

# Stuck on Washington's Blacklist

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President Barack Obama's foreign policy has been marked by detente with longtime U.S. foes like Cuba and Iran. But one country has not benefited from Obama's penchant for diplomatic re-engagement over continued isolation: Sudan. And now the northeast African nation is pressing its case on its own.

Widely known for the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, where government forces over a little more than a decade have been implicated in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people, Sudan has largely fallen out of international headlines as other crises have demanded diplomatic attention. Sudanese President Omar Bashir stands accused in the International Criminal Court for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Conflict in the western region of the country remains, as does fighting in the southern provinces of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The government has been accused of obstructing the peace process and of complicity in the death of thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire of its bombing campaign against rebel groups.

But the country's representatives insist none of that translates to involvement in international terrorism.

Maowia Khalid, the Sudanese charge d'affaires in Washington, complains that his country remains on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, even though it addressed U.S. concerns about Sudan's involvement in international terror. He says internal unrest is no justification for

U.S. policy toward his country – which he denies sponsors terror – and says there is a "double standard" when it comes to Sudan.

"We get so cooperative with Washington on combating terrorism in the region and globally and yet we are still on that list," Khalid tells U.S. News. "Washington is linking the list of state sponsor of terrorism with the internal political situation inside Sudan. "

On the terrorism list since 1993, when the U.S. State Department accused the government of harboring Osama bin Laden and supporting al Qaeda, the country faces a slew of financial sanctions that have led to its isolation from the international economy, with no access to credit and foreign investment. It has also suffered economically following the independence of South Sudan, with the new nation formed in 2011 claiming the majority of oil reserves as part of its territory.

The Sudanese government contends that it remains on the list despite repeated promises by the U.S. it would be removed if it met certain conditions. Each time, Sudan says, the U.S. has renege on those promises, leaving the country blacklisted for over two decades.

It's a tricky situation for the United States. The government has offered little proof it thinks Sudan still backs terrorism, but bestowing what could be construed as any type of reward on the pariah regime approaches political impossibility, particularly in an election season.

Each year, the State Department must present Congress with a report on terrorist activities of other countries, and the report released last year on Sudan was filled with complimentary language about its cooperation with U.S. authorities in fighting terrorism. But the findings did not merit the country's removal from the list.

The State Department found that in 2014 "Sudan remained a generally cooperative partner of the United States on counterterrorism. During the past year, the Government of Sudan continued to support counterterrorism operations to counter threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Sudan." It also acknowledged that Sudan has "taken steps to limit the activities of these elements and has worked to disrupt foreign fighters' use of Sudan as a logistics base and transit point for terrorists going to Syria and Iraq."

The discrepancy is not lost on observers.

"I'm not an apologist for the regime or justifying everything it does – most certainly not. But even the State Department doesn't try to say that it's a state sponsor of terror," says J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa Center at the Atlantic Council. "It's an absurdity. Whatever they may be, whether one chooses to characterize them as an authoritarian regime, lack of democracy, lack of respect for human rights – all of which are important concerns – but whatever they are, a state sponsor is clearly not what they are."

The State Department did not respond to requests for comment.

Similar criticisms were lodged about the State Department's designation of Cuba as a sponsor of terror for 33 years. Based on its ties to a leftist Colombian revolutionary movement and Basque separatists, the communist country carried the classification for decades with observers regarding it as a political punishment for domestic human rights violations despite scant evidence of participation in terrorist activity.

Obama restored diplomatic relations with Cuba after over 50 years of isolation, removing it from the list of terror sponsors in May and opening an embassy in Havana last summer at a ceremony attended by Secretary of State John Kerry. The president will make a historic trip to the island next month.

Also last year, the Obama administration achieved a landmark nuclear deal with Iran, requiring the Islamic Republic to relinquish its nuclear capabilities in exchange for relief from crippling economic sanctions. Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif speak regularly and have a close personal relationship forged during the yearslong negotiations.

While the Obama administration claims neither Cuba nor Iran are absolved of all their sins, it has determined that a fractured relationship with imperfect regimes serves U.S. interests better than no ties at all. Iran remains on the state sponsor of terrorism list and still doesn't have an embassy in the U.S., but diplomatic channels that had been closed since the Iranian revolution now allow for regular communication at high levels. Sudan receives no such attention.

Khalid called U.S.-Sudan relationship "one of the most promising [and] cooperative" in the region until the early 1990s when his country was put on the list.

"We try our best to cooperate and to work together with the United States," Khalid says. "We exerted all our efforts to try to normalize this relation[ship]. The demands remain from Washington, 'Go and make peace inside Sudan, and then we'll normalize these relations.'"

In fact, the Sudanese diplomat blames some of the continued unrest on the state sponsor of terrorism sanctions and additional punishments imposed by the U.S.

"As long as these sanctions are there, peace cannot prevail completely in Sudan," Khalid says. "Most of the problems in Sudan are problems of lack of development, of people sometimes confronting each other because they are fighting to get very scarce resources that they are sharing with each other."

The Sudanese government has been accused of embezzling billions in public oil profits. Although the majority of the oil is now found in South Sudan, that country must pay its northern neighbor to transit its oil to ports on the coast of Sudan, revenue the two countries have agreed to peg to record low prices. The U.N. says the regime also misuses the country's mineral deposits, including gold in Darfur. A 2013 report from the Enough Project found that the government's interest in the region "and corresponding role in spurring violence in the area" fits the pattern of employing sectarian groups "as tools for consolidating economic control and power."

Sudan is ranked "not free" by the U.S. government-funded watchdog organization Freedom House, which monitors the status of human rights and political freedom around the world. It does not have a free press, and "continues to forcibly suppress dissent and undermine citizens' right to assemble," according to a Freedom House statement following an incident last week.

Pham says that in 2010 Kerry, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, promised the Sudanese that, were they to allow the southern part of the country to hold a referendum on independence, Sudan would be removed from the list. But Pham says by the time independence was approved and South Sudan became its own nation, ending the over 20-year civil war, the U.S. was gearing up for the 2012 election and there was no political appetite for removing Sudan from the list.

"We've repeatedly done this moving the goalpost. I see both sides. I see their frustration," Pham says. "The best way to describe their listing on the state sponsor of terrorism designation is anachronistic."

The Obama administration has much the same aversion to stirring the pot by moving to delist Sudan during a contentious election and amid continued criticism of his dealing with both Cuba and Iran. But Khalid, who declined to comment on the U.S. presidential race, says it is at the United States' own peril that it eschews closer relations with his country, which has grown closer to Russia and China instead.

"In this world there is no vacuum," the Sudanese diplomat says.

Although the Obama administration has yet to extend an olive branch to Sudan, Khalid is not bitter the U.S. has drawn closer to Iran, or that Cuba has been removed from the list.

"It means basically the hope is there. The international arena, it could be changed at any point. We will not lose hope of being [off] of that list. We will not lose hope of the sanctions being removed from Sudan. And we will not lose hope of bringing the relations between Sudan and United States to normal level," Khalid says. "We are still hoping that the change [that] happened to Cuba and Iran also could happen to Sudan at any point. We [are] going to work tirelessly to reach such [a] point."

<http://sudanembassy.org/index.php/news-events/1238-stuck-on-washington-s-blacklist>