

# Checkpoint economy: the political economy of checkpoints in South Sudan, ten years after independence

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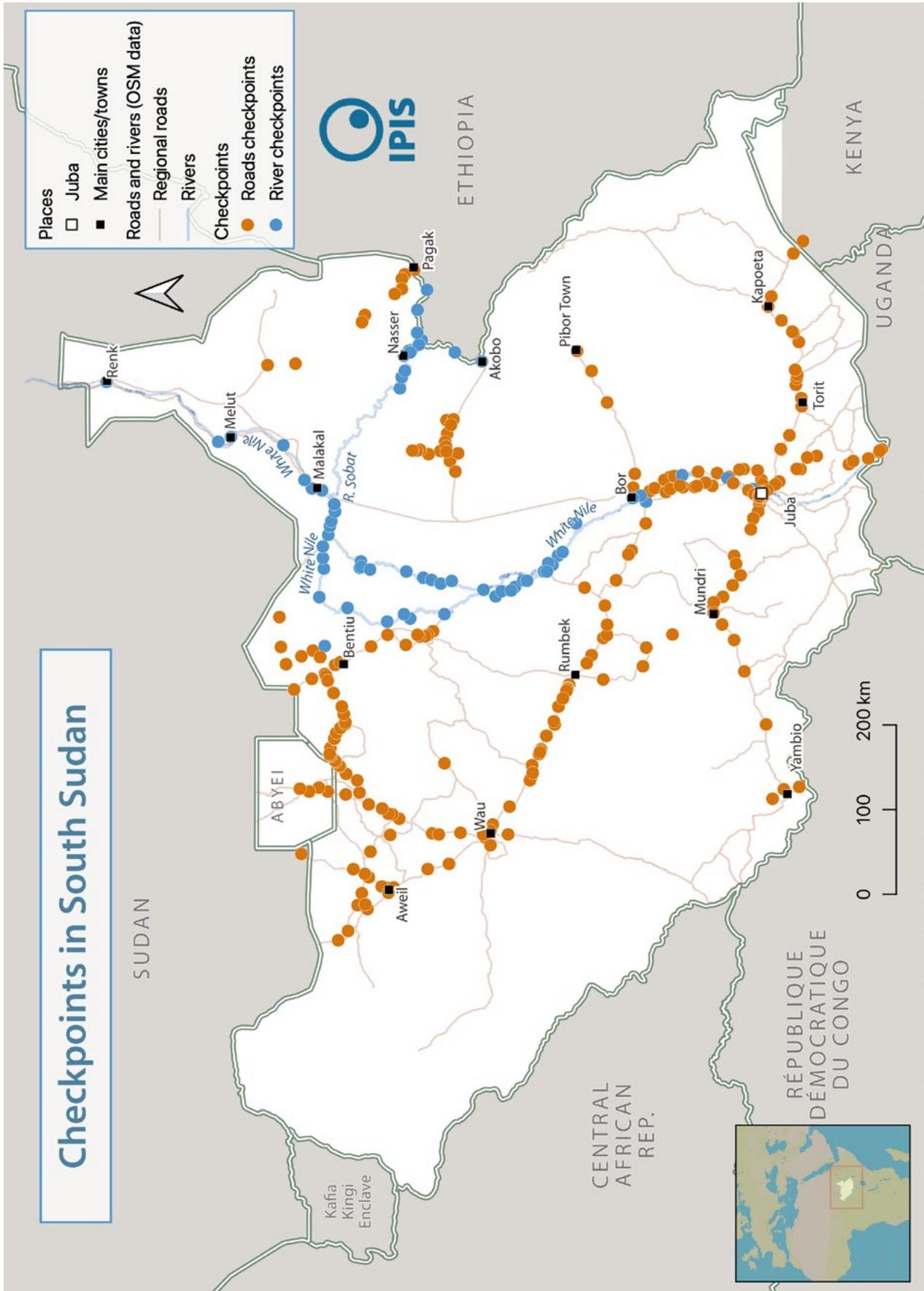
**Cover image:** Checkpoint along the Western Corridor, between Rumbek and Wau, 2021

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
CID	Criminal Investigations Department
GoSS	Government of South Sudan
JVMM	Joint Verification and Monitoring Mechanism
MI	Military Intelligence
Mt	Metric ton
NAS	National Salvation Front
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSS	National Security Service
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
RoSS	Republic of South Sudan
SDG	Sudanese pound
SOFA	Status-of-force-agreement
SPLM/A-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in Government
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in Opposition
SSP	South Sudanese pound
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defense Forces
SSNPS	South Sudan National Police Service
WFP	World Food Programme
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
USD	United States dollar

# OVERVIEW MAP



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background and Implementation

This report presents the results from a survey of the political economy of checkpoints along the major trade routes in South Sudan. Between April 2019 and April 2021, enumerators made 13 journeys along major overland and river routes and collected detailed information on the number and location of checkpoints, who operates them, who pays, and how much. The study's lead authors also conducted interviews with, and consulted data provided by, a variety of stakeholders in the transport and humanitarian sector to contextualize findings, with references to existing literature and research.

## Key findings

- We found **319 checkpoints** in South Sudan, of which 253 (79%) are roadblocks and 66 (21%) river checkpoints. Based on averages, a typical checkpoint is manned by 6 people sharing 3 visible weapons among them, and levies about SSP 48,000 (USD 80) on a commercial vehicle.
- **Checkpoints are numerous.** On average, there is one checkpoint for each 16 km (or 6 checkpoints per 100 km) along South Sudan's major trade routes. Checkpoints are more frequent on the routes from Juba-Wau, Juba-Bor, and Juba-Nimule, where there are on average 9 checkpoints per 100 km.
- **The number of checkpoints has increased by nearly 50% since independence.** In 2021, we observed on average one checkpoint for each 16 km (or 6 checkpoints per 100 km), whereas in 2011 there was a checkpoint each 23 km (or 4 checkpoints per 100 km).
- **Most individual payments are small.** At 62 checkpoints (19%) payments are lower than SSP 1,000 (USD 1.5); only 8% of checkpoint taxes exceed SSP 100,000 (USD 166), and these are mostly concentrated geographically along the White Nile.
- **Total payment is significant.** For all major routes, average total payment exceeds 60,000 SSP (USD 100). For more than half of these routes, total checkpoint taxes exceeds 450,000 SSP (USD 750). Payment is the highest on the White Nile at about 4,170,500 SSP (USD 6,951) for the total route, or SSP 126,379 (USD 211) on average per checkpoint.
- **River checkpoints taxes are higher than road checkpoints taxes in absolute terms, but lower in proportion to cargo weight.** A 40-ton truck typically pays SSP 12,514 (USD 21) per checkpoint along the Western Corridor, which corresponds to SSP 313 (USD 0.52) per ton; by contrast, the SSP 126,379 (USD 211) on average per river checkpoint cover a charge of around 1,200 tons that barges carry, yielding an average per-ton checkpoint rate of SSP 123 (USD 0.20).
- **Most payments are unreceipted.** 84% of individual payments made during the survey were unreceipted.
- **UN or NGO-contracted vehicles are subject to structural checkpoint taxation.** 157 or 49% of checkpoints levy taxes on vehicles transporting humanitarian aid.
- **The most commonly observed checkpoint operators** are the Traffic Police and SSPDF, sighted at 43% and 38% of checkpoints respectively. At 57% of the checkpoints, more than one type of official or agency is present at a checkpoint.
- The **SPLA/M-IO** controls 60 (or 19%) of all checkpoints we visited. Government forces operate most of the checkpoints along overland routes, whereas most river checkpoints (38 out of 66, or 58%) are under control of SPLA/M-IO forces.
- **SPLA/M-IO river checkpoints are 45% more expensive than government river checkpoints.** For rivers, average checkpoint taxes at SPLA-IO checkpoints were SSP 122,000 (USD 203), whereas average tax rates at non-IO checkpoints was SSP 55,700 (USD 93).

## Key implications

- Checkpoints likely form the biggest non-oil source of cash for government agents and security forces
- The transport and trade sector is therefore thoroughly implicated in financing conflict actors
- Checkpoints are key factor in the high transport prices as compared to neighboring countries
- As checkpoint taxes are calculated based on vehicle type, low value cargoes pay more as a percent of the value of goods transported, imperiling markets for agricultural produce.



*Passengers waiting at checkpoint near Aweil*

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*A river checkpoint along the White Nile.*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background and purpose

In 2011, the year South Sudan became independent, the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published a study on checkpoints along major trade routes. It provided 'evidence that roadblocks are a major constraint to trade and economic development in South Sudan'<sup>1</sup>, and recommended regular follow-up surveys on the topic. Ten years after, this is the first such follow-up study.

In the meantime, the context has changed radically. Since 2013, oil production has plummeted and endemic conflict has severely disrupted domestic economic activity, making its population reliant on imports of basic foodstuff, fuel and manufactured items as well as on emergency relief. Therefore, transport conditions are crucial to food security, influencing market prices and the cost of humanitarian distribution. Furthermore, in a cash-strapped economy, checkpoints have become the main interface of systemic predation on the value concentrated in long-distance transport. To suggest how widespread and entrenched this phenomenon has become, earlier reports have called this the 'checkpoint economy', comprising how 'official and unofficial (armed) actors tax and expropriate goods and cash travelling on South Sudan's roads and rivers'.<sup>2</sup> As a result, South Sudan has the highest transport costs in the world for aid delivery, alongside Afghanistan and DR Congo.<sup>3</sup>

While recurrently denounced in the media and NGO reports, evidence on the checkpoint economy in South Sudan has remained fragmented and anecdotal in nature. The purpose of this report is to provide a first systematical analysis of this phenomenon, answering the following two questions:

1. What is the scope of the phenomenon of checkpoints in South Sudan?
2. What is the political and economic significance of checkpoints in South Sudan?

To answer the *first* question, the report provides an assessment of the scope of South Sudan's checkpoint economy through a mapping of checkpoints along the country's main routes, combined with a survey of some of the main aspects of the checkpoint economy, such as who operates them, who is taxed, and how much. This data is also available in an interactive webmap, that can be accessed through the link [https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/ssd\\_checkpoints\\_webmap/](https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/ssd_checkpoints_webmap/)

To answer the *second* question, the report discusses the main drivers and impacts of checkpoints, both as a source of income for checkpoint operators and a burden for affected stakeholders. To assess how checkpoints figure in the political economy of conflict in South Sudan, the report attempts to estimate the amount of money that checkpoints generate by taxation of transport and discusses how it is enabled by and contributes to conflict in South Sudan.

This report is structured as follows. After providing a brief historical context of the phenomenon of transit taxes, we summarize the main findings in a single chapter. The *first* detailed part of the report is dedicated to giving an overview of dynamics per route, providing information on the number of checkpoints and level of taxes along each, alongside route-specific contextual information and dynamics. The *second* detailed part of the report provides in-depth case studies of checkpoint dynamics, focusing on certain locales, conflict dynamics or economic sectors. Each section is accompanied by tables, graphs and charts as well as maps illustrating our findings. The report as a whole is complemented by an interactive webmap, which allows users to further explore the data in more detail. What follows now is a fairly detailed discussion of our methodology—we invite the reader interested in the key points of the report to skip directly to Section 3, Main Findings.

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1 National Bureau of Statistics. (2011). South Sudan Cost-to-Market Report, An Analysis of Check-points on the Major Trade Routes in South Sudan. Juba: National Bureau of Statistics.

2 Thomas, E., Gworo, R., & Wani, K. G. (2018). Cash-based Programmes and Conflict: Key areas of interaction and options for conflict-sensitive programming in South Sudan. Juba: CSRF, p 2; also see OCHA. (2021). Humanitarian Needs Overview South Sudan, p. 72

3 Maunder, N., Coombs, D., Fenton, G., Hoogendoorn, A., & Carboni, L. (2017). South Sudan: An evaluation of WFP's Portfolio (2011 - 2016) Volume II: Annexes. Rome: World Food Programme; on the taxation of humanitarian transport, see section 2.1

## 1.2. Methodology

This report is based on a countrywide mapping of checkpoints<sup>4</sup>, stakeholder interviews, and a review of the relevant grey literature. A team of local consultant researchers was trained in the IPIS methodology developed during similar mappings in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.<sup>5</sup>

Based on initial stakeholder interviews and together with the local researchers, we developed a tailor-made questionnaire that was coupled to fieldwork-based geographical data collection on checkpoints. The questionnaire focused on collecting information for each checkpoint about checkpoint operators - such as the amount of people present, their affiliation, as well as the number of weapons; about taxation - both taxes paid for the vehicle in which the researcher was traveling as well as for other types of travelers; the date of establishment and the reason of existence for the checkpoint; as well as the type of location. In this way, we collected data on 319 different checkpoints, which we subsequently analyzed using R, to identify some statistical patterns that may provide insight into the political economy of checkpoints in South Sudan. We further triangulated our findings through interviews with humanitarian stakeholders, focus group discussions with road users, qualitative fieldwork, data provided by transporters, and participative checkpoint mapping sessions with transporters operating along different routes.

It is important to note that number and distribution of checkpoints is highly changeable, in function of the seasonality of road networks, army redeployments, as well as changes in the security context along roads. Thus, the data provided in this report should only be taken as indicative, as things on the ground may have changed in the intervening period. Similarly, checkpoint taxes vary per checkpoint and over time, making the figures in this report indicative rather than absolute. In principle, all tax amounts reported are the amounts paid by commercial transporters traveling without humanitarian convoys.<sup>6</sup> Our data covers the period between 2019 and 2021, with some historical data provided by transporters; because the USD-SSP exchange rate is extremely volatile, all figures mentioned are converted into early 2021 SSP and the corresponding value in USD.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that for our calculations about average taxes on commercial trucking, we have excluded the majority of urban checkpoints in Juba town, because except for the major checkpoints at the entry points to the town, urban checkpoints do not structurally tax long-distance trucks. We do, however, provide an in-depth look at these urban checkpoints in a dedicated case study (section 7).

### Choice of routes and coverage

This study covers all the main overland routes and waterways in South Sudan. South Sudan only has a limited road network, making it comparatively straightforward to cover all major routes. These include the Juba-Nimule road ('South Sudan's lifeline'), the route connecting Juba to Wau, and from Wau to Aweil and Bentiu (also called the 'Western Corridor', the dry-season, overland backbone for relief), as well as the White Nile, key for connecting Juba to locations up north during the rainy season. This study also covers other key routes, such as Juba-Nadapal, Juba-Yambio, Leer-Bentiu, and the Sobat River, as well as a variety of routes connecting Aweil to the Republic of Sudan (Annex 1 contains a full list of the routes surveyed).

In no small part, this selection was informed by our intent to reproduce the only previous checkpoint study for South Sudan—published by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011—allowing us to chart

4 Whereas they are called 'roadblocks' (barrières routières) in neighboring countries—and the IPIS reports about them—checkpoints is the most common term in South Sudan, although they refer to the same phenomenon.

5 Schouten, P., & Kalessopo, S.-P. (2017). The Politics of Pillage: the political economy of roadblocks in the Central African Republic. Copenhagen/Antwerp: DIIS/IPIS; Schouten, P., Murairi, J., & Kubuya, S. (2017). "Everything that moves will be taxed": the political economy of roadblocks in North and South Kivu. Copenhagen/Antwerp/Goma: DIIS/IPIS/ASSODIP.

6 In some cases, there are significant disparities between checkpoint taxation levels observed by our researchers and taxation levels provided by transporters. This is due to the fact that our researchers traveled with humanitarian convoys or other modes of transport that are subjected to lower taxes than commercial transporters. Data provided by transporters has always been independently triangulated.

7 Here, we use the 'effective' exchange rate of SSP 600 to the dollar, not the official exchange rate provided by the Central Bank of South Sudan. Calculation of values in SSP 'adjusted': 1) the values for each year were first converted into USD as specified above; and 2) for conversion into SSP 'adjusted', all the values converted in USD were afterwards multiplied by 600 (exchange rate as of 2021). Note that the above has a huge influence on tax levels. In 2019, 1 USD = 240 SSP, in 2020 1 USD = 300 SSP, while in early 2021, 1 USD = 600 SSP.

the evolution of the checkpoint economy in the ten years since independence. It was also informed by the priorities of aid organizations, established during consultations with key stakeholders in Juba. They expressed concern in particular over checkpoint taxation along the Western Corridor, as well as the road between Bor and Pibor and the rivers. Where possible, we therefore conducted surveys of these routes traveling both in commercial vehicles and in humanitarian convoys.

### Challenges and limitations

While it was initially our ambition to cover all of South Sudan's trade routes, we were limited by defective roads, excessive flooding, and insecurity. In some areas, active ongoing conflict or other forms of heightened insecurity prevented us from mapping certain checkpoints known to exist. Given budget constraints, we had to forgo a number of routes—mostly relatively less busy and remote routes, which would be relatively costly to map in proportion to their overall importance for bulk transport and the number of checkpoints. A more complete study would certainly have to pay more attention to the taxation of non-motorized transport such as cattle on hoof, market taxes, and include routes such as the road between Juba, Yei and Kaya, which was inaccessible because of insecurity, and the many secondary routes in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Identifying the name of checkpoints turned out difficult. Many checkpoints have no fixed names and are given different names by different people, for instance referring to characteristics of the location (e.g. the name of the tree under which the checkpoint operators sit). Also, there is no fixed spelling for checkpoint names, and sometimes transliteration from Arabic also entails marked differences. In case of doubt, we therefore mention the multiple names we have of checkpoints.

Identifying checkpoint operators also turned out to be a challenge. Some checkpoints are clearly associated to specific authorities—such as the Traffic Police in Juba—but other checkpoints are staffed by a number of individuals who can hardly lay claim to be from the different state 'services' they purport to represent.<sup>9</sup> Different individual commanders, furthermore, copy the hierarchies of the state services typically present at checkpoints, while in reality connections to their respective hierarchies may be fictive—in the extreme case, they may simply be the foot soldiers of the local strongman. Our local researchers have asked and recorded the offices that checkpoint agents themselves provided, forming the bulk of the information we report on. For instance, we use the designation SPLA/M-IO in this report as an umbrella designation lumping together a variety of *de facto* government offices and army units associated to the opposition rather than the government in Juba. In another way, SSPDF is used to designate all army units, however tenuous their association with the chain of command leading to Bilpam. Where possible and relevant, we provide further information on the chains of command behind individual checkpoints, along with sources for that information.

Recruitment and safety of national consultant researchers was also a challenge. The conflict in South Sudan has involved the entrenchment of tensions along ethnic lines, mainly but not exclusively affecting the two major population groups, Dinka and Nuer. We therefore consulted extensively with the consultant researchers, to arrive at a selection of researchers for each route that would minimize such risks. To mitigate risks, along certain trajectories, researchers were furthermore embedded in convoys of aid organizations that facilitated assistance, but that prefer to remain anonymous to avoid government retribution.

A further challenge pertains to calculating the amounts paid at checkpoints. The amounts demanded by checkpoint operators at any given checkpoint vary from one checkpoint encounter to the next, in function of negotiation skills of the road user, the transport mode, the identity of the driver (for example nationality), whether or not the transporter is transporting for a humanitarian organization, whether they are accompanied by a soldier and taxes paid at previous checkpoints along the way. Thus, the amounts paid that our researchers recorded may be typical amounts, or not. To control for this factor, we compared

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<sup>8</sup> Mentioned in passing in the UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/292, Annex V.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Kuda and Wau Bridge checkpoints are manned by soldiers and civilians claiming to be from agencies like CID, MI, SSPDF, NRA, but which are actually forged by the commander in charge to strengthen their negotiation position in demanding more taxes. While agents from each of these services sat in a physically separate 'office' (hut) where drivers were obliged to register, they were using a single stamp for all of them; finally, one checkpoint operator in the end collected all the taxes, which would not be the case had it been separate administrative entities. Additionally, when you move from physical office to office, in the back one guy picks up the same stamp, and carries it to the other office to stamp. Source: observations at the checkpoints, December 2019.



our data to data provided by aid organizations on taxation rates to which their commercial logistical subcontractors were subject. Where possible we held focus groups with transporters operating along each of the routes, systematically recording the taxes they last paid at each checkpoint. Throughout, we explicitly list the empirical basis for the amount we present for each checkpoint, but the reader should note that any figure is highly contingent and variable. For reasons of confidentiality, we withhold all sources.

Related, the real value of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) is subject to rampant fluctuation. We throughout use the 2021 'street' exchange rate to the USD, which is at variance from the official government exchange rate. Unless otherwise indicated, we have converted historical SSP amounts to today's exchange rate for comparability.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic seriously affected the implementation of the research. Originally, it had been foreseen to collect all primary data within a one-year period - i.e. one round of data-collection during the rainy season of 2019, and one round during the dry season of 2020. Due to Covid-19 the second round of data-collection had to be postponed to the dry season of 2021.

## 2. CONTEXT: THE HISTORY OF THE CHECKPOINT ECONOMY IN SOUTH SUDAN

### The emergence of the checkpoint economy

From colonial times until today, main trade routes in the area of what is now South Sudan have been militarized spaces, where government (*hakumah*) administration, concentrated in garrison towns, imposed exactions on the few long-distance traders along the overland and river routes.<sup>10</sup> After Sudan gained control of southern Sudan in 1956, it established military garrisons-cum-checkpoints all across the territory, deploying soldiers as a bulwark against the Anyanya rebels. Towns like Akobo started out as such checkpoints; a neighborhood in Juba is still called 'Checkpoint'; and in fact, in many areas, such roadside army checkpoints were the only sign of the state. While the Government of Sudan held checkpoints along major routes until 2005, since 2006, the SPLA have set up their own checkpoints to control and impede movement. As a legacy of its recent past as part of Sudan, South Sudan inherited a distrustful disposition towards centralized power, enshrining decentralized administrative powers in its constitution and with it, fiscal revenue raising powers at the national, state and county level.<sup>11</sup>

Given the absence of a developed taxation system, the *de facto* revenue generation by different administrative entities came to pivot on checkpoints. The most important source of checkpoint revenue generation by far has been and remains cross-border trade. An the most in-depth work on historical trade taxes in South Sudan noted, 'the main source of tax revenue in South Sudan comes from taxing (cross-border) trade', and therefore, 'a County or State's geographical location vis-à-vis an international border and its supply routes is key'.<sup>12</sup>

However, this has led to competition over taxation, in particular by administrative entities not located at an international border. To accommodate their fiscal demands, an interstate taxation agreement in 2006 stipulated that

*'goods in transit could be taxed at the international point of entry, as well as at every subsequent State border. At County level, legislation provided vague provisions for locally administered gibana taxes, which some questionably administered as an ad valorem tax for international trade'.<sup>13</sup>*

At independence, the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) Finance Ministry recognized that it had a 'legacy' tax system, 'including ad hoc nuisance fees that are charged at road checkpoints by the states ... in which 8% of the value of the goods per 100 km were lost'.<sup>14</sup> The central government has since at least formally attempted to assert its control over this decentralized taxation system with support from international donors, but not without resistance from local administrative entities.<sup>15</sup>

However, civilian administrative entities were never the only ones relying on decentralized taxation. Before independence, the SPLM/A was as a guerilla movement that resorted to local food requisitioning to feed its troops, in some places consistently creaming off 20% of humanitarian aid.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, during

- 
- 10 Colonial garrisons were often placed at the locations of earlier slaving outposts called zariba, see Sikainga AA (1989) The legacy of slavery and slave trade in the western Bahr al-Ghazal, 1850-1939. *Northeast African Studies* 11(2): 75-95.
  - 11 Twijnstra R and Titeca K (2016) Everything changes to remain the same? State and tax reform in South Sudan. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 54(2): 263-292.
  - 12 Twijnstra, R. W. (2014). On the State of Business: Trade, Entrepreneurship and Real Economic Governance In South Sudan. PhD thesis, Wageningen University, Wageningen, p. 90
  - 13 Ibidem. Gibana, also spelled gevana, may be colloquial Arabic for 'Jibu le ana' meaning 'give to me', and is formalized in the local government act section 74 [1] E. It dates back to council tax levied, at least in Juba, in colonial times, see Mulla, R.M. (1986) *Legal Aspects of Decentralisation of Government in the Sudan*, PhD thesis. SOAS University of London, p. 495
  - 14 Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (2011), *Revenue Challenges Ahead: Southern Sudan*, presentation to the OECD Task Force on Tax and Development, p. 6. Interestingly, around independence, donors sought to support South Sudanese state building by expanding its capacities to generate non-oil revenue generation, strengthening its checkpoint powers. See World Bank. (2010). *Enabling the State: Estimating the Non Oil Revenue Potential of State and Local Governments*. Washington: World Bank.
  - 15 When in 2012, government tried to centralize customs taxes—and reduce subnational taxation—Eastern Equatoria customs agents responded by imposing a new tax equal to customs, not at the border but different points along the route. See Twijnstra op cit p. 104.
  - 16 HRW. (2000). *Famine in Sudan*, 1998.

much of the two wars for independence, Anyanya and SPLA factions across the country often found themselves disconnected from supplies from friendly neighboring countries. They had to rely on local foraging strategies, requisitioning food aid and foodstuffs, something donors chose to overlook in support of the freedom struggle.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the SPLA's experience with checkpoints was as part of a war economy, in which local SPLA units and militia engaged in decentralized predation on flows of aid, teak, charcoal and cross-border trade to sustain themselves.

At independence in 2011, the GoSS put former freedom fighters on the South Sudan's People Defense Forces (SSPDF) payroll, with the ambition to finance people under arms as well as local administrative entities through oil revenues rather than decentralized taxation. The presence of substantial oil reserves and the agricultural potential of the country led to optimism about the feasibility of a stable and independent South Sudan. Since 2013, however, the country has spiraled back into conflict. Oil revenues plummeted, leading to a drying up of the flow of cash from the capital to local administrative entities and army units deployed throughout the country. The faltering of army salaries and local government budgets increased fiscal pressures, prompting local army units and government authorities to increase decentralized taxation at checkpoints.<sup>18</sup> By consequence, as one study observed, in 2014, 'more than 60 per cent of Southern Sudan's revenues has been collected at checkpoints'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in 2014, the spokesperson for the SSPDF acknowledged the army was systematically taxing at checkpoints, even though it had no corresponding mandate.<sup>20</sup> Also, in 2013, more than half of the armed forces split from the SPLA 'in government' (SPLA-IG), instead siding with the SPLA 'in opposition' (SPLA-IO) headed by Vice President Riek Machar. Cut off from government revenues, SPLA-IO army units and administrative entities in areas under IO control became increasingly dependent on checkpoint taxation to maintain afloat, complementing support from the Sudanese government.<sup>21</sup>

The conflict since 2013 has exacerbated the already fragile humanitarian situation in the country, displacing unprecedented numbers of people and leading to extreme levels of food insecurity. The international community finances humanitarian relief and peacekeeping to a level of 1,4 billion USD annually (or 7% of all global humanitarian spending)<sup>22</sup>, an important influx of resources in a cash-strapped economy. It should not come as a surprise that bulk transport of humanitarian relief figures as a major source of checkpoint revenues across the country.

Administrative reshuffling—from 10 to 32 states and back again—and an absence of salaries only added incentives for local state representatives to generate their own cash, and roadside taxation of the value concentrated in bulk transport again emerged as the easiest means to do so. When 18 new states were added to the existing ones, these new states had to find their own sources of revenue. In Madiri State, a typical example is the Ibba checkpoint. This is the last checkpoint when exiting defunct Maridi state, and it survived the abolishment of its *raison d'être* when Maridi state became once again part of Western Equatoria state.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when Northern Bahr Al Ghazal was divided into three states, each of these states erected checkpoints at their side of the new state borders, facing new checkpoints by their neighboring state on the other side (see section 4.4).

In the context where more and more state resources are funneled directly to militia or security units loyal to specific elite individuals, but not to the regular armed forces and civil services, checkpoints have formed an exceedingly important self-help strategy for agents of the 'normal' government.<sup>24</sup> Yet as

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- 17 Bradbury, M., Leader, N., & Mackintosh, K. (2000). The 'Agreement on Ground Rules' in South Sudan. London: ODI/HPG Report 4; D'Agoot, M., Daniel, A., Deng, K., Biong, L., Deng, D., Duany, J., . . . Pagan, M. (2018). The politics of humanitarianism: perspectives from South Sudan. London: LSE.
  - 18 Through Improved Agro-Logistics in a Fragile Country: Findings from a Trader Survey in South Sudan. Washington: World Bank, p. 59
  - 19 Wek, D. D. (2014). A critical analysis of tax administration in south Sudan: a case study of the national ministry of finance and economic planning (MOFEP), Juba, South Sudan. Kampala International University, p. 11
  - 20 <https://eyeradio.org/traders-protest-extortion-checkpoints/>
  - 21 UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/292, p. 38
  - 22 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/maps-and-graphics/2019/10/09/ten-donors-and-10-crises-dominate-humanitarian-spending>
  - 23 Source: interviews at the checkpoint
  - 24 See, for discussion, Kindersley, N., & Majok, J. D. (2019). Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute; Hutton, L. (2018). Aid and Government: Conflict sensitivity and the state in South Sudan. Geneva: CSRF; Craze, J. (2018). Displacement, Access, and Conflict in South Sudan: A Longitudinal Perspective. Juba: Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF).

checkpoints emerge out of decades of a war economy and are predicated on insecurity, they represent an uncomfortable balance, or ‘new normal’, of perpetual conflict as the status quo.<sup>25</sup>

Taken together, these historical developments have entailed the entrenchment of a ‘checkpoint economy’ that is premised on what others have called ‘decentralized predation’, because checkpoint revenue generation by actors - civil and military - does not give rise to local service provision.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, according to survey among traders by the World Bank in 2017, checkpoints had come to form the most common barrier along major routes, trumping road conditions and insecurity.<sup>27</sup> However, as we will show in the following, in some cases checkpoints also allow the decentralized provision of a modicum of security by the SSPDF at points where major trade routes cut through areas of notable insecurity.

### *The military uses of checkpoints*

Checkpoints have not only been important mechanisms for revenue generation in South Sudan’s recent past. As military positions, they also form key sites of active combat. In July 2016, for instance, fighting broke out at a checkpoint in Juba between SSPDF and SPLA-IO forces, leading to the coming apart of a fragile peace deal (ARCSS). As Riek Machar fled in the ensuing onslaught, ‘Fighting then spread toward the Yei military checkpoint’ ... ‘Combat between the SPLA and SPLM/A in Opposition continued on 11 July—again centered on the Yei checkpoint—as the SPLM/A in Opposition sought to flee the city toward the southwest’.<sup>28</sup>



*Checkpoint at the entrance of Aweil*

25 Also see Thomas et al op cit p. 7; UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/292, p. 38

26 M. Hart, forthcoming LSE brief

27 See World Bank, op cit. P. 76

28 See UN Panel of Experts report S/2016/805

Second, checkpoints are reflections of military control. This has three aspects: first, that control over cross-border trade routes forms a crucible in the balance of power between opposed factions, as they form indispensable supply lines to factions otherwise cut off from supplies. As a result, over the past few years, individual commanders and armed group factions have sought 'Control of roads and transportation routes, particularly near the border with Uganda'.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, most trade is from within specific zones of influence outward to neighboring countries.<sup>30</sup> The SPLA/M-IO is in control of a handful of such key routes, and opposition groups periodically demonstrate their clout by rendering cross-border routes under government control insecure.<sup>31</sup> Often too weak to be able to mount permanent checkpoints along any of the major routes, proxies for the government and larger armed groups operate through ambushes, hijackings and other forms of punctual 'taxation' of the wealth circulating through the area.

Second, 'military control', in particular by the government, often extends no further than checkpoints along main routes. This is the case in the Equatorias, where checkpoints along key trade routes (Juba-Nimule, Juba-Yei-Kaya, etc) are staffed by SSPDF recruited from Bor, Warrap or Bahr al Ghazal, but the surrounding countryside is rendered insecure by clashes between NAS and the government. Something similar holds in Unity State, where the government has progressively gained control over main roads, but where the SPLA/M-IO holds sway away from the main roads.

Finally, the South Sudanese security organs have copied the strategy that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) used against them in the 1990s, to use checkpoints as devices to block aid delivery and restrict humanitarian access to areas and towns under enemy control. Over the past years, the SSPDF and NSS have encircled Wau, Yei and other areas with checkpoints that obstructed humanitarian access to and patrols from these hubs.<sup>32</sup> Section 6 provides a further discussion of this phenomenon.

## 2.1. Background to humanitarian-checkpoint interactions

This section describes the state of knowledge about the intersections of humanitarian transport and the checkpoint economy. Hovering around 1.5 billion USD annually, ODA is about three times the size of South Sudan's national budget<sup>33</sup>; as little of that budget finds its way to street-level bureaucrats and security staff, 'predation on aid resources has become a way for officials (including from the security services) to support themselves in the absence of a viable government income stream.'<sup>34</sup> As a 2017 WFP evaluation of humanitarian transport in South Sudan puts it, 'Payments that transport companies have to make to have access to the road network may go towards the war effort'.<sup>35</sup>

Everything suggests that humanitarian transport has become a key interface of this predation, and a slew of reports worries that the international community is co-financing the political economy of war in South Sudan.<sup>36</sup> While no viable statistics are available, humanitarian bulk transport is estimated to make up about half of all bulk transport in South Sudan since independence, and over half of this transport is outsourced by UN agencies and NGOs to commercial transporters—thereby outsourcing both the risks and the costs of navigating the checkpoint economy to private contractors.<sup>37</sup> As a result, transporters in South Sudan charge aid organizations the highest per kilometer cost in the world, comparing only to the DR Congo and Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> A few reports make mention of how this transport cost is a function of

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29 See UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/1049, para 30

30 WFP. (2015). South Sudan - Market Assessment. Rome: WFP, p. vii

31 Significantly, the Opposition has not relinquished control over river routes under the R-ARCSS, while it has abandoned checkpoints along key cross-border routes in the Equatorias—routes that have, however, remained insecure ever since.

32 See Human Rights Council (2020), "There is nothing left for us": starvation as a method of warfare in South Sudan (A/HRC/45/CRP.3); also see Craze, J. (2019). Displaced and Immiserated: The Shilluk of Upper Nile in South Sudan's civil war, 2014–19. London: Small Arms Survey.

33 UNICEF (2020) South Sudan National Budget Brief 2019/2020

34 Hutton op cit p. 20; cf. Rolandsen ØH and Kindersley N (2017) South Sudan: A Political Economy Analysis. (Oslo: NUPI/PRIO), p. 18 & 31

35 Maunder et al 2017 op cit, para 36

36 Geneva Call. (2021). South Sudan: Understanding Humanitarian Access and the Protection of Civilians in an Era of Depoliticized War. Geneva: Geneva Call. and see references in footnote 24

37 Maunder et al op cit, para 86; Thomas et al op cit p. 8

38 'According to a World Bank road density study, average truck delivery times in South Sudan are 24 times higher than the current global benchmark; the average time a vehicle takes to travel over unpaved roads is 6.4 km/hour. This results in WFP having to pay very high transport rates. For example, for the route Juba to Bentiu the cost is approximately USD 350 per metric tonne (for 40 metric tonne truck payload). This is more than double the rates charged in neighbouring countries over a similar distance.' Maunder et al op cit pp. 169-170

South Sudan's checkpoint economy, such as a 2017 WFP evaluation which notes about checkpoint taxes paid by WFP transport contractors: 'Although these unofficial payments are not made by WFP ... (they) are the 'cost of doing business' that is factored into the private operators' rates... it is of obvious concern to the aid community'.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, many stakeholders in private ascribe large significance to checkpoint exactions in these high transport prices for South Sudan; however, details are lacking on the scope and significance of this phenomenon. Only a 2017 OCHA report on bureaucratic access impediments in South Sudan discusses checkpoint taxations in some detail:

*'Forty-four per cent of respondents reported having experienced issues with illegal taxation or bribery. Of these, 74 per cent reported that such issues were ongoing (6 per cent daily, 38 per cent weekly, and 31 per cent monthly), while 25 per cent stated that their experience was one-off. Military intelligence and the police force were seen to be the main initiators of requests for illegal taxation and bribery. Some 37 per cent of respondents said in 2016 they had spent more than USD 1,000 on illegal taxation and bribery, with the majority of incidents attributed to illegal stoppages by traffic police and payments demanded at check points.'*<sup>40</sup>

While the OCHA study has difficulties providing more details on the exact scope of this phenomenon, it does note that

*'... the cost of payments at checkpoints on the route from Juba to Bentiu is more than US\$2,000. Considering that annually, hundreds of trucks use this road to transport humanitarian cargo to affected populations in Northern South Sudan, this could amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars of diverted humanitarian funds.'*<sup>41</sup>

Some reports note that structural checkpoint taxation should be seen as only one way in which aid is being manipulated systematically for political uses in South Sudan. Whereas aid organizations adhere to principles of neutrality, aid is not neutral in the conflict in South Sudan. A legacy of the civil war that pitted the SPLA against the Khartoum regime, parties to conflict consider aid a strategic resource with important value in the conflict.<sup>42</sup> This takes various shapes. Parties to the conflict may modulate access to aid to populations as a counterinsurgency strategy: disallowing aid delivery to communities in the countryside to force them into garrison towns under their control, thereby reducing protection for opposition groups. In this way, the distribution of aid can become complicit in the strategic balance of power in a conflict. As mentioned in the section above, trade is concentrated in specific zones of influence, and political opponents would like to constrain aid to within these zones, considering aid across such borders as potential support for enemies.<sup>43</sup> Conflict actors may also seek to appropriate aid directly through looting or confiscation, to sustain their troops in food, medicine or other supplies. Finally, they may seek to systematically siphon off cash from aid organizations through more or less formal and more or less violent forms of taxation. As a result, an oft-repeated remark among aid workers in Juba is that 'NGOs are the new oil fields'.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, As OCHA reported in 2017, 'Some 37 per cent of respondents said in 2016 they had spent more than USD 1,000 on illegal taxation and bribery, with the majority of incidents attributed to illegal stoppages by traffic police and payments demanded at check points.'<sup>45</sup> This confirms, as a Rift Valley Institute report puts it, that 'The widespread checkpoint economy has become the main arena for interaction between the humanitarian system and conflict.'<sup>46</sup>

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39 Maunder et al op cit, para 86

40 OCHA. (2017). Bureaucratic access impediments to humanitarian operations in South Sudan. Juba: UN OCHA, p. 31

41 Ibidem

42 Craze op cit 2018.

43 UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/292 p. 16: 'In the Panel's view, the Government's aim is to control resource flows to opposition-held areas, to co-opt humanitarian funding as a source of revenue and to conceal gross violations of human rights.'

44 Also quoted in USIP & ODI (2018) The unintended consequences of humanitarian action in South Sudan: headline findings, United States Institute of Peace & Overseas Development Institute

45 OCHA op cit p. 31

46 Thomas et al op cit p. 2



Checkpoint at Wanyok, Northern Bahr el Ghazal

Under pressure from donors, in November that year, Salva Kiir issued the Republican Order No. 29/2017 for the free, unimpeded and unhindered movement of humanitarian assistance convoys (Annex 3), which ordered that ‘all the roadblocks should be removed from the roads’ (article 2). It did have some impact initially, but checkpoint taxes, including for humanitarian convoys, remain endemic. OCHA’s Humanitarian Snapshot from January 2019 for instance reported that

*‘An increasing number of checkpoints and fees demanded were reported along the Juba-Bentiu corridor with an average of 700,000 South Sudanese pounds (around US\$4,500) per truck being paid across an estimated 57 check-points. This contradicted the 2017 republican order for free and unhindered movement of humanitarian assistance convoys, and has delayed the dry season pre-positioning of lifesaving supplies.’<sup>47</sup>*

It appears *de facto* that checkpoint operators still consider the commercial subcontractors to aid organizations as business operators with a tax liability. Commercial transporters, understandably, invoice these transport costs to their humanitarian clients. However, even these extremely high costs for overland transport are cheap compared to the alternative—air drops—which is why the fuss is usually contained to within the humanitarian system.

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47 OCHA (2019) South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (January 2019)

### 3. MAIN FINDINGS

This section summarizes key findings from our research, which are discussed in further detail in subsequent sections of the report.

Because of the high monetary value concentrated in the bulk transport sector, overland and waterway transport in South Sudan is at the core of a political economy in which actors at every level attempt to take a cut of the wealth moving across the country. Checkpoints are a key element in this political economy.

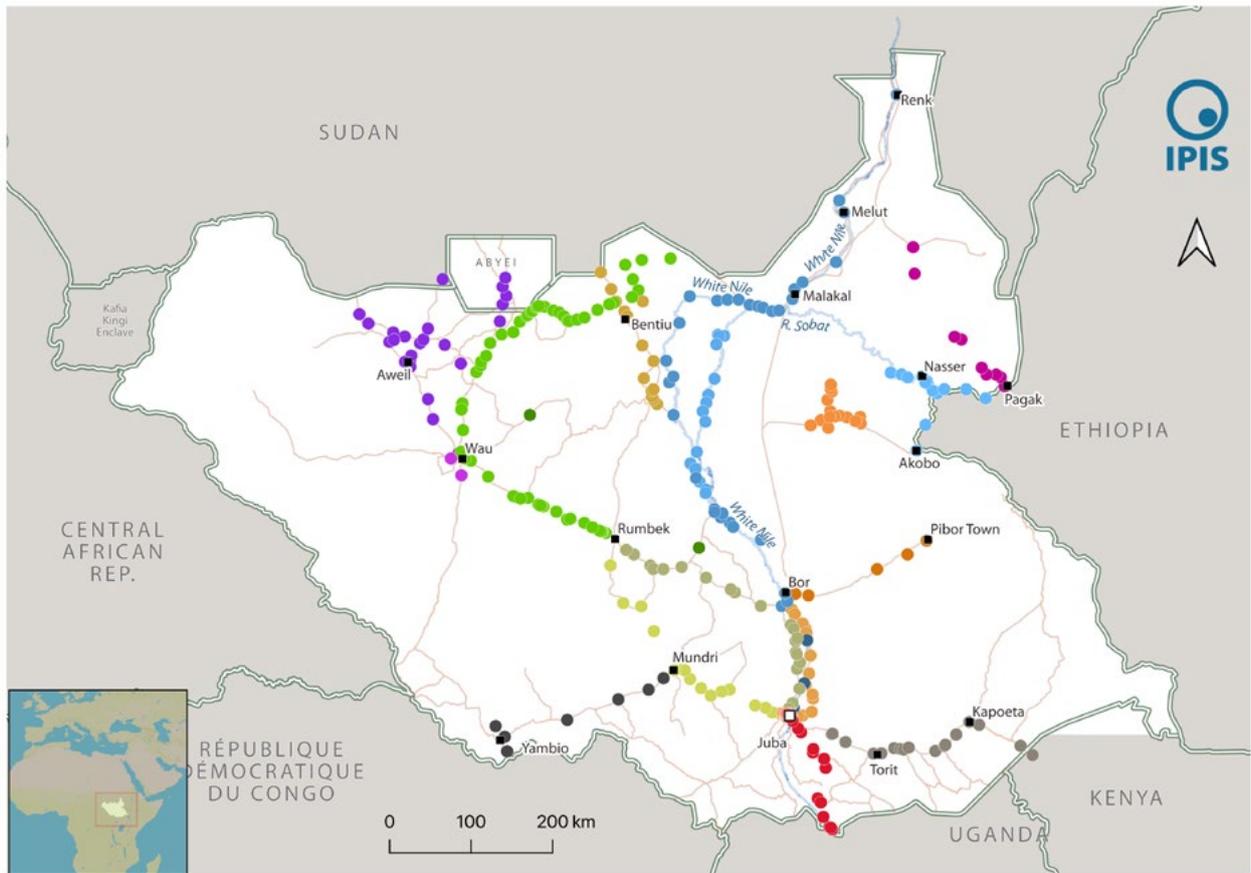
The way checkpoints work is best expressed by the (former) Secretary General of the South Sudan Chamber of Commerce, Simon Akuei, who explained most checkpoints use rope to form a barrier. 'You find illegal ropes someone puts on the road. When they see a truck coming, they erect it and block the road', Mr Akuei said. 'But when they see a small vehicle, they would hide in bush.'<sup>48</sup>

A checkpoint can have the form of ashes sprayed across the road, a log of wood, or spent tires scattered across the road. Soldiers are rotated at the roadblock, where they keep standing waiting to stop the drivers for money while the camp commander is seated in the shade of a nearby tree. In the evening, when traffic subsides, they divide the money with the checkpoint commander.



*A typical South Sudanese checkpoint.*

48 <https://eyeradio.org/illegal-checkpoints-price-hike/?fbclid=IwAR3fsF8foKJXViTIQmnr469XGzu8vZfaVaprrmtQ7ZMZFZFM0BVHZXRzrWI>



**Legend**

**Places**

- Juba
- Main cities/towns

**Roads and rivers (OSM data)**

- Regional roads
- Rivers

**Checkpoints per route**

- Bor - Juba
- Bor - Pibor
- Pathai - Langken-Akobo
- Juba - Torit - Kapoeta - Nadapal
- Nimule - Juba
- Juba town
- Mundri - Yambio
- Yambio - Nabiapai
- Yambio area
- Nzara - Li-Rangu
- Pagak - Melut
- Bentiu
- Leer - Bentiu
- Bentiu - Panakuach (border)

- Yirol - Shambe
- Chuei - Warrap
- Juba - Mundri
- Mundri - Rumbek
- Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek
- Wau - Wunrok
- Wunrok - Bentiu - Yida
- Rumbek - Wau
- Wau - Aweil
- Aweil - Nyamlel - Gok Machar
- Aweil - Majok Nyith Thiou
- Aweil - Wunrok
- Wunrok - Abyei
- Wau area
- Baro river
- Pibor river
- Sobat river
- Bor - Old Fangak (El Zeraf)
- Bor - Renk (Nile)
- Juba - Bor (Nile)

**Western Corridor**

**Wau - Sudan routes**

**River Routes**

Figure 1. Checkpoints mapped identified by route. For details on individual checkpoints, see the accompanying interactive webmap

### 3.1. Checkpoints are numerous, and have increased almost 50% percent since 2011

We have mapped a total of 319 checkpoints between 2019 and 2021, of which 253 (79%) are roadblocks and 66 (21%) river checkpoints (see Overview Map). Table 1 below shows the number of checkpoints along the routes covered by our survey, for which there was also data available for 2011.<sup>49</sup> Overall, in 2021, we observed on average one checkpoint for each 16 km (or 6 checkpoints per 100 km), whereas in 2011 there was a checkpoint each 23 km (or 4 checkpoints per 100 km).<sup>50</sup>

Whereas between 2011 and 2021, checkpoints along all routes for which baseline data was available increased with 48% (see Table 1), a remarkable decline took place along northern routes (Wau-Aweil and Wau-War-a-War). The higher number of checkpoints in 2011 along the northerly routes can possibly be explained by the then-remaining tensions between South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan. The most dramatic increases, on the other hand, took place in southern South Sudan: 183% more checkpoints along the Juba-Nimule road and a stunning 240% increase between Juba and Bor. These figures reflect the unstable security context in these areas, discussed further in section 4.

Route	Distance in Km	No. of check-points 2021	No. of check-points per 100km 2021	No. of check-points 2011	No. of check-points per 100 km 2011	Percent change
<b>Juba-Aweil</b>	746	48	6	32	4	50%
<b>Wau-Aweil</b>	144	4	3	9	6	-56%
<b>Juba-Wau (via Mundri)</b>	602	51	9	24	4	112%
<b>Wau-War a War</b>	198	5	2.5	14	7	-64%
<b>Juba-War a War</b>	800	49	6	39	5	26%
<b>Juba-Bor</b>	192	17	9	5	3	340%
<b>Juba-Nadapal</b>	338	18	5	11	3	64%
<b>Juba-Torit</b>	128	4	3	4	3	0%
<b>Juba-Nimule</b>	192	15	9	6	4	150%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>3,311</b>	<b>211</b>		<b>144</b>		
<b>Average</b>		<b>23.4</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>48%</b>

Not every vehicle has to stop at each checkpoint. Along the White Nile, for instance, large barges are required to stop at only a portion of the river checkpoints at which boats are demanded to stop (see section 6). Along overland routes, trucks and passenger vehicles are usually hailed, while pedestrians are rarely checked. This points to a bias towards bulk transport at South Sudanese checkpoints, where checkpoint taxation disproportionately targets long-distance exchange and foreign traders, while it does not concern itself with direct taxation of local trade (see section 8 for discussion).

49 For an overview of the number of checkpoints for all routes covered, see Annex 1

50 Figures for the selection of routes in Table 1

51 Shows only those routes for which 2011 data was available from the NBS study, not all routes we surveyed.

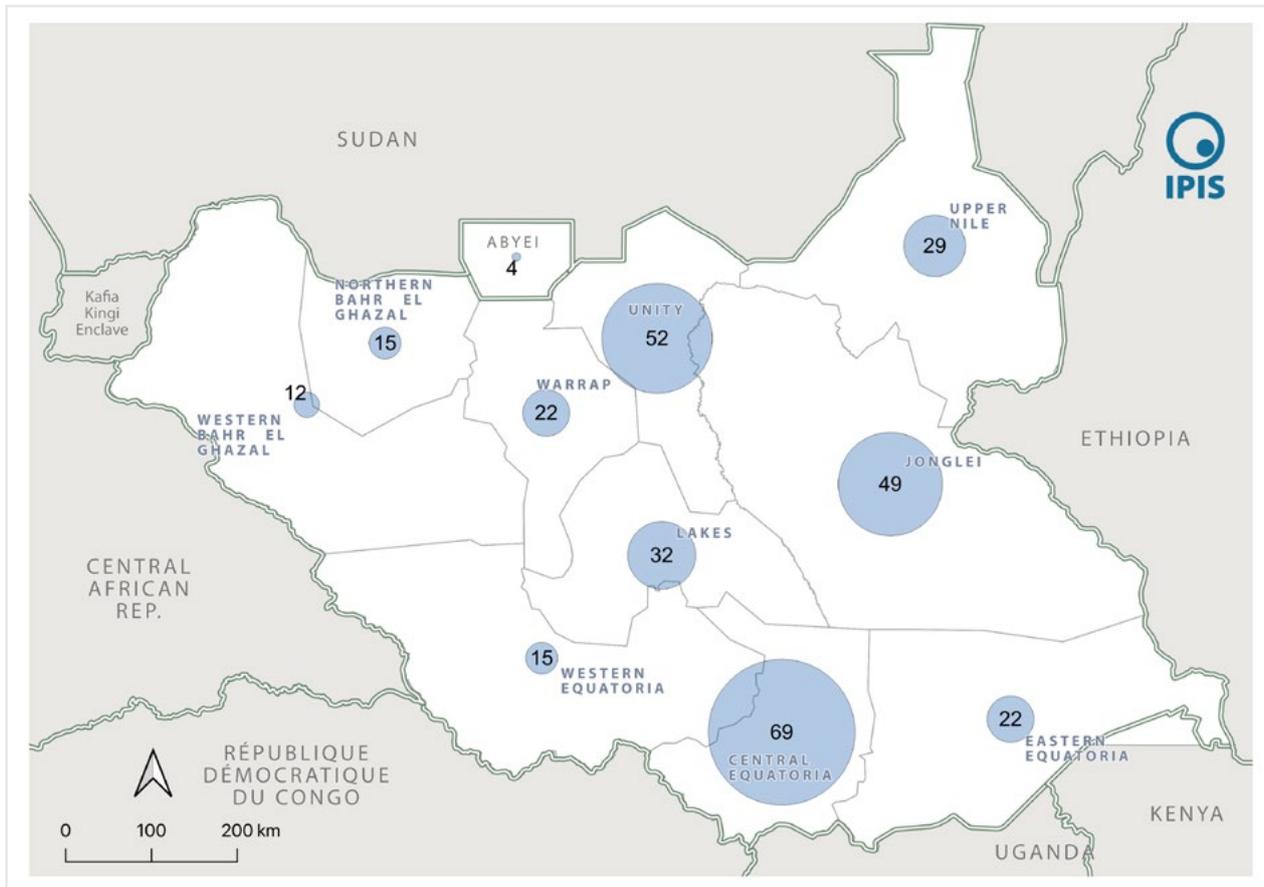


Figure 2. Checkpoints per State.

Approached per state, checkpoints concentrate in Central Equatoria. The latter state, encompassing Juba, is home to 69, or nearly a quarter (22%), of all checkpoints mapped (see Figure 2). This probably reflects the confluence of trade routes, overland and by river, around the capital, and the fact that imports need to be cleared physically in Juba before proceeding inland.<sup>52</sup> Central Equatoria is followed by Jonglei State and Unity State, each home to around 50 (or 16%) of all checkpoints encountered. Interestingly, most checkpoints in Jonglei are located along rivers (White Nile and El Zeraf), whereas most of the checkpoints in Central Equatoria and Unity State are along overland routes.

52 'due to government regulations, all trucks carrying cargo into the country (via the southern corridor) must be cleared through Juba', Maunder et al op cit, para 85

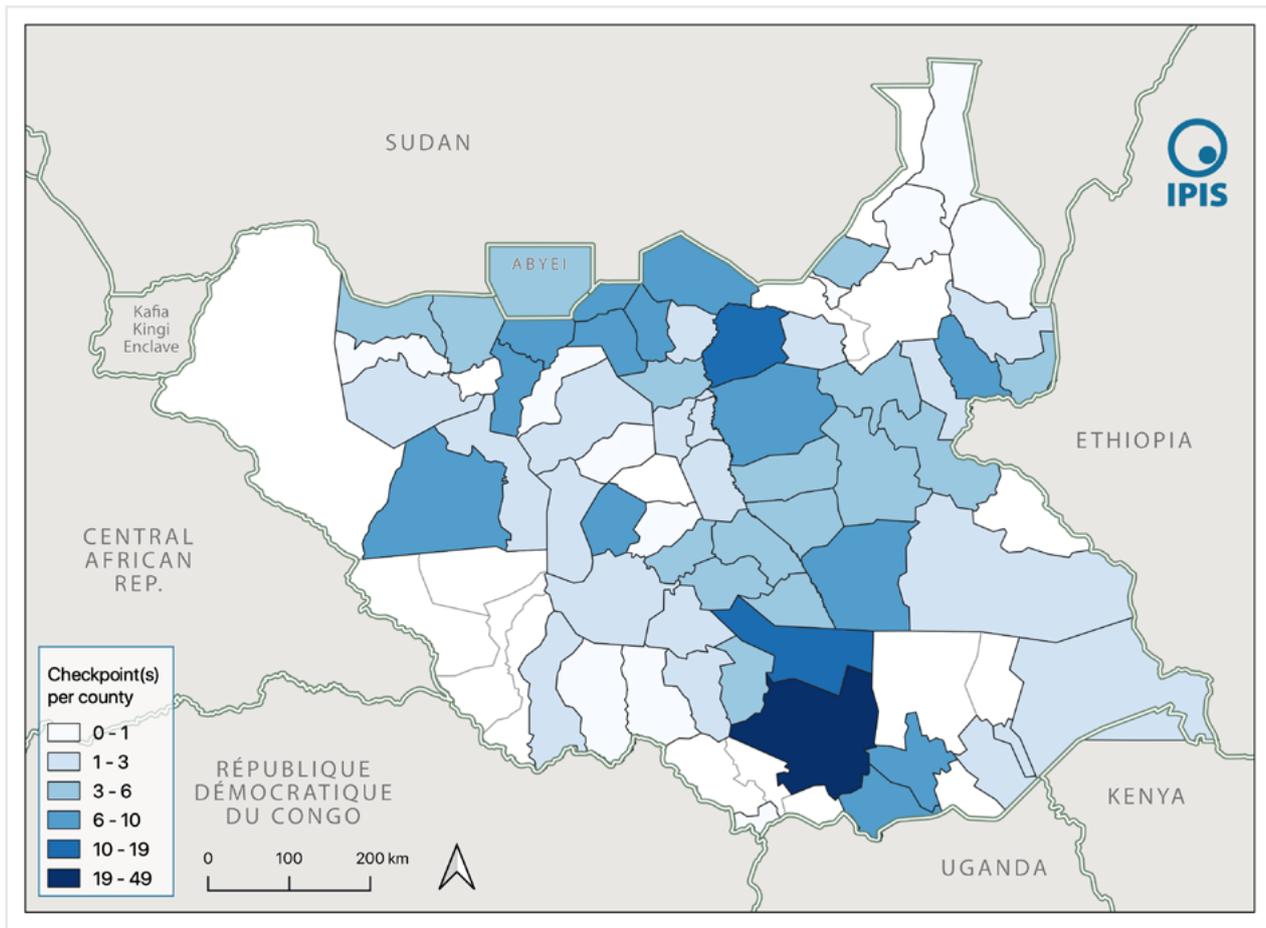


Figure 3. Checkpoints per county.

If one looks at the density of checkpoints per county (Figure 3), then the Juba, Terekeka, Mayom, Cueibet, and Fangak counties stand out. This may be due to the shifting of conflict fault lines, which involves the fortification of Juba in a context of heightened antagonism against the government among surrounding populations, but also simply to the relatively large size of the County. Cueibet’s high prevalence of checkpoints could be explained by high levels of intercommunal violence, both between different Dinka Gok sub-clans, and Gok and neighboring payams. Mayom is a strategic trading hub—forming a node along the Western Corridor connecting Abeyi, Darfuri, Sudanic trade networks—and a government bulwark against the SPLA/M-IO. Mayom is home to the SSPDF’s Division 4 Special Forces, a Bul Nuer militia semi-autonomous from the army hierarchy, and transporters reported especially high taxation here. Finally, Fangak is SPLA/M-IO heartland, but also contains the limit to the zones of influence between the opposition and government, each therefore operating a multiplicity of checkpoints here (see section 6.2).

### 3.2. Checkpoint taxes are ubiquitous, and have increased more than 300% since 2011

At almost all checkpoints, drivers of commercial vehicles are stopped and a payment of a ‘transit tax’ is demanded. Taxes vary from a symbolic—but nonetheless compulsory—‘lowering of the rope’ or ‘water’, in the range of SSP 100-1,000 (USD 0.15 to 1.50) to SSP 300,000 (USD 500) taxes for commercial vehicles in some places.

Average checkpoint taxes based on data provided by transporters for both roads and rivers in South Sudan are SSP 48,000 (USD 80), with a median of 11,500 SSP (USD 19). Average taxes recorded by our researchers, who sometimes traveled in convoys and sometimes with passenger vehicles, are SSP 5,500 (USD 9), with a median of SSP 1,500 (USD 2,5). The difference between median and average amounts

is due to individual outliers such as border posts, river checkpoints and some inland checkpoints with exceptionally high tax levels, which raise the average but are not representative for general patterns. At 62 checkpoints (19%) payments are lower than SSP 1,000 (USD 1.5); only 8% of checkpoint taxes exceed SSP 100,000 (USD 166), and these are mostly concentrated along the White Nile.

Forms of non-commercial transport are usually exempt from significant levels of taxation, with the exception of Juba, where the Traffic Police is known to harass different types of road users (see section 7). The three most commonly taxed road users were (1) passenger vehicles, were subject to taxation at 53% of all checkpoints; (2) commercial trucks, including contractors for aid agencies, taxed at 45% of all checkpoints; followed by (3) motorcycles, taxed at 26% of all checkpoints.



*Motorcycle driver pays the 'rope man' at checkpoint.*

**Table 2. Average checkpoint fees along major routes in South Sudan, 2021 rates for a one-way trip (transporter data)**

Portion of road	Km	No. of checkpoints (2021)	No. check-points/ 100 km	Total taxes SSP	Total taxes USD	Average cost/check-point (SSP)	Average cost/check-point (USD)
<b>Juba-Nimule</b>	192	15	7.8	186,600	311	12,440	20
<b>Western Corridor</b>	1,568	109	7	1,364,000	2,273	12,514	21
<b>White Nile</b>	835	36	4.3	4,170,500	6,951	126,379	211
<b>Bahr el Zeraf</b>	N/A	15	N/A	429,000	715	28,600	48
<b>Sobat</b>	N/A	12	N/A	1,875,000	3,125	156,000	260

Whereas most individual checkpoint payments are small, the overall cost for entire routes can be substantial. Payments vary substantially for the different routes. As Table 2 shows, the White Nile is the most expensive route in absolute terms, while the Sobat river has the highest average checkpoint taxes—however, this high average is influenced by the taxes levied at the international border with Ethiopia. Nonetheless, the overall higher checkpoint cost along rivers in South Sudan seems driven by two factors: first, river transport concerns much higher volumes than overland transport, and second, taxation of river transport forms a key source of revenue for the SPLA/M-IO (see section 6 for discussion).

Table 3 shows the difference in checkpoint taxes between 2011 and 2021 for a selection of stretches of road. Average checkpoint taxes have increased more than three times (336%) over the decade since independence, a possible effect of the plummeting of oil revenues and the ensuing increase in efforts to raise non-oil revenues, as well as the wider economic crisis and increasing levels of poverty since independence.<sup>53</sup>

53 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/how-conflict-and-economic-crises-exacerbate-poverty-in-south-sudan>

Table 3. Checkpoint taxes for selected routes, at independence and ten years after (2011 & 2021)

	Checkpoint costs total SSP (2021)	Checkpoint costs total USD (2021)	Checkpoint costs total SSP (2011)	Checkpoint costs total USD (2011)	Percent change
<b>Juba - Aweil</b>	817,000	1,236	203,000	339	302%
<b>Wau - Aweil</b>	65,000	108	60,000	101	8%
<b>Juba - Wau (via Mundri)</b>	677,000	1,128	232,000	387	192%
<b>Juba - Wau (via Yirol)</b>	752,000	1,253	86,000	144	774%
<b>Juba - Nimule</b>	186,600	311	37,000	62	404%

Within the selection of overland routes for which data was available in both 2011 and 2021, in 2011, Juba—Mundri-Wau was the most expensive route in absolute terms. In 2021, the road from Juba to Wau via Yirol was more expensive, increasing by 774% since 2011. Taxes on the Juba-Nimule road have increased by 404% (see discussion in chapter 4.1).

On most routes, there are many minor checkpoints demanding small payments and a few major checkpoints requiring large payments. Besides at international border posts such as Nimule, Nadiapai, and Renk, the three most expensive overland checkpoints include Wunrok on the Wau-Bentiu route, War-a-War between Aweil and the border to Sudan, and Tonj Bridge along the Rumbek-Wau route (Figure 4). Factors determining the high level of checkpoint taxes at these checkpoints include that these locations are of special political significance for elite figures and their strategic military position. The three most expensive river checkpoints were Atar, New Fangak and Diel, all along the White Nile. Checkpoint taxes were nearly four times higher than average at checkpoints marking the limit of zones of influence between government and SPLA/M-IO, and on average about two and a half times higher at river checkpoints, probably given the larger volumes involved.

The point of gravity in terms of checkpoint taxes has thus shifted since 2011, when the most expensive checkpoints were Gumbo on the Nimule-Juba, Nadapal-Juba and Torit-Juba routes, Juba Bridge and Bor on the Juba-Bor route, and Gurei, Rumbek and Tonj on the route from Juba to Wau, Aweil and War-a-War.

Like in 2011, checkpoints in principle levy a lump-sum that is determined based on the properties of the vehicle rather than its contents; if multiple checkpoint operators are present at a single checkpoint, they will each demand such a lump-sum. Along rivers, however, checkpoint operators are known to consult the waybill to calculate tax rates based on cargo.

Checkpoint taxes are demanded for outgoing as well as return journeys. As transporters usually take on new cargo for their return journey, they pay full checkpoint taxes for the return journey; yet empty trucks are often able to negotiate lower taxes (however see section 5.3).

For most checkpoints the amount paid does not vary greatly with value of goods carried, meaning that vehicles carrying lower-value goods tend to pay relatively more compared to the value of goods, which has significant implications (see section 8). However, some types of cargo seem subject to specific tax regimes, such as teak, charcoal, livestock, and fish.

54 Source: NBS 2011 study and our own data; figures from the NBS study were reported in 2011 SDG and have been converted to today's SSP

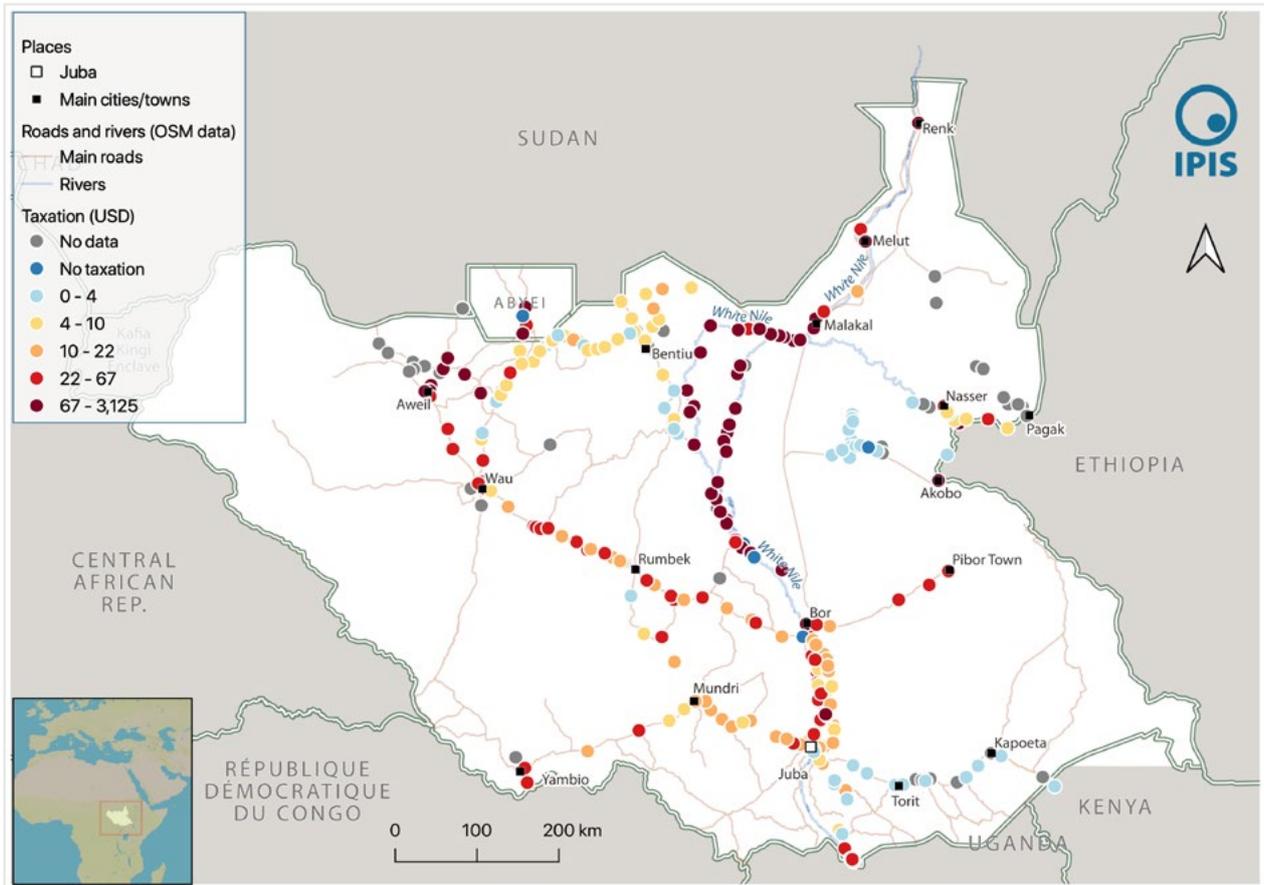


Figure 4. Map showing height of checkpoint taxes levied

The height of checkpoint taxes correlates positively with a number of parameters, including the number of people present at a checkpoint; the limits of zones of influence between armed groups and the government; the presence of a garrison next to the checkpoint; and whether the checkpoint is controlled by SPLA/M-IO; but it does not correlate with the number of entities present at the checkpoint (see Figure 5).

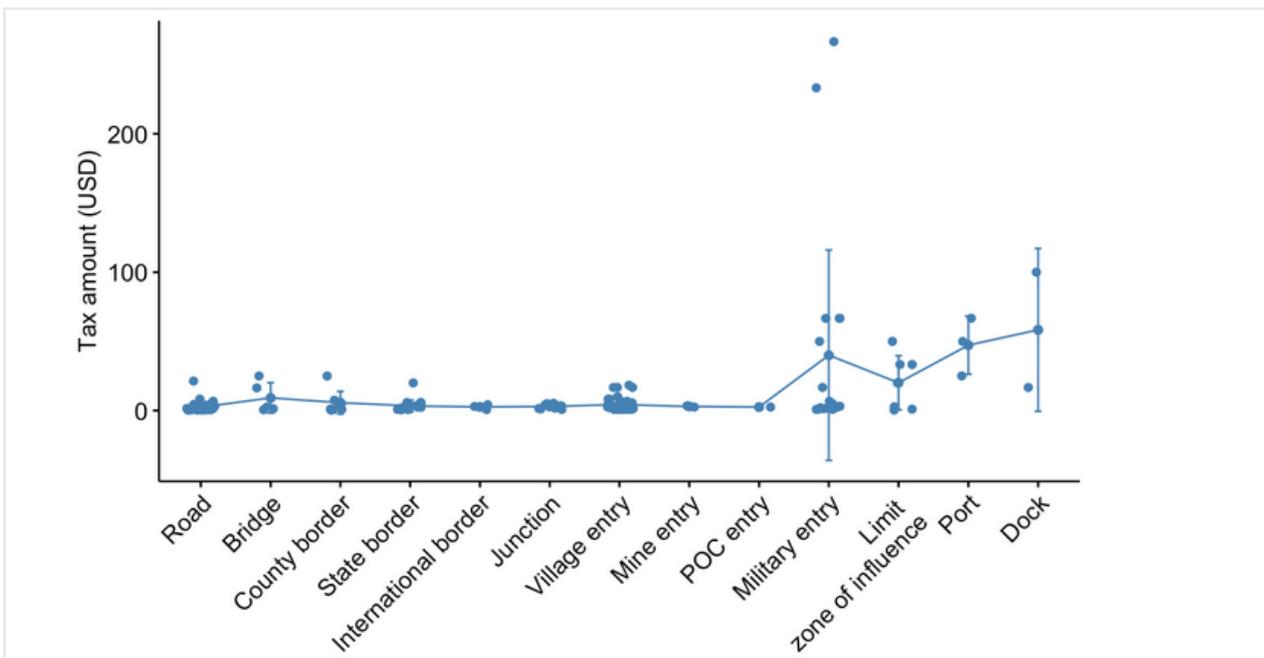


Figure 5. Tax levels per location type

### 3.3. System variations

Because checkpoint taxes present such a heavy burden as a rule, transporters are finding ways around them. A typical strategy is to hire an armed escort, in the form of one or two SSPDF soldiers traveling in the cabin of the truck, to reduce checkpoint taxes. This is the case for most fuel transporters and many bulk good truckers along the Western Corridor (Juba-Wau-Bentiu), including for vehicles contracted for humanitarian purposes.

One transport company testified that with a military escort they paid SSP 120,000, SSP 220,000 and SSP 210,000 for respectively Juba-Rumbek, Rumbek-Wau and Wau-Bentiu, early 2021. The soldiers engaged would then negotiate lower tax rates. Without an escort total expenses on checkpoints easily increased to SSP 207,000 for Juba-Mundri-Rumbek (or even SSP 282,000 via Terekeka instead of Mundri), SSP 470,000 between Rumbek and Wau, and SSP 340,000 from Wau to Bentiu.

In other cases, commercial vehicles are owned by or associated to government elite figures, exempting them from taxes. The possibility to skirt high checkpoint taxes and outcompete traders who do pay, in fact, seems an incentive for elite figures to engage in transport (see section 8 for discussion). We lack specific knowledge of the scope of such exceptions to payments-as-usual, however.

### 3.4. Checkpoint operators

Reflecting the conflict dynamics from which they issue, many checkpoints are operated by the national army and its allied militias, but others are more local freelance affairs. The most commonly observed checkpoint operators are shown in Figure 8 below. Traffic Police (present at 43% of all checkpoints), SSPDF (40%), Military Intelligence (29%) and State Police (25%) have been observed most often. This differs from 2011, when State Police and Traffic Police were present at 51% and 50% of checkpoints respectively. It reflects the subsequent re-militarization of the country after 2011.

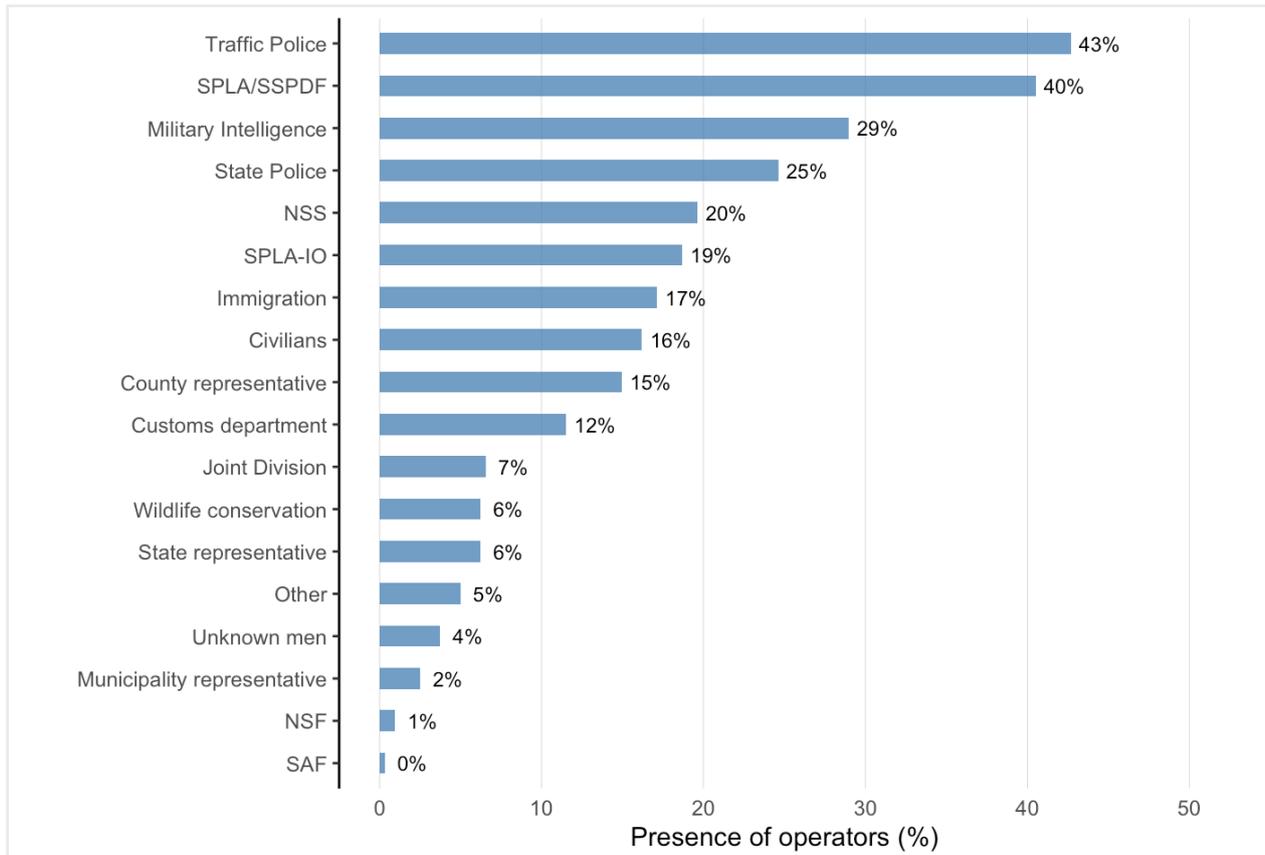


Figure 6. Prevalence of different checkpoint operators

This trend of re-militarization becomes even more apparent when excluding the Juba town checkpoints (which were not included in the 2011 survey) and the ones controlled by SPLA/M-IO (as there was no such divide yet in 2011). For the 234 remaining checkpoints SSPDF is the main actor present (119, or 51%), followed by Traffic Police (113, or 48%) and Millitary Intelligence (95, or 41%). In general, the SSPDF was present at 51% of checkpoints along main routes (i.e. outside of Juba town) in government held areas (i.e. outside of SPLA/M-IO areas). Along the Juba-Nimule road, however, it was even present at 87% of all checkpoints (13 out of 15) —probably reflecting the besieged state of that crucial government lifeline (see section 4).

The biggest new addition is probably the proliferation of NSS at checkpoints. Whereas this security service used to be secretive in the past, it has of late expanded its influence at the expense of other security services. Today it is present at 62 (or 20% of all) checkpoints.

An interesting category of checkpoint operators concerns community self-defense groups. We have come across seven checkpoints operated by *gelweng* (Dinka youth community defense groups) as well as two checkpoints operated by other Dinka youth groups; we have also received reports of, but were unable to verify, two White Army (the Nuer equivalent of the *gelweng*) checkpoints (see case study in Section 5.3). Community groups tend to raise checkpoints only temporarily, in function of ongoing local conflict.

The different checkpoint operators are not equally distributed along all routes. Today, the only major route where the Traffic Police is still the most common checkpoint operator, is the Western Corridor, where it is present at 61% of all checkpoints. For all other major overland routes—Juba-Bor-Pibor; Juba-Nadapal; Juba-Nimule; and Juba-Nabiapai—the SSPDF was the most common actor, present at around 70%, whereas the SPLA/M-IO was the most common actor along the rivers.

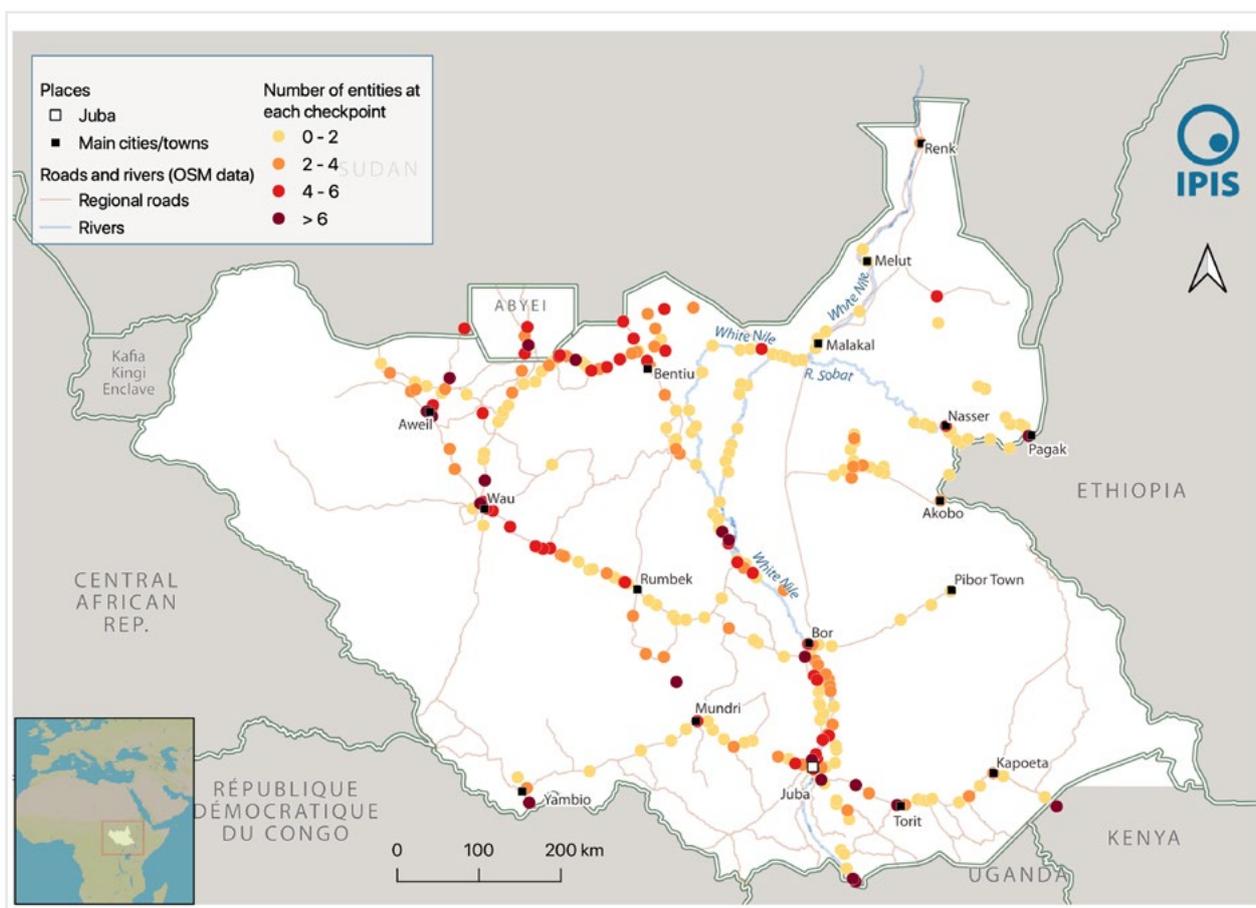


Figure 7. Number of different entities per checkpoint.

On average, each checkpoint has three different types of actors. Whereas 137 (or 43%) checkpoints were operated by only one type of actor, most checkpoints (182 or 57%) are operated by two or more types of

actors. In particular, international borders (typically 9) and checkpoints in Western and Northern Bahr el Ghazal (typically 7) had the highest number of different state services (see Figure 7).

However, as explained in section 1.2, sometimes these ‘services’ are not real, but a strategy to increase tax levels. Many checkpoints sport a variety of ‘offices’, representing different government agencies with a self-professed checking or taxation mandate. For instance, the Kuda and Wau Bridge checkpoint are manned by soldiers and civilians claiming to be from agencies like CID, MI, and NRA, which are actually forged by the SSPDF commander to strengthen their negotiation and demand more taxes. Armed groups and the SPLA/M-IO often copy these same offices.

Surprisingly, the number of such government ‘offices’ represented at checkpoints doesn’t correlate with the overall amount levied at checkpoints. Taxes are however double as high for checkpoints with county representatives, compared to military/security services only checkpoints, and triple as high for checkpoints with state representatives.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in SPLA/M-IO area, river checkpoints representing the county levy consistently higher taxes than the military checkpoints in between them. This seems to imply that civil authority claims to checkpoint levies enjoy greater legitimacy and do matter in the actual level of taxation. It also calls into question the perception of checkpoint taxation in South Sudan as a function of military clout only. There are, however, notable exceptions—of checkpoints that despite a lack of apparent mandate, consistently levy exorbitant transit taxes. According to multiple sources, some of these checkpoints levy higher transit taxes and are known for higher levels of harassment for being operated by units connected to influential high-ranking figures.

Additionally, whereas along the routes in the Equatorias, most checkpoint operators were not local - but rather state officials and security staff deployed from other regions, in the other states, most checkpoint operators were locals. Around Wau, the majority of checkpoint operators were Jurcol, while in Aweil the majority of the operators came from Dinka Malual. In Gogrial (especially at Panliet and Mayom checkpoints), most of the operators spoke the Gogrial people’s language. In Twic, the ‘sons and daughters’ of the area controlled the checkpoints. The same is true in Abyei, where most of the checkpoint managers were from Ngok Dinka.



*Checkpoint at the border between Lakes and Warrap states*

55 For example, the Lojora checkpoint was set up in Terekeka State in 2018 to prevent rival sections of Mundari people. These checkpoints are mostly found at the state border or influence limit of the rival communities. Yet the army unit that was stationed there to control the violence, cattle raiding and flow of illegal arms and ammunitions, came to command handsome profits from the checkpoint.

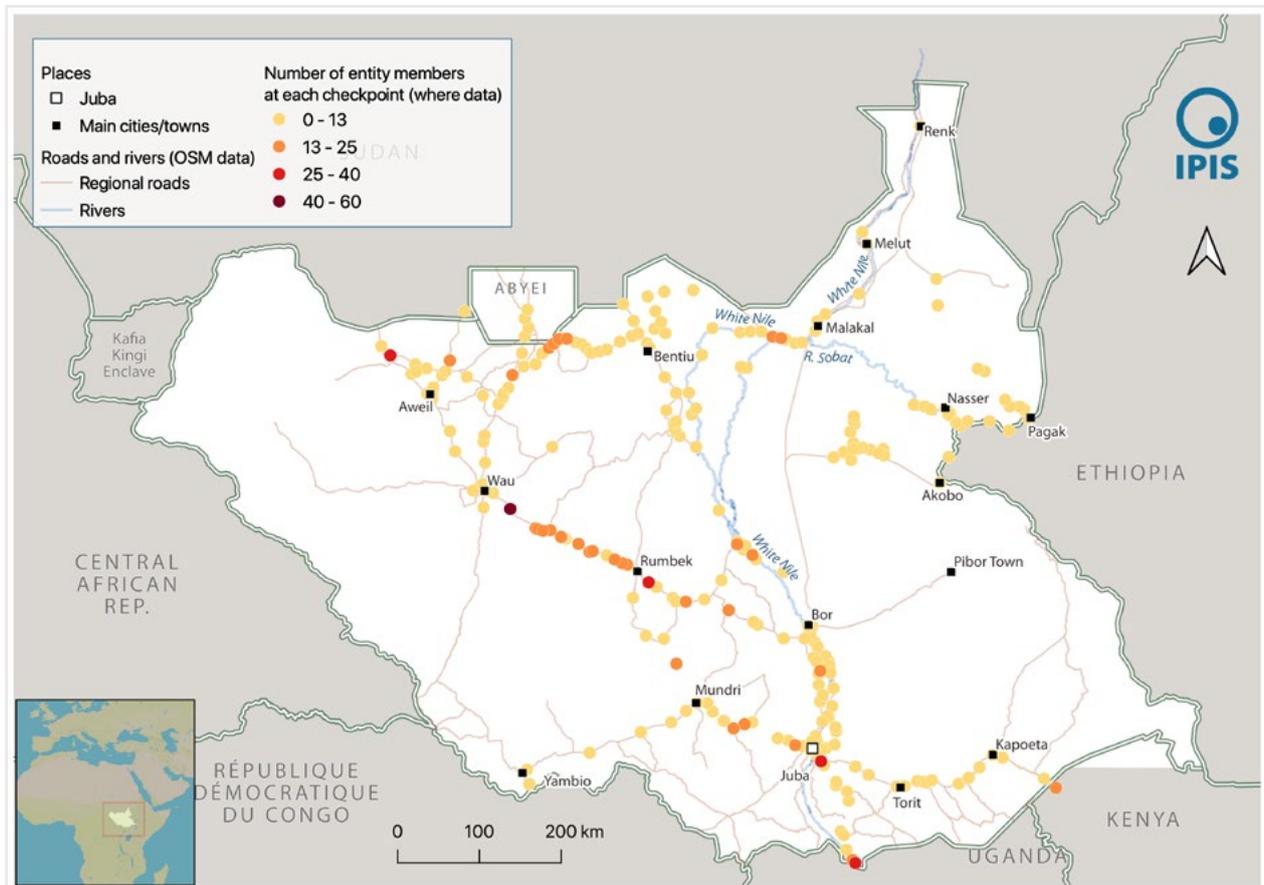


Figure 8. Number of individuals per checkpoint

There is also a large variation in the number of people working at different checkpoints (Figure 10). We counted a total of 2,233 individual checkpoint operators, meaning each checkpoint on average counted 7.5 checkpoint operators, with a median of 5.<sup>56</sup>

Juba-Nimule and the Western Corridor have the highest average number of operators per checkpoint (11) compared to other major routes. For Juba-Nimule, this may be due to the combined factors of Juba's dependence on imports, and persistent insecurity, along this route (see section 4). However, portions of the Western Corridor—particularly between Rumbek and Wau—had around 15 people on average per checkpoint, possibly as a result of localized insecurity and the increased difficulty of taxing the Juba-Nimule corridor. The latter 'problem' seems to have turned the Western Corridor into the 'lifeline' of government-affiliated checkpoint operators. Along the White Nile, each river checkpoint on average counted 8 individuals. Along most other routes, the average number of individuals at checkpoints hovers around 5 (see Annex 2).

Our surveyors found weapons visibly present at 204 (or 64%) of the checkpoints. This means that South Sudanese roads are highly militarized. The median number of weapons per checkpoint was 2, and the average 3. The number of weapons was highest at checkpoints along the stretch of road between Rumbek and Wau (an average of over 8 weapons per checkpoint), but this stretch of road also has the highest number of people present per checkpoint in the country. However, these numbers should only be taken as indicative and understood within a context in which a high percentage of civilians throughout the country carries firearms.

<sup>56</sup> It is important to note that in the case of checkpoints attached to army deployments, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between active checkpoint operators and soldiers/civilians present, but not actively involved in management of the checkpoint.



Checkpoint in Mayom county, Unity State

### 3.5. Government vs opposition

60 (or 19%) of all checkpoints we visited were under control of the SPLA/M-IO. Nearly all of them (58) are located in just three states: Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile. Government forces operate most of the checkpoints along overland routes, whereas most river checkpoints (38 out of 66, or 58%) are under control of SPLA/M-IO forces. For rivers, average checkpoint taxes at SPLA/M-IO checkpoints were SSP 210,000 (USD 350), whereas the average tax rate at non-IO checkpoints was SSP 69,600 (USD 116), making IO checkpoints three times more expensive (see section 6.2). This may be because SPLA/M-IO relies more heavily on checkpoints for revenue generation, as it is cut off from government revenues. Additionally, 10% of SPLA/M-IO checkpoints demand in-kind payments alongside payments in cash, compared to 1% government-controlled checkpoints. This usually concerns fuel, motor oil, manufactured goods, or food.

### 3.6. Receipts

Officially, only checkpoints with a mandate from the National Revenue Authority are allowed to levy taxes, and they can only do so if they dispose over Form 15.<sup>57</sup> Receipts were offered for payments at 15% of all checkpoints; however, at many of them, actual payments exceeded the amounts accounted for in receipts. As one Ugandan lorry driver explained,

*'When you find the army you have to pay them, when you find the traffic police you have to pay them. But the money they write on the receipt is less than what you pay them. You find the receipt is 20 South Sudanese Pounds but you pay SSP 300. And if you go to Juba, when you give that receipt to a traffic [officer] for that day, he can 'eat' that receipt and say it is not valid. He tells you to pay again - with money you don't have. You find traffic, the army and even the police, then the CID - you have to pay all of them.'*<sup>58</sup>

Receipts are typically issued at Traffic Police checkpoints, international borders, and some state borders with a presence of the National Revenue Authority, although receipts are not necessarily a reflection of authorized payments.

Along rivers, checkpoint operators sign and/or stamp a captain's waybill (see Figure 9), as proof of passage to be shown at subsequent checkpoints, again not reflecting a legal taxation mandate.

57 <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/national-revenue-authority-unveils-new-financial-form>

58 Cited in <https://observer.ug/news/headlines/52485-truck-drivers-call-off-strike-at-uganda-south-sudan-border>

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 22/2020 pass by cid  
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Figure 9. The waybill of a river barge, signed by checkpoint operators.

At sixty percent of all checkpoints, checkpoint operators inspected documents as part of the ritual of demanding taxes, although in many of these instances, surveyors noted that checkpoint operators either could not read, or did not master the language in which documents were written. The documents of barges and boats contracted by humanitarian organizations are checked most often (75% of the time), followed by trucks contracted by humanitarian organizations (72% of the time), and finally of commercial trucks (49%).

### 3.7. Harassments are structural to extort taxes

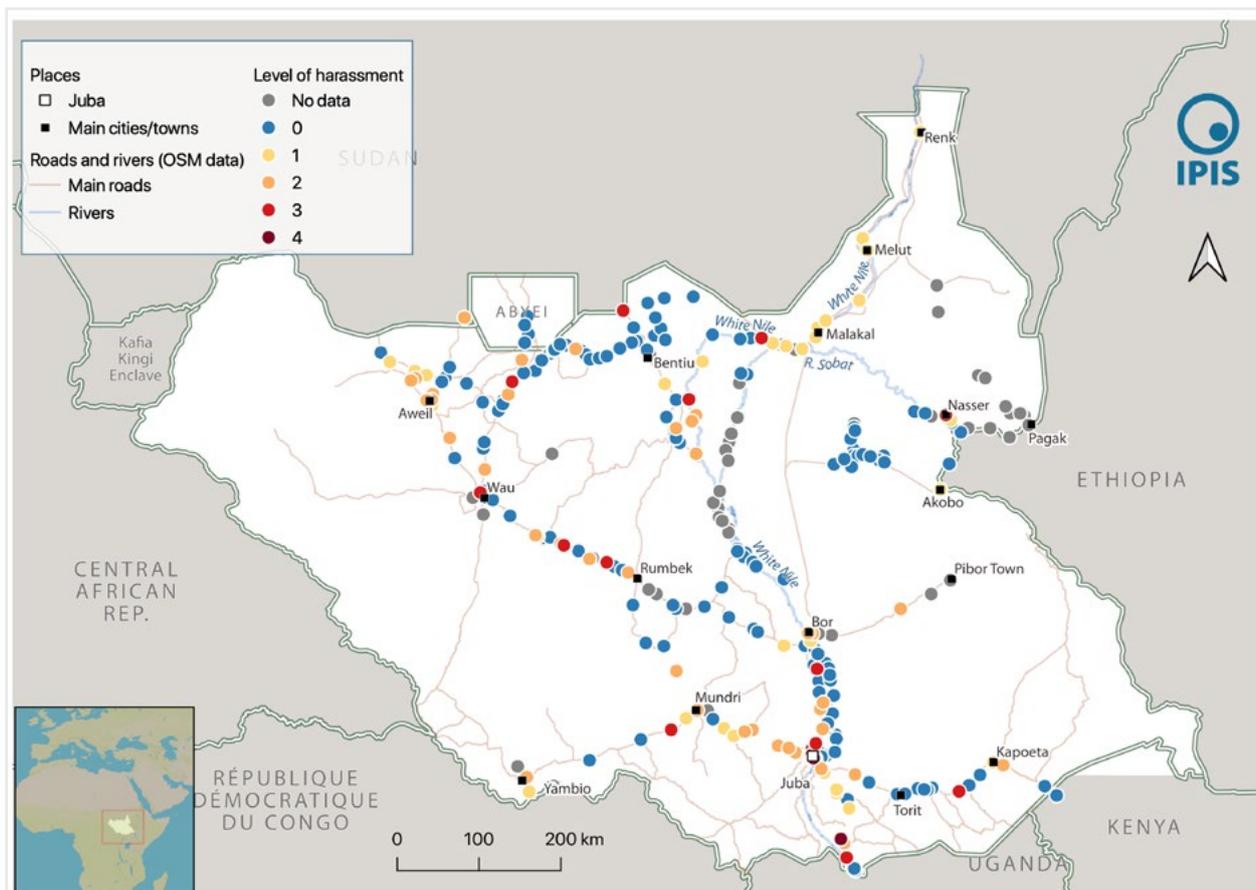


Figure 10. Harassment at checkpoints

Checkpoint operators outside urban areas structurally resort to intimidation and harassment to extort checkpoint taxes. They purposefully detain convoys to pressure transporters into paying for release and do not shun physical aggression to road users unwilling or unable to pay. Combining the experiences of our surveyors with reports from transporters, we ranked checkpoints according to the level of harassment (see Figure 10). This involves a number of indicators, such as waiting time, level of taxation, and the level of threat or physical violence deployed by checkpoint operators. The most notorious checkpoints according to this ranking are Kerepi, Rorchol Akol, Bilpam, Mobil, Tombek, Aswa River, Wunrok, Shirika Hayat, Mayat, Nasir, J1, Kilo 71, Kilo 22, Tonga, Karika and Longiro. Four out of them are river checkpoints (Kilo 71, Kilo 22, Nasir and Tonga) and three of them are operated by IO (Kilo 71, Kilo 22 and Tonga). At these and other checkpoints, humanitarian convoy leaders, involved in negotiating the passage of contracted vehicles, are often threatened and kept aside by checkpoint operators in their efforts to force payment from contracted drivers. Negotiations involving convoy leaders often entail delays of 2-6 hours per checkpoint, significantly slowing down humanitarian convoys. However, we have not factored in humanitarian access impediments. Doing so would involve a much larger selection of checkpoints, located around main UN bases and NGO hubs. UNMISS suffers structural state-of-force-agreement (SOFA) violations committed by checkpoint operators at the checkpoints surrounding Wau, Juba, and Yei, impeding patrols from leaving town under the pretext of insecurity or failure to obtain clearance from the relevant state and local authorities.<sup>59</sup>

59 Source: interviews, Juba, April 2021 & consultation of internal UNMISS documentation.

### 3.8. Humanitarian logistics is systematically taxed at checkpoints

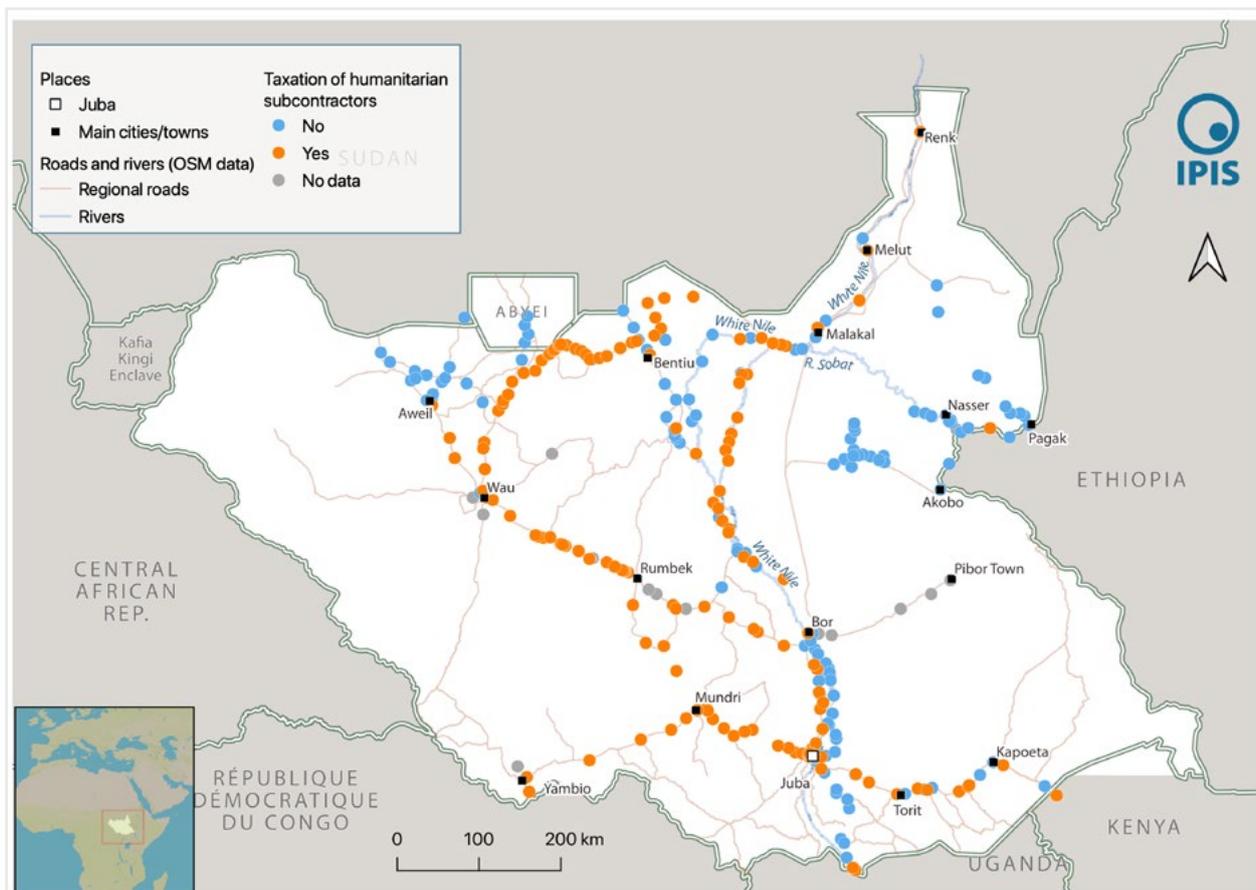


Figure 11. Map of checkpoints at which humanitarian contractors are taxed

UN and humanitarian organizations are involved in distributing relief to populations in need across South Sudan—by the latest count, over half the population is sustained by one of the largest relief operations in the world. Still, however, UN and NGO involved in relief hardly meet donor funding targets to finance the required amounts. To cut the costs for this enormous logistical machinery, relief organizations attempt to reduce transport costs by replacing air drops with road and river transport,<sup>60</sup> but also by outsourcing a large part of their bulk transport to commercial transport companies. Whereas NGO and UN vehicles are mostly exempt from taxation, checkpoint operators consider humanitarian transport contractors as *de facto* commercial transport and thence subject them systematically to transit taxes.

Indeed, we found that humanitarian convoys are subjected to checkpoint taxation at 157 (or 49%) of checkpoints in South Sudan (see Figure 11). While President Kiir issued an order in 2017 decreeing humanitarian convoys should not be hindered (see Annex 3), taxation of humanitarian convoys remains endemic.

60 For calculations, see UNOPS. (2018). *Report on River Barge System Feasibility Study Project, South Sudan*. Copenhagen: UNOPS, p. 67

## 4. JUBA-NIMULE

Length: 192 KM

No. checkpoints: 15

Checkpoints/100km: 7.8

Total CP taxes: 186,600 SSP (USD 311), excluding border: 86,600 SSP (USD 144)

Average CP taxes: 12,440 SSP (USD 21), excluding border: 6,186 SSP (USD 10)

### 4.1. Basic background to the route

The 192 km road between Juba and the Nimule border crossing is the lifeline of the South Sudanese economy. South Sudan is heavily import-dependent, and around 90% of the country's imports—of fuel, manufactured goods, and food—arrive on trucks via Nimule. Paved in 2012, it is the only all-weather road in the country and connects the land-locked country to the port of Mombasa in Kenya via Kampala in Uganda (the so-called 'Northern Corridor').

Because of the high volumes of imports—on average two hundred trucks every day of the year—the year-round taxation of traffic along this route, particularly at the international border, provides the single most important stream of checkpoint revenues in the entire country. This makes the security of the route politically and militarily strategic—including for those wishing to pressure the government by disrupting it—and the appropriation and distribution of taxes on the trade along it a perpetual source of contestation.

### 4.2. The route's checkpoints at a glance

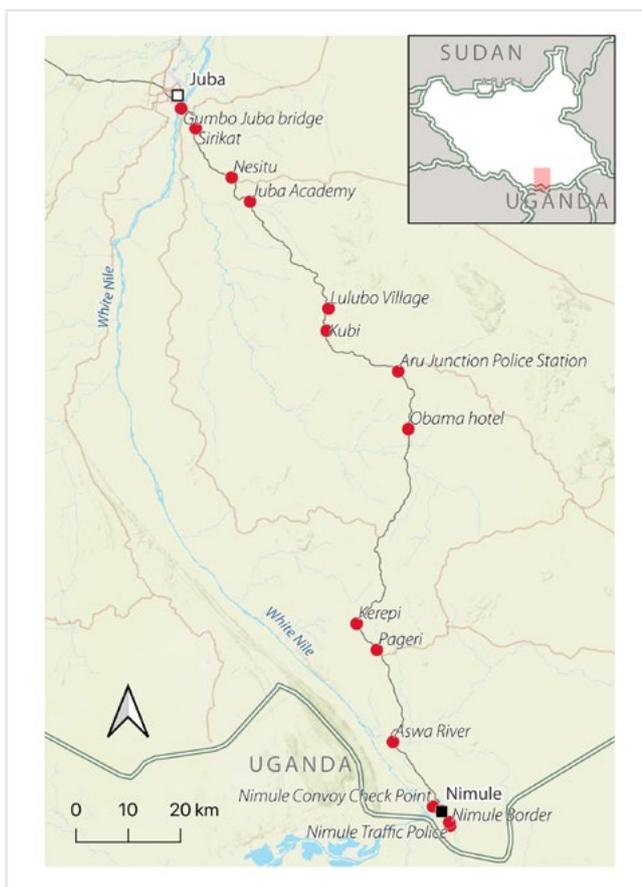


Figure 12.

Map of checkpoints between Juba and Nimule

Whereas in 2011, the National Bureau of Statistics reported six checkpoints between Juba and Nimule, this number has since risen by 250% to 15 checkpoints, at an average interval of one every 13 km (or 7.8 per 100 km). The main reason for this rise is the rampant insecurity affecting the road, driven by an entangled mix of economic, political and community motives (discussed below).

Total checkpoint levies along the route vary according to the size of the vehicle, whether or not it's traveling with a military escort, and has established connections to checkpoint operators or not. Usual checkpoint taxes are around SSP 2,000 per checkpoint, but a few checkpoints—Nesitu, Torit State—also claim higher State-level transit taxes. Thus, we found that overall, commercial trucks pay between SSP 40,000 (USD 67) when traveling without cargo from Juba to Nimule, to well over SSP

186,600 (USD 311) when fully charged, compared to an average of 7,026 SDG (Sudanese Pounds) or USD 127 in 2011.<sup>61</sup>

Fully loaded commercial trucks on average pay SSP 12,440 (USD 21) per checkpoint, whereas empty trucks pay an average of SSP 2,500 (USD 4.5). However, the actual distribution of checkpoint taxes is very unequal, with a small number of checkpoints levying very high, and supposedly formal, taxes interspersed with a larger number of checkpoints demanding only very modest amounts. Along most checkpoints, minivans carrying passengers typically pay between SSP 1,000 and SSP 2,000. It is also to be noted that the volatile security situation along the road mean that the number of checkpoints as well as the level of taxes can vary drastically from one moment to another.

A total of 162 people were recorded as operators of the 15 checkpoints on this route, entailing an average of 11 people per checkpoint. Again, the actual distribution of operators per checkpoints is highly unequal, with some checkpoints counting many individuals, and the majority only a few. Among the checkpoint operators, the army stood out, probably a reflection of the strategic nature of, and elevated insecurity along, the route (see Figure 13).

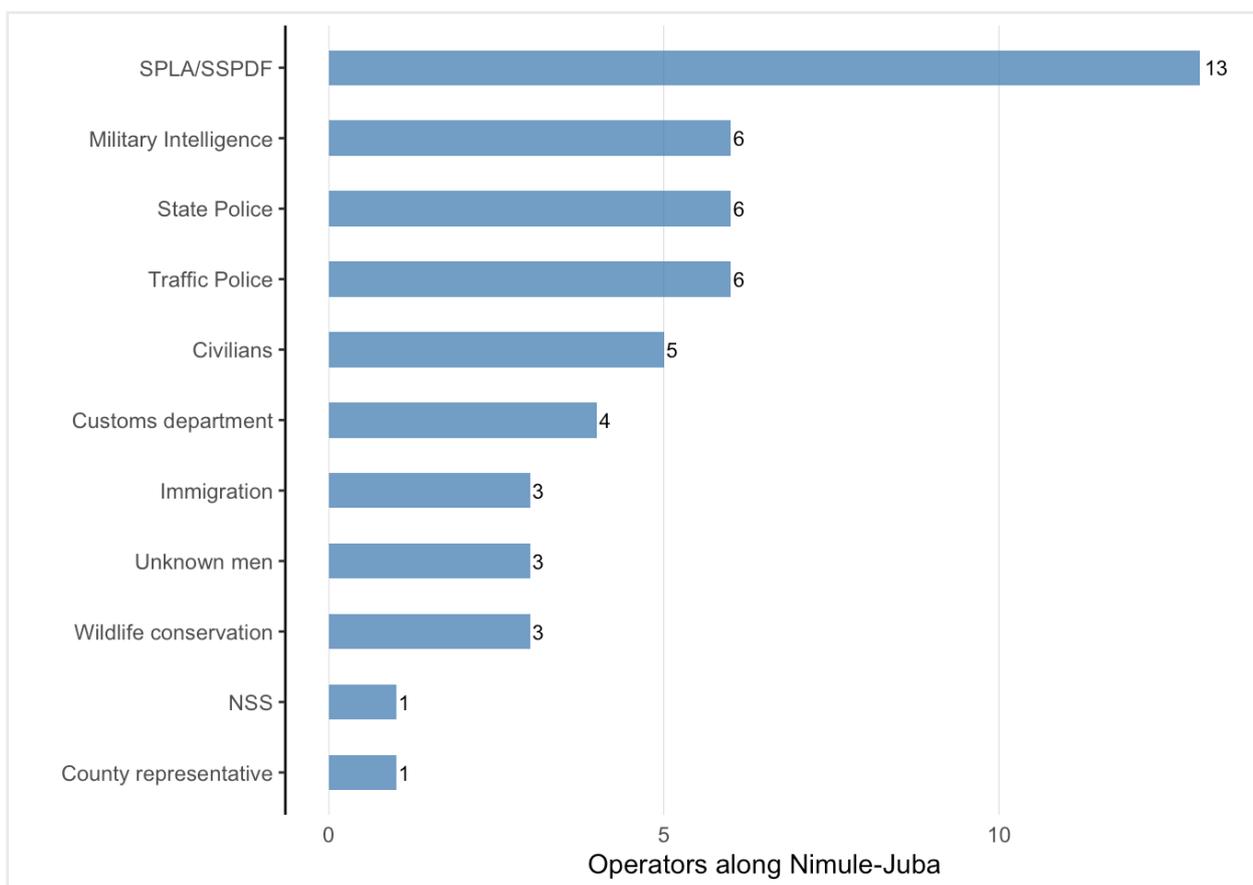


Figure 13. Operators along the Juba-Nimule route (15 checkpoints).

Geographically, the most important checkpoints cluster around the border with Uganda as well as around Juba, and each cluster of checkpoints involves a variety of checkpoint operators representing different—and often competing—hierarchies. These checkpoints levy the highest taxes and have the greatest number of people present, divided over government agencies each with their own ‘office’ (hut), through which hailed drivers have to pass for a—monetized—registration. The space in between them is home to smaller checkpoints run by army units and other security services garrisoned along the road.

61 Data provided by commercial transporters. The historical rates come from National Bureau of Statistics, *op. cit.* 2011, p. 25; currency converted at historical exchange rate of 55 SDG to the USD.

The heaviest taxes are, predictably, levied at the Nimule border post, where trucks pay excise and customs for their cargo. The Torit State revenue checkpoint, located in Nimule, levies duties for transit through Eastern Equatoria while transit duties for Central Equatoria are levied at Nesitu checkpoint (both at around 20,000 SSP for a commercial truck).

Among the checkpoints levying minor taxes are the checkpoints at Keperi, Lulubo and Juba Academy, where SSPDF and/or Police are deployed, who demand minor taxes to passing traffic (usually in the range of SSP 200-2,000).

Because transport costs are relatively low on this short, all-weather road, checkpoints are the most important source of price differences between Nimule and Juba. For example, a bag of 50 kg of rice costs SSP 10,500 in Nimule, and SSP 12,000 in Juba. 20 liters of cooking oil costs 5,800 SSP in Nimule and 7,000 SSP in Juba.

However, it is unclear how many transporters are hailed at each of the fifteen checkpoints, because some transporters are able to skirt part of the checkpoints when driving in military escorts, offered in response to insecurity along the road (discussed in next section). Because the number of checkpoints also fluctuates in function of political and security dynamics, it is difficult to determine whether recorded checkpoint fees are representative over time.

### 4.3. Key dynamics along the route

The number of checkpoints along the Juba-Nimule route is highly changeable. It varies from one month to the next, in function of the volatile security situation. Another important factor is rivalry between different administrative levels inside the government over the rents that can be extracted along the road - as well as with opposition groups and communities excluded from the spoils involved. For instance, while our surveyor encountered 15 checkpoints in late 2019, this number had allegedly doubled by April 2021, with the deployment of additional SSPDF units in response to insecurity along the road.<sup>62</sup>

#### Insecurity along the road

Resentment against government, deteriorating economic conditions, and a climate of lawlessness inspire frequent ambushes on road users. The road has been insecure since 2013 because it cuts across areas traditionally associated to the opposition, as well as areas frequently contested between local communities.

For instance, around Aru Junction and Pageri checkpoints (the latter in Magwi County), the land is very fertile. In 2015, SSPDF soldiers brought along cattle from Jonglei to pasture, which prompted the local Madi community—majority farmers—to join the opposition of SPLA-IO and, after 2017, Thomas Cirillo's National Salvation Front.

Since 2016, the SSPDF has responded by aggressively depopulating localities along the road, leaving only soldiers deployed at garrisons that double as checkpoints. After fierce battles, the majority of locals has fled to Uganda, leaving the area free for herders to occupy.<sup>63</sup> Most buildings in Pageri have been razed to the ground and overtaken by the bush, with the remaining buildings serving as a garrison to the local army detachment. As our local researcher reported about Pageri,

*The soldiers here are wild and drunk early in the day. The truck which was moving ahead of us was stopped and they harassed the South Sudanese driver, after he expressed frustration by the roadblocks everywhere along this road demanding him money using brutality. The commander who was seated under the tree came to tell the driver, "This is our office and you should respect as others do."<sup>64</sup>*

62 <https://www.independent.co.ug/truckers-strike-over-south-sudan-armed-attacks/>

63 Interviews, Pageri, November 2019. Also see <https://eyeradio.org/cattle-in-pageri-hinders-return-of-refugees-bishop/>

64 November 2019

Pageri is not unique—along other portions of the Nimule road, too, the government has adopted a tactic of the scorched earth, depopulating entire towns, to repel the opposition and curb ambushes to its main supply route. Villages like Loa and Kerepi suffered a similar fate. Local communities have been replaced with badly paid army units who survive on checkpoints and charcoal production (see section 8).

To ensure supplies to the capital, the SSPDF also began offering armed escorts to convoys of buses and commercial trucks in 2016.<sup>65</sup> Trucks from Uganda can join a convoy at the last Nimule checkpoint, from where they are escorted to Obama Hotel, changing escorts to Juba Bridge or Nesitu on the outskirts of Juba.<sup>66</sup>

In response, SPLA-IO's spokesperson in 2017 warned road users only to travel in civilian convoy and not to use SSPDF escorts as this may put them in the crossfire.<sup>67</sup> And indeed, many vehicles traveling with escorts and convoys were ambushed that year, disrupting supplies to Juba.<sup>68</sup> In April 2021, all traffic along the Juba-Nimule road ground to a halt again. Transporters from Kenya and Uganda refused to travel because 15 of them lost their lives in the previous month along this corridor and the Juba-Yei road.<sup>69</sup> The disruption, which is also affecting the Juba-Kaya road, is attributed by the government to the National Salvation Front (NAS), as part of an alleged effort by that group to target this strategic lifeline of government credibility as a response to failed negotiations.<sup>70</sup> However, NAS denies these and subsequent August 2021 attacks, instead blaming government soldiers for the ambushes.<sup>71</sup>



*Checkpoint in Gok Machar, Northern Bahr el Ghazal*

65 <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/unmiss-force-commander-leads-patrol-deter-armed-attacks-road-nimule>

66 <https://observer.ug/news/headlines/52485-truck-drivers-call-off-strike-at-uganda-south-sudan-border>

67 <https://www.southsudanliberty.com/news/index.php/latest-news/1580-public-civilians-have-been-warned-to-avoid-traveling-with-armed-escort-along-juba-nimule-highway>

68 <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/south-sudan-rebels-claim-responsibility-for-convoy-attack-on-juba-nimule-road>

69 <https://www.voanews.com/africa/south-sudan-focus/commercial-trucks-refusing-enter-south-sudan-because-insecurity>

70 <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/462881/south-sudan-assailants-attack-a-truck-convoy-along-the-juba-to-nimule-road-route-april-1>

71 <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/nas-denies-attacking-yei-refugee-camp-laying-ambushes-along-juba-nimule-road>

## Disputed checkpoint revenues

Whereas the Juba-Nimule road is the most strategic for the country, taxation of the Juba-Nimule road has been a source of ongoing controversy since South Sudan became independent in April 2011. In September that year, the government ordered the closure of 14 of the 24 checkpoints along the road<sup>72</sup>, leaving 10 along the route.<sup>73</sup> Yet number of checkpoints and taxation continue to fluctuate along this road. 30 checkpoints had been reported in 2017, before a government task force announced that only at Nimule import taxes could be levied, and that Nesitu checkpoint near Juba would verify the documents issued at Nimule.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, the Director General of customs announced closing the customs office at the Nesitu checkpoint in April 2021, reasoning that customs are already paid at Nimule.<sup>75</sup> However, that same DG had been demanded to resign in 2020, as his employees accused him of diverting a big portion of customs revenues from the Nimule corridor into his private accounts instead of to the National Revenue Authority<sup>76</sup>. It merely seems to be a continuation of 'business as usual'—in 2013, it was estimated that customs officials at Nimule pocketed 80% of taxes levied at this border checkpoint.<sup>77</sup>

Because customs taxes are thus not redistributed to different administrative levels, the consistent resurgence of checkpoints along this road in defiance of central government proclamations is in part a function of lower-level administrators who are thence deprived of operating budgets. For instance, local authorities used to levy taxes on transit through their area at the Nimule border checkpoint. When they were disallowed to do so, they since levy their local taxes at Aswa River checkpoint.<sup>78</sup>

But checkpoints also resurface time and again when soldiers are deployed along the road against the rampant insecurity—due to armed conflict, sub-national and localized violence as well as criminality—while their salaries are structurally delayed or withheld. This is for instance the case for the minor military checkpoints—often barely articulated in the landscape—such as Lulubo and Keperi.

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72 Including those at Juba Bridge, Bor junction, Rajaf, Gumba junction, Pageri, Genja, Loka, Gulumbi, Morobo town, Lainya, Mobil, Jebel Gudele (relocated to Rokon), Northern airport and Bilpham

73 Nimule exit; Amee junction; Nesitu junction; Nimule entry; Jebel Kujur (to be relocated to Digala); Yei entry; Bazi; Kaya entry; and Lasou and Muni check-points. Source: <https://sudantribune.com/S-Sudan-s-Interior-Minister-orders,40194>

74 <https://observer.ug/news/headlines/52485-truck-drivers-call-off-strike-at-uganda-south-sudan-border>

75 Source: interviews in Juba, April 2021

76 <https://eyeradio.org/customs-officers-call-for-resignation-of-their-boss/>

77 <https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48801>

78 Source: interviews, Aswa River checkpoint, December 2019; see discussion in Section 2.1, specifically footnote 11

## 5. WESTERN CORRIDOR

Length: 1,568 KM<sup>79</sup>

No. checkpoints: 109

Checkpoints/100km: 7

Total CP taxes: SSP 1,364,000 (USD 2,273)

Average CP taxes: SSP 27,500 (USD 27)

### 5.1. Basic background to the route

The Western Corridor connects Juba to Wau, Aweil, Bentiu and the Republic of Sudan and is ‘the backbone of trade in the country’.<sup>80</sup> It is only surpassed in traffic by the Juba-Nimule road (see section 4.1). This also makes it a magnet for checkpoint operators, and indeed the Western Corridor is the most intensively taxed overland route in South Sudan, harboring 30% of all checkpoints we surveyed. As the Western Corridor is also the main channel of bulk overland transport of humanitarian relief and supplies to humanitarian operations in the northern part of the country, it forms perhaps the most significant interface of taxation of humanitarian aid by government agents.

The Western Corridor is, however, not a single route, but refers to an ensemble of routes between the capital Juba and northern states of South Sudan, and eventually the Republic of Sudan. From Juba, it comprises two different routes to Rumbek: either via Mundri, Rokon and Maridi, or via Terekeka, Minkaman and Yirol (Figures 16 and 17).<sup>81</sup> After Rumbek, the Western Corridor proceeds to Wau, where it splits up in roads to Aweil, or to Bentiu and Yida. The latter towns are major state capitals, home to significant markets and harbor significant concentrations of humanitarian organizations and IDPs, from where consumption goods and relief is distributed onwards to final distribution points.



*Truck driver paying a soldier between Rumbek and Tonj*

79 Distances and tax figures comprise all the alternative routes comprising the Western Corridor, and are thus not reflective of the costs for a single trip. For more details, see subsequent tables in this section.

80 WFP (2017) *The South Sudan Western Trade Corridor in Times of Hyperinflation: Rapid Market Assessment in Northern Bahr El Ghazal and Warrap*, p. viii. Note that according to other definitions, the Western Corridor is considered as Bor—Wau—Aweil, but we here follow the definition adopted by the UN (see Figure 16).

81 The usual—and shortest—route was via Mundri, until in 2008 the Yirol route was opened. From 2010, this became the busiest route to Rumbek, and has remained since due to pervasive insecurity in the Mundri area.

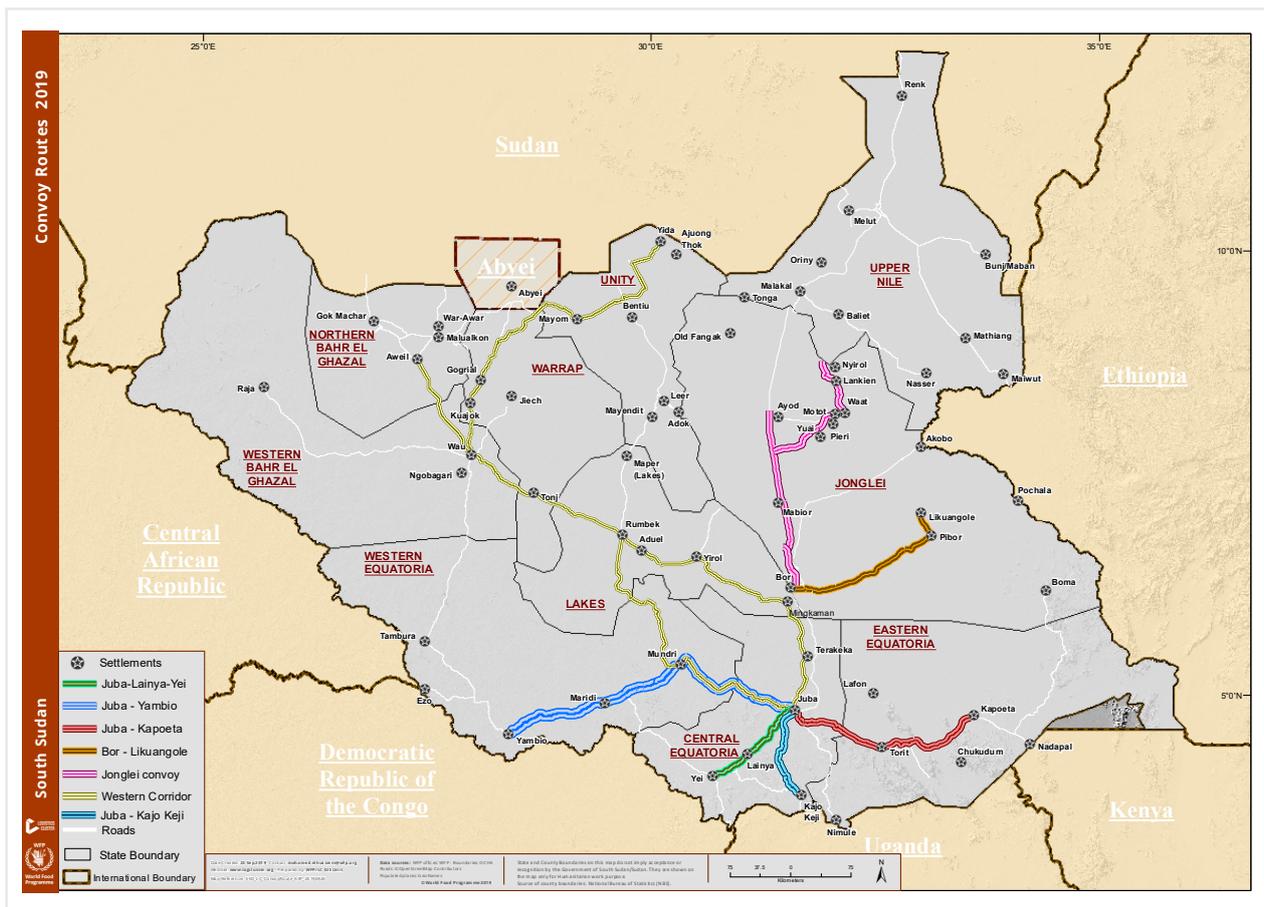


Figure 14. Routes making up the Western Corridor (in yellow), source: UN Logcluster

Unpaved, the Western Corridor is a seasonal route, largely unusable for heavy vehicles during much of the rainy season. During this time, locations in the northern part of the country rely more on imports from Sudan and river transport for trade and aid (see section 6 below).

Moreover, large portions of the route are subject to persistent insecurity since 2013, with community violence affecting road security and banditry explicitly targeting traffic. This forms yet an additional pretext for the high number of checkpoints along the road. As a result, most traffic concerns long-distance trucking, NGO vehicles or government affairs.

## 5.2. The route's checkpoints at a glance

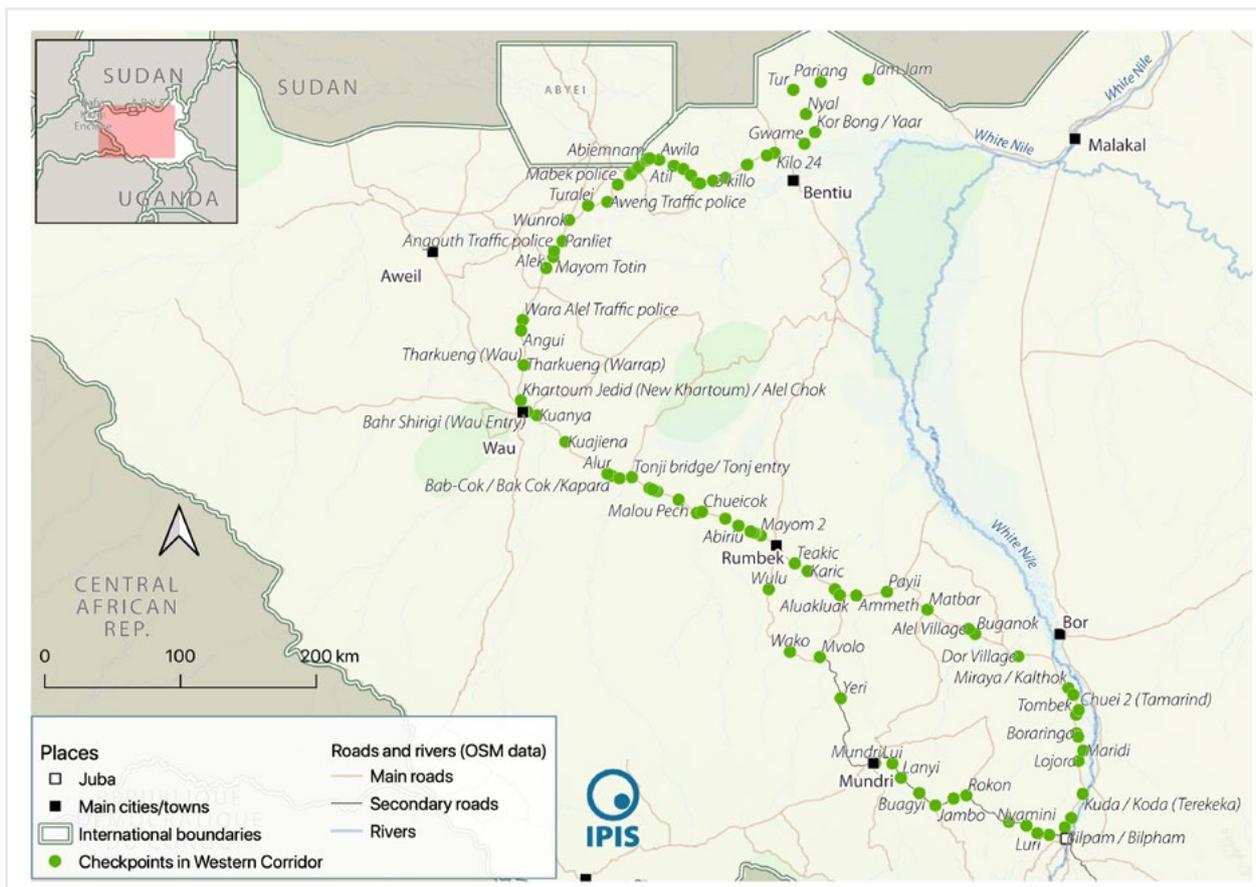


Figure 15. Checkpoints along the Western Corridor (excluding Aweil route)

We have surveyed a total of 109 checkpoints along the routes making up the Western Corridor, or on average one every 14 km, divided over the different portions of road as detailed in the following table and shown in Figure 15. Thus, the route from Juba to Bentiu can comprise either 87 checkpoints when traveling via Mundri, or 80 checkpoints when traveling via Yirol. Similarly, the route from Juba to Aweil can also have a varying number of checkpoints, depending on the route taken.

Table 4. The Western Corridor's different routes, checkpoints and average taxes for commercial transporters in 2021

Portion of road	Km	No. of check-points (2021)	No. check-points/ 100 km	Average one-way taxes (SSP)	Average one-way taxes (USD)	Average cost/check-point (SSP)	Average cost/check-point (USD)
<b>Juba-Yirol-Rumbek</b>	392	20	5	282,000	470	14,100	23,5
<b>Juba-Mundri-Rumbek</b>	420	26	6	207,000	345	7,962	13,25
<b>Rumbek-Wau</b>	227	25	11	470,000	783	18,800	31,3
<b>Wau-Aweil</b>	144	4	3	65,000	108	16,250	27
<b>Wau-Bentiu</b>	385	34	8	340,000	567	10,000	16,7
<b>Total</b>	1,568	109	7	1,364,000	2,273	12,514	21

The number of checkpoints and checkpoint taxes along the Western Corridor have fluctuated wildly over the past decade. In 2011, the National Bureau of Statistics recorded no more than 32 checkpoints

between Juba and Aweil (via Mundri), compared to 55 in 2021, while it did not provide information on the road to Bentiu.

In 2016, the journey from Juba to Bentiu cost around USD 2,000. In December 2017, a truck ‘only’ had to pay a total of USD 950 at 66 checkpoints between Juba and Bentiu. These figures reportedly rose once again to USD 1,400 and 105 checkpoints in January 2018. In 2019, the amount further surged to USD 4,500 per truck, while the number of checkpoints had shrunk to 57.<sup>82</sup> In 2021, we recorded 79 checkpoints between Juba and Bentiu, costing a commercial truck around USD 3,640 for a return journey (see Table 5 below, and Annex 4).

These fluctuations seem a function of occasional government closures of checkpoints and their subsequent resurgence, as much as weather-induced seasonal variation in taxable traffic. In the run-up to the rainy season, relief organizations use the Western Corridor more intensively, to ‘preposition’ food aid in anticipation of populations becoming inaccessible. The number of checkpoints and the levels of taxes levied along the Western Corridor tend to follow that seasonal intensification of traffic. When transporters and relief organizations increase transport in the run-up to the rainy season, checkpoint operators maximize their exactions in anticipation of the reduced revenues during the ‘lean season’, the period that the roads become impassable.<sup>83</sup> Government orders closing down illegal checkpoints along the Western Corridor, incidentally, tend to occur at the onset of the rainy season, when traffic is anyway reduced.

### 5.3. Key dynamics along the route

#### Variations in checkpoint taxes

It is important to note that not all commercial trucks pay the same checkpoint tax rates.

Given the large amounts of checkpoint taxes involved, a part of transporters—in particular, but not excluding, fuel truckers—have resorted to using private army escorts along the Western Corridor. They cite a combination of insecurity and high taxes. A Darfuri businessman in Gok state commented,

*‘When arrived in Rumbek with my truck, I’ve had to hire soldiers to escort me up to here. We couldn’t risk going without someone protecting us.’<sup>84</sup>*

**Table 5. Different checkpoint tax rates between Juba and Bentiu, first quarter 2021, based on data from commercial transporters.**

	Commercial truck (SSP)	Commercial truck (USD)	With army escort (SSP)	With army escort (USD)
<b>Outbound</b>	1,092,000	1,820	560,000	933
<b>Return</b>	1,092,000	1,820	480,000	800
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,184,000</b>	<b>3,640</b>	<b>1,040,000</b>	<b>1,733</b>

Transporters explained they take on board hired soldiers for each leg of the trip, as a measure of protection against ambushes but also, more importantly, these soldiers take charge of all checkpoint taxes along the way with the amount they are paid by transporters.<sup>85</sup> Transporters pay a lump sum to army commanders

82 Sources: OCHA *op cit*: p. 31; OCHA (2017) *South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot* (December 2017); Maunder et al *op cit*, para 36; OCHA (2018) *South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot* (January 2018); UN Panel of Experts report S/2019/301, para 80; OCHA (2019) *South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot* (January 2019)

83 Interviews with transporters and aid organizations, Juba, January 2020 and April 2021.

84 December 2019

85 Between Juba and Rumbek, transporters noted, is the only stretch where this practice is not overtly practiced but covertly: here, soldiers dress in civilian clothes. On the other stretches, soldiers travel in uniform.

from which the soldiers are hired, who then give undisclosed amounts to soldiers who then negotiate and pay at each checkpoint.<sup>86</sup> Trucks usually take on board one soldier, except for the stretch between Wau and Bentiu, which runs through an ethnic fault line. Here, they pick up a Dinka and a Nuer soldier, with the Dinka soldier responsible for negotiations between Wau and Mayom, and the Nuer between Mayom and Bentiu, to ensure negotiations are carried out in the locally dominant language.<sup>87</sup> As detailed in Table 5, this system reduces checkpoint costs by roughly half. One trader in Yirol explained us why he started using armed escorts:

*'I started my business during the civil war in 1990s. When the (CPA) came in 2005, I was moving freely because there was no insecurity and people could move. There was one checkpoint that required money, Nimule at the border. Now, there are checkpoints everywhere including in villages. Now I have to hire a military truck with few soldiers from Juba to here (Lakes). The head of logistics (SSPDF) is my friend. They couldn't stop a car with military number plate. When I do that, I save money. The few soldiers that escort my truck only cost the equivalent of two checkpoints' payment!'*<sup>88</sup>

One soldier who has been providing armed escorts along the Western Corridor for the last four years explained,

*'This work has been instrumental for sustaining my family, I can even send my children to school. On the outward journey we share the amount paid by transporters with our commander. If we also find a truck to hire us on the way back, we keep that whole amount, we can just tell our commander we got a lift.'*<sup>89</sup>

Understandably, checkpoint operators are not pleased with this system. The commander of one checkpoint along the Western Corridor warned that 'one day, fighting may break out between hired escorts and us ground forces, they confuse our job.'<sup>90</sup>

Apart from armed escorts, transporters have developed a whole repertoire of ways to try and minimize checkpoint taxes, which are discussed further in section 8.

Transport operators and surveyors report that checkpoint operators demand amounts to trucks in function of what trucks paid at other checkpoints along the route, thus indicating that checkpoint operators coordinate amongst each other to maximize checkpoint taxes. As one of our surveyors noted at the Kalthok checkpoint: 'When negotiating how much we should pay, we were surprised to learn they had information on the money we paid at the previous checkpoints.'<sup>91</sup>

Finally, there are marked differences in how drivers are taxed based on their background. Somali drivers—who amongst others dominate in fuel transport—are attributed a strategy of simply doling out the demanded amounts at checkpoints without much negotiation, to reduce transport times. Kenyans and Ugandans complain of being subjected to disproportionate taxes for being foreigners—who are accused of controlling a big part of the South Sudanese labor market, and don't speak Juba Arabic to smoothen negotiations. This dynamic is discussed further in section 8.

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86 Source, interviews with transporters & soldiers working as security escorts, various locations, 2021

87 Transporter interviews, Juba, April 2021

88 Interview, trader, Yirol, November 2019

89 Interview, 2021

90 Interview, Mayom checkpoint, January 2021

91 Source: field notes, 2019

## Checkpoint operators

The Western Corridor is entirely under government control, with a variety of government agencies present at the checkpoints. As visible in Figure 17 below, the top three state agencies present at the checkpoints were the Traffic Police (present at 62, or 58%, of checkpoints), SSPDF (present at 56 checkpoints, or 53 %) and MI, a branch of the army (52 checkpoints, or 49%).

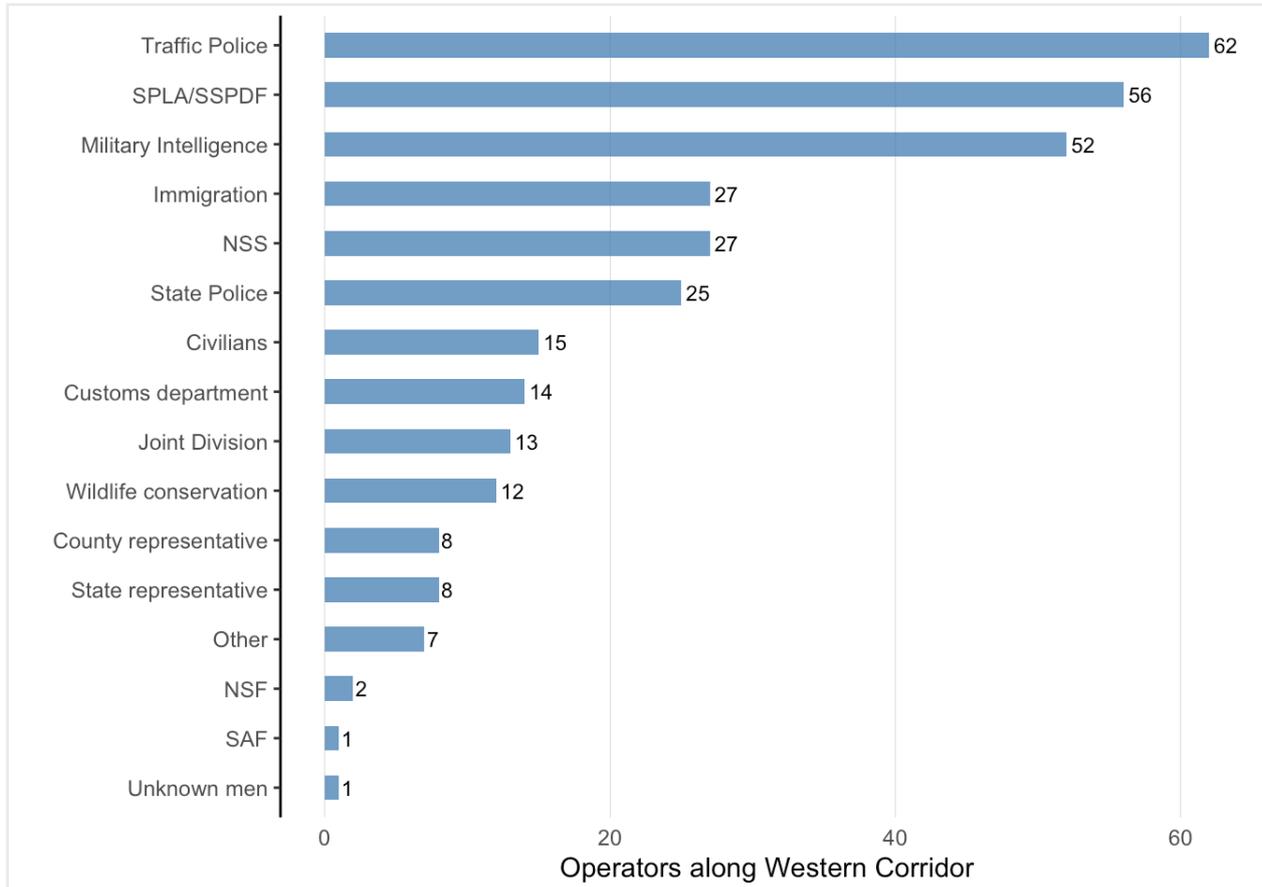


Figure 16. Checkpoint operators along the Western Corridor routes (including 'Wunrok - Bentiu - Yida', 'Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek', 'Rumbek - Wau', 'Wau - Wunrok', 'Juba - Mundri', 'Mundri - Rumbek', 'Wau - Aweil')

Along the stretch of road between Mundri and Wau, on average 15 checkpoint operators were recorded per checkpoint, the highest in the country.

Along the Western Corridor between Juba, Yirol and Wau, in 2019 there were 9 checkpoints recognized as having an 'official' taxation mandate by state and county authorities<sup>92</sup>, against 21 without. The government frequently urges all drivers not to make any payment at such illegal checkpoints.<sup>93</sup> It encourages drivers to call the office of the governor in case checkpoints demand illegal payments, yet transporters rarely do this. As one trucker commented, 'Any driver who does that risks more harassments and delays during his next trip'.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the former county commissioner for Rumbek was detained for two days for not paying at a checkpoint close to his home. He later recounted: 'So I asked them who could go against the presidential order, and they said there is no government'. As to underscore that fact and the problems resulting from leaving soldiers to their fate financially, he was ambushed by other soldiers shortly after being released from that checkpoint.<sup>95</sup>

92 Mobil, Kuda, Tombek, Kalthok, Aluakluak, Karic, Bar Gel, Kuanya, Wau Bridge (Barh Shirigi)

93 In another example, in Jonglei State, the governor declared in 2019 all checkpoints to be illegal except 5, namely Duk Pagak, Pajut, Anyidi, Bor South and Duk Padiet. 'If a vehicle is stopped anywhere apart from these areas, then it is important to alert the government', she said. (<https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/jonglei-government-bans-extortion-checkpoints>)

94 2019-11-19- Peter Luach- Mingakaman- Businessman

95 <https://eyeradio.org/soldiers-detain-family-over-checkpoint-fee/>

Trucker showing cash he'll pay at a checkpoint along the Western Corridor



The distinction between checkpoints with a taxation mandate, and those without it, is however seriously challenged. Even at government-recognized checkpoints, receipts are rarely issued, not even at the handful of checkpoints which claim to have a Department of Revenue Authority.<sup>96</sup> Yet, at the checkpoints recognized by governors as 'official', taxes were an average of 50% higher than at non-recognized checkpoints, a figure that rises to 100% as much for WFP convoys. This indicates that government endorsement of checkpoints, however dubious, does have a *de facto* impact on the legitimacy of claims to higher taxes.

Overall, 25 (or 23%) of the checkpoints along the Western Corridor lie in Unity State and an equal number in Lakes State, followed by 19 (17%) in Warrap State. Additionally, Table 4 above shows that both the density of checkpoints and average taxes per checkpoint are highest on the stretch of road between Rumbek and Wau—higher than other 'official' checkpoints.

Among the unofficial checkpoints along the Western Corridor, a significant number consists of army deployments to check communal violence. For example, Lojora checkpoint came into existence in 2018, when there were violent clashes between the rival sections of the Mundari people, the Lojora and Muni. The soldiers that were posted to prevent further violence and attacks on passengers created the checkpoint. One local public authority commented, 'These forces remain here and the best way to sustain themselves is by setting up checkpoints.'<sup>97</sup> Aluakluak, Malual, Pech, Babkoch, Abiere and Akol are other examples of SSPDF checkpoints along the Western Corridor that were set up by soldiers deployed to stem grassroots violence, and to sustain their deployment in a decentralized fashion. At times, the soldiers are deployed from elsewhere, but at least some of such army checkpoints are the initiative of the local communities embroiled in such conflict. As the commander of Abiere checkpoint explained, 'We face daily attacks from different neighboring communities; for example, a week ago cattle raiders attacked us, so that is why we and other communities set up checkpoints at our borders to protect our people from attacks.'<sup>98</sup> Such checkpoints may only be temporary—until the conflict subsides—or become semi-permanent because of their profitability.<sup>99</sup>

Interestingly, the frequency of communal incidents along the road seems to correlate with seasonal flooding. As the road generally lies on slightly elevated land to allow runoff of rains, as surrounding areas get flooded, the movement of people and cattle concentrate increasingly on the road, increasing the risk of confrontations.<sup>100</sup>

96 Observations in 2019

97 Interview, Loroja, 2019

98 Interview, November 2019

99 At the same time, the commander of Abiere checkpoint also defended cattle raiding in that same interview, explaining, 'It prides our ancestors, for us it is normal to raid because we value cows more than human lives.'

100 Source: interview with analyst, Juba, April 2021

Overall, we have recorded a total of 1,266 individuals working at checkpoints along the different routes making up the Western Corridor, at an average of 10 people per checkpoint.<sup>101</sup> In other words, over a thousand people directly gain some form of cash revenue out of the taxation of trucks; if a single truck pays a low total figure of USD 1,000 at all these checkpoints, a rough equation would imply that taxation of that individual truck at the different checkpoints provides all these checkpoint operators with a proverbial dollar a day for subsistence. This is an important supplement to the official salary of SSP 1,500 (USD 3) a month that government soldiers are officially entitled to but may or may not receive, and a comparatively pacific use of the on average six automatic weapons observed per checkpoint along this route.

However, a number of military checkpoints along the Western Corridor are also staging grounds for additional commercial activities by the army, whether to survive or to generate profits is not always clear. Where possible, soldiers place the checkpoints where there are other economic activities. For instance, the Kuda, Payii, and Bar Gel checkpoints are located nearer to water bodies to also allow soldiers to participate in fishing and well as taxing the (other) fishermen. At Rorchol Akol, a remote checkpoint in the middle of forest, there was another business booming—the sale of charcoal produced by the soldiers deployed here. More about this in section 8.



*Trucks waiting at a checkpoint while their drivers pay.*

101 For discussion of the margin of error on these figures, see Methodology, section 1.2

## 6. RIVER ROUTES

### *White Nile (Bor-Renk)*

Length: 835 KM

No. checkpoints: 33

Checkpoints/100km: 4.3

Total taxes: SSP 4,170,500 (USD 6,951)

Average taxes: SSP 126,379 (USD 211)

### *Bahr el Zeraf (Zeraf Cut-Old Fangak)*

Length: N/A

No checkpoints: 15

Checkpoints/100km: N/A

Total taxes: SSP 429,000 (USD 715)

Average taxes: SSP 28,600 (USD 47.6)

### *Sobat*

Length: N/A

No checkpoints: 12

Checkpoints/100km: N/A

Total taxes: 1,875,000 SSP (USD 3,125)

Average taxes: 156,000 SSP (USD 260)

### 6.1. Basic background to the route

South Sudan's river network forms a key complement to its often-faltering road network. The Nile cuts through the whole of South Sudan connecting it to Sudan in the north and Uganda in the south. Many population centers line the White Nile, Bahr El Zeraf, Sobat and other streams. When, most overland routes in South Sudan become impassable, during the rainy season, the country's rivers take over as alternative routes to reach inland population centers. River transport is furthermore the cheapest bulk transport option.

The existence of checkpoints along the White Nile predates independence, but little is known about it.<sup>102</sup> Since 2005, the rivers were under control of the GoSS, but after the 2013 crisis, South Sudan's rivers became of utmost strategic importance as a lifeline to a number of different government and opposition factions. In particular, the SPLA/M-IO occupies a portion of the country that isn't served by major roads and thus crucially dependent on access to, taxation of, and supplies via, river. Consequently, as we'll see below, most of the river checkpoints are operated by SPLA-IO.

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102 However, see WFP (2010). *South Sudan Logistics Capacity Assessment*. (Rome: WFP) p. 33, which reports that between Juba and Bor there were 3 checkpoints in the 1990s but 10 in 2010. 'At each checkpoint, operators will have the cargo checked, documentation checked etc.'

Just before independence, the river served for transporting an annual average of 75,000 metric tons, but the conflict in 2013 disrupted river transport until 2017.<sup>103</sup> Generally, larger barges trail the White Nile between the ports of Bor, Bentiu, Malakal, and Renk to connect onwards to Sudan. The barges usually operate as a set of four side-by-side in pairs pushed along by a tug or 'pusher'. Each barge carries around 300 to 400 metric tons (mt) with three of them taking food cargo and the fourth, being a flat-topped barge, any non-perishable items. Smaller boats (with a capacity ranging between 40 and 150 mt) serve the localities along the narrower Bahr El Zeraf and undertake shorter journeys.



*Barge (left) and boats (right) typically used along the White Nile and Zeraf respectively*

This is because barges are too large for the Zeraf River; boats also ply this route because the number of checkpoint taxes is lower. A commercial boat stated that 'we use the Zeraf Cut to avoid paying a lot of money that results in higher prices in the market'.<sup>104</sup> Failing to pay invites retribution, with armed checkpoint operators giving chase in speedboats.

Traffic along the rivers is victim to the conflict. Dinka boat operators and traders cannot travel in person along IO checkpoints, and Nuer traders and boatsmen in turn avoid traveling along government controlled checkpoints.<sup>105</sup> As one Dinka boat operator in Malakal, having come in 2015 from Bor, commented: 'up to now I can't go back because of my identity and fear of been killed'.<sup>106</sup>

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103 Hemphill, S., & Eftestol, M. (2018). *Enhancing river operational capacity in South Sudan - An assessment of operational river vessel capacity along the Nile River and capacity building training planning*. Juba: WFP, p. 5

104 Interview, January 2020. Until about 2017 boats were not allowed to travel from the Zeraf to Bor because of the conflict, but the WFP negotiated that boats contracted by them could use it, thereby also opening up the route for commercial traders.

105 See Thomas *et al*, *op cit* 2018, pp. 11ff for a case study.

106 Interview, Malakal, January 2020

## 6.2. river checkpoints at a glance

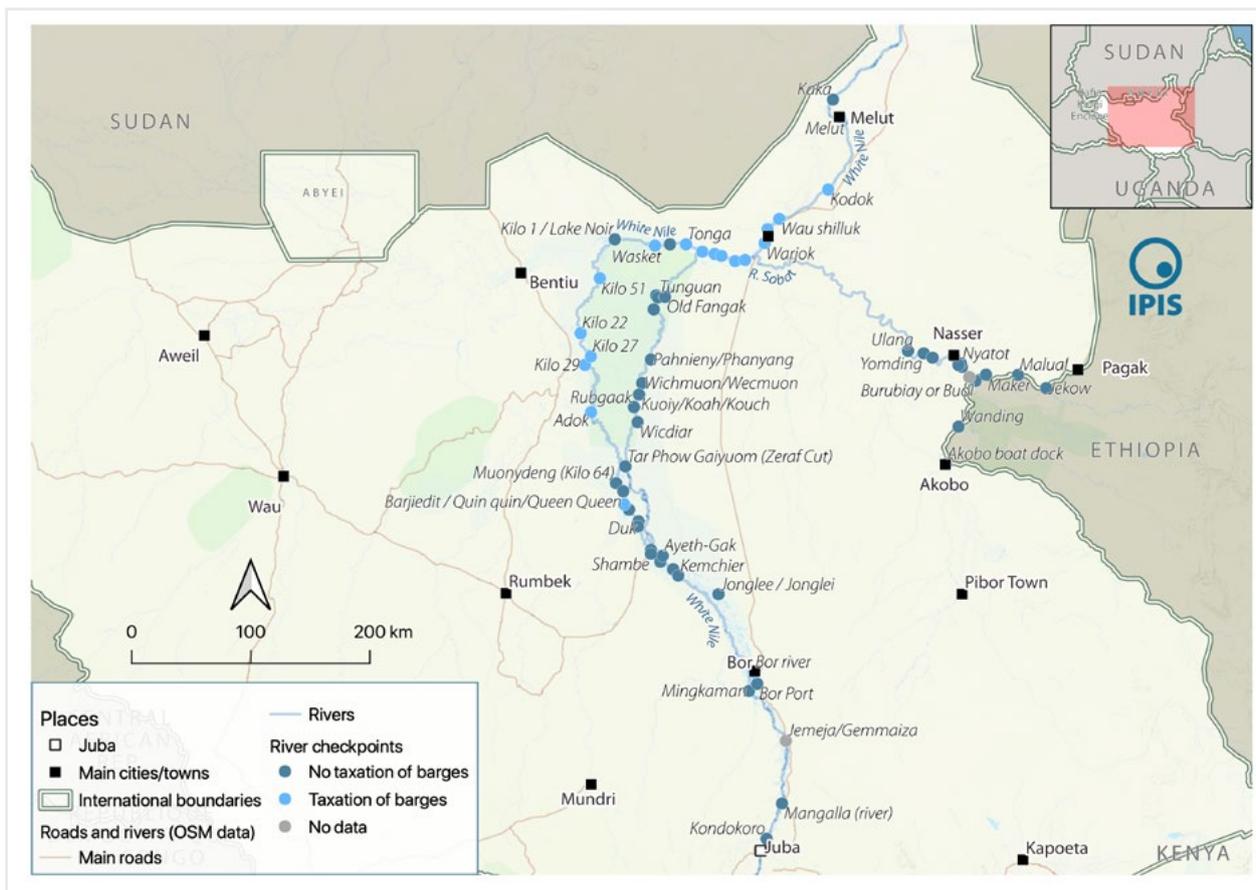


Figure 17. River checkpoints in South Sudan

We have surveyed 36 checkpoints along the White Nile between Juba and Renk, and an additional 15 checkpoints along the Bahr el Zeraf between Zeraf Cut and Old Fangak (see Figure 17). It is to be noted that our survey took place aboard a barge, and that there are apparently many more river checkpoints which don't stop barges but only tax smaller boats.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, our survey took place in 2019, and in the intervening period, around 15 more checkpoints taxing barges appeared along the White Nile.<sup>108</sup>

The majority of river checkpoints along both routes (31, or 60%) lie in Jonglei State, followed by 16 (or 31%) in Upper Nile. On average, each checkpoint along the White Nile had around 8 operators and the Zeraf checkpoints around 6, but it was often difficult to ascertain this as checkpoints double as local ports/markets and have many people 'hanging around'.

<sup>107</sup> For instance, we have mapped just one river checkpoint along the White Nile in Leer County (at Adok), but the local authorities there in January 2021 acknowledged the existence of two more 'official' checkpoints as well as two checkpoints operated by youth from the White Army, a decentralized Nuer self-defense group. <https://radiocommunity.org/authority-in-leer-ordered-the-closure-of-two-checkpoints-along-river-nile/>

<sup>108</sup> Source: evidence from transport companies, February 2021



Picture of a river checkpoint along the White Nile. River checkpoints are recognizable by the raised flags.

### Checkpoint operators

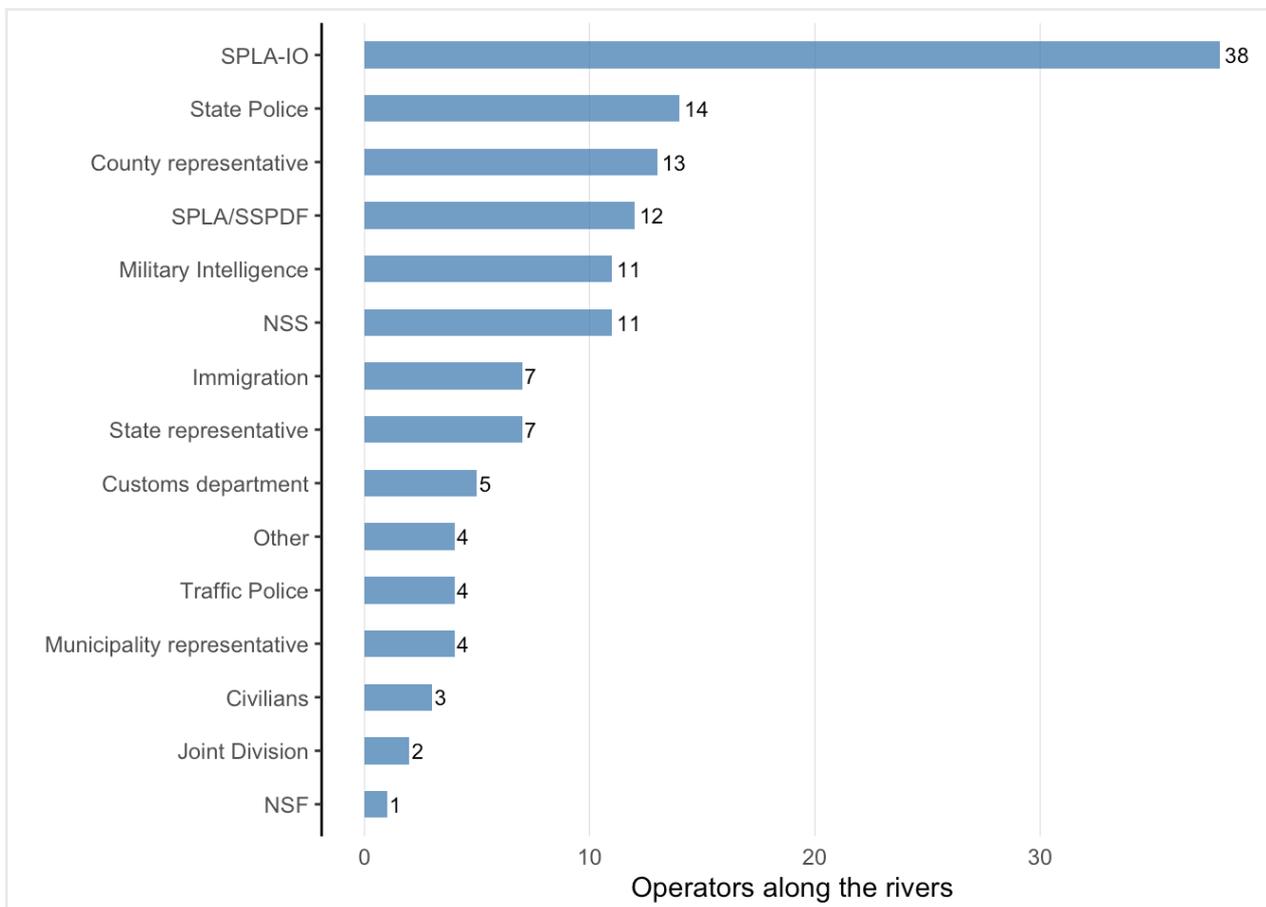


Figure 18. Checkpoint operators along South Sudan's rivers

Along the White Nile, a total of 297 individuals were observed present at the river checkpoints, with an average of 8 people per checkpoint. At the Zeraf river, we counted 95 individuals, at an average of 6 per checkpoint.

In contrast to the main overland routes covered above, checkpoints along South Sudan's main riverine transport routes are largely operated by IO forces (38, or 58%). Along the Zeraf river, the SPLA/M-IO controlled 12 checkpoints (80%) whereas along the White Nile this was 15, or 42% of all checkpoints.<sup>109</sup> The proportion of checkpoints along the White Nile operated respectively by IO and government-allied forces, has remained relatively stable between 2018 and 2021 (see Table 6 below), even though the absolute number of checkpoints has increased, possibly in par with expanding river transport. The Zeraf river has a higher percentage of IO-checkpoints because it is shorter and its entire length cuts through the area under control by SPLA/M-IO. The rest of the checkpoints was under control of a mix of government entities, save a few checkpoints that were operated by youth militia (see the case study below).

### Case study: community conflict around river checkpoints



Picture showing Jonglei checkpoint in the top right (2021).

Chuetakuët and Jorwac are river checkpoints on nearby locations along the White Nile, about 145 km north of Bor. Both have been violently disputed by neighboring communities, disrupting river traffic twice throughout 2019. Dinka Ciec of Yirol East erected the checkpoints in 2017 and 2018, to control the flow of weapons from Juba to the Nuer from Panyijiar, and to harass Nuer river users, possibly trying to push them out of river trade business that locals were coveting.<sup>110</sup> But along the way, the checkpoints also turned out lucrative sources of revenue from taxation of river transport, with in particular Chuetakuët levying high taxes. As a result, local communities began coveting the checkpoints, claiming traditional land rights to their locations.

109 It is important to note, however, that we for this study only deployed the label 'IO' for checkpoint operators associated to the opposition, and hence not differentiated between the different *de facto* government agencies, civil and military, that make up the Opposition's administration.

110 See Thomas *et al* 2018 for discussion.

This contestation is made possible because the Nile River does not have a fixed course, but can rather change shape drastically from one year to the other, in function of seasonal flooding and the moving of soils and floating plant sediment. In this way, two portions of riverbank called Chuetakuét and Jorwach have gradually turned into small islands, with the former constituted of floating reeds. These places had been dry season pasturing grounds and fishing spots claimed by different local communities. Jorwach was contested between the Ador of Malek payam and the Ajuong Twic (Aguer) from Paliau payam, whereas Chuetakuét was coveted both by the Ador from Adior (Chiech) and the Twic Adhiok from Warnjol. Traditionally, these communities intermarried and have friendly ties. Both Twic groups traditionally occupied the western riverbank, and the Ador traditionally grazed on the eastern riverbank, but as the river changed shape and checkpoints appeared profitable, they both laid claim to the same checkpoints along the meandering river.

A big part for the profitability of these checkpoints is, that the area around Chuetakuét has always been rich in fish, and since 2018, traders from Uganda and even Congo have come here to purchase fish, generating vast taxable river traffic. Observing this, senior military officers from the aforementioned communities maneuvered so that their own community would control this profitable taxation. Indeed, local interviewees explained that during high-level political meetings in February 2019, representatives from Jonglei State claimed the checkpoints to be situated in the *toch* (grazing area) of Paliau payam, Twic East county, which lies in Jonglei, whereas they were occupied by Ador Dinka from Eastern Lakes. Shortly after, Nuer river users were attacked around Jorwach and river trade was halted.

Whereas the Ador first controlled both checkpoints, during the 2019-2020 rainy season, water channels and islands began to shift, prompting local movements. In this context, the Twic took over Jorwach and attacked Chuetakuét in December 2019—some say they may have been incited by the Nuer with whom they retain friendly ties.<sup>111</sup> After river transport and the fish trade were disrupted for two months, the Ador community controlled Chuetakuét checkpoint while the Twic taxed the same boats at Jorwach, with the checkpoints manned by local youth together with the police hailing from their communities. However, shortly after, the SSPDF was sent to intervene and take over both checkpoints, which are now overseen by the commander in Shambe. As a response, the Ajuong Twic created a new checkpoint a bit upriver from Jorwach called Jorwach 2; on the other bank of the river, the Adok from Malek also created a new checkpoint at a place called Kamcier.

Most river checkpoints seem to be tied to local counties. Each county through which the river passes, operates a port/river checkpoint where they levy transit taxes, and monitor and tax on- and offloading—whether under IO or government (IG) control. Given the lack of transport connections, it is also likely that checkpoints along the rivers are operated in a relatively disconnected and decentralized fashion.

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111 During the Bor massacre, the Nuer moved around the Twic area, sparing them.

## Taxation: White Nile

We were able to collect fine-grained data on river checkpoint taxation along the White Nile over the past few years, which we summarize in the following Table. It displays the total and average taxation of a single journey of a barge from Bor to Renk for consecutive years from 2018 up to now.

Table 6. Evolution of checkpoint taxes along the White Nile (one-way between Bor and Renk) 2018-2021					
Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	Overall averages
<b>Number of checkpoints</b>	19	19	43	33	29
<b>Of which IO</b>	10	10	34	23	19
<b>Total taxes per trip (SSP)</b>	1,813,647	1,801,375	10,058,000	4,170,500	4,460,881
<b>Total taxes per trip (USD)</b>	3,028	3,002	16,763	6,951	7,436
<b>Average tax per CP (SSP)</b>	97,595	97,133	233,907	126,379	138,754
<b>Average tax per CP (USD)</b>	163	162	340	211	219
<b>Average tax per IO CP (USD)</b>	230	227	444	256	289
<b>Average tax per IG CP (USD)</b>	83	87	186	114	118

Table 6 shows that over the past years, river checkpoint taxes fluctuate around an average of SSP 163,055 (USD 219) per checkpoint, making checkpoints along the White Nile the costliest in the country. Between 2018 and 2021, an entire barge trip upriver from Bor to Renk on average costs SSP 4,460,881 or USD 7,436; on the way back, barges also pay checkpoint taxes, but these are then typically about a third to half lower. This average is no doubt influenced by the peak in number of checkpoints and checkpoint taxes demanded at each checkpoint in 2020. Nonetheless, this means that a single round trip between Bor and Renk costs a barge operator around USD 10,000 in checkpoint taxes. For details on how taxes are distributed over checkpoints along the White Nile, see Annex 5, which provides details of checkpoint taxes for barge journeys in 2020 and 2021.

In absolute terms, this makes the White Nile the most expensive route in South Sudan. In relative terms, however, a different picture emerges. This has mostly to do with the fact that river transport involves far bigger volumes than overland transport. The entity subjected to checkpoint taxes along the White Nile consists of four or sometimes five connected barges and a pusher, and each barge has a carrying capacity of 100 to 300 metric tons, whereas a single truck can carry a maximum of 40 tons. If we divide average road and river checkpoint taxes by the tonnage they carry, river checkpoint taxes are significantly lower per ton: along the Western Corridor (see Section 5 above) a 40-ton truck typically pays SSP 12,514 (USD 21) per checkpoint, which gives SSP 313 (USD 0.525) per ton; by contrast, the 1,200 tons subject to checkpoint taxes along the river yield an average per-ton checkpoint rate of SSP 123 (USD 0.2).

As Table 6 shows, over the period 2018-2021, SPLA/M-IO taxes at river checkpoints are on average three times higher than government river checkpoints. As discussed in section 3.5, this may be because the opposition is cut off from oil revenues and therefore has to rely more on checkpoint taxation.

River transport companies claim that checkpoint taxes are so high that they impede long-range commercial (food) transport. For example, shipping costs for sorghum from Renk—a surplus-producing area—to Juba are so high that they are unable to compete with imports from Uganda.<sup>113</sup> In 2021, one ton of sorghum can be shipped for USD 250 from Renk to Juba, but barge operators reported that checkpoint taxes on that route require them to charge USD 100-150 extra per ton.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, in part because of

112 Source: data shared by different river transport companies and recorded by surveyors. All figures are annual averages calculated from monthly figures. All amounts are for a one-way journey only (outward journey) between Bor and Renk and converted to 2021 SSP.

113 Interview, Juba, April 2021

114 Source, interview with river transporter, Juba, 2021

this taxation-induced height of transport costs, in a 2018 survey, four out of five boat companies listed checkpoints as their biggest operational challenge.<sup>115</sup>

The effect of checkpoint taxes on consumption prices can also easily be seen when comparing prices in markets along the White Nile (Table 7).

Table 7. Market prices along the White Nile as recorded by surveyors (2021)			
	Prices Juba	Prices in Bor (ssp)	Prices in Adok (ssp)
<b>Sugar</b>	10,500	11,500	18,500
<b>floor</b>	10,000	11,000	18,000
<b>Oil (20litres)</b>	7,500	9,000	16,000
<b>Boxes of soap</b>	6,500	8,500	12,700
<b>Adas/yellow peas</b>	3,500	7,000	11,500

There are noteworthy variations between the taxes demanded at different checkpoints along the White Nile. Taxes were consistently around 3 times higher than average at Tonga, Atar, and Diel. Sources inside IO explained these locations concentrate large IO contingents, and demand high taxes in response to fluctuating prices in the market for food to feed these troops.<sup>116</sup> Tonga in particular is the main base of Johnson Olonyi, the SPLA/M-IO Sector Commander for Sector I (as well as the Shilluk Agwelek Division) and marks the southwestern limit of the Shilluk (or Chollo) kingdom, and an important source of fishing resources and line of defense against the Padang Dinka who attempt to drive away the Shilluk from the area, and who operate the river checkpoints in the direction of Malakal.<sup>117</sup>

Taiyar/Kilo 71 checkpoint also levies such high taxes, as it is the checkpoint marking the entry to the zone of influence of IO from the direction of Juba.

115 Hemphill & Eftersol *op cit*, p. 11

116 Interviews, Old Fangak & New Fangak, January 2020.

117 Craze *op cit* 2019 p. 98. Tonga is an extremely strategic location, at the point where the Bahr el Zeraf joins the White Nile and so all barges and boats pass. In 2019, forces at the Tonga checkpoint hijacked a humanitarian barge and kidnapped its crew, releasing it only after a hefty ransom was paid. Source: interviews with humanitarian staff & river transporters, Old Fangak, January 2020 and New Fangak, Januar 2019. For discussion, see <http://www.humanityvoicewatch.com/trouble-on-the-white-nile-what-the-berge-kidnapping-reveals-about-the-un-in-south-sudan/>. Also see MAAPSS (2021) Update No. 6, Upper Nile State, retrieved from <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/MAAPSS-Updates/HSBA-MAAPSS-Update6-May2021-Upper%20Nile.pdf>



*Typical boat, docked at a river checkpoint*

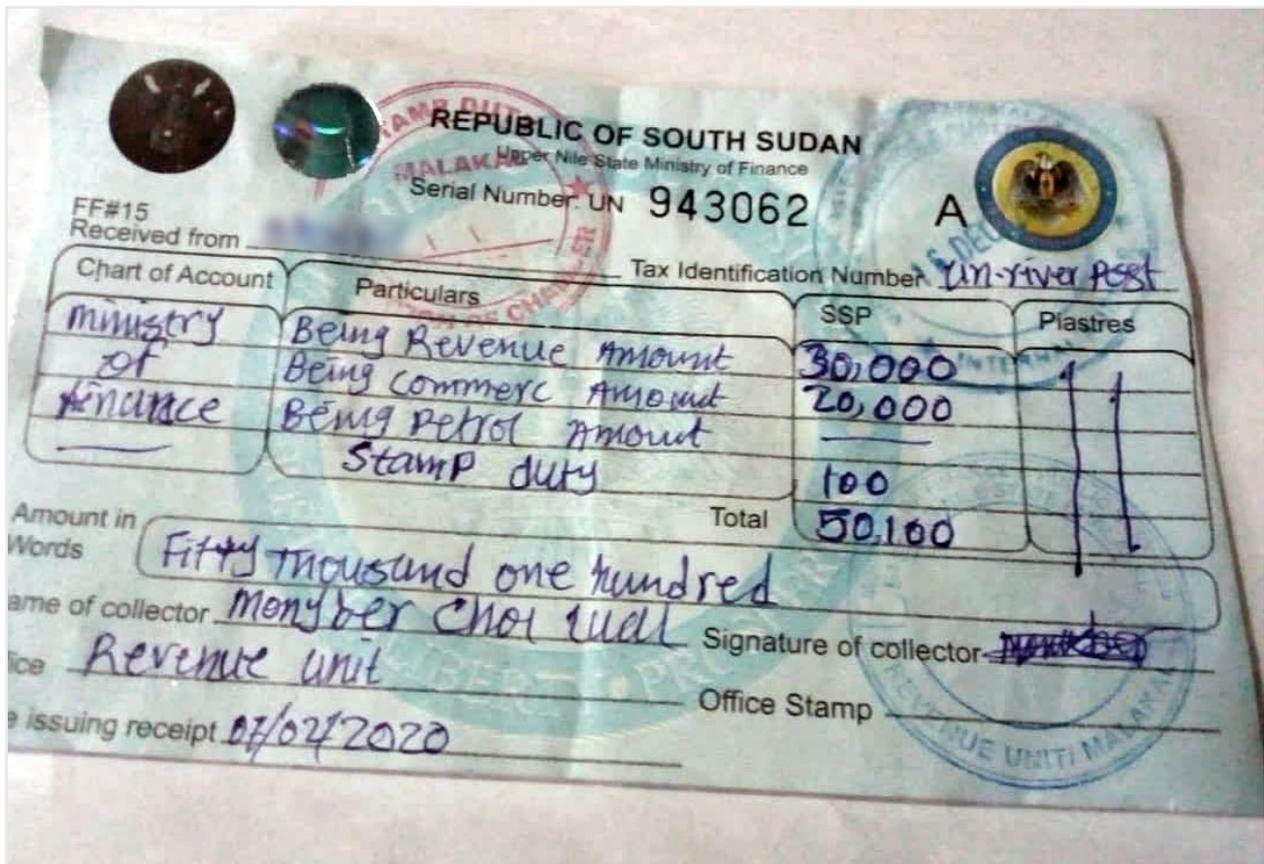
Many river checkpoint operators also demand in-kind taxes alongside the cash taxes. It concerns mostly IO checkpoints and demands for fuel (on average 200 liters) or motor oil, but can also involve manufactured items such as plastic chairs. Checkpoint operators themselves explained these demands with reference to the exceptionally high price of fuel in opposition areas as well as a general scarcity of supplies to the often remote locations they find themselves at. Soldiers stationed at the river checkpoints Jorwach and Chuetakuët for instance told us that they demand fuel alongside cash taxes to pay for their river patrols.<sup>118</sup> Yet, according to one source, checkpoint operators often sell the fuel onwards to other boat operators.<sup>119</sup>

In terms of procedure, river transporters explained that they give their crew an amount in cash for checkpoint taxes based on the previous trip. Checkpoint operators typically demand the waybill, check the crew for papers, and assess checkpoint taxes in function of the nature and number of items on board. 'For each 50 kg bag of sorghum or maize they typically ask SSP 200 and for a carton SSP 150', explained one river transport manager. 'To lower taxes, boat crews can try to hide the waybill and negotiate a lump sum; or we even prepare a waybill listing lower quantities than we actually carry.'<sup>120</sup>

118 Interview, April 2021

119 Hemphill & Eftestol op cit, p. 31.

120 Interview, April, May 2021



Receipt issued by river checkpoint.

Along the Zeraf river, taxes are markedly lower, reflecting the lower carrying capacity of the boats that can use this narrower waterway. For fifteen checkpoints between the Zeraf Cut (the small channel connecting the White Nile to the Zeraf river) and Old Fangak, boats typically pay SSP 429,000 (USD 715), or an average of SSP 612,000 (USD 102) per checkpoint when fully loaded. Here, taxation is not typically premised on the cargo, but on the capacity of the boat's engines, multiplying the outboard engine's capacity by an SSP amount to arrive at the checkpoint taxes.<sup>121</sup> As a result, boat operators consistently use outboard engines of a too low capacity.<sup>122</sup>

### 6.3. The Sobat river: a strategic opposition lifeline

Dynamics along the Sobat river (or Baro as it is called in Ethiopia) can illustrate the strategic stakes of checkpoints in struggles to control or cut off supply routes.<sup>123</sup> This waterway connects a portion of South Sudanese territory mostly under IO control to the important regional market of Gambella in Ethiopia. Reflecting this direction of trade, along much of the route, the Ethiopian Birr is the common currency, not the SSP. Along it, 11 checkpoints have been mapped over 319 km, which is on average one checkpoint every 29 km.<sup>124</sup> Taxes along this river route seem to be the highest of all the river routes, with an average checkpoint tax of USD 260. However, this high average is mainly due to the international border taxes (between USD 1,250 and 5,000 per boat) levied when goods enter South Sudan from Ethiopia. Average

121 'For instance, along the rivers, a boat with 150, 200, or 300 engine host power is equally taxed at one hundred and fifty thousand (SSP 150,000), two hundred thousand (SSP 200,000 SSP) and three hundred (SSP 300,000 SSP)', from <https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article69642>

122 Source: interviews with boat operators & engineers, Juba & Old Fangak, 2020-2021

123 Also see Carver, F. (2020). Rethinking aid in borderland spaces: the case of Akobo. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.

124 Checkpoints along the Sobat are not permanent, but rather move according to the vagaries of the seasonally changing outline of the river. For example, the checkpoint for Mandiang has recently been moved to 4 or 5 KM from riverbank due to flood. When the river recesses, Mandiang checkpoint will move back to its usual place. Similarly Burubiyai, the IO border checkpoint with Ethiopia, often gets flooded in the rainy season, and then entry taxation is done at the next river checkpoint called Jingmiir.

checkpoint taxes at the remaining checkpoints are actually lower than along other river routes, hovering around Birr 100-1,000 ( USD 2-24).

Ten of the checkpoints were held by the SPLA-IO, mostly with elements from Division 3 under Major General Tut Riek and a combination of IO National Security, CID, MI, and county and payam administrators.<sup>125</sup> Only the Nasir checkpoint is operated by the government after it captured it in 2014, blocking river trade between Gambella in Ethiopia and Ulang. This was a symbolically important capture as Nasir is where Riek Machar announced his 1991 split from the SPLA and formed the SPLA-Nasir faction during the Second Sudanese Civil War.

In response to the ensuing disruption of boat traffic, local traders invented a way around this disruption, called 'thiek'. Thiek is a vernacular transport technology made of a plastic sheet filled with dry grasses to flow with the current, which because of their small size were not subjected to controls and stoppage at Nasser (see Figure 27 below). Yet appearances deceive: one thiek can carry up to 12 drums of fuel, or the equivalent weight of other goods and people. Although there has been relative peace and commercial and humanitarian boats resumed transport since December 2018, the usage of thiek remains common on the river, because it is cheaper and not taxed a lot along any of the river checkpoints.<sup>126</sup> By contrast, goods carried by boat along this route, typically pay quite hefty transit taxes as they enter a county rather than at every single checkpoint, paying about USD 330 at Akobo and between USD 1,250-5,000 at Burabuy or Jingmiir (when Burabuy is inaccessible due to flooding). The other checkpoints collect smaller tax amounts, levied to pay for 'docking' or 'passage'. Around four to six boats a month ply this route, bringing basic food stuffs and manufactured goods.

*A typical 'thiek'.*

In December 2019, a conflict broke out when the General James Ochan Puot Buop, commander of the government-allied SSPDF Maiwut Integrated Force, confiscated a barge with supplies to SPLA-IO forces stationed in Jekow. This incident seems part of broader intra-Nuer struggles around resources & power in Upper Nile, playing out around control over the river.<sup>127</sup>



125 In fact, IO also maintains a state administration based on the officially defunct, but still active, IO division of states, here involving Sobat State and Bieh State (Akobo)

126 Observations, December 2019

127 UN Panel of Experts report S/2020/145, para 29

## 7. JUBA TOWN CHECKPOINTS

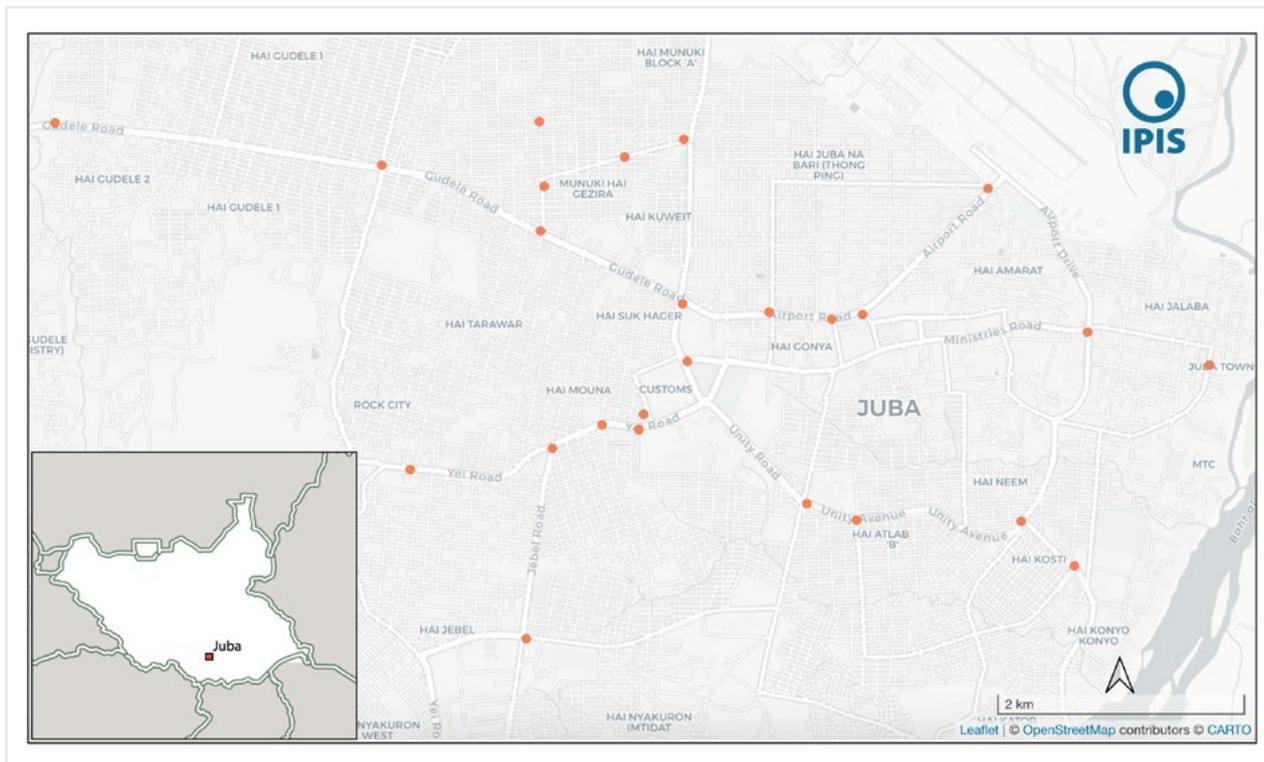


Figure 19. Juba town checkpoints

Juba is the capital and its strategic location at the heart of a spider's web of cross-border routes make it the major transshipment point for the logistical operations of commercial as well as aid imports and subsequent inland trade and distribution.

Historically, Juba's checkpoints emerged as the Sudanese government aimed to prevent intrusions of first the Anyanya and later SPLA rebels into town. Gudele 1, Gumbo Bridge, and Jebel date from this time. After 2013, these checkpoints at entry points to town became a focal point for governmental anxieties with keeping opposition out of the town. In particular at Gumbo Bridge, the soldiers here deployed have a reputation for terrible behavior, especially at night. Suspected opponents of the government have allegedly been thrown into the River Nile.<sup>128</sup>

Today, these entry checkpoints to town are still present, but they have been complemented by positions along all urban roads in Juba, controlled by the Traffic Police, who deploy at key junctions in town. We mapped a total of 25 of them, which are probably about half of all such positions. They serve as much to enforce traffic rules and check documentation as to generate revenues, substituting for meager or absent salaries. These police positions do not have any physical trappings, but rather consist of uniformed agents standing at both sides of the road (See picture on next page).



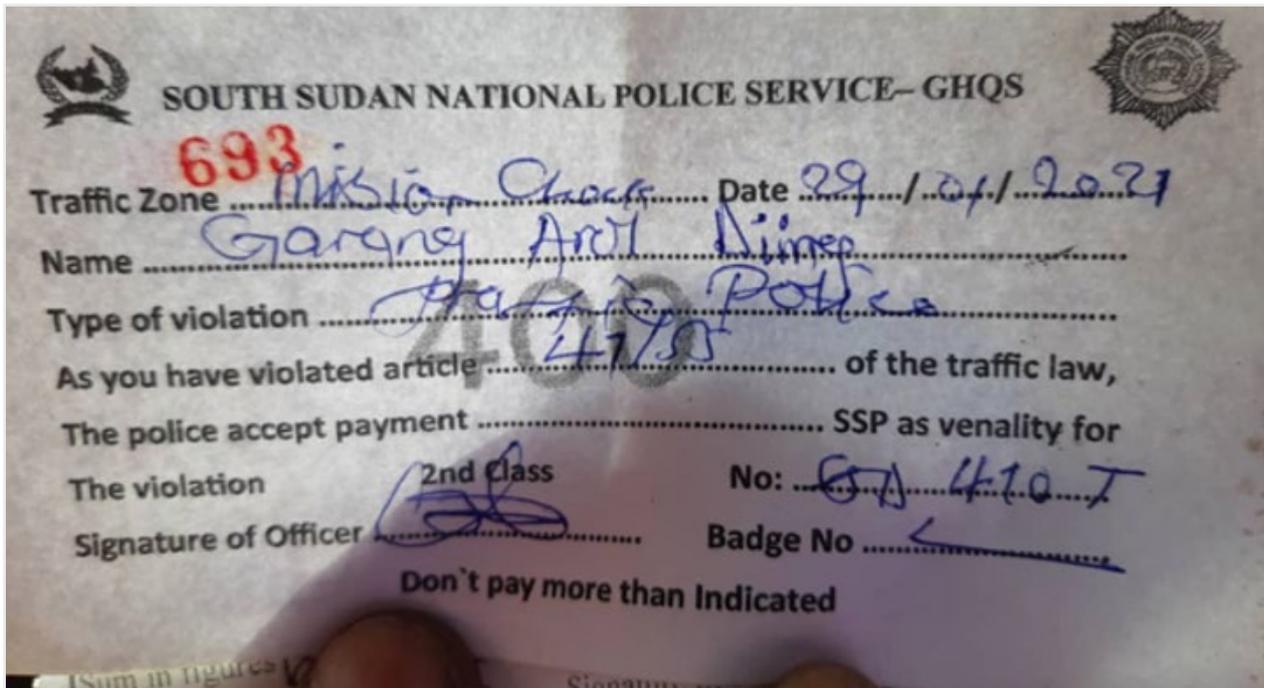
*Juba traffic police position called Customs, hailing a matatu.*

Minibuses providing the bulk of public transport typically pay SSP 1,500, but do so only once a day at the first Traffic police position they encounter along their route. The driver of a personal vehicle, by contrast, usually pays about SSP 500 (a little under a dollar) at each Traffic police position; on the way back, the police colleagues stand at the other side of the road. While the driver may argue that he just paid, police can put on an empathetic expression and ask for *haga chai*, something for tea. Given the constant use of these roads, the drivers tend to know checkpoint authorities within town this gives them advantage to negotiate and develop mutual understanding in terms of payment. However, this is not the case with foreign drivers. According John Mbaku an Eritrean who drives Isuzu lorry said,

*I am a foreign business man importing mixed goods from Kenya to Juba. We, the foreigners, face alot of checks within town, for example checks on our travel documents, driving documents, checks on car and cargo. In some instances the operators detain these documents for reasons only familiar to them and we end up paying cash in order to save time.<sup>129</sup>*

The agent overseeing Juba traffic police checkpoint explained this position has four individual traffic agents deployed every day, and that each of them collect around SSP 25,000 (USD 41) a day, meaning that in total they collect SSP 100,000 (USD 166) a day—an amount he considers average for other traffic police posts as well. This means that all the 25 Juba traffic police positions we mapped, collectively generate about SSP 2,500,000 (USD 4,166) a day in revenues. The commander explained each of his four agents receives SSP 1,000 for lunch and another SSP 1,500 at the end of the day, thus entailing a daily salary of just over USD 4.

129 Interview, Juba, November 2019, also see <https://eyeradio.org/govt-asked-to-remove-security-turned-taxmen-on-juba-roads/>



Receipt issued by traffic police.

Indeed, working at the traffic police in Juba means having a stable source of income. As one traffic police agent explained,

*'An intelligent traffic police can manage to live a decent life given the money got on the road. As for me I bought 3 plots within Juba, bought 1 public transport bus and am equally paying my children's school. I could not do all this with the small government salary which even delays for some months. That is how I am pushing life and that explains why we love the job.'*<sup>130</sup>

Asked as to how he complements his meager government salary—hovering around SSP 1,500 or just under USD 3 a month—he explained,

*'The actual life of a traffic police on road in Juba is all about mounting roadblocks with receipts in pocket. Yes we do issue receipts and it is given to us from our office on daily basis. How fast you issue them out determines what an operator gets in return. Per each receipt book an operator gets 1.000 SSP that means in a week, an operator gets approximately 7.000 SSP. In a month it amounts to 28.000 SSP and in a year with proper saving scheme an operator can make more than 300.000 SSP.'*<sup>131</sup>

He added,

*'As for us who run a junction, we don't consume all the informal taxes alone, but give to our own superiors. And that happens weekly or we even visit them in the evenings at their residence and give them in order to retain your duty post.'*

130 Interview, Juba, November 2019

131 Interview, Juba, November 2019

However, as night falls over Juba, the roads change character. Often to enforce the recurrent curfews, around high-level visits or the festive season, NSS and SSPDF take over from the traffic police at night and mount controls at established or random positions. They then charge vehicles higher amounts and may harass drivers.



*Military Intelligence checkpoint between Wunrok and Bentiu*

## 8. KEY DYNAMICS

This section contextualizes our main findings, connecting main findings and observations collected during the study with the relevant grey literature.

### 8.1. Main drivers

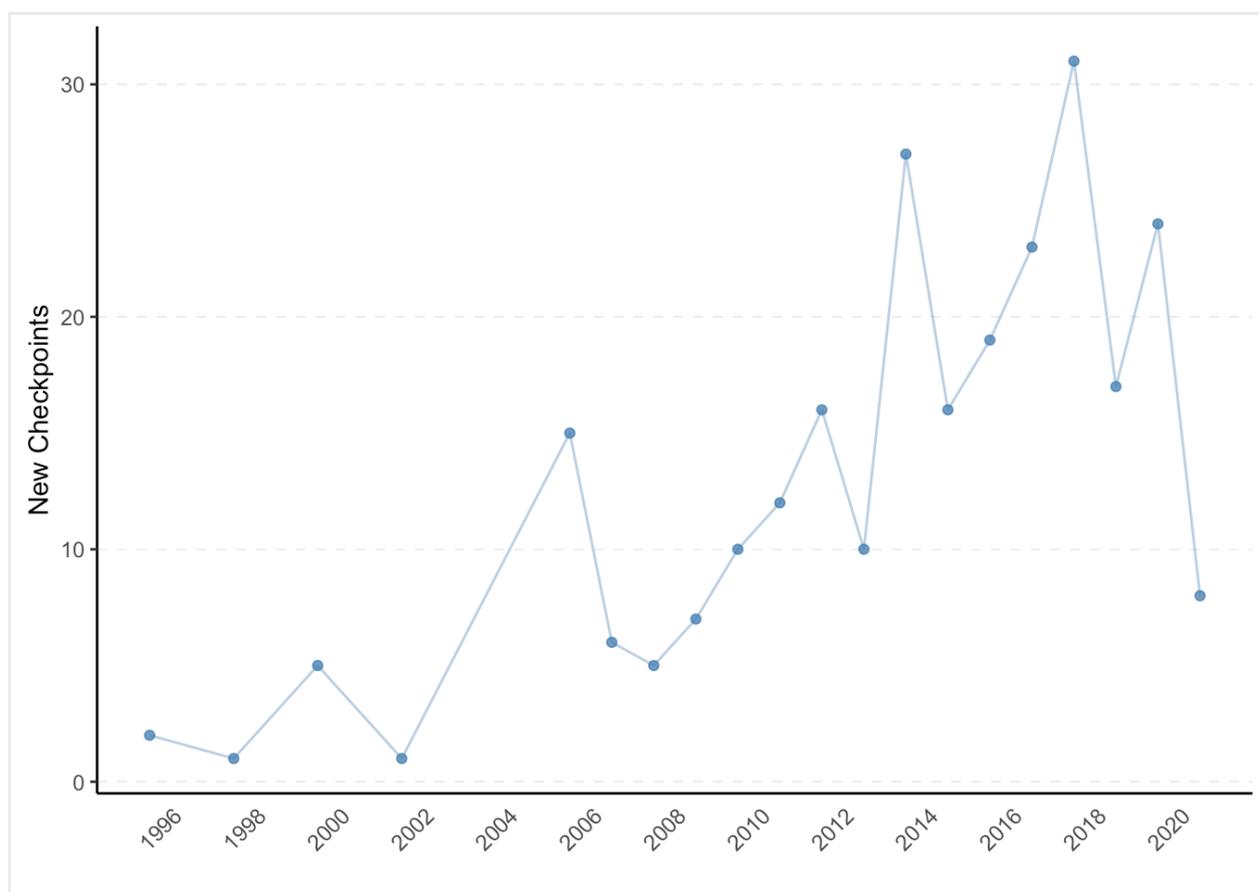


Figure 20. Recorded year of creation of checkpoints visited (our survey)

The above Figure shows the recorded year of creation for checkpoints surveyed. The first spike, in 2005, corresponds to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. After a relative lull, the number of new checkpoints increases again in 2011, the year of independence, and spikes dramatically in 2013, the year the conflict erupted. The following insecurity and violence in the country are an important reason for the multiplication of checkpoints. We found 30 checkpoints started in 2013, and 52 new checkpoints raised in the aftermath of the 2016 eruption of violence. In these recent civil wars, checkpoints were considered a ‘dividend’ and mechanism to reward soldiers, including disabled elderly former freedom fighters who are parked at military checkpoint villages.<sup>132</sup> Many of the new checkpoints created in 2017 were the result of the creation of new states, which assumed fiscal powers to finance their administration (discussed further below).

#### Decentralized self-financing of government agents

The plummeting of oil-derived government revenues, exacerbated by deflation of salaries, has meant both SPLA and IO have sought other revenue sources, reverting to earlier practices—the exploitation of

132 Such as Wathok, Pantit, Mangar Akot and Malualoich in Bahr al Gazal, see Kindersley & Majok op cit 2019 p. 33

teak and gold that were sources of funding at the time of the independence struggle<sup>133</sup>—as well as to checkpoints.

Indeed, many civilian state positions do not come with a regular salary, meaning administrators are locally dependent on extracting revenues from trade and NGOs.<sup>134</sup> Whatever salary is paid, has lost value due to the radical devaluation of the SSP. A soldier's monthly salary of SSP 1,500 had purchasing power of around USD 200 in 2013, but currently is worth only USD 3.

In a context where government salaries are deflated, often delayed and sometimes not paid out at all, there is pressure on civilian and military state functionaries to rely more and more on non-salary sources of income such as checkpoints. They may have turned into the main way to maintain the army's presence across the country on the basis of decentralized self-financing. From the perspective of individual soldiers, being deployed at a checkpoint is a premium, for the possibility it affords to make up for faltering official incomes. One SSPDF soldier who 'works the rope' of the important checkpoint at Luri, explained

*'I am happy here, as the daily collections I make here are far better than my salary. On a good day I can get 15.000 SSP (25 USD), while my monthly salary is 1.860 SSP (3 USD) and it doesn't even come on time.'*<sup>135</sup>

Other soldiers feel shame and anger that they have to resort to harassing road users to survive. One soldier deployed at a checkpoint along the Western Corridor explained:

*'We soldiers should be paid every month. The food we're getting—you wouldn't even eat it. We live in poor health. Most of us survive only from the transit taxes we enforce on traders, and of the little good Samaritans like you offer in passing.'*<sup>136</sup>

According to the UN, this particularly holds for the SPLA/M-IO, whose checkpoints are mainly for the subsistence of its troops.<sup>137</sup>

However, at other checkpoints tax collection seems driven by wealth-seeking on the part of commanders. A soldier at Kuda checkpoint along the Western Corridor—notorious for high taxes—explained that they don't collect as they wish themselves, but are bound by the orders from their superiors to collect certain amounts periodically.<sup>138</sup> At Jit checkpoint, at the end of each day checkpoint operators hand over taxes to their commanders of which they are given 2% of the total collected, encouraging them to collect much. Many similar collected anecdotes suggest that checkpoint taxes seem to travel up the 'food chain', with commanders and generals 'eating' a disproportionate amount of the revenues collected at the rope. Described one military source,

*'I knew one captain who worked at Luri checkpoint, and he owns three plots of land in Juba town which he bought over the last 6 years since he got deployed at the checkpoint. The cost of a plot currently is 8 million SSP (USD 13.000) and the salary for a captain is not more than 5.000 SSP (USD 8,3). How did he manage to buy the three plots? The answer he gave was from taxes collected.'*<sup>139</sup>

133 UN Panel of Experts S/2018/292 para 64, which adds, 'South Sudanese Anyanya rebels in the Sudan's first civil war (1955–1972) and SPLA in the Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005) harvested and sold teak to finance their rebellions. In the words of one South Sudanese parliamentarian, "Elsewhere, there were blood diamonds. For the North, there was blood petroleum — GoS [Government of Sudan] was drilling in the South to purchase weapons from Korea, China, Iraq and the Soviet Union. For us [in the SPLM/A], there was blood teak."

134 Markó, F. (2020). Research Update on Greater Equatoria, December 2020, p. 2

135 Interview, Luri checkpoint, February 2021

136 Interview, Keperi checkpoint, January 2021

137 UN Panel of Experts report S/2018/292, p. 38

138 Interview, January 2021

139 Interview, December 2020

## Reshuffling of administrative boundaries

Further, the reorganization from 10 to first 28 (in 2015) and then 32 states (in 2017) has facilitated the creation of many checkpoints, as it suddenly begot new administrations without revenues.<sup>140</sup> However, each new state border provided a new excuse/legitimization for a checkpoint, and indeed we found 32 new checkpoints appearing where roads intersect with these—now obsolete—administrative boundaries. However, the creation of new, unclearly demarcated, states also led to border disputes where the inclusion or exclusion of communities was at stake, inviting the deployment at checkpoints at every limit of influence between them.<sup>141</sup> Many of these checkpoints still exist: checkpoints are ‘sticky’, in that they often outlive their initial purpose.

## Communal violence as driver for checkpoint proliferation

Related, a big source of checkpoint proliferation is the widespread outbreaks of ‘localized’ or ‘communal violence’, i.e., eruptions of conflict driven by feuds, cattle raiding or conflict around access to pastures.<sup>142</sup> At least 20 of the checkpoints mapped were initially erected as the SSPDF was brought in in response to such violence. Where possible, army deployments called in situate themselves close to roads, so as to facilitate decentralized self-financing.

Additionally, militia from hostile bordering local communities may themselves occupy points where the road intersects with the limits of the area they claim. Often composed of youth, they may sporadically demand some minor amounts from road users. We found 9 of such, often temporary, community roadblocks: seven *gelweng* (Dinka herder community militia) checkpoints in Lakes State and two Dinka community youth operated river checkpoints along the White Nile at the border between Lakes and Jonglei.<sup>143</sup>

Oftentimes, roads near areas subject to communal violence are temporarily subject to increased banditry. However, periods of heightened banditry along a given stretch of road can just as well be an expression of political unrest, as was the case for the Juba-Nimule and Juba-Yei road in April 2021.

## 8.2. Impacts on markets

A general pattern is that the further away from Juba and borders in the north, the more dysfunctional markets are, as a function of road conditions and checkpoint taxes. In the remote market town of Bunagok, a piece of soap costs 300 SSP, or three times the price in Juba. When asked why the price was so high, a shop attendant looked up and simply said, ‘checkpoints’.<sup>144</sup>

The first impact of checkpoints is thus on consumers. As noted, a general pattern is that checkpoints disproportionately tax foreign truck drivers, which appears to displace the burden of unpaid salaries onto foreign entrepreneurs. Yet the subsequent and structural increase in transport costs is passed onwards to the final consumer—the increasing percentage of South Sudanese who depend on the market for their livelihoods. Livelihood reporting displays a clear increase in the number of South Sudanese depending on purchasing food in markets for their livelihoods, thus subjecting them to the indirect effects of

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140 News item ‘Gok governor has no office, left running his state under tree’; also see <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/south-sudan-10-states-32-states-and-back-again>

141 Lojora, Aluakluak (two), Amethdol, Rorchol Akol

142 For instance, Bahr El Ghazel, despite being under government control, is an epic center of communal violence and cattle raiding. In Lakes State, the Agar are feuding with the Gok of Cueibet; the Gok are also feuding with the neighboring Rek of Tonj; and the Rek, in turn, are also fighting with the Jurchol over territorial disputes. Other examples of the same dynamic are Lojora, Dor, Nyang Payii, Dor; there is also Aluakluak checkpoints (second Aluakluak). To control violence between Dinka Agar and Apak of Aluakluak. There is also Abeer- to control violence between the Rup of Rumbek and Pathiong of Cueibet. There are also Rorchol Akol, to control violence between Rek of Tonj and Gok of Cueibet.

143 For instance, in Northern Bahr al Ghazal, the checkpoint Abier was a position of some 20 *gelweng* (Dinka militia) from the Rupi, who are separated by a swamp from the Mayom checkpoint held by the rival Kuyi *gelweng*. Similarly, the second Aluakluak checkpoint is operated by the Apak *gelweng* and faces the Karic checkpoint held by the Aliab Koc *gelweng*. The checkpoints at Kaltok and Tombek and Karic and Teakic also developed out of hostile communities policing the limits of the contested areas to which they both lay claim.

144 Interview, November 2019, also see WFP op cit 2015

checkpoint taxes on market prices.<sup>145</sup> While—unlike for instance the DRC—pedestrians are not taxed on their way to and from local markets, the prices for food and goods they buy at the market incorporate hefty transport taxes. This may disproportionately affect the many vulnerable IDPs, mostly resettled along roads for security, where they increasingly rely on aid or the market for their food—making them vulnerable to the effects of checkpoint costs.

The second major impact is on domestic producers of foodstuff. As checkpoint taxes generally do not discriminate between the nature and value of cargo but instead determine taxes based on the size of vehicles, this means that vehicles carrying lower value goods tend to pay more relative to the value of goods.<sup>146</sup> Thus, a fuel truck pays about as much as a truck carrying sorghum, which is worth much less. This probably means that checkpoints act as a very real disincentive for agricultural exchange within the country, as only goods of which the value exceeds transport, fuel, and roadblock costs can actually travel in commercially profitable ways. As we have seen in Section 4.3.2, the rising of indiscriminate checkpoint taxes along the rivers has indeed pushed transport costs beyond the threshold at which it is profitable to ship sorghum from the producing area around Renk to Juba, penalizing domestic production against imports from neighboring Uganda.

Additionally, domestic producers and traders have reduced markets because of the large volumes of foodstuffs that relief organizations import. It may be reasoned that aid organizations can skirt checkpoint taxations and mitigate the damage of food aid on local markets by replacing in-kind food delivery with cash-based programming. However, it has already been noted that this effectively entails outsourcing the risks and costs of checkpoints to transporters and traders who then face the checkpoint economy alone<sup>147</sup>; and further, the extreme hyperinflation we're witnessing in South Sudan encourages in-kind food aid because cash may value too quickly.<sup>148</sup>

### 8.3. Fluctuations of checkpoints and tax levels over time

The number of checkpoints along any given route keeps increasing as well as decreasing, popping up in new places. This is firstly because in much of South Sudan, the checkpoint economy is seasonal, focused on the window of months in which roads are sufficiently dry to allow a regular overland traffic flow. During the rainy season, many checkpoints are inactive, resurfacing again during the onset of the dry season. The experience since 2019 has been of a narrowing of that window, as longer and more intense flooding disrupted major trade routes longer than ever.<sup>149</sup>

Secondly, the checkpoint landscape is subject to short-term changes in function of shifting army deployments, for instance around frontlines or in response to the flare-up and dying down of communal conflict.<sup>150</sup> As army units are moved around, checkpoints move around, too.

Thirdly, particularly in contested areas, checkpoints may change hands quite quickly, without a checkpoint being removed if they change hands. For instance, from Juba to Rokon, the Tapari, Jambo, and Buagyi checkpoints were in existence before the SPLA-IO overtook them in 2016; in 2019 the SSPDF took them back again.<sup>151</sup> However, the R-ARCSS agreement stipulates that Western Equatoria will be for SPLA-IO, meaning that the checkpoints should change hands again.

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145 Thomas, E. (2019). *Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan* (London/Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute) and [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/71333\\_71333specialreportsouthsudan2020041.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/71333_71333specialreportsouthsudan2020041.pdf)

146 Also discussed in NBS op cit 2011, p. 20

147 Thomas et al 2018: 3

148 See WFP 2017 Western corridor in times of hyperinflation

149 'Due to climate variability, South Sudan has experienced exceptionally short dry seasons in 2019 and 2020. Heavy downpour, beginning as early as April and continuing as late as December, leads to flooding and damages major supply routes. This has resulted in a shorter window for humanitarian agencies to preposition essential commodities ahead of the rainy season.' (OCHA op cit 2021, p. 72)

150 Bradbury et al observed the same for the civil war with Sudan: 'Taxation is closely linked to security. In locations closest to the frontline the military are able to demand more taxation. This can vary with the season. For example, in Ajiép during the dry season when the river Jur is low and the town is vulnerable to attack from government forces ... the SPLM/A military are in a strong position to negotiate a high contribution from the population. During the wet season, when government forces are unable to cross the river, they are able to exact less taxes. The military environment therefore enables predation to continue.' (op cit 2000: 52)

151 Source: interviews with the checkpoint operators, January 2021.

## 8.4. Identity of drivers and checkpoint behavior

Interviews with multiple transporters, checkpoint operators and the experiences of our surveyors revealed that the identity of drivers plays significant role in determining the level of checkpoint taxes.

First, mistrust between Dinka and Nuer puts limits on free circulation. In predominantly Nuer areas—overlapping largely with the SPLA-IO—Dinka travelers are mistrusted, whereas Nuer traders are generally subject to heightened harassment at Dinka checkpoints—correlating largely with the SPLA-IG. As key trade routes often cut across these fault lines, it appears Equatorians are considered more neutral and therefore can best navigate the ethnicized militarization of South Sudan’s long-distance routes, and they appear frequently alongside transporters from nearby African countries.

Second, many truck drivers are from East African or neighboring countries—Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Eritrea, and Somalia—and whereas they are subject to heightened transit taxes for being ‘foreigners’, they are less at risk for ethnic violence affecting key domestic groups. Conversely, foreign drivers are charged higher than citizens (South Sudanese). The sentiment that foreigners control a significant portion of the labor market in South Sudan is spread over and men in uniforms know this. In addition to that, many foreign drivers don’t speak Arabic, the lingua franca of South Sudan. The authorities subject the documents of foreigners to thorough checks and sometimes decide to detain any of the documents for reasons ‘known to them’. This was very common in Lakes and Warrap State.

Third, transporters from (northern) Sudan are treated harshly by all checkpoint operators, using conflictual history as a pretext for more harassment. As an example, the White Nile is a key artery for exchange between Sudan and South Sudan, yet one Sudanese boatman explained how at Kilo 22 and other river checkpoints, he is approached violently, subject to higher taxes than other boatmen, and referred to with the pejorative ‘*Taali ini Mudukuru*’ (‘come here you Arab’).<sup>152</sup>

## 8.5. Transporter strategies for safety and reduction of checkpoint taxes

We have noted in section 4.2.3 that along the Western Corridor, the use of armed soldiers as escorts and negotiators of checkpoint taxes is becoming an established practice. This same dynamic has also been noted for Juba-Kapoeta, where a soldier escort costs SSP 160,000 for a return journey; between Torit-Kapoeta, they engage 2 soldiers, for 20,000 SSP each (included in 160,000).<sup>153</sup>

It fits within a larger pattern in which the transport sector, due to the concentrated high value involved, is highly coveted by military-political authorities at each level, and transport operators therefore need to acquire forms of political protection—protection rackets—to shield them from generalized predation. ‘To be able to do business, you need to know a powerful general in Juba—if you grease his palm enough, he can help you if you get harassment from his government colleagues—in Juba or along the road’, comments one manager of a transport company.<sup>154</sup> Our surveyors observed multiple occasions in which East African drivers refused to pay high checkpoint taxes and placed phone calls to their military patron in Juba, who would then talk to the checkpoint commander ordering release of the vehicles or pressing for lower taxes.<sup>155</sup>

As with military escorts, this strategy on the part of transporters is not appreciated by checkpoint operators. ‘In Juba they are already comfortable while we do not even touch salaries’, commented one checkpoint operator. ‘Why do they also need to eat the little we ask to survive?’<sup>156</sup> While this framing of a tension between military elites and foot soldiers overall may hold, many individual checkpoints are also

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152 Interview, January 2020

153 Source, transporter interview, April 2021. Also see [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH\\_SSD\\_Brief\\_SSD1907b\\_February-2020-2-1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SSD_Brief_SSD1907b_February-2020-2-1.pdf), p. 4

154 Interview, April 2021. As Thomas et al 2018: 12-3 note, ‘there are a limited number of trucking companies that WFP can use to deliver aid around the country. Some of those companies are regional (Kenyan, Ethiopian), but none can operate inside South Sudan without political backing from within the government, and that inevitably means payoffs to figures within the political administration.’

155 Also see Geneva Call, op cit p. 34

156 Source, interview, January 2020.

part of networks of patronage. Disproportionately high tax levels at some checkpoints are best explained with reference to their connections to powerful generals.

Transporters also resort to hiring vehicles with government license plates, obtaining letters of 'no stop from Juba', and driving in convoy to reduce checkpoint taxes. A trader in Tonj explained this strategy:

*'We have a system of moving in convoy not just for security but also for taxes. The bigger the convoy, the less the checkpoints cost. Recently I made a mistake. I said we were ten trucks. The number was thirteen trucks. I was cleared to pass. When they counted the number of trucks that passed, they realized I underdeclared the number and paid too little. I was detained for two days. It was a crime that I cheated. But the checkpoint was illegal. I reported this to the office of governor and the checkpoint was closed. However, they simply moved a bit away and set up another checkpoint. They are hostile towards us now and threaten me terribly.'*<sup>157</sup>

Road and river users can also attenuate harassment and tax levels in minor ways: speaking Juba Arabic and by deploying relevant negotiation skills. Checkpoint operators usually ask for *grush bita habel*, money to open the barrier; but they can add *jou biga kap*, literally Juba Arabic for 'the sky is terrible', meaning things are not going well, and implying negotiations will be tough. In response, drivers and captains can respond by calling even the lowest checkpoint operator (typically the 'rope man', the person responsible for opening the roadblock) *dohl kabir* (Arabic for 'big person'), *hakuma* (Arabic for 'government'), complementing them to ease their posture. Drivers can repeat and repeat these phrases at every single checkpoint. This can help to avoid visiting the *maktab bit taftish*, the security office where heavy taxes are levied. Frequent travelers get to know checkpoint operators and pass easier, pay less and sometimes manage to pass on credit, paying on the return journey. Truck drivers told us they prefer being on the road between daybreak and noon, as soldiers across the country have a reputation for getting drunk in the afternoon, increasing their brutality. Finally, it is safe to say that checkpoint taxes are preferred by transporters to more unpredictable and violent forms of exactions such as highway banditry and ambushes, that also frequently occur in South Sudan.<sup>158</sup>

## 8.6. Command and control?

It has been suggested that key units such as the NSS and the personalized units or militia that elite figures retain receive direct funding but no uniform, and that the regular armed forces—of the opposition as well—are given a uniform but no funding. They are kept loyal through license to engaged in decentralized predation, but are kept too weak and fragmented in military terms to constitute a real threat to elite networks. While all must rely on forms of decentralized revenue generation such as checkpoint predation, different army units or local authorities enjoy varying degrees of leeway to do so, depending on their connections to elite figures in the 'center'. Their 'license to operate' depends on consent from Juba, and likely involves occasional financial demonstrations of 'appreciation'. As one report surmised,

*'payments to local commanders for the passage of relief supplies ... are not the result of an absence of command and control in Juba, but rather the result of a political decision made in Juba that local forces should make up shortfalls in their wages by demanding payments from humanitarian organizations'*<sup>159</sup>

157 Interview, November 2019

158 In the past, taxes came about as solutions negotiated between the SPLA and locals, to avoid more violent exactions. See Pendle, N., & Anei, C. M. (2018). *Wartime Trade and the Reshaping of Power in South Sudan: Learning from the market of Mayen Rual*. London/ Nairobi: RVI

159 Craze op cit 2018, p. 5. The report continues (p 13), 'Whatever the claims of the military command at Bilpam, these minor tactics of predation actually constitute an important income stream for the SPLA, as well as for armed opposition groups.' As Hutton (op cit, p. 12) further notes, 'The system of governance in South Sudan should, therefore, not be considered as a hierarchy with a lack of structure, regulation and consistency but rather like a network of relationships through which politics and economics function. In such networked authority, power functions through interconnected groups of decentralised components with significant autonomy, making room for competition even within shared strategies.'

The central and state governments, in turn, can cite a lack of control over ‘undisciplined elements’ when confronted with complaints about checkpoints.<sup>160</sup> However, the way checkpoint revenues are channeled upwards in civil and military hierarchies belie this excuse of lack of control. At the level of checkpoints, there are marked differences on how cash is divided. At some checkpoints, any cash obtained is divided immediately. At others, money is put in a common pot and divided at the end of the day. This division typically involves a bigger percentage for higher ranks, who may also be responsible for rations for the foot soldiers. In some cases, individual checkpoint operators get a fixed amount of SSP a day, in others, they get a fixed percentage of the day’s spoils. At another checkpoint, an operator explained that only the taxes they collect from commercial trucks are remitted to their respective superiors, while minor taxes or ‘contributions’ from other road users are theirs to keep.<sup>161</sup> There are also clear indications that checkpoints are subject to strong central command in the consistent denial of UN and humanitarian access (discussed below).

## 8.7. Checkpoints as nodes for other military-commercial activities

We also found that checkpoints do not only form revenue generating devices through taxation, but also constitute platforms from where soldiers engage in ancillary economic activities. They engage in fishing, the provision of paid escorts to transporters along the Western Corridor, and the production of charcoal. Many checkpoints are, therefore, strategically positioned where such other economic activities are viable. Insecurity along the road thus becomes a source of revenue for soldiers.

### Case study: the SSPDF charcoal-checkpoint business nexus

Aru Junction in Central Equatoria is one of the main charcoal transshipment points towards Juba, because consumers in Juba prefer the charcoal of Aru Junction to charcoal produced elsewhere. The charcoal production business is dominated by SSPDF soldiers, who have dedicated themselves en masse to charcoal to turn a profit and make up for their structurally delayed salaries.<sup>162</sup> Soldiers explained,

*‘We do this job (soldiering) because we love our country, we don’t do it because of the money, because the money is nothing. That’s why we have to also produce charcoal.’<sup>163</sup>*

They use the checkpoint of Aru Junction as an outlet to sell charcoal and ship it onwards to Juba. Whereas the local price for a 50kg bag of charcoal hovers between 1.500-1.700 SSP (3 USD) at Aru Junction, in Juba—only a couple of hours away—such a bag costs at least double that amount.<sup>164</sup> Juba is an enormous market for charcoal: according to one study, households here use some 2,5 million bags of charcoal annually.<sup>165</sup>



*Bags of charcoal stacked at an SSPDF checkpoint.*

160 ‘Increasing fragmentation justifies further checkpoints and payments’, observed a recent report: Geneva Call op cit p. 34

161 Interview, Kapuri checkpoint, January 2021

162 Interview with soldier in Aru Junction, November 2019

163 Interview, February 2021

164 Interview with charcoal trader in Aru Junction, November 2019

165 See UN Panel of Experts report S/2019/301/E, p. 40ff

The SSPDF is also implicated in charcoal trade along the route to Yambio in Western Equatoria, using checkpoints to sell or transship charcoal bags, most notably at the checkpoints Rokon, Tapari, Jambo, and Bueyi. Here, the local price of a bag of charcoal hovers around 1.200 SSP, making the potential profit margin of selling in Juba higher than at Aru Junction. Soldiers may hire a vehicle returning empty to Juba (at rates lower than normal) to transport their charcoals to the market, of course benefiting from significant reductions in checkpoint taxes staffed by their colleagues on the road.

Charcoal burning by the army is also rampant in other areas. The ‘Stereo Moncy’ checkpoint in Warrap (also called Rorchol Akol) is one such site. The checkpoint operators—police, intelligence and the army—fall under the authorities in Wau and Tonj, who manage checkpoints very well as a source of living and salary. At this checkpoint, a remote checkpoint in the middle of a dense forest, soldiers collect the charcoal they have burned in the vicinity, and which they sell in the towns of Tonj and Wau. They combine checkpoint income with burning charcoal. Explained one trader,

‘This suggests the checkpoint men are very wise, when your car is empty and they know that you will agree to load charcoal, they allow you free passage. After you load, they give you a soldier and you will not pay at any other checkpoint until Tonj’<sup>166</sup>

*Usually, the deployed SSPDF units approach the local chief (sultan), explaining they are not paid. The sultan may grant them license to exploit charcoal, and in exchange they periodically give the chief some bags of charcoal. For civilians, having such a predictable interface of extraction is better than the alternative of spurious looting.*

Soldiers also opportunistically engage in transport business, using trucks to ship for instance their charcoal or logs to markets. In this case, trucks often forego checkpoint taxation, and the soldiers negotiate with their colleagues. Commercial truck drivers often do this when they return empty from their humanitarian relief deliveries, to minimize checkpoint taxes.

But checkpoints also form a more indirect source of business opportunity for the army. Because of the profits involved in bypassing checkpoint taxes, a number of military figures have begun using service vehicles for business. They may repaint SPLA trucks, at times replacing the government license plates with ordinary ones, at times maintaining government license plates to assure smooth passage.



*Repainted army vehicle that still retains government license plates (redacted).*

166 Interview in Tonj, November 2019

For instance, one trucker from the Nuba Mountains, drives a truck belonging to a security service in Juba. On orders of the Director of that service, the truck transport commercial goods (sugar, soap, cooking oil and empty tanks of water) to and from Juba. At Luri checkpoint, the soldier driving the truck explained

*'I was given a departure order as a security staff by my boss, a gun, and full prison uniform to transport goods; I don't pay taxes at these checkpoints, because my truck has the yellow government license plate. The business this truck does represents the (name security service), but it actually benefits the boss.'*<sup>167</sup>

In another configuration, businessmen rent government vehicles to skirt checkpoint taxes, as discussed in section 5.3. Finally, many private vehicles—passenger cars as well as trucks—in South Sudan are privately owned by military figures, who because of their elite status may benefit from reduced checkpoint fees or even none at all. They may rent out these vehicles to private business operators or order subordinates to conduct commercial business with their vehicles, thus benefiting from unfair market advantages vis-à-vis traders paying full checkpoint taxes. Below is the picture of one such vehicle, which belongs to the former Defense Minister and which was transporting commercial goods, operated by a Sergeant Major connected to said former minister.



*Military business: private vehicle owned by general and used by his soldiers for business purposes (license plate redacted).*

167 Interview, Luri, 2020



*Bazunguwa checkpoint in Yambio*

We have similarly found military vehicles transporting charcoal produced by soldiers in the Equatorias, as well as soldiers accompanying their charcoal transported on private vehicles, to ensure minimal taxes at checkpoints along the way to Juba (see box above).

## 8.8. Effectiveness of checkpoint closures

Once in a while, authorities order the closing of checkpoints, but they often continue or reemerge. For instance, after the Governor of then Northern Unity State Dr Joseph Nguen Monytil (now the Governor of Unity State) and his SPLM-IO counterpart Mr Tor Tunguar (now the Deputy Governor) closed what they termed as unnecessary checkpoints in 2019, local authorities and army units continued operating them. The latter privately declared that ‘the order couldn’t work because the soldiers have no salaries; they and their families have to survive.’<sup>168</sup>

Similarly, the checkpoints at Maridi and Dor Village were closed by the respective governors of the then-established Terekeka and Eastern Lakes States, only to continue clandestinely. Though physical ropes were no longer stretched across the road, soldiers there still ask for *moya* or *chai* (‘water’ or ‘tea’ in Juba Arabic) to passing trucks. Such public statements may be PR targeted towards the English-speaking press, while political actors in reality accept the existence of checkpoints. Oftentimes, also, such pronouncements closing checkpoints take place before or during the rainy season, when road conditions worsen to the point of making traffic impossible, and checkpoints useless.

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168 Interview, Mayom, January 2021

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This report sought to answer the two questions. By way of conclusion, we here provide our tentative answers, implications, and further questions raised by the research.

### *1. What is the exact scope of the phenomenon of checkpoints in South Sudan, what are its main drivers and impacts?*

Regarding the **scope** of the phenomenon of checkpoints, this study has mapped 319 checkpoints, located along South Sudan's main overland routes and waterways (see 'Main Findings', section 3). However, in reality, there are probably many more, along routes that could not be covered for this study (see 'Methodology', section 2).

When it comes to **main drivers** of checkpoints, we have identified a number of interlocking factors in section 8. First, the plummeting of oil revenues that for a brief period after 2011 financed the government budget. As a response, government agents had to seek recourse to non-oil revenue generation mechanisms, among which checkpoints constitute a principal one. Second, the fact that salaries are not corrected for hyperinflation and currency depreciation means that civil servants and security agents have to survive on worthless official monthly incomes, or seek to complement it by other means. These factors combined entail that government has become a self-financing enterprise, relying on decentralized revenue generation tactics. Indeed, any army deployment in practice is accompanied by setting up a checkpoint to feed the troops. Third, since 2013, the SPLA/M-IO, being cut off from government resources, has to rely on autonomous revenue generation by taxing the portions of trade routes that are under its control. Fourth, the administrative reshuffling of states in South Sudan has entailed a profusion of new government administrations at the state and county level, often in need of raising their own revenues. They consequently set up checkpoints there, where trade routes intersect with their administrative entity. Even if this reshuffling has been annulled, many of the people involved in that short-lasting experiment hold on to the fiscal prerogatives they had temporarily gained. Fifth, checkpoints are crucial for the armed forces to control movement of IDPs and restrict humanitarian access. Finally, in particular checkpoints along high-traffic routes are key devices for profit generation benefiting individuals higher up the chain of command. Sixth, the large volumes of humanitarian relief traveling overland may also constitute a factor driving the checkpoint phenomenon, as they constitute stable sources of revenue as well as flows of food that can be used strategically in struggles for control over people. These factors combined with the history of South Sudan likely mean that checkpoints are an endemic phenomenon, and that checkpoints will remain a key interface between international trade, aid and parties to conflict in the country.

In terms of **main impacts**, the proliferation of checkpoints has a huge impact on transport costs, constituting up to 50% of transport costs. As checkpoint taxes are often calculated on the size of a vehicle and not based on its cargo, checkpoint taxes discriminate against low-value cargo, most notably food items. This, second, kills the domestic market for agriculture, as it is not profitable to sell foodstuffs over long distances. However, it is also to be noted that in a number of places, checkpoints provide a real measure of security to road users, warding off bandits or keeping communal conflict from disrupting traffic.

### *2. How do checkpoints figure in the political economy of South Sudan?*

Taxation is intimately related to state-building, and understanding how taxation works in practice therefore provides a unique window into the political economy of a country. At independence, South Sudan's fiscal system was in the first instance centered on oil revenues, and only in a second instance on non-oil revenues. When only two years after independence conflict escalated, elites from both sides as

well as lesser armed groups reverted back to pre-independence modes of revenue generation, such as the decentralized taxation of trade.

Control over trade routes, in particular cross-border trade routes, quickly turned into a pivot in the conflict as well as in competition within elites. Ever since 2013, checkpoints have gradually expanded in number as well as in taxation levels, and today, they form a key revenue generation mechanism for agents and soldiers of both the government and opposition. The long-distance transport of bulk trade and aid, which because of the volumes involved represent concentrated wealth, has along the way become profoundly implicated in South Sudan's militarized political economy. Trade routes in South Sudan—whether overland or waterways—are not spaces of free circulation but highly militarized spaces, off-limits to most civilians. Long-distance displacements are consequently also militarized, however much traders and aid organizations may seek to extricate themselves from the political economy of conflict in South Sudan. It is safe to say that checkpoints form the main interface between trade and aid on the one hand and the conflict economy on the other. Comparing checkpoint taxes to other forms of wealth extraction from traders and aid organizations was beyond the scope of this study, but it is likely that checkpoints form the main way in which both activities finance armed actors. Because rent-seeking has become an important rationale for people under arms in South Sudan, the Dinka Jieng Council of Elders reaffirmed in early 2021 that 'corruption in South Sudan is the driver of political competition and hence the war', fueling fragmentation of elites as well as ground troops.<sup>169</sup> While checkpoints enrich elite groups and keep their subordinates alive and loyal, the fact that checkpoint taxes don't end up in government accounts weakens the South Sudanese state.

The connection between trade, aid and the conflict economy is mediated by logistical subcontractors, or the transport companies that carry out the work of negotiating checkpoints as they seek to deliver trade items or humanitarian relief for their clients. Because logistical subcontractors can incorporate checkpoints costs into the transport prices they charge, they have an obvious incentive to prioritize safety and speed over reduction of checkpoint fees. They can be prohibited from paying only *de jure*, not *de facto*, as checkpoint operators do not hesitate to deploy violence to enforce payments. South Sudanese checkpoint operators do not discriminate between logistical contractors for aid organizations or traders—because logistical subcontractors work for profit even when they deliver aid, they are considered liable for taxes. In a way, this is no different from, say, Denmark, but in Denmark aid organizations don't end up paying people with guns without a formal fiscal mandate.

The findings in this report also give rise to a number of questions around impact that the data itself cannot answer. In part, these answering them would require more research and access to highly sensitive information; and in part, they involve value judgements. However, going forward, how the findings presented in this report are interpreted, depend on the stance taken to these larger questions. In the first place, the fact that security services and civil servants engage in decentralized revenue generation weakens ties to the center and fragments political authority. However, it is to be underscored that decentralized taxation can be healthy up to a certain degree, as checkpoints allow local authorities to dispose over a budget that they would not necessarily receive, had taxation been centralized in Juba. Second, it is not to be underestimated what kind of stabilizing factor regular checkpoint payments may constitute—checkpoints may well keep armed actors from engaging in more violent strategies of predation on, and extraction from, civilians. Third, because of the stakes involved, South Sudanese checkpoint operators will not easily relinquish their self-fashioned taxation prerogative in the face of pleas or pressure. Moving forward, the only way for humanitarian organizations to stop paying for checkpoints, will be to insource humanitarian logistics again, and accept the concomitant rise in prices of aid delivery. This trade-off between ethical and economic considerations is not so simple, as it also involves balancing the interests of beneficiaries.

Additional research is needed to better understand how illicit taxes and fees are contributing to the politics and power dynamics of on-going conflict. It is also important to expand the scope of future study to incorporate protection fees paid by transport companies as well as other taxes that are paid on the movement of goods, such as offloading taxes and confiscations of portions of cargo at markets or after

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169 <https://www.sudanspost.com/jieng-council-of-elders-statement-on-south-sudan-crisis/>

distribution. Furthermore, a rigorous study focusing on checkpoint taxes in relation to transport prices, and prices in markets, for which only scattered evidence is available now, would be crucial to get a better understanding of the impacts of checkpoints in its totality and in different parts of the country. Finally, it should also be investigated to which extent checkpoints affect other categories of stakeholders such as fishermen, herders and farmers.

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## 11. ANNEXES

### Annex 1. List of routes surveyed

Route	Number of checkpoints
Juba - Terekeka - Wau - Bentiu	87
Juba - Mundri - Wau - Bentiu	80
Juba - Renk (White Nile)	36
Juba - Old Fangak (El Zeraf)	28
Juba - Bor - Pibor	22
Juba - Nadapal	21
Juba - Yambio - Nabiapai	17
Juba - Nimule	15
Sobat-Baro river	12
Bor - Renk (Nile)	33
Wunrok - Bentiu - Yida	31
Juba town	25
Rumbek - Wau	24
Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	22
Juba - Torit - Kapoeta - Nadapal	18
Bor - Juba	17
Pathai - Langken-Akobo	16
Bor - Old Fangak (El Zeraf)	15
Nimule - Juba	15
Juba - Mundri	11
Sobat river	10

Route	Number of checkpoints
Wau - Wunrok	10
Pagak - Melut	9
Leer - Bentiu	8
Aweil - Nyamlel - Gok Machar	7
Aweil - Majok Nyith Thiou	6
Bor - Pibor	5
Mundri - Yambio	5
Wunrok - Abyei	5
Mundri - Rumbek	4
Wau - Aweil	4
Bentiu	3
Bentiu - Panakuach (border)	3
Juba - Bor (Nile)	3
Aweil - Wunrok	2
Baro river	2
Pibor river	2
Wau area	2
Yambio area	2
Chuei - Warrap	1
Yirol - Shambe	1

## Annex 2. Checkpoints per route, checkpoint operators per route

route	Number of checkpoints	Number of checkpoint operators	Median number of checkpoint operators
<b>Bor - Renk (Nile)</b>	33	286	9
<b>Wunrok - Bentiu - Yida</b>	31	234	6
<b>Juba town</b>	25	77	3
<b>Rumbek - Wau</b>	24	349	13
<b>Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek</b>	22	221	7
<b>Juba - Torit - Kapoeta - Nadapal</b>	18	77	3
<b>Bor - Juba</b>	17	99	6
<b>Pathai - Langken-Akobo</b>	16	42	3
<b>Bor - Old Fangak (El Zeraf)</b>	15	14	5
<b>Nimule - Juba</b>	15	162	5
<b>Juba - Mundri</b>	11	123	11
<b>Sobat river</b>	10	49	5
<b>Wau - Wunrok</b>	10	82	7
<b>Pagak - Melut</b>	9	42	5
<b>Leer - Bentiu</b>	8	28	3
<b>Aweil - Nyamlel - Gok Machar</b>	7	64	5
<b>Aweil - Majok Nyith Thiou</b>	6	46	6
<b>Bor - Pibor</b>	5	0	NA
<b>Mundri - Yambio</b>	5	27	4
<b>Wunrok - Abyei</b>	5	31	5
<b>Mundri - Rumbek</b>	4	60	13
<b>Wau - Aweil</b>	4	32	9
<b>Bentiu</b>	3	12	4
<b>Bentiu - Panakuach (border)</b>	3	15	5
<b>Juba - Bor (Nile)</b>	3	8	4
<b>Aweil - Wunrok</b>	2	8	4
<b>Baro river</b>	2	10	5
<b>Pibor river</b>	2	10	5
<b>Wau area</b>	2	10	5
<b>Yambio area</b>	2	13	13
<b>Chuei - Warrap</b>	1	6	6
<b>Yirol - Shambe</b>	1	6	6

## Annex 3. Republican order for free humanitarian movement

  
Republic of South Sudan (RSS)  
The President

Ref: RSS/RO/J/29/2017 9<sup>th</sup> November 2017

**THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN (RSS):**

Republican Order No.29/2017 for the **Free, unimpeded and unhindered Movement of Humanitarian Assistance Convoys in the Republic of South Sudan, 2017 A.D.**

**1. TITLE AND COMMENCEMENT:**

This Order shall be cited as "The Republican Order No.29/2017 for the **Free, unimpeded and unhindered Movement of Humanitarian Assistance Convoys in the Republic of South Sudan, 2017 A.D.**", and shall come into force on the date of its signature by the President of the Republic.

**2. THE ORDER:**

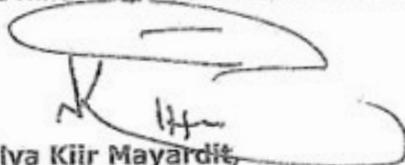
In exercise of the powers conferred upon me under Chapter 1, Clause 5.2.1 read together with Chapter III, Clause 1.1 of the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, August 2015, I, Salva Kiir Mayardit, President of the Republic of South Sudan, Commander -in-Chief of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Supreme Commander of all the other Regular Forces, do hereby issue this Republican

1

Order for the Free, unimpeded and unhindered Movement of Humanitarian Assistance Convoys in the Republic of South Sudan, with effect from 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2017 as hereunder:

1. All Humanitarian Assistance Convoys and NGOs should be accorded free , unimpeded and unhindered movement to the needy areas all over the Republic of South Sudan
2. All the roadblocks should be removed from the roads
3. All levels of the Government must assist the NGOs and their personnel in the delivery of Humanitarian Aid and services to the needy population
4. Anybody who intentionally obstructs the delivery of Humanitarian Aid and services or imposes taxes on Humanitarian Convoys shall be held accountable.
5. The High Level Oversight Committee established vide the Republican Order 23/2016 should ensure that this Order is implemented and that all the Humanitarian Convoys and NGOs should move without restrictions or hindrances.
6. State Oversight Committees shall be established in all the States to be headed by the respective State Governors and such State Oversight Committees shall report to the High Level Oversight Committee.

*Issued under my Hand and the Seal of the Republic of South Sudan in Juba, this Ninth Day of the Month of November in the Year 2017.*



**Salva Kiir Mayardit,**  
**President,**  
**Commander –in-Chief of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)**  
**and the Supreme Commander of all the other Regular Forces,**  
**Republic of South Sudan,**  
**Juba.**

## Annex 4. Detailed list of checkpoint fees along the Western Corridor

Data provided to IPIS by a transport company for trips conducted in March 2021.

Checkpoint	Route	Total amount paid (formal tax + lifting rope + any other payments)
<b>Bilpham</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	10,000 SSP
<b>Mobil</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	25,000 SSP
<b>Kuda</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Lojora</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SPP
<b>Maridi</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Chuei 1 (Tamanrind)</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	5,000 SSP
<b>Boraringa</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Adeba (Tamarind)</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Chuei 2 (Tamarind)</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	5,000 SSP
<b>Tombek</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	25,000 SSP
<b>Kalthok</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Dor Village</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	10,000 SSP
<b>Buganok</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	20,000 SSP
<b>Alel Village</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	10,000 SSP
<b>Matbar</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	10,000 SSP
<b>Payii</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Aluakluak</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Aluakluak</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Karic</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	12,000 SSP
<b>Teakic</b>	Juba - Terekeka - Yirol - Rumbek	15,000 SSP
<b>Kapuri</b>	Juba - Mundri	15,000 SSP
<b>Luri</b>	Juba - Mundri	30,000 SSP
<b>Nyamini (virtual)</b>	Juba - Mundri	12,000 SSP
<b>Kuda</b>	Juba - Mundri	15,000 SSP
<b>Rokon</b>	Juba - Mundri	15,000 SSP
<b>Tapari</b>	Juba - Mundri	10,000 SSP
<b>Jambo</b>	Juba - Mundri	20,000 SSP
<b>Buägyi</b>	Juba - Mundri	10,000 SSP
<b>Lanyi</b>	Juba - Mundri	15,000 SSP
<b>Lui</b>	Juba - Mundri	15,000 SSP
<b>Mundri Bridge</b>	Juba - Mundri	20,000 SSP
<b>Yeri</b>	Mundri - Rumbek	10,000 SSP
<b>Mvolo</b>	Mundri – Rumbek	20,000 SSP

Checkpoint	Route	Total amount paid (formal tax + lifting rope + any other payments)
<b>Abiere (same as Abeer?)</b>	Rumbek - Wau	25,000 SSP
<b>Mayom</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Mayom military check point</b>	Rumbek - Wau	10,000 SSP
<b>Ameeth Dhol</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Wara Abie</b>	Rumbek - Wau	10,000 SSP
<b>Abeer</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Abiriu</b>	Rumbek - Wau	20,000 SSP
<b>Mayath</b>	Rumbek - Wau	20,000 SSP
<b>Bar Gel</b>	Rumbek - Wau	35,000 SSP
<b>Malou Page</b>	Rumbek - Wau	25,000 SSP
<b>Rorchol Akol</b>	Rumbek - Wau	40,000 SSP
<b>Stereo Moncy</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Ater Moc</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Atere Moncy 2</b>	Rumbek - Wau	25,000 SSP
<b>Bak Cok</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Chueicok</b>	Rumbek-Wau	10,000 SSP
<b>Tonji bridge/ Tonj entry check point.</b>	Rumbek - Wau	60,000 SSP
<b>Larjang</b>	Rumbek-Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Alual Tonj exit</b>	Rumbek - Wau	10,000 SSP
<b>Alur</b>	Rumbek - Wau	15,000 SSP
<b>Aluol Agok Military</b>	Rumbek - Wau	10,000 SSP
<b>Kuajiena</b>	Rumbek - Wau	20,000 SSP
<b>Kuanya</b>	Rumbek - Wau	5,000 SSP
<b>Bahr Shirigi (Wau Entry)</b>	Rumbek - Wau	25,000 SSP
<b>Geti check point</b>	Wau - Aweil	15,000 SSP
<b>Lou chok</b>	Wau - Aweil	15,000 SSP
<b>Kuom</b>	Wau - Aweil	10,000 SSP
<b>Shirika Hayat</b>	Wau - Aweil	25,000 SSP

## Annex 5. Detailed list of checkpoint fees along the White Nile

**Annex 5.1 A trip undertaken in March 2021 from Juba to Renk. Data provided to IPIS by river transport company.**

Checkpoint Name	Amount paid (SSP)
Mangala	55,000
Bor	150,000
Shambe	400,00
Tayor	80,000
Adok	80,000
Wichliet	55,000
Kilo 37	60,000
Kilo 30	75,000
Kilo 32	55,000
Kilo 34	57,000
Kilo 31 Lift side	60,000
Kilo 31 Right Side	58,000
Rumpadak	75,000
Paa	55,000
Kilo 29	75,000
Kilo 27	85,000
Puliar	65,000
Niem	110,000
Kilo 24	57,000
Parjaak	60,000
Kilo 23	140,000
Kilo 22	150,000
Kaal	80,000

Checkpoint Name	Amount paid (SSP)
Wangchar	80,000
Balbole	92,000
Makeer	92,000
Kilo 50 West	125,000
Kilo 51 East	125,000
Wuchmon (Lual)	135,000
Kilo 10	90,000
Waskie	77,000
Nyajuat	10,000
Fangak	599,000
Tonja	350,000
Dor	250,000
Diel	455,000
Atar	550,000
Kaldak	70,000
Warjok	80,000
Malakal UNMIS Port	80,000
Wau-Shiluk	40,000
Kodok	13,000
Meluth	45,000
Kaka	60,000
Renk	400,000

## Annex 5.2. Taxation along the White Nile, early 2020

Data collected by our surveyor from a transport company and aboard a WFP-commissioned barge.  
Note: Original SSP exchange rate, not converted to 2021 rates.

Checkpoint name	WFP contracted barge	Checkpoint fees paid
North Shambe	Nil	5,000ssp
Kilo 71 checkpoint	60,000ssp	80,000ssp,
Adok checkpoint	20,000ssp	40,000ssp,
Kilo 29 checkpoint	20,000ssp	35,000ssp
Kilo 27 checkpoint	20,000ssp	30,000ssp
Kilo 22 checkpoint	70,000ssp	80,000ssp
Kilo 50 (10)	30,000ssp	Nil
Wasket checkpoint	Nil	30,000ssp
Tonga checkpoint	80,000ssp	130,000ssp
New Fangak	20,000ssp	120,000ssp
Dior checkpoint	15,000ssp	90,000ssp
Diel checkpoint	5,000ssp	120,000ssp
Atar checkpoint	10,000ssp	290,000ssp
Kaldak checkpoint	10,000ssp	28,000ssp
Warjok checkpoint	5,000ssp	3,000ssp
Malakal checkpoint	52,000ssp	18,000ssp
<b>Total</b>	<b>417,000</b>	<b>1,099,000</b>

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