

Sudan's Islamists: From Salvation to Survival

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I. Overview

There is an ideological vacuum at the heart of Sudan's ruling National Congress Party (NCP), its leaders no longer interested in a radical or reforming Islamist project yet offering no alternative political vision. President Omar al-Bashir's 2015 re-election signalled a strengthening of the political centre around its long-time leader, neutralising opposition and forcing an empty "national dialogue" process with little prospect of significant outcomes. The March 2016 death of Hassan al-Turabi, the Islamist "salvation" regime's original architect, highlighted the absence of younger, credible figures to revive a project in terminal decline since he left government in the late 1990s. Bashir's strengthening of power around a small coterie of senior politicians, the military and security services has accompanied development of a more pragmatic government focused on regime survival. This change should encourage the West to explore ways to induce a more constructive approach by Khartoum to settling the internal wars that block normal relations with an increasingly active player in the turbulent Middle East.

While the president and his allies have progressively strengthened their position within the NCP, suppressing the political and armed opposition through control over the machinery of state, they have weakened the party's attachment to the country's fractured community of Islamists – formerly its ideological centre. Many are now competing over its legacy, including reformists eager to reverse Sudan's decline into a corrupt patronage-based system, conservative supporters of a populist "Islamic Arabism" and more radical groups, including those professing support for the Islamic State (IS). The latter are a small, vocal minority, with some traction in the large student and graduate population but for now at least not a major domestic threat.

The decision to involve Sudan in major regional disputes, particularly those associated with Saudi Arabia and Iran, further demonstrates a shift from pursuit of a radical, reformist Islamist project to pragmatic use of the country's strategic location and narrowly-defined Sunni-Arab Islamic identity for short-term diplomatic and material gains. The pivot to the Gulf emphasises the wide range of diplomatic partnerships now available to the leadership in a Middle East in which political upheaval, civil war and transnational extremism have engendered a fluid and opportunistic brand of alliance-making. The regime feels able to leverage its equities so as to strengthen itself without needing to seriously seek solutions to the several conflicts it is fighting in the country's peripheral areas. This recourse to an internationalised Arab nationalism, historically adopted by the riverine elite but rejected by many others, however, further reduces the vestiges

of a political and ethnic pluralism already severely tested by the South's secession and those conflicts.

The NCP's shift from the radical Islamism of its earliest days in power to more pragmatic politics has not been matched by normalisation of relations with Western countries. This is the consequence of Sudan's failure to deal effectively with its internal conflicts, including the war in Darfur, rather than the recent trajectory of its international relations. Since the late 1990s, Khartoum has sought alternative partners, notably China and India for the development of its oil industry, but now also a security compact with the Gulf states. Its increasing integration into regional alliance-building and latterly more constructive relations with South Sudan (and Uganda), however, should provide a stimulus for countries such as the U.S. and UK to assess what incentives are available (and engage with Sudan's new allies) to more effectively influence Khartoum to end its internal conflicts.

II. The NCP: From Secession to Re-election

Sudan's "Al-Ingaz" (Salvation) regime came to power in 1989, led by the National Islamic Front (NIF), as a revolutionary Islamist project seeking to transform society.¹ Internationally isolated, economically paralysed and unable to defeat the long rebellion in the South, it survived barely a decade. The fate of its radical project was finally sealed when Turabi, its leading ideologue, left to form the Popular Congress Party (PCP) in 1999. Al-Ingaz transformed itself into the NCP, and a more pragmatic approach became evident as it engaged with international mediation that helped end the civil war in 2005 and allowed South Sudan to secede in 2011. Nevertheless, post-secession Sudan was economically diminished, still unable to normalise Western ties and wracked by new (and old) conflicts in its peripheries.² Despite this, President Bashir's first post-secession election buttressed his personal control and led to a new government that underlined the marginalisation of both reformists and Islamists and further entrenched the central role of the military and security agencies.³

A. Elections Without Opposition

The 2015 polls were torpid and a hollow victory for the NCP.⁴ The government's refusal to accede to domestic and international demands – including from the African Union (AU) – to postpone them until a substantive national dialogue had taken place brought

¹ It sought to impose Sharia (Islamic law) nationwide; turned the war in the south into a jihad against the Christian rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA); and hosted radical Islamist groups, including Osama bin Laden's nascent al-Qaeda, thus demonstrating its credentials as major Islamic force in the Arab world.

² Crisis Group Africa Report N°198, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict: War in South Kordofan*, 14 February 2013; Crisis Group Africa Report N°204, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict: War in Blue Nile*, 18 June 2013.

³ Crisis Group interviewed Sudanese based in Khartoum and in the diaspora in person, via Skype and in email correspondence, including meetings in Nairobi, Kampala, Addis Ababa, Doha, Dubai and London, April to December 2015. The government denied requests for in-country research.

⁴ Opposition supporters circulated social media images of empty polling stations with sleeping officials. Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese journalist, Khartoum, 27 April 2015.

an almost total opposition boycott.⁵ A markedly low turnout even among NCP members – estimated by the National Elections Commission (NEC) at a certainly exaggerated 46 per cent – prompted an election day extension to allow the emergency mobilisation of regime cadres.⁶

The major election-related developments were inside the party: especially the pre-election nomination of candidates and the post-election government appointments.⁷ Bashir's candidacy for president, though never really in doubt, was not the usual shoo-in and at least occasioned intense intra-party debate over leadership renewal.⁸ Many party members stayed away or voted for alternative candidates during its October 2014 National Convention. Bashir's nomination was already decided by then, having been forwarded by the more senior Leadership Council and subsequently approved by a small majority in the NCP Shura Council.⁹

The National Convention was also notable for the appearance of Turabi, reportedly to great acclaim from nostalgic NCP supporters. This was part of a broader public reconciliation with Bashir, despite the PCP's election boycott, which prompted speculation that he might merge his party with the NCP following a moderately inclusive National Dialogue process.¹⁰

B. *A Party of Functionaries, not Islamists*

Despite an unconvincing internal mandate, and against a backdrop of convulsions in the Middle East and North Africa, Bashir's control over party and state has been strengthened since late 2013. There was a leadership renewal at that time in response to

⁵ Reportedly some senior NCP members were open to a postponement, but Bashir was adamant that he obtain a clear mandate to continue as president. Crisis Group email correspondence, senior dissident NCP members, Khartoum, May 2015.

⁶ The AU estimated turnout was 30-35 per cent, while Yasir Arman, chair of the armed opposition Sudanese People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), claimed it was no more than 15 per cent. "African Union confirms low turnout in Sudan elections", *Sudan Tribune*, 16 April 2015; "Sudan's low voter turnout means a vote for change: rebel leader", Radio Dabanga, 20 April 2015. Photos were circulated of long queues of police and soldiers (some in uniform) waiting to vote. Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese journalist, Khartoum, 20 June 2015. The NEC reported Bashir received 94.05 per cent of the vote, and the NCP won 323 of 426 National Assembly seats. The NCP did not contest 30 per cent of seats, which were mostly won by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and some independent candidates. "Omer al-Bashir declared winner of Sudan's elections", *Sudan Now*, 27 April 2015.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior European diplomat, Addis Ababa, 25 August 2015.

⁸ Even the president hinted that the people needed "fresh blood and a new impetus to continue their march", as autocratic regimes fell to popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. "Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's president, intends to step down in 2015", *The World Post*, 20 March 2013.

⁹ The Leadership Council – approximately 100 individuals including the president and his executive office, federal ministers, state representatives and nominated NCP members – holds real power in the party. It nominates a list for the Shura Council – a 600-strong body elected from within NCP membership – to consider for the leadership (in this case Ali Osman Taha, Nafie Ali Nafie, Hasan Bakri Saleh, Ibrahim Ghandour and President Bashir). The NCP's 6,000-member National Convention is then expected to approve this decision. Only 396 of a possible 522 members attended, prompting speculation that many were asked to stay away, as they were not expected to vote for Bashir. Crisis Group interview, Sudan analyst, Nairobi, 9 July 2015.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, leading Islamist intellectual, London, 13 October 2015. Turabi also appeared keen to secure his own political legacy, much tarnished by the descent of his original Islamist project into civil war, economic malaise and international isolation. Crisis Group interview, Sudanese intellectual, Kampala, 11 February 2016.

September-October urban riots in Khartoum and other cities and internal party disquiet.¹¹ The president's longer-term civilian lieutenants, Nafie Ali Nafie and Ali Osman Taha, often touted as possible successors, were replaced in a process now cited internally as showing the possibilities of advancement for younger NCP cadres.¹² A loyal military aide, Bakri Hassan Saleh, was appointed vice president, which ostensibly centralised power around Bashir and offered him protection against a trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC), should he choose to leave power.¹³

Yet, Bashir's consolidation of his own position did not mean autocratic decision-making; intense intra-party negotiations over post-election appointments to the new government were drawn out over two months and required three high-level Leadership Council meetings.¹⁴ The most contested appointment, for NCP deputy president and presidential assistant, finally went to the former Kassala state governor and interior minister, Ibrahim Mahmoud, although party members preferred the former oil minister, Awad al-Jaz.¹⁵ To get his candidate, Bashir was reportedly forced to jettison one of his closest allies, Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein, long-time defence minister (moved to the profitable Khartoum state governor sinecure).¹⁶

Other significant appointments placating internal and external constituencies were Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour, a loyal and competent official also popular among (especially Western) diplomats and in their capitals;¹⁷ and National Assembly Speaker Ibrahim Ahmed Omer, in an apparent concession to the party's remaining Islamist constituency.¹⁸

Lower-level appointments were aimed at maintaining a bloated and expensive, though not intrinsically inefficient, government patronage network, via creation of many

¹¹ The period following South Sudan's separation also saw regional turmoil; the president sprinkled campaign speeches with the rhetorical question: "Do you want [Sudan] to be like Yemen?" (often substituted with Somalia, Libya or Iraq) – a question also implicitly addressed to the international community. "President Bashir's elections: victory by default", StillSudan (<http://stillsudan.blogspot.co.uk>), 16 April, 2015.

¹² Both departed in a leadership reshuffle after the September 2013 Khartoum riots. Nafie and Taha competed with Bashir for the NCP presidential candidacy in 2014 and won significant dissident support, outpolling Vice President Bakri Hassan Saleh and Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese political observers, Nairobi, 14-15 July 2015.

¹³ Bakri's appointment as vice president raised expectations Bashir might retire, but his performance – largely judged by his ability to manage the complex personal and patrimonial relationships central to government under the NCP system – is said to have fallen well short of expectations, and any tentative transition plan was scrapped. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese political observers, London, 25 November 2015. The president's indictment by the ICC in March 2009 for alleged crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Darfur left him vulnerable to a trial in The Hague, if his successor were to decide to cooperate with the court.

¹⁴ Crisis Group email correspondence, NCP dissident member, Khartoum, 16 June 2015.

¹⁵ He is a popular NCP member who played a key role in the 1990s-early 2000s oil boom.

¹⁶ Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese political analyst, 24 June 2015. Abdelrahim's administration of Khartoum state has been unimpressive. Crisis Group interview, former senior NCP politician, London, 17 November 2015.

¹⁷ Ghandour represents "newer and better thinking ... than the older generation of leaders", but his move to foreign minister "while welcome in our day-to-day relations, virtually removes him from a central role on internal developments". Crisis Group email correspondence, former senior Western diplomat, Washington, 15 October 2015.

¹⁸ Former Vice President Ali Osman Taha reportedly declined the speaker position. Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese political observer, Khartoum, 24 June 2015.

more state ministers (subordinate to ministers).¹⁹ Just before the 2 June 2015 presidential inauguration, Bashir also reshuffled senior and middle-ranking army posts, which favoured Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) officers considered loyal, as well as those well connected to the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS).²⁰ The internal party and regime manoeuvres before and after the election revealed the growing influence within the presidency of regime and party functionaries and security personnel, though with an increasingly moribund internal NCP base and an absence of major Islamist representation at the highest level of the party. After a tumultuous period that included secession, renewed rebellion and regional upheaval, Bashir's immediate political future seems secure.

III. The Fractured Islamist Landscape

The NCP has over the years purged itself of major Islamist figures and ideological baggage. This began with the splitting of the National Islamist Front (NIF) in 1999, when Turabi departed, which allowed Bashir to establish a more politically flexible administration, particularly for foreign relations.²¹ Since then, the more principled Islamist figures have left to enter an ineffectual opposition with little prospect of electoral success, while other activists (often outside formal politics) have seized control of the vestiges of the Islamist political narrative. Small populist opposition parties and religious groups, unchecked by broad-based movements, have produced more extremist offshoots.

¹⁹ There are 74 ministers and state ministers, eighteen governors and seven presidential advisers, assistants and vice presidents. "All the president's men: on al-Bashir's new presidency", Sudan Democracy First Group, 17 July 2015. Upward mobility is possible for loyal cadres, and the elevation of a younger generation is used as evidence for the NCP's internal dynamism, particularly in the context of the dismissal of former leaders, such as Nafie Ali Nafie and Ali Osman Taha.

²⁰ The defence minister position remained officially vacant until the August 2015 appointment of Lieutenant General Awad Mohamed Ahmed bin Awaf (former military intelligence head). A further reshuffle in February 2016 replaced Chief of Staff Mustafa Obaid with respected professional soldier Emad Al-Din Mustafa Adawi and also elevated commanders with field experience in readiness for "dry season" campaigns in the Two Areas – South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, where the government is fighting an insurgency against the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), which fought with the SPLM, now the government of South Sudan, during the second civil war (1983-2005). Crisis Group email exchanges, Khartoum-based Western diplomat; Sudanese journalist, 10 February 2016. Competition between the SAF and NISS is generally overstated. The responsibility given to the NISS following formation of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013, which was converted into a regular element under NISS command in 2014 and used to fight rebels in Darfur and the Two Areas, has not detracted from the SAF's overwhelming military power. Crisis Group Skype interview, Western diplomat, Khartoum, 26 October 2015; email correspondence, Sudanese political analyst, 26 February 2016.

²¹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°174, *Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Stability*, 4 May 2011, pp. 11-12.

A. *Reformists and Wanderers*

Reformist Islamist groups in and outside the NCP and Sudan Islamic Movement (SIM) are weak.²² Even their association with significant figures – notably Dr Ghazi Salah al-Din al-Atabani and General Mohamed “Wad” Ibrahim Abd al-Jalil (popular among Islamist SAF officers) – has not resulted in a major new political force.²³

Throughout 2012-2013, Dr Ghazi, supported by ex-Popular Defence Force (PDF) and SAF members known as Al-Saihou (The Wanderers), tried but failed to exert reformist pressure on the NCP.²⁴ They first circulated the “Memorandum of the One Thousand”, calling for unification of Islamic groups, political and party reform and an end to widespread corruption, patronage and nepotism within state institutions. Despite gaining popular interest in a country unused to such public disagreement within the ruling party, it was roundly ignored by the leadership.²⁵ A November 2012 attempt to win back SIM leadership from the ruling party was also blocked.²⁶

In September 2013, partly due to the draconian government reaction to the anti-austerity riots prompted by the removal of the fuel subsidy, Dr Ghazi and a group of former NCP luminaries were pushed to resign from the party. They then founded the Reform Now Movement (RNM). Both it and Al-Saihou are popular in the opposition (RNM has a formal party structure), but they remain unable to exert effective pressure for reform on the NCP from the outside and boycotted the 2015 elections.²⁷

B. *Conservatives and Salafis*

A more conservative grouping exists but has weak formal representation. It was briefly organised within the short-lived Islamic Constitutional Front (ICF), which combined Salafis (theological reformists within Sunni Islam, often known by their Saudi Arabian variant Wahhabi and preaching against perceived innovations from the early years of Islam), the vestiges of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood (a NIF precursor) and conservative Arab nationalists (generally former NCP members). Founded in 2012,

²² The SIM is a coalition of groups and individuals seen as influential in defining the NCP's ideological direction, but without a formal political role. Its leadership under ex-Secretary General Ali Osman Taha and now al-Zubair Mohamed al-Hassan has been considered pro-government.

²³ Dr Ghazi is a former NCP secretary general, state minister for foreign affairs and presidential adviser. “Wad” Ibrahim allegedly was involved with some NISS officers, including the former chief, Salah Gosh, in a November 2012 attempted coup. They were arrested but released. The alleged plotters' motives are unclear, though they may have been based as much on professional dissatisfaction with military leadership (particularly the performance of Defence Minister Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein) as ideological disillusionment. Crisis Group interview, Sudan analyst, Nairobi, 8 July 2015.

²⁴ The PDF is a paramilitary “volunteer” force initially recruited by the NIF in the late 1980s to fight a jihad against rebels in the Christian South. Al-Saihou is associated with younger disaffected NCP members but is mostly “virtual”, via social media, and without a clear structure. Some non-Islamists also identify as Al-Saihou because of its “progressive” politics. Crisis Group interviews, Al-Saihou members and sympathisers, London and Doha, November-December 2015.

²⁵ The president dismissed the demands as “premature”. “Sudan's Bashir politely brushed aside reform demands: source”, *Sudan Tribune*, 17 January 2012. For a more detailed discussion, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012, pp. 9-12.

²⁶ The NCP has sought to maintain government control over the SIM by appointing senior party members as its leaders.

²⁷ The Ghazi group also released a memorandum to the president describing the suppression of protestors as “a betrayal” of the NCP's Islamic foundations, and urged a government response to its economic grievances. Dr Ghazi's critics accuse him of staying too long in the NCP. Crisis Group interviews, Sudan civil society and opposition, Doha, December 2015.

the ICF campaigned ineffectively to have the “transitional” constitution, in force since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the civil war, replaced by a Sharia (Islamic law) version – something Bashir vaguely promised prior to South Sudan’s secession. Some ICF members warned the president that he would be “overthrown” or “replaced” if he did not fulfil these demands.²⁸

Al-Tayyib Mustafa’s Just Peace Forum (JPF) is a high-profile player in the conservative grouping, largely due to his former ownership of the populist private newspaper *Al-Intibaha*.²⁹ A former NCP member and Bashir’s maternal uncle, Al-Tayyib enjoys some general popularity, as does JPF. Most support comes from a politically and religiously conservative constituency that previously focused on facilitating the secession of mostly Christian South Sudan (contrary to the stated position of the NCP, which was to “make unity attractive”) and now champions a Sunni-Arab identity for Sudan’s many peoples.³⁰ He claims that JPF represents a “silent majority” that is focused on the ever-present external threat from South Sudan and the SPLM-N.³¹

While the ICF was partly identified with Salafism, most Sudanese Salafis are quietist, apolitical and prefer accommodation with the government, the better to pursue *dawa* (mission), often with large, mainly youthful audiences, particularly in the big university sector.³² Ansar al-Sunna, the largest and longest-established Salafi grouping, is broadly apolitical and non-confrontational with the Sufi Islamic traditions usually dominant in the country. However, some members have been accused of attacking Sufi shrines and the annual celebrations of the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday, acts the formal leadership does not condone.³³ A notable political offshoot from Ansar al-Sunna is the Al-Wasat (Centrist) Islamic Party, which has taken an anti-government position in the past.³⁴

C. *The Extremist Fringe*

In the 1990s, Sudan hosted major radical figures, including Osama bin Laden, who lived in and operated businesses from Khartoum from 1991 until his expulsion in 1996. Several well-known radical Islamist groups received support from Khartoum, including the Egyptian Al-Gama’a-Islamia, which attempted to assassinate President Hosni

²⁸ “Sudan Islamists warn Bashir over Shariah constitution”, *Sudan Tribune*, 28 February 2012.

²⁹ Al-Tayyib no longer controls *Al-Intibaha*, which was taken over by an NCP loyalist in 2013. Al-Tayyib founded a new paper, *al-Sayha*.

³⁰ A key tenet of the 2005 CPA that ended the civil war was that both the North and South should seek to “make unity attractive”.

³¹ Al-Tayyib’s antipathy is in part personal – his son was killed fighting the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) during the civil war in then southern Sudan. In a recent move, Al-Tayyib and Ghazi, plus a grouping of individuals mostly with origins in the NCP and Islamic Movement, formed Future Forces for Change, a political grouping united largely by the fact that all dropped out of the National Dialogue process. Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese political analyst, 26 February 2016.

³² Eimas Ahmed, “Militant Salafism in Sudan”, *Islamic Africa*, vol. 6, no. 1-2 (2015), p. 171.

³³ Crisis Group Skype interview, Sudanese academic expert on radicalisation, 13 October 2015. Many Salafis disapprove of shrine worship and Mawlid (the celebration of the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday) as idolatry and opposed to their purist interpretation of Islam. This includes the wish to return to conservative values of the early days of the religion and the rejection of theological innovations.

³⁴ Its leader, Dr Yusuf al-Kudah – a popular presenter of Islamic television programs – signed the “New Dawn Charter” of opposition political parties and armed rebel groups in Kampala in January 2013.

Mubarak during a visit to Ethiopia in 1995; Sudan's alleged complicity in the attempt resulted in U.S. sanctions the next year.³⁵

It is unclear, and the subject of academic debate, whether the NIF's early association with groups that went on to undertake extremist actions outside Sudan was part of a deliberate policy, or inadvertently resulted from cultivation of external Islamist groups (including "diaspora" Sudanese), with the intention of underpinning the uncertain domestic Islamist constituency.³⁶ However, it is apparent that the greater part of the NIF's religious energy went into pursuing the internal Islamic transformation of Sudanese society, and the jihad against the SPLA in the South. Radical elements – including Sudanese who gained Islamic education and activism abroad – returned to Sudan in the 1990s with the intention of working with the new regime. However, the post-Turabi leadership's desire to re-engage with Western powers, moving away from the deliberate cultivation of foreign radical groups, coupled with the generally pacific nature of Islam in the country, goes some way to explaining the sporadic and apparently contradictory examples of extremist-inspired violence domestically.

The radical Islamist Al-Takfir wa al-Hijra group was blamed for two attacks in 1994 and 2000 on the Al-Jaraffa Mosque in Omdurman favoured by the reformist and Salafi-inclined Ansar al-Sunnah.³⁷ In 2008, a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) employee, John Granville, and his Sudanese driver were shot dead outside the U.S. embassy. The four perpetrators, who claimed to be members of Ansar al-Tawhid (a local militant Islamic group) were captured and imprisoned but escaped in 2010; only one was recaptured; another was reported to have died in Somalia fighting with Al-Shabaab in December 2015.³⁸ In December 2012, the government announced it had destroyed a camp of some 30 "extremists" in the Al-Dindir national park in Sennar state (near the Ethiopian border).³⁹

The International University of Africa (IUA) in Khartoum, established with Gulf-state funding in 1970 to educate students on the theory and practices of Salafi Islam, is often blamed for propagation of extremist views.⁴⁰ In 2014, the Nigerian Boko Haram bomber Aminu Sadig Ogwuche was arrested while studying Arabic at IUA and

³⁵ NIF facilitation of export of regional and global Islamic jihad became a major Western policy preoccupation, reaching its high-point in 1998 with the U.S. bombing of the Al-Shifa factory in Khartoum (falsely believed to be producing chemical weapons), as a response to al-Qaeda's East Africa embassy bombings. Concerns declined following the 11 September 2001 attacks and Sudan's renewed willingness to cooperate with the U.S. on intelligence sharing. Crisis Group email correspondence, retired Western diplomat, Washington, 15 October 2015.

³⁶ Roland Marchal, "Epilogue: A New Sudan?", in Barbara Casciari, Munzoul A.M. Assal and Francois Ireton (eds.), *Multidimensional Change in Sudan (1989-2011): Reshaping Livelihoods, Conflict and Identities* (New York, 2015), p. 324.

³⁷ Al-Takfir wa al-Hijra was a loosely affiliated *takfiri* – broadly those who denounce other Muslims as unbelievers – extremist group with a small cell operating from Sudan. A group of its fighters twice attempted to kill Osama bin Laden in Khartoum and Omdurman in early 1994. In 1995, the Sudanese government executed the group's founder, a Libyan national, who had fought in the "Afghan jihad".

³⁸ Granville's killers produced a video showing how they escaped, suggesting some level of official complicity, since the government feared a violent reaction if it carried out their death sentences. Crisis Group interview, Sudanese academic expert on the case, Doha, 2 December 2015. See also, "Sudanese jihadist media front releases video detailing prison escape of convicted militants", *The Long War Journal*, 30 December 2012.

³⁹ "Captured Islamist extremists planned assassination of officials – Sudan's security chief says", *Sudan Tribune*, 4 December 2012.

⁴⁰ Its curriculum has since become substantially diversified. "When worlds collide: Sudan's Islamist divisions", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 15 September 2014, p. 5.

extradited to Nigeria for trial.⁴¹ IUA is one of several state-run or private institutions which have been linked to the operations of radical Islamic groups. For example, an al-Qaeda offshoot announced in 2013 that it had set up a “student wing” at the University of Khartoum.⁴² In January 2016, NISS briefly detained five individuals after they distributed a questionnaire in Khartoum universities asking students whether they support a unified Umma (Islamic community) and Islamic caliphate.⁴³

During 2015, students from the University of Medical Studies and Technology (UMST) – including some with dual British-Sudanese nationality – left to fight or work with the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁴ The interior minister estimates that 70 Sudanese have left to join IS, and there were sporadic reports of Sudanese deaths in Syria, Iraq and Libya during 2015.⁴⁵ Recruits have often been from wealthy families, well educated and comfortable interacting with globalised social media networks.⁴⁶ Sudan is also reportedly a transit hub for IS recruits bound for Libya, or for Turkey from where many go on to Syria.⁴⁷

A handful of clerics have professed public support for IS, most notably Mohammed al-Gizouli and Musa’ad al-Sidira (both Khartoum-based).⁴⁸ The former is the leader of the One Nation Group, a non-violent radical Salafi organisation active in Khartoum since the early 2000s which has some popularity, particularly among disaffected students. It gained increased attention when Gizouli publicly came out for IS in June 2014 and was arrested and held by the NISS for eight months.⁴⁹

Arguably, the NCP’s retreat from Turabi’s Islamist vision created space for dissident religious voices to develop outside the mainstream and weakened Islamist political formations (NCP and SIM). Trying not to make martyrs of individuals with populist appeal, the government has shown restraint in managing such groups and

⁴¹ “British-born man arrested in Sudan after bomb blasts killed 105 in Nigeria”, *The Guardian*, 17 May 2014.

⁴² “Al-Qaeda announces formation of its student wing in top Sudan university”, *Sudan Tribune*, 10 January 2013.

⁴³ Crisis Group email correspondence, Sudanese journalist with knowledge of radical activity, 26 January 2016.

⁴⁴ UMST is a medical school owned by Mamoun Hummidah, a prominent NCP member and Khartoum state health minister. The dean of student affairs acknowledged that while political activities are prohibited, groups supporting IS’s aims may have had access to students under the aegis of the Islamic Civilization Association, which operated freely. Mohammed Osman, “Sudan, ISIS and radical Islam: examining a contradictory approach”, *African Arguments*, 18 May 2015.

⁴⁵ “70 Sudanese have joined ISIS in total: minister”, *Al Arabiya*, 13 October 2015. The official numbers are relatively low compared to other countries. “Sudanese jihadist killed in a suicide attack in Iraq”, *Sudan Tribune*, 11 December 2015; “Student from group of British-Sudanese Isis recruits killed in Syria”, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2015.

⁴⁶ Messages posted online by Sudanese in Syria (notably Mohammed Fakhri, a British-Sudanese medical student) indicate acute political frustration with both the Western countries in which they were brought up and the corrupted Islamic Sudanese society to which they relocated. Mohammed Fakhri, “A message to the hesitant one from hijrah and jihad – Part 2”, JustPaste.it, 26 October 2015, <http://justpaste.it/okme>.

⁴⁷ Indian national Mohammad Nasir (who had been living in Dubai) was deported in December 2015 after travelling to Khartoum to reportedly meet with an IS recruiter based in the country. An unsubstantiated claim is that he received “combat training” in Sudan. “Indian youth told parents of his intention to join IS”, *The Hindu*, 13 December 2015.

⁴⁸ “Sudanese cleric calls for attacks on U.S. embassies, planes, restaurants in support of ISIS”, video, YouTube, 19 June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1nCEySa>.

⁴⁹ Released in June 2015, Gizouli reaffirmed his support for IS. “Sudanese security re-arrests ISIS sympathizer”, *Sudan Tribune*, 30 June 2015.

has sought to engage them in debate through pro-government clerics.⁵⁰ This careful approach is also manifest in NCP willingness to tolerate radical Islamist groups within limited, non-violent, parameters – with some suggestions of official support when deemed politically advantageous.⁵¹ It has, however, raised fears from some commentators that this is “a dangerous game”, in which a marginal constituency has been permitted a foothold and could have the capacity to expand in a more febrile political environment.⁵² But Sudan’s own radical constituency, as detailed, has rarely engaged in domestic terrorism, and association with IS so far has been reserved to rhetorical support and departure of small numbers of individuals to fight outside the country.

IV. The NCP’s New “Sunni-Arabism” and Its Implications

The NCP’s drift away from a transformational domestic Islamist project that was partly inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution toward a less ideologically-rooted form of government enabled Sudan’s rehabilitation with the more conservative Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia.⁵³ It consequently has found itself well placed to exploit the recent intensification of Saudi-Iranian (with elements of Sunni-Shia) antagonism in the Middle East. The result has been a new Gulf security partnership with Saudi Arabia that brings financial and diplomatic rewards for Khartoum.

A. Pivot to the Gulf

The NIF’s decisions not to denounce Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and to host radical foreign Islamists during the decade brought a close relationship with Iran but otherwise isolation.⁵⁴ The Iranian links and Islamist sympathies, particularly with the Muslim Brotherhood, were viewed with deep suspicion in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Libya.⁵⁵ As recently as 2014, Saudi Arabia imposed financial restrictions on Sudan’s

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Dr Ghazi Salah al-Din al-Atabani, London, 17 November 2015.

⁵¹ An example of this was the mostly passive behaviour of security forces when thousands of people marched on the U.S., British, and German embassies in Khartoum on 14 September 2012 to protest a video denigrating the Prophet Mohammed. The U.S. and German embassies were stormed and vandalised after police either retreated or stood by idly. The government had called for the protests but said they should be peaceful.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, senior Sudanese civil society activist, Kampala, 10 September 2015.

⁵³ Turabi himself, who initially shunned a formal political position and conducted business from his house in Khartoum, implicitly impersonated the role of the Iranian Supreme Leader at the time of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini.

⁵⁴ Iran was particularly significant as a supplier of arms needed to fight the war in the South. Sudan is also accused of being a conduit for arms transfers to the radical Palestinian group Hamas. This relationship has provoked occasional military responses from Israel, notably in October 2012, when its planes were accused of bombing the Yarmouk weapons factory in Port Sudan, associated with Sudan’s domestic arms industry. “Sudan blames Israel for Khartoum arms factory blast”, BBC, 24 October 2012.

⁵⁵ After the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi was deposed as his country’s president in July 2013, many members sought refuge in Khartoum or travelled through Sudan en route to a more permanent sanctuary in Qatar. The Qadhafi regime in Libya had a long history of attempts to destabilise Sudan, including support for Darfuri rebels, most notably the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

banking sector, threatened to deport thousands of migrant workers and prevented a Tehran-bound plane carrying President Bashir from transiting its airspace, as Khartoum continued to pursue a close alliance with Tehran.⁵⁶

However, changing dynamics in the Gulf region, especially Saudi-Iranian antagonism, saw Sudan deliberately pivot from Tehran, when it became clear a closer relationship with Riyadh would bring more diplomatic and financial advantages. In 2012, Sudan reportedly rejected Iranian requests to build a naval base at Port Sudan (although Iranian ships regularly docked there until 2014), and in September 2014, the government closed Iranian cultural centres, which it stated were spreading Shiism.⁵⁷

In October 2015, Sudan committed troops to the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Huthi rebels (loosely backed by Iran) in Yemen, a major signal that the diplomatic shift to the Gulf went beyond rhetoric to include strategic realignment.⁵⁸ In December, Khartoum joined the Saudi-led "Islamic Group", meant to demonstrate how Riyadh and other Sunni Arab powers were fighting Islamic extremism in the region (notably the campaign against IS in Syria and Iraq).⁵⁹ In January 2016, Sudan was one of the first countries to break diplomatic relations with Iran, in solidarity with Riyadh after its embassy in Tehran was attacked following the Saudi execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.⁶⁰

B. *Reasserting Sunni-Arab Identity at Home and Abroad*

Sudan's growing assertion of its Sunni-Arab identity is likely to reap a variety of material benefits domestically as well as regionally. Most immediately, the expected cash payments and investments, particularly in agricultural, irrigation and hydroelectric schemes, by Gulf partners will be a welcome stimulus to an economy chronically short of foreign exchange due to Western banking restrictions (as well as the NCP's inclination for government through patronage).⁶¹ Saudi investment in the SAF, with funds reportedly diverted from a previous alliance with Lebanon, is likely to further strengthen the position of military's position in the country.⁶²

Sudan's Yemen involvement has made it a player in a conflict in which the U.S. has significant interests, including major counterterrorism priorities targeting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This contributes to a wider foreign policy narrative, assiduously pursued for over a decade (primarily through post-9/11 intelligence sharing), that it is a partner in combatting, not creating, Islamic extremism, despite the accusations of detractors.⁶³

⁵⁶ "300,000 Sudanese expat workers could face deportation from Saudi Arabia: report", *Sudan Tribune*, 5 November 2015; "Saudi Arabia bars Sudan's Bashir from entering airspace", Reuters, 4 August 2013.

⁵⁷ "Sudan closes Iranian cultural centres and expels diplomats: source", Reuters, 2 September 2014.

⁵⁸ "Sudan sends ground troops to Yemen to boost Saudi-led coalition", Al Arabiya, 18 October 2015.

⁵⁹ "Joint statement on formation of Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism", Saudi Press Agency, 14 December 2015.

⁶⁰ "Iranian protesters ransack Saudi embassy after execution of Shiite cleric", BBC News, 2 January 2015.

⁶¹ "Saudi Arabia to provide 1.7 billion dollars for Sudan's dam projects", *Sudan Tribune*, 5 November 2015. Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Hoboken, 2015), pp. 69-73.

⁶² "Saudi Diverts Military Aid from Lebanon to Sudan", *The New Arab*, 23 February 2016.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, high-level European diplomat, 26 November 2015; high-level African diplomat, New York, 24 September 2015.

At the least, the progressive sidelining of the NCP's own Islamists over the past decade allowed the leadership to pursue a more flexible foreign policy. In Libya, as more capable regional powers competed for influence in the post-Qadhafi political disarray, Sudan was alleged to have facilitated arms supplies to the Qatari-backed Islamist "Dawn" coalition, only subsequently offering vocal support to the anti-IS operations there of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁶⁴ The NCP's admittedly mild opposition to politically and socially radical Islamism – from the Muslim Brotherhood to the puritanical Salafism – nevertheless puts the government at odds with a number of former Islamist fellow travellers.⁶⁵ Young, often middle class, Sudanese who sympathise with IS will find the increasingly pragmatic foreign policy difficult to swallow.

Tapping into the long-held pretensions of a self-proclaimed Arab identity, focused on a small ruling class with its origins in the twin cities of Khartoum and Omdurman, the NCP has often sought to reinforce its conservative support by stoking anti-Southern (and Christian) xenophobia, historically focused on the government in Juba. This was notable after the SPLA's invasion of the disputed Heglig oil region in April 2012, but in the context of a more recent rapprochement with Juba, engendered by the strategic necessities of the civil war in South Sudan, this became increasingly focused on the ongoing war with the SPLM-N.⁶⁶

The NCP's willingness to leverage Arab identity, playing to the domestic chauvinism of the country's ruling elite, strikes further at the roots of Sudanese pluralism. During the first decade of Islamist rule, this was eroded by the regime's explicit intention to focus investment in a small, central area known as the Hamdi Triangle.⁶⁷ Following South Sudan's secession, the northern rump of the SPLA, the SPLM-N in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, sought common cause with the Darfuri rebel groups. They formed the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), which conceives of the new insurgency as a product of the "New South", that is, Sudan's new peripheries fighting the centralised dictatorship of the Arab elites.⁶⁸ The NCP's current recourse to an internationalised Arabism gives credence to this framing of Sudanese politics, allowing little space for an inclusive negotiated settlement with the armed opposition.

⁶⁴ "Is Libya a proxy war?", Monkey Cage Blog (washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/), 24 October 2014; Crisis Group email correspondence, Libya analysts, 6 November 2015.

⁶⁵ In May 2015, Sudanese Islamists, including Al-Tayyib Mustafa, demonstrated in Khartoum against the death sentence handed to Mohamed Morsi, the former Egyptian president and leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. "Sudanese Islamists protest against Morsi's death sentence", *Sudan Tribune*, 22 May 2015.

⁶⁶ See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°228, *South Sudan: Keeping Faith with The IGAD Peace Process*, 27 July 2015, pp. 10-11; and *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁶⁷ Named after then Minister of Finance Abdel Rahim Hamdi and said to be within a day's journey by car from the capital.

⁶⁸ See "Yasir Arman and the war in Sudan's new south: 'We cannot sit idly and wait for Khartoum to kill us'", *Daily Maverick*, 30 October 2012. This also borrows from the rhetoric of former SPLM/A leader John Garang, who saw the ultimate objective of the South's insurgency as being to win power in Khartoum, rather than simply independence for South Sudan.

V. Conclusion: New Circumstances and Opportunities

The NCP's retreat from the deeply-held Islamist project of its predecessor, the NIF, is not new. However, developments in Sudan's northern Arab neighbourhood coinciding with the partial resolution of its own existential crisis (the South's secession) left the regime exposed domestically and internationally, along with a serious economic crisis. The party shifted all its resources into survival mode, making tactical decisions that nevertheless seemed in line with a deeper shift from the former Islamist orientation. The short-term success of its timely ideological and diplomatic shifts, just before divisions in North Africa and the Middle East became deeper and more deadly, is clear. Initial rhetorical support has become more meaningful, including the military deployment in Yemen. For a government that has committed to support a Sunni-Arab intervention in a sectarian war while reasserting its own brand of nationalism at the centre, the remnants of its grand Islamist project look increasingly peripheral.

The dynamics discussed in this briefing, including the well-established decline of a radical Islamist project at the heart of the NCP, point to major shifts in Sudan's relations within the Middle East and with its immediate east African neighbours.⁶⁹ This should also change the context in which many other international actors, including the U.S. and UK, relate to Khartoum.⁷⁰ The progressive inclusion of Sudan in Gulf states' political alliances and more constructive behaviour in relations with Juba and Kampala, coupled with the apparent durability of President Bashir and the NCP, should engender a more pragmatic approach from Western countries. This should be developed with the understanding that major diplomatic shifts in the region can have a significant impact on the capacity of both government and rebel groups to wage open conflict. Policy toward Sudan should become more forward-looking in line with the changing strategic realities in the region.

Western countries seeking to engage more effectively with Khartoum should, however, be mindful of the continuing inability of the government to deal effectively with its internal conflicts (particularly in Darfur and the Two Areas), despite concerted mediation efforts led by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP). Sudan's behaviour in the international sphere, in line with the historical evolution of the Islamist regime, has improved significantly, but domestic policy failures still demand attention from concerned international actors. Diplomatic shifts in the region should be viewed as opportunities to incentivise conflict resolution and peacemaking in Sudan, not as justification merely to normalise relations.

Nairobi/Brussels, 21 March 2016

⁶⁹ Notably, this includes South Sudan and Uganda, whose improving relations with Sudan, in the context of the former's civil war, will be covered in an upcoming Crisis Group Briefing.

⁷⁰ The U.S. applies economic sanctions on Sudan and retains it on a list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.

Appendix A: Map of Sudan



Appendix B: Glossary

AU	African Union
AUHIP	African Union High-Level Implementation Panel
AQAP	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
ICC	International Criminal Court
IUA	International University of Africa
ICF	Islamic Constitutional Front
IS	Islamic State
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPF	Just Peace Forum
NCP	National Congress Party
NEC	National Elections Commission
NIF	National Islamic Front
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service
PCP	Popular Congress Party
PDF	Popular Defence Force
RNM	Reform Now Movement
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SIM	Sudan Islamic Movement
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UMST	University of Medical Studies and Technology
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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