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Sudan: Old Memories and New Reality

Khartoum, Sudan  
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Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

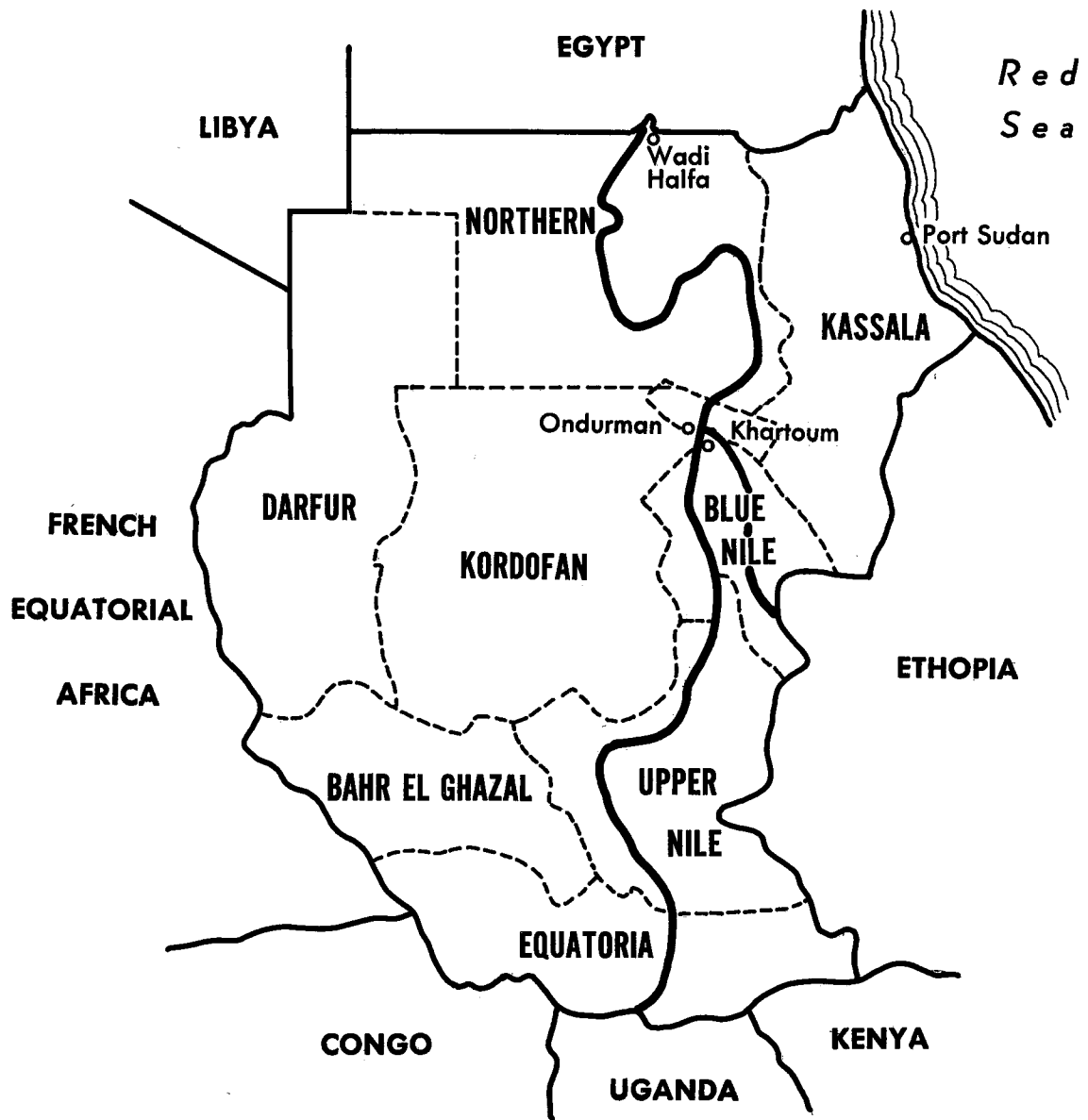
The trim, new Viscount of Sudan Airways' weekly London to Khartoum service left Cairo exactly on schedule. For the next three hours and 45 minutes (we arrived in Khartoum at 4:00 p.m., also exactly on schedule) there would be time for reminiscing....

My first flight from Cairo to Khartoum had taken place four and one-half years earlier in July 1956. I was then a very junior Foreign Service officer on my way to join a very junior American Embassy. U.S. diplomatic representation in the Sudan went back only to 1953, when the British Government agreed somewhat reluctantly to the presence of a "Liaison Officer" in the then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. He was not to be a proper consul, for the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1899 setting up the Sudanese Condominium had specified no diplomatic representation in the Sudan. This small "Liaison Office" was converted to an Embassy with the achievement of Sudanese independence on January 1, 1956.

In July 1956 its modest origins were still evident, and my arrival was to raise the officer strength from three to four. I believe I can safely claim that no future American diplomat arriving for duty in Khartoum will be able to match this distinction of having increased the American staff by a full one-third.

I was soon to feel a common bond with the Sudanese Government. We were both rather new and shaky in our jobs. Happily we could both enjoy getting accustomed to our new work without the intimidating presence of too many "old hands" who really knew how it was done. For better or worse the small, elite corps of British officers who had ruled the Sudan (in the words of the old adage -- often ruling single-handed a district half the size of England) was all gone. Several score British remained in technical positions with the independent Sudanese Government, but technicians had always been deemed a very different breed from the "Political Service." As for the diplomatic community, it was so small that everyone knew everyone else, and the Sudanese Government saw no reason to distinguish between those Embassy officials who were or were not on the diplomatic list.

Now in January 1961 I again regard Egypt and the Sudan from the air. I had remembered the striking view from above of that thin green line which is the real Egypt -- the Nile and those narrow verdant strips of irrigated land extending from each of its banks. On the other hand I had forgotten just how bleak and barren the Sudan appeared. Even when in sight of the Nile there is only spotty evidence of intense cultivation; for from Wadi Malfa, on the Egyptian-Sudanese border, southward to Khartoum, cataracts or rocky ground too high for irrigation often reduce



Sudan -- Population: 10,263,000 (1955-56 Census)  
Area: 967,910 square miles

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that lush strip to little more than faded and sparse green dots.

Then when the plane leaves the Nile there is only desert. A geologist could be more explicit. To the layman there seem to be only two varieties of nothingness — hard, sandy ground broken by occasional small, black mounds; or another type offering no relief from the dull khaki color, but showing a faint design somewhat like the lines of fossilized leaves. These lines trace the courses of wadis -- the dried beds of short-lived streams formed by flash rains.

This stretch of land from about 100 miles north of Khartoum to about the same distance south of Wadi Halfa is also one of the hottest in the world — perhaps the very hottest if judged by the standard of mean annual temperature.

This brief glimpse from the air should help the visitor make certain necessary adjustments in order to understand the Sudan. Time permitting, the lesson is even more effective if one takes the train from Wadi Halfa to Khartoum (one day), or for that matter from Port Sudan to Khartoum (also about one day). In both cases the fact that much of this large country (one million square miles or 1/3 the area of the U.S.) is semi-desert and inhospitably hot becomes apparent. Experts advise that the Sudan is fortunately not over-populated (just under 11 million) and that there is still land either not yet in use or not fully exploited. Nevertheless, the visitor's tired eyes will tell him that well over half the Sudan represents a type of land which the pioneers of the American West would have given a wide berth.

To see the major exceptions to this bleak fact one must go to the vaster irrigated cotton plantations between the Blue and White Niles south of Khartoum (especially the Government-controlled Gezira Scheme of about 1½ million acres), or to large sectors of the three Southern Provinces where a richer land is not too effectively exploited because of primitive tribal society, unhealthy living conditions, and poor communications.



Gezira tenants loading cotton for the gin

After the plane had reached Omdurman, Khartoum's sister city just north of the point where the Blue and White Niles meet, it was a matter of minutes to circle south of Khartoum and prepare to land. From the air Omdurman looked just as it had before -- a maze of one-story, dun-colored mud brick houses containing some 110,000 souls; but even before landing it was obvious that Khartoum was on the move. The approach to the airport, once bare desert, now reveals a 1,200 unit housing project well on its

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way to completion.

It is interesting to reflect on the changing fortunes of the two cities. Khartoum, established in 1823 by the conquering troops of Muhammad Ali's Egypt, remained capital and chief commercial center of Egypt's Sudan until sacked by the victorious forces of the Mahdi in 1885 (when General Gordon was killed). Most of its population consisted of Egyptian civil and military occupiers and a few Greek, Syrian and Armenian traders, while Sudanese tended to settle in the native city of Omdurman.

Omdurman had its turn under the Mahdi and, after his death, the Khalifa Abdullah. The depopulated Khartoum (later completely razed by the Khalifa) served only as a convenient quarry for the building materials needed in an expanding Omdurman, capital of the Mahdist state.

Then came the Sudan's second foreign occupation in modern times -- the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium following the defeat of the Mahdist state in 1898. Khartoum was rebuilt (with streets tracing out the design of the Union Jack), and just as before, it was predominantly the city of foreigners, whether civil and military rulers or traders.

Here the cycle ended, and now in a newly independent Sudan the future seems to favor Khartoum rather than the more "native" Omdurman. Perhaps this "Sudanization" and growth of Khartoum after independence has a symbolic value. The transition of power from the British (who were the real rulers even though legally only joint sovereigns with Egypt) was smooth -- no battles, repressions or exiles -- and the Sudanese accepted whole-heartedly the basic pattern of this British-created governmental structure. This time, unlike the case in 1885, Khartoum absorbed the Sudanese and they accepted Khartoum.

The impression of great change in Khartoum was strengthened after landing. Several of the main streets have been widened and brightened



View of downtown Khartoum showing the Union Jack pattern of streets

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with new lighting. Even a system of one-way streets has been adopted for the downtown section, completely confusing this returning old-timer. The major business district has been enhanced by a whole city block of four story office buildings, and across the street looms the almost-completed eight story building (previous high - four) which will house the American Embassy and Economic Aid Mission. Khartoum, in short, has lost that sleepy, small town atmosphere which still prevailed as late as 1958.

I was eager to explore another important change in the Sudan since my departure in mid 1958. In November 1958 the Sudan, after less than three years of parliamentary democracy, chose the way of military rule. By a sort of guided coup d'etat, the then prime minister, Abdullah Khalil, turned the government over to a group of top army officers. (Abdullah Khalil is presently off hunting in the Western Sudan, and one would gather that this old soldier is not discontent with the present situation even if he were induced to add his name to a petition demanding a return to civilian rule.)

In a later letter I will go into this military regime more thoroughly, but for the moment let us stick to immediately apparent differences. There was quite a rash of pictures of the Sudan's president, General Ibrahim Abboud, as well as slogans supporting the Thawra (revolution), but admittedly much of this is left over from the recent state visit of Egypt's Abdel Nasser.

Still, it must be true that the present military rulers are both more intent on building up a hero and more alert to the power of propaganda in general. The idea of the strong leader in the Sudan has been dormant since the days of the Mahdi. In the later decades of British rule the almost equal strength of the two religious leaders, Sayyid Abd al Rahman al Mahdi (son of the original Mahdi) and Sayyid Ali Mirghani, tended to result in something of a stand-off; while most of the new generation (even those linked with these two religious leaders) worked for ideas of political democracy which de-emphasized the leadership principle.

Now a rather different note is sounded -- that of the secular, national strong-man. The influence (in descending order of importance) of the United Arab Republic, Yugoslavia and Pakistan is obvious in this new pattern. On first sight, sixtyish, short (about 5'6") and somewhat self-effacing Ibrahim Abboud might seem a strange choice for this new role, but he does seem to personify consistent, faithful army service free of party affiliation or personal favoritism. The picture, in short, of a Naguib rather than a Nasser seems to come into focus.

The military regime appears to have easy control of the press through the direct means of its own two dailies -- one Arabic, one English language -- which have achieved a dominant position. (Radio Omdurman, being government-owned presents no problem.) The English language newspaper, like most Sudanese English language journals past and present, is not too well done; and with its many errors it is often more a source of amusement than information. On the other hand, the Arabic newspaper, Al Thawra, is well above the previous Sudanese standard in format, and appears to give fair coverage in a reasonably interesting style. Six to eight pages long, it is a full 50% larger

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than the previous average. Still I would hazard the guess that it gets a little dull after a few weeks with its constant theme of proud exhilaration and its self-imposed restriction to general symbols and straight news (as seen by the government), thus avoiding personalities, veiled allegations and innuendoes which are the basic ingredients of popular Sudanese (and Arabic) journalism. (It is interesting to compare this type of Sudanese and Arabic journalism with that of England under Queen Anne. In both cases witty, reasonably well-educated dilettantes dashed off highly personalized articles

based on bits of gossip and humor gleaned from long hours in their clubs and coffee houses. Equally, in both cases society was still basically non-technical, and the political parties were really little more than cliques all from the same social class grouped around political favorites.)

Whatever its actual merits, Al Thawra will probably maintain its leading position since the most popular daily has recently been banned for the second (and probably last) time, and the other papers are too cautious to be interesting.

Much, of course, has not changed in the Sudan, and this fortunately includes many of the more endearing qualities of the Sudanese. The same open, friendly informality prevails. I remember clearly the first official Independence Day reception I attended at the Palace -- to my surprise the waiters took time out from their duties to shake hands with the Prime Minister and other high officials. The way of life supporting such manifestations of real social democracy is still very much in evidence.

At the same time if many former leaders and men of influence are now ignored, none are in prison (only army officers who took part in later abortive coups have been jailed). Whether the military regime has been an improvement or not is a question I will try to answer later, but it is comforting to be able to report at once -- the Sudan is no police state....

We started with a reminiscence and implicitly a comparison. In 1956 there was a brand new independent Sudan and at the same time something almost equally new -- American-Sudanese relations. Let us close with a backward glance. In five years that independent Sudan has lost a bit of its innocence and perhaps more than a bit of its optimism. In suspension, and also probably lost, is the formal structure of a British-



President Abboud welcoming President Nasser  
at Khartoum Airport

type parliamentary democracy. However, there is room for hope. Nothing is irrevocably gone, and no new fundamental cleavages in Sudanese society have developed as a result of its trials.

Perhaps full-blown parliamentary democracy was too much the hot house plant, developed too late in the period of the Condominium; but the roots of hardier institutions of government and consultation do exist in the Sudan, and it may be that a less ambitious start can achieve more. Perhaps.

What then about the American diplomatic position in the Sudan after five years? Here the simile must be not a hot house plant but rather a large, sturdy weed. From two officers on the day of Sudanese independence, January 1, 1956, we have blossomed to some 24 in Embassy and U.S.I.S. plus 60 in the Economic Aid Mission. American clerks, wives and dependents would more than double this figure. The Economic Aid Mission, set up late in 1958, has already spent over \$44,000,000.

Being strongly committed for both practical and idealistic motives to the principle of U.S. economic aid to underdeveloped countries, I do not begrudge in the least this heavy expenditure of manpower and money. Still, gnawing doubts occur. In the face of such a large official American community, what is the reaction of the independent Sudan completely ruled until recently by less than 150 British members of the Sudan Political Service aided by about 800 British officials in administrative and technical positions (40% of whom were either in the railroads or education)?

Do we have enough competent persons seeking overseas government service to insure such large numbers of good officers in the Sudan and in all other countries where our interests are just as strongly committed?

In five short years of experience have we learned enough of the Sudan to be able to spend wisely the amount of money appropriated?

Is it more effective diplomacy to move into a new country on a "crash basis" and then later cut down the amount of aid than to build up slowly?

Before assuming major Western responsibility and liability in the Sudan, did we exhaust every possibility to induce the British, in addition to other NATO allies, to assume a larger proportion of the burden?

This all sounds very severe, and admittedly the very human tendency to laud the "good old days" and insist that things were done better "when I was there" must be discounted. To end on a more cheerful note, it is indeed good to be back in the Sudan even if the temperature often reaches 100 during this, the "coldest" month of the year.

Sincerely,  
  
Leon Carl Brown

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