



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “The Sudan Referendum: Dangers and Possibilities”

The Brookings Institution 1775 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC

October 13, 2010 11-12:30 pm

The Brookings Institution held an event today entitled “The Sudan Referendum: Dangers and Possibilities.” The featured speaker for the event was Representative **Donald Payne** (D-NJ), the chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States House of Representatives. The discussants for the event were **Richard Williamson**, non-resident Fellow on foreign policy at Brookings, and **Mike Abramowitz**, director of the Committee on Conscience at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

**Rep. Payne** began the event by sharing with the audience that he had been sworn in for his first term as a representative to Congress the same year that Omar al-Bashir led a coup which ended with Bashir as the ruler of Sudan. Payne expressed his concern about the regime in Khartoum while lauding the efforts of the president of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit. Payne explained that he had spoken to Mayardit earlier in the day and that the president had told him that all 24 parties in South Sudan had come together, that he had met with generals that were threatening unrest and promised them amnesty in exchange for peace, and that there was an “oneness of purpose.” **Payne said that the south had been nearly destroyed by war, but that the region’s spirit remained intact. He explained that in 2005 the government in Khartoum signed a peace agreement with the South (the agreement was called the Comprehensive Peace Agreement or CPA) and that Khartoum had 6 years to prove to the South that unity was possible and mutually beneficial. In Payne’s estimation, Khartoum has failed.** Recent talks between the two sides over the oil rich Abyei region have fallen apart. He said that the two sides must come to an agreement over Abyei before the general referendum on Southern independence scheduled for January 9<sup>th</sup> of next year. Payne accused the government in Khartoum of “stalling and obstructing” the CPA, and said that holding the referendum in a free and accountable fashion in the South may not be possible. He also pointed out that the regime has said nothing about the “silent genocide” of Dharfurians who are currently starving in refugee camps in places like Chad. Payne called on the US to stop offering concessions to Khartoum, adding that the message from the US must be that the dismissal of the CPA is not acceptable, that the referendum must be free and fair, and that there must be justice for the victims of the genocide in Darfur. He concluded his remarks by quoting the late Dr. John Garang, former vice president of South Sudan, that Sudan is “too reformed to be reformed,” and warning that the protection of President Mayardit must be ensured.

**Mike Abramowitz** spoke next, explaining why the Holocaust Museum was interested in Sudan. He clarified that the museum does not generally take policy positions, preferring instead to raise awareness among the public and policy makers through exhibits and presentations. Abramowitz went on to describe a recent trip the museum had sponsored to Sudan, of which he was a part. The group spent 12 days in South Sudan, speaking to members of the government, civil society groups, and average people. Abramowitz spoke of how moved the group was by the stories that survivors told of their trials during the civil war. **In spite of their hardships, the people he spoke with were upbeat about the future and excited about the referendum and the CPA process.** He did mention several

concerns. **The foremost concern was the rhetoric coming out of Khartoum and the presence of what he called “key risk factors” for mass atrocities.** Abramowitz explained that militias were massing on the North/South border and that the regime in Khartoum had been saying that “the only acceptable outcome of the referendum is unity.” He went on to say that the core message he ascertained from these conditions was “don’t wait until it is too late,” and that the international community needs to act now to head off further violence. He advocated for on-going negotiations that take violence directed at civilians “off the table.” **One of his main concerns (which would be echoed by all of the participants) was the effect of non-state or independent actors in the precipitation of violence.** Abramowitz described a governor in the Blue Nile region that controls a large militia as an example of an actor who could start a conflict that could spread. He concluded by saying that the world must follow up after the referendum in order to ensure peace because the country will be like a “powder keg” regardless of the result.

**Richard Williamson** took a more historical perspective on the situation, explaining that Sudan suffers because it “has no national identity.” He reminded the audience that “when you deal with this area, there are no ‘white hats’. Some are just darker than others.” He referenced the occupation of what is now Sudan by the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire, and the historic primacy of the Arabic speaking, northern riverine tribes as the basis for many of today’s issues. When Sudan became independent in 1956, the British left the northern tribes in charge. The South has been institutionally deprived ever since, leading to the longest running civil war in African history. Williamson quoted an acquaintance who once told him that Sudan “has too much history to digest,” and once the “gates of hell” had been opened in the country, they would be nearly impossible to close.

Williamson then moved on to current concerns, noting that 18 months of activity had led to little real progress. **He expressed a great deal of frustration with western nations who say little when the Bashir regime fails to live up to its agreements.** He listed numerous examples: **When the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Bashir on charges of genocide there were murmurs of approval, but no sustained effort to back up the charges. When 13 NGO’s were kicked out, leaving 16,000 civilians aid workers vulnerable, the international community failed to act forcefully. Humanitarian aid has decreased in recent years, but nothing is being done.** Williamson then described some key issues between now and the referendum. First, the electoral mechanics, which Williamson said was an issue due to a lack of ballots and other concerns. He also spoke about legal treaties over the Nile and the issue of Southerners who have been displaced in Northern Sudan. Would they be considered South Sudanese and thus able to vote in the referendum? Would they be allowed to relocate to the South? Next, Williamson talked about the border issues, including oil and the Abyei region. **He noted that 70% of the oil in Sudan is in the South or the border regions and both North and South are dependent on oil revenues.** He said that the two sides agreed to international arbitration on the border, but when the north disagreed with the conclusion of the process it simply backed out. Williamson described Khartoum as “divided”, saying that the Bashir regime was more flexible about dissent than most authoritarian regimes. **He described the regime as “pretty smart” and concerned primarily with staying in power. They believe they have a range of options, some which would be abhorrent to the international community.** Williamson’s expectations for the situation were reserved. He said that both North and South were preparing for war, and that the North is genuinely concerned about dismemberment. If the South breaks off, what of Darfur or the eastern regions? **The main issue in Williamson’s opinion is oil. According to Williamson, the South should get 70% of the revenue, although he admitted that they have no way to get the oil to market. This necessitates a transport deal with the North, something Williamson sees as an area of possible cooperation in the future.** He concluded by agreeing with Abramowitz’s concerns about

non-state actors sparking violence, pointing to a flare up in the Abyei region in 2008 that left 50,000 people homeless.

At this point in the event, the floor was opened to questions. One questioner asked about the Abyei issue, how the US could affect a resolution, what a deal on that region would look like, and what would happen if it failed.

Payne answered that the US must increase pressure on the Bashir regime. He mentioned the recent incentives that the Obama Administration has offered to gain cooperation, calling the action “more carrot than stick.” He insisted that the US needs to “draw a line” by threatening more sanctions if Bashir resists negotiations. **Payne also noted that China has been uncharacteristically reserved in its support for the regime recently, offering an opportunity to apply pressure to the regime in Khartoum.**

Williamson described the regime’s position on Abyei as “brinksmanship.” The closer the deadline gets, the more likely the south will be to make a deal that would be advantageous to Khartoum. He said that the regime is using Abyei as a “pawn” because, unlike the Dinka people, they care little about the region itself. They just want access to the oil revenue. **Time, he said, benefits Khartoum.**