



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



**Bar-Ilan  
University**

# **Sudan's Policy in the Era of Arab Upheaval: For Good or for Evil?**

Haim Koren



**Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 148**

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# Sudan's Policy in the Era of Arab Upheaval: For Good or for Evil?

*Haim Koren*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to examine Sudan's policy with an emphasis on the last seven years, analyzing the constraints within which the leadership has made its decisions. Since attaining independence (1956), Sudan has developed a policy in which its domestic considerations dictate the agenda and drive its regional and international moves. The study will survey the political-historical background of modern Sudan, taking into account the society's complexity and heterogeneity with its various religious, racial, and tribal groups, along with the country's geopolitical location. Attention will be given to the changes that have occurred in the country and the region and how these have influenced Sudan's policymaking. Not to be ignored is the emergence of ideologies, and the changes that have been wrought in them both by leaders and by force of circumstance. Starting in the mid-1970s, the identity that initially was molded by the ruling elite as an Arab and Middle Eastern one was transformed into a radical Islamic-Sunni one. The attitude toward Israel – as evidenced, for example, in the pan-Arab “three no's” of the 1967 Khartoum summit conference – evolved into Islamic hostility toward the Jewish state. Along with other major changes, the removal of Hassan al-Turabi from the political arena (and his death) has led the leadership to consider establishing diplomatic relations with Israel.

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# Sudan's Policy in the Era of Arab Upheaval: For Good or for Evil?

*Haim Koren*

## INTRODUCTION

Sudan as a geographical entity has undergone many changes in the course of history. Its geopolitical location in the Horn of Africa – on the seam line between the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, from the Red Sea coast westward, along the banks of the Nile that traverses it, within its wide land, linked to a region that is seen as a cradle of civilization for kingdoms and tribes, religions and cults, and for colonial forces that ruled it in different periods – give Sudan uniqueness and complexity. Its frequently changing borders, along with its ethnological, tribal, and religious composition, have continued to create tension between borders and identities.<sup>1</sup>

Bilad al-Sudan (the Land of the Blacks), whose borders and population composition have kept shifting amid difficult circumstances, has never been a homogeneous political or ethnic unit. At this geopolitical junction, a varied and complex ethnological, cultural, political, religious, and economic mosaic emerged.

The purpose of the article is to examine Sudan's policy within and beyond the region in recent years. It will consider Sudan's society and politics as a factor shaping its policy. Background information on the society's structure and political history will help clarify the ramifications for its foreign relations and the interconnection between these two arenas.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The borders of modern Sudan were shaped at the beginning of the twentieth century in a process of transition from more ancient territorial units, extending southward from the border with Egypt to the Kurdufan region, the Blue Nile region, and the Equatoria region in the south. In the west, the Funj and Darfur sultanates were added (the latter became part of Sudan only in 1916 when Ali Dinar, the last sultan of Darfur, was defeated in a battle with the British). In 1956 Sudan attained independence, and it preserved this territorial framework until July 9, 2011, when South Sudan seceded from the Sudanese state and became independent after a long, difficult process. Thus the borders of Sudan underwent a further change.

It is no surprise, then, that over the generations a complex domestic policy took shape that sometimes displayed a violent, belligerent nature. To a large extent, even in the current era, Sudan's foreign policy has been derived from its domestic policy.<sup>2</sup> The process of molding the territorial dimension of modern Sudan, and the emergence of its complex identity, are attributed to the era of Turko-Egyptian conquest (1821-1885) through the Mahdia era (1821-1885) and the era of Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule (1899-1956). This process has continued from independence in 1956 to the present.<sup>3</sup>

The population is divided along ethnic, tribal, social, and religious lines. In addition to racial (Semites and Hamites) and religious (Muslims, Christians, and animists) divisions, there is great variance within the ethnic groups themselves. Altogether Sudan contains some 62 groups and subgroups that speak more than 250 languages and dialects. Even the Arabic language, which is common to most of the population, is spoken in the dialects of specific areas.

Northern Sudan's population is of Muslim religious identity. From an ethnic standpoint, the Muslims are divided into groups claiming Arab extraction and non-Arab African groups. The Islamization process of the latter began at the end of the sixteenth century. In the southern region (now South Sudan), most of the population is Christian and of African ethnicity. A considerable number of animists also live there along with a small Muslim minority. A clear-cut distinction is now made between the

“Arab-Muslim north” and the “African (Hamite/black) Christian south.” Because the slave traders in Sudan were mostly Arabs (the most famous was Rahma Abu Zbeir), there are also residues of the traditional master-slave/Arab-African notion, which is also found in other countries along the sub-Saharan line (for example, Mauritania). These are the roots of the severe conflict between the north and the south, which already turned into a civil war in 1955, before independence. This war claimed more than two million fatalities and a larger number of wounded and refugees (who fled mainly to Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda).<sup>4</sup>

In western Sudan, particularly in the Darfur area, the ethnic extraction of most of the population is African (Hamite/black), Christian, or animist. The region has undergone an Islamization process since the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Apart the north-south opposition, there has been conflict between northern Sudan (which includes the capital, Khartoum), where the Arab-Muslim governmental elite lives, and western Sudan, where most of the population is African and has Islamicized. The great heterogeneity of the groups in Sudan’s three main geopolitical regions has given rise to unbridgeable disagreements about the desirable nature of the country.

The civil war between the north and the south that broke out even before independence, and the later wars in Darfur (culminating in the genocide of 2003–2005, for which Bashir and some of his government ministers are wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity)<sup>6</sup> and in the border areas between the north and the south, manifest the rifts in Sudanese society: between Arabs and Africans, center and periphery, and between Muslims on the one hand and Christians and those with traditional African religions on the other.<sup>7</sup>

## **TRIBAL TRADITION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

Affiliation with a family, clan, or tribe is a main motif in Sudanese society for all the groups, whether Arab, African, Muslim, Christian, or animist. The Islamic religion, among whose adherents are most of the residents of northern and western Sudan (without connection to their ethnic extraction), who constitute a majority in the Sudanese territory (the Christian majority, as mentioned, is in the south), assumed significance in sixteenth-century

Sudan in the form of the Sufi stream of Islam. This communally based mode of worship comported with the tribal structures that already prevailed in Sudan. The Sufi order (or fraternity) gives rise to solidarity, a common economic sector for all the members of the order, pride in the unit, and most of all, worthy leadership. The more charismatic the sheikh who leads the tribe, the greater the economic, social, and political power of the Sufi tribe/order. Islam, with Sufism as a central factor in Sudanese society, rose to prominence in the Mahdia era, which emerged from a rebellion against foreign Turko-Egyptian rule and against the British occupier.<sup>8</sup> The leader of the revolt was Muhammad Ahmad, who saw himself as the Mahdi (messiah). Many in the north regard the Mahdi as a symbol of the crystallizing Sudanese nationalism, and the Islamic world in general views the Mahdi as a leader of great stature.<sup>9</sup>

This legacy of the Mahdi still constitutes the main factor in the identity, which gives special place to the elements of Arabness and Islam. Notwithstanding the political changes, these identity components are the keystone of the political elite's outlook.

### ***The Maze of Identities***

Beginning in the nineteenth century, three basic concepts prevailed in the struggle to shape the Sudanese identity: Nile Valley unity (with Sudan deeply tied to Egypt); Sudan for the Sudanese – in which the residents belong to their natural territory; and support for British hegemony.<sup>10</sup> These concepts became, in part, the reality that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century; they underwent further changes toward the end of the millennium and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The leaders of the Sufi orders became leaders of the large political parties (such as Umma and Ansar), and even officers who carried out military coups against weak regimes (beginning with the Ibrahim Abboud regime in 1958) had to maneuver politically within changing coalitions – sometimes together with representatives of the parties (like Jaafar Nimeiri with Sadiq al-Mahdi – against political parties (Nimeiri suppressed an attempt at a communist revolution and damaged Sudan's relations with the Soviet Union). During almost a decade, joint – almost symbiotic – rule was established between General Omar al-Bashir and the cleric Hassan al-Turabi, who left a deep mark on Sudan's policy.

***Hassan al-Turabi and His Influence on the Sudanese Reality***

Turabi represents both continuity and the change that Sudan has undergone since the beginning of the 1970s. His outlook, which at first espoused a certain relative tolerance toward women (including their right to vote in elections) and minorities, developed in his writings into something more radical, exclusive, and rigid. In the 1980s, as an Islamic theologian and political leader, he was considered one of the important radical thinkers in the Sunni world.<sup>11</sup> During the 1960s the Arab orientation predominated, and the rise of Idi Amin's pro-Arab, Islamic regime in Uganda in 1971 prompted a peace process between Sudan's north and south that was formalized in 1972. The agreement signed in Addis Ababa preserved Sudan's territorial integrity and its control by the Arab-Muslim majority, while also responding to the south's demand to exercise regional autonomy, run its own political and economic affairs, and maintain its religious and ethnocultural attributes. Because of Nimeiri's political and economic troubles, the agreement eroded. Turabi, who strongly opposed it (and was not one of its signers) and strove to impose sharia law on Sudan, exploited Nimeiri's weakness to bring about rapid and substantial changes in the political-religious-social map of the north. There was a clear, immediate, negative effect on the effort to design the map, with north-south relations returning to a state of war.<sup>12</sup>

Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 was a formative event. Iran saw Sudan as the gateway to exporting Shiite Islam to Africa. The assassination in 1981 of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, who was an ally of Nimeiri (who supported his peace moves toward Israel and hence incurred numerous threats – unlike in the case of Sudan's overwhelming support for Nasser, prophet of pan-Arabism and anti-Zionism, particularly in the late 1960s), along with Sudan's deteriorating economy and inability to win the war with the south, brought the Nimeiri era to a close. Under the impact of Turabi's doctrine, the 1980s saw a hardening of attitudes toward non-Muslims (in the south) and toward those who, in his view, had improperly converted to Islam (in the west of the country).

### ***The Domestic Arena and Its Influence on Sudan's Foreign Policy***

In 1989 Brigadier General al-Bashir staged a military coup (with help from Turabi behind the scenes) that enabled the rise of an Islamist, ideological, militant regime with its own political, religious, and dictatorial characteristics. Under this regime the Sunni-Shiite axis with Iran was forged. Despite the hurdles that were encountered (including Sudan's support for Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran and Sudan's good relations with Saudi Arabia for part of the period), this axis endured until the relations were severed at the end of 2016. From 1991 to 1993, the Sudanese government gave refuge in Khartoum to Osama Bin Laden and members of his organization after they had fled Saudi Arabia, turning Sudan into a hothouse for terror. The increase in the government's involvement in terror prompted the president of Egypt to accuse the Bashir regime of instigating terror attacks in Cairo (1992), and in 1993 the United Nations imposed sanctions on Sudan as a state sponsor of terror. Egypt began to exert pressure on Sudan – with the issue of the Nile also beclouding the relations between them.

The US, too, could not abide a terror-sponsoring Islamist regime. In 1997 Washington slapped sanctions on Sudan because of its support for terror and human rights violations. Sudan's backing of Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War, and the 1998 suicide bombings at the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, led to the bombardment of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factor, which had been producing nerve gas in cooperation with Al Qaeda.

Against the backdrop, however, of the peace process with the south in the 2000s, sanctions were eased. They were renewed under the impact of the genocide in Darfur and the mass killings in the Nuba Mountains and in the state of Blue Nile.

Toward the end of the millennium, Sudan was associated with an economy collapsing to the point of hunger, a cruel and dictatorial regime, ongoing support for terror, and the provision of refuge to terrorists. Resulting sanctions on the regime brought the leadership to adapt its policy to the changing conditions. Turabi and his extreme doctrine became a liability for Bashir, who several times placed Turabi under house arrest. Given

the strength of Turabi's public status, Bashir could not put him in prison for fear of riots by his supporters. After the September 11 attack in the US, and in the context of his conflict with Turabi, Bashir realized that he needed to amend Sudan's image as a terror state. He announced that he was joining the US and the West in their war on terror, thereby seeking to get the UN sanctions from 1993 lifted. This stance did not prevent Bashir from continuing to cooperate with Iran (which transferred missiles to Hamas in Gaza via Khartoum) and support Hamas.

During the 1990s, the rigid ideology that was adopted against the south also sparked opposition among neighbors of the south – Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Tribes that were divided among these countries urged them to demand independence or at least autonomy for the south. U.S. president George Bush also called for a settlement, and talks began on an arrangement that at least would grant the south autonomy.

Egypt (because of its concerns about the Nile) and Libya (on behalf of the Arab interest in Africa) opposed such a settlement. The US, however, rejected such opposition and led the talks that began at the end of the 1990s and produced results by 2005.

In the early years of the millennium, the awareness that the south would be able to separate from Sudan inspired the people of Darfur in western Sudan to demand their rights. For years they had suffered discrimination, neglect, and persecution by the north. Turabi's notion that the blacks of Darfur had improperly converted to Islam and needed to reconvert according to his outlook, along with their economic subjugation by the militias of Arab extraction (the Janjaweed) at the behest of the government, laid the groundwork for what turned into genocide in Darfur from 2003 to 2005 (and continued intermittently, at different intensities, until 2012, and since then sporadically up to the present). Since the 1980s these militias had taken up residence in Darfur on behalf of the central government in Khartoum, which used them as a whip against the residents. The militias drove farmers from their fields and shepherds from their pastures. During the genocide, the Sudanese air force bombed population centers; then the militiamen entered and massacred, burned, plundered, raped, and destroyed. The pattern by which the Sudanese government made use of the militias, with which it supposedly had no

connection, had already prevailed since the 1970s under Nimeiri's rule. The militias were then known as Marahiloun and the regime used them against the south. Arab-Muslim militias from the north sowed terror among the southern (animist, Christian, and black) tribes with the same methods: attacks on villages, shooting, theft and plunder, rape, and burning; whoever was left alive fled to wherever they could.

## **SUDAN'S POLICY SINCE THE ARAB UPHEAVAL**

Since the "Arab Spring" began and South Sudan attained independence, and in light of the fall of the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt along with the troubles in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Omar al-Bashir has had to keep adjusting his policy to the changing reality. His heavy involvement with terror organizations and terror states gave him an image as someone wily in dealing with organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and others, who could regulate their passage to Libya from Yemen and from the Central African Republic. The Obama administration and some of the European countries saw Bashir as someone who could maintain stability in a region that serves as a seam line between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.<sup>13</sup> Egypt, which wants to continue its relations with Sudan because of the importance of the Nile, is not impressed by Bashir's antiterror activity. The Saudis, who have offered Sudan generous support if it distances itself from Iran, have prompted discussions among the Sudanese leadership. Former Sudanese foreign minister Ali Ahmed Karti declared publicly that Iran could not be trusted and it was better to ally with Saudi Arabia. When the Iranian-Saudi rift deepened against the backdrop of the war in Syria, the Saudis urged their Sunni allies to cut off ties with the Iranian enemy. Sudan, for its part, ended its relations with Tehran. Sudan is also, along with Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni states, participating in the war in Yemen. Despite indirect and ongoing involvement in South Sudan, Bashir is trying to maintain good relations with it while seeking to portray it as a country that is collapsing compared to stable Sudan.

South Sudan attained independence on July 9, 2011, after a protracted process that yielded the CPA agreement<sup>14</sup> in 2005 and was intended to lead to elections in 2010 and to a referendum in southern Sudan in 2011 that would decide the issue of its secession from Sudan. The six years of joint

administration of the north and south (that is, all of Sudan) were meant to prepare for a secession by mutual consent. The main patron of the process was the Bush administration, which was able to complete it.

## **POLITICAL MANEUVERS AND SUDAN'S ISRAEL POLICY**

Sudan hopes that with its joining of the coalition of Sunni Arab states, its hints about possible diplomatic relations with Israel,<sup>15</sup> and the accession of the Trump administration in the US, it will be able to deflect the order to extradite its leaders to the International Criminal Court in The Hague and obtain wider international economic aid for its tottering economy. The leaks about possible ties with Israel are apparently meant to convey to the West that Sudan is seriously looking to align with the positive forces. The Sudanese opposition leader and cleric Yusuf al-Kuda maintains that Islamic law permits normalizing relations with Israel and that Sudan should do so.

Al-Kuda asserts that boycotting Israel does not harm Israel but, rather, Sudan, and points out that other countries in the region – such as Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, and even the Palestinian Authority – have ties with Israel. He adds that Sudan maintains relations with countries that have conquered it in the past (not to name names).<sup>16</sup>

This was the second such public statement in the course of a year. In January 2017 the issue was raised at the Sudanese dialogue summit. One participant, Sudanese foreign minister Ibrahim Ghandour, said: “This issue of normalizing relations with Israel is one that needs to be examined.” A report by an Israeli journalist who visited Sudan emphasized the fact that some in Khartoum are saying that “normalization” is not a dirty word.<sup>17</sup>

Unconfirmed reports spoke of Israeli officials trying to persuade European and American officials to remove the economic sanctions on Sudan – despite the international extradition order against its president.<sup>18</sup>

This is based on an understanding that Sudan's disengagement from the Iranian axis, warming of ties with Saudi Arabia, and joining the axis of Sunni states that are fighting terror can distance it from the “axis of evil” and move it closer to the Arab coalition, whose regional interests now dovetail with Israel's.

Sudan's signals about a warming of ties with Israel, with hints about establishing relations, are meant to create an impression of repudiating the "axis of evil." If Sudan joins the Sunni Arab coalition after cutting ties with Iran, its ability to prevent terror activity in Libya and Egypt (given Bashir's familiarity with the terrorist circles and ability to speak with them) can give Sudan a different status. With the ability to maneuver that he demonstrates both in the regional arena and toward the West, Bashir is trying to overcome the obstacle of being charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court.

The Trump administration is continuing the Obama administration's policy, and early in October 2017 it lifted some of the economic sanctions that the US had imposed on Sudan in 1997, which strangled its economy until it reached the edge of the abyss.<sup>19</sup> The Trump administration does not reject the possibility of eventually removing Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terror.

Along with his ideological extremism, Bashir knows how to act pragmatically. In the sharp dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar – with Saudi Arabia urging its allies to take a hard line against Qatar – Bashir assumed the role of mediator and continues to enjoy generous economic aid from both countries. Qatar has committed to build, in Sudan, the largest port on the Red Sea.<sup>20</sup> Out of the large Sudanese army, Bashir chose to send 6,000 Janjaweed fighters (members of the Arab militias subordinate to his regime that perpetrated the genocide in Darfur from 2003 to 2013) to the war in Yemen. No one protested his making the murderous militia part of the coalition forces and thereby affording it international legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> Even former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salah, who called on Bashir to withdraw his troops from Yemen, did not refer at all to the Janjaweed but only to the Sudanese army.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Bashir remains the most veteran Arab ruler despite the domestic crises (recent months have seen zealous demonstrations against him – to the point of a campaign for civil disobedience – protesting the international sanctions' harsh effects on the economy) and the impacts of the Arab Upheaval. For now the opposition does not appear to threaten his regime, and he seems to be calculating his approach to his country's next challenges.

Bashir has proved himself as an Arab leader who has maintained his rule since 1989 despite the political and ideological changes that have occurred in Sudan, the Middle East, and Africa. With his pragmatism and ability to maneuver politically, he adjusts to the emerging political circumstances (disengaging from Iran and joining Saudi Arabia and the axis of Sunni states, maintaining good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar while acting as a mediator, openness to the West while presenting himself as a leader who is a partner to the war on terror, and hinting at diplomatic relations with Israel as a signal to the West of his desire to be part of the “good” camp).

Sudan's signals about its readiness to forge diplomatic ties with Israel reflect a desire to be salvaged from its distress and not necessarily an ideological transformation among its leadership. When comparing Sudan's policy at the Khartoum “three no's” conference in August 1967 and its policy today, one must take into account the geopolitical changes that have occurred since that time in the Middle East and beyond it. Israel needs to consider the situation soberly, taking into account Bashir's political behavior<sup>23</sup> and the changes in the Middle East in recent years. Apparently Sudan does not intend to establish diplomatic relations with Israel at this time, but, rather, to use that possibility to promote its status in the region and vis-à-vis the West. But if relations with Israel are not the real aim at this stage, will they become the real aim at some later stage? Time will tell.

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