

Sanctions and Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood: Decoupling Burhan from Sudan's Islamists and Iran

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Brief Analysis

Sanctioning Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood will likely have an impact on Burhan's approach to the group, but a true decoupling will likely require additional pressure given their political influence and role in the current conflict.

On March 16, the U.S. State Department designated Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), a decision that came at a critical juncture amid increasing Iranian interference in Sudan's war, deepening MB integration into Sudan's military apparatus, and a reduced focus in Washington on Sudan. More important than the timing is the decision's implicit message: Washington views the Brotherhood as a central obstruction to peace and stability rather than a peripheral actor in the conflict.

The day the designation was announced, Massad Boulos, the U.S. senior advisor for Arab and African affairs, **noted that (https://x.com/US_SrAdvisorAF/status/2031009540813033706)** "the United States continues using all available tools to counter [and] counteract the malign influence of Iran." His statement situated Sudan within the broader framework of containing Iran's regional influence.

War as a Tool of Survival for the Muslim Brotherhood

By designating the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan, Washington targets a key political player in the country. For thirty years, the movement served as the ideological backbone of the Omar al-Bashir regime as Sudan became a hub for transnational Islamist activity. The country hosted Osama bin Laden in the early 1990s, and elements linked to the movement were connected to the attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in 1995. In addition, Khartoum under Bashir served as a meeting point for Iranian leadership.

These incidents reflected Bashir's deliberate policy of cultivating ties with militant and ideological networks across

the region. And when he was removed, the MB networks within state institutions remained largely intact, albeit without an official role.

The current war has created space for some of these networks to regain influence by presenting the conflict as a struggle to protect the state, delaying accountability, and maintaining their positions within Sudan's wartime power structure. For the Sudanese MB, war is not a crisis but an opportunity to be managed.

Iran: An Old Friend Who Was Never Really Gone

According to the [official U.S. statement \(https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/designation-of-the-sudanese-muslim-brotherhood/?utm_source=chatgpt.com\)](https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/03/designation-of-the-sudanese-muslim-brotherhood/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) on the designation, Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood helped recruit more than twenty thousand fighters for Burhan's forces during the war in Sudan, many of them trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The roots of this relationship likewise stretch back to Bashir's presidency, and his regime was subject to American sanctions for many years due to accusations it supported terrorism, hosted extremist groups, and committed violations linked to the war in Darfur.

Although in 2017 Sudan severed ties with Tehran as part of a Saudi-led regional realignment, that chapter was never fully closed. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of Sudan's Sovereignty Council and commander of the Sudanese army, who has ties to the MB, reopened channels of communication with Iran in October 2023 in a search for weapons, months after war broke out in Sudan. This timing was likely not coincidental, as [reports \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/palestinian-territories/hamas-not-done-fighting\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/palestinian-territories/hamas-not-done-fighting) suggest that one factor behind Iran's effort to restore relations with Sudan was the potential to reestablish logistical routes for transferring weapons to Hamas through Sudan. Tehran then supplied the Sudanese army with drones, returning Khartoum to Iran's orbit in a manner reminiscent of the Bashir years.

At the time, Iran [sought \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-tried-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-tried-to-persuade-sudan-to-allow-naval-base-on-its-red-sea-coast-77ca3922) to use Sudan as a depot for weapons storage and re-arming its allies in the region. In this sense, Sudan became not merely a partner for Iran, but a logistical node in its regional influence network, drawing the country into a strategic alliance far exceeding the boundaries of its internal crisis.

The Army's Allies Face a Credibility Test

In addition to its potential impact on the war itself, sanctions on the MB will also likely have broader regional implications, both in terms of Gulf states' approach to the war and Burhan's relationship with these states. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have supported the Sudanese army despite domestic policies opposing the MB and their commitment to exclude the group from any future political arrangement in Sudan. Both work as partners in the Quad diplomatic framework, along with the United States and the United Arab Emirates, where the latter's deep antipathy to the MB backs the Rapid Support Forces rather than Burhan, in part due to their deep distrust of the MB. Now, with the Brotherhood a U.S.-sanctioned entity, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—alongside Qatar and Turkey, both historically favorably inclined toward the MB—face an unavoidable question of whether they can continue to support an army dominated by a network under American sanctions.

During the latest U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict, with Iran's unprecedented attacks on Gulf countries, Burhan struggled to navigate competing pressures, given the MB's association with Iran. He called the leaders of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, purportedly expressing Sudan's solidarity in facing what he described as "Iranian aggression."

Yet Burhan cannot credibly stand with Iran's victims while his brigades declare their readiness to defend Tehran. A [video \(https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2118253148962248\)](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2118253148962248) widely circulated on social media showing soldiers in Sudanese military uniforms declaring their readiness to defend Iran if attacked, laid bare the contradiction of Khartoum's approach to Iran. The video was so alarming that Burhan was compelled to immediately

disavow it, insisting that the soldiers did not represent the armed forces. In any event, it highlights that Burhan does not possess full control over his forces. For example, reports indicate that the Al-Bara Brigade, an Islamist faction, operates under the Sudanese Armed Forces' formal structure but answers to its own command. It controls many military decisions and fights in sensitive locations, and according to analysts, this is not a partnership, since the brigade has functional autonomy, with hardliners holding the real reins of power. The MB in Sudan were never allies of the army, but infiltrators. The officers who trained and rose through the ranks under Bashir are, for the most part, either members of the MB or indebted to it for their careers. Removing them will not reform the army, but will rather cause the command structure to collapse in wartime. These officers now issue a threat: keep us in place or watch the entire military command structure collapse in the middle of the battle.

The Limits of Sanctions Against a Deeply Rooted Network

Since the United States designated Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood, operating under the banner of the Islamic Movement, as an FTO, sanctions have rightly been welcomed as a long-overdue acknowledgment of the MB's role in fueling the war. Yet the designation alone will not be enough. Among the most significant challenges to implementing sanctions is the tendency of such groups to rename themselves and establish new entities to circumvent restrictions, a pattern the United States has seen in Iran and Iraq. Countering this requires a sustained intelligence focus on Sudan, tracking and disrupting attempts by the MB to reconstitute itself under different names.

If Burhan wishes to demonstrate the removal of MB elements from the Sudanese army, he must take a series of unambiguous steps: 1) the verifiable removal of Islamist elements from positions of leadership and influence; 2) genuine engagement in a negotiating process that leads, in its first phase, to a ceasefire, which in turn paves the way to a second phase for comprehensive peace and genuine political transformation; and 3) dismantling of the MB movement's financial networks spanning the banking sector, import-export companies, and gold smuggling operations that fund the war and guarantee that MB influence survives.

Equally essential is demonstrating that Sudan has severed its ties with the Iranian regime once and for all, that its territory will not serve as a corridor for Tehran's expansion toward the African continent or an arena for harnessing Sudanese chaos in the service of Iran's expansionist project. Most important of all is the unavoidable reckoning the Sudanese military now faces: to prove through action, not words, that it has truly broken free from the MB's grip and that its strategic choices are no longer held hostage to the interests of the Islamists who, for decades, built it and supplied it with the tools of survival. Given the complications that such a move would involve, it is unlikely that Burhan will enact such stringent measures independently. Given this reality, the designation of the MB is an effective first step, but sustained international pressure will likely be required in order to push Burhan towards a true decoupling. ❖

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