

How the Situation in Sudan Is Affecting the MENA Region

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Researchers and academics are baffled by Sudan's geographical setting: is it sub-Saharan Africa, north-east Africa, the Middle East or part of the Horn of Africa? However its geo-setting is defined, Sudan and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have impacted and continue to impact each other in multiple ways. This short article will show how Sudan has impacted MENA in selected fields: economic history, nation-state and territorial disintegration, political culture, radical Islam and terrorism and youth-led social movements.

It is argued here that a combination of state clientelism, economic dependency and a fractured political class have shaped not only the politics of the country, but also its impact on the MENA region.

Economic History and Dependency

The year 1821 marked a turning point in Sudan's recent history, when Mohamed Ali Pasha, the viceroy of Egypt invaded Sudan in search of resources, both natural and human. For decades during the 19th century, Egypt was extensively involved in colonizing Sudan as a peripheral area, adopting extractive policies and hunting for minerals and agricultural products to meet Mohammed Ali's programme of "forced industrialization." Heavy handed and repressive policies implemented by the Egyptian Administration inflicted misery on the local population, breeding and ripening an insurrectionary political climate for the

Mahdist revolt, and culminating in the expulsion of the colonial forces in 1885, ushering in an era of an Islamic Mahdist state.¹

In 1898, the Anglo-Egyptian army reconquered and colonized Sudan, though effectively it was now a British colony. Socioeconomic projects introduced by the British led to the emergence of an educated class with strong links with MENA. Following independence in the early 1950s, Sudan played the role of mediator. During the 1950s and 1960s, Sudan hosted Egyptian military jets, sent battalions to fight alongside the Egyptian army following the June 1967 war with Israel and played a key role in ending the Arab cold war in 1967 when reconciling President Nasir of Egypt and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Sudan was the only "Arab" country to side with President Sadat when the latter signed the Camp David Peace Accord between Egypt and Israel.

Sudan remained tied to MENA from the 1970s onwards. The failure of nationalization policies in 1970, and the impact of the use of oil as a weapon in the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973, among other factors, compounded Sudan's economic difficulties and marked a shift from a quasi-articulated pattern of development to a disarticulated one (O'Brien, 1983). In the mid-1970s, a tripartite partnership between the Arab capital, Western technology and Sudan lands, sought to make Sudan the breadbasket for MENA, reinforcing Sudan's dependency (Ali, 1992). However, the 30-year rule of radical Islamist officers from 1989 up to 2019 put the country at odds with MENA, weakening it, reinforcing its dependent status and turning it into a playground for interventions by regional and international powers. Sudan changed regional allies, and in 2015 took the

¹ A precursor to the Islamic State in MENA in the 21st century.

side of Saudi Arabia, Emirates and Egypt and sent troops to fight in Yemen.

In their efforts to stabilize and shape developments in Sudan and align it with MENA politics, dominant world powers are working through proxy deals with regional agents such as Egypt, the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and, most recently, Israel. Now, Saudi rulers, in coordination with American and other Western actors, are using the good offices of Saudi Arabia to bring Sudanese parties to stabilize post-el-Bashir Sudan,² which led to the secession of South Sudan and left the rest of the country embroiled in violent conflicts, with all the signs of the country drifting as a failed state *par excellence*. Close ties with MENA have been a key part of Sudan's conflict history.

A Nation-State at War with Itself

Sudan has been at war since the mid-1950s, and a pro-MENA element is not far away from this. Over-inflating Sudan's Arab identity and downplaying its African character was a major factor in alienating African ethnicities who from the early days of independence in the 1950s took up arms to demand self-rule in a federal state. The Arabized ruling elite failed to manage the country's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, thus sowing seeds of violent conflict and protracted civil war that ended in South Sudan seceding in 2011 and other parts left in violent conflicts with ruling Arab-Muslim elites.

South Sudan's secession emboldened other ethnic-regional groupings to demand the power and wealth be shared with the Arab-Muslim centre of power, as reflected in the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, signed between the Khartoum government and a number of armed movements. Yet, not all armed movements have joined this transactional peace deal, as shown by the stance of the Sudan People Liberation Movement – North (El-Hilu) and Sudan Liberation Movement (Abdelwahid).

Multiple armed groups and militias are taking up arms in peripheral regions, appeasing and holding the au-

thorities to ransom. Given the geopolitics of Sudan, these armed groups and militias cross borders and roam across MENA countries and sub-Saharan Africa, raising more fears about links with Islamic terrorist groups and bent on pillaging mineral resources. Moreover, Sudan is considered a transit and corridor for migration to Europe.³ All these miseries have compounded the challenges facing the political class, a class fractured and factionalized since independence and weak and lacking in effective leadership.

Political Culture and Fractured Political Class

An observable similarity between Sudan and MENA politics (Lebanon, Tunisia, currently Libya, etc...) is a fractured political class and instability. In Sudan, this structural feature dates back to the days of British policies of working with tribal and religious sectarian leaders in what was known as "indirect rule." Post-independent governments followed in the colonial footsteps and relied on coalitions and alliances bringing together traditional and conservative forces and the more modernized and educated northern bourgeoisie class.

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A marked feature of Sudan's recurrent failed democratic governance is not only the fact that it has been dominated by the autocratic northern elites, but also that its *modus operandi* has been to rule through a shaky coalition of northern factions/actors in a fragile alliance with regional elites. These ruling coalitions

² *Al-Arab* London-based newspaper, 16 June 2022. Currently, to stabilize Sudan politics, Saudi Arabia is playing a role reminiscent to the one it played in stabilizing Lebanon in 1989 with the Taif Agreement, when various parties in Lebanon reached an agreement that put an end to the civil war that had been fought there since the mid-1970s.

³ The European Union signed the Khartoum Agreement in 2015 entrusting the Rapid Support Forces to secure Sudan's borders to prevent migrants crossing to North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe.

have been shaped by an unstable equilibrium of compromises between the contending politicians, families and factions of the northern ruling elites that are constantly in competition with each other for soft and hard rent resources (El-Battahani, 2017).

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On the other hand, the military regimes that took over from the democratic regimes had to forge coalitions with these groups in order to sustain their rule. Thus, in order to protect their "inherited" rent privileges, the ruling elites presided over regimes that alternated between weak, multi-party governments and military, authoritarian rule, in what has frequently been described as a vicious circle of politics. Weak performance of the political class paved the way for the radical Islamists to rise to the top and take power in 1989, with serious repercussions for MENA countries.

Radical Islam and MENA Politics

For many years, many Sudanese have received their education either in Egypt (Al-Azhar University) or Saudi Arabia. During the Anglo-Egyptian rule over Sudan, many young Sudanese were educated in Egypt. Some of these were influenced by Hassan al-Bana, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the late 1920s, and became disciples, establishing MB circles in Sudan. In 1957, after the country had obtained independence, they called for an Islamic constitution based on Sharia law.

Even the drift of secular, northern-educated Sudanese towards emphasizing their Arab identity was somehow aligned with Islamism, or at least not antagonistic to Islamist activities, with the exception of the Communist Party, which is wholeheartedly secular. Hence, successive governments in Khartoum have been very mild and accommodative to the MB.

Developments in MENA, the oil decades of the 1970s and 1980s and the introduction of Islamic banking in Sudan paved the way for an aggressive version of Islamism, led by Hassan al-Turabi, who influenced many Islamists in MENA.

Once in power, in 1989, Hassan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front (NIF) and other radical Islamists used security, intelligence and violence to maintain control, consolidate their hold on the power, and deliberately perpetuated the imposition of an Arabic-Islamic identity on all Sudanese, irrespective of the country's diversity. The NIF government and, later, the National Congress Party (NCP) used Islamic religious symbolism like jihadism in an attempt to rally "infidels" and "non-believers" into Islam and consolidate Sudan under a centralized political, economic and social identity.

In the 1990s, Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, emerged as a launch pad for an *Islamist Internationale*, providing safe haven to extremist Islamist groups operating against MENA state authorities, and hosting the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Carlos the Jackal, Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and Al Shabab etc... a policy that earned the country an international boycott and its characterization as a pariah state.

However, the dictates of politics forced Omer al-Bashir, who took over from Hassan al-Turabi, to shift regional allies from Qatar, Iran and Turkey to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in 2015, and to send troops to fight against the Houthi in Yemen. This situation remains unchanged, despite al-Bashir's removal from power in 2019.

Youth Movements

The legacy of the 30-year Islamic rule in Sudan can be seen in the country's disintegration, peripheral regions mired in conflict, widespread poverty and a rentier, parasitic ruling class at the top. This has posed a challenge to younger generations, the sector in all societies that is most sensitive to "existential threats." Faced with a grim future and politics dominated by a corrupt, kleptocratic class, youth groups in Sudan, like their counterparts during the Arab Spring, rose up and challenged the status quo.

Led by the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA), a coalition of trade unionists and youth groups formed by hundreds of thousands of unemployed

graduates armed with IT skills, a broad-based opposition movement succeeded in removing al-Bashir from power in April 2019. Following the removal of al-Bashir, an alliance of political forces, *al-Hurriya awa altagier* military in August 2019 and a civilian cabinet negotiated the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020, opening the door for some armed movements to join the government.

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In the meantime, the Resistance Committees (RCs) continued to put pressure on the civilian government to stick to the objectives of the December Revolution and bring those responsible for the Sit-in Massacre in June 2019 to justice, thereby ending an era of impunity and enstating democratic governance, where rule of law and civil-political rights for all Sudanese are protected. These reforms were not accepted by the army, the RSF or armed movements, as they would mean these groups losing control over the economy and facing persecution for the Sit-in Massacre. Under the leadership of General al-Burhan, the army staged a coup in October 2021 and reinstated al-Bashir aides to the power, triggering a second wave of broad-based, youth-led protests. The MENA region is closely following developments in Sudan, as they will likely shape how the latter will impact the former.

Conclusion

Sudan's impact on MENA can be traced back to well before the country obtained independence. The political class's failure in uniting the country and Islamism ended in the country's disintegration, leaving

large areas embroiled in violent conflict. Signs of state failure in Sudan will no doubt have a negative impact on MENA. Vehement efforts are therefore being taken by MENA stakeholders to intervene and shape the outcome of Sudan's internal conflicts: from Turkey's movements on the shores of the Red Sea to Israel's "return to Africa," in part to find new alliances as it faces growing international pressure over its occupation of the West Bank (Lynch, 2022). Saudi Arabia has bought wide swaths of agricultural land in Ethiopia and Sudan, and the UAE is looking to establish naval bases in the Horn of Africa and Sudanese ports. Egypt has been embroiled in a conflict with Ethiopia over its plans for a dam at the head of the Nile River. Cultural and political assumptions regarding MENA are being reconfigured, and Sudan will remain an important piece of this jigsaw whatever plans regional and world powers have for a new map in the making.

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