



Egypt-Sudan: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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The Sudan's neighbor, Egypt, has until now been one of its staunchest allies, willing to support the government of Sudanese President *Bashir* at any cost. The reluctance of the United States to translate its rhetoric into action and get tough on Khartoum has also, until now, largely been dictated by the potential impact such action could have on Egypt, one of its main allies in the region. But, is the situation changing? The veteran Egyptian writer/journalist *Muhammad Hassanein Haykal* is a strong supporter of Pan-Arabism and, until recently at least, a supporter of the Sudanese government. This week, however, *Haykal* stated that the Sudanese government's unwillingness to change its policy towards the South and Darfur requires action (what he referred to as a "surgical operation"), which he says is about to occur.¹ It is unclear, however, whether *Haykal's* statements reflect an actual change in the Egyptian government's policy towards the Sudan. PI Online examines the dilemma Egypt faces.

On the surface, Egypt's support for the Sudanese government appears to be a form of solidarity between the people of both countries based upon their common Islamic and Arab roots. However, given the religious, ethnic and socio-economic divides splitting the Sudanese population between Muslims and non-Muslims, Arabs and Africans and farmers and nomads, however, notions of solidarity cannot explain, or sustain, the Egyptian-Sudanese relationship. In reality, that relationship is far more complex.



For observers of the Middle East, the most important economic and political aspect of Egypt's relationship with Sudan can be summarized simply in two words – the Nile. As Herodotus stated in the fifth century BC, Egypt is "a gift of the Nile". The water of the Nile runs through Egypt from the Sudan and it is a tie that binds. While there are other considerations that drive the Egyptian government to oppose international pressure on the government in Khartoum, the water resources of the Nile are undoubtedly one of Egypt's most pressing concerns.

An article by *Badr Hassan Shafei*, which examines the Sudanese crisis as a matter of "the Egyptian national security," describes four serious implications upheaval in Khartoum could have for Egypt.

1. He first discusses the potential migration of armed militia to the North, which could operate in Egyptian territory to disrupt Egyptian security or launch counter-offensives into Sudan. *Shafei* also mentions a relationship between Israel and the Sudanese southern army or the rebels in Darfur, citing the liberation army of *Abdelwahed Nour* which he claims has opened an office in Tel-Aviv. In addition, he raises the related concern that more refugees will flood into Egypt, recreating the crisis that erupted in Cairo at the end of 2005 when Sudanese refugees established a protest camp and had to be forcibly dispersed and relocated by the Egyptian security police.
2. *Shafei* then cites political movements in the Northern Sudan, such as the *Kosh* movement,² demanding an independent Nubian country in land that is presently part of the Sudan and Egypt. According to *Shafei*, the

¹ http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1209358023732&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout

² Name given after the ancient Nubian king who ruled Egypt

concern is that the dormant Nubian aspirations will revive and that the United States could use the “Nubia card” to put pressure on the Egyptian government to extract policy concessions.

3. In his third point, *Shafei* touches on the importance of the Nile, noting that the increase in population has raised the demand for water resources and will eventually lead Egypt to demand an increase in its water allocation from the Nile basin. It would be easier, according to *Shafei*, to negotiate such demands with a unified Islamic/Arab Sudanese government than with a Sudan divided into multiple distinct territories (a Northern territory with Khartoum as its capital, a western territory in Darfur, a southern one ruled by the Popular Army and an Eastern territory ruled by the forces of *Al-Bija*).



- 4) Finally, *Shafei* notes that the Sudan represents Egypt’s gate to the African continent, which is important for Egypt’s efforts to reinforce its ties with African countries – a policy that has been in place since Egypt joined the COMESA³ in 1998.

Shafei’s points are well taken (although his statements about the intentions of Israel and the U.S. seem to be an unnecessary distraction from his analysis of the real problems Egypt is grasping with). Thus, it is somewhat perplexing that despite those problems he remains optimistic that Egypt can play an active role in mediating a solution to the problem in the Sudan.

Until now, Egypt’s approach to the Sudanese crisis, which it has coordinated with Libya, calls for maintaining a unified Sudan under an Arab-Muslim government, and mediating a peaceful solution to the conflict between the government in Khartoum and southern Sudan. Egypt has also adamantly opposed sanctions against the Sudanese government in response to what is viewed worldwide as a campaign of genocide in Darfur. That approach, however, conflicts with the views of the United States and the European Communities. The US and the EC advocate either maintaining a united secularized Sudan, or allowing the largely Christian/African South to determine its own destiny.

In light of *Haykal*’s prediction of a “surgical operation”, it remains to be seen whether Egypt has finally given up on the *Bashir* government and what the goal of such an operation would be. The current government in Khartoum is not viable. A new government with a Muslim-Arab constitution, however, would be rejected by the South, and a secular government is unlikely to be accepted by the Muslim Arab world. As a result, it seems that partition of the Sudan is becoming more likely day by day.

Source: Aljazeera – May 29th, 2008
<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/448EECB5-F2DB-4C14-A3E4-EB09907214D1.htm>

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³ The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) comprises 19 member states, with a population over 390 million. Member states are: Burundi, Comoros, Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.