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JON TEMIN

E-mail: jtemin@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.4726

JAÏR VAN DER LIJN

E-mail: jlijn@clingendael.nl

Phone: +31 70 374 66 06

Scenarios for Sudan's Future, Revisited

Summary

- Many of the post-referendum scenarios in Sudan envisioned by the U.S. Institute of Peace and Clingendael Institute one year ago remain plausible today, less than six months prior to the referendum.
- While recent progress on post-referendum arrangements is encouraging, a return to a North-South civil war is possible, and there is reason to be concerned about the stability of both states if the outcome of the referendum is secession.
- As the referendum approaches, it will be important for the South to develop a stronger sense of cohesion and common purpose given the uncertain and unprecedented environment following the vote.
- Productively engaging the opposition (armed and unarmed), incorporating marginalized ethnic and tribal groups into power structures, decentralizing authority, more equitably sharing resources, and refraining from supporting armed opposition against rivals are important principles for both parties to adhere to in any recipe for peace and stability.

“For all the dire warnings about a return to civil war in Sudan and the gloomy scenarios envisioned by our organizations’ reports, it is worth recognizing that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement remains intact and in effect.”

Sudan is less than six months away from a seminal event: the referendum on whether Southern Sudan remains part of a united Sudan or secedes. In an effort to stimulate discussion of and planning for the referendum and its aftermath, last year our two institutions—the United States Institute of Peace and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael—each conducted scenario development exercises designed to describe a few (by no means all) of the potential scenarios in Sudan surrounding the referendum. One year later, we are revisiting those scenarios to evaluate how they have held up and which ones appear most likely given recent developments in Sudan.

Summarizing the Scenarios

USIP summarized three scenarios in the USIP Special Report, “Scenarios for Sudan: Avoiding Political Violence Through 2011”:

- “Muddling Through”—With concerted effort, robust international engagement, and some progress on key issues, the parties avoid large-scale violence. This requires collaboration and compromise between the parties on several key issues, such as oil management and revenue sharing.

- “Civil War, from Tinderbox to Conflagration”—The failure to build trust and address key issues between the North and South prior to the referendum results in violence after the referendum. A single incident, especially around Abyei or the oil fields, can trigger a return to war.
- “Costly Secession”—Without a change in its current capacity to govern, the South devolves into a downward spiral of violence, even in the absence of aggression from the North or a loss of existing donor support. The lack of a “peace dividend” at the grassroots is especially disruptive.

On the basis of two key questions—“Will Sudan remain united or will the South secede?” and “Will there be a renewed war between the North and South or can it be avoided?”—the Clingendael Institute described four scenarios in its report, “Sudan 2012: Scenarios for the Future”²:

- “The Last War Revisited?” (*war & united*)—Southern Sudan declares itself unilaterally independent. Khartoum uses tribal discord to manage the rebellion and is able to control an unstable, conflict-ridden Southern Sudan. The Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) splinter as a result of Khartoum's divide and rule strategy.
- “Border Wars” (*war & secession*)—The South chooses independence in the referendum. This choice is not acceptable to Khartoum, which decides to start a military offensive. The South unites in the face of a common enemy and keeps the northern forces at bay. Subsequently, the war continues, mainly in the border region.
- “Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) Hurray!” (*no war & united*)—As a result of a renewed mediation effort by the international community, the peace process is rejuvenated. The elections are won by the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the northern opposition, who subsequently form a coalition with the National Congress Party (NCP). This new government starts a process of further democratization and redistribution of power and income, so that most marginalized groups no longer need to take up arms against Khartoum. Moreover, the atmosphere in Southern Sudan changes and the population regains confidence in the unity of the country.
- “Be Careful What You Wish For: Somalia?” (*no war & secession*)—Even before the South declares independence, various groups anticipate the coming redistribution of power. In the North, the conflicts in Darfur and other regions intensify, while the South faces an increasing number of tribal conflicts. After the referendum, in which the South chooses independence, the balance of power is lost. The South splinters into smaller parts controlled by various factions, while the North also loses its coherence.

The two scenario development exercises were conducted independently, using different methodologies and participants³, but the similarities between some of the outcomes were striking. Each included a scenario in which secession resulted in a new state in the South that is weak and racked by internal violence (“Costly Secession” and “Be Careful What You Wish For: Somalia?”). Each described a possible return to a North-South civil war, with fighting concentrated around the North-South border (“Civil War, from Tinderbox to Conflagration” and “Border Wars”).

Both exercises also left little room for optimism. The best case USIP scenario is “Muddling Through.” The most optimistic Clingendael scenario is “CPA Hurray!,” which was assessed as plausible but unlikely. The USIP and Clingendael exercises both emphasized that Sudan's future is unlikely to be free of violence and conflict, and both highlighted the need to negotiate key post-referendum arrangements in advance of the referendum.

The main difference between the exercises is that none of the USIP scenarios envisioned a vote for unity, whereas two of the Clingendael scenarios (“CPA Hurray!” and “The Last War Revisited?”) involve unity, both voluntary and forced. The prospect of southerners voting for unity seems even less likely now than it did one year ago; the time remaining to make unity attractive is minimal, and the unity campaign promised by the North after the April elections is just getting off the ground.

Two of the Clingendael scenarios and all of the USIP scenarios envisioned the referendum occurring on time. For all the dire warnings about a return to civil war in Sudan and the gloomy scenarios envisioned by our organizations’ reports, it is worth recognizing that the CPA remains intact and in effect. Over the past year, several issues and events could have led to the unraveling of the CPA, including the disputed census, contentious legislation (including the Southern Sudan Referendum Act, the Abyei Referendum Act and the National Security Act), and the recent nation-wide elections. None of these challenges were handled by the NCP and SPLM with particular grace or subtlety (elite bargaining between the parties remains the norm), but all were managed and widespread violence avoided. Of course, the referendum will be the ultimate test of the parties’ ability to collaborate and avoid disaster, in part because the SPLM has compromised in other areas while clearly signaling that they will not compromise on the referendum.

Revisiting the USIP Scenarios

All three USIP scenarios seem plausible one year later. The “Civil War” scenario may be less likely now that some of the possible seeds of political violence identified in that scenario—the census, elections and referendum legislation—are in the past. But other possible triggers—such as oil revenue sharing, border demarcation and citizenship—remain to be negotiated, with disagreement over oil and revenue sharing possessing the greatest potential for instigating North-South violence.

The “Costly Secession” scenario remains worryingly possible. The USIP report identified six factors that could trigger large-scale political violence in the South:

- failure to distribute food, water and power and build basic infrastructure (still a concern, as there is little tangible “peace dividend” to speak of);
- intertribal conflict (which has generally increased over the past year, though may have decreased in recent months);
- violence in Southern Kordofan or Blue Nile states (encouragingly, there has been relatively little in the past year);
- the GoSS’s inability to disarm militias (minimal progress made and some tensions exacerbated by disarmament efforts);
- lack of decentralization of power (only limited decentralization has occurred); and
- the North’s failure to lend assistance to avoid violence in the South (there is no reason to believe the North has worked to deter violence in the South).

All six factors still have the potential to destabilize the South.

Encouragingly, the “Muddling Through” scenario may be more likely now than one year ago. The report identified five ingredients to building the confidence and stability essential to this scenario:

- compromise on the census (which has occurred);
- acceptance of election and referendum results (election results were not wholly accepted but contestations have been muted; acceptance of the referendum results remains a massive factor);

- developing a shared vision of the future (little progress, though negotiations on post-referendum arrangements may help);
- reaching a negotiated settlement or other resolution concerning the status of the three areas (the Permanent Court of Arbitration verdict on Abyei was largely accepted and legislation governing the Abyei referendum and Popular Consultation processes passed, but how those processes play out remains hugely influential); and
- Darfur does not become a source of escalating violence (sadly violence has increased significantly in recent months).

That the “Muddling Through” scenario may be slightly more likely to occur than the other scenarios is cause for cautious optimism.

Revisiting the Clingendael Scenarios

The two key questions in the Clingendael scenarios—whether the country remains one or the South secedes, and whether there will be a return to war—remain relevant. Looking at the four scenarios, all but one remain plausible.

If war cannot be avoided, the relative strength of the South and North, to a large extent, determines whether “Border Wars” or “The Last War Revisited?” is more likely. If both parties remain coherent and find themselves in a relative power balance, the former scenario becomes more likely. If the North has the upper hand and the South is unable to remain united, the latter scenario becomes more likely.

The precondition for the “CPA Hurray!” scenario was free, fair and uncontested elections. This condition was not met, making this the one scenario which is no longer plausible. In the original report, however, an alternative scenario involving unity and no return to war was suggested: “Stagnation.” In this scenario, elites in Khartoum and Juba have little to gain from a change in the status quo and cooperate with each other. Sudanese and international actors carry on, continuing to hold Sudan together and address problems in an ad hoc manner. Although the country is formally still united, in the North, certain areas, such as Darfur, continue to rebel against Khartoum, while in the South, marginalized areas increasingly resist and push back against Juba. Essentially, “Stagnation” is not very different from “Be Careful What You Wish For: Somalia?” Paradoxically, because progress has been made over the past year towards a peaceful referendum and possible secession, this latter scenario becomes more likely. This underlines the need to confront the formidable task of managing internal conflicts in both the North and South.

Going Forward

It is late in coming, but there has been some encouraging recent progress in addressing a main concern raised in the USIP and Clingendael reports regarding post-referendum arrangements. For example, the NCP and SPLM signed a memorandum of understanding in late June that outlines the structure of negotiations over post-referendum arrangements that began in July. They will need to progress quickly, however, as the window for negotiations will be open for probably only three or four months until the hype surrounding the referendum takes hold. The top of the list of issues to be negotiated should be post-referendum oil sector management and revenue sharing.

Both reports emphasized the potential for increased South-South and North-North violence. In addition to negotiating post-referendum arrangements, both the North and South need to develop strategies to productively engage the opposition (armed and unarmed) and incorporate marginalized ethnic and tribal groups into power structures, while decentralizing authority and

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was written by Jon Temin, a senior program officer at USIP, and Jäir van der Lijn, a senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute, both of whom focus much of their work on Sudan. The Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael works to identify and analyze emerging political and social developments for the benefit of government and the general public.

more equitably sharing resources. Both parties also need to refrain from supporting armed opposition against each other. Strategies that pursue a union of the marginalized against Khartoum or a divide and rule approach in the South have a good chance of backfiring and creating an uncontrollable chaos.

Finally, the Southern leadership needs to develop a strategy for generating a stronger, broader sense of cohesion and common purpose across the South. Much of what unifies the South today is the perceived common enemy in the North and the promise held by the referendum. Whether the referendum results in secession or continuation of the CPA-style of governance featuring a semi-autonomous GoSS, now is the time for an inclusive dialogue on the bonds that can be the basis for stronger Southern cohesion.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.usip.org/resources/scenarios-sudan-avoiding-political-violence-through-2011>
2. <http://www.clingendael.nl/cscp/publications/?id=7626>
3. The USIP exercise involved Sudan experts outside of Sudan, while the Clingendael workshops were conducted in Sudan with Sudanese.



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INSTITUTE OF PEACE

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.457.1700

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