

# Sudan-Israel Relations: Ensuring Civilian Buy-In During a Democratic Transition

by [Areig Elhag \(/experts/areig-elhag\)](#)

Aug 26, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/allaqat-alswdanyt-alasraylyt-dman-aldm-aldny-khlal-ftrt-althwl-aldymqraty\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Areig Elhag \(/experts/areig-elhag\)](#)

Areig Elhag is a contributor from Sudan. She is a journalist and researcher in international relations and national security.



## Brief Analysis

In a recently announced move, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Khartoum yesterday as part of his broader tour through the region, including visits to Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE. The Israel-UAE normalization deal sparked the series of diplomatic visits. In the wake of these developments, international observers wondered if Sudan might be the next Arab state to normalize relations with Israel.

Even so, Sudan's current government—deep in the process of a challenging transition to democratic governance—faces divisions between its military and civil components that may lead to a lopsided relationship with Israel should normalization actually go forward. With the potential for Sudan's military to attempt to shape any efforts to normalize for its own benefit, it is imperative that any future relationship between the two countries strengthen Sudan's civil society and not inhibit a peaceful transition to democratic rule.

There are also divisions within the Forces of Freedom and Change, the main incubator for Hamdok's government, which is made up of a constellation of political parties that radically differ among themselves on many ideological issues. For example, there is no agreement yet between Sadiq al-Mahdi, the head of the Islamic-oriented Umma party, and the leaderships of the Sudanese Communist Party, the Sudanese Congress Party, and the Assembly of Professionals on the future of Sudan's external relations. Some of them call for complete independence from any international alliances, while others believe that this is currently difficult to achieve.

Thus far, the Sudanese government's contradictory statements about its relations with Israel have led to confusion and speculation about whether Khartoum is in fact pursuing normalization. On August 18, Sudanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Haidar Badawi confirmed diplomatic talks between the two countries in an interview with Sky News Arabia. That same day, Foreign Minister Omar Qamar Al-Din said he was "surprised" to hear the statement, later saying the ministry had not discussed the issue of Sudanese-Israeli relations. The ministry then fired Mr. Badawi, and the topic of normalization has since remained unclear.

The Sudanese government's position here indicates some division and confusion. The conflicting—and, for the ministry spokesperson, very dangerous—statements put Prime Minister Hamdok's civilian government in a sensitive

position. It could be that the statements indicate that Hamdok's government has a lack of knowledge, for the second time, of its own government partners pursuing negotiations with Israel. Sudan's Information Minister emphasized that "the transition government does not have the mandate... to decide on normalization with Israel" and that such a matter would need to wait until a legislative transitional authority is formalized.

The military, on the other hand, revealed its stance last February when Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, in an unprecedented moment of Sudanese history, met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Ugandan capital of Kampala, where both parties agreed to open channels of communication between the two countries. These channels enjoy the sponsorship of Khartoum's regional allies in the UAE-Saudi-Egypt axis. This decision also asserted that the responsibility for relations associated with Sudanese national security lies with the military, specifically Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, even though al-Burhan supposedly holds no executive authority.

The Arab populace now widely expects that Sudan will follow the lead of the UAE's announcement and pursue normalization with Israel. Furthermore, comments made by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also indicate that the normalization of relations is just a matter of time, saying in an official statement that "Israel, Sudan, and the entire region will benefit from the peace agreement (with the UAE) and together will build a better future for all the region's peoples. We will do whatever is necessary to turn this vision into reality."

In Sudan, which had for decades been known for its refusal to recognize, cooperate, or negotiate with Israel, the ruling government is hoping to solve one of the many problems left behind by the previous regime. The civilian side of the government, represented by Prime Minister Hamdok and the Forces of Freedom and Change, is trying for their part to build regional relations that will help achieve its primary goal, the removal of Sudan from the U.S. sanctions list. This requires the compensation of victims of terrorist acts; peace with armed movements; cooperation in combating terrorism; strengthening of human rights, religious rights, and rights of the press; degrading its relationship with North Korea; and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid. Cooperation with Israel is widely understood as a way to open access to the White House and the International Monetary Fund, and normalization may help to remove Sudan from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Normalization would not be built on nothing; Sudan and Israel have cooperated in the past, such as when the former president Jaafar Nimeiry helped evacuate the Beta Israel Jewish community from Sudan and facilitated their resettlement in Israel. However, all connections ceased after the military coup that put Omar al-Bashir in power in 1989, which was spearheaded by the leader of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood Hassan al-Turabi. In the beginning, the al-Bashir government was hostile towards Israel and the United States and preferred to align Sudan with Iran and extremist groups. Al-Turabi himself invited Hamas, Osama bin Laden, and a number of extremist leaders to operate and open training camps in Sudan, with extremist groups bonding with Sudanese leadership over a mutual distaste for the United States.

However, al-Turabi and al-Bashir had a notorious split in December 1999, and al-Bashir became increasingly concerned with consolidating his rule. He expelled al-Turabi from the country and stripped him of his powers. Al-Bashir then cut off relations with Iran and realigned Sudan with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. This shift towards the Gulf states, which themselves began tacit explorations of relations with Israel, made the option of normalizing relations with Israel possible. Al-Bashir's Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour even said at one point that Sudan was not opposed to exploring the possibility of normalizing relations with Israel. Then, many saw the approach as the ideal way to get Sudan removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism that al-Bashir's welcoming of extremists had engendered while continuing al-Bashir's corrupt dictatorial rule.

Currently, the military wing of the Sudanese transitional government seeks to attract American attention and satisfy the regional competitors that support a military government in Sudan. This trend has sparked fears that the military

will use the idea normalization in the manner of al-Bashir's government, gaining international support for the military in particular and thus influencing the peaceful transition to democratic governance expected in 2022.

By negotiating with Sudan's military wing, Israel may be playing into the hands of Sudan's military faction. As such, lasting relations with Sudan must not be achieved by way of the military channels to the neglect of the civilian government. The general mood on the streets of Sudan is one of opposition to the former regime. Sudanese saw anti-Israel banners linked with the regime for decades, and the populace is now searching for peaceful relations with the world. But this could change if those relations are linked to legitimizing military control of the government.

Therefore, Israel must actively seek friendship and a real relationship with all stakeholders in Sudan to guarantee that the Sudanese populace will not reject such a relationship in the future. Ignoring the civilian side of relations will not be in Israel's future interests, especially as the Forces of Freedom and Change and the Assembly of Professionals, the primary incubator for Prime Minister Hamdok, have a large influence on the Sudanese populace.

On the Sudanese side, Hamdok must open a general political discussion with political forces. He must hold a national dialogue around this issue so that talk of conspiracies and secret discussion among secret regional channels, as is common in the region, can be avoided. In this case, if the Sudanese government is really laying the groundwork for a democratic transition, the issue of relations should be put to a popular referendum. And if the will of the people approves it, Sudan must open overt and transparent channels of communication with Tel Aviv that are suited to the new Sudan and its interests. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

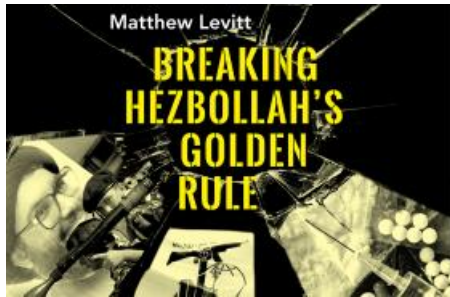
### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)