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An Israeli-Sudanese Rapprochement? Context, Interests, and Implications

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Introduction

The last few months have yielded signs of a possible rapprochement between Israel and Sudan. In February 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, in Uganda.¹ It was the first publicly reported meeting between the countries' heads of state. Shortly after, commercial flights heading to or from Israel were permitted, for the first time, to fly over Sudan.² After Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed their "peace agreement" (August 2020), spokesman for the Sudanese Foreign Ministry, Haider Badawi Saddiq, also confirmed that talks between Israel and Sudan are underway. Saddiq stated that the latter is "looking forward to concluding a peace agreement with Israel" and that "there is no reason to continue hostility between Sudan and Israel."³ Then came a report claiming that Yossi Cohen, Head of the Mossad, met with General Mohammed Hamdan

¹ TOI Staff and Agencies, "Sudanese leader says he 'felt comfortable' with Netanyahu during meeting," *Times of Israel*, February 9, 2020.

² Michal Raz-Haimovich, "LATAM airline shortened its route: will be able to fly over Sudan," *Globes* [in Hebrew], March 15, 2020.

³ Josef Federman, "Officials say Israel, Sudan close to peace agreement," *AP*, August 18, 2020.

Dagalo, Deputy Head of Sudan's ruling government.⁴ A few days later, the US Department of State testified of “positive developments in the Sudan-Israel relationship,” and Secretary Mike Pompeo visited Khartoum in this regard.⁵ In late September, some speculated that “Israel’s next peace deal will be with Sudan,” after Burhan held another round of talks with American and Emirati officials.⁶

The Sudanese government, however, tried to dampen optimistic expectations. It quickly renounced spokesman Sadiq’s remarks and fired him. Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, the most prominent civilian figure in the transitional government currently ruling Sudan, argued—in front of Pompeo—that the decision to normalize relations with Israel can only be made by an elected government.⁷ Following the 2019 revolution, the different parties in Sudan agreed to a road map for their transition to democracy, which requires that an elected government be formed by the end of 2022. It is clear, however, that the possibility of establishing official relations between Israel and Sudan is on the table and a serious consideration for both parties. This article purposes to make sense of these dramatic developments in Israel-Sudanese relations, place them in a broader context, and analyze the multifaceted interests of both parties.

Historical Background

Considering Sudan and Israel’s immensely hostile history, their recent rapprochement is unprecedented. Despite Israeli attempts to establish relations in the 1950s, Sudan joined the Arab League in boycotting the Jewish State shortly after gaining its independence in 1956.⁸ Sudan sent an expeditionary force to the Egyptian front during the *Yom Kippur War* (1973) and the *War of Attrition* (1969-1970). In retaliation, Israel supported the Southern Sudanese insurgents through military training and propaganda services and established close relations with the Republic of South Sudan since its independence in 2011.⁹

There was occasional covert cooperation between Jerusalem and Khartoum during the 1980s, especially concerning Ethiopian Jews’ journey to Israel, but this proved limited and short-lived. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir (ruled 1989-2019) supported militancy against Israel and

⁴ Jack Khouri, “Mossad Chief Met With Top Sudanese Official, Report Says,” [Haaretz](#), August 22, 2020.

⁵ “Sudan PM: Government has 'no mandate' to normalise Israel ties,” [Aljazeera](#), August 25, 2020.

⁶ Jonathan Schanzer, “Israel’s next peace deal will be with Sudan,” [The New York Post](#), September 22, 2020.

⁷ “Sudan PM: Government has 'no mandate' to normalise Israel ties,” [Aljazeera](#), August 25, 2020.

⁸ Yotam Gidron, *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics*, (London: Zed Books, 2020) 16.

⁹ Yotam Gidron, “‘One people, one struggle’: Anya-Nya propaganda and the Israeli Mossad in Southern Sudan, 1969–1971,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 12, No.3, 2018, 428-453.

formed close ties with revolutionary Iran, which consequently viewed Sudan as “a bridge suitable for its activities in Africa.”¹⁰ After 2009, Sudan bolstered Iranian efforts to arm Hamas and other militant organizations in the Gaza strip. Khartoum’s role in transporting weapons to Gaza made Sudan a target for the Israeli MABAM (Hebrew acronym for “Campaign between the Wars”) military doctrine.¹¹ With the objective of hindering the armament of its foes, Israeli forces reportedly attacked Iranian and Palestinian targets several times in Sudan between 2009 and 2015.¹²

Nevertheless, the recent rapprochement between the countries should not come as an absolute surprise. In the last years of Bashir’s regime, Sudan started a major geopolitical shift, from a close alliance with Iran toward the so-called “moderate,” Sunni-conservative Gulf states: Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen and severed its ties with Iran in early 2016. But Khartoum maintained close relations with Qatar and Turkey, to the chagrin of the more conservative forces in the Gulf. Sudan’s full “conversion” solidified itself after the April 2019 revolution. The generals who ousted Bashir after a massive, popular upheaval prominently allied themselves with the Gulf monarchies, as well as with Egypt.¹³ In the summer of 2019, civilian and revolutionary groups joined the ruling generals to form a transitional government. Since then, Sudan’s new geopolitical orientation has remained moderate.

Sudan’s Interests in a Potential Rapprochement with Israel

Sudan’s new regime strives to shed the reputation of pariah earned during Bashir’s rule. Sponsorship of terrorism, involvement in genocide in Darfur (2003-), bloody wars in the South (1955-1972, 1983-2005), and alliances with other radical forces during the Bashir era prompted international backlash and harsh American sanctions. Khartoum’s desire to “normalize” its international status prompted still-ongoing negotiations with the United States, in an attempt to

¹⁰ Arye Oded, *Africa and Israel: A Unique Case in Israeli Foreign Relations*, (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2018) 180-181.

¹¹ More about the MABAM Doctrine: Nitzan Alon and Dana Preisler Swery, “The Campaign Between the Wars in the IDF,” *Bein Haktavim* [in Hebrew], October 2019.

¹² For example: “Israel Attacked Three Times in Sudan,” *Calcalist* [in Hebrew], March 28, 2009; “Israel Attacked in Sudan Again,” *Israel Defense* [in Hebrew], December 24, 2011; “Sudan Accuses: Israel Bombed a Military Factory,” *NRG* [in Hebrew], October 24, 2012; “The Sudanese Army: We Intercepted an Israeli Armed Drone that Invaded our Territory,” *Globes* [in Hebrew], May 6, 2015.

¹³ Asher Lubotzky, “Three Months after the Revolution in Sudan: A Regional Perspective during a Transitional Period,” *Ifrigiya* [in Hebrew], July 22, 2019.

remove the country from the American list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. The United States demands that Sudan normalize its ties with Israel and pay reparations for several al-Qa'ida terror attacks.¹⁴ Reportedly, Sudan's military leaders have recently agreed to normalize ties with Israel in return for a four billion USD aid package, an amount that the United States has been reluctant to offer.¹⁵

Evidently, Sudan's new regional orientation and close ties with the Gulf states encouraged its gestures toward Israel. The UAE reportedly facilitated the Netanyahu-Burhan meeting in February, and some sources claim that it also had a hand in arranging the Cohen-Dagalo meeting in August.¹⁶ Since the 2019 revolution, the UAE has been investing large sums of money in Sudan, furnishing it with increasing influence over Khartoum.¹⁷ This new Emirati influence has proven crucial to recent developments in Israeli-Sudanese relations.

Along with international interests, domestic factors play an important role in shaping Sudan's attitudes towards Israel. The fresh memory of the revolution which toppled Bashir in 2019, the incorporation of civil public figures into the transitional government, and the promise of eventual democratization compel the Sudanese government to consider public opinions seriously. Evidently, the Sudanese public has complex opinions of Israel. On the one hand, the Sudanese were exposed to anti-Israeli rhetoric for years, especially under Bashir's regime (1989-2019), which forged a negative image of the country.¹⁸ According to a poll published in January 2020, 36% of the surveyed Sudanese perceived Israel to be "the greatest threat to the stability" of their country, versus the mere 4% who mentioned Iran. On the other hand, 32% of the surveyed Sudanese "strongly agreed" with the statement that "it is good for the Arab region that countries started coordinating their foreign policies with Israel." In fact, of the 11 Arab countries surveyed, Sudanese most highly agreed with this statement.¹⁹ This mixed attitude manifests itself in

¹⁴ The Americans demand reparations for Al Qaeda's 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and its 2000 attack against the USS Cole near Yemen.

¹⁵ Ronen Bergman and Declan Walsh, "Sudan Is Focus of U.S. Efforts to Improve Ties With Israel," [*The New York Times*](#), September 29, 2020.

¹⁶ Mohammad Ayesh, "Arabic press review: UAE mediates between Sudan and Israel in wake of normalisation deal," [*Middle East Eye*](#), August 22, 2020.

¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, "The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan," [*POMEPS*](#), June 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Inbal Ben Yehuda, "Israeli-Sudanese Relations: Beyond the Slogans of Normalization," [*The Forum For Regional Thinking*](#) [in Hebrew], February 19, 2020.

¹⁹ Michael Robbins, "Does Iran pose greater threat to the region than Israel? Here is what Arab citizens think," [*Arab Barometer*](#), January 3, 2020.

Sudanese public discourse about Israel as well; some denounce the country, while others suggest that normalization is necessary.²⁰

Another factor shaping Sudan's approach to Israel is the current division in Sudanese politics between the military establishment and the civil revolutionary leadership. As shown above, it is primarily the ruling generals who express willingness to normalize ties with the Jewish State.²¹ The generals possess several unique interests in establishing relations with Israel: to strengthen American and Emirati support of their leadership over Sudan (perhaps even for the "day after" the transitional period); to distance themselves from Bashir's regime and blur their own hand in crimes against humanity; and to enjoy the military benefits of relations with Israel, which countries like Egypt have already experienced firsthand. The civil leadership, on the other hand, is more attentive to the lack of popular legitimacy that may characterize such deals with the US, the UAE, and Israel.

Israel's Interests in a Potential Rapprochement with Sudan

Israel has both direct and indirect interests in normalizing relations with Sudan. Sudan's position on the Red Sea is strategically important to Israel, as it controls the maritime routes to the port of Eilat and is a key node within networks of arm transports to Gaza and Sinai. Cordial relations and tight security cooperation with Khartoum could therefore significantly undermine the links between Iran and the militant organizations in Gaza.

In the longer run, Israeli companies might also find economic prospects in Sudan. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which is currently being filled by Ethiopia, presents the opportunity for major developmental projects in Sudan as well.²² Based on optimistic projections, the GERD will improve the regulation of water in the Nile River and provide electricity to neighboring states, expanding Sudan's agricultural and industrial capacities. Israeli tech, water, and agricultural companies may find these projects appealing.

In the Israeli perspective, Sudan could serve as the exemplar for "full conversion": from a radical ally of Iran to a "moderate" country that even embraces Israel. As such, it could set the precedent

²⁰ See MEMRI publications from: [February 3, 2020](#); [February 6, 2020](#); [February 13, 2020](#) [in Hebrew].

²¹ See for example: Jihad Mashamoun, "The Domestic Implications of Sudan Normalizing Ties With Israel," *Sada: Middle East Analysis Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, August 27, 2020.

²² John Mukum Mbaku, "The controversy over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam," *Africa in Focus Brookings*, August 5, 2020.

for other regional actors and prove that such a conversion is rewarding. An agreement with Sudan may also reinforce Netanyahu's regional strategy of "Peace for Peace" (as opposed to "Land for Peace": the perception that Israeli territorial concessions are necessary for normalization with the Arab World) as the ideal formula for advancing peace in the region. Moreover, Sudan is not only a member of the Arab World, but an important country in Africa. Sudan's acceptance of Israel may influence the few African countries which currently lack official ties with Israel: Niger, Mali, and Mauritania (all predominantly Muslim). In the future, it may also lead countries like Libya or Somalia to consider establishing ties with Israel.

But relations with Sudan also entail risks for Israel. First, Israel has evidently been in contact with the military rulers of the transitional government. Besides the moral dilemma at hand—these generals' bloody history—associating with the military junta in Sudan may harm Israel's reputation in the country. Second, the Sudanese people might perceive relations with Israel an external imposition by foreign powers (the USA and UAE). Lastly, Egypt, which views Sudan as its "backyard," may be wary of Israeli involvement there in a way that would embitter its attitude towards Jerusalem.²³

Reflection and Conclusion

Despite the proximity in timing to the Israeli-UAE "peace agreement," the interests behind the possible Israeli-Sudanese rapprochement are inherently different. The Israeli-UAE accord is based on, among other factors, a mutual understanding that their bilateral ties yield clear, potential benefits. From security cooperation and medical research to investments and tourism, both Israel and the UAE foresee the strong and almost immediate potential of their relationship.

Sudan is different in this regard. Direct incentives for bilateral relations with Israel are limited, especially considering the domestic "cost" they might entail. Furthermore, Sudan has no significant history of covert cooperation with Israel, like the UAE has had for years, to foster trust between the parties. Unlike the UAE, Sudan does not share Israel's strong and tangible belief that Iran is an existential threat; and Khartoum must consider domestic factors and pressures much more seriously. Rather, for Sudan, relations with Israel are a (reluctant) by-product of its desire to improve relations with the USA and boost its international status. Therefore, it is likely that even

²³ On the Egyptian suspicious attitude regarding an Israeli-Sudanese rapprochement see, Ayah Aman, "Would Egypt support Sudan-Israel normalization deal?" [Al-Monitor](#), September 2, 2020.

if Sudan were to continue its public gestures towards Israel, a *warm* Israeli-Sudanese peace—the essence of Israel’s yearning for “normalization”— is not around the corner.

And yet, even “cold” peace might entail significant benefits for Israel. Relations with Sudan are of both strategic and symbolic importance. Sudan’s position on the Red Sea would prove crucial to protecting maritime routes to Eilat and blocking Iranian arm transports to Israel’s adversaries. Symbolically, relations with Sudan may open the door for other countries to recognize Israel and manifest a regional blow to Iran’s current position. Israel, however, must also calculate its moves with caution, taking into consideration other regional actors (Egypt), Sudan’s political and social diversity, and the need to avoid a strict identification with the military junta.

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