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► **To cite this version:**

Iris Seri-Hersch. From One Sudan to Two Sudans: Dynamics of Partition and Unification in Historical Perspective. Tel Aviv Notes, 2013, 7 (13), pp.1-8. halshs-00911879

HAL Id: halshs-00911879

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00911879>

Submitted on 30 Nov 2013

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Volume 7, Number 13

July 9, 2013

From One Sudan to Two Sudans: Dynamics of Partition and Unification in Historical Perspective

Iris Seri-Hersch

July 9th marks the second anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of South Sudan, the 54th member state of the African Union. The partition of Sudan into two states followed a January 2011 referendum in which 98.8% of southern Sudanese voted for independence. The referendum was part of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that officially ended a twenty-year war between the central government in Khartoum and the South-based Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM). This partition raises a number of questions: how should the break-up of Sudan be understood, and what is the current state of relations between the two Sudanese states? Should the break-up be seen as the first time an African state disintegrated in the postcolonial era? Was it the inevitable outcome of a cultural clash between a Muslim "Arab" North and a Christian-animist "African" South?

Sudan's partition can be better understood by locating its roots in colonial history, focusing on a specific episode of the mid-20th century (when two Sudans became one) that curiously mirrors the current situation (one Sudan becoming two). In essence, British policies of separation between the North and the South, followed by northern attempts at forceful Arabization and Islamization of the South, set the stage for the failure of the unified Sudanese state that was established in 1956.

The 2011 secession of South Sudan is often viewed as a direct consequence of the longest civil war experienced on the African continent in the postcolonial era.

Indeed, from the moment of its establishment, Sudan was plagued by successive civil wars (1955-1972/1983-2005) that claimed millions of lives and displaced even larger numbers of people from their home areas.¹ The 2011 political split between the North and the South ensued from the ongoing conflict between Khartoum's ruling elites and the southern rebel movements. The former stressed the "Arab" and Islamic identity of Sudan, while the latter, depending on the time period and leadership, advocated either regional autonomy for the South or cultural pluralism in a unitary state.² For decades, these actors have been engaged in a military struggle over the cultural basis of the Sudanese state, political power and representation, the distribution of economic resources, and the provision of social services. However, partition should not be seen retrospectively as an inevitable outcome of Sudan's postcolonial civil wars. Current trends in Sudanese politics are grounded in older realities and policies going back to colonial—and even "pre-colonial"—times.

Historical Background

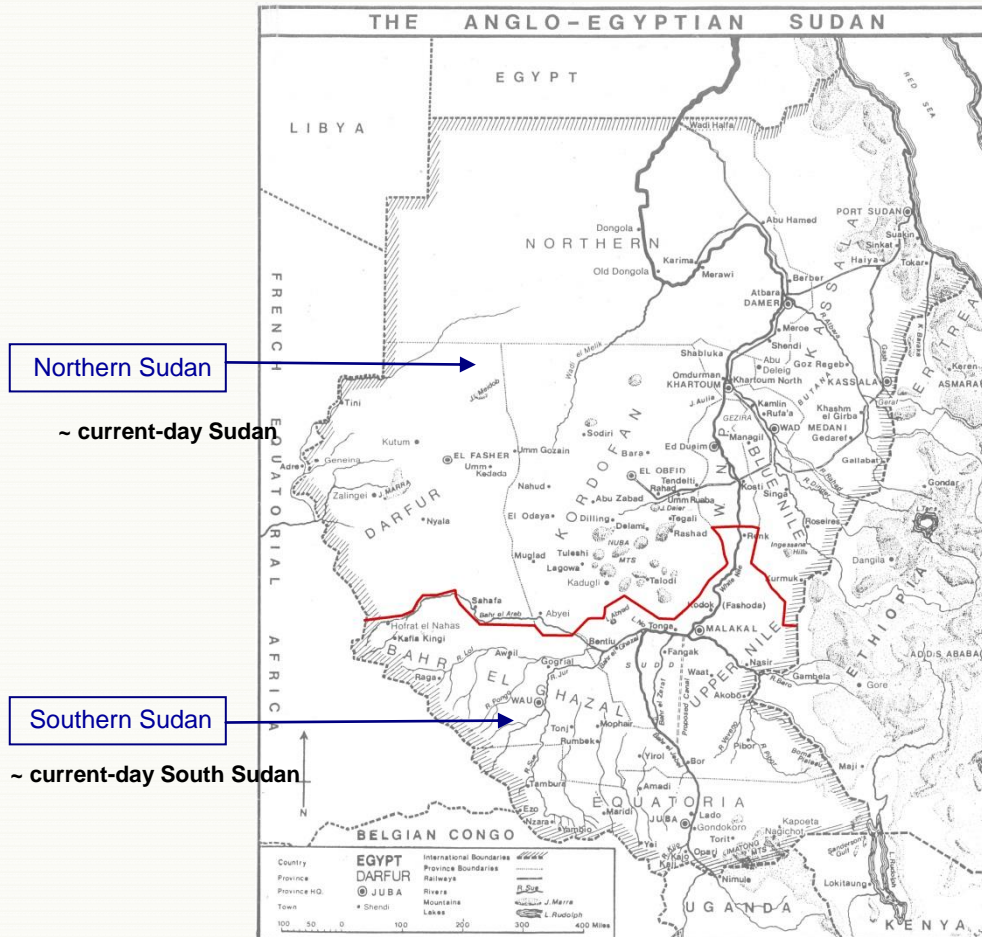
Sudan in its pre-2011 borders has a relatively short yet extremely volatile history as a political unit. Until the early 20th century the areas covered by current-day Sudan and South Sudan were never united in a single administrative unit. The Ottoman-Egyptian rulers of Sudan (1821-1885) had incorporated parts of the South into their polity, but these conquests occurred at a late stage—just ten years before the Ottoman-Egyptian authorities were evicted by the Sudanese Mahdist movement in 1885. Under the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad and his successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi, the Mahdist state (1885-1898) extended towards the southern region of Bahr al-Ghazal but never included the whole of the South. Only after the occupation of the country by Anglo-Egyptian troops (1899) were the North and the South formally assembled into what came to be known as the "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" (see map below). The new entity's population was nominally governed by a joint Anglo-Egyptian administration during the following fifty years, the Condominium era (1899-1956). In practice, the British monopolized the highest administrative positions and retained all

¹ On the Sudanese civil wars, see Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: International African Institute & James Currey, 2003); Robert O. Collins, *Civil Wars and Revolution in the Sudan: Essays on the Sudan, Southern Sudan and Darfur, 1962-2004* (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai, 2005); Scopas S. Poggo, *The First Sudanese Civil War: Africans, Arabs, and Israelis in the Southern Sudan, 1955-1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

² Both the North and the South are home to a great variety of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. In the last centuries, Islam and the Arabic language have been dominant in the North but also present in the South. In the North, groups such as the Fūr, the Masālit, the Zaghāwa and the Beja are Muslims but do not identify themselves as "Arabs". They have their own languages and also use Arabic. Christianity was introduced in the South by European and American missionaries, where it has coexisted with Islam and various local religions. Dozens of languages are spoken in South Sudan, including English, various forms of Arabic, Dinka, Nuer, Bari and Zande.

decision-making powers. Egyptian nationalists, for their part, championed the principle of the “unity of the Nile Valley” and claimed sovereignty rights over Sudan until the fall of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952.³

Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1899-1956)⁴



The Southern Policy

During most of the colonial period, the British did not govern one Sudan but rather two: the North and the South. Hence, despite the international recognition of a territorial unit called “Sudan” or “Anglo-Egyptian Sudan,” British policies strengthened the idea and the reality of two separate Sudans. Why did the British administer separately the North and the South until 1947? British officials often referred to cultural and religious differences between a predominantly Arabic-

³ Mekki Abbas, *The Sudan Question: The Dispute over the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1884-1951* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952); Lawrence A. Fabunmi, *The Sudan in Anglo-Egyptian Relations: A Case Study in Power Politics, 1800-1956* (London: Longmans, 1960).

⁴ Author’s adaptation from a map drawn by Rosalind Caldecott for K. D. D. Henderson’s *Set Under Authority: Being a Portrait of the Life of the British District Officer in the Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1898-1955* (Castle Cary: Castle Cary Press, 1987), SAD 769/7/4-6 [MP], Durham University Library, UK.

speaking Muslim North and an “animist” and Christian South. In fact, the emphasis on real and imagined differences was closely linked to British attempts to prevent Arabic culture and Islamic values from spreading into southern Sudan, a process that had started unfolding in previous centuries. Thus the British gave a free hand to Christian missionaries in the South while considerably restricting their presence in the North. They also expressed concern for the well-being of southern populations, which they perceived as easy prey for northern “Arab” slave traders.⁵ This preoccupation was connected to the long history of slavery in Sudan, but it was consciously used to legitimize separate rule. In addition, the “Southern Policy” allowed the British to concentrate scarce economic resources in the North while limiting expenditure in what they considered the “barbaric” South. The Southern Policy touched upon various aspects of government and social life. The language of administration was Arabic in the North, English in the South. Whereas a government educational system was gradually developed in the North, education was left to missionaries in the South. The circulation of people and goods between the two areas was severely restricted from 1922 onwards. Southerners were forbidden to bear Arabic names and “mixed” marriages involving northern and southern Sudanese were strongly discouraged.⁶

From Two Sudans to One Sudan

By the early 1940s, the Southern Policy was harshly criticized by the Northern Sudanese intelligentsia and by some British officials. The gap in infrastructures and development between the North and the South was increasingly seen as a problem. In 1945 the British authorities in Khartoum considered three possible options for southern Sudan: unifying it with the North, attaching it to the territories of British East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika), or integrating part of it to the North and the rest to East Africa.⁷ The possibility of establishing an independent, separate state in southern Sudan at some point in the future was ruled out on geographical and economic grounds. In addition, the reversal of the Southern Policy was instrumental in British attempts to co-opt northern Sudanese elites against Egyptian ambitions of uniting the Nile Valley. By satisfying one of the main demands of northern Sudanese nationalists (the unification of northern and southern Sudan), the British hoped to gain traction in their political and ideological dispute with the Egyptian government.

⁵ David Sconyers, “Fading Voices: Some Reflections on British Rule in the Sudan,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, New Series No. 3 (1999), pp. 68-70.

⁶ Muddathir Abd al-Rahim, “The Development of British Policy in the Southern Sudan, 1899-1947,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2(3), 1966, pp. 231-235 ; Mohamed Omer Beshir, *The Southern Sudan: Background to Conflict* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1968), pp. 48-53, 115.

⁷ Beshir Mohammed Said, *The Sudan: Crossroads of Africa* (London: The Bodley Head, 1965), p. 30.

Most of the British officials posted in the South opposed the reversal of the Southern Policy, fearing that northern officials would seek to impose their Arab and Islamic culture upon the southern Sudanese. They also condemned the fact that not one single southern representative had been consulted on the unification issue.⁸ In response, on June 12-13, 1947, the British governors of the three southern provinces, seventeen Southerners, and six Northerners gathered in Juba to discuss the relations between Northern and Southern Sudan. Most of the southern representatives endorsed unification. They nonetheless stressed what they saw as the backwardness of the South compared to the North and expressed worries about the prospect of being dominated by their northern neighbors.⁹ The Juba conference stirred a political and historiographical controversy in the postcolonial era: Northern scholars sought to legitimize the Sudanese unitary state by claiming that the Southerners had expressed full support for unification in 1947.¹⁰ Southern politicians and historians, for their part, claimed that unification had already been decided before the conference and that it would have been carried out even had the southern representatives voiced disapproval. Another argument was that the southern leaders expressed support for unification only after they had been threatened or blackmailed by northern participants.¹¹

In any case, British authorities in Khartoum proceeded to hastily unify the northern and southern regions. One result was the gradual “Nordization” of southern education from 1949 to the 1960s: Arabic was introduced in southern schools, first as a subject-matter and then as a teaching medium, and northern Sudanese curricula replaced missionary programs. Most missionary schools were nationalized one year after Sudanese independence (1957).¹² Coupled with

⁸ Beshir, *The Southern Sudan*, pp. 122-135.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66; Said, *The Sudan*, p. 44; Abd al-Rahim, “The Development of British Policy,” p. 244.

¹¹ Abel Alier, “The Southern Sudan Question,” in Dunstan Wai (ed.), *The Southern Sudan: The Problem of National Integration* (London: F. Cass, 1973), p. 16; Bona Malwal, *People and Power in Sudan: The Struggle for National Stability* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), p. 26; Lilian P. Sanderson and George N. Sanderson, *Education, Religion and Politics in Southern Sudan: 1899-1964* (London: Ithaca Press and Khartoum: Khartoum University Press), 1981, p. 296; Deng D. Akol Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans: The South and the North 1821-1969* (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1994), pp. 52-53.

¹² Ministry of Education, *Proposals for the Expansion and Improvement of the Educational System in the Southern Provinces, 1951-56* (Khartoum: McCorquodale & Co., 1950), p. 3; Said, *The Sudan*, pp. 185-189; Sanderson and Sanderson, *Education, Religion and Politics*, pp. 298, 336, 359-361; Fadwa ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Alī Ṭaha, *‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Alī Ṭaha 1901-1969 bayna al-Ta’līm wa-l-Siyāsa wa-Arbajī* (Khartoum: Dār Jāmi‘at al-Kharṭūm li-l-Nashr, 2004), pp. 223-227, 233.

the political and economic marginalization of the southern Sudanese,¹³ Arabization and Islamization policies carried out in the South by successive Khartoum governments from 1949 onwards played a critical part in stirring up the civil war that began in 1955. President Ja'afar Nimeiry's imposition of shari'a law upon the whole country (1983) and Omar al-Bashir's coup d'état (1989), which brought Hasan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front to power, were turning-points in the second phase of the North-South conflict (1983-2005).

Post-Secession Sudan and Colonial Resonances

The recent "divorce" between the North and the South is in many ways a reversal of Sudan's political evolution in the last decade of colonial rule (1946-1956), when two Sudans were amalgamated into one political unit. Sudan's current division into two states suggests the need for reimagining the "national" history of each country. Until 2011 Sudanese historiography was broadly divided along northern and southern interpretations. Whereas northerners portrayed Britain's Southern Policy as a central cause of the Sudanese civil wars (it "stopped" the historical process of Arabization in the South and prevented the emergence of an all-Sudanese national identity), southerners often blamed the British for giving it up too hastily, "surrendering" southern Sudan to northern political elites. As one Japanese scholar has pointed out, concepts such as "Sudan," "Sudanese nation," and "Sudanese history" need to be rethought by both academics and citizens.¹⁴

On a more practical level, the viability of the Sudans as two independent states depends not so much on historical precedents of "one" or "two" Sudans, but on the ability of their leaders to solve contentious issues between the two countries and answer urgent needs within each country. Border demarcation, oil sharing, and citizenship/nationality laws are disputed issues that still await solutions.¹⁵

¹³ Until 1948, southern civil servants earned lower wages than their northern counterparts. No southerner was invited to the Cairo discussions between the Sudanese political parties and the Egyptian government (1952-1953), which paved the way for Sudanese self-determination. Moreover, the southern Sudanese obtained only six out of the 800 administrative posts that were "Sudanized" in 1954.

¹⁴ Yoshiko Kurita, "Rethinking the Role of Historiography in Sudan at the Time of Crisis: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of 'Sudanese History,'" Paper presented at the International Summer School on Sudanese Studies, Khartoum, University of Khartoum, October 2011.

¹⁵ See John P. Cann, "Sudan on a Precipice," *Security in Africa. IDA Research Notes* (Summer 2012), pp. 14-20, <https://www.ida.org/upload/research%20notes/researchnotessummer2012.pdf>; "South Sudan Pleads for Public Support on Cooperation Deal with Sudan," *Sudan Tribune*, 15 October 2012, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article44212>; Adam Mohamed Ahmad, "Border and Abyei Issues Threaten Recent Deal Between South Sudan and Sudan," *The Niles*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.theniles.org/articles/?id=1543>; Atem Simon Mabior, "Al-Khartūm wa-Jūbā: Fakk al-Irtibāṭ wa-Ḍakḥkh al-Bitrūl," *The Niles*, 19 November 2012, <http://www.theniles.org/articles/index-ar.php?id=1576>; Augustino Ting Mayai, "Sudanese Refugee Influx into South Sudan: Security and Bilateral Relations Implications," *Weekly Review (The Sudd Institute)*, 21 November 2012,

Current efforts by the African Union at mediating between Khartoum and Juba may facilitate the implementation of cooperation agreements signed last year by the two countries.¹⁶

Yet bilateral issues should not divert local and international attention from internal problems in each one of the Sudans. To avoid new episodes of secession or implosion in the coming years—especially in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile and the Eastern Sudan—the ruling elites of both countries will have to address a wide array of issues ranging from security, infrastructures, social services, and employment to the regional distribution of resources, political representation of various groups, and individual liberties.¹⁷ The successful fostering of inclusive national identities—or at least allegiances—in each Sudan will require the broader society in Sudan and South Sudan to turn to pluralistic models and give up exclusivist claims based on ethnicity. Dominant groups such as the riverain self-defined “Arab” tribes in Sudan and the Dinka in South Sudan will have to acknowledge the role of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in the history of the region and recognize the place of these minorities in current society.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

<http://suddinstitute.org/assets/Publications/Immigration-and-Security-in-South-Sudanformat2.pdf>; Joseph Edward, “Sudan and South Sudan Pledge to Ease Border Tensions,” *The Niles*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.theniles.org/articles/?id=1744>; Bronwen Manby, *The Right to a Nationality and the Secession of South Sudan: A Commentary on the Impact of the New Laws*, The Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa, 2 July 2012, <http://www.afriMAP.org/english/images/report/OSIEA-AfriMAP-Nationality-Sudans-full-EN.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Sudan Formally Accepts AU Mediation Proposal to Defuse Tensions with Juba,” *Sudan Tribune*, 16 June 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article46978>.

¹⁷ See “Opposition Party Says Sudan’s NCP Using Poverty & Unemployment as Weapons against People,” *Sudan Tribune*, 10 March 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45776>. A Civil Society Forum on Sudan and South Sudan was convened in Addis Ababa on 21-23 January 2013, during which Sudanese, South Sudanese, African and European NGOs discussed some of the more pressing issues (humanitarian situation, citizenship, civil rights, political freedoms).

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