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Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 02 05 2018		2. REPORT TYPE NDSM Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) Dec 2017 - Feb 2018	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE US Rapprochement with Sudan: State Sponsor of Terrorism No More			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Wunderlich, Erwin J.			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval War College; 686 Cushing Rd, Newport, RI 02841				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT This paper argues that the U.S. government should remove Sudan from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. It makes this argument based on four reasons. First, removal from the list would be in the mutual interests of both Sudan and the United States. Secondly, the Sudanese government has taken positive steps over the past year in pursuing a closer relationship with the US government and in its compliance with US policy. Third, redesignation of Sudan as a state that no longer sponsors terrorism would have a positive impact the international community. Fourth, removing Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism would help foster a positive attitude towards the United States for Arabs living in North Africa and in the Middle East.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Sudan, State Sponsor of Terrorism					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 19	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON E.J. Wunderlich
a. REPORT U	b. ABSTRACT U	c. THIS PAGE U			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) 407-375-2947

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Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8/98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18
Adobe Professional 7.0

US Rapprochement with Sudan: State Sponsor of Terrorism No More

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of National Security Decision Making.

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February 11, 2018

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the U.S. government should remove Sudan from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. It makes this argument based on four reasons. First, removal from the list would be in the mutual interests of both Sudan and the United States. Secondly, the Sudanese government has taken positive steps over the past year in pursuing a closer relationship with the US government and in its compliance with US policy. Third, redesignation of Sudan as a state that no longer sponsors terrorism would have a positive impact the international community. Fourth, removing Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism would help foster a positive attitude towards the United States for Arabs living in North Africa and in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1993, Sudan has become an enduring occupant on the US government's list of states that sponsor terrorism (SST).¹ The time is now past due for Sudan's removal from the list. Beginning with the George W. Bush administration, the US government has maintained a strategy of gradual rapprochement with the Government of Sudan (GOS).² The Obama administration twice considered Sudan's removal from the SST list but then relented.³ President Obama eventually signed an executive order during his last week in office recognizing the GOS's "positive actions."⁴ The Trump administration, meanwhile, appears to be following the rapprochement strategy laid out by previous administrations. In October 2017, the State Department revoked several economic sanctions with Sudan.⁵ The following month, the Deputy Secretary of State, John J. Sullivan, announced that the United States was "willing to consider" Sudan's removal from the list of SST.⁶ The US government should continue its strategy of rapprochement with Sudan by removing the country from the SST list for four reasons: the decision would be in the mutual interests of Sudan and the United States, the positive steps that the Sudanese government has taken in pursuing a closer relationship with the US government, the message that such a decision would send to the international community, and the favorable impression it would have on Arabs in North Africa and the Middle East.

MAIN BODY

National Interests of Sudan and the United States

The reason why Sudan desires removal from the SST list is because the government is saddled with debt. With a total deficit projected at \$55.6 billion for 2017 (60% of GDP),

Sudan's debt will continue to grow by a billion each year according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁷ At the start of 2018, the government tried eliminating its subsidy for wheat in compliance with IMF reforms but reversed its decision when mass protests erupted after the price of bread doubled.⁸ Sudan is in a precarious position: it needs to borrow money to keep its economy afloat but cannot afford to pay off the interest—unless it were to come off the SST list. Once off the list, the GOS could then request that the Trump administration write off the \$400 million of debt it owes to the US government.⁹ Another factor is the appeal of foreign investment from American businesses. Even with the sanctions now removed, American companies will be hesitant to invest in Sudan, similar to how American executives shied away from Iran after the nuclear deal. To date, China has been Sudan's biggest donor to its national debt, estimated at 20% of the total. Because Sudan's debt is now in arrears, Chinese companies have stopped work on several infrastructure projects.¹⁰ Between a rock and a hard place, the GOS hopes relief will come when the United States removes its name from the SST list, which explains why it is so responsive to US diplomatic efforts.

From the American perspective, the US government's main interest at stake in Sudan is increased competition from China and Russia. China's interests are economic: Port Sudan is a key stop along its maritime silk road.¹¹ Russia's interests are tied to its military: Russia seeks to expand its influence into North Africa, and the GOS recently announced a military modernization effort with Russia's support.¹² Because of its geopolitical position along the Red Sea, Sudan would be a valuable partner to the United States in an era of great power competition.

Positive Steps Taken by the GOS

Sudan is no longer a state sponsor of terrorism but is a state partner against terrorism. In the past year, multiple government reports have acknowledged GOS's cooperation in advancing US counterterrorism objectives.¹³ Statutory law delineates three main criteria for designation as an SST: support for international terrorism, granting sanctuary to international terrorists, or provision of material assistance to terrorists.¹⁴ Although some speculate that the GOS may still be providing refuge to Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Sudan publicly opposes the LRA.¹⁵ As the US government confronts threats in the Middle East, it finds itself increasingly on the same side as Sudan, such as in Yemen, where Sudan has deployed hundreds of troops to support the Saudi coalition.¹⁶ Often, the US government takes on a logistics role in these conflicts, and taking Sudan off the SST list would facilitate arms sales to the Sudanese military. By improving the effectiveness of Arab military forces, states like Sudan keep the pressure on Islamic jihadists on their home turf instead of traveling overseas to commit acts of terror.

Another reason for the redesignation is the GOS's support for the peace process in South Sudan, despite its secession in 2011. Yesterday's freedom fighter turned today's responsible politician, the government of South Sudan has struggled to impose governance. With a population of just over 12 million, the country is expected to have over 7 million famine victims and over 3 million refugees in 2018, which would make it the worst humanitarian crisis since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.¹⁷ The GOS has become a partner in ending South Sudan's civil war and was one of eleven countries that signed a cease-fire agreement on 21 December 2017.¹⁸ Moreover, the GOS is helping South Sudan repair its oil pipeline, which South Sudan desperately needs to stabilize its dysfunctional economy.¹⁹ Sudan has shown impressive restraint in not supporting South Sudan's insurgents, even

though the grievances are still sharp, and the GOS could easily provide sanctuary to the resistance forces.

In addition to its support for South Sudan's peace process, the GOS has also stood by its pledge to cease hostilities within its borders. In Western Sudan, both the Department of State and the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) have published reports recognizing the GOS's helpful role in promoting peace in Darfur.²⁰ Meanwhile, in Southern Sudan, the GOS has finally started negotiating with rebels after a two-year hiatus, mainly due to pressure from the American Embassy.²¹ If the US government were to proceed forward with removing Sudan from the list of SST, then one could argue that with the carrot removed, Sudan might dip back into its old pattern of stirring up conflict. But the reality is that this carrot would turn into a stick with a lot more bite. As Princeton Lyman, a past US special envoy to Sudan and South Sudan has pointed out, one of the difficulties that US diplomats have in dealing with Sudan is that "the normal means of persuasion-pressure are not very effective."²² Because of the SST restriction imposed on Sudan, US diplomats have more carrots than sticks right now to incentivize the GOS. With a more balanced tool bag, the State Department would be better equipped to deter the GOS's bad behavior, e.g., returning Sudan to the SST list if the GOS resorted to violence again in Darfur.

Impact on the International Community

In addition to the positive impact it would have on US-Sudan relations, the decision to remove Sudan from the SST list would also advance US national interests in the international community. Sudan is a member of the African Union as well as the Arab League, which support US-Sudan rapprochement.²³ These institutions represent 69 of the 193-member states in the United Nations (UN). Although removing Sudan from the SST list

would not guarantee support from the African Union and Arab League states, it certainly would not hurt the US government when seeking common ground on UN resolutions that affect US national interests. Additionally, Sudan is a quasi-member of the SST club. For instance, the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) is silent on Sudan yet condemns Iran for sponsoring "terrorism around the world," Syria for using "chemical weapons on its own people," and North Korea because it shows no "regard for human dignity."²⁴ Like the service member who had a recent dental screening but whose name shows up on the hit list for dental, Sudan's inclusion on the list actually delegitimizes it. Removing Sudan from the list, therefore, would strengthen the SST stigma and further isolate the states still on the list. Once removed, Sudan could then serve as an example to the remaining SST states what types of behaviors they should pursue to get off the list—an important consideration for North Korea should the Kim regime continue to thaw relations with the international community.

Favorable Reaction from Arab People:

The final perspective considered is the constructivist argument on how the decision to remove Sudan from the SST list would affect the average Arab living in the Middle East or in North Africa. In a departure from the policy of past administrations, President Trump declared on 6 December 2017 that the US government would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Overwhelmingly, the international community has opposed this decision. The Arab League declared the move violated international law, and on 8 December, all of the members on the UN Security Council (except the United States) condemned the decision.²⁵ In a Gallup International poll from December 2017, 94% of Arabs surveyed disagreed with the pronouncement.²⁶ Removing Sudan from the SST list would help counter this negative perception. President Omar al-Bashir has considerable influence in the Arab League. In a

recent speech, al-Bashir attributed the October removal of sanctions to Arab leaders who advocated on his behalf to the US government.²⁷ Both Jordan and Turkey permitted al-Bashir to attend Arab summits in their countries despite his arrest warrant from the ICC.²⁸ Thus, removing Sudan from the SST list would foster a positive US perception, counterbalancing against the anti-American resentment many Arabs now feel in light of the Jerusalem decision. In the Arab world, rising US unpopularity is a concern to US national interests because of its potential to widen the support base for Islamic terrorists.

COUNTERARGUMENT

Those on the opposing side of the argument include authors John Prendergast and Omer Ismail whose op-ed published on 10 January 2018 laid out their position that “removal of the state sponsor of terrorism designation should only be associated with evidence of major Sudanese reforms,” of which the authors find no evidence.²⁹ The authors belong to an advocacy group called “The Enough Project,” and they have disseminated emails asking people to “take action letting Congress know you want to see strong Sudan legislation.”³⁰ Herein lies one of the difficulties for removing Sudan from the SST list. Unfortunately, lobbyist groups such as the Enough Project as well as celebrities such as George Clooney have taken up the cause of Darfur, which ultimately led to the labeling of the Darfur conflict as genocide in the UN. Today, many scholars dispute that label.³¹ Although significant atrocities took place in Darfur, the conflict was not along ethnic lines, the GOS's actions were part of a broader counterinsurgency campaign, and most of the fatalities occurred due to famine and disease. As a result of the UN's overreach in labeling Darfur as genocide, the ICC ruled in 2009 that al-Bashir should be arrested and tried. Despite his arrest warrant, al-Bashir has traveled to twenty-four different countries including China and Russia.³² Al-

Bashir bears an uncanny resemblance to another African ruler—Muammar Gadhafi, who was also wanted by the ICC, whose country was on the SST list, and who eventually curbed his behavior to align with US national interests.³³ In hindsight, the decision in 2006 to remove Libya from the SST list proved to be a good one—it led to the opening of Libya’s society and Gadhafi’s compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty—so too the decision to remove Sudan from the SST list will prove to be a good one, even though several lobbyists might disagree.

CONCLUSION

In summary, US policymakers should remove Sudan from the list of SST because the decision would advance US national interests, because the GOS responds to and complies with US diplomatic efforts, because of the decision’s positive impact on the international community, and because of how it would offset the negative Arab perception resulting from the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. At seventy-four years of age, al-Bashir is twenty years junior to Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe’s recently removed president. If twenty years ago, the US government had formed better ties with the Zimbabwe government, then perhaps a more democratic leader would have succeeded Mugabe. But instead of the US, it was China’s influence that seems to have determined Mugabe’s successor.³⁴ China's orchestration of Mugabe's removal signifies a significant turning point in African politics. Challenging the long-held assumption of Chinese investment with "no strings attached," many Africans will begin to wonder if China will next target their country for a coups d'etat, and, should the saboteurs succeed, whose interests will their future leader be most keen to advance—theirs or China’s. At some point, al-Bashir will need to relinquish power. Normalizing relations now with Sudan will ensure that when the time comes to appoint al-

Bashir's successor, the United States will at least have its foot in the door to recommend that it be the Sudanese people who determine Sudan's next president.

NOTES

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