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Markets *East and West of the Nile*

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On opposite banks of the Nile, the markets of Umm Ruwaba in North Kordofan and 24 Qurashi in Al-Jazirah reveal how war is reshaping Sudan's everyday political economy in uneven but connected ways. Both markets are struggling to function after the shock of conflict, yet each is constrained by a different configuration of power, security, and extraction. Together, they illustrate how trade has resumed in Sudan not through recovery alone, but through adaptation to militarization, fiscal pressure, and fractured transport routes.

In Umm Ruwaba, west of the Nile, insecurity, surveillance, and damaged hinterlands have hollowed out what was once a strategic trading hub linking Kordofan to White Nile and beyond. Commerce has returned, but cautiously, shaped by military oversight, disrupted supply chains, and volatile prices driven by transport costs and frontline movements. East of the Nile, in 24 Qurashi, relative physical security has not translated into economic relief. Instead, traders face an intense regime of levies and fees enforced through contractors and security bodies, turning the market into a site of extraction rather than circulation. Read together, the two markets show that Sudan's post war economy is not divided simply between stability and chaos, but between different forms of pressure that weigh on trade, livelihoods, and survival across the country.

- From the editor

Recovery under guard: *Trade and uncertainty in Umm Ruwaba*

Residents of Umm Ruwaba say they long for life as it was before April 15, 2023 when everything changed. The war shut off roads and spilled into their market and homes.

After roughly 17 months under the control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that begun in August 2023, the town was retaken by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) on January 30, 2024.

That shift is most visible in the town's market, once a bustling central hub for a wide variety of crops and livestock that made Umm Ruwaba one of the largest towns in North Kordofan state.

A regular at the market told Atar that after SAF regained control, the market has seen an intensified presence of military intelligence and security forces.

The seizure of several properties and houses on allegations of collaboration with RSF that had previously controlled the town has fostered a climate of caution and unease among traders and residents, one of the most striking differences between the market before and after the war.

Mohammad Ahmed Adam, a market merchant, says strict oversight of cash and bank transfers through apps such as Bankak inside the market, intended to prevent funds reaching the RSF, sometimes slows large commercial transactions.

Adam and his colleagues openly welcome resumption of clearing, which eases trade. "We await the Clearing House system's rollout in the city's bank branches," he says.

Although commercial activity in Umm Ruwaba has resumed, the markets have not fully regained their economic vigour to restore the town's role as a strategic trading hub linking the cities of Al-Obeid and Kosti.

A market observer told Atar that the road east toward White Nile State is relatively stable, but the flow of goods remains constrained by livelihoods damaged during the war, rising transport costs and multiple checkpoints on routes to and from the town.

These factors have pushed up prices of basic commodities and eroded purchasing power. He described the situation in the market as "a market trying to recover." Trade is present but surrounded by security caution and economic strain, with residents constantly watching for developments along nearby front lines in the Kordofan region.

Seizure of properties on allegations of collaboration with the RSF has generated widespread caution and unease among traders and residents.

Central staples such as sesame, peanuts and corn are seeing volatile prices as traders, wary of security fluctuations, avoid hoarding large stocks. That often pushes them to sell whatever they have on hand, driving prices down.

"The biggest problem is the cost of moving goods out of Umm Ruwaba," the observer said.

Abubakr Al-Bashir, a trader at the Karkadi market, says items like sugar and flour typically come from Kosti and sell for about 15 to 20 per cent more in Umm Ruwaba than in White Nile State because of road levies.

Hassan Jad El-Sayyid, a livestock dealer welcomed the partial revival of the market as a tangible sign of recovering commerce, but warned the trade remains weakened by the disappearance of villages along the Umm Ruwaba–Al-Abbasiyya Taqali route, which still suffer restricted movement owing to military activity and armed looting.

In the crop market, one merchant said rural farmers have resumed harvesting oilseed crops but face difficulties transporting them safely to the town's main market.

A trader who requested to remain anonymous described the atmosphere in Umm Ruwaba's market as "very cautious," noting that even a rumour of military movement near Al-Rahad or Al-Obeid immediately reverberates through trade and market's movement.

The crop exchange is operating well, traders told Atar. One merchant said reopening the exchange in mid-November helped draw supplies from surrounding villages and reduced dependence on prices set by the Al-Obeid exchange.

Prices for gum Arabic have surged sharply because of strong global demand and a constrained supply after security conditions impeded tapping in some production areas, a dealer at the exchange said.

Previously, there was robust trade between Umm Ruwaba and Al-Obeid, but that trade is now nearly halted, especially for large trucks, and depends instead on the risky "adventures" of small-vehicle drivers or on rough alternative routes that lengthen journeys and add cost.

As a result, the town's markets increasingly rely on the White Nile State rather than on Al-Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan State.

At 24 Qurashi Market, *traders struggle under the weight of relentless levies*

At dawn in 24 Qurashi market, Jaafar al-Khalifa spreads his tomatoes in neat red rows, hoping the day's trade will justify the gamble he makes every morning.

He recently bought a crate of tomatoes for 2,000 Sudanese Pounds (SDG)

from a farmer who had arrived to sell his produce on a mat at the market's edge. On a good day, Jaafar sells three crates, bringing in around 12,000 pounds. But the arithmetic no longer works in his favour. After paying 6,000 pounds to the farmer and handing 5,000 pounds to the locality authorities in daily fees, he is left with just 1,000 pounds. "What can I do with that?" he asks quietly.

His frustration echoes across the market's narrow lanes. Traders say the levies imposed by the locality authorities are crippling — in some cases exceeding a vendor's daily profit. On 19 January, vendors shut down the market in protest against the mounting fees. The closure ended only after a meeting between the locality's executive director and market contractors produced an agreement to reduce the charges.

Yet traders insist the agreement has not been honoured. According to several vendors, the levies continue at their previous levels.

"On 19 January, vendors shut down the market in protest against mounting fees."
— Market traders, 24 Qurashi

A strategic trading hub

The 24 Qurashi locality — known locally as "Al-Qurashi" — is one of eight districts in Al-Jazirah state and occupies a pivotal position in the region's commercial geography. It sits at a crossroads linking the Al-Jazirah Irrigation Project with White Nile state via Al Duwaym, and with Sennar state and the capital, Khartoum.

That strategic location has long made its market one of western Al-Jazirah's most important trading centres, second only to Al-Manaqil. It connects to key markets such as Maatuq and Al Azazi, as well as to markets across White Nile and Sennar states.

The market serves as the principal bridge between the Al-Jazirah Project's irrigated agriculture and the pastoral and rain-fed farming zones of the White Nile. Ed Dueim functions as a major hub for rain-fed crops and livestock, while Qurashi is renowned for irrigated produce such as wheat and maize. Wheat flows westwards towards the White Nile; livestock and rain-fed crops move eastwards, some continuing on to the Kordofan region. More than 100 villages and settlements across Al-Jazirah and the White Nile depend on this commercial artery.

The market also operates as a miniature exchange for meat and dairy prices in western Al-Jazirah. Given the region's dense livestock population, large volumes of animals are exported from here to markets in the capital and overseas, through exporters based in the town.

Before the war, 24 Qurashi market was one of Khartoum's principal food-supply hubs, dispatching hundreds of trucks daily loaded with vegetables,

dairy products and meat — especially to Omdurman, the Central Market and Al-Kalakla Laffa. After the conflict reshaped trade routes, the town emerged as a national transit zone linking eastern and western Sudan. Notably, during its incursion into Al-Jazirah state and Jabal Moya, the Rapid Support Forces did not reach the locality.

Fees at every turn

When residents returned to safer areas, the issue of levies remained among their chief grievances.

Many of the charges appear to have a state-level character, though their legal forms vary between states and even between localities. Recently, the Prime Minister urged traders not to pay unlawful levies and encouraged them to submit complaints to the Council of Ministers.

A knowledgeable source said the local administration assigns contractors to collect levies under the protection of security forces. The contractor takes a share, while the remainder is distributed among the locality, Al-Jazirah state and security bodies — including the Popular Resistance, whose expenditures increased after life resumed in the towns.

The levies extend beyond traders to shoppers themselves.

Al-Tahir Kamal El-Din came to buy a sack of sorghum priced at 90,000 pounds. He says he was compelled to pay an additional 10,000 pounds: 2,000 for a newly introduced "security receipt" benefiting military intelligence affiliated with the army, 5,000 in locality fees and 3,000 for the market.

For some traders, the strain has become untenable.

Al-Hadi Ahmed Al-Tayeb says he is seriously considering closing his shop and relocating to his village of Khudr in Al-Matori within the locality. Rising taxes and levies mean he can no longer cover his operating costs.

Levies are collected under security protection and shared between the locality, the state and armed bodies.
— Knowledgeable source

Livestock trader Qusai Hussein describes a cycle of payments that drains any hope of profit. He pays 10,000 pounds per head to bring animals into the market and another 10,000 to take them out — fees often collected without receipts by individuals linked to the market contractor, he says.

"One day I brought a sheep to sell," Hussein recalls. "I paid 10,000 pounds to enter. I couldn't sell it because it didn't fetch the price I wanted. I had to pay another 10,000 pounds just to take it back out."

A retail vendor, known locally as "Ferisha", says his daily fee rose in January from 1,000 pounds to 5,000 — often

more than he earns in profit. He too is contemplating leaving.

Adam Aduma, a cobbler, says he has fallen into debt to the locality's collector, who demands 5,000 pounds a day. Unable to pay the full amount, Adam survives on one meal a day to gather 3,000 pounds, deferring the remaining 2,000 to another day.

"If I knew of another place to work, I would go," he says. "I support my five brothers and my mother since my father died. I don't know anywhere beyond 24 Qurashi market and the surrounding villages."

Tuhami Jibril Al-Tayeb, a livestock dealer, warns that unless the levies are reduced, traders will shift their business to Al-Manaqil, threatening the market's position as a regional hub.

A burden both old and new

Merchants describe a maze of long-standing and newly introduced charges. These include business profits tax based on annual estimates from tax offices — often calculated through "lump-sum assessments" that fail to reflect real earnings during market downturns.

In addition to commercial licence fees, traders pay annual locality charges to renew their authorisation to operate. Service fees fund municipal services; transit charges are imposed on trucks hauling crops; and scale fees are collected at the market's official weigh station.

Many of these levies predate the war. What has changed, traders say, is the intensity and proliferation of collection points. A senior merchant, speaking on condition of anonymity, describes multiple "checkpoints" where traders must pay fees as goods move between different areas.

For a market that once fed a capital, the burden now feels existential.

As the day winds down, Jaafar al-Khalifa gathers his unsold tomatoes. Around him, the market still hums — buyers bargaining, livestock lowing, porters weaving through the crowd. But beneath the noise lies a persistent question shared by traders and customers alike: how long can this marketplace - and those who depend on it - survive under the weight of so many demands?

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