

# Supporting Sudan's Essential but Risky Progress

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and a former senior State Department official.



Brief Analysis

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**Since experiencing major upheaval and demands for change in 2019, the country has achieved real gains in its political transition, but it needs serious American assistance to safely advance the fragile process.**

**O**n June 29, the executive boards of the IMF and the World Bank's International Development Association approved Sudan's eligibility for debt relief under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC). In announcing the decision, the IMF lauded the reforms and other steadfast efforts Sudan's interim government has taken just to meet the tough prerequisites for such relief, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the surface, this news was both startling and heartening. If fully implemented within the next three years, the move will decrease Sudan's international debt by roughly 90%, from about \$56 billion to \$6 billion—or from 163% of the country's GDP to 14%. Around half of that relief will be granted immediately. By clearing up arrears to the IMF and other creditors, Khartoum stands to open up new financing arrangements that should strengthen the country's social safety net, improve the government's bottom line (mainly by enhancing tax collection and reducing subsidies), support the financial sector, and generally increase good governance and transparency.

## Promising Signs

**I**n a sense, the debt relief announcement is a metaphor for much of what Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's interim government has had to do since coming to power in 2019. Just as IMF arrears had to be cleared to open new avenues of funding, officials have also strived to clear the political, social, economic, and security "arrears" racked up during three decades of brutal and incompetent Islamist rule under Omar al-Bashir.

Indeed, Sudan has made real progress under Hamdok's government and the Sovereignty Council, the military-led body whose fourteen members include five generals. Their efforts to reintegrate the country into the global

economic system were turbocharged by the Trump administration's October 2020 decision to remove Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list after twenty-seven years—a move made in conjunction with Khartoum's normalization moves toward Israel.

The government has also repealed Bashir-era laws penalizing women, mandating flogging as a legal punishment, and criminalizing apostasy. Press freedoms and the right to peaceful demonstration are now broadly respected, and authorities have affirmed their commitment to respecting diversity and freedom of religion.

In addition, the government has stopped bombing civilian areas in the restive Jabal Marrah region and concluded successful peace negotiations with most of the country's rebel groups, largely ending the low-grade insurgencies that had plagued Sudan for decades. Today, the governor of the Darfur region is Mini Minawi, a former rebel leader. Hamdok's finance minister is Gebreil Ibrahim, another former rebel whose brother was killed by the Bashir regime. Likewise, three of the members appointed to the Sovereignty Council this February were previously part of rebel groups. A definitive peace in hotspots such as the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile is now closer than ever. Overall, Western interlocutors seem impressed and optimistic about the progress after decades of bad faith from Khartoum.

## Remaining Challenges

Even so, the threats to Sudan's fragile transitional state are daunting. The IMF breakthrough does not in itself translate to additional assistance and is more popular in Western capitals than in the dusty streets of Khartoum. The goal is to make the country's debt level and repayment schedule sustainable, but the government will still need to figure out how to balance collecting taxes and removing subsidies with protecting the poor. According to data reported by the African Development Bank, the poverty rate was at 36% as of 2018 (the most reliable statistics available), and other estimates are higher. Inflation is expected to decline over the coming year but is currently among the worst in the world. A \$400 million World Bank program aimed at providing cash transfers to Sudanese families affected by economic reforms and other short-term shocks should help, but it has only been in effect since December.

While managing this Rubik's Cube of a crisis, the government is under siege from two camps: those who believe change is happening too slowly, and those who want to reverse what change has already taken place. Civil society elements are frustrated at the slow pace of reform and have criticized the committee charged with dismantling remnants of Bashir's "party state," spurring Hamdok to recently pay a personal visit to the body as a show of support for its work. At the same time, elements connected or sympathetic to the Bashir regime have been steadily denouncing the government. Satellite television propaganda against Hamdok and the military leadership is beamed into Sudan daily from Turkey and Qatar, two states that were ideological allies of Bashir. Qatar's Al Jazeera seems intent on toppling Sudan's leadership, not only because of past grievances but also due to Khartoum's current ties with Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

On the security front, internal wars have been tamped down but banditry and ethnic violence linger. Moreover, substantial conspiracy plotting is suspected among former regime elements, particularly those connected to the massive apparatus once headed by National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) chief Salah Gosh, who is supposedly hiding in Egypt.

As for popular discontent, hundreds were arrested earlier this year for promoting weeks of protest against rising food prices. Rampant inflation has made fuel and medicine less affordable as well—a sobering fact given that rising prices were the proximal trigger for the unrest that led to Bashir's ouster. Yet behind the sincere demonstrators have been cynical instigators such as Bashir's former vice president Hassabu Abdel Rahman, one of the most despicable figures in a regime loaded with bad actors. For instance, when he was in charge of the Bashir-era committee that oversaw foreign humanitarian NGOs, he did everything he could to make their work more difficult and deepen the

misery of displaced Sudanese. Later, according to a 2015 report by Human Rights Watch, he encouraged genocide in rebel-held Jabal Marrah; during one speech before a large audience of soldiers, he is said to have declared, “We don’t want anyone there to be alive,” urging them “to kill any male...to clear the area of insects.”

## Policy Recommendations

International, especially American, support is essential if Sudan is to navigate out of these perilous waters.

Washington should therefore pressure partners such as Egypt and the UAE not to stress Sudan any further than it already is in pursuit of their own agendas. On the positive front, this already seems to be happening with the dangerous Renaissance Dam crisis and related border demarcation tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan. Yet U.S. officials need to step up and be more proactive in curbing open incitement from Qatar and Turkey. Constant on-air invective against the current government coupled with conspiracies by former regime elements is a deadly combination.

Sudan’s nascent relationship with Israel also requires careful American nurturing. Israeli officials will need to methodically expand their outreach beyond the security forces—gentle and low-key public diplomacy among the Sudanese people is essential if this breakthrough is to thrive. Accordingly, Washington should put a strong, empowered voice on the ground to serve as chief of mission and handle the day-to-day relationship—ideally an energetic, larger-than-life, Arabic-speaking figure stationed in Khartoum, not a regional envoy who appears in-country for just a few days at a time. Unfortunately, no nominee has been named yet to serve as the next U.S. ambassador to Sudan, the first since 1996. The delay is worrisome given how slow the Senate confirmation pipeline can be.

In addition to finding creative and impactful ways of improving the lives of ordinary Sudanese, the success of the transition process will depend on managing the delicate relationship between three unlikely partners: Prime Minister Hamdok, an economist and international civil servant; Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, a career military officer and chairman of the Sovereignty Council; and Gen. Mohamed Hamdan “Hemeti” Dagalo, the council’s vice chair and a former Darfur tribal militia leader. Tension persists not only between civilian and uniformed elements of the government, but also between Burhan’s Sudanese Armed Forces and Hemeti’s Rapid Support Forces (with the latter increasingly taking on the trappings of a Praetorian Guard).

Going forward, the United States should throw its constant, full-throated support behind Hamdok’s calls for greater unity and justice, rallying its regional partners to do the same. All parties should be more consistent in engaging, respecting, and encouraging Hemeti and Burhan as well, since such attention may help convince them to curb their ambitions (especially Hemeti’s), to truly reform the armed forces, and to focus on the greater good. According to Sudan’s governing agreement, neither the two generals nor Hamdok can be a candidate in the next election scheduled for late 2022, but all three will be essential in keeping the country on a relatively even keel in the short term.

Despite its state of near-constant crisis, Sudan is the only nation to achieve something positive out of the turmoil that rocked several Arab countries in 2019. This fragile progress deserves a chance to overcome its flaws and succeed.

*Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). Previously, he served as the U.S. charge d’affaires in Khartoum from 2007 to 2009, and as Sudan desk officer at the U.S. Information Agency from 1990 to 1992. ❖*

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