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Fikra Forum

# Egypt Should Adopt Active Neutrality Toward the Sudanese Revolution

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### Brief Analysis

In light of recent developments, Egypt must once again decide how to address one of its most complicated foreign policy challenges: Sudan. In the wake of the 1989 coup in Sudan, which saw Colonel Omar al-Bashir oust the elected government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi of the National Umma Party, Egypt was quick to recognize al-Bashir's regime. Yet shortly afterwards, Egypt classified al-Bashir's regime as Islamist, leading to an estrangement and, ultimately, a series of hostile exchanges between the two countries. One of the most dangerous results of this for Egypt was Sudan's shift towards an alliance with Ethiopia. This prompted Egypt to begin dealing with the Sudanese opposition and Eritrea, which had displayed animosity towards Ethiopia and Sudan.

Now that the Bashir regime has been ousted, Egypt is making the same mistake by allying itself with the Transitional Military Council led by Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Burhan without considering all involved parties. While the Council [announced](#) that it would hand over power to civilians after three years, Sudanese revolutionaries have expressed their disapproval of this timeline, and negotiations have hit an impasse. The Peace and Security Council of the African Union has also [rejected](#) the idea of the Transitional Military Council remaining for two years, and members of the military itself have begun to speak out against the military maintaining power.

Egypt, however, has taken a different approach, calling a special mini-summit in Cairo to discuss the situation in Sudan and Libya. With regard to Sudan, the summit pushed to adjust the transitional deadline of 15 days set by Peace and Security Council to three months. This conference appears to have been a product of Egyptian, Saudi, and Emirati coordination with the Sudanese military council, with the latter two countries pledging days prior to inject up to three billion dollars to support Sudan, including 500 million dollars deposited in the central bank. During this process, Egypt may have erred by not dealing with both sides of the Sudanese equation. Indeed, even though Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has [professed to support](#) the reinstatement of a democratic process in Sudan, Cairo appears to favor the Transitional Military Council. Now, revolutionary forces in Sudan are [coming to believe](#) that Egypt supports the military council's continued control for their originally proposed two years, and may

be less inclined to work with the government.

In addition to Egypt's apparent bias, Egypt has also put itself in a complicated position by identifying with the approach to the revolution taken by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While Egypt has long-standing strategic, economic, and security interests in Sudan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not have the same type of deep-seated investment in the country. Rather, their interest stems from recent efforts to expand influence along the Horn of Africa. Thus, it is unclear if Gulf interests and Egyptian interests in Sudan will align in the long-run.

Furthermore, and in contrast to the Gulf states, Egypt could achieve its national security needs with most governments chosen by the Sudanese people through their various political forces. While the al-Bashir military regime caused considerable damage to Egyptian national security over the last thirty years, going so far as to form an alliance with Ethiopia at the cost of their relationship with Egypt, there is no reason to believe that future Sudanese governments would pursue this type of foreign policy if they viewed Egypt as an ally. Thus, Egypt needed to explore the sort of active neutrality that the United States and to some extent the EU are applying to the Sudanese question as it evolves.

While a new civilian government could present an opening for Egypt to adjust its relationship with its southern neighbor, it is important to remember that the Transitional Military Council is ultimately a product of the Sudanese military establishment, which has had a spotty record when it comes to managing national security concerns. The military establishment produced the regimes of Abboud, Nimeiry, and al-Bashir, each of which damaged Sudanese national security. Al-Bashir's tenure in particular witnessed the independence of South Sudan in 2011, which emerged in accordance with the [2005 peace agreement](#) it signed with Sudan. The catastrophe of South Sudan's independence compounded with another disaster in the north with Egypt, as several confrontations eroded the two countries' relations. These issues remain a thorny complication between the two countries, and the ability of the Transitional Military Council to handle each of these challenges must be taken into account.

First, Egypt and Sudan have a marked disparity between their concepts of national security. The theory of national security between the two countries since Sudan's independence in 1956 initially operated through unity and reciprocity. However, once the Mubarak regime became reluctant to support Sudan due to its belief that al-Bashir's regime was Islamist, Sudan began taking broad, hostile measures against its northern neighbor. Most importantly, the al-Bashir regime eliminated Egyptian educational exchanges and scholarships, seized the branch of Cairo University in Khartoum, and put pressure on Sudanese branches of Egyptian companies. Moreover, the government seized a number of Egyptian irrigation systems in Sudan and froze the meetings of the Permanent Joint Technical Commission for Nile Waters.

These actions ended the principle of shared national security between the two countries that had shaped bilateral relations for decades. Sudan's parallel shift towards Ethiopia was highlighted when President al-Bashir said at a joint press conference in Addis Ababa that "there is no limit to cooperation between us on security, because Ethiopia's security is Sudan's security, and Sudan's security is Ethiopia's security."

The unprecedented differences between the Sudanese and Egyptian positions on the issue of the Nile waters are also a key point of concern for Egypt regardless of which government comes to power. Tensions in relations between the two countries rose when Khartoum supported the building of Ethiopia's Nile dam as a result of Sudanese electricity needs—Sudan felt that Egypt had encroached upon Sudan's share of the Nile. This crisis between the two countries escalated further after an Ethiopian newspaper published [reports](#) that Cairo had officially asked Ethiopia to exclude Sudan from negotiations on the dam, although the Egyptian side [denied](#) this.

Several official statements issued by Sudan confirmed the severity of the crisis between the two countries during this period. For example, the Sudanese minister of irrigation stated before Parliament on January 30, 1994 that

“there are attempts to reach a full agreement that includes all of the countries on the Nile Basin regarding the distribution of the Nile waters. The current situation is unfair to Sudan.” This view was reflected in Sudan’s indirect support for the Entebbe Agreement signed between six of the ten Nile basin countries in 2010, which Egypt rejected. Although Egypt and Sudan are bound by the earlier Agreement for Full Utilization of Nile Waters, signed in Cairo on November 8 1959, the Entebbe Agreement states that bilateral consultation could not prevent the Sudanese side from taking a position against Egypt in matters related to the technical specifications for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia. The dam lies at the heart of many Egyptian concerns over the future of the Nile river, as its completion would give Ethiopia 74 billion cubic meters of water while reducing Egypt’s share as previously specified in the 1959 agreement, which amounted to 55.5 billion cubic meters.

The truth of the matter is that the Sudanese position on the dam was developed during this period based on political rather than technical grounds. As an Egyptian official source argued in a 2013 Asharq Al-Awsat article, “President al-Bashir is talking about the benefits of the dam, but ignoring the disadvantages as well as the impact of the dam on Egypt’s share of the Nile waters.” Here, the impact of the erosion of political coordination between the two countries was visible in full force.

Geographic conflicts between the two countries have also extended beyond the Nile. In response to al-Bashir’s hostile actions, tensions escalated between the two countries to the point of military confrontation. A breaking point appeared to occur when Egyptian armed forces deployed a contingent in the contested Hala’ib triangle in March 1992 and were able to assert control of the border up until the 22nd parallel. The crisis began when the Egyptian Ganoub El Wadi Petroleum Holding Company tendered sectors for oil and gas drilling in the Hala’ib region on the Red Sea, which Sudanese Minister of Oil and Gas Saad Eldin Beshri considered to be a “direct incursion on the jurisdiction of the Sudanese Ministry of Oil and Gas.” Beshri made this claim on the basis that the Hala’ib concession is located within the Sudanese Oil Ministry’s area of authority according to maps approved by Sudan’s General Survey Commission and the Ministry of Defense.

On more than one occasion, Egypt has refused to allow Sudanese officials and members of Parliament to enter the disputed area. In May 2014, Egypt incorporated the Hala’ib triangle into its electoral districts, thereby angering Khartoum. The issue of Hala’ib remained problematic until al-Bashir’s ouster. The combination of these major points of conflict were mutually corrosive, eroding options for coordination between the two states and leading to an increasingly unproductive relationship. And while the Revolution presents a chance to reset relations, a policy of active neutrality on the issue of Sudan’s government is the option most likely to achieve success.

Given the longstanding weight of the conflicts between Sudan and Egypt, and since Burhan’s government is in many ways emerging from the same point of view as a member of Sudan’s military establishment, Egypt should not expect for the Transitional Military Council to have a substantively different attitude than that of al-Bashir when it comes to Egypt.

Thus, Egypt’s current handling of the issue of Sudan may not emerge as very different from the Mubarak regime’s management of the situation. Mubarak may have had more success were he to have given appropriate attention to the myriad of Sudan’s component political pieces in the early days of al-Bashir: the ruling authority, the different political parties, and the Sudanese people themselves.

Now, it is worth making the effort to engage these different groups. Sudan is a major pillar of Egypt’s national security and deserves to be treated as such; it is part of Egypt’s strategic purview and it is important to apply long-term strategies that will secure the most positive outcome possible. Although politicians in the two countries are currently discussing prospects for a political solution, a solution cannot be reached as long as the differences between the two countries remain unresolved and remain subject to political blackmail. Egypt has the highest chance of success by engaging with all sides, thereby avoiding an alienation of any one party that may subsequently

come to power. ❖



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