



# The Middle East Institute

## *Encounter*

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### *From Khartoum to Meroe*

By Andrew Watkins

Recently, I took a journey with the English language professors of the University of Al-Neelain in Khartoum to the Pyramids of Meroe, some 300 kilometers away. While the pyramids are a testament to the power of the ancient civilizations that produced them, this is not a story of those civilizations but rather a view into modern Sudan. The drive from Khartoum passes over one of the country's main east-west roads. Shipping from Port Sudan on the Red Sea moves west over these roads in huge trucking convoys towards the country's political and economic center. Running parallel to the massive Nile River north of the capital past the town of Shendi, it reaches Atbara where the river bends north and the road heads east, following one of the country's major oil pipelines. The outside world is acutely familiar with the builder of this road, Saudi millionaire and al-Qa'ida leader Usama bin Ladin. Bin Ladin's road linked the outer areas of Port Sudan and eastern Sudan directly to the capital for the first time. His construction team shaved 400 kilometers off the previous circuitous path to the capital, shortening the route from 1,200 kilometers to 800. Along this road, some of the difficulties and realities facing the country's development become glaringly apparent.



Part of the road between Khartoum and Meroe.

(All photos: A. Watkins)

Visible from the road, the Nile feeds a lush green strip of land along its banks, which stands in stark contrast to the desert stretching out in all directions. Under an intense desert sun, sporadic acacia trees stand as faithful providers of shade, surviving to provide a splash of color and protection in this formidable environment. A testament to humanity's ability to adapt and survive in even the most difficult of environments, villages of farmers and herders dot the landscape. Seemingly more frequent than the acacia trees are the mounds of mangled tires littering the roadside. The roads throughout Sudan were pieced together — whether intentionally or otherwise — in a manner emphasizing speed rather than efficiency and are ill-constructed to ably

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For more than 60 years, the Middle East Institute has been dedicated to increasing Americans' knowledge and understanding of the region. MEI offers programs, media outreach, language courses, scholars, a library, and an academic journal to help achieve its goals. The views expressed in this *Encounter* are those of the author; the Middle East Institute does not take positions on Middle East policy.

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service the hundreds of thousands of overloaded lorries and semi-trailers transporting the goods and people of the largest country in Africa.

The importance of Sudan's roads, particularly the stretch from Khartoum to Port Sudan, becomes evident simply by taking a drive. Unfortunately, their dangers are equally apparent. The section of road from Khartoum to Atbara, and indeed roads throughout the country, resemble pancake mix on a hot grill: dribbles of pavement fall off the side into the desert, forming little black crumbs. Giving little room between two passing SUVs, the road's narrow construction leaves a much slimmer margin for error when a loaded to the gills hauler careens by going at a speed of the driver's choosing, as there are no posted speed limits. Mammoth semi trucks often pull two full-length trailers, causing the back wheels of each trailer to sag ominously as they speed forward. Every so often, the burnt-out wreckage of a bus, long hauler, or car can be seen — a visible testament to the worst of possible outcomes. It's not the fact that there are horrendous accidents along this road that makes it unique; Egypt, Jordan, and a host of other countries in the region experience much of the same. The difference is in the frequency of these tragic events and the relative failure of the government to reduce them. On our journey alone, our group came within a hair's length of being on the wrong side of a decision by an oncoming trucker who stayed towards the middle of the road rather than hugging the uncertain terrain of the road's edge.



A ruined bus alongside the road.

There are no lights on these roads. Towards the end of our journey, our party had another close call as we crossed a small agricultural bridge. Going at our driver's usual brisk pace in our loaded bus, we abruptly skidded to a halt just before crashing into the back end of a stalled semi-trailer. The massive transport had apparently lost power and come to a stop in the middle of the bridge. The warning lights to alert approaching drivers were not functioning and the safety cones positioned at the rear of the truck were invisible since the reflective tape was either non-existent, severely worn down, or facing backwards.

In development, diagnosing a problem by its symptoms is one thing, but prescribing a sustainable and effective solution is something quite different — a point attested to by the results of the International Monetary Fund's *Structural Adjustment Policies* throughout Africa. Similarly, the question of how to effectively modernize the Sudanese transportation grid brings up still more questions. As the largest country in Africa, Sudan has a veritable cornucopia of logistical issues. First, the country's size requires a colossal influx of funds, money which is too often siphoned off by corrupt local officials or doled out through inefficient or non-existent bidding processes. A problem of more natural origins faces engineers and laborers in the form of exhaustive heat and even more encumbering torrential rain; the latter causing many of the dirt roads in the country to become impassable. The south of Sudan might as well be an island, as you can only get there from Khartoum by boat or plane.

Furthermore, there are no speed limit signs, and even if there were, there are no police to monitor speeds or enforce any limits on the number of hours a long-haul driver can drive, even if such a law was passed by Parliament.



Women gathering water in a small village outside of Shendi, along the road to Meroe.

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There are army checkpoints on some roads, such as the route from Khartoum to Atbara, but these are few and far between, and adding military personnel to an already highly militarized society has its own complications. Roads need to connect people and things, but Sudan, unlike many countries in the world, has an extraordinarily bloody and complex conflict in its western region of Darfur and an even longer conflict still simmering in its southern region. The North is no utopia either. Roads to and from these places are marred by the reality of frequent military use, a fact recently demonstrated by the armed anti-government forces of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which used the roads to bring hundreds of fighters from Darfur to the doorstep of the Sudanese government in Khartoum.

Any number of difficulties face developing countries, and in this respect Sudan is no different from many other nations. However, the context of these issues does not exist in a vacuum, but rather as the outgrowth of a very specific set of circumstances. The road from Khartoum to Meroe, linking the rapidly urbanizing capital of Africa's largest country with the tombs constructed by one of humanity's oldest civilizations, is but a single example of a larger problem and the host of issues influencing its intransigence. Khartoum to Meroe is at once a terrestrial journey and something more metaphorical. Running in the shadow of a kingdom of the past, the road is but one symbol of the difficulty of building a thriving modern state amid the complications of the present.

*Andrew Watkins is the director of English language editing at the Khartoum Monitor. He graduated with high honors from the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. Andy was formerly a research and publications intern with The Middle East Journal.*