

# SPOTLIGHT ON SUDAN



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## FOREWORD

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The regime change in Sudan, after the removal of president al-Bashir from power in April 2019, offered local actors and foreign powers the possibility of shaping Sudan's new international realignment. The transitional government, with civilian and military leadership, has carefully sought to stabilize ties with Sudan's traditional allies and re-establish its foreign relations with the West. For decades, Sudan was an international outcast under the al-Bashir regime.

Since September 2019, the transitional government has been involved in internationally-backed high-level diplomatic exchanges with Europe, the United States, neighbouring countries and other regional players. These efforts resulted in the removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list and to the normalization with Israel, the EU, the World Bank and other regional stakeholders. Sudan needs international financial and technical assistance to address political and economic uncertainty and to succeed its transition to democracy.

Within this context, the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung continues to explore the geopolitical dimension of the fragile Sudanese transition. In this edition of Spotlight on Sudan, we aim to highlight the internal and external factors that determine the main orientations of Sudan's current foreign policy. In addition, the publication examines the many facets of the country's relations with external powers and concludes with a set of recommendations.

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# Sudan's foreign policy priorities

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## Introduction

On April 11, 2019, Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in a coup d'état. A Transitional Military Council (TMC) swiftly consolidated power under Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's leadership, but mass protests from the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) opposition movement and backlash against the June 3 Khartoum Massacre, which killed 128 civilians, facilitated Sudan's democratic transition. On August 17, the TMC and FFC agreed to a 39-month transition agreement, which will culminate in national elections in late 2022. These political transformations have profoundly impacted Sudanese foreign policy. In the post-Bashir era, Sudan has preserved its core partnerships with China, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, while also thawing its historically fraught relationships with the United States, European Union and Israel. While the interests of Burhan, Rapid Support Forces (RSF) chief Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo and civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok periodically clash, Sudan has made strides towards advancing a coherent national foreign policy strategy. This report will examine Sudan's relationships with external powers in the post-Bashir era and how political shifts in Sudan have impacted its partnerships with foreign actors. It will conclude by providing recommendations for Sudanese officials, as they embrace the nascent multipolar world order and court a broad array of investment, security and diplomatic partners.

## Sudan Upgrades its Partnerships with the Gulf Monarchies and Turkey

During the first quarter-century of Bashir's rule, which began with a coup d'état in June 1989, Sudan was estranged from the Middle East's leading regional powers. Bashir's solidarity with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War strained Sudan's decades-long partnership with Saudi Arabia. Sudan's crackdowns on Shiite cultural centres in 2014 affected its relationship with Iran. Turkey viewed Sudan as a marginal player in its African strategy, as it was primarily focused on strengthening its presence in the Maghreb, Sahel and Somalia. Sudan's support for the 2015 Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and suspension of diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 helped rebuild Khartoum's partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The RSF complemented the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes against Yemen's Houthi rebels with ground force deployments, which resulted in an estimated 4,000 Sudanese casualties.<sup>1</sup>

The Sudan-Qatar partnership strengthened due to Bashir's non-participation in the June 2017 Qatar blockade. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's historic December 2017 visit to Khartoum laid the foundations for stronger Sudan-Turkey relations. After mass protests erupted in December 2018, Bashir leveraged its diverse array of partnerships and courted financial aid from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar with mixed results.

The April 2019 coup enhanced the UAE and Saudi Arabia's influence in Sudan, and temporarily marginalized Turkey and Qatar. Nevertheless, Sudan's current foreign policy towards the MENA region hinges on maintaining close ties with all four countries. The Sudanese military spearheaded Sudan's engagement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In early 2019, the UAE abandoned Omar al-Bashir over his co-option of Islamists and worked with opposition figures, such as former national security advisor Salah Gosh, on facilitating Bashir's ouster.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Huge Sudanese Losses in Yemen Highlight Fighters' Role in the Conflict," *Middle East Eye*, November 10, 2019

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/thousands-saudi-paid-sudanese-mercenaries-die-frontline-yemen>

<sup>2</sup> "Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir was Destined to Fall," *Reuters*, July 3, 2019

<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/>

Immediately after the April 2019 coup, Burhan secured \$3 billion in credit from Saudi Arabia and the UAE,<sup>3</sup> and Hemedti secretly received arms from the UAE.<sup>4</sup> Amongst advocates of civilian rule, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's enduring influence has created deep polarizations. Mohammed al-Mahdi Hassan, a key FFC figure praised Saudi Arabia and the UAE's role in facilitating the transition agreement.<sup>5</sup> However, Sudanese Communist Party and civil society organizations have stoked anti-UAE sentiments over Abu Dhabi's recruitment of Sudanese mercenaries in Libya and Yemen.

In spite of these palpable grievances, Sudan's post-transition authorities value closer economic and diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Sudan's relationships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE strengthened after both Gulf countries shipped 540,000 tons of wheat to Sudan in October 2019<sup>6</sup> and Riyadh endorsed Sudan's removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list in November 2019.<sup>7</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sudan received seven medical aid shipments from the UAE, a \$3 billion investment pledge from Saudi Arabia<sup>8</sup>, and a \$400 million joint Saudi-UAE investment to modernize Sudanese agriculture.<sup>9</sup> In March 2021, Saudi Arabia announced its plan to invest in the modernization of Sudan's Red Sea coast, which would eradicate "terrorism and poverty" and open the region to tourism.<sup>10</sup> As Sudan's third largest creditor with \$4.6 billion in outstanding loans, Saudi Arabia has offered to help Sudan alleviate its external debt burden. On May 20, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan offered to help Sudan renegotiate its debt with China, Kuwait, the UAE and Japan, and claimed that Saudi Arabia would work with the IMF to eliminate rather than merely reduce Sudan's external debt burden.<sup>11</sup>

To capitalize on the good will generated from its economic assistance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have expanded their engagement with Sudan on regional security issues. Sudan is a member of the Saudi Arabia-led Council of Arab and African States, which was unveiled in January 2020 to combat threats to Red Sea security. Burhan, Hamdok and Sudanese Foreign Minister Omar al-Din welcomed Faisal bin Farhan to Khartoum in December 2020 to discuss Red Sea security.<sup>12</sup> In March 2021, Saudi Arabia made unpublicized contacts with Sudan and Egypt to mediate the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute, and Riyadh has publicly aligned with Cairo and Khartoum on this crisis.<sup>13</sup> The UAE has been more proactive

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<sup>3</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, "Saudi Arabia, UAE to Send \$3 Billion in Aid to Sudan," *Reuters*, April 21, 2019

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-idUSKCN1RX0DG>

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan," POMEPS

<https://pomeps.org/the-great-game-of-the-uae-and-saudi-arabia-in-sudan>

<sup>5</sup> Tariq Othman, laeibat al'iimarat dwraan ryysyaan fi al'ijmae alsudanii (The UAE Played a Key Role in the Sudanese Consensus), *Al-Bayan*, July 10, 2019

<https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2019-07-10-1.3602246>

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Saudi, Emirati Statecraft Secures Influence in Sudan," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, December 13, 2019

<https://agsiw.org/saudi-emirati-economic-statecraft-secures-influence-in-sudan/>

<sup>7</sup> "Saudi Arabia Says it Seeks Removal of Sudan from US Terror List," *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2019

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/6/saudi-arabia-says-it-seeks-removal-of-sudan-from-us-terror-list>

<sup>8</sup> "Saudi Arabia to Invest \$3 Billion in Sudan Investment Fund," *Reuters*, March 12, 2021

<https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-saudi-int-idUSKBN2B41WF>

<sup>9</sup> "Sudan to Receive \$400 Million from Saudi Arabia, UAE for Agriculture," *Voice of America*, April 11, 2021

<https://www.voanews.com/africa/sudan-receive-400-million-saudi-arabia-uae-agriculture-state-media-says>

<sup>10</sup> "Sudan, Saudi Arabia Discuss Red Sea Investments," *The Arab Weekly*, March 10, 2021

<https://the arabweekly.com/sudan-saudi-arabia-discuss-red-sea-investments>

<sup>11</sup> "Saudi Arabia to Help Sudan Cut Debts from UAE, Kuwait, China and Japan," *Arab News*, May 20, 2021

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1861721/business-economy>

<sup>12</sup> Mohammed Amin Yassin, "Saudi Arabia, Sudan Discuss Red Sea Security," *Asharq al-Awsat*, December 9, 2020

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2672431/saudi-arabia-sudan-discuss-red-sea-security>

<sup>13</sup> "Saudi Arabia Making Low-Key Contact with Egypt-Sudan over Nile Dispute with Ethiopia: Reports," *The New Arab*, March 24, 2021

than Saudi Arabia in its mediation efforts in conflicts where Sudan is a party and publicly emphasized its impartiality. Sudan and Egypt welcomed the UAE's offer to mediate in the GERD dispute. However, Ethiopia's insistence on an African Union solution to this crisis will likely prevent the UAE's diplomatic efforts from gaining serious traction. The UAE has also tried to mediate in the Sudan-Ethiopia border conflict, but Sudan has rejected the UAE's diplomatic overtures on April 16. Sudan justified this decision by citing the 1902 border demarcation's exclusive legal grounding and insisting the external mediation would be superfluous.<sup>14</sup> However, Sudanese media outlets also cited the exclusion of Sudan's chief negotiator Moaz Tango from UAE-sponsored talks over COVID-19 precautions, as a sign of Abu Dhabi's pro-Ethiopia bias.<sup>15</sup>

Sudan's partnerships with Turkey and Qatar were disrupted by Bashir's overthrow. The TMC viewed Turkey as an unreliable partner, as its textile industry investments were facilitated by patronage links with Bashir's inner circle and its flagship \$1.5 billion Khartoum airport project was marred by repeated delays.<sup>16</sup> On April 26, 2019, Turkey announced that it would stay in Suakin Island for civilian purposes,<sup>17</sup> which prompted rumours that Burhan had rejected Ankara's potential military base aspirations. Expressions of solidarity between Turkish and Sudanese civil society after the June 2019 Khartoum massacre, which resulted in 128 civilian casualties at the hands of the RSF, strengthened Ankara's relationship with Sudan's civilian authorities. This relationship masked tensions between Turkey and the RSF, which were exacerbated by Hemedti's deployment of mercenaries on Khalifa Haftar's behalf in Libya. Turkey's regular provisions of medical aid during the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency 250 MW electricity shipments to Sudan in March 2021,<sup>18</sup> elevated prospects for bilateral cooperation, especially in the defence sector. Turkey's trade with Sudan has also increased from \$398 million in 2019 to \$481 million in 2020, and the 2018 Turkey-Sudan Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement remains in effect. On May 27, a Sudanese delegation arrived in Ankara to discuss economic cooperation, and Turkey's Vice President Fuad Oktay overcame past tensions by meeting with Hemedti.<sup>19</sup> The establishment of Libya's Government of National Unity and Haftar's waning influence likely facilitated this thaw between Turkey and the RSF.

Although Sudan did not join the Qatar blockade, the April 2019 coup temporarily strained relations between Doha and Khartoum. On April 17, 2019, Sudanese officials refused to receive a Qatari delegation in Khartoum, which was headed by Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani.<sup>20</sup> Over the past year, Qatar-Sudan relations have improved considerably. In May 2020, Hemedti stated that "We have no issues with Qatar or any other

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<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/saudi-arabia-attempting-mediate-dispute-between-nile-countries>

<sup>14</sup> "Khartoum Rejects UAE's Initiative on Border Standoff," *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 16, 2021

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2922256/khartoum-rejects-uae%E2%80%99s-initiative-border-standoff-ethiopia>

<sup>15</sup> "UAE 'Arrests Sudanese Official,'" *Middle East Monitor*, April 1, 2021

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210401-uae-arrests-sudanese-official/>

<sup>16</sup> Pinar Tremblay, "There is No Room for Erdogan in Sudan Turmoil," *Al-Monitor*, July 1, 2019

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/07/turkey-sudan-there-is-no-room-left-for-erdogan-in-turmoil.html>

<sup>17</sup> "Turkey to Stay on Suakin Island for Civilian Purposes," *Daily Sabah*, April 26, 2019

<https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/04/26/turkey-to-remain-on-sudans-suakin-island-for-civilian-purposes>

<sup>18</sup> Mohamed Amin, "Turkey to Raise Power Supply to Sudan Amid Shortage," *Anadolu Agency* March 25, 2021

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-to-raise-power-supply-to-sudan-amid-shortage/2188227>

<sup>19</sup> "Turkey Wants to See Sudan Standing Tall on its Own Feet: VP," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 28, 2021

<https://www.hurriyetcdailynews.com/turkey-wants-to-see-sudan-standing-tall-on-its-own-feet-vp-165070>

<sup>20</sup> "Sudan Authorities Refuse to Receive Qatari Delegation Headed by Foreign Minister," *Al-Arabiya English*, April 17, 2019

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2019/04/17/Sudan-authorities-refuse-to-receive-Qatari-delegation-headed-by-foreign-minister>

country," and claimed that other countries tried to instigate tensions between Khartoum and Doha. Qatar capitalized on this conciliatory rhetoric by supplying food and humanitarian aid to flood victims in Sudan's West Kordofan region.<sup>21</sup> The January 2021 AIUla Agreement, which ended Saudi-led blockade against Qatar has assuaged the divide between Sudan's military and civilian authorities over engagement with Doha. On January 31, Hemedti met with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani for the first time, and on April 9, Burhan revived 36 Bashir-era economic agreements with Qatar, which could cause Qatari investments to expand beyond their current \$3.8 billion level.<sup>22</sup>

### Sudan Consolidates its Partnerships with China and Russia

Although U.S. relations with China and Russia have deteriorated over the past two years, Sudan's transitional government has tried to balance favourable relations with all three great powers. During Bashir's last decade in power, Sudan pivoted strongly towards China and Russia, and both countries supplied arms for Bashir's war in Darfur. Sudan defended Russia's policies in Ukraine and China's policies in Xinjiang and the South China Sea. Sudan's triangular relationship with China and Russia remained intact after the April 2019 coup. Much like their coordinated efforts to block a UN report detailing Bashir's human rights abuses in Darfur in 2007, Russia and China blocked Britain and Germany's UN resolution that supported a "consensual solution" to the Sudan crisis in June 2019.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to Russia's counter-revolutionary policy, China has balanced positive relations with Sudan's military and civilian authorities in the post-transition period. China's balancing strategy was the product of its vast investments in Sudan's oil industry and desire to recoup loans to Khartoum, which most recently included \$88 million in grants at the September 2018 China-Africa Cooperation Forum.<sup>24</sup> The Sudanese military views China as a crisis-proof partner, as Beijing was the sole exporter of arms to Sudan in 2018,<sup>25</sup> and respected China's insistence on non-interference after the Khartoum massacre. The Sudanese civilian authorities valued Beijing's acquiescence to Bashir's overthrow and emphasis on stability rather than regime type in the transition process.<sup>26</sup> Sudan has also capitalized on its strategic location within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and maritime Silk Road projects. Suakin's strategic value has appealed strongly to Chinese officials, and China Harbour Engineering Company is competing with DP World and an unnamed Qatari consortium for control over that port.<sup>27</sup> In spite of its formidable economic influence, China's close relationship with Ethiopia has limited its engagement in regional conflicts involving Sudan. On May 9, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Sudanese counterpart Mariam al-Sadiq al-Mahdi that it

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<sup>21</sup> "Urgent Relief from Qatar Charity for those Affected by Floods in Sudan," Relief Web, October 26, 2020 <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/urgent-relief-qatar-charity-those-affected-floods-sudan>

<sup>22</sup> "Sudan Agrees to Reactivate Agreements with Qatar in First Post-Revolution Meeting," *The New Arab*, April 9, 2021

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2021/4/9/sudan-agrees-to-reactivate-agreements-with-qatar>

<sup>23</sup> China and Russia Block UN Action after Bloody Massacre in Sudan, *South China Morning Post*, June 5, 2019

<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/3013179/china-and-russia-block-un-action-after-bloody-massacre-sudan>

<sup>24</sup> Sudan to get \$88 million in Loans and Grants from China, *Dabanga*, September 3, 2018

<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-to-get-88-million-in-loans-and-grants-from-china>

<sup>25</sup> Roie Yellinek, China and the Sudan Coup, *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, May 2, 2019

<https://besacenter.org/china-and-sudan-coup/>

<sup>26</sup> Laura Barber, China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition, *USIP*, May 8, 2020

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/chinas-response-sudans-political-transition>

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed Alamin, DP World, China Vie For Roles in Sudanese Ports, *Bloomberg*, March 2, 2021

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-02/dp-world-china-harbour-vie-for-roles-in-sudan-s-red-sea-ports>

supported trilateral dialogue between the GERD dispute's conflicting parties and would be ready to assist that process.<sup>28</sup>

During the last decade of Bashir's rule, Sudan-Russia relations strengthened significantly, as Russia supplied 87% of the weapons used by the Sudanese military in the Darfur conflict.<sup>29</sup> The relationship expanded further after Bashir offered Russia a Red Sea base in November 2017<sup>30</sup> and Wagner Group PMCs were dispatched to Sudan in early 2019 to help Bashir retain power. The TMC's relationship with Russia was initially ambiguous, as the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee chairman Konstantin Kosachev decried Burhan's unconstitutional seizure of power<sup>31</sup> and the Russian Foreign Ministry waited until April 16 to recognize Burhan's legitimacy. Nevertheless, the TMC solicited Russian assistance against the FFC, but the June 2019 leak that Wagner Group PMCs encouraged the TMC to repress dissent with a "minimal but acceptable loss of life" tarnished Moscow's image in Sudan.<sup>32</sup> The Sudanese military has maintained close relations with Russia in the post-transition period, as Burhan met with Putin at the October 2019 Sochi Summit and Sudan purchased Russian weapons at the August 2020 Army-2020 forum.

This relationship culminated in the November 2020 Russian basing agreement in Port Sudan. Russia hailed this deal, as it could operate a base in Sudan for twenty-five years free of charge and could use its base in Port Sudan to bolster its Red Sea and Indian Ocean naval presence.<sup>33</sup> The agreement was highly controversial in Sudan. Amongst supporters of Sudan's democratic transition, this agreement was widely viewed as Russia's attempt to bolster the Sudanese military's resistance to liberalization pressures from the United States.<sup>34</sup> On April 29, Al-Arabiya reported that Sudan had cancelled its basing agreement with Russia, which prompted strenuous denials from Moscow.<sup>35</sup> These reports were dashed after the Russian Navy's repair ship PM-138 arrived in Port Sudan on May 2<sup>36</sup> but Sudan confirmed later that month it was renegotiating its basing agreement with Russia. While the future of the basing agreement is unclear, Sudan's army chief of staff Mohammed Osman al-Hussein stated on June 2 that "the agreement can be continued if we can find profits and benefits for our country."<sup>37</sup> On June 4,

<sup>28</sup> "China, Sudan Pledge Joint Protection of Legitimate Rights of Developing Countries," *Xinhua*, May 9, 2021

[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/09/c\\_139934393.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/09/c_139934393.htm)

<sup>29</sup> Andrew MacGregor, "Russia's Arms Sales to Sudan a First Step in Return to Africa: Part Two," Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 6, Issue 29, February 12, 2009

<https://jamestown.org/program/russias-arms-sales-to-sudan-a-first-step-in-return-to-africa-part-two/>

<sup>30</sup> "Bashir Discusses with Russia Setting up Military Base on the Red Sea," *Asharq al-Awsat*, November 26, 2017

<https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/1095236/bashir-discusses-russia-setting-military-base-red-sea>

<sup>31</sup> "Sovet Federatsii prokommentiroval situatsiyu v Sudane" (The Federation Council Commented on the Situation in Sudan), *RIA Novosti*, April 11, 2019 <https://ria.ru/20190411/1552572571.html>

<sup>32</sup> Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

<sup>33</sup> Kirill Semenov, "Russia to Establish Naval Base in Sudan," *Al-Monitor*, November 16, 2020

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/russia-military-bass-sudan-red-sea-khartoum-kremlin.html>

<sup>34</sup> "Aikhtalafat Alara' hawl Mawqie Alqaeidat Alruwsiat fi Alsuwdan ... Wamsdr: Aljaysh Yaqtarib Min Musku Tahasubaan Libayidan" (Opinions Differed about the Location of the Russian Base in Sudan and a source: the military is approaching Moscow in anticipation of Biden), *Al-Quds*, November 15, 2020

<https://www.alquds.co.uk/ال-القاعدة-موقع-تحديد-حول-الرأى-تباين/>

<sup>35</sup> "Sudan Suspends Planned Russian Naval Base- Reports," *The Moscow Times*, April 29, 2021

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/29/sudan-suspends-planned-russian-naval-base-reports-a73770>

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Binnie, "Russian Navy Ships Continue to Visit Sudan," *Janes*, May 5, 2021

<https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-navy-ships-continue-to-visit-sudan>

<sup>37</sup> "Sudan reshil peresmotret' soglasheniye s Rossiyei o sozdanii voyenno-morskoy bazy VMF" (Sudan Decided to Revise the Agreement with Russia on the Creation of a Naval Base), *RIA Novosti*, June, 2021

<https://ria.ru/20210601/baza-1735174544.html>

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov confirmed the receipt of Sudan's renegotiation terms and also expressed optimism about the deal's potential fulfilment.<sup>38</sup>

## Sudan Reaches out to New Partners: Israel, the United States and Europe

Although continuities in Sudanese foreign policy from the Bashir era have been emphasized in this report, the transitional government has broadened the horizons of Sudan's international partnerships to include Israel, the United States and Europe. The October 23, 2020 normalization of Sudan-Israel relations was a seminal moment for Sudanese foreign policy, as Sudan was a party in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and imposed a boycott on Israeli businesses in 1958. Sudan's Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour expressed interest in normalizing ties with Israel in exchange for U.S. sanctions relief in January 2016, but this proposal did not make tangible progress.<sup>39</sup> Much like Sudan's relationships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Russia, Burhan and Hemedti were the driving forces behind the Sudan-Israel rapprochement. In February 2020, Burhan spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and subsequently announced that Israel would help end U.S. terrorism-related sanctions on Sudan.<sup>40</sup> In April 2020, Burhan endorsed re-engagement with Israel, when he stated that Sudan should not have hostility with any party, religion or sect, including Israel.<sup>41</sup> Sudan also opened its airspace to Israeli planes.<sup>42</sup> On October 3, Hemedti framed Sudan's case for re-engagement with Israel in economic terms, as the Sudanese economy could benefit from Israeli technical expertise and agricultural technology.<sup>43</sup>

As Burhan did not consult Hamdok before reaching out to Israel, the announcement triggered severe backlash from Sudan's opposition parties and civil society activists.<sup>44</sup> On October 24, 2020, Sudan's last democratically elected prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi called the Israel normalization illegal and warned that it would lead to the "ignition of a new war."<sup>45</sup> Al-Mahdi's sudden death from COVID-19 on November 26 silenced Sudan's most outspoken critic of normalization with Israel but Israel's May 2021 airstrikes in the Gaza Strip galvanized anti-Israeli sentiments in Sudan. In response to Israeli airstrikes, Burhan defended Sudan's engagement with Israel as a reconciliation with the international community and condemned Israeli strikes on "defensive civilians" in Gaza.<sup>46</sup> This response suggests that Sudan could

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<sup>38</sup> "Musku: talaqayna tawdih alkhartum bisadad markaz al'iimdad albahrii alruwsii ealaa sahil alsuwdanarab" (We Received Khartoum's Clarification Regarding the Russian Naval Supply Center on the Coast of Sudan), *RT Arabic*, June 4, 2021

[https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/1238869-ساحل-البحر-ي-الإمداد-مركز-الخرطوم-موسكو/](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1238869-ساحل-البحر-ي-الإمداد-مركز-الخرطوم-موسكو/)

<sup>39</sup> Sue Surkes, "Sudan said Willing to Consider Normalizing Ties with Israel," *The Times of Israel*, January 21, 2016

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/sudan-said-willing-to-consider-normalizing-ties-with-israel/>

<sup>40</sup> Arwa Ibrahim, "Netanyahu-Burhan Meeting Slammed in Sudan, Exposes Divides," *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2020

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/5/netanyahu-burhan-meeting-slammed-in-sudan-exposes-divides>

<sup>41</sup> "Sudan Leader: Israel is not Our Enemy," *Middle East Monitor*, April 28, 2020

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200428-sudan-leader-israel-is-not-our-enemy/>

<sup>42</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, "Sudan PM Tells Pompeo He's not Authorized to Normalize Ties with Israel," *Reuters*, August 25, 2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-usa-pompeo-idUSKBN25LOXE>

<sup>43</sup> Basant Ahmed, Hemedti: Sudan Seeks Relations with Israel, not Normalization, See Egy, October 3, 2020

<https://see.news/hemedti-sudan-wants-relations-israel-not-normalization/>

<sup>44</sup> Jihad Mashamoun, The Domestic Implications of Sudan Normalizing Ties with Israel, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 27, 2020 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82596>

<sup>45</sup> Head of Sudan's Largest Party Slams Trump and Israel Deal, Associated Press, October 24, 2020

<https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-donald-trump-israel-sudan-middle-east-83af13e8f2d90d479b664ddb82c8927>

<sup>46</sup> Sudan's Burhan Defends Israel Normalization Move Amid Violence in Palestine, Al-Arabiya, May 17, 2021



simultaneously engage with Israel and champion Palestinian self-determination to accommodate the policy preferences of its military and civilian authorities.

The 2019 Sudanese revolution brought immediate changes to the U.S.-Sudan relationship. At the time of Bashir's fall, the U.S. had listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1993 and had no resident ambassador in Khartoum since Tim Carney left in November 1997. The memory of Bashir's human rights abuses during the Second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005) and Darfur conflict, as well as Sudan's solidarity with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, created steep obstacles to re-engagement. Capitalizing on President Donald Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy and apathy towards human rights, Sudan's military and civilian authorities saw a unique opportunity to revive U.S.-Sudan relations. In the months following the transition, Burhan held backchannel discussions with the United States on an exchange of ambassadors and in February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo formally invited the Sovereignty Council chief to Washington.<sup>47</sup> These diplomatic overtures encouraged Pompeo to visit Khartoum on August 25 in order to discuss the progress of Sudan-Israel relations and the conditions of Sudan's removal from the state sponsors of terrorism list. Sudan's payment of \$335 million to U.S. victims of al-Qaeda attacks and normalization with Israel resulted in its removal from the terrorism list on December 14, 2020.

Although economic benefits of ending U.S. sanctions are undeniable, the path towards strengthened U.S.-Sudan relations is fraught with complications. Abdalla Hamdok's personal popularity in Sudan was eroded by his long association with international institutions, such as the UN Economic Commission for Africa. The compromises that Hamdok made to the U.S. could further diminish his stature and make him reticent about appearing too pro-American.<sup>48</sup> While the Biden administration immediately revoked the travel ban on Sudanese nationals and appointed Jeffrey Feltman as U.S. special envoy to the Horn of Africa on April 23, it is unclear whether the U.S. will use its influence in the World Bank to restructure Sudan's \$65 billion external debt burden.<sup>49</sup> On May 15, Feltman visited Khartoum and hailed Sudan's democratic transition as a model for the region.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the reluctance of U.S. officials to arbitrate in the GERD and Sudan-Ethiopia border disputes raise questions about the substantive foundations of the Biden administration's outreaches to Sudan.

Sudan's relationship with Europe has loosely mirrored the path of its relations with the United States, as the European Community suspended development aid to Bashir's regime in March 1990 and maintained humanitarian assistance-driven relationship with Sudan after 1999. While Burhan took immediate steps to repair U.S.-Sudan relations, the Khartoum massacre impeded a similar improvement in Sudan-EU relations. The EU stated that the TMC was complicit in the deaths of civilians, as it was the "authority in charge of protecting the population."<sup>51</sup> The EU also halted the provision of training and equipment to Sudanese border guards that fend off illegal migration in March 2019 and in June 2019, it deferred the

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<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/05/17/Sudan-s-Burhan-defends-Israel-normalization-move-amid-violence-with-Palestine>

<sup>47</sup> "Head of Sudan's Sovereign Council invited to Visit Washington," *Reuters*, February 2, 2020

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-sudan-idUSKBN1ZW0PQ>

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Leriche, "Sudan: Trump's Deal Could be Disastrous. Biden can Fix it," *African Arguments*, November 18, 2020 <https://africanarguments.org/2020/11/sudan-trumps-deal-could-be-disastrous-biden-can-fix-it/>

<sup>49</sup> Cameron Hudson, "Sudan is Removed from the Terror List. Now What?," *The Atlantic Council*, October 19, 2020

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/sudan-is-removed-from-the-terror-list-now-what/>

<sup>50</sup> "Feltman: Political Transition in Sudan Serves as an Example for the Region," *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 15, 2021

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2973786/feltman-political-transition-sudan-serves-example-region>

<sup>51</sup> "EU Blames Sudan's Military Council for Violent Attacks," *New Europe*, June 17, 2019

<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/eu-blames-sudans-military-council-for-violent-attacks/>

construction of an intelligence centre in Khartoum.<sup>52</sup> This downgrade of EU-Sudan security cooperation, which was overseen by Germany, was linked to the RSF's pervasive influence in Sudanese politics. Once the transition agreement was signed, EU-Sudan relations improved considerably. The June 2020 Sudan Partnership Conference consisting of the EU, Germany, Sudan and the UN, resulted in 1.6 billion Euros of pledged investments in Sudan, which included 770 million Euros of humanitarian funding.<sup>53</sup> The return of the Norwegian Refugee Council, which was expelled by Bashir in 2009, and the COVID-19 pandemic have expanded European aid to Sudan.

In recent months, European countries have helped facilitate economic reform in Sudan. In March 2021, Burhan invited the Head of the EU delegation to Sudan, Robert van den Dool, to solicit European mediation assistance in the GERD dispute and secure EU support for Sudan's economic reform process.<sup>54</sup> The support of the U.S., the United Kingdom, Sweden and Ireland helped Sudan clear its arrears to the World Bank and African Development Bank.<sup>55</sup> France has played the most decisive role in ameliorating Sudan's external debt burdens, as President Emmanuel Macron seeks to reverse the erosion of French soft power in Africa. On May 17, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire announced that France would grant Sudan a \$1.5 billion bridge loan to eliminate its outstanding arrears to the IMF.<sup>56</sup> France's IMF debt forgiveness was significant, as it allows Sudan to receive debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Joining the HIPC initiative could eliminate \$40 billion in Sudan's external debt by the end of 2021.<sup>57</sup>

Later that day, Emmanuel Macron chaired a conference in Paris to rally financial support for Sudan, which included Abdalla Hamdok, Sudan's Finance Minister Gebreil Ibrahim and a dozen other senior officials. While debt relief was the primary focus of the conference, it also addressed issues such as the modernization of Sudanese agriculture and poverty relief in Sudan. This conference had an immediate impact. Saudi Arabia offered Sudan \$4.5 billion in debt relief, the World Bank agreed to supply Sudan \$2 billion in grants over a ten-month period and the African Export-Import Bank announced \$700 million in power and telecommunications projects.<sup>58</sup> European efforts to alleviate Sudan's economic crisis have not yet translated into the expansion of the EU's diplomatic assistance to Khartoum. Although Sudan hopes European officials might put their experience mediating the Hungary-Slovakia dam dispute to use in the GERD, the scope of the EU's intervention remains unclear.

## Prescriptions for Sudan's Post-Transition Foreign Policy

For Sudan's post-transition foreign policy to most effectively advance its economic interests and security imperatives, Sudanese officials need to repair the civilian-military divide on foreign policy decisions. Inconsistent patterns of consultation between Sudan's military and civilian authorities could create polarizations that impede critical domestic reforms, such as

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<sup>52</sup> "EU Suspends Migration Control Projects in Sudan Amid Repression Fears," *DW*, July 22, 2019 <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-suspends-migration-control-projects-in-sudan-amid-repression-fears/a-49701408>

<sup>53</sup> "Sudan Partnership Conference: EU Mobilizes More Support for Sudan's Transition," European Commission, June 25, 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1183](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1183)

<sup>54</sup> Mohammed Amin Yassin, "US, EU to Mediate in GERD dispute," *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 30, 2021 <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2890281/us-eu-mediate-gerd-dispute>

<sup>55</sup> Rosalind Marsden, "Paris Conference Key for Sudan's Transition and Unlocking its Economy," *The Africa Report*, May 13, 2021 <https://www.theafricareport.com/87918/paris-conference-key-for-sudans-transition-and-unlocking-its-economy/>

<sup>56</sup> "France to Provide Sudan with \$1.5 bln Bridge Loan to Clear Arrears," *Reuters*, May 17, 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-provide-sudan-with-15-bln-bridge-loan-clear-arrears-2021-05-17/>

<sup>57</sup> Mohammed Alamin and Alonso Soto, "Sudan \$60 Billion Debt in Focus at Paris Conference," *Bloomberg*, May 17, 2021 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-17/sudan-s-60-billion-debt-in-focus-at-paris-investment-meeting>

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*

the pursuit of federalism and the reduction of the military's ownership of Sudanese economic assets. These divisions could also perpetuate grey zone financial linkages with external powers, such as Hemedti's gold trade via Dubai,<sup>59</sup> that threaten Sudanese democracy and finance paramilitary repression in Darfur. To mitigate these divisions, Sudan should prioritize relations with China, the EU and the United States. Due to their vested interest in Sudan's stability which was apparent throughout the post-April 2019 period, these powers will engage directly with Sudan's civilian authorities and deter Burhan and Hemedti from concentrating an excessive amount of power in their hands. Sudan can pursue economic relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and Russia, but should be wary of attempts by these countries to empower the military at the expense of the civilian authorities. Deep informal economic links between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Hemedti, will likely survive the transition and should be mitigated. Sudan should codify the elected National Assembly of Sudan's authority over military basing and major foreign policy decisions, and expel semi-state security companies, such as the Wagner Group, which engage in political interference tactics that undermine Sudan's sovereignty.

As the removal of U.S. sanctions has lifted legal obstacles to investment, the transitional government needs to focus on improving Sudan's foreign investment climate. Abdalla Hamdok has repeatedly emphasized the need to improve Sudan's investment climate and at the Paris Conference, Hamdok called Sudan a "very rich country" and said that "We do not want charity, we want investments."<sup>60</sup> Sudan's economic reforms, emphasis on a diplomatic resolution of the GERD dispute and agreement to the August 2020 peace deal with Darfur rebels are positive steps. Sudan's exercise of restraint and pursuit of a diplomatic solution to its dispute with Ethiopia over control of the disputed al-Fashaga territory, which is located at the intersection of Ethiopia's Amhara region and Sudan's Gedaref state, will also reassure investors of the country's stability. Easing civilian-military frictions and avoiding January 15, 2020-style mutinies from Bashir loyalists in the Directorate of General Intelligence Service<sup>61</sup> could help reassure international investors of Sudan's political stability. Progress towards trying Bashir for war crimes in Darfur and professionalizing the RSF would further strengthen the case for new investments.

The Sudanese transitional government also needs to withstand populist scepticism of international institutions and work with multilateral organizations to create a more investment-friendly economy. The May 17 Paris Conference was a milestone for Sudan's multilateral engagement and could lead to Sudan's participation in similar multilateral summits on economic restructuring.<sup>62</sup> To shield the most vulnerable from the impact of economic restructuring programs, Sudanese officials need to work closely with the World Bank and World Food Program.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, the success of Sudan's foreign policy depends on improving its internal political situation along major benchmarks, such as a transition to democracy, creation of a market economy and strengthening political institutions.

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<sup>59</sup> Khalid Abdelaziz, Michael Georgy and Maha el-Dahan, "Exclusive: Sudan Militia Leader Grew Rich by Selling Gold," *Reuters*, November 26, 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-gold-exclusive-idUSKBN1Y01DQ>

<sup>60</sup> "Saudi Arabia to Help Sudan Cut IMF Debt," *Arab News*, May 18, 2021 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1860651/business-economy>

<sup>61</sup> "Sudan Government Forces Quell Armed Protest by Security Agents," *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/15/sudan-government-forces-quell-armed-protest-by-security-agents>

<sup>62</sup> Nafisa Elthahir, Aidan Lewis and John Irish, "Sudan Clears Final Hurdle for Debt Relief at Paris Conference," *Reuters*, May 18, 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-seeks-debt-relief-pledges-investment-paris-conference-2021-05-16/>

<sup>63</sup> Volker Perthes, "Sudan Opens for Business," *Project Syndicate*, May 7, 2021 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sudan-post-revolution-reforms-create-investment-opportunities-by-volker-perthes-2021-05>

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