

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

Summary report

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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

INTRODUCTION

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'¹. Ever since the NBS study, evidence on checkpoints in South Sudan has remained fragmented and anecdotal in nature. This report demonstrates how checkpoints have today become the main interface of systemic predation on the value concentrated in long-distance transport.



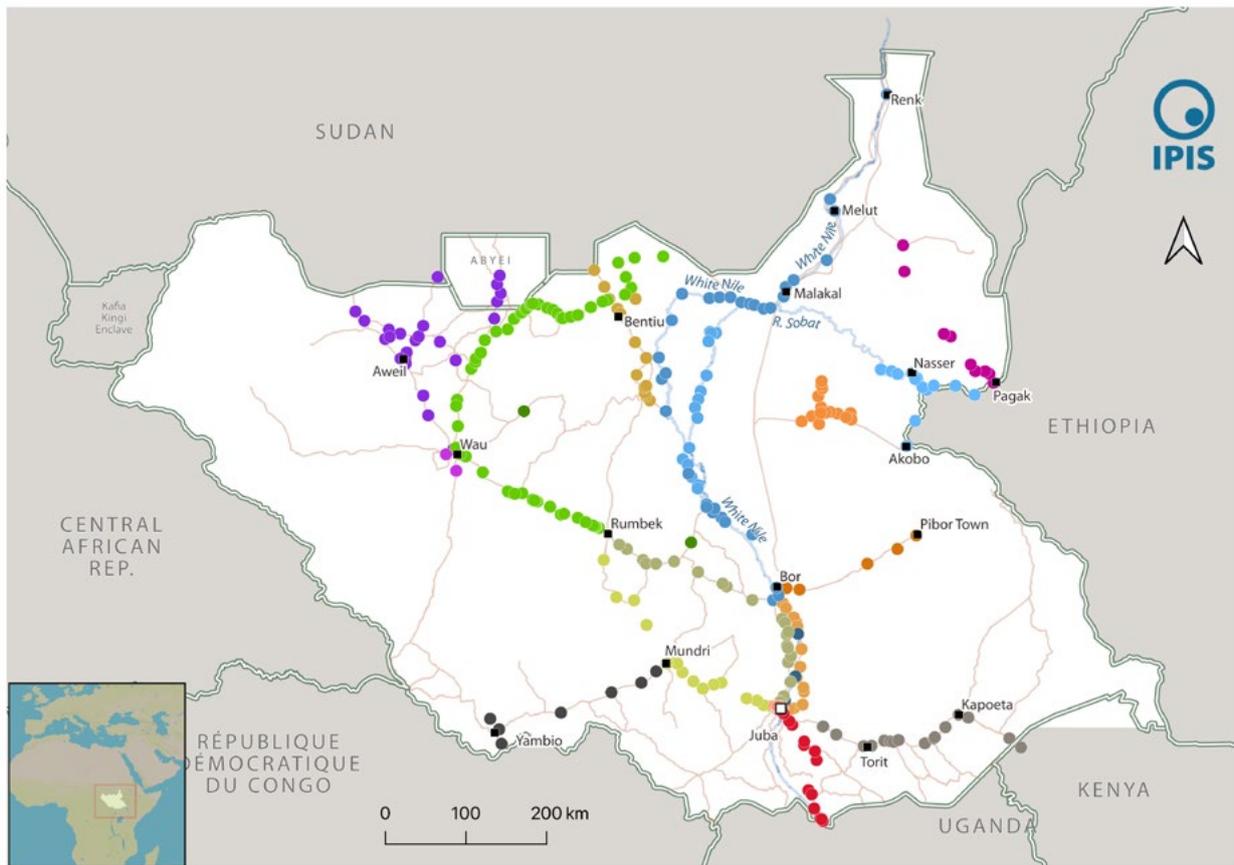
Figure 1. Trucker paying a South Sudanese soldier

To provide a **better understanding of the political economy of checkpoints in South Sudan**, IPIS and DIIS conducted a systematic study of checkpoints along the country's major trade routes, mapping 319 checkpoints in total (See Figure 2). At these checkpoints, actors armed and civilian, from the opposition and the government, annually extract millions of USD from aid organizations and commercial businesses.

The current report presents an **executive summary** of our main findings about who operates the checkpoints, who is taxed, and how much. It also assesses the main drivers and impacts of checkpoints, both as a source of income for checkpoint operators and a burden for affected stakeholders. For more detailed discussion of the findings, we invite readers to consult the full report.

The report is accompanied by an **interactive webmap** (https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/ssd_checkpoints_webmap/), where you can explore the data yourself.

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.



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 2. Checkpoints identified by route. For details on individual checkpoints, see the interactive webmap

1 CONTEXT, DRIVERS AND IMPACT

1.1 Context

At independence, South Sudan's fiscal system was in the first instance centered on oil revenues. When only two years after independence conflict escalated, government and opposition elites as well as 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 routes, quickly turned into a pivot in the conflict, as well as in 'elite competition'. Ever since 2013, checkpoints have gradually expanded in numbers as well as in taxation levels. 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, involving high volumes of concentrated wealth, has become part of South Sudan's militarized political economy. To suggest how widespread and entrenched this phenomenon has become, earlier reports talk of South Sudan's 'checkpoint economy', in which 'Official and unofficial (armed) actors tax and expropriate goods and cash travelling on South Sudan's roads and rivers'.²

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. As logistical subcontractors manage to 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. As a result, South Sudan has the highest transport costs in the world for aid delivery, alongside Afghanistan and DR Congo.³

1.2 What drives the checkpoint economy?

For a brief period after 2011, oil revenues financed the government budget. Briefly after, when production faltered, 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 salaries, 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. For individual soldiers, being deployed at a checkpoint is a premium, for the possibility it affords to make up for faltering official incomes. However, at other checkpoints tax collection seems driven by wealth-seeking on the part of commanders. In particular checkpoints along high-traffic routes are key devices for profit generation benefiting individuals higher up the chain of command.

Second, 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.

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.

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

Another 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. At least 20 of the checkpoints mapped were initially erected by the SSPDF in response to such violence.

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.

An SSPDF soldier, Luri checkpoint, February 2021

Local community militia may equally occupy roads during conflicts. We found 9 of such, often temporary, community roadblocks.

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.

1.3 Main impacts

The proliferation of checkpoints has a huge impact on transport costs, constituting up to 50% of transport costs. Checkpoints disproportionately tax foreign truck drivers, which appears to displace the burden of unpaid government salaries onto foreign entrepreneurs.

Yet the subsequent and structural increase in transport costs is passed onwards to the final consumer—the increasing number of South Sudanese who depend on the market for their livelihoods.

Further, 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, negatively affects the domestic market for agriculture, as it is not profitable to market 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.



Figure 3. A typical South Sudanese checkpoint

2. KEY FINDINGS

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.

2.1. Checkpoints are numerous

We have mapped a total of 319 checkpoints between 2019 and 2021, of which 253 (79%) are roadblocks and 66 (21%) river checkpoints (see Figures 2 and 4). On average, this is one checkpoint for each 16 km (or 6 checkpoints per 100 km) along South Sudan's major trade routes. The number of checkpoints has increased by nearly 50% since independence, as in 2011 the National Bureau of Statistics found a checkpoint each 23 km (or 4 checkpoints per 100 km).

You find illegal ropes someone puts on the road. When they see a truck coming, they erect it and block the road. But when they see a small vehicle, they would hide in bush.

(Former) Secretary General of the South Sudan Chamber of Commerce, Simon Akuei

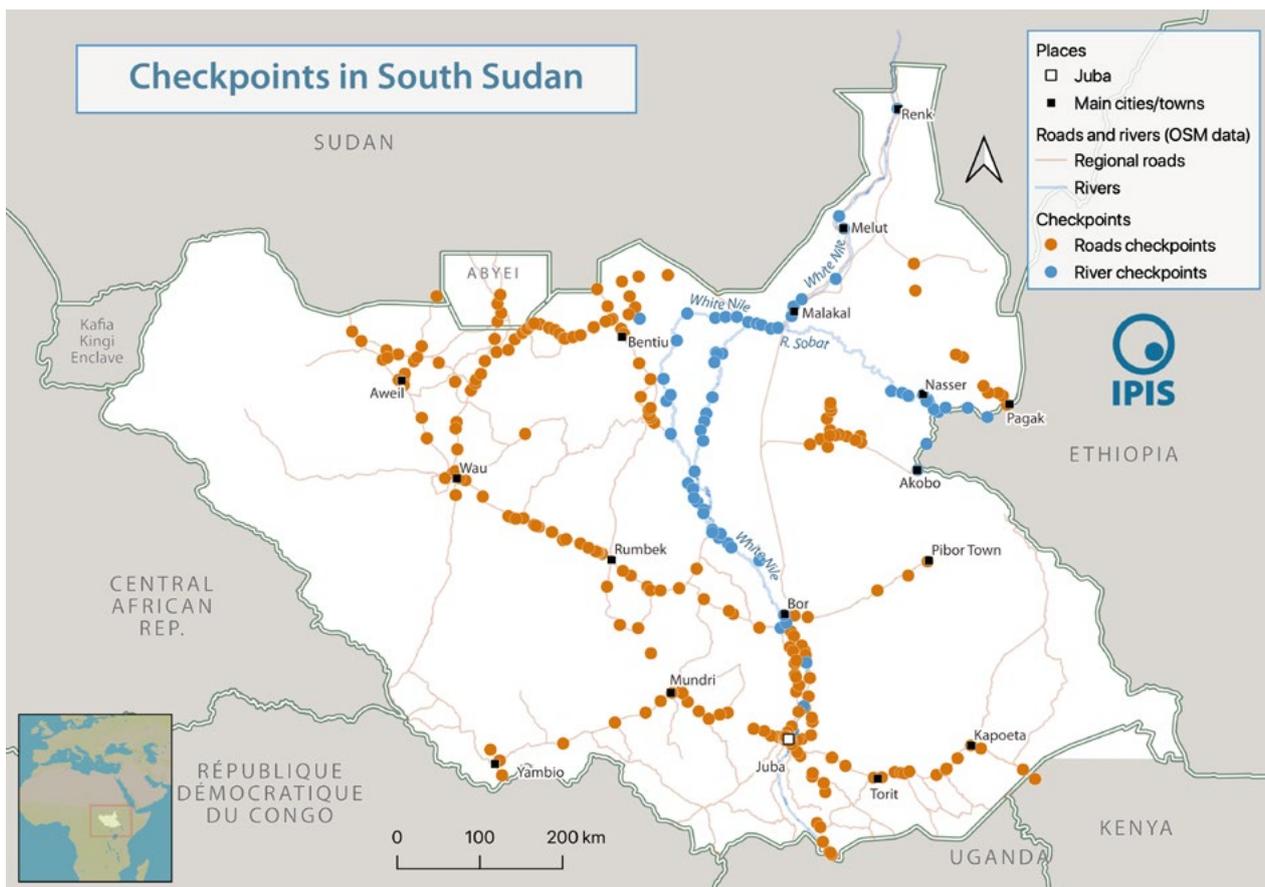


Figure 4. Road vs river checkpoints

2.2 Taxes

Checkpoint 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 a stunning SSP 300,000 (USD 500) for commercial vehicles in some places.

At 62 checkpoints (19%) payments are lower than SSP 1,000 (USD 1.5), and only 8% of checkpoint taxes exceed SSP 100,000 (USD 166). Yet, the total cost of a journey is significant. For all major routes (see Table 1), average total payment exceeds 60,000 SSP (100 USD). For more than half of these routes, total checkpoint taxes exceed 450,000 SSP (750 USD). Payment is the highest on the White Nile, notably 4,170,500 SSP (6,951 USD) for the total route, or SSP 126,379 (USD 211) on average per checkpoint.



Figure 5. Motorcycle driver paying at a checkpoint

Table 1. Average checkpoint fees along major routes in South Sudan, 2021 rates for a one-way trip (transporter data)

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

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 - actually resulting in lower taxes in proportion to cargo weight.⁴ Second, taxation of river transport forms a key source of revenue for the SPLA/M-IO (see 2.3 below).

4 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 1,200 tons that barges haul along the river yield an average per-ton checkpoint rate of SSP 123 (USD 0.20).

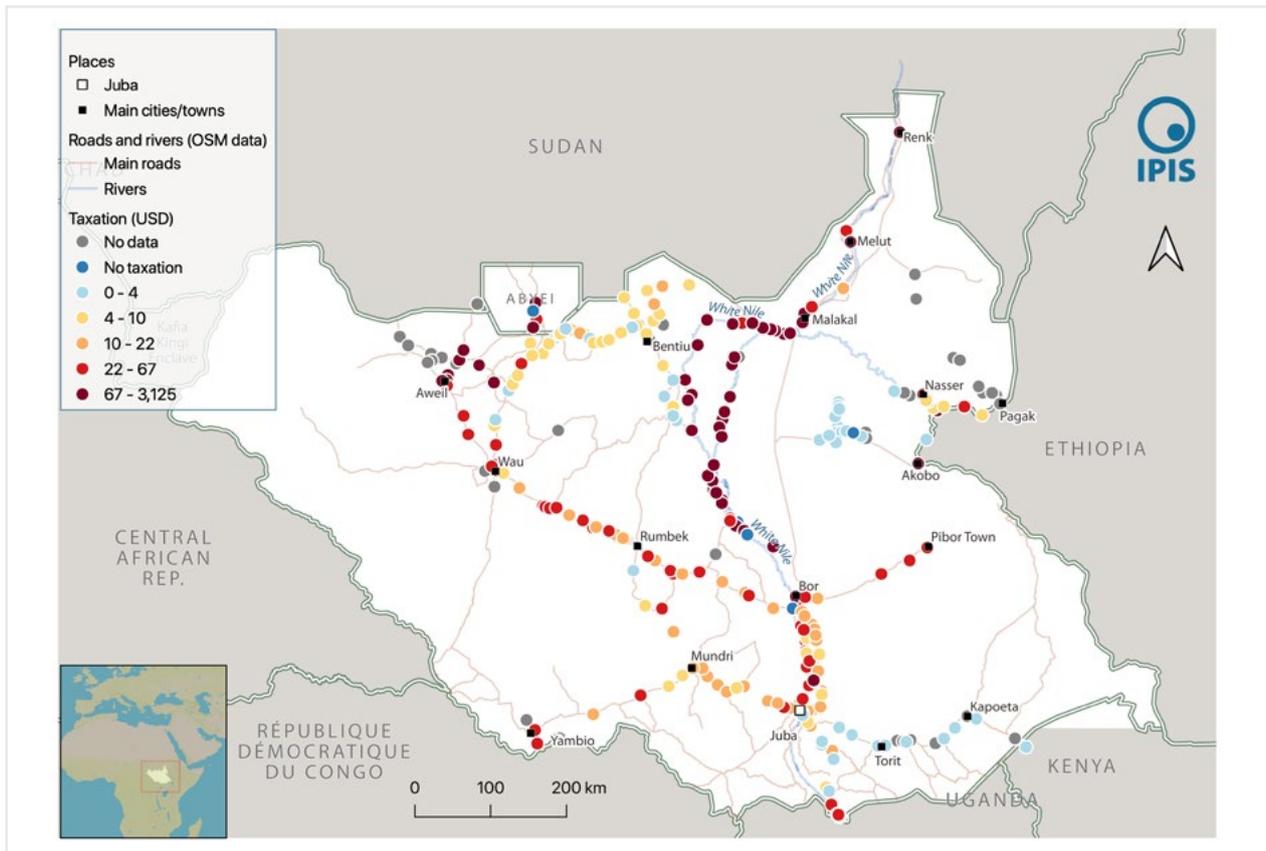


Figure 6. Height of checkpoint taxes levied

Because checkpoint taxes present such a heavy burden, 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 many vehicles contracted for humanitarian purposes. These soldiers take charge of all checkpoint taxes along the way with the amount they are paid by transporters, reducing checkpoint taxes significantly (see Table 2).

Table 2. 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)
Outbound	1,092,000	1,820	560,000	933
Return	1,092,000	1,820	480,000	800
Total	2,184,000	3,640	1,040,000	1,733

In other cases, commercial vehicles enjoy protection by elite figures, exempting them from taxes. At Luri checkpoint, the soldier driving a truck explained for example

*'I was given a departure order as a security staff by my boss, a gun, and full 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.'*⁵



Figure 7. Repainted army vehicle that still retains government license plates (redacted).

2.3 Checkpoint operators

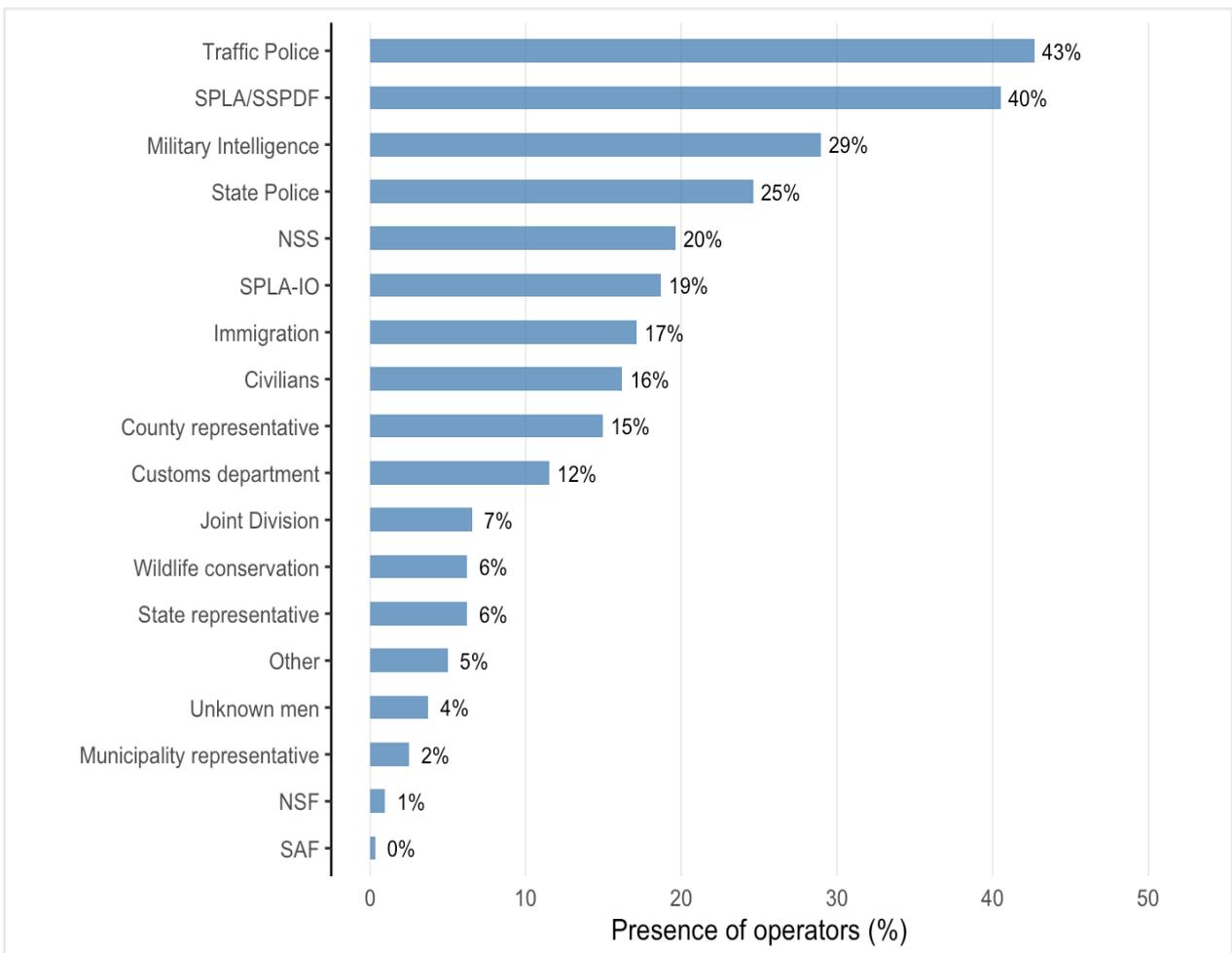


Figure 8. Prevalence of different checkpoint operators (%)

Most checkpoints are operated by the national army and its allied militias. Traffic Police and SSPDF are the most observed checkpoint operators - present at respectively 43% and 40% of all checkpoints.⁶ They are followed by Military Intelligence (29%) and State Police (25%). 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.

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. The SPLA/M-IO on average charges SSP 210,000 (USD 350) per river checkpoint, whereas the average tax rate at non-IO river checkpoints was SSP 69,600 (USD 116), making IO checkpoints three times more expensive.⁷ 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.

2.4 Harassment

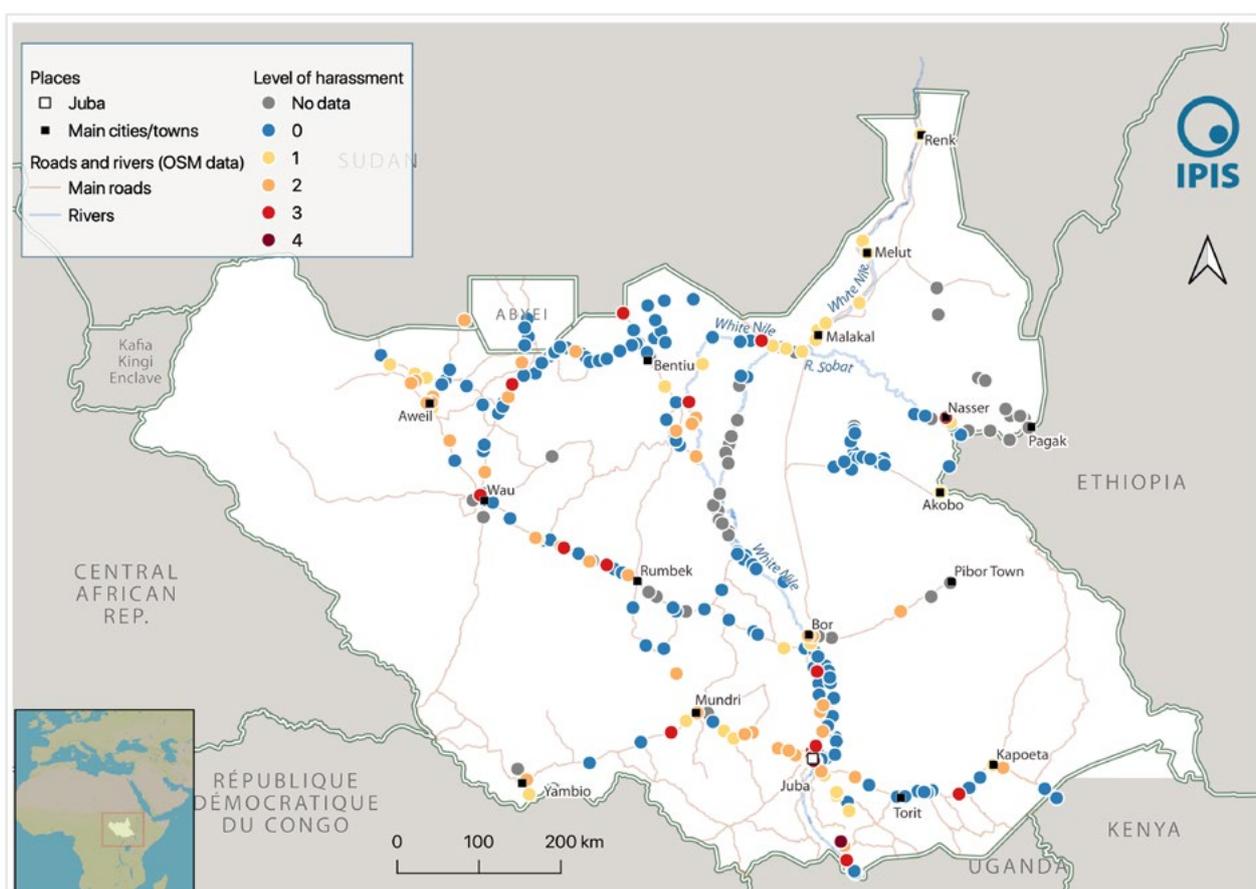


Figure 9. Harassment levels

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 9). This involves several indicators, such as waiting time, level of taxation, and the level of threat or physical violence deployed by checkpoint operators.

6 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).

7 This may be because SPLA/M-IO relies more heavily on checkpoints for revenue generation, as it is cut off from government revenues.

2.5 Humanitarian logistics

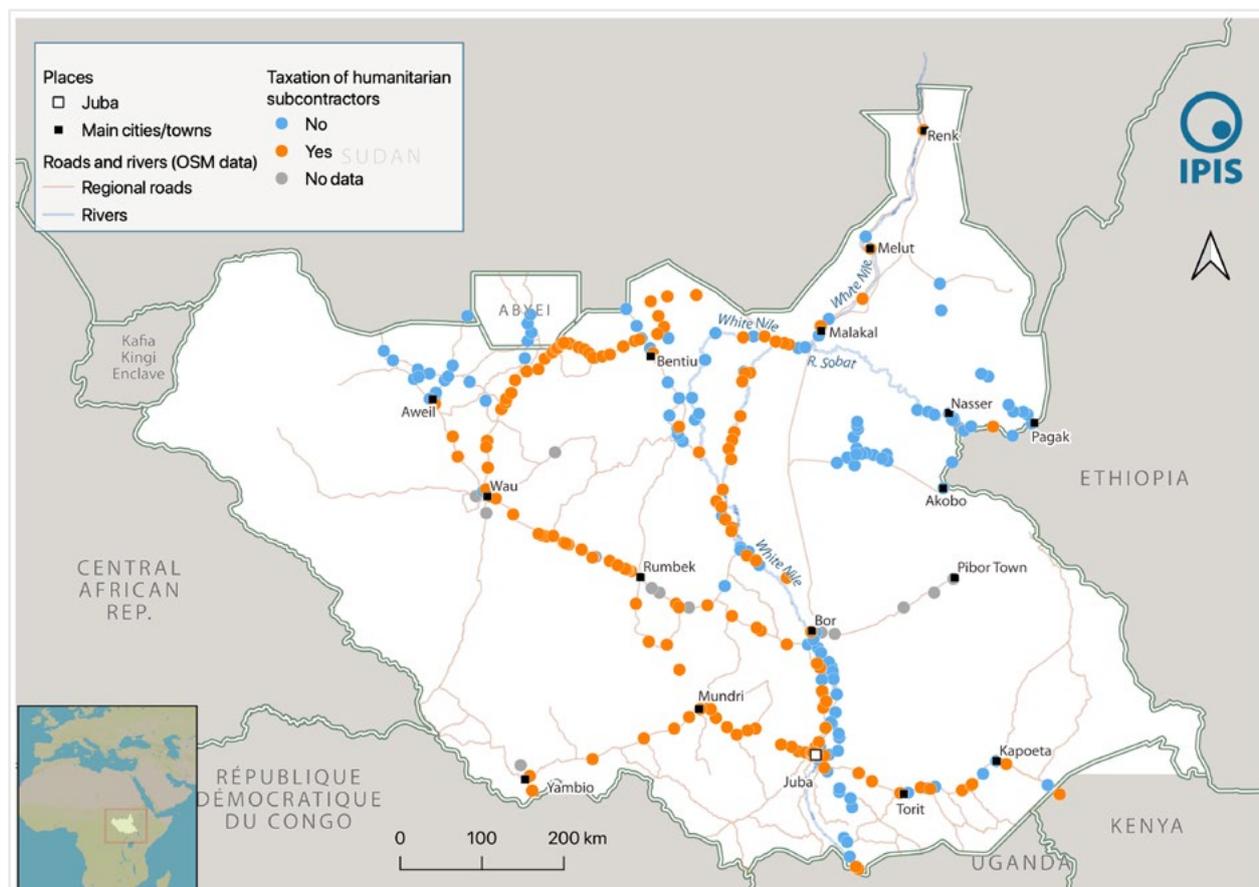


Figure 10. Map of checkpoints at which humanitarian contractors are taxed

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 served by one of the largest relief operations in the world. Hovering around 1.5 billion USD annually, ODA is about three times the size of South Sudan’s national budget.⁸ 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.’⁹ 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.’¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Whereas NGO and UN vehicles are mostly exempt from taxation, checkpoint operators consider humanitarian transport contractors as commercial businesses and thence subject them systematically to transit taxes. Indeed, we found that humanitarian transport contractors are subjected to checkpoint taxation at 157 (or 49%) of checkpoints in South Sudan. While President Kiir issued an order in 2017 decreeing humanitarian convoys should not be hindered, taxation of humanitarian convoys remains endemic. Drivers and humanitarian convoy leaders are often threatened and kept aside by checkpoint operators in their efforts to extort payments. Negotiations can involve delays of 2-6 hours per checkpoint, significantly slowing down humanitarian aid deliveries.

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

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

10 Maunder et al 2017 op cit, para 36

11 ‘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 ... very high transport rates.’ Maunder et al op cit pp. 169-170

3 KEY ROUTES

3.1 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)

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. 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.

Whereas in 2011, six checkpoints had been reported 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). This number had allegedly even doubled by April 2021, with the deployment of additional SSPDF units.¹² The main reason for this rise is the rampant insecurity affecting the road, driven by an entangled mix of economic, political and community motives.

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.

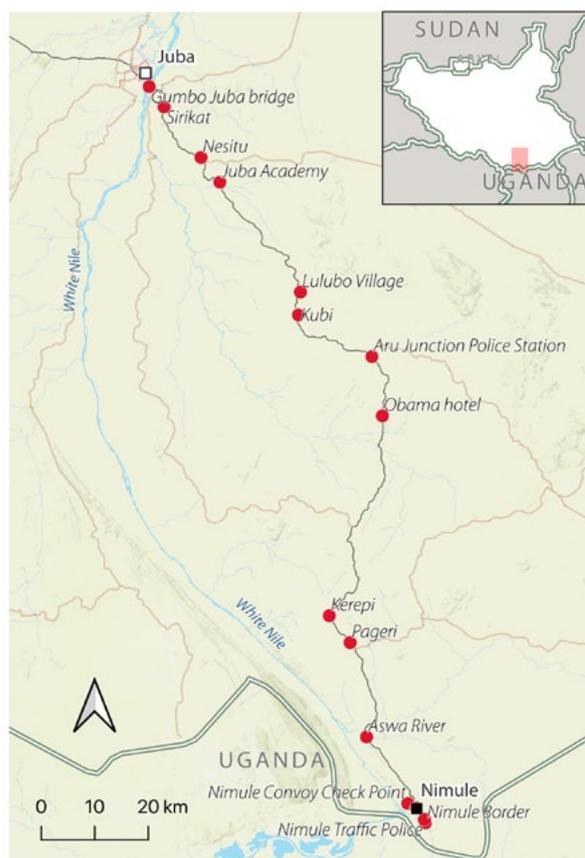


Figure 11. Checkpoints along the Juba-Nimule road

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

3.2. Western Corridor

Length: 1,568 KM¹³
 No. checkpoints: 109
 Checkpoints/100km: 7
 Total CP taxes: SSP 1,364,000
 (USD 2,273)
 Average CP taxes: SSP 27,500 (USD 27)



Figure 12 Checkpoints along the Western Corridor (excluding Aweil route)

The Western Corridor is ‘the backbone of trade in the country’.¹⁴ This also makes it the most intensively taxed overland route in South Sudan, harboring 30% of all checkpoints we surveyed. In early 2021, we recorded 79 checkpoints between Juba and Bentiu, costing a commercial truck around USD 3,640 for a return journey.¹⁵ Overall, a total of 1,266 individuals work at checkpoints along the different routes making up the Western Corridor. 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.

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. Given the insecurity and density of checkpoint taxes along the Western Corridor, a number of transporters has resorted remunerated army escorts, allegedly reducing checkpoint costs by roughly half.

13 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.
 14 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).
 15 The number of checkpoints and taxation levels along the Western Corridor fluctuate between months and years, 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.

3.3 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)

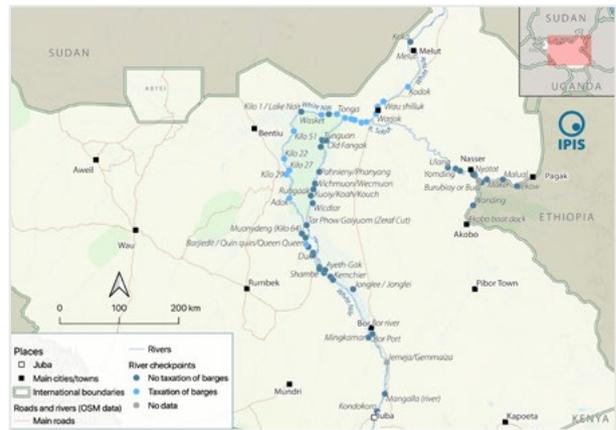


Figure 13 River checkpoints in South Sudan

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 (3,125 USD)
 Average taxes: 56,000 SSP (260 USD)



Figure 14. Picture of a river checkpoint along the White Nile. River checkpoints are recognizable by the raised flags.

During the rainy season, most overland routes in South Sudan become impassable and the country's rivers take over as alternative routes to reach inland population centers. River transport is furthermore the cheapest bulk transport option. Generally, larger barges trail the White Nile between the ports of Bor, Bentiu, Malakal, and Renk to connect onwards to Sudan. Each barge carries around 300 to 400 metric tons (mt). Smaller boats (with a capacity ranging between 40 and 150 mt) serve the localities along the narrower Bahr El Zeraf and undertake shorter journeys.

River checkpoint taxes fluctuate around an average of SSP 163,055 (USD 272) 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 4,299,997 or USD 7,167; on the way back, barges also pay checkpoint taxes, but these are then typically about a third to half lower.

In absolute terms, this makes the White Nile the most expensive route in South Sudan. In relative terms, however, a different picture emerges. 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 3.2 above) a 40-ton truck typically pays 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).

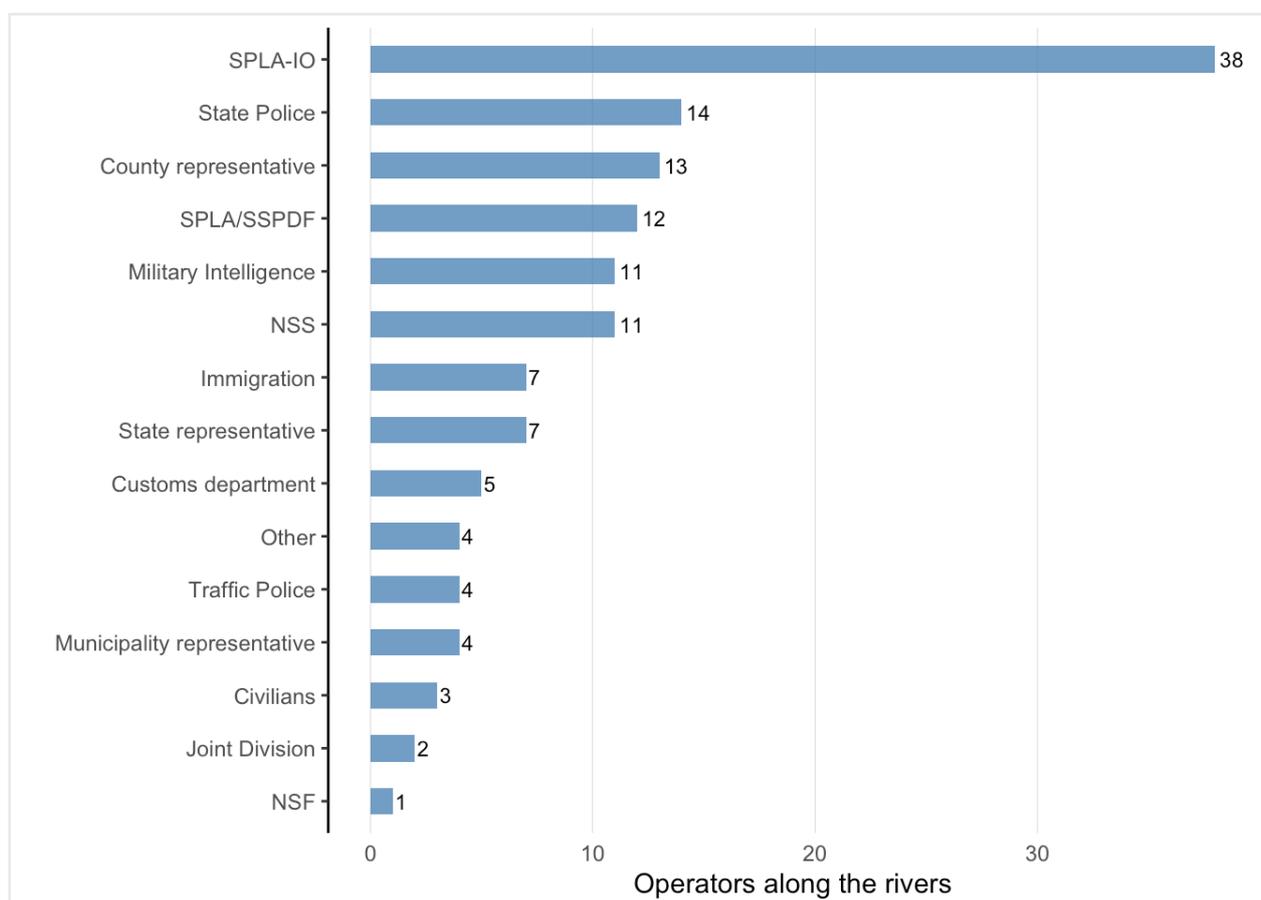


Figure 15. Checkpoint operators along South Sudan's rivers

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 (see Figure 15).¹⁶ SPLM/A-IO checkpoints also demand in-kind taxes, such as fuel (on average 200 liters) or motor oil, but can also involve manufactured items such as plastic chairs.

16 It is important to note, however, that we 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.

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