A Normalization of Sudan–Israel Relations: Why Now?
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NORMALIZATION OF SUDAN–ISRAEL RELATIONS

Introduction

In remarks published by state media in mid-January, Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour stated that his country was prepared to consider normalizing its relations with Israel (Sudan, like many Arab nations, has no formal diplomatic or trade relations with Israel). According to Ghandour, the topic of normalizing relations with Israel was an item up for discussion on the agenda of the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Dialogue Conference, which continues apace in Sudan. The full press report indicated that most members of the Foreign Relations Committee supported a “conditional” normalization of relations with Tel Aviv.

Did they Mean it?

Despite official denials of normalization of Sudan–Israel relations, as stated by politicians in the ruling party—including Vice President Hasbo Mohammed Abdulrahman and the Deputy President of the National Dialogue Conference, Ibrahim Mahmoud, and while the latter affirmed that the ruling National Congress Party never discussed the possibility of normalizing ties with Israel during any of its meetings, there is evidence that normalization has long been a distinct policy option floated behind closed doors within the ruling party. Former governor of Al Qadarif state, Karamallah Abbas Al Sheikh, declared in April 2012 that a clique within Sudan’s ruling party had long been sympathetic to the idea of normalizing ties with Israel, leading the ruling Congress Party to describe those statements as “merely the personal opinion” of the minister in question. Abdulhamid Musa Kasha, governor of the White Nile State and also the former head of a parliamentary committee on investment and industry, commented on these developments by quipping, “If we have accepted the United States of America, then we should accept Israel”. In response to these claims and those made by Ghandour, no official denial of Khartoum’s intention to normalize its relations with the Israelis has been forthcoming, while the head of the ruling Congress Party’s politburo has offered

1 “Sudan may normalise relations with Israel, says FM”, The New Arab, January 16, 2016, available online: http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/1/16/sudan-may-normalise-relations-with-israel-says-fm


3 Ibid
only that the decision to normalize relations with Israel would only be taken as part of the discussions within the National Dialogue.\(^4\) Statements such as these, in this context, suggest a testing of the waters with regards to Sudanese opinion about normalization. They even perhaps indicate an effort to prepare the public for an imminent development. Given that it was carried by Sudan’s official news agency, SUNA, the statement by Ibrahim Sulieman that he could not discount the possibility of a normalization in Sudan-Israel relations did not just come out of thin air.\(^5\)

Pointedly, the discussion of a normalization of relations between Sudan and Israel coincided with a visit by Taraji Mustafa, a Sudanese political dissident resident in Canada who heads the Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association. Despite her previous opposition to government policies, Mustafa was received with some fanfare at Khartoum Airport by Hamid Mumtaz, a leading figure in the National Congress, and even secured an audience with President Omar Al Bashir during her short visit.\(^6\) Such a reception overlooks just how opposed Mustafa was to the rule of Al Bashir in the past, and in particular, rumors of her association with American Zionist groups supportive of the Darfur separatist movement.\(^7\) This is further evidence that Khartoum is looking to build a relationship with the Israeli government, which it regards as the key to stronger relations with Washington. Looked at from this angle, the Sudanese government is looking for stronger ties with both Israel and the United States, out of a hope that these two countries will help it find a way out of the Darfur crisis, after having done so much to exacerbate it.

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\(^5\) See numerous reports carried by Sudan News Agency, SUNA, including: [http://suna-sd.net/suna/showNews/280427/en](http://suna-sd.net/suna/showNews/280427/en)

\(^6\) See “Political Parties Welcome Taraji Mustafa”, SUNA, December 18, 2015, in Arabic: [http://suna-sd.net/suna/showNews/276593/2](http://suna-sd.net/suna/showNews/276593/2)

The Twists and Turns of Sudanese Foreign Policy

The fact that Sudan has undertaken a number of serious and swift policy transitions in its foreign relations lately is an indication that—National Dialogue Conference notwithstanding—all of the major policy decisions in Sudan are taken by the president, and nobody else. Following years of attempting to cooperate with the United States, and even appeasing Washington in its ultimate capitulation of the South, all Khartoum’s efforts to have US sanctions lifted have been in vain. Even Sudan’s enthusiastic embrace of the ‘war on terror’, with the country’s intelligence chief visiting Washington to cooperate in identifying a list of “dangerous terrorists”, went unrewarded: like clockwork, successive White House administrations have continued to consistently renew sanctions on the country.

These sanctions have served to make Sudan’s economy, already fragile, far worse. With secession, South Sudan took two-thirds of oil production with it to the newly independent government in Juba. Even the meager transit fees which the Republic of Sudan received from its neighbor to the south were heavily reduced by a series of events, including a civil war in the newly established South Sudan which disrupted production, as well as the collapse of world oil prices over the last 18 months. All of these have served to make the Juba government less reliant on the infrastructure controlled by Khartoum, including the oil pipelines and the export installations along the Red Sea. These changes in South Sudan plausibly contributed to the turbulent shift of direction of Khartoum’s foreign policy.

Previously, the Sudanese government had sought to align itself with Iran—this policy dates to the rise to power of General Bashir in 1989, and was caused by his country’s tense relationship with fellow-Arab neighboring states on the other side of the Red Sea and with Egypt to the North. For its part, Tehran was able to make the most of Sudan, as a vital pied-a-terre along the Red Sea, which it could use to effectively encircle Saudi

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Arabia. In addition, Sudan’s territory provided Iran with a forward base from which they could infiltrate into sub-Saharan Africa. In order to secure these aims, Iran provided Sudan with invaluable assistance in the formation of its security forces, as well as its military industries. On the public diplomacy level, Iran was allowed to establish and operate a number of Iranian cultural centers across the African country.

All this came to a halt in September of 2014, however, when the Bashir government ordered the closure of all the Iranian cultural centers in Sudan on the grounds that they were proselytizing Shia Islam, which they had openly been engaged in for years. This announcement, and the 72 hours’ notice which Khartoum gave to the Iranian officials working in these centers, was the first sign that Sudan was on its way to rejoining the Arab fold, and specifically into the orbit of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This transformation in Sudan’s regional alliances was sealed with the decision to deploy a battalion of its soldiers to Yemen, as well as Sukhoi fighter jets, to fight alongside the Saudi-led coalition battling the forces of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his Iranian-backed Houthi allies. Bashir’s decision to sever all diplomatic ties with Iran, in the wake of an attack on Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Tehran by protestors angry at the execution of Saudi dissident Nimr Al Nimr in Riyadh, went beyond the few steps taken by few GCC states, some of which limited their reactions to reducing their diplomatic representation in Iran. It seems that Sudan’s military rulers, specifically, the governments led by Jaafar Al Numairi and by Omar Al Bashir, have a particularly radical interpretation of the old maxim that in politics there are “no permanent friends, or enemies, in politics, only interests”. This was initially demonstrated by Sudan’s first experiment with Islamic rule, under Numairi: the general’s move to apply Islamic Sharia law across the country in 1983 was a response to growing political pressure from the opposition. This new-found Islamic piety did not stop Numairi’s government from facilitating an airlift of Ethiopian Falasha Jews to Israel, known as the “Moses Operation”, the very next year. Following the receipt of $60 million in emergency funds and with the expectation of a further $200 million to be received, Numairi believed that his support for the airlift operation had secured a new lease of life for his regime, with the help of the US, and promptly left to Washington, DC to collect his dues and cement his relationship with the Americans. To his surprise, however, the military leadership sided with the outbreak of a popular uprising against his rule while he was abroad, and the former dictator lived out the rest of his days in exile in Egypt.
Conclusion

It appears that the prospect of a possible normalization of ties with Israel—regardless of the sincerity of such overtures at the moment—has become a common trope of the Sudanese ruling class, presented as a lifeline for the regime in its efforts to chart a course through its current plight. This is in line with a general observation that rapid turns in foreign policy tend to be an indication of domestic crises.

In terms of public opinion, data from the Arab Opinion Index indicates that only a small proportion of the Sudanese population – some 18% - support the idea of formal recognition of Israel by their government. Nonetheless, this does make Sudan the Arab country with the greatest support for formal recognition of Israel, just ahead of Egypt and Lebanon, at 16% each.

One likely factor for this relative acceptance on the part of the Sudanese people for normal relations appears to be an overall deterioration of their living standards. This is felt across the Arab region, with an increase in youth unemployment and lack of future opportunities, and this sense of general hopelessness can be tied to a growing alienation from pan-Arab concerns. This is exacerbated by the ways in which repressive Arab regimes have often employed their hypocritical championing of the Palestinian cause as a means of securing public legitimacy. A peculiarly Sudanese phenomenon is the growing number of young people making the journey to immigrate to Israel.

Indeed, along the “Arab Periphery”, in countries such as Somalia and Sudan, such trends are intensified by the perceived exclusion of non-Arab ethnic groups from the ruling regimes’ official discourse. Such attitudes may be flawed, and perhaps do not account for the difficulties faced by many Arab countries—Sudan’s economic troubles cannot be explained by support for the Palestinian cause—but it must nonetheless be taken seriously. In fact, those Arab states which have concluded peace treaties with Israel did not experience any sort of “peace dividend” in the form of either enhanced development or greater liberties. Indeed, the only consequence of normalization between an Arab country and Israel was to further entrench the divide between the ruling regime and public opinion. Arab regimes have often used a normalization of relations with Israel not as a means of addressing the concerns of their peoples, but purely as a ploy to improve their standing with the United States and thereby secure their permanence and future. Sudan is no exception in this case. History has shown, however, that Washington will likely withhold its acceptance of an Arab regime until
compliance with all of the US’ aims is fully implemented, and this in itself is likely to fray the social contract between the rulers and the ruled further still.