

Preventing the Next Mali John Prendergast Foreign Policy 4 March 2013 The heat was stifling and the climb was steep, but Adam insisted that he show us the place where his life was forever altered. It was mid-January, and we were deep in the Nuba Mountains, in territory controlled by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army-North. Only two short weeks before, Adam's family heard the familiar hum of a government Antonov bomber. They had time to scurry to two makeshift bomb shelters before nine bombs were released from the plane's cargo hold. Those who hid in the dugout next to an old tree escaped unscathed. Those who sought sanctuary in a rocky depression in the side of the mountain, however, met a different fate. One of the bombs scored a nearly direct hit; Adam lost his mother, wife, and daughter all at once.

The assault on the people of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, two regions just north of the border with South Sudan, bears a deadly resemblance to the tactics the Sudanese government has used in Darfur and South Sudan. Aerial bombing terrorizes the population and prevents it from farming, while humanitarian groups are prevented from delivering aid. Starvation is the objective. Draining the water to catch the fish is one of the oldest counterinsurgency strategies known to man. (...)

Despite a raft of agreements with internal opponents and neighboring South Sudan, the Khartoum government is not evincing any willingness to implement any of them, including a basic humanitarian access agreement for the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. The policy of the United States and other internationals has understandably been to encourage Sudanese officials to implement existing deals and sign new ones, principally an African Union-led peace initiative chaired by former South African President Thabo Mbeki. As the death tolls and reneged promises mount, however, it is becoming clear that no peace is possible without profound political change in Khartoum.

Given the lack of progress toward peace, attitudes are hardening in rebel zones throughout Sudan, increasing the potential for the disintegration of the Sudanese state. "If things don't change," proclaimed Amir, a Nuba Mountains' community leader we met, "then we want these 99 mountains to become our own country like South Sudan." The longer the interlocking civil wars rage, the harder it will become to put this secessionist genie back in the bottle.

South Sudan, the world's newest country, has disturbingly begun to fall into traps and habits that could lead to similarly negative outcomes. The intersecting trends of corruption, abuse of power by security structures, and closing political space create cause for greater concern and engagement.

A core long-term U.S. interest in this region should be to ensure against the inadvertent creation in Sudan of another Mali or Somalia -- state collapse, Balkanization, and radicalism. Sudan's government has a history of cooperation with terrorist groups, and ties with Iran seem to be deepening again. Sudan's periphery has been disintegrating over time, and that trend will only accelerate. The root driver of this deepening crisis is unaccountable, unrepresentative, authoritative governance. The international response isn't working, so new ideas and

approaches are urgently needed. (...)

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has a long, deep history working on Sudanese issues, as does President Barack Obama. They have the opportunity to reimagine policy based on evolving realities, which requires finally dealing directly with the core issues of governance in Sudan and South Sudan. In Sudan, a small clique of Islamists headed by Bashir has held absolute power for nearly 24 years. Until that concentration of power is addressed, peripheral regions will continue to rebel, with massive humanitarian consequences, potential further state disintegration, and likely further radicalization. South Sudan, meanwhile, is less than two years old, but corruption and concerns over concentration of authority in the presidency require real governance reform as a means of preventing future conflict within that country. Both governments will have to deal more seriously with their economic and regional tensions and stop demonizing each other, or a new war between Sudan and South Sudan could be possible. Washington can build greater leverage in support of peace between and within the Sudans by widening and deepening high-level engagement and support for effective democracy, peace, and human rights advocates in both countries. In Sudan, in particular, catalytic foreign assistance for civil society and service delivery should be provided to the groups involved in the New Dawn Charter as they ascertain how best to achieve a nonviolent political transition.

As we prepared to depart his burned-out village, Adam summed up the resolve of the people of the Nuba Mountains and other areas rebelling against the government: "We're ready to fight for change until all of us are dead." The Save Darfur movement launched nearly a decade ago was driven by outsiders. Today's Save Sudan movement is led by Sudanese, but the United States should be there to help them bring about their own change.

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