Strengthening Israel-Sudan Ties and Preserving the Abraham Accords

written by David Aaronson | 11.03.2024

Key Points:

- Sudanese Transitional Sovereignty Council leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has taken major steps to demonstrate his commitment to peace with Israel. Israel must welcome and embrace this serious commitment, rather than taking it for granted.
- Iran's destabilizing activities in Sudan can be countered by stronger security cooperation between Israel and Sudan. Such cooperation would help prevent Sudanese territory from being used to smuggle Iranian weapons to Hamas in Gaza.
- Sudan, as the third-largest country in Africa, has the potential to become a major exporter of wheat and agricultural products. This potential can be realized through cooperation with Israeli agri-tech companies, which can provide the necessary technology to develop the fertile Sudanese land.
- Just as peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia is still possible despite Saudi Arabia re-establishing ties with Iran, peace between Israel and Sudan is still possible despite Sudan re-establishing ties with Iran.

Four years ago, on February 3rd, 2020, a dramatic meeting took place against all odds and expectations in the Middle East. While on a working visit in Uganda, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a meeting with the leader of Sudan, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The meeting was a breakthrough for numerous reasons. First and foremost, until that point, Sudan was most notable in Israeli history for hosting the Arab League Khartoum Summit of 1967. This summit, which followed Israel's decisive victory in the Six Day War, established the Arab League's "Three Nos" – "No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel."

The meeting between Netanyahu and Burhan in 2020 helped shift the mindset of Arabs and Israelis, leading them to realize that the region was changing for the better. It became obvious that Netanyahu's successful campaign of expanding Israel's engagement with Africa ("Israel is returning to Africa and Africa is returning to Israel") was producing positive results in the Arab world as well. The immediate publication of the meeting in a statement to the press – as agreed by both Netanyahu and Burhan – showed that Sudan wanted this relationship to be public.

Three days later, on February 6th, 2020, Burhan announced that Sudan would allow Israeli planes to use its airspace. This move significantly reduced the flight time between Tel Aviv and Johannesburg, as well as to other destinations. Indeed, on February 16th, 2020, the first-ever commercial Israeli flight entered Sudanese airspace, a historic moment that proved Burhan's commitment to normalizing ties with Israel.

Eventually, on October 23rd, 2020, a three-way telephone call was held between Burhan, Netanyahu, and then-US President Donald Trump. In that phone call, it was agreed that Sudan would sign the Abraham Accords and normalize ties with Israel. In exchange, the United States would remove Sudan from its list of state-sponsors of terror. On January 6th, 2021, Sudan formally signed the Abraham Accords and on April 20th, 2021, Burhan canceled the official Sudanese boycott of Israel.

Since then, however, there has been little progress made on reaching a full normalization agreement. The Biden Administration, as well as the Bennett-Lapid government, both chose to maintain distance from Burhan. Sadly, potential avenues for collaboration were overlooked. But Burhan was patient and remained optimistic that Israel would eventually advance its normalization with Sudan. This is evidenced by the fact that in September 2022, Burhan said in an interview that he would visit Israel if and when invited – as well as in November 2022, when he was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Netanyahu on his return to the Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

Unfortunately, the rebellion launched by rival forces in April 2023 pushed Sudan into a devastating civil war, which has made the situation even more difficult.

Burhan has managed to retain control of much of Sudan, while the rebel forces were repeatedly sanctioned and condemned by US and Western officials.

Burhan also made significant trips to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which remain supportive of him. Additionally, Burhan represented Sudan at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023 and also met with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine.

Eventually, given the lack of robust support from the US, Israel and other Western nations in the context of the Sudanese civil war, Burhan reluctantly accepted Iranian offers to re-establish diplomatic relations and sign arms deals. This unfortunate development highlights an important reality which Israel must recognize: When Israel neglects its relations, anywhere in the world, our enemies quickly expand their influence. Wherever Israel is not actively pursuing peace, prosperity and security – Iran is actively pursuing terrorism, war, and genocide.

Like the Saudis, Burhan would have preferred not to do a deal with the devil in Iran. This can be seen from his recent decision to prohibit the construction of an Iranian Naval Base in Port Sudan. But just as the decision by Western leaders to distance themselves from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman led Saudi Arabia to draw closer to China and Iran, the West's similar approach to Burhan has led to the rekindling of Sudan-Iran ties. Just as peace with Saudi Arabia is still possible despite the Saudis re-establishing ties with Iran, finalizing Israel's peace agreement with Sudan is still possible despite Burhan's deal with Iran.

Israel should consider offering Burhan options for security cooperation that would allow Sudan to cancel its agreement with Iran, or at the very least, to reduce its need for Iranian military assistance. This could include presenting Burhan with possibilities for cooperation with Israeli defense companies, including those that have expanded their relationships with other Abraham Accords countries since the signing of the Accords. It is imperative that Israel – not Iran – have a strong relationship with the Sudanese military and security forces. Particularly as Israel's war against Hamas continues, Israel and Sudan should work together to prevent Sudanese territory from being used to smuggle Iranian weapons to the Gaza Strip. This security coordination would strongly bolster Israel's regional deterrence.

Sudan also has potential to help bring prosperity to the region, including through

enhanced agricultural cooperation with Israel. Sudan is the third-largest country in Africa and home to expansive stretches of fertile farmland. In the past, Sudan served as a major exporter of wheat and cotton. As a result of the Russia-Ukraine War, Sudan has the potential to once again become a major supplier of wheat to Europe and Africa. It can partner with Israeli agri-tech companies to do so. This would be a major achievement for both the Israeli and Sudanese economies. It would cause the people of the region to benefit from the fruits of this peace in the most literal sense.

Some continue to question Burhan's commitment to normalize relations with Israel. As noted, Burhan has openly demonstrated his seriousness on peace with Israel by meeting publicly with Israel's Prime Minister, annulling Sudan's boycott of Israel, opening Sudanese airspace to Israeli flights, and joining the Abraham Accords. The various rebel groups in Sudan have taken no such steps towards normalization with Israel – certainly not in public.

Initiatives for security and economic cooperation with Burhan and his government, despite the civil war in Sudan, and the Israel-Hamas conflict, would help ensure that Sudan remains inside the Abraham Accords. As a result of this crucial cooperation at such a critical time, Israel and Sudan could finally sign the long-awaited normalization agreement and realize the potential of peace.