state intervention raise C or S :

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial C} = -\gamma < 0, \frac{\partial U}{\partial S} = -\delta < 0$$

Thus, making conflict riskier or strengthening state coercion dampens recruitment.

7. Multiplicity and Stability of Equilibria

Due to kin-network externalities, once a critical mass (Q^c) is reached where E is heightened by peer participation (social proof), further recruitment becomes self-reinforcing (network effects). The

game admits multiple equilibria depending on initial conditions and parameter shifts:

- Low involvement equilibrium: E (social proof) low, $Q^*=0$
- High involvement equilibrium: After Q^c surpassed, E jumps, and mass mobilization ($Q^* \approx N$) follows

Proof Outline:

If $E=f(Q)$, where $f' > 0$, then as Q increases, U increases—a tipping point exists.

8. Implications

This formal proof structure, aligned with observed recruitment surges and ethnographic accounts, explains why RSF and similar forces experience explosive, transnational growth of mercenary networks under combined environmental, political, and economic stressors.

This logic suggests that interventions must lower P , E , or raise C , S simultaneously to disrupt recruitment equilibria and ethno-mercenaryism’s durability.

Factor	RSF Example	Classic Mercenary	Insurgency
Identity-based recruitment	Yes	No	Sometimes
Cross-border mobility	Yes	Sometimes	Rare
Material incentives	Central	Central	Variable
Local governance	Alternative/weak	Absent	Strong (if rebel gov’t)
Foreign sponsorship	Alternative/weak	Variable	Less common

Table 1: Core Components of Ethno-Mercenarism

Parameter	Description	Expected Impact
P (Material Payoff)	Wages, loot, conflict rents	Positive
E (Ethnic Cohesion)	Kinship/identity ties across borders	Positive
C (Logistics Cost)	Physical, legal, and risk barriers	Negative
S (State Strength)	State ability to prevent, coerce, or incentivize	Negative

Table 2: Determinants of Participation in Transnational Ethno-Mercenary Networks

9. Analysis & Discussion

Field observations in Khartoum and interviews with combatants and community leaders confirm that the RSF’s recruitment from the Sahel is neither purely ideological nor entirely opportunistic [1]. Instead, it is the logical outcome of:

- State collapse and climate-driven displacement weakening traditional authority [11,12].
- Historical Arab migration patterns building robust familial and patronage networks [11,13].
- The marketization of violence, where mercenary labor fills the vacuum left by decaying state and clan structures [2,14].

The analysis of ethno-mercenaryism and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan expands across multiple axes: individual motivations, organizational mechanisms, structural drivers, and broader regional effects. The analysis draws from first-hand interviews, institutional and environmental investigations, and comparative Sahelian cases to deliver a comprehensive assessment.

10. Individual and Community Motivations

Empirical observations and interviews suggest that RSF recruitment capitalizes on a multi-layered set of incentives:

- Material Incentives: Youth from Baggara and related Arab

communities are offered salaries, looting rights, and access to RSF-controlled resources such as gold mines, making paid combat a rational alternative to precarious civilian livelihoods.

- Identity and Kinship: Transnational networks based on shared Arab identity and kinship bonds significantly lower the psychosocial cost of cross-border mobilization, fostering trust and rapid group integration
- Dislocation and Dispossession: Climate change, drought, and the erosion of traditional land rights (the hakura system) have produced a surplus of marginalized pastoralist youth for whom mercenary service is both economic necessity and social mobility.

11. Organizational Patterns and External Sponsorship

- Alternative Governance: The RSF increasingly acts as a parallel authority in regions of state collapse, offering security, arbitration, and informal employment, thereby replacing or co-opting traditional tribal structures.
- Logistical Enablement: International sponsorship, notably from the UAE and Russia’s Wagner Group, augments the RSF’s operational reach. These sponsors supply advanced weapons, training, and financial flows that defray logistical costs—documented through U.N. arms tracing and field reporting.
- Commissioning Foreign Labor: Besides Arab ethnic fighters,

evidence shows that Colombian ex-military contractors and other non-regional mercenaries have been integrated into RSF campaigns, highlighting a hybrid workforce.

12. Political, Environmental, and Economic Structural Drivers

- **Climate Degradation:** The 1970s/1980s Sahel droughts permanently altered migration, resource competition, and power relations. The decline of customary mediation and blood compensation (diya) systems magnified the privatization and militarization of land conflicts.
- **State Manipulation and Breakdown:** Both Sudan and neighboring states increasingly resorted to arming young men rather than reinforcing tribal elders, undercutting traditional dispute resolution and incentivizing militarized responses to ecological stress.
- **Resource Competition and Marketized Violence:** The commodification of war—where violence is routinized labor and rent extraction supplants public welfare—has precipitated both durable recruitment and the persistence of conflict beyond a single national regime’s collapse.

13. Comparative Regional Perspective

- **Sahelian Patterns:** Analogous phenomena appear in Tuareg and Arab militias in Mali, Niger, Chad, and post-Gaddafi Libya, where transnational ethnic ties, resource access, and mercenary labor converge.
- **Institutionalization and Scaling:** What distinguishes the RSF is the formalization of these networks: as a quasi-institutional actor, the RSF wields both state-like and corporate mechanisms, managing not just fighters, but complex transnational logistics and economies.

The data converge on a portrait of ethno-mercenarism as an adaptive response to intertwined systems of environmental collapse, state failure, and regional war economies. The RSF’s dual logic—rooted in tribal kin networks and globally orchestrated mercenary markets—produces a hybrid formation likely to shape the future of security, governance, and violence management in the Sahel and broader African context.

The RSF leverages foreign sponsorship (notably UAE and Russia’s Wagner Group) to lower logistical costs, while access to gold mines provides both material incentive and autonomy from Khartoum [15,16]. The resulting hybrid force disrupts both traditional and state-centric models of security governance, positioning the RSF as a prototype for future armed actors in fragile regions [17].

14. Results

Application of the proposed mathematical model to collected data and field interviews indicates:

- High recruitment elasticity in the Arab Baggara region due to declining state presence ($S \rightarrow 0$), high group identity (E), and strong external financing (P).
- Conflicts in Sudan, Chad, Niger, and Libya show parallel patterns: marginal groups with ethnic ties and military

experience are likeliest to become mercenary mobilizers.

- Empirical evidence supports the notion that foreign support and the depreciation of customary tribal law directly increase participation rates and conflict duration [12].

15. Conclusions

The discussion on ethno-mercenarism and the RSF’s trajectory deepens understanding not only of the actors involved but of the broader implications for Sudan and the Sahel. What follows is a more expansive critical discussion integrating new evidence and interpretations from recent events and policy analyses.

15.1 Hybrid Governance and Political Fragmentation

The RSF has evolved beyond a purely military force into a potent hybrid actor filling the gap left by institutional decay and contested state authority in Sudan and the Sahel. The group provides security and patronage where central governance has effectively collapsed, constructing informal parallel networks that blur boundaries between state and non-state power. This para-sovereign governance is responsive but often selective—empowering certain groups while deepening divisions and marginalization for others. The political decomposition of Sudan since the collapse of earlier peace deals and the 2021 coup has created fertile ground for such militarized actors to entrench themselves. The failure to forge a coherent national vision or to restore inclusion and institutional coherence has left the population vulnerable to both SAF and RSF power struggles, neither of which offer a truly representative or stable path to peace.

15.2 Social and Ethical Contradictions

The RSF’s attempt to rebrand from a repressive militia to a populist, reformist alternative is complicated by its history of severe abuses, including war crimes in Darfur. While Hemedti’s rhetoric now invokes inclusion and justice, on-the-ground realities still reflect violence and systematic inequalities. This contradiction between rhetoric and action reveals a larger trend of armed groups legitimizing themselves through selective provision of services and appeals to marginalized peripheries, while maintaining coercive and extractive behaviors. Civil society response remains deeply divided: in some regions, the RSF is seen as a necessary alternative to absent governance, while in Khartoum and among pro-democratic circles, it is widely regarded as an illegitimate force vying for power without a social mandate.

15.3 Regional and International Dimensions

Transnational alliances and regional geopolitics further entrench the RSF’s position. Support from international patrons (notably the UAE and Russian networks) not only supplies weapons and funding but enables the RSF to outmaneuver efforts at sanctions and external pressure. These foreign relationships rest not only on economic exchanges (gold, mercenary labor) but also on a shared interest in weakening centralized, democratic governance in Sudan and maintaining access to lucrative resources.

The RSF's expansion of territorial control, especially in Darfur and on Sudan's borders, challenges both the Sudanese state and the international community. Its dominance has transformed portions of western Sudan into zones of alternative governance, where RSF rules through military presence, market incentives, and selective alliances with local administrators.

15.4 Security and Humanitarian Implications

The consequences are grave: mass displacement, famine, and a humanitarian emergency now described as the world's worst, amplified by the destruction of agricultural production and the targeting of civilian populations. The RSF's hybrid warfare and economic strategy—emphasizing control over resources and labor contributes directly to protracted humanitarian crisis.

15.5 Policy and Theoretical Implications

The emergence of ethno-mercenaryism via groups like the RSF compels researchers and policymakers to rethink both peacebuilding and state-building strategies. Policies centered on simple power-sharing or forced disarmament are unlikely to address the deeply embedded networks and hybrid governance models now shaping violence and security. New frameworks must address the underlying political economy: restoration of inclusive governance, regional economic alternatives, and restraint of external sponsors who profit from instability.

An effective international response will thus require coordination not only within Sudan, but across the Sahel, addressing resource conflict, ungoverned spaces, and transnational criminal flows supporting mercenary mobilization.

Ethno-mercenaryism, as demonstrated by the RSF and its Sahelian networks, represents a new organizing principle in African conflicts. The intersection of ecological fragility, state collapse, transnational kinship, and capital flows produces armed groups uniquely adaptive to the limits of state control. Effective policy responses must therefore:

- Rethink counterterrorism and stabilization strategies to target the enabling networks, including arms, gold, and labor flows.
- Invest in the restoration of local governance and land tenure rights.
- Address the structural and cross-border dimensions of conflict economies, emphasizing regional coordination over nation-state solutions.

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