Sudan Vision
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Sanctions Without Purpose: U.S. Penalizes Sudanese People to Punish Their Government

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Khartoum, Sudan- Like the dog that didn't bark in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's tale, little advertising promotes American goods in Khartoum. Ads ubiquitous elsewhere in the world are absent. U.S. products can be found -- usually resold through third countries. But public symbols of commercial America are lacking.

Washington has banned most business with Sudan. With few exceptions, Washington prohibits imports and exports, extension of credit, fulfillment of contracts, and all petroleum and petrochemical transactions. Sanctions have become a tool of choice for Washington to coerce governments short of war. Yet severing commercial relations rarely has promoted America's ends. Nothing obvious has been achieved in Sudan, where the U.S. stands alone.
Among the strongest supporters of economic coercion have been American Christians, understandably appalled by a long-running civil war which broadly pitted the Muslim-dominated central government against the nation's south, in which Christians and animists predominated. Yet that conflict ended years ago. Moreover, Sudanese Christians with whom I recently spoke said they suffer when Washington penalizes the Sudanese people for Khartoum's sins. Explained Rev. Filotheos Farag of Khartoum's El Shahidein Coptic Church, "We want to cancel all the sanctions."

The Clinton administration first imposed restrictions in 1993, citing Khartoum as an official state sponsor of terrorism. President Bill Clinton reinforced those penalties in 1997 by executive order, explaining that Khartoum was being punished for its "continued support of international terrorism, ongoing efforts to destabilize neighboring governments, and prevalence of human rights violations." A decade later the Bush administration imposed additional restrictions in response to continuing ethnic conflict.

All remain in effect, though earlier this year the Obama administration allowed the export of communications equipment. The impact of U.S. financial restrictions is magnified by foreign firms unwilling to risk tangential or indirect connections with America leading to penalties. Limited access to financial institutions and the need to operate in cash may be one of the most significant problems for the Sudanese. A receptionist at what used to be a Hilton -- now owned by a Middle Eastern company -- commented that sanctions are "a big problem" since people can't easily send or receive money.

U.S. sanctions are not watertight. One Sudanese businessman told me: "We are importing everything from Europe." He added: You "find cars from around the world." Firms from other nations also export to Sudan, but must avoid U.S. dealings. In some cases the alternative products clearly are inferior. Said one Sudanese official, "We cannot buy Boeing or Airbus, so we buy Antonov and Illuyshin." Acquiring spare parts for U.S.-made aircraft and rail cars has been a significant problem (which I noticed when I flew internally).

Other states are active in Sudan. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov "came here and said Russia wants a strategic partnership. One month later ministers from China were coming to support Sudan. They were ready to invest in a lot of areas, not just oil," explained a foreign ministry official. Thirteen Arab banks operate in Sudan. Many American products are available, though at added cost, through third countries. The foreign ministry official recounted how he sent his iPhone with a friend to Dubai to get it fixed. "Still, we want to reconcile with the U.S.," he said.

America matters, especially to an underdeveloped nation like Sudan. At the Khartoum airport I spoke with an Egyptian businessman who said "sanctions have sucked the life out of the economy." A Sudanese economics ministry official complained that "We are suffering a lot. Sanctions create many obstacles to the development process." Khartoum has pointed to lost concessional loans, higher interest rates on commercial lending, impediments to debt relief, the necessity for complicated currency conversions, refusal of foreign banks to deal with Sudanese institutions, and sharply reduced foreign investment. Officials cite the agriculture, health, information, and transportation sectors as particularly hard hit.

Hamid Salih Asanay, Minister of Social Affairs of the Red Sea State, noted special difficulties in health and education. He explained that Sudan was quite reliant on imports, which sanctions hit with particular force. There also is a social impact, said Asanay: "Vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the disabled, are suffering a lot." In some areas the poverty rate runs 50 percent. This has "affected social ties between tribes" and caused "some confrontations with unemployed youth," he noted. A UN official observed that "poverty is one of the key determinants of malnutrition," so sanctions indirectly add to that problem as well.

Washington obviously intends sanctions to cause economic hardship, but for what purpose? In the early 1990s Khartoum supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq against America and dallied with Islamic radicalism, even inviting Osama bin Laden to stay. However, that practice ended after 9/11.

A Sudanese diplomat insisted that his country "is always very cooperative with the U.S., even when it comes to combating terrorism," which Washington has affirmed. The administration's latest terrorism report stated: "Sudan remained a generally cooperative partner of the United States on counterterrorism. During the past year, the government of Sudan continued to support counterterrorism operations to counter threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Sudan."

Moreover, Khartoum "has taken steps to limit the activities of [al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist groups] and has worked to disrupt foreign fighters' use of Sudan as a logistics base and transit point for terrorists going to Syria and Iraq." Sudan also opposed terrorist fund-raising and "took steps to meet international standards in combating money laundering and terrorist financing." Obviously it makes no sense to apply sanctions against Khartoum on grounds of fighting terrorism.

Today Washington's main complaint is that Khartoum, like many other nations, has a relationship with Iran and Hamas. Yet Sudan has been moving closer to America's alliance partners in the Middle East -- Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States, for instance. In Libya Khartoum has shifted its support from Islamist to Western-backed forces and improved relations with Chad, supported by the West against jihadists. "Regionally, Sudan has come in from the cold," argued the Economist. In fact, sanctions hinder further cooperation by Khartoum. For instance, Sudan is a major transit route for refugees seeking to reach Europe. Sudanese officials complain that U.S. the controls limit their access to border surveillance equipment. Economic penalties also were used to punish the government for its brutal conduct in the country's long-standing civil wars. The Bush administration's special envoy to Sudan, Andrew Natsios, explained that the penalties meant "to send a message to the Sudanese government to start behaving differently when they deal with their own people. That's what this is all about." Sudan was one of many Third World states that combined often contentious ethnic groups, religions, tribes, and more. Conflict began even before independence. The murderous fighting went through multiple phases as the rebels both fractured and received outside support. Casualties were in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. It was seen as Muslim versus Christian, but in practice was much more complex. A peace agreement finally was reached in 2005 between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Army. The pact provided for a referendum, which ultimately lead to the formation of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011. Expectations were high. One Washington Times article declared: "U.S. eyes secession to keep peace in Sudan."

Alas, civil war engulfed the new country in December 2013. The International Crisis Group reported nearly two dozen armed factions with differing grievances, "and many do not support the peace process, creating a chaotic environment on the ground." The fact that America's nominal friends now are fighting each other highlights how the earlier Sudanese conflict always was more complicated than the simple Muslim-Christian meme. Isaiah Kanani of the Presbyterian Nile Theological College and formerly on the Sudan Council of Churches, told me "What you see going on in the south has nothing to do with religion. It is about tribal conflict." He added: "We are praying for reconciliation for our southern brothers."

A separate insurgency arose in Sudan's west around Darfur starting in 2003. The fighting and ethnic cleansing, involving the pro-government Janjaweed militia as well as Sudanese military, was particularly brutal, consuming hundreds of thousands of lives, whether or not it technically constituted genocide. The battle was complex: One Sudanese told me it was an "inter-communal conflict due to migration and crop destruction, plus an insurgency and military movements." This fighting led to the indictment of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir by the International

Criminal Court. A peace agreement was reached in 2006, but fighting soon resumed as groups fragmented and allies became enemies. The following years were filled with battles and talks. While government responsibility for the bloodshed was obvious, rebels also were accused of human rights abuses. Noted Jerome Tubiana of the International Crisis Group last year: "More than a decade into the Darfur conflict, it would be reductive to simply blame the government's militia strategy. There is plenty of blame to go around. The government, the rebels, and all the other players need to work together to stop the violence in all Sudan's peripheries."

Some fighting persists along the border, particularly in the provinces of Blue Nile and South Kordofan (containing the Nuba Mountains), in which both Sudan and South Sudan have been involved. This battle also is more ethnic and political than religious; civilians have suffered disproportionately, with thousands killed and tens of thousands turned into refugees. Mass rapes by the military also have been charged.

Obviously sanctions have outlived their purpose when it comes to the civil war that spawned South Sudan. They also have little relevance for Darfur, with the end of the mass killings of a decade ago. The ongoing combat, though still awful, is far more limited, indeed, hardly unusual for many Third World states. There's no obvious reason to punish Khartoum and not many other conflict-ridden nations. Nor have sanctions moderated Khartoum's policies. Instead, Washington has less influence.

Yet the economic penalties interfere with other U.S. objectives. Earlier this year State noted that "The Sudanese government's ability to monitor illicit finance flows is increasingly hampered by the Sudanese banking sector's difficulty finding correspondent banks to process international transactions, leading most Sudanese to instead move money in cash." El Fatih Ali Siddig, ex-minister of finance, made the same point. With international banks closing in Sudan, everyone relies more on cash. But this "creates the problem of money laundering. In a way U.S. is encouraging more money laundering."

Why do sanctions remain? Noted Jonathan Schanzer and Laura Grossman of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "to the Bashir regime, it appears the U.S. has moved the goalpost." Sudanese with whom I spoke felt misled by Washington. A Sudanese businessman complained: "You said to release south of Sudan. We did so. What else is necessary to end sanctions?" Siddig claimed that in talks over terrorism with the U.S. one American official said: "you are clean on terrorism. But the issue is political. Congress will not accept the end of sanctions."

Is there any other reason to maintain sanctions? Politics today in Sudan is authoritarian, but that has never bothered Washington. After all, the U.S. is paying and arming Egypt, more repressive now than under the Mubarak dictatorship. Khartoum also has been labeled a "Country of Particular Concern" by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Commission concluded that the government engages "in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom or belief." Yet the problems are worse in such U.S. allies as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The only other CPCs under sanctions are Iran and North Korea -- for their nuclear

activities. Ironically, by making the penalties essentially permanent the U.S. has made dialogue over political and religious liberty more difficult. With nothing at stake Khartoum has little reason to consider what Washington thinks.
Among the more perverse impacts of sanctions has been to encourage Khartoum to look for friends elsewhere. A Sudanese businessman argued that his country was "changing to China" in response to sanctions. State Minister Yahia Hussein Babiker said that we are "starting to get most of our heavy equipment through China." Chinese were a common sight and my hotel's restaurant offered Chinese dishes. Across the street was the "Panda Restaurant." Beijing built both the foreign ministry and presidential residence. China, as well as Russia and the Gulf States, also present, certainly won't be discussing human rights issues.

Equally important for a policy pushed especially hard by American Christians, sanctions are harming Sudanese Christians. Despite the many pressures resulting from life in an overwhelmingly Muslim society, Christians generally appear well-integrated into Sudanese society. I visited a number of churches of different denominations which appeared to operate freely. The Catholic cathedral sits across the street from the Foreign Ministry, which relies on a travel agency owned by a Coptic Christian. I visited the National Museum which hosted an exhibit on the country's Christian heritage going back to the 8th century.

"All Coptics, all Christians, are citizens," said Farag. He writes a column for the newspaper and was visited by Imams and government ministers while recently in the hospital. Every Sunday there is a Christian hour on television. There are limits, however: "some churches were taken from Southerners. They were treated very badly." He also warned against political involvement: If you "write against the government, there will be problems." Similar was Kanani's analysis: "Sudanese are tolerant of ethnicity and religion. Muslims and Christians get along. If you make trouble for the government, however, it will stop you."

Hafiz Fassha is an Evangelical Presbyterian pastor at the Evangelical Church of Khartoum North. His family contains both Muslims and Christians, which is not unusual, he said. His Muslim neighbors have "helped take care of his family" and he would do the same. "There are many examples like this, examples of coexistence." George Banna, the Patriarchal Vicar in the Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarchate, heads the Oriental Catholic church. He hung a picture taken with Bashir in his home and said that government ministers responded to his plea to close the open trench by the church which served as a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

A consistent message from these and other Christian clerics is that they suffer disproportionately from U.S. sanctions. Said Farag: "Everybody here is affected. From America we stopped importing necessities we need." Moreover, "many businesses here are closed. Taxation is much higher." The husband of our interpreter, he said, "had to close his travel operation." Indeed, "All people in church are suffering," In his view "the government is not punished. If officials ask about anything, they can bring it from outside. But we can't." (I heard similar complaints from Serb opposition workers almost two decades before.)

Kanani said much the same. "Generally speaking sanctions are affecting everyone in the community in every corner of the country." Unfortunately, "the grassroots feel it very harshly." He pointed to lost jobs and people relocating for work. Moreover, while people believe the government is not responsible for these problems, their "eyes fix on the government to find a solution."

Fassha reported that economic controls have a "real bad impact on Sudan," which obviously affects Christians "as part of the community." The harm is felt in "medical services, even education." He had a cousin with cancer whose doctor told him that the necessary medication was in "very limited supply due to sanctions." Fassha's church has a relationship with the Presbyterian Church in America, but when they have "money transfers, financial transfers, with brother churches in America, they have problems," as do other Sudanese relying on remittances. He prays for the lifting of sanctions, which "are like putting oil on a fire," he complained. Finally, he believed: "According to Christian teachings they have to solve problems by dialogue so it is important that Sudan and America get together to solve the problem, the humanitarian problem."

Sanctions "make life very difficult for Christians and their jobs," reported Banna, also a member of the Sudan Council of Churches. A number are in businesses or professions and "they find difficulties importing what they need." Medicines and equipment, spare parts, and raw materials all are in short supply. Over the years "many have left the country for financial reasons." Many were well-established and "I don't think they would have left otherwise." Some told him that "if they were working they wouldn't have left." As for the church, "we depend on donations. If members don't work, they don't have anything to give." He suffered from prostate cancer and the necessary treatment was not available in Sudan. He went to Australia, where one of his daughters and a sister live, for treatment. "We all oppose sanctions," he said.

In Port Sudan I visited Coptic and Catholic Churches. Father Elia Saad at the former noted that "all the people of Sudan are suffering from sanctions. It affects the livelihood of the people." At the latter I spoke with two priests, E. Luigi Cignolini and Antonio Manganhe Meej. Cignolini said because of the sanctions "we don't get offerings. Even Europe can't send them. Of course this hampers our work." Sanctions have a disproportionate impact on the poor: "The rich find their way," he opined.

Meej also emphasized that "Poor people feel it more." When they aren't able to pay their school fees "it is becoming impossible to run these schools." In school, he said, they have trouble getting the latest information and can't upgrade computer programs. "Apple iPhones and Blackberries don't work," he said. While the U.S. might believe it is punishing the government, it is "only punishing the people."

Another adverse impact on Sudanese Christians, argued Fassha, was that some people "hate those who impose sanctions on Sudan." That means Americans, mostly. Unfortunately, he believed popular ire also targeted Sudanese Christian churches. Local people "imagine that if sanctions come from a Christian government, then they believe the church has a share in it as Christians from Sudan." That is, some Sudanese Muslims believe that "because Christians are against Muslims and are imposing sanctions, maybe the church is helping." Other Sudanese Christians believed the Sudanese people were more forgiving on the issue.

There was and remains much about which to criticize Sudan's government. However, U.S. sanctions have lost any purpose they once may have had. The Khartoum regime is no worse than many others, including some allied with America. Sanctions have not changed the Sudanese policies to which Washington objects. The penalties also inhibit bilateral dialogue, including over religious persecution, such as the imprisonment and threatened execution of a Christian convert last year (she ultimately was released and emigrated to America). Indeed, Siddig, who was educated at the University of Wisconsin, worried that Sudanese are not exposed to nearly as many Americans as they would otherwise. He noted how "personal contact can change attitudes," as it did for him, when he went to the U.S. for school.

Most important for American Christians, the sanctions hurt believers already living and worshipping in difficult circumstances. Said Fassha: "We love America. We need America to help Sudan." That will happen only when Washington removes sanctions and allows the Sudanese to rejoin the international economic community. Isolation most hurts vulnerable communities, such as religious minorities.

Changed circumstances require changed policies. So it is in Sudan. More than two decades have passed since economic controls were first imposed. U.S. policy should change along with the world.

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