

Sudan, Terrorism, and the Obama Administration

Written by Eric Reeves

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ERIC REEVES, FEB 24 2011

Following the celebration of an apparently successful referendum for South Sudan, we should not forget the deals the Obama administration was obliged to cut so that voting could take place as scheduled—and what further deals will be required going forward to ensure the secession vote is respected by the Khartoum regime. The most significant concession was suggested last September, when President Obama declared that Khartoum's National Islamic Front/National Congress Party (NIF/NCP) might escape its listing of many years as a state sponsor of terrorism—the greatest burden the regime feels internationally—if they facilitated the referendum. On Monday (February 7) Obama made good on that offer:

“For those who meet all of their obligations, there is a path to greater prosperity and normal relations with the United States, including examining Sudan’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.”

Secretary of State Clinton was more explicit and detailed:

“Removal of the state sponsor of terrorism designation will take place if and when Sudan meets all criteria spelled out in U.S. law, including not supporting international terrorism for the preceding six months and providing assurance it will not support such acts in the future, and fully implements the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, including reaching a political solution on Abyei and key post-referendum arrangements.”

So just how justified is this enormous carrot the U.S. is offering Khartoum? What's strikingly omitted from Clinton's list of criteria is a demand that the regime work in good faith to end what the U.S. still officially describes as “genocide” in Darfur. This is not, however, so surprising: last November senior U.S. officials declared in a State Department “backgrounder” that when it came to assessing Khartoum and its history of supporting terrorism, the “Darfur issue” had been “de-coupled.” This culminated an Obama administration process of “de-emphasizing” Darfur that began last August. Perversely, this so despite the fact that there are few places in the world today in which “terror” is more a fact of life than in the displaced persons camps in Darfur, and in rural areas that remain vulnerable to Arab militia attacks and Khartoum's continuing aerial bombardment.

The Real Issue

But leaving aside the obvious expediency of the Obama administration's “de-coupling” decision—ultimately a reflection of ineptitude and diplomatic failure on Darfur—is a decision to remove Sudan from the list of terrorism-sponsoring countries really warranted? And by “Sudan” here, I mean of course the Khartoum regime, which will retain its stranglehold on national wealth and power after Southern secession in July—indeed, will face even less opposition and scrutiny than it does now with a Southern presence in the factitious “Government of National Unity.”

In July 2009 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Scott Gration—Obama's special envoy for Sudan—declared:

“There's no evidence in our intelligence community that supports [Sudan] being on the state sponsors of terrorism. It's a political decision.”

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This is not what he would tell Darfuris in September 2009. Rather, when pressed about his Senate testimony, Gration declared in an interview with Radio Dabanga (an increasingly important news clearinghouse for Darfur): “I never said [that] we should remove Sudan from the terrorist list.” This seems rather thoroughly disingenuous, given his that claim that Sudan remains on the list only because of a purely “political decision”—one that Gration insists is not supported by evidence from “our intelligence community.”

But is this true? More consequential than what Gration did say is what he did *not* say in his Senate testimony—and this gets to the heart of the deal that the Obama administration has struck with Khartoum. Notably, the most recent State Department assessment of international terrorism (August 2010) finds that “al-Qa’ida-inspired terrorist elements as well as elements of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and HAMAS, remained in Sudan in 2009.” So what to make of Gration’s claim of July 2009 that there is “no evidence in our intelligence community” that Khartoum supports terrorism? The presence of these terrorist organizations certainly would have required acquiescence from the NIF/NCP regime. Moreover, U.S. intelligence knows that as recently as March 2009 Sudan had a role in supplying Iranian arms for Hamas in Gaza. *The Guardian* (UK) reported late last year on “Wikileaks” State Department cables from both January and March 2009:

“State department cables released by WikiLeaks show that Sudan was warned by the U.S. in January 2009 not to allow the delivery of unspecified Iranian arms that were expected to be passed to Hamas in the Gaza Strip around the time of Israel’s Cast Lead offensive, in which 1,400 Palestinians were killed.” (December 6, 2010)

US diplomats were instructed to express “exceptional concern” to Khartoum officials, but those warnings evidently went unheeded. *The Guardian* goes on to report:

“In March 2009, Jordan and Egypt were informed by the U.S. of new Iranian plans to ship a cargo of ‘lethal military equipment’ to Syria with onward transfer to Sudan and then to Hamas.”

The cables don’t specify what the disposition of this “lethal military equipment” was. But Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by Canada, the European Union, Japan—and the US. Khartoum’s role in the supply operation to Hamas in March 2009 is explicitly identified by U.S. intelligence. So, was Gration’s testimony an exercise in deception or ignorance? Both are dismaying possibilities for an administration that came to office having excoriated the Bush team for expediency in its own negotiations with Khartoum. In April 2008 candidate Obama expressed “deep concern” that the Bush administration was making an unseemly deal with the Khartoum regime as a means to bolster the fledgling but already failing UN/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID):

“This reckless and cynical initiative would reward a regime in Khartoum that has a record of failing to live up to its commitments. First, no country should be removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism for any reason other than the existence of verifiable proof that the government in question does not support terrorist organizations.”

Indeed! But what, then, about the disconnect between what candidate Obama said in April 2008 and what his special envoy to Sudan was saying a little over a year later to the U.S. Senate? What about those State Department cables that speak of Khartoum’s planned involvement in supporting a terrorist group—Hamas—in March 2009? (And let’s not forget that this is the same Khartoum regime gave sanctuary to Osama bin Laden from 1991 – 1996, the years during which al-Qaeda came to fruition.) What about the U.S. Darfur Peace and Accountability Act (DPAA), which Obama administration officials now say they will simply ignore (“waive”)? As a presidential candidate Obama celebrated his “creation” of the DPAA while he was in the Senate; but the Act requires Khartoum to end genocide in Darfur before the regime can be removed from the terrorism list. Is ignoring the DPAA more hypocrisy from the Obama administration in speaking about Khartoum and terrorism?

Why Did They Do It?

Having allowed Khartoum to cruise through so much of the electoral calendar for South Sudan’s self-determination referendum, the Obama team lurched into ungainly diplomatic action last September in an effort to put this essential vote back on track. But in doing so, Darfur was explicitly “de-coupled,” and many of the key issues that had been

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obvious six years ago at the time of the CPA signing were never resolved: the status of the explosive Abyei region; other disputes about the 1,200-mile border; oil revenue-sharing (75 – 80 percent of oil reserves are in the seceding South); citizenship for Southerners who remain in the North; division of the massive external debt Khartoum had accrued over many years of profligate spending; and a military stand-down, or at least the creation of a UN-enforced buffer zone (predictably opposed by Khartoum). Key issues all, but now the regime is to be handsomely rewarded simply for doing some of what it had previously agreed to do.

Moreover, the peace that has rightly been celebrated by the international community is extraordinarily fragile. We should recall that shortly before the referendum, Khartoum repeatedly bombed civilian and military targets in the South; Khartoum-inspired violence in Abyei during the referendum very nearly brought about a major military confrontation; and military violence subsequent to the vote has left scores dead in Malakal and other locations in Upper Nile State. We must hope that the standards laid out for Khartoum by Secretary Clinton will be the source of more rigorous assessment than we have seen from U.S. special envoy Gration over the past two years, and that she will keep in mind *all* U.S. laws in evaluating regime behavior.

Certainly we must ask about the wisdom of “de-coupling” Darfur at a time when humanitarian reach is contracting yet further, violence and civilian displacement are escalating, and the UNAMID peacekeeping operation is essentially paralyzed—all forces putting millions of innocent civilians at risk. Terror in the west of Sudan is far from concluded.

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