

Sudan May Emerge As Irritant to U.S.-Egyptian Ties

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Apr 17, 1998

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Brief Analysis

As President Clinton toured Africa earlier this month, seven U.S. government officials met with Sudanese rebel leaders in Asmara. The meeting followed months of signs that the U.S. government is stepping up efforts to weaken if not overthrow the Sudanese government. At the same time, ties between the governments of Sudan and Egypt have grown significantly more cordial. Absent a change in Sudanese behavior, an improvement in the often troublesome relations between Sudan and Egypt could put American and Egyptian policy at loggerheads on issues including Sudanese support for international terrorism, relations among Nile riparian states, and conflict resolution in the Horn of Africa.

U.S. opposition to the National Islamic Front (NIF), which has ruled Sudan since 1989, stems from Sudan's providing a haven for Islamist terrorist organizations, as well as from its support for insurgencies seeking to overthrow the governments of neighboring Uganda and Eritrea. The 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa was staged out of Sudan, and three of those accused later took refuge there. In addition, the NIF's strategy of battling rebellion in the largely Christian and animist South has raised concern in the United Nations and on Capitol Hill. There have been persistent reports of government involvement in extrajudicial killings, disappearances, forced labor, slavery, the forced conscription of children, and the persecution of non-Muslims. In November 1996 the U.S. government announced the provision of some \$20 million in military assistance to Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea in a move that was widely interpreted as encouraging those countries to continue their support for anti-NIF forces. The United States imposed sanctions on Sudan in November 1997, and in December Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with leaders of Sudanese opposition forces, thereby giving public blessing to their efforts against the government in Khartoum.

From tension to amity: Egypt had quasi-colonial control over Sudan during the first half of this century, and Sudanese have long complained that the Egyptians regarded them as poor cousins. Egyptian-Sudanese relations reached their nadir with the 1995 assassination attempt, which followed long-standing Egyptian allegations that Sudan provided a base and a haven for Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the government in Cairo.

Since January 1, however, a flurry of officials has shuttled between the two countries. The Egyptian public works and water resources minister visited Khartoum in February, the Sudanese foreign minister completed a visit to Cairo last week, a bilateral trade deal was recently concluded, and there are persistent rumors that Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir will visit Cairo in the near future. In addition, joint security committees have met repeatedly in recent months, and there are reports that Sudan has turned over more than ten Islamist activists sought by the Egyptian authorities. Both sides are asserting that they are rapidly moving toward resolution of the major issues of contention

between them.

The Driving Forces: From the Egyptian perspective, improved relations with Sudan hold out the prospect of advancing four major goals: ending Sudanese support for Islamist forces attempting to overthrow the government of Egypt, creating a common front against other Nile riparian countries which lately have been expressing interest in dipping into Nile waters for irrigation purposes, reducing tensions over a territorial dispute involving the Halaib Triangle along the Red Sea, and projecting Egyptian influence into the Horn of Africa.

From the Sudanese side, improved relations give the Sudanese a friendly border, end intermittent Egyptian support for Sudanese rebels, and decrease Sudanese reliance on their relationship with the Iranian government, some factions of which support closer ties to the West. Turning toward Egypt also highlights Sudan's Arab identity and may help Sudan enlist more Arab support in terms of economic assistance, military aid, and diplomacy. It remains unclear whether the warming of relations between Egypt and Sudan represents a true reorientation by the regime in Khartoum or a tactical retreat because of internal weakness.

Conflict to the South: The Egyptian-Sudanese rapprochement comes amid stirrings of possible tension between Egypt and Sudan's southern neighbors. In particular, Ethiopian officials have called for a reconsideration of the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters, which allocates the entire annual flow of the river to Sudan and Egypt, even though eight other countries also lie in the Nile Basin. Ethiopian officials have been particularly vocal in recent months about their intention to use Nile water for their own purposes; the foreign minister recently said, "No earthly force can stop Ethiopia from benefiting from the Nile." Although Egyptians are reportedly confident that international organizations will abstain from funding large-scale Ethiopian irrigation projects, Ethiopia could build a series of "micro dams," which require no external financing and which combined could reduce water flows downstream as much as 7 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year.

Egypt currently uses all of its 55 bcm/year quota and is moving quickly on the Toshka irrigation project, a public-private land reclamation project which will require an additional 5.5 bcm/year and irrigate a half million acres of desert land. Egyptian officials are confident that conservation projects now underway, combined with a reduction in rice acreage, can more than make up for the new needs of the Toshka project, but upstream water use could leave Egypt short. Egypt has long expressed its interest that Sudan remains unified, and one explanation of this interest is a fear that if Sudan split, the southern portion of the country might orient itself toward African interests and support the claims of other riparian countries currently cut out of the Nile Waters agreement.

In addition to defending Egypt's share of Nile waters, the rapprochement between Egypt and Sudan also boosts Egypt's influence in the Horn of Africa. Egypt's interest there stems from the strait of Bab al-Mandab -- one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world -- the security of which is essential for maintaining free shipping through the Suez Canal.

Some commentators assert that Egypt's primary goal is to broker a Sudanese peace, first bringing in Eritrean-supported elements of the National Democratic Alliance in the North and East, and then the southerners. American judgment appears to hold out much less hope that the NIF is redeemable. America's and Egypt's apparently diverging policies toward Sudan come at a time of other differences in the relationship: the countries' respective roles in the Arab-Israeli peace process, policy toward Iraq, and growing criticism on Capitol Hill of Egypt's treatment of its Christian population. Unless the Egyptian gambit leads to either Sudanese reconciliation or the NIF adopting new policies toward its other neighbors and toward its own population, Sudan could emerge as another irritant in the relationship between the United States and Egypt.

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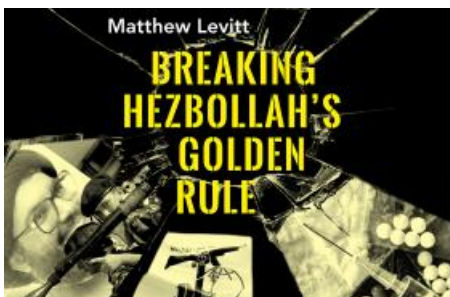
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