

SUDAN

MOHAMMED SOLIMAN

ISSUES

- Sudan is an extremely fragile state that has experienced state failure and internal conflict and breakup. Decades of conflict with the South ended with the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Years of conflict in Darfur between government and local groups devastated that province and its inhabitants, and led then President Omar al-Bashir to be indicted in the International Criminal Court.
- A popular uprising in 2019 resulted in the ouster of President Bashir by the military, and a tentative agreement — between the military and civilian protest groups — on a 39-month transition process to include power sharing between the military and civilians, and ending with a full return to democracy and the establishment of functioning and accountable executive, legislative, and judicial institutions. Alongside Tunisia, it is one of the rare — but very precarious — cases of attempted democratic transition in the region.
- The population of over 40 million is among the poorest in the world, heavily dependent on agriculture, and suffering from poor wealth distribution, poor infrastructure, and poor governance. Sudan is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project.
- The country has been hit hard by the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has registered a fairly limited number of cases and deaths — around 30,000 and 1,900 respectively — but the economy is in deep crisis. Over 80% of the population has been included in a direct cash transfer program supported by the international community, and a full fourth of the population faces extreme hunger, if further urgent humanitarian measures are not put in place.
- China is the main player in Sudan's energy sector, and national energy income has contributed to some infrastructure and capital development, but is also impacted by high levels of corruption and poor governance.
- In addition to Sudan's objections and concerns over the GERD project and the thousands of Ethiopian refugees escaping the Tigray region into Sudan since November 2020, Khartoum and Addis Ababa are engaged in clashes over the disputed triangle of al-Fashqa, ultimately putting the two nations on a collision course.
- In a U.S.-sponsored deal, Sudan agreed to normalize relations with Israel in return for its removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list. Despite the removal of Sudan from the list, Sudan and Israel have not yet signed an official normalization agreement because of Khartoum's desire to do so at the White House.
- The UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have become Sudan's closest regional allies. The UAE has brokered meetings between the Sudanese military and Israel. Egypt conducted a historic military exercise with Sudan in 2020 to show solid support for Khartoum on the issue of ongoing border tensions with Ethiopia.
- Last December, Russia signed a 25-year agreement with Sudan that allows Moscow to station four ships and up to 300 personnel on the Red Sea at Port Sudan. Port Sudan is the second Russian naval base outside of the former Soviet Union and gives Moscow a strategic niche in the Red Sea.

US INTERESTS

- After many years of an adversarial relationship, relations with the U.S. have improved in recent years. In 2017 the two countries embarked on a five-track reengagement process that has shown improvements in military, intelligence, political, and economic relations. To lay the groundwork for the Sudan-Israel normalization agreement, the U.S. removed Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, ushering a new era in U.S.-Sudan relations.

- The U.S. has a particular interest today in helping Sudan's democratic transition process succeed. This is important for Sudan's own stability and future, but it will also have a positive demonstration effect for other countries in the region that are doubling down on autocracy, showing them that democratic transition is both possible and necessary.
- Historically the U.S. does have major national interests in Sudan, but the agreement between Khartoum and Moscow could impact the strategic balance in the Red Sea. Thus, the U.S. does have a significant interest in keeping the country away from alignment with adversaries like Russia, Iran, or China, and helping to ensure that the precarious Sudanese state does not disintegrate further, or fail altogether. The consequences of such a failure would reverberate throughout the region.
- Continue to play a proactive role in engaging with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt in shepherding the GERD project in ways that enhance win-win outcomes for all riparian countries and reduce the risk of extreme negative fallout for Sudan.
- Intervene diplomatically to de-escalate the border tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia, and isolate the border dispute from other issues, such as the Tigray war and the GERD project.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to use gradual reengagement with Sudan as leverage to encourage the democratic transition process. The U.S. should also use what leverage and influence it has to strengthen state institutions and the rule of law.
- Finalize the Sudan-Israel normalization deal by inviting the two countries' leaders to the White House.
- Dissuade Sudan from aligning with Russia through economic, diplomatic, and strategic means, and ultimately putting the Khartoum-Moscow agreement on pause.
- Maintain leadership within the international donor community to help Sudan attend to its urgent humanitarian needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic contraction.
- Encourage reform and effective development and economic policies to support economic resilience and a rapid and inclusive post-COVID recovery, while working to increase U.S.-Sudan investment and trade relations.