

Sudan

Soft Power, Cultural Engagement, and National Security

MARCH 2018 TIM CARNEY AND MARY CARLIN YATES

Sudan Task Force

Following sustained progress on a “five-track” engagement plan, on October 12, 2017, US President Donald Trump permanently lifted significant and long-standing economic sanctions on Sudan. The Atlantic Council’s Sudan Task Force applauds US efforts to promote positive domestic changes in Sudan, while recognizing the obstacles to full normalization that exist. The reforms necessary to drive real change—improvements in governance, rule of law, human rights, and political participation—are well known and must remain a centerpiece of US-Sudan engagement; they should not take a back seat to narrow counterterrorism concerns. But administration officials would be prudent to also consider Sudan’s strategic relevance in a wider regional and global context. Failing to seize the opportunity at hand could risk pushing Sudan into the arms of global competitors.

To advance the dialogue on the US-Sudanese relationship in a way that could benefit both Americans and Sudanese, task-force members traveled to Sudan in January 2018—the third delegation in two years—to research three critical topics: governance and political reform; economic reform and impediments to investment; and prospects for greater US cultural engagement. While in Khartoum and in the Darfur region, the group sought out a diverse range of perspectives, speaking to government, civil society, business, youth, and artistic communities. That trip formed the basis of three issue briefs: “[Sudan: Politics, Engagement, and Reform](#),” “[Sudan: Prospects for Economic Re-engagement](#),” and “[Sudan: Soft Power, Cultural Engagement, and National Security](#).” Each brief proposes concrete measures that the US and Sudanese governments should undertake to continue advancing the bilateral relationship and to maintain momentum on addressing longstanding issues of mutual concern.

The Atlantic Council’s **Africa Center** promotes dynamic geopolitical partnerships with African states and redirects US and European policy priorities towards strengthening security and promoting economic growth and prosperity on the continent.

A hidden casualty of the past twenty years of poor US-Sudan relations is the people-to-people contact that should form a foundation for understanding the mutual interests, intentions, and motives as one nation deals with another. Americans and Sudanese have much to learn from, and about, each other. The current diplomatic opening, if used wisely, could lead to greater understanding of both countries’ complex histories and cultures, and to better relations in the long run.

Thanks to media coverage and broad global US cultural penetration, many Sudanese have a view, if a sometimes-distorted one, of the United States. Americans, however, have little clue of Sudan beyond

About the Sudan Task Force

The Sudan Task Force—co-chaired by Atlantic Council Vice President and Africa Center Director Dr. **J. Peter Pham** and Atlantic Council Board Director Ambassador (ret.) **Mary Carlin Yates**, former special assistant to the president and senior director for African affairs at the National Security Council, as well as chargé d'affaires of the US embassy in Sudan—proposes a rethink of the US-Sudan relationship to better serve US interests and to improve the lives of those in Sudan, both goals that task-force members believe to be mutually reinforcing. The task force also includes: Ambassador (ret.) **Timothy Carney**, the last senate-confirmed US ambassador to Sudan; Ambassador (ret.) **Johnnie Carson**, former US assistant secretary of state for African affairs and ambassador to Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda; Dr. **Jeffrey Herbst**, expert on African political economy and former CEO of the Newseum; **Cameron Hudson**, former chief of staff to the US special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan; Ambassador (ret.) **Princeton Lyman**, former US special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan and assistant secretary of state for international organizations; and **Zach Vertin**, visiting lecturer at Princeton University and former director of policy for the US special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan. **Kelsey Lilley**, associate director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, is the task-force coordinator.

This issue brief is one of a three-part series that continues the work of the task force's July 2017 report, *Sudan: A Strategy for Re-engagement*—authored by Ambassador Yates with Lilley—which detailed the costs to both the United States and Sudan of the status quo of strained relations. That report found that the decades-long US policy of isolation toward Sudan had not yielded significant changes in the country's governance, to the detriment of US policy objectives as well as the Sudanese people.

The content and recommendations are the result of task-force collaboration and represent a majority consensus among participants. Nothing implies that the lead authors or every participant agree unequivocally with every finding and/or recommendation. Individuals served in their personal capacity.*

* Participants in the January 2018 delegation traveling to Sudan included Pham, Yates, Carney, Carson, Herbst, Vertin, and Lilley. Their work was augmented by the expertise and insights of the wider US-based task force.

the agendas of US special interest groups, adding difficulty to the case for why the United States should more actively engage the Sudanese people. A dearth of recent public-opinion data makes opaque the current state of mutual attitudes and beliefs.

As Washington seeks to re-engage with Khartoum on a series of political, economic, and diplomatic matters, it should also focus its efforts on engaging the country's twenty-two million youth, who make up nearly 60 percent of Sudan's total population. Like their American counterparts, Sudanese youth are remarkably connected and informed, with many drawing on social media and other online outlets to receive their information and connect with one another. For many years, young Sudanese sought out the United States as a destination for higher education, contributing to the widespread English proficiency evident in Sudan in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. However, Sudan's next generation of leaders has already spent more than two decades in isolation from the United States, its influence, and its values. This has created the opportunity for extremism and radicalization, which is worrying in a strategic country like Sudan, which sits at the crossroads of the Arab and African worlds. The United States has lost valuable ground to other actors, ranging from the benign to the malicious, who are influencing Sudan's youth and wider population in ways that almost certainly will not serve US interests.

For these reasons, it is vital that robust re-engagement efforts—led by the US government, as well as private or nonprofit partners—commence immediately. Soft power has long-term payoffs, and the United States is already starting at a disadvantage. These efforts should center on youth engagement, including bolstering: exposure to the English language; culture in its many dimensions of art, music, and literature; and Sudanese history, including religion, archaeology, and tourism, to provide a much more nuanced understanding of how Sudan has evolved. Leading these engagement efforts provides the United States a window into understanding modern Sudan and its future leaders.

Tools for people-to-people engagement can be augmented (and their costs significantly reduced) via the Internet, through online or distance-learning applications that allow Sudanese to participate in academic courses, podcasts, and conferences. Increasing English-language educational opportunities and other academic training in Sudan, and the region,

SUDAN BY THE NUMBERS

Sudan is home to:



The greatest proportion of the **Nile Valley civilizations**

220 pyramids

Five active US-led archaeological digs



530 miles of coastline along the Red Sea

Borders with seven countries: Egypt, Libya, Chad, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea



Seventeen principal populations, 570 tribes divided among 56 ethnic groups

A **population of 37.3 million**

A **median age of 19**



Arabic as the dominant language, though 125 languages can be enumerated

A **literacy rate of 75 percent** (83 percent for men, 63 percent for women)

About **27.8 million mobile-phone subscribers**

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Sudan," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/su.html>; International Telecommunications Union, "Statistics," <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>; Claude Rilly, Marc Maillet, Vincent Francigny, Bernard Francois, et. al., *Histoire et Civilisations du Soudan: De la Préhistoire à Nos Jours* (Khartoum, Sudan: SFDAS/Soleb, 2017); LaVerle Berry (editor), *Sudan: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2015), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/pdf/CS_Sudan.pdf. *Image credit:* thenounproject.com.

could also encourage further cooperation. Meanwhile, exhibitions of Sudanese art, history, or music in the United States could offer a glimpse into Sudan to large US audiences that would otherwise not be exposed to it. As formal US restrictions against Sudan ease, the potential grows for tourism to serve as a window into Sudan's rich history, biodiversity, and culture.

To facilitate these exchanges, and to ensure their success in connecting citizens of both countries, Sudan must allow greater media freedom and unrestricted Internet access, which will reinforce the reach and impact of US efforts. Sudan could also benefit from capacity-building assistance to develop and modernize its nascent tourism industry, while reducing restrictions like the arduous travel and photo-permitting process. Lastly, both the United States and Sudan can be encouraged to pursue the easing of visas—particularly

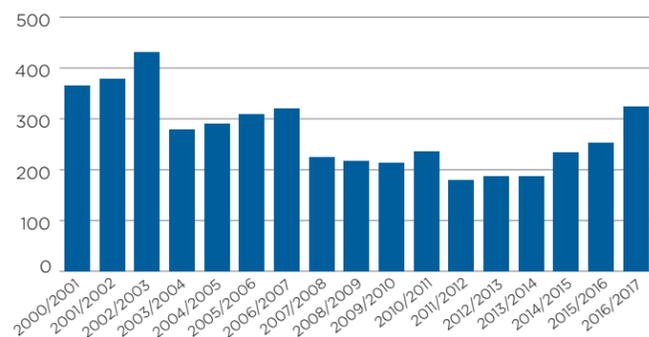
for those seeking cultural, educational, and touristic exchanges.

Reliable long-term public opinion data are difficult to come by when envisioning future opportunities for people-to-people engagement. Frequent public-opinion polling will become an increasingly important and accessible tool for measuring both baseline perceptions and understandings—and those over time—of both nations' citizens.

Educational and Youth Exchanges

Modern, Western education has been a priority for Sudan for more than a century. Sudan's Gordon College, which started in 1902 and later became the University of Khartoum, was a top higher-education institute in the Middle East and North Africa for decades. The combination of a British syllabus with Sudanese talent and determination put the university's graduates

Figure 1. Sudanese Students Studying in the United States Since 2000



Since 2000, only about 4,600 Sudanese students have studied in the United States. Given these extremely low numbers, the United States is losing the potential impact of the American experience on Sudanese young people, as it is unlikely that the next generation of Sudanese leaders will have been educated and trained by US institutions. Source: IIE International Students Studying in the United States by Places of Origin: Sudan, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin>.

into banks, government agencies, and businesses throughout the Gulf.

To study abroad, Sudanese historically preferred US universities—by the early 1980s, nearly seven hundred Sudanese students were studying in the United States annually.¹ But fewer and fewer Sudanese have come to the United States since 1989. In large part, this was due to sanctions restrictions, an arduous and expensive visa process, and Sudan’s cultural isolation from the United States. Sanctions had the unintended effect—whether because of actual restrictions or simply reputational effects—of dissuading young Sudanese from pursuing their studies at US higher-education institutions. Since 2000, only about 4,600 Sudanese students have studied in the United States. Given these extremely low numbers, the United States is losing the potential impact of the American experience on Sudanese young people, as it is unlikely that the next generation of Sudanese leaders will have been educated and trained by US institutions.

In place of the United States, Sudanese students have chosen the Gulf states, China, and Russia as go-to destinations for higher education; in recent years, Canada has also emerged as a popular choice. For

1 Data from *Open Doors* (Washington, DC: Institute of International Education, 2017), <https://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

example, the number of African students studying in China has surged to nearly sixty thousand annually as of 2016.² Chinese country-level data is provided sporadically, and no African countries were listed in the top fifteen origin countries for 2016, but task-force interviews in Khartoum suggested that scholarship opportunities in China and Russia dwarfed those of the United States.

The 2017 executive orders that removed many sanctions against Sudan will likely spur a rise in Sudanese students studying in the United States, and a slight uptick from 253 students in 2015-16 to 324 students in 2016-17 may be the start of this positive trend.³⁴ An East-to-West transition in terms of where Sudanese students pursue higher education is by no means certain, nor will it happen overnight. The United States is very clearly playing “catch up” to many other nations, all of which have an edge in the influence that their educational institutions, culture, values, and norms will have on Sudan’s next leaders.

In October 2017, a delegation from the Institute of International Education (IIE) visited nine Sudanese institutions of higher education across the country to explore the potential for academic partnerships with Sudanese educational bodies. IIE sees potential in disciplines such as agriculture and livestock, archaeology, tropical diseases, education, peace studies, renewable energy, and water management—sectors in which US universities have strong expertise. The trip followed a successful 2017 visit of thirteen Sudanese university vice chancellors to the United

2 Victoria Breeze and Nathan Moore, “Why African Students are Choosing China,” *US News and World Report*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-06-29/china-second-most-popular-country-for-african-students>. Official Chinese data, released each year, details student origin by continent and by the top fifteen origin countries. No African country is part of the top fifteen “sending” countries detailed. See “2016 Report on International Students in China,” https://breezegeography.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/2016_translated.pdf. As of 2012, the Chinese embassy in Sudan reported that nearly six hundred Sudanese students have studied in China on scholarships, but offers little breakdown of that data over time. Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Sudan, “Bilateral Relations,” 2012, <http://sd.china-embassy.org/eng/sbgx/>.

3 For a more detailed look at the restrictions against Sudan, see Mary Carlin Yates and Kelsey Lilley, *Sudan: A Strategy for Re-engagement* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017), http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Sudan_Strategy_for_Re-engagement_web_0712.pdf.

4 Data from *Open Doors* (Washington, DC: Institute of International Education, 2017), <https://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

An increase in the allotted fellowships for Sudan—especially at such a critical time—could reap rewards for decades to come.

States, as part of an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) run by the US Department of State. This promising program could offer major gains in education by using advanced US techniques in areas vital to Sudan’s well-being and prosperity.

The US embassy in Khartoum can also continue to play, and augment, its important role in connecting Sudanese youth with opportunities to advance their English-language skills, or explore higher-education opportunities in the United States. The embassy maintains an active presence on social media, including Facebook and Twitter. Through its “American Spaces” and “American Corners” in select locations in Khartoum and Port Sudan, the embassy provides an opportunity for Sudanese to learn more about the United States, including through its collection of books, magazines, and movies, as well as access to English-language resources and educational-advising services.⁵ The two unofficial “American Spaces” in Khartoum will eventually offer internet connections and access to US academic research. The “American Corner” in Port Sudan is a good example of a more established US-supported space in which exposure to the English language and US culture occurs.

The task force heard laments about the dearth of US educational advising capacity in Sudan, and a demand from Sudanese students to learn more about how to research, apply for, and win fellowship and educational opportunities in the United States. The US embassy in Khartoum was allowed to fill an EducationUSA position, which dedicates a full-time embassy staff member to international-student advising in Sudan, though this is only a first step. More broadly, the embassy’s interest in offering convenient sessions at universities and elsewhere could help cement existing interest, and facilitate an overall increase in student applications to US

5 US Embassy in Sudan, “American Spaces,” <https://sd.usembassy.gov/education-culture/american-spaces/>.

universities. It is important that these sessions take place outside of Khartoum and via outreach to top students regardless of their English fluency, as well as advertising educational opportunities on social media and facilitating access to higher education tests, such as the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Several US-led professional-exchange programs—including the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), the Fulbright Scholar Program, and the International Visitor Leadership Program—provide vital opportunities to travel, study, and intern in the United States. While the number of slots and funding for these programs is limited, demand for them is high. An increase in the allotted fellowships for Sudan—especially at such a critical time—could reap rewards for decades to come.

English Language Programming and Social Media Access

While English is one of two official working languages in Sudan, its use is clearly dwarfed by a preference for, and proficiency in, Arabic. Many leading academics in Sudan have also noted the marked deterioration in English-language capability among university students and graduates over the past two decades. This reality cements the trend, established during the period of Sudanese isolation from American institutions, that pushed bright, young Sudanese to pursue educational or employment opportunities in other Arabic-speaking countries, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—or even as far away as China and Russia.

Nevertheless, English instruction remains in demand, and is a key opportunity for the United States to promote and enhance English-language capabilities. A new effort inside the Ministry of Education to revamp Sudan’s English curriculum offers an ideal opportunity for the United States to offer capacity-building training and other assistance. Through English programming via social media, the Internet, radio programs, and training opportunities (including the relatively low-cost “train the trainer” programs, in which each trainee goes on to lead their own workshops), the United States can convey American values and norms. Leveraging the widespread penetration of US popular culture—including hit TV series and movies, as well as popular music—the United States is well positioned to turn the affinity for American artistic productions into a more concrete bond between the United States and the next generation of Sudanese. Importantly, English-

language efforts should focus outside of Khartoum, and not just on the elites.

These opportunities offer the easiest (and most inexpensive) chance to project soft power in a way that also increases mutual understanding. In many cases, nongovernmental or nonprofit institutions—many of which have deep expertise in English teaching—can augment English-language promotion. The alternative is a deepening of the status quo—a populace more comfortable choosing East over West, not only for language, but also to influence Sudanese values, governance, and education.

Sudan has broad international educational contacts, though most are with UK institutions or regional bodies, rather than US universities. Ahfad University for Women, for example, already has close ties to the American University of Beirut and the American University of Cairo. However, the US educational community has some longstanding contact with Sudan, which could now be used to build on the wider, bilateral normalization process. The US-based Sudan Studies Association, for example, will hold its annual conference this May at Northwestern University.

With the lifting of many executive-branch sanctions, it is now easier for US educational institutions to offer Internet-based university courses in Sudan. At the same time, to help broaden and diversify the Sudanese economy, a combination of business/financial training and Internet-technology (IT) training in Sudan might be funded through a combination of Sudanese businesses, educational institutions, US nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Direct contact between American and Sudanese young people might be fostered through US groups that work to connect youth, emphasizing communication and creativity, with values related to problem solving.

Social media is by far the most popular medium for sharing information and communicating among Sudanese youth, and its popularity is partially bolstered by the unreliability and biased nature of many official news sources.⁶ WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube are widely used, especially on cell phones; youth praised WhatsApp, in particular, for its ability to send

6 Khalid Albaih, “How WhatsApp is Fueling a ‘Sharing Revolution’ in Sudan,” *Guardian*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/sudan-whatsapp-sharing-revolution>.

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messages to multiple people at the same time.⁷ While the percentage of Sudanese who have cell phones is quite high (71 percent), Internet penetration is much lower, with just over a quarter of Sudan’s population connected.⁸ A popular way to connect with one another inside Sudan, social media also offers a quick and inexpensive way for Sudanese youth to connect with their peers across Africa, and even globally.

Culture: Art, Music, and Literature

Art, music, and literature are well developed in Sudan, creating a role for the arts in advancing US and Sudanese understanding of one another. Though nontraditional diplomatic tools, artistic exchanges promote greater understanding of each country’s traditions and heritage, while staying away from more controversial subjects like politics. They are also comparatively low in cost, and can easily be “outsourced” to private funding mechanisms, or to foundations that want to support cultural exchange.

US popular music, as well as more traditional genres like jazz and folk, is widely listened to in Sudan. In 2017, for example, an American jazz trio traveled to Sudan to participate in a series of public concerts and “master classes” with Sudanese musicians. While in Sudan, the group joined with local Sudanese musicians to film a music video—directed and produced by Sudanese entrepreneurs—that has been wildly popular online.⁹ Musical exchanges or training of this type—both in Sudan and in the United States—offer additional opportunities for widespread cultural engagement.

7 Task-force interviews with youth in Khartoum, January 2018.

8 Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2016: Sudan,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/sudan>.

9 US Embassy Khartoum, “Ahab Makan,” Facebook video, January 1, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/khartoum.usembassy/videos/1788907944487110/>.



In January 2018, American jazz trio The Petrio visited Sudan on an artistic exchange, where they played a series of public concerts, including with Sudanese musicians, and also held “master classes” for aspiring jazz artists. While in Sudan, they filmed a music video with Sudanese musicians that detailed the group’s trip—complete with a visit to the market to be outfitted in Sudanese national dress. *Photo credit: Alsanosi Ali.*

Well-developed modern painting in Sudan includes artists ranging from the late Professor Ahmed Shibrain to the well-known Rashid Diab, whose work resonates across the Middle East. Younger artists returned from exile, such as Abushariaa Ahmed, should also be acknowledged for their artistic renderings of Sudanese history, culture, and society. It is difficult for many Sudanese artists to make a living selling their work inside Sudan, so many turn to international exhibitions—including artistic hubs like Nairobi, London, New York City, and the Gulf states—to raise their profile. As a result, many Sudanese artists remain unknown even to more cultured Americans, though it is likely that, with greater exposure, their work would fascinate US audiences. As one Sudanese artist remarked, “We see artists in the West get showered with support and appreciation by the masses and the media. We simply don’t have that here.”¹⁰ An exhibit at a US-based

10 Yousra Elbagir, “Art Against the Odds: New Book Showcases

organization like Meridian House, or elsewhere, could combine Sudanese painting with performances by admired Sudanese musicians, and could be organized to include travel to several venues across the United States.

Sudanese literature in English, Arabic, and local languages resonates nationally and internationally. The well-known Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, an inversion of Joseph Conrad’s voyage in Africa, has a marvelous grasp of the role of strong women in Sudan. Leila Aboulela’s *Lyrics Alley*, shortlisted for a number of prizes, is told through a number of narratives, and follows members of an affluent family during the end of British colonialism in Sudan. Familiarity with Sudanese literature could easily be approached through a curriculum guide for

Sudan’s Isolated Creatives,” *Guardian*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/18/art-against-the-odds-new-book-showcases-sudans-isolated-creatives>.



A Christian fresco of the Archangel Michael from the ancient Sudanese city of Faras (now underwater due to flooding from Egypt's Lake Nasser) is on display in the Khartoum National Museum. Many of Sudan's historic artifacts have been excavated and preserved with the assistance of western experts, and Sudan's ongoing archaeological sites remain of great interest to university researchers. *Photo credit:* Alan Hansford Waters.

US colleges and universities, and through low-cost options like podcasts by academics. Some academic connections exist between the United States and Sudan—especially through the Sudanese diaspora in the United States—and should be leveraged. A similar opportunity offers to develop a curriculum on US literature for Sudanese students, particularly for those wishing to advance their English-language study.

Just as US music, movies, and TV have proven popular in Sudan, Sudanese music, art, and literature would likely captivate American audiences once properly exposed. In 2005, for example, Meridian International used seventy photographs from the 2005 book *Sudan: The Land and the People* for an exhibition that traveled the United States for six years, and showcased Sudan's diversity. The exhibition included an education guide for high-school and college students, to broaden their understanding of Sudan's culture and history. Similar institutions like the Library of Congress or the National Museum of African Art, may have a role to play in hosting and showcasing exhibitions on Sudanese art

and culture that would otherwise be inaccessible to most Americans.

Educational efforts can also be combined with non-English or non-American research about Sudan, such as the outstanding, and unique, 2017 French history book, *Histoire et Civilisation du Soudan*.¹¹ Given the dearth of accurate and comprehensive history available on Sudan, and the tendency of the country's rich history to be viewed only through the "prism" of Egypt rather than on its own, five specialists—all of whom either live or regularly travel to Sudan—began this history project. In their book, they comprehensively cover Sudan—from prehistory through the Nile Valley civilizations, to the Christian kingdoms, and into the modern era—with a section on the music and painting of today. If translated into English and Arabic, this volume would be a superb reference book.

¹¹ Claude Rilly, Marc Maillot, Vincent Francigny, Bernard Francois, et. al. *Histoire et Civilisations du Soudan: De la Préhistoire à Nos Jours* (Khartoum, Sudan: SFDAS/Soleb, 2017).

History, Religion, Archeology, and Tourism

It is more likely that readers in the United States and Sudan are aware of US history—from the time of indigenous tribes, European explorers, and colonization, to the two hundred-some years since the US Declaration of Independence—than with the millennia of Sudanese history dating back to approximately 2500 BCE.

Sudan's history divides into roughly four phases, and is heavily intertwined with the fate of Egypt, of which Sudan used to be part. In 2500 BCE, the Kingdom of Kush, as the Egyptians styled it, established itself at present-day Kerma. After a period of Egyptian subjugation, Kush conquered and briefly ruled Egypt.

The Assyrians expelled Kushites from Egypt and, over several centuries, Kush was pushed south to where Khartoum exists today. The Kingdom of Axum (present-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) finally conquered the region in the fourth century. Christian kingdoms prevailed in Sudan from the sixth century until the peaceful ascension of Islam in Nubia (present-day central Sudan and southern Egypt) by the early sixteenth century. Between 1820 and 1821, the Ottoman Empire's governor in Egypt invaded Sudan. The Mahdi Millenarian movement expelled the Ottomans in 1885, lasting until the British returned in 1898. Independence came in 1956.

In the modern period, Islam has been Sudan's predominant religion, although Coptic Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Evangelical Christianity are practiced in the country. Several Christian holidays, including Christmas and Easter, are national holidays.¹²

The origins of Sudan's people are in the process of elaboration. As DNA studies advance, they will have more to tell the world about the complicated and rich history of Sudan. The mosaic of Sudanese peoples deserves celebration as a national strength—a desire that many Sudanese youth expressed in conversations with task-force members.¹³ Sudan's prehistory is regularly the subject of foreign archaeological expeditions to remote parts of the country.¹⁴ Research

¹² Religious freedom issues are discussed in "Sudan: Politics, Engagement, and Reform," <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/sudan-politics-engagement-and-reform>.

¹³ Task-force interviews with youth, October 2016 and January 2018.

¹⁴ Task-force discussion with Sudan National Museum and tourism experts, January 2018.

teams from elite US universities began coming to Sudan more than a century ago.¹⁵ More than fifty expeditions from around the world are actively ongoing in Sudan, but, despite the vast archaeological expertise of US universities, only a handful are run by Americans.¹⁶ Moreover, experts maintain that, with the proper attention and resourcing, the study of Sudan could easily rival that of Egypt—and there is probably more left to discover in Sudan.

Sudan has vast tourism potential; it is home to three United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-designated World Heritage Sites that celebrate the art and architecture of the ancient Nile Valley civilizations. Another five sites are under consideration by UNESCO, and the designation would ideally bring attention and resources to the sites, which are often in desperate need of protection and preservation. Additionally, Sudan has increasingly become a destination for adventurous US vacationers—one top university is even planning an alumni trip to Nubia and Khartoum in January of 2019. European tourism in Sudan is more established, and several indigenous tourism companies meet the demands of these Western tourists.

Visa, movement, and infrastructure deficiencies currently restrict the potential of Sudan's tourism industry. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council's 2017 report, Sudanese tourism remains critically underdeveloped—contributing just 2.5 percent of Sudan's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016.¹⁷ Neighboring Egypt, in contrast, posted an astonishing \$8.7 billion in tourism revenue in 2016, despite growing security concerns there.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in Kenya, tourism directly supported nearly four hundred thousand jobs in 2016, more than double the employment statistics for tourism in Sudan. If managed carefully and supported by infrastructure development and policy reforms, tourism in Sudan could prove both a boon in additional revenue and as a source of much-needed jobs.

¹⁵ American researchers from Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston were the first to conduct large-scale archaeological digs in Sudan, beginning in 1907. For more, see *Histoire et Civilisations du Soudan*, p. 50.

¹⁶ Task-force interviews with tourism officials and archaeology experts in Sudan and the United States, January 2018.

¹⁷ World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel and Tourism: Economic Impact 2017 Sudan* (London: WTTC, 2017), p. 2, <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/countries-2017/sudan2017.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.



The pyramids of Meroë at night. Sudan is home to some two hundred pyramids, relics of ancient Nubia, which attract modest numbers of international visitors but yield great potential for Sudan's nascent tourism industry. *Photo credit: Michael Freeman.*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sudan's rich history and culture remain obscure to most Americans, though more exposure to them would likely generate great interest. Sudanese know comparatively little about the United States, as well. Few have had the opportunity to experience it—via travel, education, or exchange. More than two decades of isolation have succeeded in funneling Sudan's best and brightest to seek higher education and post-graduate employment in locations other than the West. As a result, the start of diplomatic, political, and economic normalization between the United States and Sudan must also include aggressive re-engagement with the country's twenty-two million youth. Doing so immediately is the United States' best chance to prevent a "lost generation" of Sudanese youth, with no linkages with or affinity toward the United States—and to avoid the potentially devastating consequences therein.¹⁹

¹⁹ Grant T. Harris, *Why Africa Matters to US National Security* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017), p. 6, <http://www.atlan->

A review of Sudanese history, culture, and art makes clear the immense potential for engagement and exchange between the people of the United States and Sudan. This report offers a series of recommendations as to the kind of cultural engagements that could be carried out. It also puts forth two overarching recommendations for both countries to best shepherd valuable ideas, expertise, and resources—reiterating the importance of a sustained, long-term engagement. These recommendations center on increasing the communication and cooperation between both countries, and the vital need to find a private funding mechanism to support many of these ideas and bring them to fruition. For these recommendations to succeed, the United States and Sudan will need to work together to find ways to reduce the uncertainty, difficulty, and expense associated with traveling between (and within) both countries. Sudan will also

ticcouncil.org/images/publications/Why_Africa_Matters_to_US_National_Security_0524_web.pdf.

need to ease up on its restrictions on freedom of speech; without a fundamentally freer society, US initiatives to reach out to the Sudanese people will fall flat. The two overarching recommendations are:

- 1 Create a quasi-official joint working group, comprising both Sudanese and American experts, to support exchanges and cultural programs that would lay the basis for expanding contact and adding mutual knowledge. A separate, but parallel, official body, composed of both American and Sudanese officials, would also coordinate and expedite needed changes to travel regulations, like visa applications, permitting, but also greater media freedom and internet access that could quickly improve the atmosphere for exchanges and tourism.
- 2 Given declining public funds, establish a private funding mechanism to support and expand people-to-people programs and exchanges (augmenting official programs), by approaching major Sudanese, US, and international philanthropic organizations, as well as the Sudanese diaspora.

To the United States:

- 1 **Undertake reciprocal visa easing.** State Department Consular Affairs should work with its Sudanese counterparts to consider a timeline and process for reciprocal visa easing, which would allow for an increase in student and cultural exchanges, as well as tourism.
- 2 **Conduct regular polling.** Establish baseline metrics on Sudanese and American opinion via regular, professional polling, to establish the impact of ongoing and future engagement.
- 3 **Expand the US embassy's footprint in Sudan.** Urge the US Department of State to re-open a large cultural center in downtown Khartoum, to serve as a coordinating point for cultural exchange and education. Ideally, the embassy's presence should also expand to key, smaller cities like Dongola, El Fasher, and El Obeid. Until something permanent can be established, itinerant programming for outreach should occur on a regular basis.
- 4 **Bolster educational advising.** The hiring of a US embassy EducationUSA advisor should be applauded, as it will facilitate educational advising to Sudanese students, including by offering sessions at select universities outside of Khartoum

(like University of Khartoum or Ahfad University for Women), as well as at secondary schools, when feasible.

- 5 **Leverage US teaching and educational expertise.** Encourage a program that brings US teachers from key fields to train Sudanese teachers. This might be productive in entrepreneurship training, as well as in English-language training, and it could leverage the expertise of Sudanese institutions, such as the School of Management Studies at the University of Khartoum. Similarly, US educational institutions or academics could support their Sudanese counterparts, or actors like the Sudan National Museum, in creating educational programs for Sudanese children about their own history, taking advantage of the vast wealth of knowledge and artifacts housed in Sudan's own institutions.
- 6 **Offer capacity building to Sudan's Ministries of Higher Education and General Education.** Insofar as is allowed under remaining sanctions and restrictions, the United States can provide training and partnership opportunities, including support for long-term planning, to Sudanese education officials.
- 7 **Offer capacity-building training to the Sudanese tourism sector.** To have a better understanding of Sudan's archeological significance, the United States might aid the creation or update of an existing Sudanese strategic plan for tourism.
- 8 **Preserve funding for longstanding exchanges.** Particularly as programs like Fulbright come out of "dormancy" after sanctions, opportunities are ripe to encourage reciprocal exchanges that benefit both the United States and Sudan. The Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) remains extremely popular. While it only reaches a handful of relatively privileged youth each year, it is an important opportunity for Sudanese youth to travel to and experience the United States.

To the Republic of Sudan:

- 1 **Ease restrictions on freedom of speech.** Priorities include: ending censorship and confiscation/destruction of critical newspapers; ceasing interference in Internet speeds, especially on mobile devices, at critical times; licensing and allowing more independent English-language media (print and radio), to promote greater mutual

understanding; and easing restrictions on Internet speed and access to facilitate distance learning and educational exchange.

- 2 **Undertake reciprocal visa easing.** Work with US State Department officials to meet the technical requirements for reciprocal easing of visa timeframes and fees to promote educational, cultural, and artistic exchanges, as well as increased tourism.
- 3 **Identify long-term educational goals.** As Sudan's international relationships improve, it should undertake strategic planning for its educational sector, particularly in higher education, to most efficiently channel capacity-building assistance from the US or other non-governmental entities.
- 4 **Author, or update, a strategic plan for Sudan's tourism sector.** Few accommodations are available for visitors to the Nile Valley, a growing tourism destination, and transport throughout Sudan is irregular and in need of major upgrades. Sudan needs to begin long-term thinking and planning about the future of its tourism sector, as well as short-term policies or reforms—including on visas, travel permits, and internet restrictions, for example—that could support tourism's growth.

To Both Governments and to Nongovernmental Organizations:

- 1 **Exchange academic experts.** Encourage exchanges of think-tank experts—particularly those with preexisting relationships, or by institutions with longstanding expertise on Sudan, such as the US Institute for Peace. Doctoral candidates and postdoctoral fellows may also provide opportunities for exchange and mutual learning. Shorter-term exchanges or visits can also serve a key purpose, allowing US and Sudanese experts to travel to offer lectures or roundtables with interested participants. Also, much can be done electronically. Short podcasts from Sudanese and US experts on topics of mutual interest are inexpensive, easy to produce and disseminate, and appeal to youth.
- 2 **Encourage artistic showcases and exchanges.** Leveraging the networks and resources of educational and nonprofit entities could provide space for Sudanese artists to be invited to the United States and produce works based on their impressions, as well as to showcase their creations.

Similarly, American artists could travel to Sudan on a short exchange, to meet and learn from their Sudanese contemporaries. US institutions with some capacity to host or partner (for example, Meridian International, or the various African institutes at US universities) remain open to collaboration. Plenty of space exists for more US musicians to perform in Sudan, like the embassy-supported visit of jazz trio The Petrio that recently received praise for its interpretation of a well-known piece of Sudanese music. Similarly, the Library of Congress has an extensive catalogue of Sudanese music available online, which could be paired with educational efforts about the meaning and history of music in Sudan to appeal to US listeners.²⁰ Recordings like “Abudahbi Life Concert” by Hafiz A. Rahman, who performed at the Kennedy Center in 2004, are available.

- 3 **Showcase the many Sudanese artifacts and photographs held by US museums, leveraging international expertise to educate about them.** In 2020, a major exhibit of Sudanese artifacts will travel to the Louvre, the British Museum, the Boston Fine Arts Museum, and, possibly, Toronto, providing opportunities for lectures and broader discussions about Sudanese history and culture. In many other US museums, numerous Egyptian and Nubian artifacts remain in storage, for lack of the expertise to appropriately categorize and showcase them. Adding an American research unit into the National Museum in Khartoum—or using the vast expertise based there to provide historical verification, academic lectures, and broader context for such artifacts—would both add to the historical record and make history more accessible to newcomers. Existing organizations, such as the newly established American Sudanese Archaeological Research Center, which will soon have a headquarters in Khartoum, can help navigate the landscape in Sudan. Meanwhile, large US museums—including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, or the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—could facilitate future exhibitions.

²⁰ See, for example, audio recordings of Sudanese artists like Abdel Aziz el Mubarak housed in the Library of Congress files, <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=90753224&searchType=1&permalink=y>.

- 4 **Increase accessibility of scholarship through translation.** Find sponsors to translate key foreign-language works—notably, the outstanding 2017 French history *Histoire et Civilisation du Soudan*, considered the most accurate modern presentation of Sudan's history—into English and Arabic to increase its reach.

Ambassador Tim Carney is a member of the Sudan Task Force and was the last accredited US ambassador to Sudan, where he served from 1995 to 1997. After that, he was US ambassador to Haiti from 1998 to 1999. He is co-author of the book *Sudan: The Land and the People* (Marquand Books, 2005).

Ambassador Mary Carlin Yates is an Atlantic Council board director and co-chair of the Sudan Task Force. She was interim chargé d'affaires to Sudan (2011 to 2012), appointed by President Barack Obama. She also served as senior director for African affairs at the National Security Council of the White House. A career member of the Senior Foreign Service, Yates previously served as US ambassador to the Republic of Ghana and to the Republic of Burundi.

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