



Volume 2, Number 41  
August 1997

# Foreign Policy In Focus

## Sudan

by Dan Connell

Sudan's size—it is the largest country in Africa, with borders that touch Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, and Libya—coupled with its strategic location, straddling the Nile and abutting the Red Sea, made it the target of revolving-door superpower intervention and massive arms transfers during the cold war. The U.S. alone provided over \$2 billion in arms, usually in the guise of fighting Soviet penetration.

As corrupt civilian regimes alternated with both Soviet- and U.S.-supported military coups, the country slid deeper into economic malaise and social crisis, accentuated by lengthy outbreaks of civil war. Then, in June 1989, Gen. Omar el-Bashir seized power on behalf of

the National Islamic Front (NIF), polarizing the country along ethnic and religious lines, just as the cold war wound down. As Sudan lost significance to the departing superpowers, it was allowed to wither in arms-bloated poverty. Today it is enmeshed in an escalating internal conflict that threatens to erupt into regional war that could involve Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, and possibly Egypt.

This crisis radiates in concentric circles from the civil war in southern Sudan, which has sputtered for more than 30 of the past 40 years.

Like all the former European colonies along the Sahel (the Sahara's southern rim), Sudan comprises an Arabic-speaking, Muslim north and an African south inhabited by ethnically diverse Christians and practitioners of traditional religions. The capital, Khartoum, is in the north.

Since independence in 1956—when Sudan moved out of its British-Egyptian colonial orbit—rival northern factions have vied to control the country and dominate the south. Massive injections of weapons magnified these ethnic and political divisions. Rebel forces in the south were armed (through Ethiopia) by Israel in the 1960s and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.

This was matched by even larger arms flows to successive northern governments from the Soviets in the 1960s and by the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s, after the superpowers switched sides.

The latest fighting started after the northern government gutted a regional autonomy agreement that ended the first round of civil war in 1972. Khartoum reneged after confirming oil discoveries in the south. For southerners, the last straw came when Gen. Jaafar al-Nimeiri imposed Islamic *shari'a* law in 1983. Nimeiri came to power in 1969, backed first by the Soviet Union and later by the United States. Nimeiri was overthrown in 1985, but the civilian government elected a year later did little to change the country's basic policies. U.S. support diminished but did not end until after the NIF seized power.

The NIF regime banned political parties, trade unions, and other secular institutions. It imposed tight controls on the press and strict dress and behavior codes on women. More than 78,000 people were purged from the army, police, and civil administration, thoroughly reshaping the state apparatus, while dissidents were routinely detained in "ghost house" torture centers. In war zones, conscription of child soldiers became widespread, and forms of slavery reappeared. Under a policy termed the "Comprehensive Call," the NIF merged religious indoctrination and conversion with education, social services, economic development, and political mobilization, and the NIF also established Peace Camps under the paramilitary Popular Defense Forces to promote Arabization and Islamization in the south.

But it was Sudan's support for Iraq in the Gulf War in 1990, not the regime's internal policies, that triggered the break with the United States. This support for Iraq, coupled with charges that the NIF harbored Islamist guerrillas operating in bordering countries and the Middle East, put it on a collision course with the U.S. and neighboring governments. Washington responded by prohibiting economic investment, increasing anti-Sudan moves in the UN and other international forums, and isolating Sudan as a "rogue" state by including it on the State Department's list of countries sponsoring international terrorism.

### Key Points

- Sudan's size, strategic location and as-yet-unexploited oil reserves made it a cold war target of superpower intervention.
- Massive injections of U.S. and Soviet arms kept a bitter civil war raging between north and south for nearly a half century.
- The U.S. has designated Sudan a "rogue state" and broken relations with the present regime, accusing it of harboring Islamist terrorists.

Current U.S. policy toward Sudan is narrowly defined around issues of terrorism and has a punitive character that leaves little room for maneuvering. Unilateral U.S. restrictions on trade and investment have had little impact on the government, which has found other sources of new weapons. Sophisticated means of domestic repression obviate the possibility of serious internal challenge, yet the escalating armed resistance by groups with bases outside the country makes the U.S. and Egypt (whose views strongly influence U.S. policy) extremely nervous.

U.S. relations with Sudan have careened between extremes. When Gen. Nimeiri seized power in 1969 and touted pro-Soviet nationalism, Sudan joined the U.S. enemies list. Then, after an abortive Communist Party coup in 1971, Nimeiri did an about-face and veered rightward. In 1977, after a pro-Soviet coup in Ethiopia—Washington's chief African ally since the 1940s—the U.S. carried out a massive military build-up in Sudan. By 1980 Sudan was the world's sixth largest recipient of U.S. military aid and the pivotal state in an anti-Soviet bloc that included Somalia and Kenya.

Meanwhile, U.S. advisers, engineers, and military trainers descended on Khartoum, dispensing dollars for generally unmonitored aid programs. The result was a spate of poorly conceived and mismanaged development projects that soon failed, producing further impoverishment and spiraling debt. At the same time, internal strains intensified as the corrupt military government, bloated with U.S. arms, moved to impose its will on the oil-rich south.

When hunger ravaged the region in 1984, U.S. food aid poured in. But the invasion of U.S.-led relief workers, whose often domineering, culturally insensitive presence many Sudanese found humiliating, failed to avert a famine or to rescue Nimeiri's flagging popularity. In 1985, Nimeiri was overthrown, and during the next four years U.S. policy drifted and direct aid declined.

The country's continuing slide into chaos—with the economy in perpetual crisis, the political class riven by fratricidal competition, and the civil war dragging on in the south—set the stage for the 1989 coup by Islamist forces, just days before peace talks were slated to begin with repeal of Islamic law high on the agenda. Support from Iran, which rushed to strengthen relations with its first African ally, enabled the NIF to make massive arms purchases from China and former Soviet republics and to step up the war in the south.

The 1996 launch of a northern armed resistance from bases in Eritrea and Ethiopia, allied with the southern Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)—under a broad coalition known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—thoroughly transformed the conflict from a regional civil war into a countrywide revolt. This

threw Washington into a quandary. Until then, U.S. policy, strongly influenced by Egypt, was aimed at altering the Khartoum government's external relations and curbing its support for Islamist "terrorists." Now, however, Washington was confronted with a multiethnic, national opposition that had no interest in wringing concessions from the NIF—only in overthrowing it. In 1996 the Clinton administration pledged nearly \$20 million in nonlethal military aid to Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda, in what many observers considered a gesture of support to NDA forces based there.

U.S. support for the NDA is complicated because the opposition is itself divided between traditional pro-Western parties and new, progressive groups. The largest NDA constituents are the southern-based SPLA and the old-style northern parties, the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which have dominated Sudanese politics since independence. These old-style northerners have mobilized token military units to claim a role in the armed uprising, while positioning themselves in the international arena as the only legitimate alternative to the Islamists. Their diplomacy focuses on Egypt and the U.S. and is aimed at starting peace talks to short-circuit the armed revolt.

Among the smaller NDA constituents are the Beja Congress, the Sudan National Party, the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance, and the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF). Launched in 1995, the SAF is the main armed threat in the north and the key force among those identifying with the "New Sudan" movement. Led by former army officers, trade unionists, and professionals, the SAF draws members from all regions of Sudan and offers a progressive alternative to the ethnic and clan-based parties, promising a social revolution along with secular democracy.

The SPLA, which recently formed an armed wing in the north, falls between these two camps and is courted by both. Where it eventually aligns—with the Umma Party and DUP traditionalists or with the New Sudan forces—will determine the balance of power between the rival opposition tendencies.

The Egyptians fear a loss of influence over Sudan (and the waters of the Nile) if the country breaks up or aligns itself with its African neighbors, and Cairo is terrified of an Islamist upheaval at home if it is perceived as helping to overthrow the NIF. U.S. State Department officials share Egypt's concerns and distrust an armed revolt that could have unpredictable—and uncontrollable—consequences.

## Key Problems

- U.S. policy toward Sudan has alternated between extremes for decades, driven largely by shifting geopolitical imperatives.
- Current U.S. policy is an extension of cold war formulas, failing to account for new regional and national realities.
- The apparent U.S. tilt toward traditionalists within the opposition coalition could set the stage for a new round of civil war.

U.S. policy needs to be recast to deal with Sudan as a country, not merely as a font of terrorism, and it must be integrated into a regional perspective that takes account of cold war policies that shaped the current crisis.

Total economic sanctions that punish the population for the sins of the regime can have an effect opposite to that intended, thereby magnifying the suffering of ordinary people while providing the government with a rallying cry to mobilize the nation against foreign intervention. Support for an international arms embargo (expanding on the one already in force in Europe) together with an oil embargo (a move endorsed by the SAF) would focus U.S. policy on the core of the problem—war and repression—without exacting an unbearably heavy price from civilians. Freezing the overseas assets of NIF businesses and individuals could also have a direct impact on the regime. These measures would shift the political terrain from the defense of the nation to its character and future course, leaving matters to the Sudanese people to decide the answers.

A viable alternative to the NIF is emerging within the NDA. U.S. policy should foster it, without trying to preempt or control it and without interfering in its internal affairs. New Sudan forces are emerging that propose to reconstruct the nation on a nonsectarian democratic basis. Yet they are eclipsed in both the diplomatic arena and the international media by better-bankrolled traditionalist Umma Party and DUP leaders, widely discredited at home. The U.S. should pull back from an apparent tilt toward these traditionalist parties and act even-handedly toward NDA members, providing humanitarian support and staying out of the conflict.

Meanwhile, the expansion of SPLA operations in the south, where they now control all but a handful of garrison towns, sharply increases the need for humanitarian aid. Yet the Khartoum government restricts access to

the UN-sponsored Operation Lifeline Sudan in the south, and it bombs towns where aid is distributed. As opposition forces take more territory in northern Sudan, thousands more impoverished civilians are being displaced. To save lives and avoid mass migrations, there will be an increasing need for humanitarian aid delivered directly to people in contested areas, bypassing government controls.

The U.S. should strive to channel aid through non-governmental Sudanese intermediaries in cross-border operations in both the north and the south. Also, the U.S. should choose to work with Sudanese aid organizations that have a demonstrable presence in the war zones and the capacity to provide aid, not those organizations that exhibit the most pro-U.S. sympathies or write the best proposals. Efforts should be made to foster a consortium of Sudanese aid organizations to manage the aid operations.

The U.S. professes to support regional responses to Africa's crises. Yet when crises materialize, as in Zaire/Congo, Washington has balked, preferring to negotiate transitions in which it controls outcomes. The OAU, historically paralyzed by cold war divisions and dominated by neocolonial regimes, has so far proved unable to respond successfully to either political crises or regional development needs. As its membership changes to include new, more democratic governments, the OAU could become pivotal in charting the continent's future. But for the time being, regional groupings—like the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD)—are playing the central role in reconstructing Africa.

Eritrea and Ethiopia have taken the lead in reorienting IGAD—a forum initially set up to deal with drought—toward resolving crises and generating joint economic initiatives. IGAD members continue to urge a comprehensive political solution in Sudan, and they have designed seven major infrastructure projects to promote regional economic integration. The U.S. should support such development initiatives and bolster IGAD's efforts towards a political solution in Sudan.

*Dan Connell is an independent research journalist and development consultant based in Gloucester, Mass.*

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should support an international arms embargo against the Sudan government.
- The U.S. should forego efforts to impose nonmilitary sanctions on Sudan, apart from specific measures aimed at the NIF, while supporting a cross-border relief operation to civilian war victims.
- The U.S. should support new regional development initiatives with material and political assistance.

*Foreign Policy in Focus* is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

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