

ISSUE BRIEF

A US Agenda for Action in Sudan's Information Environment

Lessons learned for improving the timeliness and effectiveness of combatting disinformation and supporting civilian rule

These recommendations were compiled in the second half of 2022, well ahead of the start of the April 2023 violence. As such, they reflect the earlier reality of the pre-April time period.

The mission of the **Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)** is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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There are few African countries that have received the same degree of high-level and sustained attention from the US government, during the administrations of both Donald Trump and Joe Biden, as the Republic of Sudan. While this engagement stems in large part from a long history of Washington leading diplomatic efforts to isolate the Sudanese government for its support for terrorism during the 1990s, advance the peace process in the country's north-south civil war, and eventually punish the government for the Darfur genocide, Washington's renewed diplomatic engagement at the time of Sudan's 2018 popular uprising reflected a sense of opportunity that real change was potentially coming to the country.

The historic events during the spring and summer of 2019, beginning with longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir's arrest and removal by senior army officers and the brokering of a civilian-military hybrid government, created both an opportunity and what many in Washington saw as an obligation to help Sudan's transition succeed. After decades of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, the installation of a civilian-led government created the minimal condition that allowed Washington and Western allied governments to begin the task of providing a trusted local partner with the assistance to begin reforming the political system, stabilizing the economy, and transforming the armed forces that would eventually enable a full transition to democracy, one of the popular demands of the revolution.

By late 2019, during a historic visit to Washington by Sudan's newly named prime minister, Abdallah Hamdok, the Trump administration announced a process to nor-

malize diplomatic relations with Sudan through an exchange of ambassadors, among other steps. Privately, the Trump administration also set about the task of constructing an assistance package that would meet the moment and provide the technical, financial, and development assistance needed to demonstrate a true “democracy dividend” to the vast majority of average Sudanese who were by this time struggling under the weight of financial collapse brought on by the one-two punch of regime neglect and, soon, COVID-19 shutdowns.

Washington, however, was both ill-postured and slow to foresee the monumental political opening occurring in the early days of the revolution and then further delayed by an interlocking web of restrictions and prohibitions, some of them self-imposed and some imposed by the US Congress, that limited its ability to scale up resources in a timely manner. In addition to the challenges of having to undo more than twenty-five years of bureaucratic restrictions and red tape, Washington also needed to scale up its human resources inside Sudan that had largely dwindled over the years.

Many of those we spoke with both inside and outside the US government and on the ground in Sudan acknowledged that the speed of change in late 2018 and early 2019, leading to the April 2019 arrest and removal of al-Bashir from office, was so dizzying that Washington was forced into a “wait-and-see” approach. As such, it was more inclined to stand back and assess events as they unfolded and only act to prevent what many feared could result in a mass atrocity against civilian protesters instead of actually trying to shape an outcome that would more immediately deliver on the aims of the protesters. This posture was aided by the fact that the US government had no recent history of partners and programming around the kind of democracy and governance issues that were needed in the early days of the revolution. Nor was the US government postured to provide other forms of assistance owing to its own existing restrictions on the al-Bashir regime.

Many of these issues were exacerbated by the lack of an ambassador at post; the state sponsor of terrorism label that until December 14, 2020, still applied; and the personal restrictions imposed on US diplomats in Khartoum that meant critical positions were left unfilled at the time of the revolution, leaving them to be filled by an acting junior officer or those who did not have a deep understanding of the unique challenges in countries seeking to transition from autocracy to democracy.

Illustrating the severity of this point, through the popular wave of protests until six months after a civilian government was installed in September 2019, the US government remained unable to initiate any new Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) programming related to ongoing restrictions from the al-Bashir era, a lack of policy direction from Washington, and a dearth of programmatic staff in the field.

One observer noted in testimony to the US Senate in February 2022, “While assistance opportunities may have been limited in post-secession Sudan, there has not been adequate staffing up [of the embassy] since the 2019 revolution.... More personnel could be devoted to messaging and public affairs outreach, both in person in Sudan and on social media.”¹

This problem persisted until early 2020 when, after Hamdok’s visit to Washington in December 2019, US officials accelerated their efforts to shore up the new prime minister’s standing vis-à-vis the security services, which remained the dominant force in the country, while helping Hamdok deliver some early wins to his government that could be passed on to the Sudanese people. In fact, some of Washington’s caution was well-intended, if not well-founded, as it struggled to ensure that the civilian component was in fact functioning as an independent and responsible arm of the Sudanese government and was not operating under duress or influence of the military. In retrospect, however, that delay in programming ultimately provided Russia and other malign external influencers more time to cement their operational and influential roles with Sudan’s security services, giving the other powers an advantage in setting and controlling the narrative around the new government, as was only later evident.

Comfortable in the view that the West could work with the civilian government, by November 2019, the first assessment team from the US Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) was on the ground in Sudan identifying needs and opportunities. According to its website, OTI “provides fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs. Strategically designed for each unique situation, OTI has laid the foundation for long-term development by promoting reconciliation, supporting emerging independent media, and fostering peace and democracy through innovative programming. In countries transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, from violence to peace, or following a fragile peace, OTI’s programs

1 *Sudan’s Imperiled Transition: U.S. Policy in the Wake of the October 25th Coup*, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 117th Cong. (February 1, 2022) (statement of Joseph Tucker, senior expert for the Greater Horn of Africa, United States Institute of Peace), https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/020122_Tucker_Testimony.pdf.

serve as catalysts for positive political change.”² Starting with the OTI team’s arrival in February 2020, it would lead all US government programmatic activity around these areas, including the growing concern around disinformation.

During its time in Sudan, the OTI team took its programmatic direction from the prime minister’s office in the belief that, as the central reformist figure and symbol of the change brought about by the revolution, those around the prime minister would know how best to design and manage the technical resources that OTI provided. However, as one USAID employee said, echoing a point made by several colleagues in interviews, “our programming needed to be sensitive to the politics of the country, but the cabinet of technocrats were themselves not sensitive to the politics of their own country, especially the PM.”³ Themes quickly emerged as a large impediment to effective US programming and messaging, specifically those of government leaders being divorced from the politics and public opinions in Sudan and, therefore, unable to tailor messages to them or adequately respond to active disinformation campaigns led by the security services and their foreign backers.

Nearly six months after OTI’s engagement began, a United Kingdom-based contractor was engaged via a US contract to provide the prime minister’s office, as well as the US government, a window into the kinds of disinformation, public attitudes, and trending news items that were circulating on a daily basis across Sudanese social media networks. The project also aimed to identify which ministries and ministers were being particularly targeted with disinformation campaigns so that efforts could be made to counter those stories, prepare ministers to get ahead of trending news events, and empower individual social media influencers with accurate information for dissemination. Through the firm’s weekly social media monitoring reports and more frequent spot reports, civilian leaders and those inside the US Embassy with access to the reports had a real-time view as to which issues were trending among local social media users, a measure of evolving public attitudes toward those issues, and which local and foreign accounts were responsible for driving these narratives.

While these efforts to share and disseminate this “intelligence” were viewed inside of USAID as having mixed levels of success inside the prime minister’s office and with other ministries, depending on the quality of the people on the in-

side responsible for acting on and sharing these reports, it was nonetheless viewed as critical that these efforts and this contract transition to a wholly owned and operated program of the civilian government. By mid-2021, efforts were being made to create a disinformation unit inside of the Ministry of Information and Culture that would move the center of gravity on this issue away from the prime minister’s office, which was often inundated with reports and visitors and had difficulty making decisions in a timely way, to a central command center where information could be more effectively disseminated across the cabinet in a more timely manner and where policy questions could perhaps get a decision faster.

In talks with representatives of the British contractor, on many occasions civilian government officials were presented with data on manipulated content emanating from collections of accounts driven by, inter alia, pro-Islamist, pro-military, and pro-Hemedti accounts and given options that the contractor could pursue on the government’s behalf, including notifying Facebook to shut the accounts down and offering counter-messaging. [Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and commonly known as Hemedti, served as deputy chairman of the Transitional Military Council after al-Bashir’s ouster in 2019.] In many instances, “decision-making paralysis” often meant that timely decisions on fast-moving messaging issues went unaddressed. However, in one instance, the contractor was able to notify Facebook of the inauthentic behavior, prompting the platform to shut down more than one thousand accounts. Several months later, Facebook shut down an additional tranche of inauthentic accounts without prompting from the Sudanese or their contractor, suggesting to the contractor at least that Sudan had been “put on the map” for Facebook as a place of concern that they should continue to monitor.⁴ In response, however, one former OTI staffer noted that “shutting down Facebook accounts is great, but they keep churning out new ones. It only helps if it is in service of a larger strategy, which we didn’t have.”⁵

Beyond these efforts, with the help of outside contractors, the government was able to train journalists, including citizen journalists, to identify misinformation and perform their own investigative work to push back against false narratives circulating about the civilian government. Contractors also compiled a list of the most influential social media voices in the country and worked with government officials to ensure those

2 “Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI),” USAID, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/bureaus/bureau-conflict-prevention-and-stabilization/office-transition-initiatives>.

3 Interview with USAID employee, Washington, DC, October 6, 2022.

4 Interview with UK-based disinformation contractor, October 19, 2022.

5 Interview with former OTI employee, October 7, 2022.

influencers were engaged with regularly to ensure they had access to accurate information and could promote it. These efforts also included financial support to a Sudanese-operated nongovernmental organization that actively fact-checked news reports and published deep-dive analyses behind military and foreign-backed disinformation campaigns. One policy request, not acted upon, was the creation of a network of “500 or more newly trained journalists who could sit inside the Ministry of Information and push out factual information, reasoning that if the Islamists and military had troll farms churning out fake news why couldn’t the government counter that with its own team pushing out real news?”⁶ What the government routinely failed to realize was that it had the power to defuse these narratives and their accounts if it only used the tools and took their contractor’s advice.

However, just as these nascent efforts were beginning to take hold, two simultaneous events derailed those efforts: the October 25, 2021, military coup in which Hamdok was detained and the civilian cabinet dissolved and the simultaneous internet shut down, which not only halted most of the information sharing but also limited pro-democracy groups’ ability to use online tools to organize and coordinate their activities. And since the US government programming came well after the internet shutdowns that defined the early days of the popular revolution, its efforts to empower online activism were immediately and completely undermined by the military’s renewed control over the internet after the coup.

According to several USAID employees at the US Embassy in Khartoum at the time, there was initially serious consideration and effort given to bringing in internet hardware from outside the country to create a parallel, albeit temporary, internet infrastructure that would get around the junta’s shutdown of the service. One former OTI official interviewed noted “there were three to four weeks of intense effort given to identify the technology, the resources, and the requirements of the system,” but that Washington ultimately decided that it would be too difficult to procure and to get into the country without being discovered.⁷

But while some on the USAID side felt that the risk to reward was worth it, more conservative voices within the US Department of State worried that, if their efforts were discovered by the military, it could result in the expulsion of US diplomats and a worsening of the military’s response against

protesters. The effort was ultimately abandoned with no other serious conversation beginning that could help to empower civilian protesters with virtual private networks (VPNs), burner phones—sometimes call “protest phones”—or other means of circumventing the junta’s control over private communications.

Indeed, as the internet controls became more widespread post-coup, resistance committees and others reverted to previous, decidedly low-tech communication and organization efforts, including the use of printed pamphlets and flyers or word-of-mouth organization. Here, too, there was little the United States or others could offer in the way of support to these efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington was caught flat-footed in 2019 when al-Bashir was removed from office after nearly thirty years in power. No day-after plan existed for supporting a transition, nor had any efforts been foreseen to untie the hands of US policy so that the full diplomatic toolkit of rewards, incentives, and punitive measures could be deployed in a timely manner. This was as true in efforts to push back against online disinformation efforts as it was in providing technical assistance to ministries or direct financial and organizational support to pro-democracy organizations still on the frontlines. In the ten months from the fall of the National Congress Party regime to the first deployment of OTI advisers to Sudan, Russia and other malign actors demonstrated an ability to build relations, become operational, and begin to influence the media and political environment in favor of their allies in the security services. This left the United States and its Western allies playing an even bigger game of catch-up when their staffing was in place and when their programs were finally ready to be rolled out.

In watching the events in Sudan unfold through the revolution and speaking to Sudanese stakeholders and US government officials on the ground since that time, a number of important insights and recommendations, specifically around countering online influence from malicious actors, have emerged:

- 1. Invest in resources, strategies, and lessons learned for combatting disinformation.** The United States needs a specific strategy for combatting disinformation. The United States has never had a strategy for pushing

6 Interview with UK-based disinformation contractor, October 19, 2022.

7 Interview with former OTI employee, October 7, 2022.

back against online content that is intended to weaken civilian and pro-democracy governance and empower security actors. Both Sudanese actors, working closely with the United States, along with US staff-level officers from across USAID variously described US efforts as “ad hoc,” “inconsistent,” and “haphazard,” in some cases responding to requests from the prime minister’s office and in some cases surmising what was needed. While one former OTI staffer noted that, while OTI was still “brand new to the communications and disinformation space, there must have been some case studies or resident knowledge somewhere in the US government that could have served as a kind of playbook.”⁸ Given the explosive growth in the use of disinformation and online authoritarianism and the shrinking of internet freedom in Sudan and across the region, the United States would be well-served to invest in further developing its expertise in this space, while at the same time conducting a lessons-learned process of what worked and what did not in Sudan and other analogous settings for future use.

- 2. Do not just detect misinformation, respond and combat it.** The United States must make better use of the information that it collects about online disinformation and get it into the hands of those who need it in time to be useful. In particular, many in USAID noted that US diplomats did not know how to make use of the information and insights in the reports they were generating, viewing the information merely as “interesting data points” rather than intelligence that could better inform policy choices or programmatic efforts. One former OTI staffer sounded a similar note that “the products were useful and provided us with ongoing sentiment analysis of the protest movement, but we could never operationalize what we were learning.”⁹ Interviewees mentioned similar arguments regarding Sudan’s civilian government, which had difficulty deciding what it should do since acting on advice to shut down, for example, pro-Islamist accounts could have unleashed a backlash those officials could not foresee. In those cases, the United States would be well advised to consider its own ability to act in support of its allies in the civilian government and authorize action against inauthentic networks in a bid to “decontaminate the information space for the sake of civilian rule and democracy.”¹⁰

- 3. Shine a light on disinformation.** The United States should make public its findings and research on the information space in Sudan. While the training of journalists, promotion of media freedom, and advocacy around free speech is important, the speed at which fake accounts and fake news can be put up, taken down, and spread, to paraphrase Mark Twain, happens before the truth can put on its boots. Part of an offensive would be the more immediate and regular release of disinformation reporting that is being collected to shine a light on bad actors in real time. To a large extent, this requires treating that information not as intelligence, with a limited and tightly controlled distribution, but simply as public information. Creating a stand-alone website or dashboard or sharing that information in real time with a trusted Sudanese source for posting and dissemination would have compelled not just governments to act, but empowered civil society, including many young people, who might have made better use of the information.
- 4. Improve working relationships with Sudanese civil society.** The United States needs to develop more effective ways of working with local civil society organizations. This holds true in regard to both US efforts in the counter-disinformation space and its entire engagement in support of pro-democracy forces throughout the revolution. It is clear that government-to-government ties and assistance relationships are the most natural and comfortable way for the United States to engage, but in circumstances like in Sudan, where civilian leaders were either too constrained or too paralyzed to act, empowering civil society actors must become a more available alternative. While some of that was accomplished through the sharing of disinformation reporting with local influencer and fact-checking organizations, more could have been done to creatively support their efforts to circumvent military shutdowns of the internet or the near continuous churn of new disinformation campaigns that actively sought to undermine civilian rule and the popular revolution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8 Interview with former OTI employee, October 7, 2022.

9 Interview with former OTI employee, October 7, 2022.

10 Interview with former OTI employee, October 7, 2022.

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