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Sudan's Nimeiri: More Problems and Fewer Options

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Summary

Since mid-1981 there has been a significant increase in Libyan efforts to bring down the Nimeiri regime. These have included plans to assassinate Nimeiri and other senior Sudanese officials, sabotage and terrorism operations, and efforts to create unrest in outlying areas, principally the west and the south. It is such Libyan-sponsored subversion that constitutes the greatest immediate threat to Nimeiri's continued rule rather than the possibility of a conventional attack by Libyan troops.

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Given the intensity of Libya's anti-Sudanese effort and the possibility that some plots to kill Nimeiri have gone undetected by Sudanese security, the chances that the President could be assassinated have increased. If Nimeiri should be killed or forced to leave office during the next few months because of ill health, he would probably be succeeded by First Vice President Abd al-Majid Khalil. Under Khalil, Sudan's pro-Western and pro-Egyptian foreign policy would change very little. Khalil, however, lacks Nimeiri's skill in dealing with Sudan's various contending groups and might soon be replaced by another military leader.

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The danger to the government may have been reduced temporarily by the arrest in recent weeks of several thousand refugees and unemployed Sudanese in the Khartoum area. In addition, the domestic opposition is divided, and no opposition leader is acceptable to all of Sudan's disparate political and tribal groups. More important, there is no evidence of widespread dissatisfaction in the military, Nimeiri's principal power base. Consequently, Nimeiri appears capable of surviving the present challenges to his rule.

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Over the longer term, the survival of the Nimeiri regime depends on the ability of the government to reverse the nation's economic decline. The austerity measures required under the terms of an International Monetary Fund reform program carry significant political risks. Many Sudanese, especially those in urban areas, hold the regime responsible for what they regard as intolerable living conditions. Further increases in the prices of basic commodities could lead to widespread public disorder that would test the loyalty of the military to the regime.

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This memorandum was written by *Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near East – South Asia Analysis.* *It has been coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Africa, the Directorate of Operations, the Office of African and Latin American Analysis and the Office of Central Reference. Information as of 4 November 1981 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, ArabIsraeli Division, Office of Near East – South Asia Analysis,*

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**Sudan's Nimeiri:
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President Gaafar Nimeiri has been in power since May 1969, longer than any other Sudanese leader since the country gained independence in 1956. The 51-year-old former Army officer has survived three major coup attempts and widespread antigovernment demonstrations in August 1979. His long tenure is due largely to his ability to maintain the loyalty of the military and to the considerable political skill he has demonstrated in dealing with Sudan's disparate political and tribal groups. His low-key, unpretentious leadership style has led many Sudanese to prefer him to more controversial figures on the national scene, none of whom is acceptable to all the major opposition groups.

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A stroke forced Nimeiri to curtail his activities last year and fueled speculation about his continued ability to govern. He underwent surgery in June 1980, however, and by early 1981 he was able to resume his full schedule of activities.

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Initially an adherent of leftist Arab socialism of the Nasirist variety, Nimeiri abruptly moved Sudanese policies to the right following an abortive, Communist-led coup in July 1971. Since that time he has become a moderating force in the region and an obstacle to the expansion of Soviet influence. Nimeiri's endorsement of the Camp David accords in September 1978 led Libyan leader Qadhafi, who had backed rightist coup attempts in 1975 and 1976, to resume financial support and military training for Sudanese dissidents. Sudan's role in early 1981 as the leader of a diplomatic campaign to force Qadhafi to withdraw his troops from Chad and public calls by Nimeiri for the Libyan leader's removal led to a further intensification of Qadhafi's anti-Nimeiri activities.

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Nimeiri has permitted the use of Sudanese territory as a safe haven and supply base for the forces of Chadian dissident Hissein Habre. Habre's forays into Chad generated a number of Libyan airstrikes on his staging areas in Sudan between early September and mid-October. The Libyan withdrawal from Chad, begun in early November, should ease Sudanese concerns about Qadhafi's intentions. The Sudanese have responded to the withdrawal by asking Habre to cease his operations from Sudanese territory. Libya's withdrawal of its troops from Chad, however, is the result of Tripoli's desire to avoid further international censure and concern over possible US, French, and Egyptian actions. It does not signal a change in Qadhafi's anti-Nimeiri stance.

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Despite Sudanese claims in early October that Libyan forces were about to launch a military attack across Sudan's border with Chad, the greatest immediate threat to the Nimeiri regime appears to be Libyan-sponsored subversion. Libyan leader Qadhafi's efforts to topple Nimeiri have included plans to assassinate the Sudanese President and other government officials, the sabotage of key economic installations, terrorism, and possibly raids from Chad into western Sudan by Libyan-trained Sudanese dissidents. 25X1

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Sudanese concern over these efforts has been heightened by the assassination of President Sadat, Nimeiri's principal ally in the Middle East. 25X1

The conclusion of the Libyan–Ethiopian–South Yemeni friendship agreement in August 1981 has prompted speculation that Ethiopian leader Mengistu might cooperate with Qadhafi against Nimeiri, a development that would place Sudan between hostile neighbors. Both Nimeiri and Mengistu have benefited from the Sudanese-Ethiopian rapprochement reached in early 1980. Nimeiri has limited Sudanese and Arab support for the Eritrean insurgents, and Mengistu has kept Sudanese dissidents in Ethiopia under tight control. In late August and early September the Sudanese, at least in part out of a desire to mollify Mengistu, disarmed and expelled elements of the Eritrean Liberation Front after fighting between it and the stronger Eritrean People's Liberation Front spilled over into Sudanese territory. Mengistu, however, may have decided that the financial rewards of cooperation with Libya outweigh the benefits of continued cooperation with Sudan and may permit Libya to use the Sudanese dissidents in Ethiopia for subversion in Sudan. 25X1

Domestic Opposition

Nimeiri's skill in balancing the various groups seeking power has prevented the development of broad opposition to his rule. Through his policy of reconciliation with conservative opponents, which he initiated after the coup attempt in 1976, he was able to persuade the two major opposition groups—the Ansar religious sect and the Muslim Brotherhood—to abandon their efforts to overthrow the government. At the same time he has used the Army and security forces to neutralize those groups that continue openly to oppose his regime—the National Unionist Party, the Baathists, and the Sudanese Communist Party. 25X1

Although considerably weakened after its defeats by Nimeiri, the *Ansar Muslim sect,* whose adherents constitute approximately one-fifth of Sudan's 18 million people, is a significant force on the Sudanese political scene. Its ability to exert influence, however, has been eroded by factionalism. The principal Ansar leader, Sadiq al-Mahdi, returned from exile in 1977 under the terms of the national reconciliation, but he has been frustrated by Nimeiri's refusal to give him a meaningful role and has withdrawn from direct participation in the government. A small group headed by Sadiq's cousin, Wali-ad-Din al-Hadi al-Mahdi, never accepted reconciliation with Nimeiri and continues to oppose the regime. 25X1

The Ansars could be used by Qadhafi in his efforts to destabilize the present government. Reflecting the historic Ansar distrust of Egypt, Sadiq is at odds with Nimeiri over his close alignment with Cairo. He has also opposed Nimeiri's decision to resist the Libyan presence in Chad and Sudan's offer of military facilities to the United States. 25X1

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Since the initiation of Nimeiri's national reconciliation policy, the *Muslim Brotherhood* has actively participated in the government, but it is almost certainly maneuvering to place itself in a favorable position if Nimeiri is forced out. The most conservative of all organized Islamic groups in Sudan, its primary base has been the faculty and student body at the University of Khartoum. Despite its small membership—estimated at between 60,000 and 300,000 nationwide—the appeal of the Brotherhood's militant brand of Islam and its willingness to use intimidation to achieve its ends have made it a formidable political force. The Brotherhood operated as a clandestine organization from 1969, when Nimeiri banned all political parties, until 1977, when it accepted Nimeiri's offer of reconciliation. Although its leader, Hasan al-Turabi, serves as Attorney General, Sudanese security officials regard the organization as a threat to the regime and closely monitor its activities. 25X1

The *National Unionist Party* is the most important of those groups actively seeking to overthrow Nimeiri. It reflects the views of the better educated and more secular merchants, civil servants, and professionals who oppose the conservative forces represented by the Ansars and the Muslim

Brotherhood and resent the dominant role of the Army. In the past the party drew much of its strength from the pro-Egyptian Khatmiyyah Islamic sect, the principal rival of the Ansars. The party now appears to have split into two factions. The Khatmiyyah sect headed by the Mirghani family does not share the leftist sentiments of Sharif al-Hindi, the present leader of the National Unionist Party. 25X1

Al-Hindi, who is in exile, has received aid from both Libya—his principal backer since 1980—and Iraq. Recently, however, the Libyans apparently have been disappointed by al-Hindi's failure to win support inside Sudan; they reportedly have decided to divert their assistance to a former Sudanese Army officer who is training Sudanese dissidents in Libya. 25X1

The *Sudanese Communist Party* was at one time the largest Communist party in Africa. It has been seriously weakened by government repression since the disorders in August 1979, in which the Communists played a significant part. The party, nevertheless, has considerable assets in the labor movement and among students. Although it can no longer mount a direct challenge to the regime, it probably can still stimulate unrest. 25X1

The *Sudanese Baath Party* has only a few hundred members and does not constitute a serious danger to the Nimeiri regime. Active primarily in the University of Khartoum, it is closely monitored by security officials. 25X1

The Role of the Military

The Sudanese armed forces constitute Nimeiri's principal power base. The Army helped Nimeiri come to power in May 1969, and it proved loyal to him during the conflict with the Ansars in 1970 despite the fact that many members of the armed forces nominally belonged to that sect. It was Army support that enabled Nimeiri to regain power following the abortive, Communist-led coup in July 1971. 25X1

Morale in the military appears to be a major factor in its willingness to support the regime. Although pay appears to be a key factor in maintaining morale, the acquisition of new equipment from the United States will probably also have a positive effect throughout the armed services. The continued inability of the government to improve overall economic conditions, however, could induce dissatisfaction with Nimeiri. 25X1

During the Ansar-led, Libyan-supported coup attempt in 1976 some officers joined the rebels, and only a few off-duty enlisted men reported to their units. Since then the regime has striven to ensure military loyalty. Because an estimated 60 percent of the enlisted ranks came from western

Sudan, the homeland of most Ansars, recruitment of northerners and easterners has been emphasized. This policy, however, has left the military below strength—probably less than 60,000 as opposed to an authorized strength of 71,000—because civilian pay is higher in the northern and eastern regions of the country. 25X1

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Security officials pay particularly close attention to the "young majors"—a group in the armed forces that has been identified as not fully supporting the regime. These are officers who graduated from military college shortly after the 1969 revolution and before the abortive coup in July 1971. These military classes were particularly large (300 to 700 in each class instead of the normal 100 to 200) and therefore faced reduced chances for rapid promotion over the next few years. 25X1

Units stationed in the capital area are positioned to respond rapidly to any coup attempt and are specially trained to counter threats to the regime. The 600-man Republican Guard is the first line of defense in guarding the palace. The Airborne Brigade has its headquarters in Khartoum, and one paratroop battalion is stationed in north Khartoum. Two other battalions, an airmobile and a ranger battalion, are located 65 kilometers south of Khartoum. The 10th Infantry Brigade, located at Shendi, 160 kilometers northeast of Khartoum, is known to have a contingency mission to deploy to the capital in the event of "problems." The 1st Brigade, at El Obied, 340 kilometers southeast of Khartoum, is believed to have a similar mission.

Ethiopia and Libya pose the greatest external threats to Sudanese security. 25X1
The Sudanese are concerned that these militarily well-equipped countries will, either alone or in concert and with Soviet support, attempt to exploit Sudan's relatively weak defenses to topple the Nimeiri regime. On the Ethiopian front Sudanese military planners fear large cross-border operations against the numerous Eritrean base camps and refugee concentrations in eastern Sudan. A military confrontation on the border, if accompanied by airstrikes against Khartoum, Port Sudan, and other key cities and installations, would weaken the regime by demonstrating its

inability to defend the country. The recent Libyan airstrikes inside Sudan against the forces of Chadian dissident Habre underscored this point.

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Sudan's ability to defend itself against an Ethiopian or Libyan attack is questionable given the steady deterioration of its military equipment, the lack of funding to purchase new hardware, and weaknesses in training, leadership, and organization. Sudanese artillery consists primarily of obsolete British and Soviet equipment, for which spare parts and ammunition are not available. Air defense consists of four nonoperational SA-2 surface-to-air missile batteries at Port Sudan and a variety of 37-mm and smaller caliber antiaircraft guns scattered throughout the country. Moreover, only about 10 percent of Sudan's Soviet-manufactured radars are operational, and only two airfields—Wadi Seidna and Khartoum International—are suitable for fighter aircraft. Despite the acquisition of six C-130 transport aircraft in 1978, the military cannot transport food, fuel, and ammunition to its forces promptly and in sufficient quantities.

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To date, only the United States has offered Sudan any substantial military assistance, and the majority of this aid depends on Saudi financing which has not been forthcoming. Saudi Arabia tentatively agreed in 1978 to finance a $200 million purchase of 12 F-5 fighter aircraft and support equipment and six long-range air defense radars. But it did not follow through. The United States recently agreed to provide eight Vulcan self-propelled antiaircraft artillery guns, 12 155-mm towed howitzers, and 20 M-60A2 medium tanks. The howitzers and tanks will be diverted from US stocks and delivered by the end of the year. The most badly needed equipment, however—aircraft, air defense radars, and antiaircraft artillery—will require 24 to 36 months for delivery. Until this equipment is received, the Sudanese probably will be unable to turn back a concentrated Libyan or Ethiopian attack.

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Regional Problems

In attempting to subvert the Nimeiri regime, Libya has tried to exploit longstanding resentment by western and southern Sudanese against the central government. Inhabitants of both regions have long considered themselves victims of discrimination and neglect by Khartoum. The decentralization program, which has created five new regions in addition to the southern region and transferred some powers from the central government to the regions, could eventually ease some strains between Khartoum and outlying areas of the country. The program, however, is unlikely to reduce the susceptibility of the south or the west to Libyan subversion for some time.

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Many westerners who live near the Chadian border and who have close links with their fellow tribesmen in Chad could be influenced by Libyan propaganda. In addition many westerners travel to Libya in search of employment, 25X1

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The north-south cleavage, however, is the most serious division in Sudanese society. Relations between the two areas were relatively tranquil between February 1972—when the Addis Ababa agreement that ended the 17-year civil war was signed—and early 1980. But traditional southern distrust of the north has since intensified. Southerners have long believed that they have not received their fair share of development funds. In addition, the predominantly black, non-Muslim southerners have been concerned for some time over efforts by northern Muslims to give Sharia law greater force. 25X1

Southerners see the choice of Kosti in the north as the proposed site of a small refinery—rather than Bentiu in the south which is closer to recent oil discoveries—as a deliberate effort to deprive the south of its natural resources. Some southerners have threatened to use force to prevent oil from being moved to Kosti. Arguments by northerners that Kosti is a better location for communications and processing have not been persuasive. Although southern officials have reluctantly endorsed a compromise whereby the central government and the Chevron oil company would increase development investment in the south, provide training in the oil industry to southerners, and improve the distribution of oil products to the south and the west, protests over the refinery location are likely to continue. 25X1

Some southerners are also unhappy over the dissolution in early October 1981 of the southern regional assembly and the replacement of the southern executive council by a military administration. The action appears intended to resolve a dispute over partitioning the south into three regions. New elections and a referendum on the issue are scheduled to be held in six months. The division of the southern region is favored by many northerners because it would weaken the south. It is also supported by some southerners because it will reduce the dominant role of the Dinka tribe. Partition, however, could lead to greater tribal conflict and further increase southern resentment against the north. 25X1

The Faltering Economy

Sudan's precarious economic situation poses a serious threat to the regime. The foreign financial picture is particularly grim. Sudan is far behind in paying foreign debts and has scant prospects for any near-term increases in earnings. The country will require generous foreign assistance in the years ahead as well as additional debt reschedulings, but dealing with the foreign payments problem will not be enough. Tough economic reforms that have been long postponed will be necessary if the economy is to regain momentum. Imposing austerity to right the economy raises the danger of unrest that could threaten the Nimeiri government. 25X1

Real economic output has fallen for three straight years, and recovery is expected to be slow. Agricultural difficulties are largely to blame. Production of cotton, Sudan's most important export crop, has been particularly hard hit; last year's output was only 45 percent of the level three years earlier. Other major crops have not fared much better because of maintenance and pest control problems in Sudan's irrigated farmlands and government policies that hinder incentives. The small industrial sector also has had difficulties stemming from power cuts, labor disputes, emigration of skilled workers, and lack of foreign exchange for imported spare parts and other materials. 25X1

Sudan's economic decline has caused the government serious domestic financial difficulties. In the recently completed 1980-81 fiscal year, the government deficit shot up 60 percent over the previous year. Expenditures continue to increase as the government attempts to provide services and pay for public sector wage hikes, while tax revenues are suffering from low levels of domestic output and exports. Domestic borrowing for government spending and expanded credits to money-losing public sector firms have resulted in a rapid monetary expansion. In the fiscal year ending 30 June, the money supply increased 44 percent, more than double the rate of the previous fiscal year. In the absence of economic growth this monetary expansion is fueling strong inflationary pressures. Especially sharp price increases in July and August caused the government to attempt exhortation and then to resort to "price courts" staffed by military personnel that meted out floggings and jail sentences for price control violators. 25X1

Sudan's domestic economic problems are more than matched by the magnitude of its foreign payments difficulties. The country is saddled with roughly $3 billion in foreign debts, including $1 billion in debt arrearages primarily owed private lenders. This enormous debt resulted from overambitious efforts in the 1970s to become the breadbasket of the Middle East. Although unused arable land and recent oil discoveries provide some optimism for the longer term, it will be several years before these resources

can be developed. In the meantime, with no significant new sources of foreign earnings in sight and with imports already cut to the bone, Sudan will have to rely on foreign assistance and debt rescheduling. 25X1

In the year ending 30 June Sudan received about $1 billion in economic aid and International Monetary Fund loans. Under Sudan's three-year extended fund facility, the IMF provided $300 million. Saudi Arabia was the largest bilateral donor with $150 million in economic aid and was followed by the United States, which provided slightly more than $100 million. In the current fiscal year Sudan will need an even greater amount of foreign assistance. It faces a foreign exchange shortfall of at least $200 million in the year ending June 1982, given likely aid levels and assuming that Sudan receives $230 million from the IMF under a recently negotiated one-year standby agreement. Khartoum will look primarily to Saudi Arabia and the United States for additional funds. 25X1

Sudan's teetering foreign payments situation presents the government with a considerable dilemma. If the government fails to secure major foreign assistance and IMF loans, it will exhaust its foreign exchange and be forced to cut imports of essential foods and fuel even further, which will be highly unpopular. But in order to secure funds from the IMF and meet demands by foreign donors and private creditors to pursue policies that will right the economy, Khartoum will also have to take economic austerity measures that risk political unrest. For example, under the terms of the one-year standby agreement with the IMF, the price of government-supplied imported powdered milk and medicines would increase immediately by at least 80 percent while petroleum prices would rise 35 percent. Bread prices would rise by 33 percent next April. Prices of other imported goods also would increase, although by lesser amounts, as a result of devaluation and the imposition of higher import duties. Apparently in accordance with the IMF agreement, Nimeiri announced on 9 November the devaluation of the Sudanese pound and selected tax increases. 25X1

Policy changes that result in such price hikes could easily cause a repeat of the disorders that followed sharp increases in petroleum prices in 1979. Labor unrest similar to the railroad strike in June 1981 also could occur. Although that strike did not spread and was put down by the government, a new occurrence may not turn out so well. The imposition of austerity also risks undermining military support for the government. Although military personnel can be protected from the impact of austerity, their extended families are not, and profuse public complaints could raise questions in the military about Nimeiri's continued suitability to rule. 25X1

Outlook

[redacted] 25X1

Under Khalil or a government in which he had the strongest voice, Sudanese policies probably would change very little. Sudan probably would maintain its pro-Western and pro-Egyptian orientation. Khalil lacks Nimeiri's skill in dealing with the opposition and probably would be inclined to treat domestic critics of the regime more harshly than Nimeiri. This approach could end the uneasy truce between the government and its conservative opponents created by Nimeiri's national reconciliation campaign. [redacted] 25X1

The greatest threat to the survival of the regime over the longer term is the possibility of civil unrest as a consequence of commodity shortages or high prices. We believe that the Army is willing and able to put down most public disorders. The Army's resolve, however, might falter during an extended period of public unrest. Such an uprising could occur spontaneously given the extent of public dissatisfaction over the declining standard of living. [redacted] 25X1

If the government should change as a result of a popular uprising, the successor regime would most likely be another military or military-backed government. It is possible that Sadiq al-Mahdi or another opposition leader might come to power. Such an event would require the broad acquiescence of the military, and this would occur only if the military's commanding role on the national scene were not threatened. [redacted] 25X1

If military officers sympathetic to more conservative elements in Sudanese society, especially the Ansars and the Muslim Brotherhood, were to control or have a significant voice in a successor government, the new regime's foreign policy would shift from the present pro-Western stance toward a

more nonaligned position. Such a government would abandon its alignment with Egypt in favor of closer ties with the conservative Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia. Sudanese-US relations probably would be less close, but correct. [redacted] 25X1

In the unlikely—but not impossible—event that officers sympathetic to the goals of Libya or other radical Arab states controlled a successor government, US interests in the region would suffer a serious setback, and Sudanese ties to the USSR and its allies could be expected to increase dramatically [redacted] 25X1