



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Echoes of the Muslim Brotherhood “Arab Spring” in Post-Bashir Sudan

by Irina Tsukerman

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Post-Bashir Sudan is being proclaimed a new “Arab Spring” by many who failed to grasp the meaning of the first. And just as occurred the first time, the failure to distinguish among interests and actors is hindering understanding of the movement.

Omar Bashir was working to [normalize relations](#) between Sudan and Israel, but was forced to abdicate after failing to secure funding even from his erstwhile supporter, Qatar. Bashir craved stability and likely hoped to reap Israeli investments and green technology. After years of genocide and corruption (including Bashir’s own theft of [\\$9 billion](#)), however, he is now [facing assorted charges](#).

Could Bashir’s openness to relations with Jerusalem have contributed to his former backers’ loss of confidence? Was his fall from grace an inevitable result of growing public discontent – or was the movement pushed over the edge by an ongoing, internal battle for control between the Janjaweed and the more hardcore Islamists? Bashir’s recent downgrading of violent rhetoric and attempts to satisfy at least some international benchmarks perhaps reveals an awareness that he could not count on his former political backers.

The US under President Obama suspended “[comprehensive economic sanctions](#)”, but did this did not stop the economic downturn. Moreover, Bashir’s subtle gestures toward the West likely accelerated his seemingly sudden downfall.

The period of elation following the fall of Bashir (not the entire regime) soon gave way to increasing tensions between the crowds of opposition protesters, who demand transition to a civilian government, and the Transitional Military Council. [Massive protests](#), which drew tens of thousands to the streets to rally against the TMC, were

met with violence; seven people were killed by the controversial Janjaweed-linked Rapid Support Forces. This follows numerous [episodes](#) of violence in which the numbers of protesters killed is inevitably disputed.

Middle East Broadcasting Networks' (al-Hurra's) director, Alberto Fernandez, describes [four possible ways](#) in which the situation can now unravel:

1. A stable and more peaceful transitional process that eventually leads to a civilian rule
2. Return of the Bashir regime
3. TMC remaining in perpetuity
4. Sudan's descent into chaos

The first scenario seems increasingly unlikely considering the number of actors and interests involved. In another piece, Alberto Fernandez [points out](#) that the conflict has been presented as a battle of powers between the Qatar/Turkey axis and Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt. Although the members of the Anti-Terrorism Quartet indeed have geopolitical interests in a stable Sudan opposed to Qatari and Turkish influence, there is little evidence to support propagandistic claims by Qatar-backed sources that the three powers somehow instigated the suppression of peaceful protests. Rather, the TMC itself is torn by internal rivalry between the Janjaweed-linked RSF, the Islamist National Congress Party, and the National Intelligence and Security Service.

The ambitious, Janjaweed-affiliated leader of the RSF, Hemeti (General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo), who has been held responsible for the violent crackdown, appears to be firmly ensconced even after a [power-sharing agreement](#) was reached between the TMC and the opposition.

Does civilian governance remain the goal? Is the continued push for civilian governance truly as democratic as its proponents claim? And, if these unfolding events constitute a second "Arab Spring," are they more or less likely to result in a liberalized, reformed country with strong protections for its civic institutions and democratic processes?

Sudan's history may [point](#) to greater familiarity with civil institutions than Egypt, Algeria, or other countries that have undergone or are undergoing waves of unrest and reform. Those expecting truly free democratic processes and the emergence of a European or Jeffersonian democracy fail to take into account the prevalence of Islamist elements.

The first attacks on protesters occurred shortly after TMC [shut down the Al Jazeera office](#) in Sudan and [turned away](#) the Qatari FM. A few days later, a TMC account reported that a number of Qatari intelligence officers operating under press cover were arrested in a hotel, where they appeared to be [planning a military](#)

[operation](#). Allegedly, Qatari passports were recovered from the scene. That account, registered to current de facto head of state [Abdel Fattah Burhan](#), was later suspended. He met with the protesters while Bashir was still in power. Sudan then [recalled](#) its ambassador to Qatar for “consultations.” The Qatari FM later [retaliated](#) by accusing Saudi Arabia of blackmail and destabilizing the region (the kingdom and UAE offered, and the TMC accepted, [\\$3 billion in humanitarian aid](#)).

Sudan is a [geopolitically strategic](#) location for the Gulf States, as well as for Egypt. Qatar considers Sudan to be within its sphere of influence, jointly (with Turkey) secured a series of defense agreements with Bashir, and was accused of fomenting a dispute between Sudan and Egypt over Nile dam and water rights. The decision to [abandon](#) its former client was likely due to Doha’s recognition that the protests against Bashir were better organized and more likely to succeed than past attempts, and that they were sufficiently powerful to determine his successor.

These developments are reminiscent of the conditions in Egypt that led to election of the late Muhammad Morsi in 2012. Until Morsi, as [declassified CIA documents show](#), the Egyptian government had made a somewhat tense, but mostly comfortable alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. Although a Brotherhood political party was banned, members successfully infiltrated other parties, served in the military and government, and, most importantly, took control of cultural and educational institutions, including the mosques.

In this way, the Brotherhood spread its ideology and produced generations of influencers and sympathizers loyal to its extremist ideology. More than a movement, the Brotherhood became ingrained in society and government, garnering legitimacy at home and abroad, and was in the perfect position to pounce when a confluence of factors weakened Mubarak.

As a result, an Islamist-backed, vote-once autocracy was nearly a preordained result for Egypt’s “Arab Spring.” Proponents of liberalism were small in number and had no visibility outside of Cairo apart from Western media coverage. Worse, the Obama administration preferred the Brotherhood, repeating [Jimmy Carter’s](#) misplaced betrayal of the Iranian Shah thus enabling Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution.

The Agency’s analysis admits that the Brotherhood was pushing for fundamentalism, but still found it preferable to more violent or extremist elements waiting in the wings. That thinking partly explains the sympathy in the administration, academia, and among democracy activists for “moderate” Islamists familiar from the Mubarak years. Little acknowledgment was made that “moderate” Brotherhood members funded violent organizations and preached the path of war in mosques. While calling for the voice of the people to be respected, the administration (along with Qatar and

Turkey, the only countries to [react to Morsi's death](#)) backed the Islamists instead of secularist candidates.

In reality, there was no real choice (the difference between Morsi and his leading [pro-Mubarak opponent](#) in the first round of elections was minimal). A democratic government was not in the offing. Even if a secularist had won, Islamists would still have played a major role in government, just as they had under Mubarak. In the best case scenario, the Egyptian "Arab Spring" would have brought about a distinction without a difference. The pretense of support for some radical change from the status quo was just that.

The Muslim Brotherhood received political support through supposedly [charitable donations](#), an option denied to other candidates, and Qatar's Al Jazeera gave [disproportionate coverage](#) to pro-Morsi activists during the campaign. Indeed, after Morsi was deposed, Egyptians *en masse* [protested](#) Obama's role in supporting him and giving him legitimacy. Morsi was too weak and didn't have enough time to implement too much of the Brotherhood's agenda; he compromised, including on retaining diplomatic relations with Israel. Yet behind Morsi's figurehead, the Islamists increased their control of civic and government institutions.

In Sudan, Hemeti, who comes from the tribal and largely secular Janjaweed, has made an alliance with the Islamists along the lines of Mubarak's alliance with the Brotherhood, similarly leaving little room for genuine liberal-minded reformists. Hemeti has been aggressively pushing for control of diplomatic and economic affairs, including [intercepting](#) a Moroccan plane carrying gold for the Moroccan mining company Managem, which was accused of smuggling gold. His personal ambitions may ultimately be at odds with the Islamists.

As with Egypt, foreign interference on behalf of Islamists is also present in Sudan. Qataris have used left-leaning European media, such as The Guardian, known for its indiscriminate promulgation of Qatari conspiracy theories and rumors, to [accuse Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt](#) of masterminding violence against protesters, although the true reason for the crackdown is not yet known and none of these countries has anything to gain from more bad publicity or bad relations with the Sudanese. Rather than respecting the "democratic choices" of the Sudanese, Qatar has been [vocally campaigning](#) against one of the two leading candidates, an exile who lived for 25 years in London and is now advocating patience with the TMC.

Qatar has also successfully co-opted a number of [opposition activists](#), who attempt to garner sympathy during their frequent appearances on Al Jazeera. Members of Qatar's ruling Al Thani family created and fund social media campaigns and activist groups, such as #FreeSudan and [#BlueForSudan](#), which have been presented to Western countries as indigenous to Sudan. Ironically, Emir Tamim's sister, Sheikha

Mayassa, who is at the forefront of financing these activities, is involved in a [protracted legal battle](#) in the US over alleged violation of human trafficking and labor laws.

Some Sudanese [activists](#) in the US have attempted to present themselves as neutral on the issue, but rather than protesting how the *Guardian* pushes Qatar's agenda, they have expressed concern over Al Jazeera's closure. While writing [articles](#) in support of "democracy," these supposedly unbiased activists have also [attacked Saudi Arabia](#) and UAE relentlessly while presenting [no evidence](#) of either country's support for violence, and champion the [#BlueForSudan campaign](#) as a legitimate, democratic Sudanese effort when it is in fact a creature of Qatari control.

Whatever its motives, Doha benefits from efforts that reduce the complicated conflict in Sudan to a supposed expression of geopolitical ambitions by Qatar's regional rivals. How much, then, of what is going on has to do with democracy and how much is merely yet another foreign-backed campaign to co-opt legitimate grievances in the service of perpetuating the status quo and supporting Islamist agendas, ingrained ideologies, and institutions in the region?

The first "Arab Spring" was neither about democracy nor even revolution so much as about foreign actors' support for the Islamists' extremism over attempts – secular, Salafist, leftist, or liberal – to challenge them. The situation in Sudan now is not much different. If indeed a second "Arab Spring," a heartfelt Sudanese response to corruption and expression of a yearning for freedom, the process is in peril.

*Irina Tsukerman is a human rights and national security attorney based in New York. She has written extensively on geopolitics and US foreign policy for a variety of American, Israeli, and other international publications.*