

The U.S. Must Help to Consolidate Civilian Government in Sudan Against Entrenched Security Hardliners

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The formation of an at least nominally civilian transitional government in Sudan is an opportunity for it to escape Islamist autocracy.

The unfolding transition requires thoughtful, committed American engagement for the foreseeable future, given entrenched security elites' effort to maintain power.

The U.S. and its partners must support unity within the Sudanese civilian movement, and hold it accountable for delivering responsible and effective government.

The East African country of Sudan has been a problem for the U.S. for decades. Its dictator Omar al-Bashir cooperated with American enemies, such as Iran and al-Qaeda. He embedded Islamism within the government and security institutions, and his scorched-earth wars against his own people created hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees. His regime allowed, or was unable to stop, the movement of terrorists and illegal migrants through his country, and he embroiled Sudan in border conflicts and proxy wars with neighboring states.

Its strategic importance made the Sudan problem all the more pressing. Sudan has 530 miles of coastline on one of the world's most important shipping routes, the Red Sea. Its nearest point sits about 120 miles from the western shores of Saudi Arabia.¹ It is Africa's 10th-most populous country, with 40 million people; and its approximately 200 million

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acres of arable land—coupled with about a quarter share of Nile River water²—makes it a potential agricultural hub for a region struggling to produce enough food for its people. Bashir’s mercenary approach to foreign policy has also made Sudan fiercely contested ground in the rivalry among Middle Eastern states.

While Bashir’s regime tried to mend fences with the U.S. in the past several years, his ouster through a military coup on April 11, 2019, and the subsequent formation of a transitional government with significant civilian involvement opened a window of opportunity. Yet there are powerful forces opposed to what would be the best outcome for Washington: the establishment of a friendly, civilian, non-Islamist government powerful enough to stabilize the country. Sudan’s unfolding transition is potentially positive as well as dangerous for U.S. interests, and requires wise and committed American engagement for the foreseeable future.

A Landmark Agreement

On August 21, Sudan’s chief justice swore in a new prime minister and a Sovereignty Council charged with shepherding the country through an approximately three-year transitional period. The ceremony followed a series of agreements between a coalition of Sudanese civilian groups known as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that had ruled the country since ousting Bashir in the April 11 coup.

The putsch followed months of large-scale street protests in cities across Sudan, featuring Sudanese from all walks of life. Sparked by discontent over the mounting cost of basic necessities, the uprising evolved into a movement to unseat the brutal and corrupt Sudanese government. Hardliners from the security services, fearing that Bashir was no longer able to keep the government together, removed him and established the TMC.³ After some initial shuffling of the leadership, a Lieutenant General in the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, settled in atop the TMC. Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (better known as “Hemeti”), leader of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), became the TMC’s deputy head.

The TMC claimed it would lead the country to elections, but the protesters demanded a civilian-led transition. Amid stalled negotiations, factions of the security services attacked the main protest camp in Khartoum on June 3, likely killing well over a hundred protesters and injuring, detaining, and raping scores more.⁴

TEXT BOX 1

The Sudanese Security Services Hydra

Sudan's security services are complex and fractured, partly by design. Omar al-Bashir seized power in a 1989 coup, and in an effort to protect himself from the same fate, weakened parts of the security services while strengthening others, playing all parts off each other. In the current crisis, the three most relevant security elements are the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS)—which was rebranded as the General Intelligence Service (GIS) in July.¹

Lieutenant General Hemeti leads the RSF, a paramilitary that grew from the notorious Janjaweed Arab militias in Sudan's Darfur region in the west. He rose through the ranks of the Janjaweed before being appointed head of the RSF when Bashir formalized the force in 2013. Bashir mandated the RSF to suppress internal rebellions and prevent coups (he reportedly referred to Hemeti as "my protector"²), but Hemeti helped to remove Bashir after RSF forces moved into Khartoum in response to the protests. The RSF was initially a part of NISS and was later merged with the SAF,³ but operates independently. It may have as many as 50,000 fighters.⁴

Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan heads the SAF, the country's military, which is comprised of the army, navy, air force, and the Popular Defense Forces, an irregular, Islamist, militia-reserve force.⁵ Bashir's regime purged much of the SAF's senior leadership as part of an Islamization and coup-proofing campaign, and further divided and weakened the SAF by favoring specific branches within it while marginalizing others. Bashir's regime also created and empowered various militias that further diluted the SAF's authority.⁶ Estimates of SAF manpower range from 100,000 to 180,000 troops.⁷

Abubakar Mustafa "Dambalab" heads Sudan's feared NISS since his predecessor, the infamous Salah Mohamed Abdallah "Gosh," fled the country in May 2019. The NISS originated from Sudan's Islamic Security unit that Bashir's regime founded after the 1989 coup.⁸ NISS is a paramilitary intelligence force with well-armed, capable combat elements charged with regime security and other sensitive tasks, such as guarding oil pipelines.⁹ It is infamous for disappearing and torturing regime opponents in "ghost houses."¹⁰ Together with the RSF, NISS was involved in much of the brutality directed against protesters.

1. This *Backgrounders* uses the NISS acronym rather than GIS, as the former is still in common usage, and the organization was known as NISS when most of the events described in this *Backgrounders* occurred.
2. Peter Munaita, "The Resistible Rise of a Warlord to Sudan's Political Helm," *The East African*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Rise-to-Sudan-political-helm/4552902-5204954-b8owc9/index.html> (accessed September 16, 2019).
3. Mohamed Elagami, "The Checkered Past of Sudan's Hemedti," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, May 29, 2019, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/checkered-past-of-sudans-hemedti/> (accessed September 16, 2019).
4. Declan Walsh, "Sudan Ousted a Brutal Dictator. His Successor Was His Enforcer," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/world/africa/sudan-leader-hemeti.html> (accessed September 16, 2019).
5. LaVerle Berry, ed., *Sudan: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2015), 5th ed., <https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sudancountrystud00berry/sudancountrystud00berry.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2019).
6. International Crisis Group, "Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Future Stability," *Africa Report* No. 174, May 4, 2011, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/174-divisions-in-sudan-s-ruling-party-and-the-threat-to-the-country-s-stability.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2019), and Jago Salmon, "A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces," *Small Arms Survey HSBA Working Paper* No. 10, December 2007, <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-10-Paramilitary-Revolution.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2019).
7. GlobalSecurity, "Sudan—Military Personnel," <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/sudan/personnel.htm> (accessed September 16, 2019), and "Cutting a Deal on a Knife-Edge," *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 60, No. 10 (May 2019), https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/12638/Cutting_a_deal_on_a_knife-edge (accessed September 16, 2019).
8. Berry, ed., *Sudan: A Country Study*.

9. The rebranding of NISS reportedly includes focusing its mission on “combating terrorism and espionage, preventing human trafficking and fighting corruption and money laundering.” There are also reports that the restructuring will transfer NISS’s armed wing to RSF control. “Sudan Issues Decree to Restructure National Security Body,” *Xinhua*, July 30, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/30/c_138268173.htm (accessed September 16, 2019), and Lauren P. Blanchard, “#Sudan’s junta issues a decree renaming the infamous National Intelligence & Security Services (NISS) and seemingly restructuring the agency. The decree follows reports that the RSF has taken over the NISS’s operations division (of which it was once part).” Tweet, July 29, 2019, 4:22 p.m., <https://twitter.com/laurenbindc/status/1155936640981798912> (accessed September 16, 2019). Lauren Blanchard is a specialist in African affairs at the Congressional Research Service.
10. News release, “Sudan: Students Beaten, Detained and Reportedly Tortured in ‘Ghost Houses,’” Amnesty International, February 13, 2006, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/sudan-students-beaten-detained-and-reportedly-tortured-ghost-houses> (accessed September 16, 2019).

The brutal crackdown did not end the protests, and the subsequent international outcry raised the pressure on the TMC. Its primary international supporters—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt—apparently believing the generals had overstepped and likely fearing the reputational damage they could suffer by association, joined the pressure.

On July 17, the TMC and the FFC signed a power-sharing agreement that laid out the structure of the transitional government. The two sides initialed a subsequent August 4 agreement, known as the “constitutional declaration,” that resolved a number of outstanding issues, and officially signed the document on August 21.

The agreements established the Sovereignty Council that consists of five military officers and six civilians.⁵ Lieutenant General Burhan will head the council for the first 21 months (Hemeti is also on the council), and a civilian will lead for the final 18. The Sovereignty Council established a Council of Ministers headed by newly sworn-in Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and will establish a Legislative Council, 67 percent of whose members the FFC will choose. Other civilian groups that participated in the protests and that are not associated with Bashir will choose the remaining legislators. Hamdok has selected most of the 18 ministers he can appoint, and the TMC, per the agreements, appointed the Interior and Defense Ministers.⁶

Now for the Hard Part

Despite the understandable euphoria surrounding the signing of the constitutional declaration, powerful hardliners within the security services will almost certainly do everything they can to prevent true civilian rule of Sudan. A civilian government would endanger the hardliners’ two core interests—their economic privileges and their immunity from prosecution. They will not abide by any arrangement that strips them of sufficient power to protect those interests.

The range of economic benefits that the security services enjoy due to their privileged position is extensive. The RSF controls a business fiefdom centered in Darfur, and Hemeti has economic interests stretching from iron and steel to a limousine-for-hire company.⁷ In 2017, he seized the Jebel Amir complex of gold mines in North Darfur. While it is unclear how much he makes from the mines, they netted the former owner an estimated \$54 million every year.⁸

The RSF's control of stretches of Sudan's border brings more money, as it reportedly profits from the human smuggling common in the region.⁹ It also reportedly collects taxes and customs fees in the regions in which it is active.¹⁰

Hemeti further profits by renting RSF fighters out to the Emirati and Saudi coalition fighting in Yemen, providing most of the as many as 14,000 Sudanese serving there at any one time.¹¹ Hemeti also sent a brigade of RSF fighters to serve with Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army, in exchange for financial support.¹² The Saudi-led coalition of Arab states may also directly support Hemeti.¹³

Other elements of the security services benefit from their privileged position in Sudan. Khartoum's 2017 budget allocated as much as 75 percent of the country's expenditures to the defense and security sectors.¹⁴ Sudanese elites, including from NISS, SAF, and the police, own or control at least 164 companies with interests in a broad range of industries.¹⁵ The SAF also has troops in Yemen for which it is paid, and even low-level members of the security services benefit from the widespread practice of demanding bribes.¹⁶

Immunity

Perhaps the most pressing concern for the security hardliners is avoiding prosecution for their many crimes.¹⁷ All elements of the Sudanese security services have committed atrocities, including Sudan's most powerful generals, Hemeti and Burhan. Hemeti was a Janjaweed (a militia) warlord before it became the RSF—during his tenure the militia committed such brutal crimes in Darfur that the International Criminal Court indicted Omar al-Bashir for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Burhan was a colonel in military intelligence during the Darfur atrocities, and helped direct attacks against civilians.¹⁸ The NISS's history of committing extreme human rights abuses, such as torture and murder, is also well documented.¹⁹ Most recently, the RSF, police, and NISS all committed serious abuses during the popular uprising.²⁰

Under Bashir, the security services were protected from prosecution for their misconduct. The 2010 National Security Act gave NISS officials immunity for acts committed as part of their official duties.²¹ When the Sudanese government formalized the RSF in 2013, it extended the Security Act's immunities to the RSF.²²

The security hardliners have good reason to fear prosecution if civilians take undisputed control of the government. Many civilians throughout the protests have demanded justice for abuses the security services meted out.²³ The constitutional declaration calls for accountability for the previous regime's crimes, for an investigation into the June 3 massacre, and stipulates that the civilian-appointed Legislative Council can strip members of the security services of their immunity in the case of severe crimes.²⁴ Just a few days after his swearing-in, Prime Minister Hamdok reiterated the need for justice for those responsible for violence during the protests.²⁵

The Security Hardliners' Options

It is implausible in the extreme that the security hardliners will abide by an agreement that imperils their economic privileges and triggers an investigation that could put them in prison. The hardliners' willingness to agree to the declaration—and make public avowals to seek justice for the perpetrators of the violence²⁶—suggests that they either do not intend to fully honor their commitments, or that they believe they can adequately protect themselves in the new political dispensation.²⁷

There is some opening within the agreements for the security hardliners to shield their privileges. The security services retain control of two important portfolios, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense. The constitutional declaration also stipulates that Sovereignty Council decisions require either consensus or a two-thirds majority to be implemented, so that at least one military officer will have to agree with the civilians to reach the necessary threshold.²⁸ That gives the security hardliners an opportunity to block legislation, though the constitutional declaration does provide a way for civilians to overcome such an obstacle.²⁹

Furthermore, it is unclear when the Legislative Council—the body that can vote to strip immunity—will be formed, and how effective it will be. The FFC, which will select most of the members of the Legislative Council, is diverse and fractious, and agreeing on 200 legislators will be difficult. Civilian groups outside the FFC also have to choose 100 legislators, further increasing the potential for a slow and haphazard process that may result in an unwieldy and divided legislative body.

TEXT BOX 2

Sudan's New Constitutional Declaration and Its Threat to the Hardliners

The constitutional declaration¹ has many provisions that, if faithfully implemented, would ruin the security services' most powerful men. Some of these provisions are:

7. (3): "Hold accountable members of the former regime by law for all crimes committed against the Sudanese people since 30 June 1989."

7. (16): "Form a national, independent investigation committee, with African support if necessary as assessed by the national committee, to conduct a transparent, meticulous investigation of violations committed on 3 June 2019, and events and incidents where violations of the rights and dignity of civilian and military citizens were committed. The committee shall be formed within one month from the date the appointment of the Prime Minister is approved, and that the order forming the committee contains guarantees that it will be independent and possess full powers to investigate and determine the timeframe for its activities."

Given that the RSF and NISS are credibly accused of leading the June 3 massacre, those units' leaders are highly motivated to ensure a "transparent, meticulous investigation of violations" never occurs.

18. (2): "The chairman and members of the Sovereignty Council and ministers, governor and ministries of provinces or heads of regions undertake to not practice any profession or commercial or financial activity while occupying their positions. They do not receive any financial compensation, gifts, or work of any type from any non-government entity, whatever the case may be."

All five of the military representatives on the Sovereignty Council are senior generals. One of them, Hemeti, runs an extensive commercial enterprise that this clause proscribes. Given the security services' enmeshment in the Sudanese economy, it is likely that the other four generals have similar interests that are now also forbidden.

21. (1): "Criminal procedures may not be taken against any members of the Sovereignty Council, Cabinet, Transitional Legislative Council or governors of provinces/heads of regions without receiving permission to lift immunity from the Legislative Council." And 21. (2): "The decision to lift this procedural immunity is issued by a simple majority of members of the Legislative Council."

Any senior officer in the Sudanese security services has likely been involved in war crimes, given the security services' brutal, decades-long record. The senior officers of the Sovereignty Council surely dislike this provision that allows the civilians of the Legislative Council to rescind a member of the Sovereignty Council's immunity from prosecution, making all five military members theoretically vulnerable.

67. g: "Start implementing transitional justice and accountability measures for crimes against humanity and war crimes, and present the accused to national and international courts, in application of the no-immunity principle."

As with clauses 7. (3), 7. (16), 21. (1), and 21. (2), the military members of the Sovereignty Council almost certainly wish to avoid "justice and accountability measures" that would inevitably ensnare them if faithfully carried out.

1. Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period, translation by Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <http://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Sudan%20Constitutional%20Declaration%20%28English%29.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2019).

Yet navigating the ruthless netherworld of Sudanese politics has probably trained the hardliners to mistrust everyone. They likely wish to control their own fate by remaining in power, and signed the declaration merely to relieve the pressure they were under from the popular uprising and the international community. They may also understand that rescuing Sudan's spiraling economy—which provoked the protests in the first place—will require foreign investment and help from international financial institutions.³⁰ Until Sudan escapes the State Department's official list of state sponsors of terrorism—and the U.S. has signaled that a civilian-led government will be a prerequisite for removal³¹—it cannot access any such assistance, and foreign investors will probably remain wary.

Given these realities, the security hardliners are likely to attempt the delicate task of appearing to abide by the agreements while ensuring that an independent civilian government does not form. A civilian veneer to their continued dominance would avoid provoking the street, give their allies cover to further support them, and potentially help them move from the U.S.'s terrorism list.

Part of the strategy is almost sure to be an attempt to fracture the civilian movement. The protesters achieved a remarkable feat, but the alliance is strained. The Sudanese Communist Party, an important part of the FFC, rejected the July 17 power-sharing agreement and the initialing of the constitutional declaration,³² as did the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), a coalition of major Sudanese armed groups.³³

The elections ending the transitional period are supposed to consolidate civilian control of the government, but the security hardliners may view these elections as an opportunity to achieve the patina of legitimacy they need. If the generals believe they have hamstrung the popular movement, or that it has neutered itself with internal bickering, they would likely support elections, hoping to either win outright or to manipulate them sufficiently to get a military man or a figurehead civilian elected. They may even rush the country to elections if it is favorable to them.

Will the Security Services Break?

The security services have their own internal divisions that threaten the unity needed to outmaneuver the civilians. There are particular tensions among the SAF, RSF, and NISS. SAF and RSF units may have fought one another in 2016 in Darfur due to tensions around the RSF's brutal treatment of civilians.³⁴ During the recent protests, some younger SAF officers and soldiers in Khartoum were reportedly confined to their barracks without weapons as the RSF

MAP 1

Sudan and Surrounding Region



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and NISS prepared to raid a protester camp.³⁵ SAF soldiers even exchanged gunfire with NISS in an attempt to protect protesters from a NISS raid.³⁶ The prospect of the security services melting down into a civil war so rattled the generals that it probably contributed to their decision to remove Bashir.³⁷

Many within the SAF also reportedly resent Hemeti and the RSF's meteoric rise to prominence, in part because Hemeti is illiterate and has no formal military education or service.³⁸ He also hails from the periphery—as the marginalized regions of Sudan are known—while officers from tribes in the country's center dominate the SAF and NISS.³⁹ Finally, Hemeti's duplicity earned him powerful enemies. He joined with the then-head of NISS, Salah Gosh, to unseat Bashir, and then turned on Gosh, forcing him to flee Sudan. Such incidents have likely deepened distrust and bitterness within the security services.⁴⁰

Yet there is no guarantee that these tensions will outweigh the security services' interests in protecting their economic prerogatives, and they all would suffer under a civilian-led government determined to see justice served. Their shared history of brutality binds them together. Furthermore, Burhan and Hemeti reportedly have a strong relationship derived from their time commanding Sudanese forces in Yemen.⁴¹

Since the coup, Hemeti has also consolidated power by arresting and removing senior leaders of rival elements in the government and security services.⁴² The SAF is larger than the RSF, but RSF fighters are well-equipped, seasoned, and much better paid,⁴³ and so perhaps more loyal. Hemeti has an independent and diversified funding stream that has made him wealthy.⁴⁴ He is also backed by powerful friends, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The Generals' Arab Allies

There are a number of foreign powers whose influence in Sudan will significantly shape the outcome of the transition. Three of the most relevant are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The trio have strong relationships and interests in Sudan that significantly overlap and prompted their support of the TMC. Soon after the generals deposed Bashir, the Saudis and Emiratis promised \$3 billion in aid, and reportedly sent plane loads of military equipment to Khartoum.⁴⁵ Egypt gave strong diplomatic support to Sudan at the African Union.

One of the trio's primary concerns is ensuring that Sudan's new government excludes Islamists. Egypt and the UAE in particular oppose political Islam, and the latter has made suppressing it one of its primary foreign policy goals. Saudi Arabia has a more complex relationship with Islamism. It currently opposes the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to the monarchy, but has had an on-again, off-again relationship with the Brotherhood.⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia has also supported the global proselytization of the radically Islamist Wahhabi practice of Islam for decades.

The FFC is avowedly secular, so much so that many Islamists were marginalized during the protests, and some formerly allied with Bashir began supporting the TMC.⁴⁷ Yet the trio appear convinced that their friends among the security hardliners are non-Islamist enough. Hemeti and Burhan reportedly pitched the idea that they will suppress political Islam and fend off states associated with Islamism, such as Qatar and Turkey.⁴⁸ Since the coup, in fact, the RSF has arrested a number of leading Islamists, though it is unclear whether Hemeti is merely clearing out potential rivals.⁴⁹ Burhan is reportedly one of the few non-Islamists in the senior ranks of the Sudanese security forces.⁵⁰

The trio also want to keep their geopolitical rivals at bay. Following his ascension in 1989, Bashir strengthened relations with Iran, which reciprocated with weapons, training, investments, and economic support. Tehran helped to operate an arms factory in Sudan, and reportedly smuggled weapons through Sudan to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthi militias in Yemen.⁵¹ The liaison ended in 2016 when Bashir, trying to curry favor with Arab countries, broke relations with Tehran.⁵²

Qatar, which angered the trio by, among other issues, supporting Muslim Brotherhood groups, including in Egypt, has large agricultural investments and philanthropic initiatives in Sudan.⁵³ Qatar also built significant goodwill in Sudan by mediating peace talks between Khartoum and Darfuri rebels that culminated in the signing of a 2011 agreement. In 2017, Doha announced a \$4 billion renovation project of Sudan's Suakin Island in the Red Sea.⁵⁴

Turkey, another rival to the trio and a Qatari ally, in 2017 announced its own investments in Suakin Island that included a military facility that would have given Turkey a strong position just across the Red Sea from Jeddah, and close to Egypt as well. The following year, Sudan and Turkey signed more agreements covering a range of sectors.⁵⁵ The trio badly want to frustrate their rivals' activities in a country sitting on their doorstep.

As monarchies, the UAE and Saudi Arabia also dislike popular revolts demanding civilian rule. Egypt had a tumultuous Arab Spring uprising that briefly brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power before a coup ensconced a general, current president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Egypt is also suffering similar economic difficulties to those that sparked the Sudanese uprising, and wants to avoid any copycat protests.⁵⁶

The trio also seek to avoid upheaval in a country of 40 million people that perches so close to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The bedlam of Libya and Syria has likely made the trio particularly wary. The UAE's foreign minister, Anwar Gargash, referenced the need to avoid further "all-out chaos in the region" when announcing that Abu Dhabi supported "an orderly [and] stable transition [in Sudan]...that carefully calibrates popular aspirations with institutional stability."⁵⁷

Stability would also protect the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's significant commercial links to Sudan. Riyadh is Sudan's largest Arab investor with more than 590 projects in the country,⁵⁸ and has periodically injected billions of dollars into Sudan's central bank.⁵⁹ So, too, has the UAE, which has its own large investments in Sudan.⁶⁰ Egypt has significant interests in Sudanese agriculture.⁶¹ Given the trio's support for the TMC, they must believe that stability in Sudan requires a role for the security services in the government.

Finally, Hemeti is providing thousands of RSF militiamen to fight, for a price, on the Saudi–Emirati side of various regional conflicts. Many of the Sudanese battling on behalf of the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition in Yemen come from the RSF.⁶² One thousand RSF militiamen, the first tranche of an eventual 4,000-man deployment, recently deployed to Libya to fight with the Saudi-, Egyptian-, and Emirati-backed Libyan National Army.⁶³ Having such a force of capable fighters at their disposal in a fractious region is undoubtedly useful to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

There are disagreements within the trio, however. Egypt purportedly dislikes the RSF, viewing it as the sort of irregular force that destabilized neighboring Libya. Egypt prefers to work with established institutions like the SAF that also have long-standing, close ties to the Egyptian military.⁶⁴ The military in Egypt has been a bulwark against the domestic Muslim Brotherhood, and the Egyptians may hope that the SAF can play the same role, despite the fact that Bashir systematically Islamized Sudan’s military. With its long history in Sudan, Cairo also likely wants as much influence as possible—the better to resolve in its favor contentious issues, such as its border dispute with Sudan—something the assertive Saudi and Emirati engagement makes more difficult.

Finally, Cairo may diverge from its partners on the question of the massive dam that Ethiopia is building on the Nile River. Egypt fears the dam will restrict its amount of Nile water, a critical resource for the water-starved country.⁶⁵ Saudi Arabia has supported Cairo in the dispute, even reportedly seeking a promise from Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to protect Egypt’s supply of Nile water.⁶⁶ Yet the dam will moderate the Nile’s flow in Sudan, creating even more arable land from which the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with their food-security concerns, could benefit.

A Knotty Problem for America

The U.S. desires a non-Islamist, stable civilian government in Sudan. Yet there is scarcely a chance that the security services will negotiate themselves out of power, and they have the means to play spoiler. The security forces’ rivalries can be a vulnerability if wisely exploited, but their powerful shared interests also bind them together. There is as well the risk of a civil war within the security services if their rivalries get out of hand.

Given these realities, the U.S. should proceed with the understanding that it is impossible to quickly marginalize the powerful and committed security hardliners. The U.S. should, in close coordination with allies—some

of whom will likely have to be persuaded to support such a course—focus on facilitating the gradual removal of the hardliners from political life while helping the civilians consolidate their position.

This will require an approach tailored to account for the diversity of the security apparatus. Given all that they have to lose, hardliners like Hemeti will not be cajoled from power. The civilians will have to outmaneuver and, with international help, coerce them by chipping away at their sources of strength: their funding, fighters, and foreign backers. The process will have to be delicate and gradual enough to avoid provoking a bloody backlash.

Targeted sanctions of people and particular industries, ensuring that civilians gain full control of the budget, and economic reforms in exchange for international assistance can help disrupt some of the hardliners' funding. Squeezing the hardliners would make it tougher for them to pay their fighters, presumably easing the civilian administration's task of demobilizing or integrating those fighters into the legitimate armed forces. Some security personnel not violently opposed to civilian government might also be coaxed into a process of reform, and away from obedience to the hardliners. Such people are most likely to be found within the SAF and the younger generations of security personnel. Given their apparent loyalty to Hemeti, RSF fighters will likely be very difficult to cajole. NISS operatives may be as well, given the extent of the privileges they enjoy under the current system.

The U.S.'s ability to engage with the Sudanese security services is circumscribed by American law, but the U.S. should think creatively about what it can do to support the civilian government's attempt to reform the security apparatus. The U.S. will have to work with trusted Sudanese civilians to make the necessary fine distinctions between the amenable and hardline elements of the security forces, as doing so requires a depth of knowledge that the U.S. likely lacks.

A campaign to strengthen the civilian parts of the Sudanese governments will have to accompany the gradual coercion of the security hardliners out of the political sphere and the inveigling of the amenable elements of the security forces into their legitimate roles. The international community should accord Prime Minister Hamdok alone the privileges of a head of state, and engage with the security service leadership only on matters within its legitimate portfolio. The U.S. should lead an international effort to ensure that the government receives any technical assistance it requests, and use its diplomatic might to attempt to rally the international community behind the civilian government.

The U.S. would be wise to assess in the critical months ahead whether the popular movement is translating into a responsible government. Washington cannot achieve its national interests in Sudan unless the civilians provide unified, responsible leadership of the country. The protest movement was exemplary, a hopeful sign for the civilian government's prospects. Yet the popular uprising that toppled a previous government in 1985 failed to consolidate civilian government because of internal bickering, providing an opening for Bashir's coup four years later.⁶⁷ The mass protests combined with international pressure alone forced the TMC into concessions. If the civilians fracture, a major piece of leverage over the security hardliners will evaporate.⁶⁸

The Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi long-term vision for Sudan will also be crucial to the fate of a civilian government. The trio have deeper strategic interests in Sudan than perhaps any other countries, and are willing to devote significant time, money, and effort to achieving their objectives. The trio pressured the TMC to negotiate after the June 3 massacre, but the trio also backed the generals immediately following the coup. If the trio believe that including the generals is simply a necessary short-term measure, the U.S. should be able to work with the trio to consolidate civilian rule. If the trio envision a long-term military government,⁶⁹ it will be virtually impossible for the U.S. to effectively help the civilians consolidate control of the government.

It is difficult to change a nation's perceptions of its national interests, so the U.S. must focus on where its goals overlap with those of the trio. Khartoum must get off the State Sponsor of Terrorism list to unlock the international financial help it needs to revive the economy, otherwise the unrest the trio fear is likely to continue in Sudan. Lifting the designation will also lessen the odds that the UAE and Saudi Arabia need to expensively prop up the Sudanese government again. A civilian government will also probably have a better chance of bringing stability by making peace with the periphery, rather than a regime headed by the same rapacious forces that have persecuted the marginalized regions for decades.⁷⁰ Finally, the civilians have a demonstrated commitment to keeping Islamists away from positions of power, whereas Islamists still populate the security services.

The Uncertain Way Ahead

To gradually marginalize the security hardliners, induce the security elements amenable to civilian rule, and empower the civilians, the U.S. should:

- **Coordinate and monitor international efforts to support the consolidation of civilian government.** Regional groups and neighboring states have been closely involved in the mediation efforts in Sudan and pressuring the TMC to relinquish control.⁷¹ Their cooperation will be critical to making any future sanctions against spoilers effective as well. If the U.S., like-minded international partners, and the region coordinate their actions on Sudan, the TMC will be increasingly boxed in with less and less capacity to prevent civilianization. The U.S. should use its diplomatic strength to facilitate the necessary cooperation and keep international partners committed.
- **Rally the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to the civilianization program.** The U.S. should focus on shared goals, such as the desire for a stable, non-Islamist Sudan. The U.S. should continue to make the case that the best way to achieve those mutual goals is through the gradual civilianization of the government, while acknowledging that the sudden marginalization of the security forces is impossible and would be destabilizing. The U.S. should try to persuade the Saudis and Emiratis to re-route any payments made directly to the security services to the central bank of Sudan.
- **Try to shore up FFC unity.** If the FFC fractures, the civilians will lose their most potent weapon, the ability to mobilize massive demonstrations that paralyze the country. The U.S. should mobilize American nonprofit organizations that specialize in training political parties, and American diplomats should do what they can to encourage unity and mediate disputes among the civilians.
- **Continually assess whether civilians are constructing a responsible government.** Key indicators will include whether they reach a compromise with the Sudan Revolutionary Front, make a sincere effort to ensure the periphery regions and peoples are welcomed as equal partners in Sudan's political life, and whether the relevant political parties are willing to compromise with each other for the good of a civilian government.
- **Find and support a younger generation of moderate, non-Islamist, untainted security service personnel.** The American government's ability to interact with Sudanese security institutions is circumscribed by U.S. law, but it should think creatively about ways

to mentor a new generation of security leaders who accept civilian rule. Such engagements must start small and build if the participants continue to make demonstrable commitments to abiding by civilian authority. Initiatives to consider include invitations to prestigious joint exercises, to international military conferences, or to participate in the U.S. military's Expanded International Military Education Training course that focuses on civilian control of the military and human rights, among other issues.⁷² The latter effort will likely require Congress to create an exception to the "Leahy laws."⁷³

- **Stick to a roadmap for removing Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list.** The U.S. has rightly said it will not immediately begin the process of removing Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list until the new administration demonstrates it is worthy.⁷⁴ The roadmap should include measurable, time-bound benchmarks that the Sudanese government must achieve to continue, and ultimately complete, the process of removal from the list.
- **Support mediation efforts between the civilians and the armed groups.** The rift between the Sudan Revolutionary Front and the FFC threatens the already difficult challenge of consolidating civilian governance. The rise of the civilian government, however nominal, brings a golden opportunity to achieve peace with the marginalized regions of Sudan. Quickly doing so would ameliorate a grave injustice and remove an energy-intensive and resource-intensive problem from the civilians' overcrowded docket. It would, as well, eliminate a primary rationale for the lavish state funding of the security services. The U.S., depending on what would be most effective, can serve as a convener, a guarantor, or a neutral arbiter to facilitate a reconciliation process.
- **Offer forensic accounting expertise.** An important part of prying the security hardliners from political power will be helping the civilian administration to control the state budget. Sudan's ledgers are notoriously opaque, and the government may need help auditing them to bring all state funds under its control.
- **Place sanctions on the illicit gold trade.** Doing so would dent Hemeti's economic empire, a pillar of his power. Effective sanctions would require the support and collaboration of the UAE, a major destination for Sudanese gold.⁷⁵

- **Strengthen the civilian components of the government.** This could take a number of forms, including treating the civilians as the legitimate rulers of Sudan, providing them with technical assistance, and sending an ambassador to Khartoum.

A Hopeful, But Dangerous, Time

Disengaging the security services from Sudan's political life is impossible in the near term, and difficult over the long term. It will require the international community to muster a level of engagement, coordination, persistence, and strategic thinking rare in such complex situations. The U.S. is the only country with the diplomatic heft to corral the many actors with interests in Sudan into something resembling a united effort. It will also have to support the civilian government in chipping away at the security services' power that gives them such influence in the political sphere, while simultaneously strengthening the civilians' position. Part of the U.S. effort will have to include doing what it can to support unity within the civilian movement, and holding it accountable to deliver responsible and effective government.

As difficult as the task is, the U.S. should engage, as there is an opportunity to address a long-standing bugaboo in the region, and because the downside risks in Sudan are all disagreeable, and some disastrous. If the civilians do not win out, it is plausible that Sudan could face bloody suppression of more mass protests, continued violence from armed groups on the periphery, economic collapse, another Islamist party stepping into a vacuum left by exhausted antagonists, or a civil war sparked by security services' divisions. Such outcomes would damage American interests in the region, and represent a squandered opportunity for Sudan to finally emerge from decades of ruinous Islamist rule propped up by a brutal security apparatus.

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Endnotes

1. Saudi Arabia's western littoral is only becoming more important as the kingdom continues its efforts to diversify away from the Strait of Hormuz, increasingly menaced by Iran, with its oil exports. Riyadh recently expanded its export capacity from the Yanbu' South Terminal on the Red Sea by three million barrels per day. "Yanbu' South Terminal Boosts Export Capacity," Aramco ExPats, October 17, 2018, <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/yanbu-south-terminal-boosts-export-capacity/> (accessed September 16, 2019).
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3. Khalid Abdelaziz, Michael Georgy, and Maha El Dahan, "Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir Was Destined to Fall," Reuters, July 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/> (accessed September 16, 2019).
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9. Multiple reports accused the European Union of indirectly funding the RSF through its migration management programs in Sudan, since Bashir deployed the RSF as a border security force. The European Union strongly denies the charge. For a report of the RSF profiting from human smuggling, see Jérôme Tubiana, "The Man Who Terrorized Darfur Is Leading Sudan's Supposed Transition," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/14/man-who-terrorized-darfur-is-leading-sudans-supposed-transition-hemeti-rsf-janjaweed-bashir-khartoum/> (accessed September 16, 2019). For an example of the accusations against the European Union, see Suliman Baldo, "Border Control from Hell: How the EU's Migration Partnership Legitimizes Sudan's 'Militia State,'" Enough Project, April 2017, https://enoughproject.org/files/BorderControl_April2017_Enough_Finals.pdf (accessed September 16, 2019). For the European Union's denial, see "Mythbusting: What the EU Really Does in Sudan," The European External Action Service, undated, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/mythbusting_what_the_eu_really_does_in_sudan.pdf (accessed September 24, 2019).
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11. *Ibid.*
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14. Baldo, "Border Control from Hell."
15. International Crisis Group, "Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Future Stability," *Africa Report* No. 174, May 4, 2011, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/174-divisions-in-sudan-s-ruling-party-and-the-threat-to-the-country-s-stability.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2019).
16. U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011: Sudan," <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2011humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=186245#wrapper> (accessed September 16, 2019).
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18. Tubiana, "The Man Who Terrorized Darfur Is Leading Sudan's Supposed Transition."
19. Amnesty International, "Agents of Fear: The National Security Service in Sudan," July 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/36000/afr540102010en.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2019), and International Crisis Group, "Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Future Stability."
20. This is only the most recent example of the RSF brutally suppressing civilian protests. In September 2013, the RSF killed 170 Sudanese who were protesting the elimination of government subsidies for basic necessities: Baldo, "Border Control from Hell."
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22. Mohamed Elagami, "The Checkered Past of Sudan's Hemedti," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, May 29, 2019, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/checkered-past-of-sudans-hemedti/> (September 18, 2019).
23. The Sudanese Communist Party, for instance, rejected the power-sharing agreement and constitutional declaration because they do not dissolve the RSF and grant some security service members immunity that can only be stripped by the Legislative Council. The Sudanese Communist Party vowed to "continue to struggle until all the militias are dissolved, till ousted president Omar al-Bashir and other military generals convicted of genocide and war crimes are handed over to the International Criminal Court, and a civilian government capable of accomplishing the aims stated in the declaration is formed." "Sudanese Communist Party Rejects Agreement with Military Junta," *Peoples Dispatch*, August 5, 2019, <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2019/08/05/sudanese-communist-party-rejects-agreement-with-military-junta/> (accessed September 18, 2019). See also "Sudan Urged to Ensure Justice for Raped Women Protesters," Voice of America, July 18, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/sudan-urged-ensure-justice-raped-women-protesters> (accessed September 18, 2019).
24. Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period.
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26. "Sudan Constitutional Declaration Signed—Sovereign Council to Be Announced in Two Weeks," *Dabanga*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-constitutional-declaration-signed-sovereign-council-to-be-announced-in-two-weeks> (accessed September 18, 2019).
27. Unless Hemeti and other security service members of the Sovereignty Council with commercial interests have divested, they are already in violation of the constitutional declaration, suggesting again that they do not intend to treat it as binding. The generals may also try to satisfy the demands for justice by scapegoating low-level or disfavored perpetrators, such as when the TMC arrested nine RSF fighters and threatened to discipline local government officials, for their alleged role in killing protesters in Omdurman and El-Obeid. "Sudan's Military Council Detains 9 Soldiers for the Student Killings," *AfricaNews*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.africanews.com/2019/08/02/sudan-s-military-council-detains-9-soldiers-for-the-student-killings/> (accessed September 18, 2019).
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30. Many of the leaders of the TMC were senior figures in the security services under the Bashir regime that labored to get off the sponsors of terrorism list, so they likely have some understanding of the country's economic dynamics. For a recounting of Prime Minister Hamdok discussing Sudan's need for international help, see Lynch, "AP Interview: Sudan PM Seeks End to Country's Pariah Status."
31. U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale intimated in remarks in Khartoum that the U.S. will only discuss Sudan's removal from the terrorism list with a civilian-led government: "Under Secretary Hale: USA Will Stand by Sudan During Transition," *Dabanga*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/under-secretary-hale-us-will-stand-by-sudan-during-transition> (accessed September 19, 2019).
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33. The SRF initially rejected the July 17 power-sharing agreement as well. Subsequent negotiations in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, brought an agreement between the SRF and FFC. The SRF claims that the constitutional declaration violates assurances that the FFC gave them in Addis Ababa. "Sudan Revolutionary Front Rejects Constitutional Declaration," *Dabanga*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-revolutionary-front-rejects-constitutional-declaration> (accessed September 19, 2019), and "Sudan Opposition, Armed Movements Reach Agreement in Addis Ababa," *Dabanga*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-opposition-armed-movements-reach-agreement-in-addis-ababa> (accessed September 19, 2019).
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36. Ibid.

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38. Author meeting with Sudanese business executive, August 7, 2019, Washington, DC.
39. Hemeti was born in Chad, and his family emigrated to Darfur when he was a child. Elites from the "center," generally Muslim Arabs from Nile River Valley tribes, have long dominated the Sudanese government and society. U.K. Home Office, "Country Policy and Information Note. Sudan: Non-Arab Darfuri," Version 3.0, September 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1099096/download> (accessed September 18, 2019). See also Attal El-Battahani, "The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change," *CMI Insight* No. 3, April 2016, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5790-the-sudan-armed-forces-and-prospects-of-change.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2019).
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42. "Sudan Continues to Arrest Military Officers, Former Officials after Failed Coup," *Sudan Tribune*, July 26, 2019, https://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?iframe&page=imprimable&id_article=67835 (accessed September 18, 2019).
43. "Cutting a Deal on a Knife-Edge," *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 60, No. 10 (May 2019), https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/12638/Cutting_a_deal_on_a_knife-edge (accessed September 16, 2019).
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62. While a senior Emirati official recently claimed that the Sudanese are not critical to the Yemen war effort and could be replaced by local forces if necessary, the Sudanese are involved enough in the fighting to be taking significant losses. At a hospital treating wounded soldiers from the Yemen war, an Emirati doctor mentioned to the author that of the approximately 28 cases the hospital had treated in the previous two weeks, all but two or three had been Sudanese. The claim that the Sudanese are not critical to the Yemen war effort came during an author meeting with a senior Emirati official in Abu Dhabi in June 2019. The number of Sudanese treated at an Emirati field hospital came during an author meeting with an Emirati doctor at an undisclosed location in June 2019. For more mention of Sudanese casualties in Yemen, see David D. Kirkpatrick, “On the Front Line of the Saudi War in Yemen: Child Soldiers from Darfur,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/africa/saudi-sudan-yemen-child-fighters.html> (accessed September 20, 2019).
63. “Hundreds of Sudan Militia Fighters Deployed to Haftar’s Libya Offensive,” *The New Arab*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2019/7/26/Hundreds-Sudan-militia-fighters-deployed-to-Haftars-Libya-offensive> (accessed September 24, 2019).
64. Saudi Arabia and the UAE may prefer working with the SAF and NISS, given their own long relationships with those units and their reliance on NISS for intelligence. However, the RSF is useful because it supplies capable troops to regional conflicts in which the Saudis and Emiratis are involved. Author meeting with a researcher/journalist based in East Africa, Washington, DC, September 2019.
65. Jacob Wirschafter, “Egypt Confronts Water ‘Poverty’ in Shadow of Ethiopia’s Dam,” *The Washington Times*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/jan/2/egypt-water-anxiety-grows-over-ethiopia-dam-nile/> (accessed September 20, 2019).
66. International Crisis Group, “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn: Lessening the Impact,” *Middle East Report* No. 206, September 19, 2019, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/206-intra-gulf-competition.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2019).
67. Sarra Majdoub, “Sudan’s Ghost Battalion,” *Mail & Guardian*, August 14, 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-08-14-00-sudans-ghost-battalion> (accessed September 20, 2019).
68. The civilians likely rattled the TMC by refusing to buckle after the June 3 massacre, and forced the resignation of a number of senior TMC officials. Khalid Abdelaziz, “Three Members of Sudan Military Council Resign After Demand by Opposition,” Reuters, April 24, 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCNIS02DF> (accessed September 20, 2019).
69. The trio may be split on this issue. Egypt appears to believe that long-term military rule is preferable in Sudan, in part to “sanitize” perceptions of its own military regime. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are comfortable engaging with military regimes, and clearly believe that Sudan’s security services must have a role in government to ensure stability. However, they might view Sudan’s civilian movement as the best long-term means of suppressing Islamists. Author e-mail exchange with senior African Union official, September 10, 2019.
70. However, Hemeti has been making overtures to the Sudan Revolutionary Front. Despite Hemeti’s forces’ brutality in Darfur and other marginalized regions represented by the SRF, both sides fear continued domination by a reinvigorated Khartoum-based elite. The civilian component of the Sudanese government, meanwhile, has thus far done a poor job of including representatives from the marginalized regions. Author meeting with a researcher/journalist based in East Africa, Washington, DC, September 2019.
71. Michael Woldemariam and Alden Young, “What Happens in Sudan Doesn’t Stay in Sudan,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2019-07-19/what-happens-sudan-doesnt-stay-sudan> (accessed September 20, 2019).
72. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Security Assistance Management Manual,” undated, <https://www.samm.dsca.mil/glossary/expanded-imet-e-imet> (accessed September 20, 2019).
73. For a comprehensive review of the Leahy laws, see Nina M. Serafino et al., “‘Leahy Law’ Human Rights Provisions and Security Assistance: Issue Overview,” Congressional Research Service, January 29, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43361.pdf> (accessed September 20, 2019).
74. Lesley Wroughton, “U.S. to Keep up Pressure on Sudan as It Discusses Lifting Sanctions–Official,” Reuters, August 27, 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1VHOPR-OZATP?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews> (accessed September 20, 2019).
75. Colum Lynch, “Russia Blocks U.N. Report Linking Alleged Sudanese War Criminal to Gold Profiteering,” *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/04/russia-blocks-u-n-report-linking-alleged-sudanese-war-criminal-to-gold-profiteering/> (accessed September 20, 2019).