

# The Sudan Agreement: Implications of Another Arab-Israel Milestone

by [Ehud Yaari](#)

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Brief Analysis

**The latest deal shows how firm U.S. pressure, quiet contacts with Israel, and domestic political breakthroughs can help Arab governments advance normalization even in the face of popular opposition and past military conflict.**

**W**hen the White House announced an agreement for mutual recognition and normalization of relations between Sudan and Israel on October 23, it represented the successful conclusion of a multilayered, multiparty package deal that had been negotiated intensively for over a year. The main trigger for this breakthrough was the Trump administration's decision to delist Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism, a designation the country had held since 1993. Given Sudan's severe economic crisis, the authorities who toppled the dictatorship of Gen. Omar al-Bashir and took power in April 2019 have been desperate to end U.S. sanctions, attract investments, and open prospects for relieving around \$60 billion in debt.

As part of the negotiations, the Sudanese government has deposited \$335 million in an escrow account to compensate victims of the 1998 terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden. According to local authorities, Khartoum has been assured that no further claims are forthcoming. Lifting the sanctions is the next step in the process, to be followed by talks with the IMF and resumption of American aid.

Alongside consistent U.S. pressure to link the terror delisting with peace moves toward Israel, the preliminary negotiations benefited from behind-the-scenes encouragement and financial aid commitments by the United Arab

Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as well as tacit backing by Sudan's neighbor, Egypt. Khartoum's decision could also accelerate similar normalization efforts by other Arab countries, though such progress will probably be more gradual than the [“big splash” peace agreements](#) with the UAE and Bahrain.

## PAST HOSTILITIES AND SECRET TALKS

**K**hartoum's decision differs from the Emirati and Bahraini normalization moves in another notable respect: Sudan and Israel have a history of past military clashes and other hostile behavior. For example, Sudanese companies fought alongside the Egyptian army in the 1948 and 1967 wars. Shortly after the latter conflict, Khartoum hosted the summit at which the Arab League adopted its infamous “three no's” policy—no peace, no negotiations, no recognition of Israel. And during the 1973 war, Sudan sent an expeditionary force to the Suez front, though only after a ceasefire had been reached, rendering the deployment largely symbolic.

Meanwhile, Israel began helping the insurgency in southern Sudan as early as 1968, offering equipment and training to the Anyanya rebels and, later, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) up until South Sudan won its independence in 2011. Israeli forces also mounted several air raids against Sudanese munitions storage facilities in 2009-2012, attempting to curb Bashir's practice of allowing Iran to ship weapons through his territory to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Despite these hostilities, Israel and Sudan pursued intermittent secret contacts for decades prior to the current deal. They began in the mid-1950s with Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the powerful National Umma Party who was engaged in a struggle with President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt at the time. (Interestingly, the eighty-five-year-old Mahdi has since become the most vocal domestic opponent of the current normalization drive, presumably in a bid to reverse his political marginalization.) Later, Israel secretly cooperated with President Jaafar Nimeiri, who shook hands with Prime Minister Menachem Begin during Anwar Sadat's 1981 funeral in Cairo—an event that other Arab leaders boycotted due to Begin's presence. Israel also obtained quiet help from Khartoum in evacuating Jews from Ethiopia.

Under Bashir, Khartoum sought contacts with Israel after breaking with Iran, distancing from Turkey, and joining the Saudi war effort in Yemen. After his ouster, Sudan resumed quiet dialogue with Israel, leading to the first public meeting between Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Sovereignty Council head Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan this February in Uganda.

## DOMESTIC REPERCUSSIONS FOR SUDAN

**T**he Uganda meeting stoked a stormy debate in the Sudanese press and social media about the pros and cons of reconciliation with Israel. The prime mover in favor of speedy normalization was the council's vice president, Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known by his nickname Hemeti. He commands the Rapid Support Forces, a 70,000-strong military organization that is separate from the Sudanese army and sprang out of the militias formed during the long Darfur conflict. These irregulars were often blamed for committing atrocities, but Hemeti denies the accusations and was not among those charged at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

While Burhan remained tight-lipped about normalization in public, Hemeti campaigned for it at gatherings all around the country, arguing that engagement with Israel was in Sudan's best interests. The main objections came from Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who heads a civilian cabinet created by the partnership formula reached between the military chiefs and the “Freedom and Change” political coalition. As late as September, Hamdok was still attempting to delink the Israel issue from Sudan's U.S. terrorism designation. Yet his position softened once Washington firmly conditioned the end of sanctions on peace with Israel.

Meanwhile, developing cooperation between Hemeti and Hamdok brought about a breakthrough in efforts to restore

internal peace, with rebel groups represented by the Sudan Revolutionary Front signing the Juba Agreement early this month. All of these groups support rapprochement with Israel and oppose political Islam. Abdel Wahid al-Nur—the Paris-based leader of the strongest rebel faction, the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), which is still negotiating its own peace agreement—has already made a public statement welcoming normalization. Another key rebel figure, Abdelaziz Hilu of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), is expected to follow suit. Hamdok, an experienced economist, apparently concluded that he could use the practical benefits of normalization to overcome opposition from communists, Nasserites, Baathists, and Islamists. Indeed, these groups have not managed to stage meaningful protests against the deal so far, nor have they left the government.

Through Foreign Minister Omar Qamar al-Din, Hamdok is now promising that the Israel deal will be ratified by parliament. Yet the legislative assembly that was supposed to be formed for the transitional period until elections in 2022 has not been established. According to arrangements between Sudan’s military chiefs and civilian politicians, a joint meeting of the Sovereignty Council and the government’s ministers may exercise the powers of the absent parliament. This mechanism may allow Israel and Sudan to activate their coming normalization protocols without a parliamentary vote.

For now, Sudan has granted Israel the right to use its airspace for shorter flights to Latin America—one of Netanyahu’s longstanding priorities for boosting trade ties. The Sudanese are also seeking Israeli know-how and technologies for agriculture, among other sectors. With drastic reforms and substantial investments, the country could eventually become a breadbasket for the Arabian Peninsula and beyond—the Emiratis and Saudis have already expressed great interest in this potential. Moreover, cheap electricity from Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam, only a few miles from Sudan’s border, would further enhance the prospects of igniting an economic recovery in the not-too-distant future.

It is unclear at the moment how quickly Israel and Sudan will sign each of the individual protocols and establish mutual embassies. Yet it is safe to assume that Burhan is keen to move as fast as possible—certainly before January, when a new president may enter the White House.

## PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER NORMALIZATION DEALS?

Most Arab states are waiting for the results of the U.S. election before making any public overtures toward Israel. Morocco, Oman, and Qatar are weighing the possible advantages of upgrading their relations—though all three may be overtaken on the bumpy road to Jerusalem by Djibouti, whose president has been urged by the UAE to consider a move. Eventually, Abu Dhabi’s great influence down the East African coast may lead to some form of cooperation between Israel and the two de facto states of Somaliland and Puntland. Israel will also intensify efforts to establish relations with the Muslim-majority states of the Sahel, including Mauritania, which recognized Israel in 1999 but severed formal relations a decade later.

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