

## THE "SPLENDID ISOLATION" OF THE SUDAN

An Arab-Speaking Country Holds Itself Aloof  
—Even from the Arab World

by Alan W. Horton

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Foreign correspondents reckon that the Sudan is less newsworthy than it used to be. Because it is not well known abroad, stories about it are ordinarily filed only when some unusual, preferably dramatic incident can be related to something external that readers know more about—such as the retreat of colonialism or the ambitions of revolutionary Egypt. The difficulty nowadays is that ways of relating the Sudan to the outside world have been increasingly hard to find; no longer does any foreign power have a major influence in Sudanese affairs, nor can the Sudan be firmly identified with any grouping of nations, new or old, except groupings so universal that they commit the Sudan to nothing at all. Since the military coup d'état of 1958, there has, in fact, been a growing governmental pride in disengagement from the problems of others, and one well-placed official recently gave a title to this Report by saying: "We think our isolation is perfectly splendid."

The interest in isolation is as much a feeling as a policy; rather than a rational approach to what Sudanese foreign policy ought to be, it is more a reflection of the personalities now in authority. Of these, the most important by far are the handful of military men who make up the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the ruling junta that considers itself the collective head of state and represents the arrival in power of a disciplined officer elite. These men are of varying quality and competence, but all were specialized in military affairs before the coup of 1958. Some have without great difficulty learned many of the techniques necessary to the administration of the Sudanese government machine, but few have the breadth of knowledge and the sophistication to be very successful in managing the nation's foreign relations—and here one must include relations with the Sudanese South, an essentially foreign region in which clumsy "foreign policy" has contributed to separatist violence. But whereas the situation in the South necessitates action of

some considerable kind by the central government in Khartoum, relations with genuinely foreign nations can be handled on a "least-action" basis; this method of conducting foreign policy has the merit that it reduces to a minimum the number of mistakes the Supreme Council can make in the area of its greatest ignorance.

The personality of General Ibrahim Abboud, President of the Supreme Council, is particularly intriguing. It has been said of him, in unfair caricature, that when he lived in Khartoum North before the coup d'état, he was "the sort who knew everybody but nobody knew him"—though how this could be the social situation of a chief of staff is not explained. His critics say that he is a man who wants no trouble and yearns for a quiet life, essentially an elderly person who believes that any action might bring tiresome difficulties for himself; his defenders say, with some justice, that these criticisms are invalid and cite well-known instances, among them the time of the military take-over when he himself gave (felt he had to give?) the orders to march. No one questions his personal integrity and no one doubts he has the best interests of the nation at heart. He is not the usual dictator—and in fact there is some reason to doubt that he controls the Supreme Council. Some observers say he is President of the Supreme Council only because he is the senior officer present and they say his chief function is to stay alive in order to prevent an open split between two stronger, much younger generals. He presides but does not rule; he spends his time hoping for reconciliation of the views of more enterprising junior officers and hoping that their agreed solutions to problems will be the right ones. The colorlessness and indecisiveness of his personality, say these observers, combine with the power struggles within the Supreme Council to produce a dispiriting governmental inertia; one civil servant put it: "If we must have military government, at least let us enjoy its benefits by having an energetic and dominating leader."

Below and beside the Supreme Council is the Council of Ministers, which is made up of seven members of the Supreme Council holding various portfolios (Abboud is Prime Minister and sometime Minister of Defense) and seven civilian ministers. Unlike the Supreme Council, which apparently meets only irregularly, the Council of Ministers holds meetings twice a week and considers a long agenda; the decisions reached at these meetings are of only moderate importance—despite the representation from the Supreme Council. The civilian ministers are most often high-level bureaucrats who are appointed for sheer technical or administrative ability, but in two or perhaps three instances civilian ministers have more than mere administrative influence. Of these instances, the most important for our purposes is the

Foreign Minister, an astute and charming man named Ahmad Kheir, who has connections with the struggle for independence and with the three years of parliamentary ferment that preceded the coup d'état. Some former collaborators from nonmilitary days consider him almost disloyal for his willingness to work with the military regime.<sup>1</sup> Because he possesses the sophistication they lack, and because they trust him, the military men of the inner circle listen carefully to Ahmad Kheir—one antiregime intellectual said: "After all, compared to them [this scornfully], he is practically a political philosopher." They trust him, perhaps, because he shares, though probably for different reasons, their feelings about the convenience of disengagement from the rest of the world,<sup>2</sup> and they are grateful because with his help disengagement has been transformed from a necessity into a philosophy. Not untypical of his approach to international relations is his habit of covering his eyes with his hands after the posing of a difficult but not immediate problem and saying, "That is a problem we don't have to solve and I don't want to think about it."

The Sudanese government has, of course, adopted the popular stance of cold-war neutrality, though one would be hard put to say it was positive. Located near the Afro-Asian bridge, where "progressive" thought is neutralist, the Sudan calls itself a political neutral as much from a desire for anonymity as anything else. Though the sympathies of the regime are clearly Western in terms of both commercial relations and economic doctrine, lip service to neutralism helps the country blend into the underdeveloped background and provides one more opportunity for agreement, superficial but useful, with its "progressive" (and perhaps ideologically aggressive) neighbors. In Afro-Asia it is often safer and simpler to be "one of the boys."

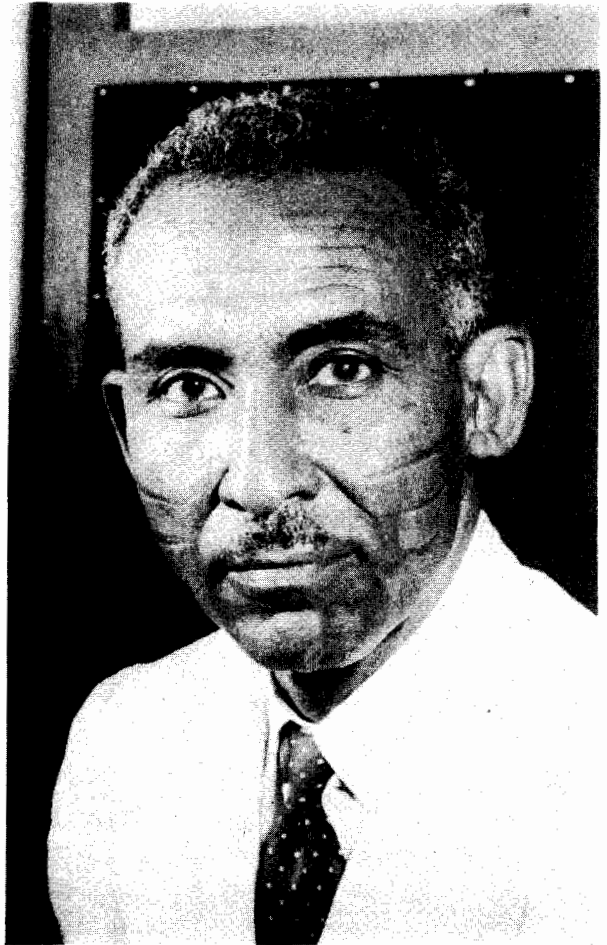
The regime's critics, and there are many of these in the higher ranks of the civil service and in academic circles, say that the great fault of present foreign policy is its lack of political decisiveness. Neutrality is all right, they say, provided it is positive and partisan on some issues; the Sudanese brand of neutrality does the country no good because, like the personality of Abboud, it is colorless and indecisive. All developing nations should ask themselves the question: What politi-

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<sup>1</sup> The continuing rivalry of two elites, "intellectual" and military, will be discussed in a subsequent Report.

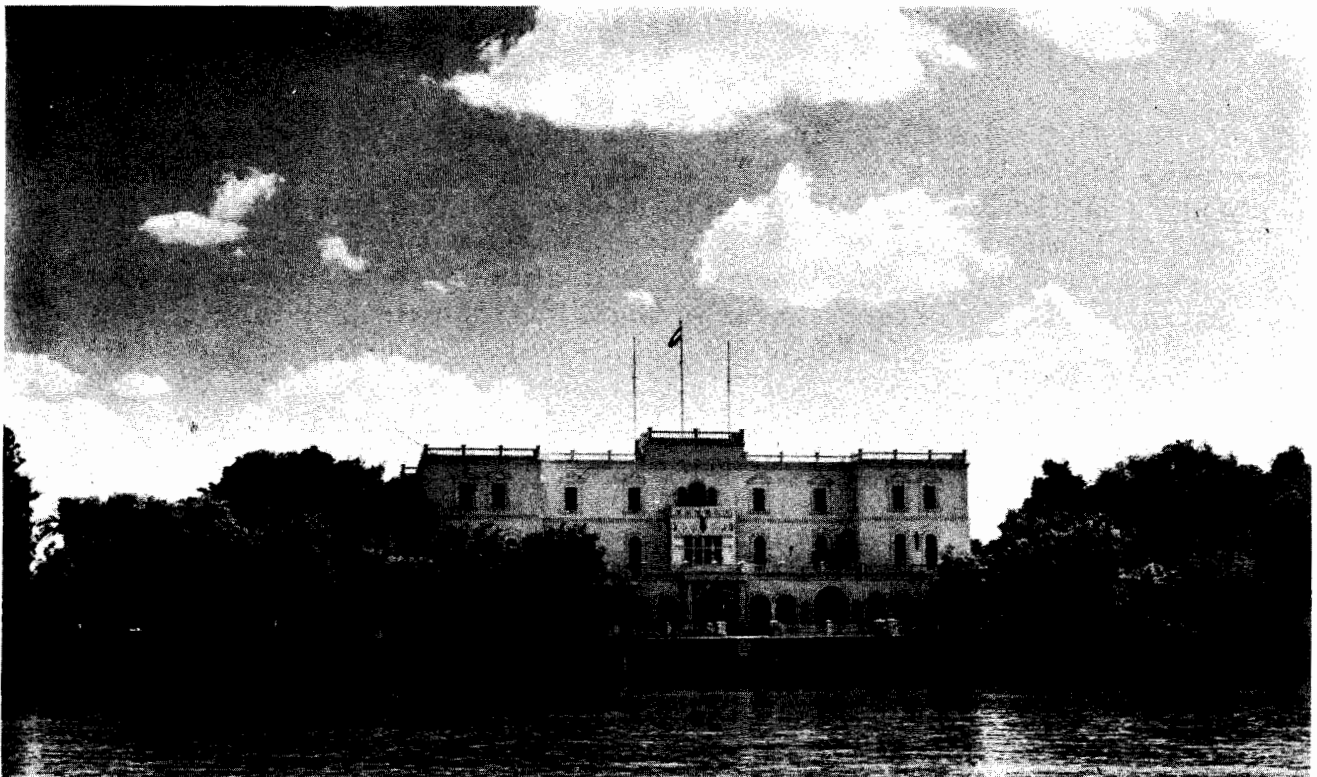
<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Kheir also shares a Shayqiyya tribal affiliation with General Abboud and a few others of the Supreme Council, but the importance of this can be, and quite often is, greatly exaggerated.

Ahmad Kheir  
Minister of Foreign Affairs



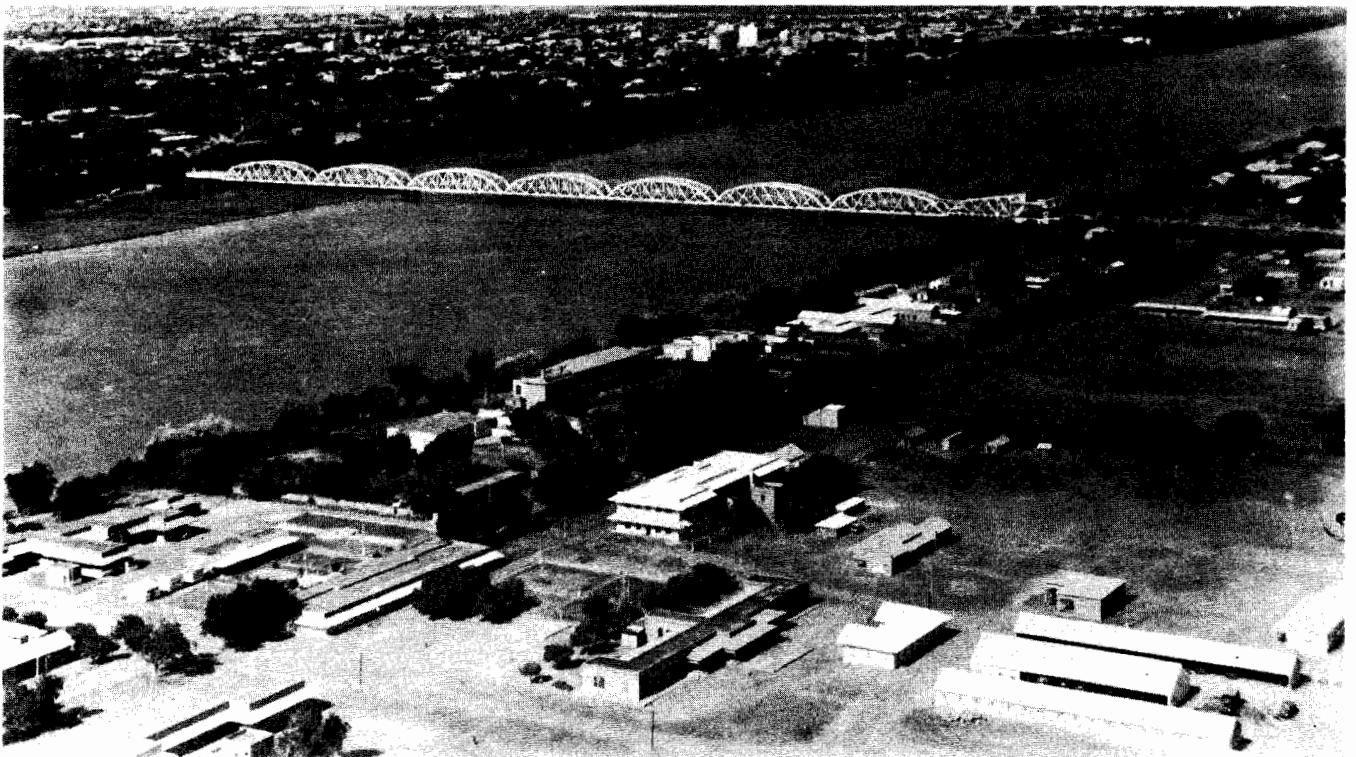
Ibrahim Abboud  
President of the Supreme Council  
and Prime Minister

The presidential palace.





An aerial view of Khartoum.



Looking across the Blue Nile bridge from Khartoum North.

cal posture would be the most successful financially? In the Sudanese instance, despite the success story of the United Arab Republic immediately to the north, the government has not even asked itself the question, much less received from West and East the money for development it could be getting. What country, sigh the critics, would now be interested in large-scale financial aid to the Sudan—one does not give money to the colorless fellow who would never harm you, the man of no opinions who can be easily forgotten.

The regime's point of view is quite different. The Sudan's economic potential is enormous, but because no serious economic crisis looms in the near future, the government is in no tearing developmental hurry. What the regime wishes to avoid more than anything else is major involvement with any other nation (which the large-scale economic assistance the critics want would certainly bring). Thus, few political speeches delivered in the Sudan contain vilification or even disparaging remarks directed at other countries, and few strongly worded resolutions at international conferences have Sudanese support. The regime would never take sides publicly in the affairs of a neighbor or in a dispute between two neighbors.<sup>3</sup> To routine meetings of the Arab League, the Organization for African Unity, or some other international gathering that cannot be avoided, the nearest ambassador is usually designated as the official delegate—despite the occasional provision that special, presumably higher-ranking delegates should be sent—and the job of the delegate is not to become entangled with political lobbying or reconciliation but to listen and report and fight shy of Sudanese representation on interim committees. With one exception, and for reasons I will mention this is becoming less of an exception all the time, the Sudan has joined no discriminatory political blocks. The attitude toward all other countries has, in fact, been simple: do not meddle in our affairs and be assured we will never meddle in yours.

Still, in this imperfect world the regime has found it impossible to avoid some foreign entanglements. Any Sudanese government must have more than routine relations with some Arab and some African countries—and any developing country, no matter how slow its pace, must have selective relations with the developed world.

In its relations with the Arab world, the Sudan evinces the least touch of ambivalence. The dominant ethnic block has an Arab heritage,

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<sup>3</sup> Such as the current border dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia. General Abboud sent identical cables to both sides, imploring each "sister nation" to work for "brotherhood and peace."

and the country's official language is Arabic. Literature from the presses of Cairo and Beirut dominates urban markets and conditions urban thought. Many Sudanese have been educated in Egypt, some at the secular universities and some at the Azhar, and there is a branch of Cairo University in Khartoum. Located at a provincial periphery of Arab society, the Sudan is culturally dependent on other Arabs for the evolution of thought and the excitements of the arts (this is aside from the interesting Arab-Anglicism of the University of Khartoum). The political link to the Arab world is the Sudan's membership in the Arab League.

For all these connections, educated Sudanese feel themselves to be a people apart. One report has it that Sudanese, when talking about Arabs, use the pronoun "they" instead of "we." "Israel," said a university professor, "is not in our midst," clearly implying an unwillingness to become embroiled in strictly "Arab" problems. At the Arab summit conference of January 1964, the Sudanese subscribed to strong anti-Israeli language; but rather than an act of political feeling, this was the moment's most comfortable posture, a conforming to the pressures of a highly inflated situation: more typical was the Sudan's refusal at that same meeting to take any part in the reconciliations and other maneuverings among the Arabs themselves.<sup>4</sup> There is, doubtless, a feeling of technical inferiority vis-à-vis the Mediterranean Arab, but this is not matched at other levels; some observers have noted, on the contrary, an almost self-satisfied conviction among urban Sudanese that they are morally superior and that their intellectual potential is greater. The educated say the Sudan has special problems that other Arabs cannot possibly understand (and should not interfere with), and they confess to alienated feelings when abroad in Arab countries other than their own. The relation of skin color to their view of the Arab world is problematic: one notes no sensitivity in any direction in the Sudan itself, only a straightforward opinion that brown skins do make a difference; but tales are told of annoying experiences in Mecca, where other Arabs will occasionally treat Sudanese pilgrims as social inferiors.

Of all the Arab states, the United Arab Republic is the one with which the Sudan must always come to terms. The closest cultural links have always been with Egypt, and the Nile, the natural link, is unequiv-

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<sup>4</sup> The Sudanese delegation, interestingly enough, was reportedly as impressed with Amin el-Hafez of Syria as with any other Arab head of state, but it took no part, one way or the other, in the successful efforts to isolate him.

ocally vital to both countries. On the allocation of Nile waters there has always in modern times been considerable tension, and one of the achievements of the military government was the conclusion of a satisfactory Nile Waters Agreement in November 1959. For a decade before this the waters had been mixed with the political ambitions of Egyptian governments, both royal and revolutionary; the slogan had been "Unity of the Nile Valley," as if it were the practical political thing to do. It was sometimes stated that the unity would be a "unity between equals," but few Sudanese had any illusions. The Agreement of November 1959 demonstrated that Nile waters could be fairly apportioned without political unity and made it finally clear that the independence of the Sudan from all uninvited outside influence was a reality.

But traditional antagonisms die slowly, and there is a long history of disagreement and attempted dominance to forget. The trouble is that Egypt, presently the most powerful Arab country, is the Sudan's necessary link to other Arab states, the connection without which the Sudan would be politically and even culturally adrift from the Arab island—and hence dependence for national security on friends in the Arab block really means dependence on the United Arab Republic, the very country with which the Sudan would be most likely to find itself at odds. Because the Sudan is aware that among Arab states it is considered almost an Egyptian appendage and in a dispute with Egypt could expect no support from any other Arab state, the country is turning elsewhere—not abruptly leaving the Arab League, simply looking for other friends in sufficient number that it will be dependent on none.

Only recently has the Sudan turned to its African neighbors. When independence was achieved in January 1956, the number of political links with Egypt was at a temporary high because the leverage of Egyptian support had been used against the British, and one of the political parties of those nonmilitary days openly favored the unity of the Nile Valley. With one exception, the neighboring countries of brown and black Africa were still under arch-colonialist tutelage and several years away from independence. But as Egypt became less useful, the Sudan began to look carefully to the east, west, and south. The view was not reassuring at first: despite the mild untidiness of its own early independence, the Sudan has a basic stability that all Sudanese recognize, and what met the eye across the borders was alien and disturbing—chaotic scrambles for power, dictatorial whimsey without regard for law, and even enlisted mutinies. The two political blocks, Monrovia and Casablanca, began to form, and the military regime shunned them both because they were discriminatory in intent and because joining them would mean taking sides.



The formation of the Organization for African Unity (O.A.U.) in May 1963 in Addis Ababa seems to have provided an opportunity to launch a new African policy. The Organization is made up of all independent African states, and in becoming a member the Sudan could express solidarity without involvement or fear of having to take uncomfortably strong political positions—and could establish, in the Sudanese manner, new friendships of equal warmth for all. The Organization also supplies in its charter a basis for moral support by others if Sudanese anxieties about Egyptian aggression should ever become a reality. But some Sudanese officials feel the greatest advantage of membership in the O.A.U. is the possible assistance it offers for the Sudan's great internal problem, the dead-serious separatism of the Sudanese South. In the three southern provinces, black Africans, ethnically and racially distinct from the brown-skinned Arabs of the north, are striving for federal status (and perhaps more) in sometimes violent ways; and the intransigence of northern attitudes and the clumsiness of military government are making the problem more acute every day. Some of the southern tribes have kinsmen across the border in neighboring countries, and the Khartoum government is now, in effect, vying with its own tribes for the sympathy and co-operation of those foreign governments. This is a tricky business indeed, but up to the present the regime has received from its southern neighbors the co-operation it needs. As the situation worsens, however, the pressures beyond the frontier to vacillate and be co-operative with unhappy kinsmen in the Sudan will mount, and it is then, it is hoped, that Khartoum will reap the harvest of its new pro-Africanism.

As it does with African states, the Sudan tries to apply the principle of "equal warmth for all" to its relations with the nations of the developed world, but despite the ideology of nonalignment, the West is clearly more popular than the East. Great Britain, the ruling power before 1956, is perhaps most admired; though educated Sudanese do not hesitate to criticize their behavior during the condominium, they seek the respect of the British more than that of any other foreign group. In terms of financial aid, British and West German credits are the largest, but a consortium of Western powers is behind the biggest assistance project. The United States has provided development funds in the amount of some 10 to 15 million dollars annually. The Soviet Union has recently extended unpublicized credits of 22 million dollars for various projects, but as yet there has been little implementation. The Yugoslavs, in the role of nonaligned colleagues, have been intelligently helpful in their aid—including the outright gift of some secondhand naval craft for use on the Red Sea. No degree of popularity or amount of financial aid, however, has so far permitted any foreign

nation a special position in the independent Sudan, and it is probably to avoid the necessity of conferring the status of "special friend" that the government does not seek large-scale assistance. In the face of the regime's emotional attachment to the principle of minding one's own affairs, diplomats in Khartoum are most careful never to give the impression of "throwing their weight around"; any foreign country that tried, however subtly, to suggest a privileged position for itself would soon be placed in the opposite category.

Neutrality, nonalignment, noninterference—these and other words express the Sudan's present wish to be isolated from the problems of others and from the influence of others, and at the moment isolation is thought to be "splendid." With changing circumstances, however, a new view of the outside world may work its way into the thinking and feeling of the regime. For one thing, there is social and political change now in process within the Sudan. The military feel themselves secure enough to permit greater nonmilitary participation in government, and the long march toward a new constitution and some form of representational guided democracy has begun. More importantly, the regime is beginning to listen to advice from trusted civilians more experienced in planning and policy-making. As long-term economic needs are recognized, the pressures for increased help from outside will rise—leading inevitably to the foreign entanglements that are now frowned upon. As for the Sudan's future position in African politics, a great deal is unclear—much will surely depend on events in the Sudanese South—but the signs point to growing regional involvement with new friends and neighbors.

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[Photographs courtesy Sudan Ministry of Information, Khartoum (p. 4, top) and Sudan Embassy, London (p. 4, bottom, and p. 5).]