

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

BRIEFING

SEPTEMBER 2001

Overview

1. The terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September have the potential to transform the politics of Sudan. The situation at present is extremely fluid with many uncertainties. However, in the short term it has brought Khartoum and Washington much closer together in what is at least tactical cooperation. President Bashir is utilising the crisis to further strengthen his ties with Egypt, against Hassan al Turabi and against the SPLA.
2. The scenario that is unfolding after 11 September gives hope that the Sudan peace process may be given additional momentum, as a spin-off of the U.S.'s global anti-terrorism campaign. Settling the Sudanese conflict would be a significant part of the regional jigsaw. However, if the opportunity is missed, then the conflict may become even more intractable.
3. The Nigerian initiative for a Southern Political Forces Conference in Abuja is potentially a major step forward. The SPLM leadership has agreed to participate but its reluctance is very evident and it is continuing to try to block the meeting.

Terrorism

4. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had the immediate impact on Sudan that the 17 September UN Security Council debate on lifting the sanctions on Sudan has been postponed. Before 11 September, the U.S. was ready to acquiesce in sanctions lift. After 11 September, a fierce debate ensued in Washington, with a strong Congressional lobby arguing that Sudan should still be considered a state sponsor of terrorism.
5. The GoS took this threat seriously. Osama bin Laden was based in Sudan up to 1996. During that time he developed extensive commercial activities as well as training camps. During this period, the NIF was at its most aggressive in promoting political Islam, and its members signed many commercial deals. Not only Hassan al Turabi and his followers, but leading figures in the current government were involved. After 1996 and especially after the Bashir-Turabi split in 1999, many of the connections to bin Laden were reportedly dismantled, but it is quite possible that there are remaining commercial and financial linkages to al Qa'ida of which even the GoS remains unaware. Fearing the implications of any linkages that might be uncovered, the Sudan Government is doing its best to show the Americans that there are no active bin Laden investments in Sudan, especially in the oilfields. A delegation from Talisman has been despatched to the U.S. to produce all necessary documentation.

6. The Sudan Government eagerly seized the opportunity presented by the 11 September atrocity. It condemned the attack. There have been very high level contacts with the State Department and the Foreign Minister, Mustafa Ismail, has visited London.
7. More substantially, Khartoum has begun very active cooperation with the CIA and FBI in counter-terrorist activities. It has extensive files and other information which will be invaluable in any U.S. efforts. Khartoum is in a strong position because of the weakness of U.S. human intelligence, and because of its own detailed knowledge of al Qaeda and other networks. The U.S. neglected the opportunity to gain the extensive human intelligence about international terrorist networks that was available from the security officers who defected from Khartoum to the NDA in the mid-1990s, and from the second wave of defectors who left when the NIF split in 1999-2000, and must now make up for those lost opportunities as rapidly as it can. This reflects the systemic weakness of U.S. intelligence—it has excellent high-tech capacities but few people who can actually penetrate terrorist networks or provide the basic information about who is who. Lacking this capacity, the U.S. must now rely on the Arab and Middle Eastern intelligence services to deliver the goods. This means cutting deals with governments, groups and individuals that have shady pasts, taking a rather pragmatic line than that implied by President George W. Bush's rhetoric of no compromise with anyone who has associated with terrorists.
8. It is notable that Sudan has not figured high on the list of possible targets for U.S. reprisals, unlike in the aftermath of the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa. The embarrassment suffered by the U.S. over the bombing of al Shifa and the intelligence failures that contributed to it, also mean that a hasty attack is very unlikely. But there is also a clear note of caution in the U.S. counter-terrorists' welcome to Khartoum's cooperation: they don't know how long it will last or how much it will deliver.
9. The Sudan Government clearly seeks to outflank the SPLA in Washington. But it is unlikely that the U.S. will wholly abandon its pro-SPLA sympathies and turn to a simple alliance with Khartoum. A more even-handed approach is probable. This is likely to increase the stature of the new U.S. Special Envoy, Senator John Danforth. The fact that Danforth's chief of staff is former Ambassador Robert Oakley, who has served in counter-intelligence, and as ambassador to Pakistan and special envoy to Somalia, indicates that there will be close linkages between U.S. engagement in peace efforts and global counter-terrorism strategies.
10. The Sudan Government cannot be united on this pro-U.S. approach. Key figures within the government such as Mustafa Ismail and Mahdi Ibrahim will be enthusiastic. But others will be concerned. It is notable that the veteran leadership of the NIF has so far remained silent. But there are augurs. A previously-unknown organization, the Liberation Party, announced a press conference in Khartoum to condemn cooperation with the U.S. The party leader was arrested before he could address the press conference. The possibility of an Islamist backlash against the pro-U.S. policy cannot be ruled out. In addition, Khartoum will want to keep an eye on developments in the Arab world, and not be isolated if there is a wider movement towards 'non-alignment' in the conflict.
11. In the short term, the enhanced U.S. leverage in Khartoum increases the opportunities for a peace deal. But if there is no quick deal, if the U.S. 'war' against terrorism proves a protracted affair, and if Khartoum's cooperation proves strategic, then it is possible that Sudan will revert to the status it had in the latter years of Nimeiri's government—as a

strategic U.S. ally, undemocratic, Islamist in colour, and unstable, but nonetheless the recipient of U.S. largesse.

The SPLM

12. The August meeting of the SPLM Leadership Council was marked by some of the most open debate ever within the ranks of the movement. Commanders asked why there had been no attack on Wau during the rainy season when the government was most vulnerable. There was vigorous debate on the wisdom of signing the Memorandum of Understanding with Hassan al Turabi's PNC.

13. The meeting took some significant decisions about the internal functioning of the movement and army. Most notably, the Chief of Staff (and number 2 in the SPLA), Cdr Salva Kiir, was given new powers for coordinating the actions of commanders, and obtaining and supplying armaments. This is likely to increase the military effectiveness and cohesion of the SPLA.

14. The SPLM leadership has presented the 11 September attacks and their aftermath to its rank and file as the beginning of a new era of U.S.-SPLA cooperation. But in private the chairman must be concerned about the clearly-evident Khartoum-Washington cooperation.

The Joint Libyan-Egyptian Initiative

15. The Joint LEI has been quiescent this month. The major meeting of the parties was scheduled for 15 September but has been postponed and the government is now indicating that it may occur in October or November. The GoS, Umma and Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani (the NDA Chairman) have all indicated that a conference is forthcoming. Al Mirghani has said he will be issuing invitations to the NDA parties.

16. There are external and internal reasons for the delay. The external factor is clearly the need for Libya and Egypt to take stock of the U.S. strategy after 11 September. The internal factor is principally the consequence of the 23 August SPLM Leadership Council meeting in Narus. The SPLM Chairman initially asked for a mandate to travel to Libya to sign up to the JLEI Nine Points. The LC members—overwhelmingly SPLA commanders from the field—insisted that there should be no compromise on self-determination. When this was transmitted to Libyan leader Col. Gaddafi, he expressed his complete opposition to self-determination (which he equated with separation) and demanded that Dr Garang personally lead the SPLM delegation to Libya for the 1 September celebrations of the Libyan revolution. Garang did not attend.

17. President Museveni of Uganda took the initiative to reconcile the SPLA leader and Col. Gaddafi, taking Dr Garang to Libya with him in his visit on 10 September. However, it is unlikely that Garang will have adjusted his position on self-determination.

18. During the September meeting of the EU-Sudan dialogue on human rights, the Sudan Government requested the EU to work towards a unified forum for peace in Sudan.

IGAD

19. The IGAD meeting scheduled for the first week of September was postponed until 24th. Each side blamed the other for the postponement. The GoS, keen to demonstrate its good faith to the U.S., appeared ready to make some concessions including an investigation into slavery and a halt to aerial bombardment. The main agenda of the session was to set up the continuous negotiating committees called for by the IGAD Summit.

20. However, the talks were again postponed, this time by the GoS, which asked for a delay of about a month. The statement said the government was ‘engaged with other issues’. In addition to the obvious factor of cooperation with Washington, it is likely that the government wanted the JLEI meeting to proceed before the next round of IGAD.

The Abuja Conference

21. The initiative by the Nigerian President Olesgun Obasanjo to convene a Southern Political Forces Conference in Abuja in October has kept its momentum. Pres. Obasanjo insists that this is not a separate initiative but rather it is complementary to the ongoing JLEI and IGAD processes. He has kept Libya, Egypt, Kenya and Uganda informed at presidential level. Pres. Museveni traveled to Abuja to meet with Pres. Obasanjo, bringing Dr Garang with him, and Uganda has expressed its support for the Abuja conference. The U.S. government is also fully in the picture and President Bush has personally sent a message of support to Obasanjo. However, Nigeria has not directly dealt with the IGAD Sudan Peace Secretariat.

22. After initial attempts by the SPLM leadership to block or postpone the conference did not succeed, the SPLM is asking for a dominant presence at the conference, to reflect its claim that it controls two thirds of Southern Sudan. Alongside the existing organizing committee, convened by the Southern Sudan Civic Forum, the SPLM has established its own committee to select SPLM participants. The SPLM is also requesting the presence of Northern NDA parties, to reflect the SPLM’s national agenda. Meanwhile there is consent to the conference from Khartoum and enthusiasm among all non-SPLM Southern parties and also the SPLM rank and file.

23. While he was in Abuja, Dr Garang met with Bona Malwal, in a private reconciliation meeting organized by Obasanjo. The two agreed to pursue the reconciliation further, by convening a committee of elders, and by *SPLM/SPLA Update* publishing a retraction of the allegations made against Bona Malwal. Subsequent to the meeting, a detailed but partial account was published, and a mischievous announcement was made by SPLA members in London and Washington that the Southern ‘dialogue’ conference was now unnecessary and had in fact been postponed indefinitely. SPLA members were implored to boycott a separate meeting of the Southern Sudan Civic Forum in London. This appeared to be another attempt to block the initiative, by provoking Bona Malwal into an intemperate response. This ruse is likely to generate more suspicions among the Southern rank and file about why the SPLM leadership is so reluctant to engage in an open debate on the future of Southern Sudan. As of this writing, the Abuja conference is still scheduled for the end of October including SPLM participation (see annexes).

24. The Obasanjo initiative appears to be the main opportunity that exists at present for knitting together the different strands of the peace process, namely IGAD, the JLEI, the internal Southern reconciliation process, and the U.S. role. With his prestige across the continent, Pres. Obasanjo is the one mediator who can gain the respect and support of all the parties currently involved in facilitation or mediation. It seems likely that there will be a significant U.S. presence at the Abuja meeting.

Humanitarian Issues

25. Although good rains promise an excellent harvest for most of Sudan at the end of the year, food security remains poor. This is particularly the case in the areas worst-hit by drought and in the SPLA-held areas of Nuba Mountains, which are still deprived of assistance from the UN.

The Region

26. The absence of Libya from the likely list of U.S. targets for anti-terrorist strikes is even more notable than the absence of Sudan. Libya is of course a secular leftist regime virulently opposed to right-wing Islamist extremism. This marks a step towards Libya's rehabilitation in the U.S.

27. Eritrea has taken another lurch towards dictatorship and internal crisis. On 18-19 September the Eritrean government arrested a group of leading figures from the party, all of whom had played major roles in the liberation struggle and who had recently called for democratisation. They are yet to be charged though the government has publicly accused them of 'treason'. Given the continued existence of a secret 'special court' and the recent summary dismissal of the Chief Justice, their prospects for fair treatment and due process of law are not good. Leading dissenters outside Eritrea had their passports cancelled, effectively depriving them of citizenship. All private newspapers were closed and two journalists fled as refugees to Sudan.

28. The Ugandan government has been playing a more active role regionally. President Museveni and his new minister for regional affairs, Kahinda Otafiire, have visited Libya, Nigeria and South Africa. Uganda has now re-established full diplomatic relations with Sudan. It is debating whether to import Sudanese oil. However, Pres. Museveni's personal relations with Dr John Garang remain undimmed.

29. Following protracted negotiations, facilitated by the Carter Center, the Sudan Government has finally delivered on its promise of cutting off support to the LRA. As a result, the LRA appears to be fragmenting. Some LRA forces have resorted to banditry in Ekuatoria including attacking Sudanese army units. The promised Egyptian observation team on the border has yet to materialize. Khartoum will now be pressing Uganda for a quid pro quo cutback in assistance to the SPLA. This is unlikely to materialize as Pres. Museveni never acknowledged any symmetry between Sudan-LRA and Uganda-SPLA relations.

30. In Ethiopia, the 'reformist' faction headed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has emerged battered but victorious after a protracted internal power struggle. This will be regarded positively by donors. Given the ongoing conflict between Ethiopia and the Somalia-based

Islamist organisation al Ittihad (which has known links with al Qa'ida), it is likely that there will be intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and Ethiopia in the coming months. In the meantime, the Ethiopian government's main preoccupations will be securing internal political stability, and trying to revitalise the economy. In this context, it is likely to continue to cooperate closely with Khartoum on a range of economic, political and security concerns.

Conclusions

31. IGAD remains moribund; the JLEI is fatally damaged by its failure to recognize the right of self-determination. The only viable peace process at present is the Nigerian initiative. Given the mandate of President Obasanjo for spearheading regional peace initiatives under the New African Initiative, his ambition to find solutions, his prestige and the potential for U.S. backing, the Abuja conference is the most promising peace initiative for some years. If it is successful in bringing the Southern groups together in a common platform, it may be the springboard for a national peace conference. Abuja deserves the full backing of all those interested in peace in Sudan.