



## Sudan: Recasting U.S. Policy

By Dan Connell

Some two million Sudanese—nearly 8% of the country's population—have lost their lives to war or famine-related causes since 1983, when fighting resumed in Africa's longest running civil war. Millions more have been displaced, many fleeing to neighboring states. Despite competing peace initiatives on the table today,

there is no end in sight to the conflict. Instead, the prospects are for intensified combat as the war spreads to new areas of the country.

What started in the 1950s as a battle between the Arabized, Islamic north and the non-Muslim, African south has become a contest between an extremist Islamic movement that controls the country's center and a diverse alliance of peoples and political groups that challenge it from the periphery. What is at stake is

the country's identity—whether it is to be strictly Arab-Islamic or loosely multicultural and secular, and whether it can exist as one or the other within a single national boundary. But that is not all. The steadily escalating conflict has drawn in many of Sudan's neighbors—in the fighting and in efforts to promote peace—while involving the United States in a hostile confrontation with the current regime.

Sudan has the largest land mass in Africa, with borders that touch Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, and Libya. It straddles the Nile and abuts the Red Sea, a location that made it the target of revolving-door superpower intervention throughout much of the cold war. The U.S. alone provided more than \$2 billion in arms in the 1970s and 1980s—ostensibly to counter Soviet influence in neighboring Ethiopia, though most of the weaponry ended up being used in the civil war. Today, new oil revenues fuel fresh arms purchases.

The latest round of civil war erupted in 1983 when the national government in northern Sudan under Gen. Jaafar al-Nimeiri gutted a regional autonomy pact that had ended 16 years of combat. Khartoum reneged on the peace pact after confirming oil discoveries in the south. When Nimeiri imposed restrictive Islamic religious law throughout the country, non-Muslim southerners joined the opposition in droves.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led the revolt. Its army, the SPLA, quickly captured much of the southern third of the country, which its political

wing administered as if it were a separate state. Meanwhile, in 1985 at the peak of a popular uprising in the north, military officers overthrew Nimeiri, promising peace and a return to democracy. However, the election a year later of Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of a powerful Islamic sect that had long dominated Sudanese politics, did little to change the country's basic policies. During his tenure, the war worsened and the economy crumbled further. As protests rose within the army and civil society, al-Mahdi agreed to sign a truce and suspend Islamic law. But before he did, his government was overthrown by Gen. Omar al-Bashir on behalf of the National Islamic Front (NIF).

The new Islamist junta quickly banned all political parties, trade unions, and other "nonreligious institutions" and imposed tight controls on the press and strict dress and behavior codes on women. It purged 78,000 people from the army, police, and civil administration, thoroughly reshaping the state apparatus, and its operatives detained hundreds of dissidents in "ghost house" torture centers. The NIF merged religious indoctrination and conversion with education, social services, economic development, and political mobilization. It used the paramilitary Popular Defense Force, modeled on the Iranian Republican Guards, to enforce Arabization and Islamization along narrowly sectarian lines. This provoked many Muslims to join the opposition, which gelled in the mid-1990s into a coalition of a dozen armed and unarmed groups dubbed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

After several failed attempts, in 1999 the NDA integrated the armies of seven constituent organizations under a single, ethnically mixed command. The largest force comes from the SPLA, which continues to operate on its own in the rural south, but northern troops and officers have played important roles in the new force. The NDA has also set up nonmilitary departments to establish civil administration and provide social services in rebel-held northern areas, as the SPLM has done in the south.

At the end of the decade, the NDA opened new war fronts in eastern Sudan and along the northeastern Red Sea coast, threatening key transportation and communication links to the capital, just as the government began to exploit its extensive oil reserves and enlarge its arms purchases. A 1998 border war between neighboring Eritrea and Ethiopia disrupted the rebels' logistical support and slowed their military advances, as did the March 2000 defection from the NDA of former Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, who—finding himself isolated within the NDA, whose members refused to place him at its head—bolted the opposition to seek an accommodation with the regime.

### Key Points

- Millions have died or been forcibly displaced from their homes in Africa's longest running civil war.
- Massive injections of U.S. and Soviet arms have kept the war raging between northern and southern Sudan for nearly a half-century.
- A new multiethnic and explicitly secular opposition has arisen to challenge the current Islamist regime.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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U.S. relations with Sudan have careened between extremes since the country moved out of the tightly circumscribed orbit of Britain and Egypt, which jointly administered it through the colonial era. When General Nimeiri seized power in 1969—touting a program of Nasserite, pro-Soviet nationalism—Sudan went onto the U.S. enemies list. Then, after an abortive Communist Party coup in 1971, Nimeiri veered rightward. In 1977, after a pro-Soviet coup in neighboring Ethiopia, Washington's chief African ally since the 1940s, the U.S. carried out a massive military buildup in Sudan.

The country soon became the pivotal state in an anti-Soviet bloc that included Somalia and Kenya. By the early 1980s, Sudan was the sixth largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the world. Bilateral economic aid also soared. At the same time, strains within the country intensified, as the corrupt military government, bloated with new U.S. arms, sought to impose its will on the oil-rich south. During the four years of faction-ridden civilian rule after Nimeiri's ouster, U.S. policy drifted as Sudan slid into chaos, setting the stage for the June 1989 coup. Soon after the NIF seizure of power, the U.S. ended bilateral aid.

However, bridging funds from Afghan war veteran Osama bin Laden and support from Iran enabled the regime to make massive arms purchases. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1991 overthrow of the Ethiopian government—both of which supported the SPLM—weakened the rebels, who went through a bitter split during 1992-94. Khartoum exploited this by arming rebel splinter groups and tribal "militias," but this was not enough to produce a victory for the government.

Meanwhile the NIF's tilt toward Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War and its growing support for Islamist guerrillas operating in the region and as far away as the Middle East and West Africa triggered breaks with the U.S. and with its immediate neighbors. The Clinton administration prohibited U.S. economic investment, increased anti-Sudan moves in the UN, and isolated Sudan as a "rogue" state. After Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda began to provide military and logistical support to the SPLM, which went back on the offensive, Washington also pledged \$20 million in "non-lethal" military aid to these "frontline" states.

The NDA's 1996 launch of military operations in eastern and northern Sudan turned a regional conflict into a countrywide revolt. This threw Washington into a quandary. U.S. policy was strongly influenced by Cairo, which feared that a radical change in Sudan—a north-south split, a Somalia-style breakup, the ascension to power of a non-Arab government—could threaten Egypt's access to the Nile headwaters. Yet Cairo aimed only to alter Khartoum's external relations and curb its support for Islamist "terrorists," not to change the structure of the country. Now, Egypt and the U.S. confronted a multiethnic, national opposition that had no interest in wringing concessions from the NIF—only in overthrowing it.

In 1999 Egypt and Libya mounted a "peace initiative" designed to defuse the conflict while leaving the present government in place with minor modifications, including a power sharing arrangement with al-Mahdi. This was intended to preempt an African-led peace initiative for more substantive changes under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), which Washington supported. With the 1998 outbreak of war between two of IGAD's most active members—Eritrea and Ethiopia, both of which sought tactical rapprochements with Khartoum—the IGAD initiative faltered, and U.S. efforts to contain Sudan from this direction hit a wall.

Meanwhile, the strongest lobbies impacting Sudan policy inside the U.S. have been private aid agencies and antislavery groups operating in famine and war-affected areas of the south. Sadly, the advocacy that results from their limited focus—particularly on the issue of slavery—often exacerbates the crisis.

Slavery was formally abolished in Sudan in 1924, but remnants persisted, as Arab tribes in central Sudan raided cattle-herding southern communities for booty and captives. This practice was revived in the 1980s, when then-Prime Minister al-Mahdi armed militias in a bid to undercut the rising revolt in the south. Slavery gained momentum under the NIF regime, which invested heavily in the expansion of these militias, whose raiding parties seized civilian men, women, and children and kept them in servitude.

Rather than ameliorating slavery, the advent of highly publicized "slave redemption" schemes by evangelical Christian organizations—led by the Swiss-based Christian Solidarity International—has actually heightened ethnic and religious tensions and made slavery more profitable for the captors. For this reason, UN organizations, aid agencies, and many human rights groups criticize these "buybacks" as doing more harm than good. They argue that only disarming the militias and negotiating durable peace agreements among the conflicting communities can solve this problem.

In the face of this growing complexity, the U.S. under President Bill Clinton opted for random actions to pressure the regime, such as the August 1998 bombing of the Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum in reprisal for Sudan's harboring of terrorists suspected of bombing U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. At a meeting in Kampala, Uganda, in 1999, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also promised SPLM and NDA leaders military help. The rebels say they heard nothing afterward, though the pledge was reported in international media. A U.S. offer to provide large-scale food aid directly to the rebels, leaked to the press in late 1999, also never materialized.

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## Key Problems

- U.S. policy toward Sudan has veered between extremes for decades, driven largely by shifting geopolitical imperatives.
  - Random punitive actions aimed at the regime have backfired, strengthening its nationalist credentials rather than weakening it.
  - The rising influence of right-wing Christian evangelicals impacting U.S. foreign policy could exacerbate ethnic and religious divisions and obstruct peace.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

U.S. policy needs to be recast to deal with Sudan's intricate ethnic, religious, and political conflicts. And it needs to be tailored to the complex, shifting reality on the ground, not the public relations needs of politicians in Washington.

U.S. policies and operations over the past decade did little to weaken the Islamist government. Instead, they lent credibility to its claims that it is battling not just indigenous opposition but imperial American power. Meanwhile, unilateral U.S. restrictions on trade and

investment have little impact on the government, which has had no difficulty obtaining new weapons to prosecute the civil war from China, the former Soviet republics, and other international arms dealers.

To the extent that U.S. policy is defined narrowly around issues of "terrorism," it has a punitive focus that leaves little room for maneuver. It also appears to lack long-term objectives, other than to keep the NIF government off balance. The current sanctions that punish the population for the sins of the regime

are having the opposite of the intended effect. As in Iraq, they magnify the suffering of ordinary people while providing the government with a rallying cry to mobilize the nation against foreign intervention. Highly visible actions—like the cruise missile attack on Khartoum in 1998—do the same.

Ending economic sanctions while supporting an international arms embargo would focus U.S. policy on the core of the problem—war and repression. Restrictions on U.S. capital market participation in Sudan's rapidly growing oil industry, as some critics of the regime demand, might retard Khartoum's capacity to enlarge its arsenal, but by itself will not have a sustained impact. Such moves, however, add pressure to the regime to enter into serious negotiations with the nationalist opposition—the only avenue for a lasting solution.

The problem in Sudan is structural—the imposition of an Arab-Islamist theocracy on a multicultural, religiously diverse nation. This does not lend itself to single-issue policy initiatives, such as ending support for terrorism, clamping down on slavery, or granting limited autonomy to the south. There will be no lasting peace within the country or stability in the wider region until Sudan breaks with this model and takes decisive steps toward building a multicultural democracy in which religion and ethnicity give way to citizenship as the defining feature. U.S. policy should take promoting this outcome as its overarching aim.

A viable alternative to the NIF is emerging within the NDA, though it will take time for it to mature. The U.S. should nurture this opposition without trying to control it and without interfering in its internal affairs, particularly not singling out any of its member organizations for preferential treatment.

A sudden, large influx of arms could destabilize the alliance and short-circuit the popular mobilization now under way in rebel-held areas. Similarly, the sudden provision of large stores of emergency food could thwart promising rebel efforts at food production and undermine economic independence. What is needed are carefully targeted but modest efforts to strengthen the opposition without preempting it. Direct U.S. assistance to the NDA should be concentrated in the economic and social spheres and at building its organizational capacity.

The SPLM has promulgated new regulations to manage the activities of foreign aid agencies in order to promote indigenous alternatives. In response, the U.S. should scale back aid channeled through non-Sudanese NGOs in order to alter the balance in favor of local organizations. And all aid should promote self-reliance. For example, rather than sending food relief, the U.S. should provide seeds and hoes as well as trucks to transport crops.

Washington should increase capacity building to a range of groups in rebel-held areas—civil administration, women's and youth organizations, community-based self-help groups—but above all, it should act to enhance the NDA itself as the unifying center of the national opposition. Such aid should encourage the SPLA rebels to integrate their southern operations more organically into the NDA, while inviting some northern forces and logistical operations into the south, instead of treating each as a separate operation. This would position the NDA to enter peace talks as a viable national alternative to the regime.

Decisions about which organizations to support should be based on whether groups have a demonstrable presence in the war zones and exhibit the capacity to either govern effectively or manage aid projects, not on whether they display more pro-U.S. sympathies or write the best proposals. The SPLM has a highly developed relief operation under the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association, the SRRA, with a wide array of education, health, and development programs in the south. The SPLM is also developing an infrastructure of village, county, and provincial governors and popularly elected assemblies. The NDA has a relief wing—the Sudan Humanitarian Commission—to channel resources to civilians in northern war zones. It is also building civil administrations in the east and north. The U.S. should strengthen all of these structures.

Finally, Washington should support efforts to combine the competing African and Arab-driven peace initiatives into a single forum for negotiating a durable solution to Sudan's structural problems rather than dabbling with piecemeal proposals that serve the interests of discredited domestic politicians—such as the former prime minister—or the narrowly drawn ambitions of rival regional powers. This peace building mediation should start with pressure on Egypt, which normalized relations with Sudan in 2000, to abandon its interference in the peace process and join its African counterparts in the campaign to bring about a settlement that resolves the structural problems in Sudan instead of papering them over.

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## Key Recommendations

- America should support an international arms embargo against the Sudan government.
  - The U.S. should forego efforts to impose nonmilitary sanctions on Sudan, while stepping up direct aid to indigenous organizations operating in the war zones.
  - Washington should support the consolidation of competing peace initiatives in order to facilitate a lasting solution to the crisis.
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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

**Africa Policy Information Center**  
110 Maryland Ave. NE, Suite 509  
Washington, DC 20002  
Voice: (202) 546-7961  
Fax: (202) 546-1545  
Email: apic@igc.org  
Website: <http://www.africapolicy.org/>

**Amnesty International**  
International Secretariat  
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Phone: (44 207) 814 6200  
Fax: (44 207) 833 1510  
Email: amnestyis@amnesty.org

**Amnesty International USA**  
322 8th Ave.  
New York, NY 10001  
Voice: (212) 807-8400  
Fax: (212) 627-1451  
Email: admin-us@aiusa.org  
Website: <http://www.amnesty.org/>

**Human Rights Watch/Africa**  
1630 Connecticut Av. NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20009  
Voice: (202) 612-4321  
Fax: (202) 612-4333  
Email: hrwdc@hrw.org  
Website: <http://www.hrw.org/>

**Justice Africa** (formerly African Rights)  
United Kingdom  
Voice: (44 20 7) 837-7888  
Fax: (44 20 7) 837-8919  
Email: ja@justiceafrica.org  
Website: <http://www.justiceafrica.org/>

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*SudanUpdate*, electronic newsletter. For subscriptions, contact: [sudanupdate@gn.apc.org](mailto:sudanupdate@gn.apc.org)

## Websites

**SPLM**  
<http://www.newsudan.com/>

**SudanNet** (culture, information, news links)  
<http://www.sudan.net/>

## Self-Determination Briefs

Papua: Another East Timor? by Abigail Abrash (October 2000) available at:  
<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n37papua.html>

Sri Lanka's Long War by Miriam Young (October 2000) available at:  
<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n35srilanka.html>

The War Between Ethiopia and Eritrea by Patrick Gilkes and Martin Plaut (August 2000) available at: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n25eritethiop.html>

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<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n09tibet.html>

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<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol4/v4n33balk.html>

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