



# Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Transition in Sudan

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**What's new?** Protests across Sudan flared up as the government cut a vital bread subsidy. Economic grievances are fuelling demands for political change, with protesters calling on President Omar al-Bashir, in power since 1989, to resign. Authorities have responded with violence, killing dozens and arresting many more.

**Why does it matter?** In the past, President Bashir and his government have been able to ride out popular demonstrations. But these newest protests, demanding Bashir resign because of economic mismanagement and corruption, have spread to loyalist regions and coincide with rising discontent in his party.

**What should be done?** Foreign governments influential in Khartoum should continue to publicly discourage violence against demonstrators, with Western powers signalling that future aid and, in the U.S.'s case, sanctions relief are at stake. They should seek to improve prospects for a peaceful transition by creating incentives for Bashir to step down.

## I. Overview

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Protests engulfing Sudanese towns and cities have seen dozens killed in crackdowns by security forces and could turn bloodier still. Demonstrators express fury over subsidy cuts and call for President Omar al-Bashir to resign. Discontent within the ruling party, the depth of the economic crisis and the diverse makeup of protests suggest Bashir has less room to manoeuvre than before. He may survive, though likely by suppressing protests with levels of violence that would reverse his recent rapprochement with Western powers and deepen Sudan's economic woes. Another scenario would entail his ouster by parts of the security apparatus, though this could also prove destabilising. Better would be for Bashir to negotiate his exit, perhaps induced by some form of conditional immunity. Outside powers should keep discouraging crackdowns, with Western leaders underscoring that continuing to use violence against protestors will scuttle aid and sanctions relief. They should also create incentives for Bashir to resign and signal to Sudanese elites the economic lifeline on offer were that to happen.

Protests broke out in mid-December in Atbara, a mid-size town 350km from the capital Khartoum, and quickly spread to towns and cities across the country. People from all parts of Sudanese society initially took to the streets to protest the rising

cost of staples, particularly bread; anger had been bubbling for years but heightened when the government lifted wheat subsidies in January 2018 without putting in place social protections to offset deteriorating living conditions. Now, many protesters focus their ire on the president himself and demonstrations feature chants calling on him and other top officials to step down.

President Bashir has weathered many such protests in the past, but a number of factors this time around are different. Protesters have gathered in Bashir's strongholds, mostly in the wealthier centre of the country, and attacked several ruling party offices. The police and other security agencies, including the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), have at times responded brutally but the army has shown greater restraint than before and, noting this, the opposition has urged generals to remove Bashir. The feared Rapid Support Forces, a government militia renowned for its brutal counterinsurgency tactics, has been active, particularly in Khartoum, but less prominent than during previous protests, when they were responsible for many deaths. Within the ruling party and security elites, ever-louder voices question whether the country can escape its economic doldrums with Bashir at the helm, given that his presidency is the greatest obstacle to obtaining foreign aid or loans.

Three scenarios appear possible. One is that the president survives, though without funds to offer protesters significant reforms, he will likely have to subdue them by force. This in turn would slow Western re-engagement with Khartoum and almost certainly end prospects of the U.S. lifting its remaining sanctions, including its designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism, which in effect bars Sudan from international debt relief or bailouts. A second scenario could see protests gathering pace and prompting the president's ouster by elements within his party or security elites. This might usher in a new government and fresh direction, though it could also trigger further instability. To insulate against coups, Bashir has regularly shuffled security chiefs, marginalised rivals and kept the security forces factionalised. A take-over by another senior figure could prompt infighting among divided security factions.

A third scenario would see Bashir resign. This would allow for a leadership change that could mollify protesters. Many see Bashir as emblematic of an unaccountable and self-interested elite that has led the country into long-term economic crisis, isolated Sudan and stubbornly refused to implement substantial reforms to resolve these problems. Some of Bashir's allies and former senior officials are encouraging him to step down in 2020; the president pledging not to contest the 2020 vote would be positive, though this carries a risk that he later reneges. For now, he shows few signs of stepping down. Indeed, the president has strong incentives not to do so, fearing the next government would hold him accountable for corruption at home or, if he leaves Sudan, delivery to the International Criminal Court, which has indicted him for atrocities in Darfur.

For outside powers, the first priority should be to minimise bloodshed on the streets. Foreign governments with sway in Khartoum should publicly discourage violence against demonstrators and call on the government to maintain forces, especially the Rapid Support Forces, in check. Western powers should continue to signal that future cooperation, aid and, in the U.S.'s case, normalisation of ties, are at stake. They should warn commanders of the various security forces that they could face travel bans, asset seizures and prosecution abroad for indiscriminate violence against demonstrators.

More broadly, those governments should seek to improve prospects for a peaceful transition; doing so is as critical as taking immediate steps to deter violence. Behind the scenes, they should press the president to step down or at least pledge not to seek re-election in 2020. They might also signal to Sudanese political and security elites that greater aid and investment would likely be forthcoming without Bashir. The UN Security Council might also offer to request the ICC defer investigation or prosecution of Bashir's case for one year, pursuant to the Rome Statute's Article 16, were he to resign or to leave office in 2020; the deferral could be extended provided Bashir stayed out of – and did not interfere in any way with – Sudanese politics. The downsides to deferring his case would be enormous, but without a pledge along these lines, Bashir is unlikely to step down.

## II. Protests Spread Across Sudan

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Protests broke out on 19 December in Atbara, a town about 350km from the capital Khartoum and the historic home of Sudan's once-powerful national labour movement.<sup>1</sup> This followed a cut that same month in the government subsidy on bread in River Nile state, where Atbara is located, which tripled its price. Demonstrations quickly spread across the country to at least 28 towns and cities, including major centres such as Port Sudan, El-Gadarif and, eventually, the twin cities of Khartoum and Omdurman, the country's political and economic centres. Videos posted on social media, circulating despite the government's attempt to shut down the internet, showed protesters calling for Bashir to step down from power.<sup>2</sup> Unusually, protests are taking place in riverine areas, which are close to Sudan's wealthier centre and traditionally loyal to Bashir, making them all the more threatening to his rule.<sup>3</sup> Protesters have attacked offices of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in a number of towns, ransacking and sometimes burning the buildings; rarely in the past have such attacks occurred outside Darfur or Sudan's other conflict zones.

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<sup>1</sup> For past Crisis Group work on the implications of Sudan's long-term economic crisis and the prospects of full re-engagement with Western powers, see, Crisis Group Africa Reports N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012; N°174, *Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Future Stability*, 4 May 2011 and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°128, *A New Roadmap to Make U.S. Sudan Sanctions Relief Work*, 29 September 2017. Sudan's national labour movement was historically influential, playing a lead role in the agitation for the end of Anglo-Egyptian rule and demands for expansion of political space after independence. Bashir banned independent unions and imprisoned leading figures in the labour movement after taking power in 1989 but unions are still allowed to organise by sector and an alliance of professional unions is spearheading this latest wave of protests. The date 19 December is also significant as it marks the day when, in 1955, Sudanese nationalists kicked off a campaign for independence from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium that ruled Sudan between 1899 and 1956.

<sup>2</sup> See, "Protesters call on Sudan's President Bashir to step down", BBC, 4 January 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interviews, academics, security figures and National Congress Party (NCP) officials, Khartoum, December 2018–January 2019. Unlike in 2013, the protests do not mainly include just opposition supporters. Some affiliates of the ruling party have broken with the government and backed the demonstrators; the response of many senior officials to calls for change has been muted. One NCP official said it was significant that senior officials apart from Bashir have come out to condemn the protesters or to defend the government. He said this uncertainty about events but also a general frustration with Bashir's administration, including among ruling party supporters unhappy with the economy and wanting a change of direction.

Protesters come from mixed political and economic backgrounds. They include members of Sudan's longstanding leftist movements, the Sudanese Communist Party and the Sudanese Congress Party (whose members are particularly active on social media) and a number of other political parties, along with professional trade unions, notably doctors, who are currently on strike.<sup>4</sup> The newly-formed Sudanese Professionals Association – an umbrella group encompassing several professional unions – organised a march on the presidential palace on 25 December and again on 31 December demanding Bashir's resignation. The association is coordinating with *Girifna*, a loose coalition of youth movements formed by anti-regime university students in 2009 to agitate for reform in Sudan and a change in the country's leadership.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of the protesters, however, are ordinary Sudanese with no strong political affiliation and who blame their dire economic plight on the NCP's economic mismanagement and kleptocracy.

So far, the Sudanese government's response has largely involved deploying its four security organs: the police, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and Rapid Support Forces militia.<sup>6</sup> Those forces, accustomed to violent tactics, have shot into crowds and hurled teargas at protesters. Amnesty International stated on 24 December that it had "credible reports" that 37 people had already been killed.<sup>7</sup> That said, security forces have not yet unleashed the level of brutality witnessed in 2013, when militias indiscriminately killed almost 200 protesters then opposing the removal of a fuel subsidy.<sup>8</sup>

Bashir has labelled the protesters "vandals and looters" and in a speech, delivered in the NCP's stronghold of Gezira state, just south of Khartoum, describing them as "traitors, mercenaries, agents and heretics".<sup>9</sup> But at the same time, he has urged the police not to use "excessive force".<sup>10</sup> Reportedly, some senior security officials have counselled against using indiscriminate violence, fearing this could provoke a larger public backlash and weaken the government's relationship with Western countries, who have already condemned the violence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sudan's opposition parties have joined protesters in urging Bashir to step down. A number of smaller parties affiliated with the NCP also on 1 January asked Bashir to leave power and form a government of technocrats to resolve the crisis. Protesters on the streets, however, have been keen to emphasise their non-affiliation with any of the mainstream political parties.

<sup>5</sup> *Girifna* means "We are fed up" in Arabic.

<sup>6</sup> In an effort to prevent a coup, Bashir has deliberately created numerous separate security and intelligence units, with loyalties to different leaders.

<sup>7</sup> "Amnesty International: 37 killed in Sudan protests", Associated Press, 25 December 2018.

<sup>8</sup> 'Sudan: Five years later and no justice for 185 protesters shot dead by security forces', Amnesty International, 9 October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> "Sudan's Omar al-Bashir: 'Our duty is to stop looting'", Al Jazeera, 31 December 2018; "Sudan's protests points to weaknesses in Bashir's rule", Associated Press, 27 December 2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Sudan's Bashir tells police to rein in force against protesters", *Daily Nation*, 31 December 2018. In 2013, Bashir opted for a violent response, sending militias out to the streets to shoot into crowds. He did not issue statements acknowledging the legitimacy of protesters' grievances as he has in 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Sudanese academic, December 2018. The head of the intelligence service, Salah Gosh, is said to be coordinating the regime's response to the protests and he has reportedly advised against a harsh crackdown. The UK, Norway, the U.S. plus Canada, the "Troika" of countries coordinating talks that could lead to full re-engagement between Khartoum and the West warned 8 January that the actions of Sudanese authorities in response to protests would have

Encouraged by the army's reticence, a coalition of political parties including some Islamists previously allied with Bashir, has urged the military to seize power.<sup>12</sup> Although protesters favour the wholesale fall of the government, many would welcome a transition that sees Bashir leave, offers a chance for economic relief and opens the way to political reform.<sup>13</sup> Responding to calls for a military intervention, Bashir declared 8 January that he was open to handing over to the military but not, in words he uses to describe the political opposition, to "traitors".<sup>14</sup>

### III. Economic Grievances at a Tipping Point

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President Bashir's government has weathered protests and contended with economic discontent in the past. But entering 2019, it has fewer options for generating the revenue necessary to assuage protesters. It has faced a severe economic crisis since the start of 2018, consistently refused to cut exorbitant state spending in the security sector and lost potential investment due to sanctions, international isolation and a failure to develop an attractive environment for investors. The country's already-high levels of debt mean that it will be difficult to borrow funds to finance its deficits, and its chief financial backers in the Gulf are less generous than in the past.

Sudan's economic crisis originates in part from South Sudan's secession in 2011, which led to the loss of nearly three quarters of Sudan's oil reserves. Previously, oil production generated around half of all tax revenues and two thirds of Sudan's foreign exchange earnings.<sup>15</sup> The secession agreement sought to cushion the impact of South Sudan's independence through a series of lump-sum payments from the now oil-rich Juba to Khartoum amounting to some \$3 billion. But this arrangement only went so far in compensating for fundamental damage to the Sudanese economy and, in any case, Juba has been unable to pay up since South Sudan's civil war broke out in December 2013.<sup>16</sup>

While the economic shock of South Sudan's secession was inevitable, Khartoum also failed to prepare for it. Long-term economic mismanagement, pervasive graft and high military expenditure have contributed to unaffordable levels of spending.<sup>17</sup> International isolation caused by U.S. sanctions, introduced in the late 1990s, inhibited attempts to diversify the economy through foreign investment, leaving Sudan

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an impact on efforts at re-engagement. See p. 12, also "Troika countries say human rights violations during Sudan protests may affect engagement with Khartoum", *Sudan Tribune*, 9 January 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See, "No objection to handing power to the army: Sudanese president", *Sudan Tribune*, 9 January 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Sudanese civil society activist, December 2018.

<sup>14</sup> See, "Bashir scoffs at Sudan protesters, says army won't back traitors", *Africa News*, 9 January 2019 and "al-Bashir hints at handing power to army", *allafrica.com*, 9 January 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Sudan: 2013 Article IV Consultation", IMF Country Report No. 13/317, October 2013, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> More than two decades of easy oil money had also made Sudan's large agricultural economy uncompetitive. See Kabbashi Suliman, "Understanding and Avoiding the Oil Curse in Sudan", in Ibrahim Elbadawi and Hoda Selim (eds.), *Understanding and Avoiding the Oil Curse in Resource-rich Arab Economies* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 421-460.

<sup>17</sup> Sudan is rated 175 out of 180 on Transparency International's corruption perception index. See, "Sudan, South Sudan, near bottom of 2017 corruption perceptions index", *dabangasudan.com*, 23 February 2018.

with a crippling lack of foreign-exchange reserves, which has resulted in shortages, particularly of fuel.<sup>18</sup> A small gold boom since 2011 has not made up for the loss of oil revenue, in part because traders avoided selling to the Central Bank and instead smuggled gold out of Sudan to countries where prices were higher.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Sudan's \$55 billion in external debt prevents the government from accessing new foreign credit, except ad hoc loans mostly from Gulf allies. Sudan would normally be eligible for debt relief under the joint International Monetary Fund (IMF)-World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC), but cannot gain that while it remains on the U.S.'s list of state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>20</sup>

Authorities in Khartoum like to blame U.S. sanctions for all the country's economic woes. But their own failure to encourage dynamism contributes significantly to economic dysfunction. Investors talk of encountering a sclerotic bureaucracy which insists on imposing byzantine rules for simple transactions, causing many to stay away. The security establishment's overbearing control of economic policy, including in determining allocation of foreign currency, does little to improve conditions for business.<sup>21</sup>

The government's limited attempts at belt tightening have both failed to address the economic crisis and fuelled discontent. In January 2018, its annual budget included a cut to wheat subsidies. The World Bank and IMF had encouraged such measures, seeing subsidies as a costly and ineffective method to help the poor, but recommended Khartoum offset these cuts by increasing spending on social protection, such as making cash transfers to needy families.<sup>22</sup> The government did not do so. Moreover, because its efforts to reduce spending focused on eliminating subsidies rather than downsizing the military budget or recovering revenues lost to corruption, they hit the poor hardest.<sup>23</sup> In response to the wheat subsidy cut, bread prices doubled and the cost of other staples, particularly sorghum and millet, increased as the market reacted to extra demand.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the government devalued the Sudanese pound from seven to eighteen pounds per U.S. dollar and then later to 30 pounds per dollar. Following

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<sup>18</sup> "Sudan: Staff Report for the 2017 Article IV Consultation", IMF Country Report No. 17/364, 13 November 2017, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sudanese politician, Khartoum, 22 February 2018.

<sup>20</sup> For countries on the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list (SSTL), sanctions are applied under four main categories: restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance, a ban on defence exports and sales, certain controls over exports of dual use items, and miscellaneous financial and other restrictions. Most importantly, this means the U.S. government cannot support World Bank debt relief assistance to Sudan. Due to the influential positions the U.S. holds within international financial institutions (World Bank and IMF) this effectively means that the U.S. government can veto debt relief or major economic assistance programs for Sudan. "State Sponsors of Terrorism", U.S. Department of State.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese and Saudi agri-investors, Khartoum and Cairo, April 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, World Bank and IMF economists, Khartoum, February 2018.

<sup>23</sup> According to the government, spending on security and defence was 23.9 per cent of total expenditures. "Projected General Budget Expenditure of the National Government for the Year 2018 on the Basis of Sectors", Government of the Republic of Sudan, December 2017, p. 80. Hard copy seen by Crisis Group.

<sup>24</sup> Wheat smuggling was rife, with traders buying the subsidised wheat in Sudan and selling it at a high price in neighbouring countries. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese economist and politician, Khartoum, February 2018; "Food Price Monitoring and Analysis Bulletin", Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 16 February 2018.

the first devaluation in early January 2018, the illegal parallel market rate, which had fluctuated between eighteen and twenty Sudanese pounds per dollar, rapidly increased to 31 and later doubled to 60 pounds per dollar.<sup>25</sup> The government then became concerned about the possibility of uncontrollable hyperinflation and, from February 2018, put in place limits on the amount of money Sudanese could withdraw from banks.<sup>26</sup> In November 2018, the official inflation rate stood at 68.93 per cent, one of the world's highest.<sup>27</sup>

Already in January and February 2018, the combined effects of the subsidy cuts and the currency devaluation stimulated a number of well-coordinated protests. Many demonstrators were committed anti-government activists and some were linked to established opposition political parties; the protests failed to attract the broader social base that has taken to the streets today and were not large enough to threaten Bashir. Still, security forces arrested over a hundred protesters and held them without charge for weeks.<sup>28</sup> Newspapers that covered the events had entire print runs confiscated and some journalists were temporarily detained. The harsh measures the government used illustrated its nervousness about potential public anger at the economic downturn.

While Sudan's relations with Western powers, particularly the U.S. and European Union, have improved, they have yet to pay economic dividends. Over the past few years, Khartoum has skilfully used its advantages as a partner on counter-terrorism (particularly regarding jihadist groups in neighbouring Libya), its influential role in South Sudan and its cooperation with the EU on migration management to slowly build better relations with Western countries. Western diplomats also cite Sudan's strategically important location and the need to prevent further economic decline that could lead to political instability and conflict as drivers of their gradual re-engagement.<sup>29</sup> Though European concerns over migration attract the most press coverage, diplomats say they worry most about the economy's structural fragility and the possibility of state collapse that could further destabilise the region.<sup>30</sup>

In October 2017, the U.S. lifted some economic sanctions, which had been in place since the late 1990s. As yet, however, this has not had a notable effect. Khartoum remains deeply in debt and considered a risky investment destination. The second phase of U.S. sanctions relief, the program for which was announced in November 2018 – requiring Khartoum to make improvements in six areas, including in its respect for human rights – should be more significant, potentially leading to Sudan's eventual removal from the U.S.'s state sponsors of terrorism list. This could allow the country to secure debt relief or a full World Bank or IMF bailout.<sup>31</sup> Sudanese officials

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<sup>25</sup> "Sudan pound slides to widest over official rate since devaluation", Reuters, 10 December 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sudanese economist, Khartoum, 15 February 2018.

<sup>27</sup> "Sudan's inflation rises to 68.93 per cent as dollar price hits record high", *Sudan Tribune*, 11 December 2018.

<sup>28</sup> "Dozens arrested in Sudan as protests over price hikes continue", *Sudan Tribune*, 17 January 2018; Crisis Group interview, Sudanese opposition activist detained by government January – April 2018, phone, April 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Senior EU diplomat, Khartoum, 20 February 2018; EU officials, Brussels, January 2018; U.S. government officials, Washington D.C., March 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, European ambassador, Khartoum, June 2018.

<sup>31</sup> "Sudan Commits to Strengthening Cooperation and Meaningful Reforms", U.S. State Department, 8 November 2018.

also argue that the country's continued designation as a state sponsor of terrorism has kept foreign investors and banks away. The country's foreign minister has said Khartoum would quickly ask for a bailout by the IMF if the designation is lifted.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years, Khartoum has relied heavily on assistance from Gulf partners, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, to prop up its ailing economy. According to the IMF, Gulf monarchies deposited an estimated \$2.5 billion into the Central Bank of Sudan in 2015-16.<sup>33</sup> This was, in part, a payment for Khartoum's 2014 decision to break off relations with Tehran and committing thousands of Sudanese forces to the Saudi-led war against the Huthis in Yemen. In return, Riyadh also lobbied the U.S. for the repeal of economic sanctions.

These warming ties suffered a setback in June 2017 due to the Gulf crisis, which saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE and a number of their allies sever diplomatic relations with and impose an economic blockade on Qatar.<sup>34</sup> Despite pressure from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and unlike some other African governments, Sudan has not picked a side in the Gulf dispute, preferring maintain good relations across the board. That said, despite its nominally neutrality, Sudan is ideologically closer to the more Islamist-leaning administrations in Qatar and its main ally, Turkey. Though Khartoum has maintained cordial ties to Saudi Arabia and UAE (and retains troops in Yemen), financial assistance from those two powers has mostly dried up at a critical moment, in part, perhaps, because they view Khartoum as insufficiently loyal but also because they see investment in Sudan as risky.<sup>35</sup> This has contributed to the vulnerable position in which President Bashir now finds himself.

#### IV. Bashir's Choices

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President Bashir has shown himself capable of weathering popular unrest in the past. This time around, however, he has fewer options to placate demonstrators and is widely seen, including by many within his own ruling party, as part of the country's malaise rather than an antidote to it. Even so, the critical questions at this juncture are whether protests calling for Bashir's resignation will gather force and, if so, whether this will change the calculations of the security forces and elites who still support him. Three different scenarios could unfold.

The first, and seemingly most probable, is that the security services step up repression to disperse protesters, deter future demonstrations and crack down on the unions and associations organising them. As in the past, such a campaign could see protests dwindle without any immediate threat to Bashir's hold on power. This would ensure

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<sup>32</sup> See, "Trump administration gives Sudan a way to come in from the cold", *Foreign Policy*, 8 November 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "Sudan: Staff Report for the 2017 Article IV Consultation—Debt Sustainability", IMF Country Report No. 17/364, 13 November 2017, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> This has had far-reaching and destabilising effects on the Horn of Africa region beyond Sudan. Crisis Group Commentary, "A Dangerous Gulf in the Horn: How the Inter-Arab Crisis is Fuelling Regional Tensions", 3 August 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Emirati government figures and think-tank officials, Abu Dhabi, July 2018. Officials say they appreciate Sudan's assistance in Yemen, where Sudanese troops are deployed in some of the most dangerous front lines, but find Bashir erratic and that his precise loyalties are unclear.



Bashir's short-term survival, but greater repression risks backfiring and prompting more public outrage. A crackdown would likely slow, if not halt, Sudan's improving relations with Western powers and lifting of U.S. sanctions, thus blocking its path to debt relief or a World Bank or IMF bailout and leaving the government no good option to improve economic conditions. Bashir would simply store up more problems for the future, when unaddressed grievances could potentially trigger even greater protest.

In this scenario, countries that remain friendly to Khartoum will almost certainly be unwilling or unable to provide the funds necessary to reverse the economic slide. Bashir may look to the Gulf, as he has in the past. But while Gulf leaders on both sides of the 2017 intra-Gulf spat (Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on one side, and Qatar on the other) can be described as allies and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in particular want Sudanese troops to remain in Yemen, they will probably not provide game-changing support.<sup>36</sup> An injection of cash from the Gulf – most likely from Qatar – might, in other words, buy Bashir time but would not address the country's underlying economic challenges. While Turkey and Russia, both relatively new players in Khartoum, have growing business and diplomatic interests in the country, those interests are not sufficiently large or important to motivate a more serious, direct investment in the government.<sup>37</sup> China's involvement in Sudan, traditionally focused on developing the oil industry, has diminished since the south's secession.

A second scenario might involve the president's removal by elements within his own security forces, particularly if protests continue to spread and Bashir still refuses to step down. This scenario might arise if protests grow in force, the economic crisis deepens and the situation threatens the survival of not only Bashir but also other top officials. Still, given Bashir's repeated reshuffles of leadership positions in the security agencies, such a scenario could provoke infighting among security factions to determine the succession of leadership.

For now, however, a successful coup appears a remote prospect. It is unclear that any figure could unite the factionalised security sector behind such a move. True, the military so far has shown less appetite to confront protesters than it has in the past. Some evidence suggests soldiers share protesters' frustration over grim economic conditions.<sup>38</sup> But no evidence suggests Bashir's ouster is imminent. Senior generals issued a statement backing the president a few days after the protests kicked off in response to reports of divisions within their ranks.<sup>39</sup> Many have engaged in war crimes and serious corruption themselves and worry about retribution were Bashir gone.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Khartoum, February 2018. The Bashir administration has sought to deepen ties with Russia in recent years although it is unclear if Moscow deems these budding relations sufficiently significant for them to invest directly in the government's survival. President Bashir visited Moscow in July 2018 and urged the Russians to broaden their engagement with Sudan in the face of what he described as Western hostility. He also travelled to Syria, a key ally of Russia, with Moscow's apparent encouragement, in the third week of December. The head of Sudan's defence subcommittee said 13 January that a draft agreement had been signed that could pave the way for Russia to build a military base on Sudanese territory. "Sudan says Russia could set up military base in Red Sea", *Sudan Tribune*, 13 January 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Khartoum, January 2019.

<sup>39</sup> "Sudan's military pledges to stand by embattled president", *Washington Post*, 23 December 2018.

Senior officials also express concern about the potential revival of insurgencies in Darfur were Bashir to depart.<sup>40</sup>

Bashir reportedly trusts his intelligence services, key members of which hail from his own riverine ethnic group, more than he does the army, which recruits from a wider pool and whose loyalty is more ambiguous. Salah Gosh, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) chief, now seen as the second most powerful man in the country, was accused of coup-plotting in 2012, and spent six months in prison. But after Bashir restored him as security chief in February 2018, he played a key role in purging anti-Bashir elements from the NCP and NISS in 2018 and is likelier to be a central figure in suppressing protesters than taking up their cause.<sup>41</sup>

Nor do leaders of other security agencies appear inclined to make such a move. On 25 December, chief of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a pro-government militia recruited mainly from the Darfur and Kordofan regions – Mohamed Hamdan Daglo “Hametti” made a speech in Khartoum state to a unit recently arrived from North Darfur, in which he urged the government to provide more services to the people.<sup>42</sup> Though his statement received wide attention and seemed an implicit criticism of the government, he has shown no sign of acting against Bashir.<sup>43</sup> In any case, while the RSF are a major element of the security architecture, they remain mobile and relatively lightly armed, accustomed to counterinsurgency campaigns in Darfur. Those forces are not strong enough to take on the Sudanese army, assuming it remains loyal to Bashir.

A third and optimal scenario would see the president resigning or pledging not to contest the 2020 election, with the encouragement and pressure of allies within the ruling party or security agencies and foreign governments. Bashir’s decision to seek another term had already divided the NCP and provoked some consternation within elements of the security services; this latest wave of protests has left him further weakened.<sup>44</sup> Dissenters within the party, or those sidelined by the president, view him and his style of government – decision-making concentrated in the presidential palace and a small circle of advisors, with technocratic ministers marginalised – as a liability.<sup>45</sup> A negotiated transition, in which Bashir himself agreed to hand over power to a new government, potentially including moderate NCP and military figures, would be the best way out of the crisis. It could set the country on a path to receiving emergency aid and undertaking necessary reforms to end repeated cycles of conflict.

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<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sudanese security official, Khartoum, December 2018.

<sup>41</sup> “Sudanese president replaces security and intelligence chief”, Reuters, 11 February 2018; Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese political analysts and journalists, Khartoum, February 2018.

<sup>42</sup> “Bashir haemorrhaging domestic support as Sudanese protests rage”, *Middle East Eye*, 28 December 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Sudan has sent thousands of RSF fighters to fight with the Saudi-led alliance in Yemen. Recent reports suggest that RSF soldiers are deployed in the most bitterly contested front lines and taken substantial casualties, breeding discontent. Crisis Group phone interview, Sudan analyst, December 2018; “On the front line of the Saudi war in Yemen: Child soldiers from Darfur”, *New York Times*, 28 December 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Sudan analyst, December 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Sudanese government official, Khartoum, June 2018. The official said he was fed up with Bashir’s heavy-handed rule. He said Bashir made all key decisions and was mercurial and erratic, rendering it impossible to conduct government business in a professional manner.

The odds of Bashir taking this route also appear slim. Nothing in his track record suggests he will give up power easily; the recent moves to amend the constitution and remove term limits suggest he already is manoeuvring to retain power beyond 2020. Moreover, he has strong incentives to hold on. Out of power, he would likely fear for his safety, whether at home or living in asylum in a friendly country. He could orchestrate a handover to a loyal general, but he and his family would still risk facing accountability for corruption or other crimes. His ICC indictment for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur narrows his options for seeking refuge abroad. Those Gulf countries that would be his most probable hosts, chiefly Saudi Arabia, are not parties to the Rome Statute. But settling there would still be a gamble for Bashir, as any shift in geopolitical winds or his host country's domestic policy might leave him exposed to international justice.<sup>46</sup>

## V. How Outside Actors Should Respond

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For Western and other outside powers, the immediate priority should be to avert further violence during protests. On 8 January, the Troika – the UK, Norway and the U.S. plus Canada – issued a strong statement demanding that Khartoum undertake political reform and warning that further indiscriminate violence against protesters would have consequences for future re-engagement between Sudan and the West. This was an encouraging first step. These parties should continue to press the Sudanese authorities to exercise restraint, release political prisoners and address the protesters' legitimate demands. The U.S. should explicitly pin further sanctions relief on the government switching to a more measured response toward the protesters.

More broadly, outside actors should do everything in their power to improve prospects for a peaceful transition. The optimal scenario would be some form of negotiated exit whereby Bashir steps down and Sudanese elites form a government more open to political and economic reform and that has less troubled relationships with key outside powers.<sup>47</sup> Such a transition would open up the possibility of further re-engagement with the West and international financial institutions and could offer a lifeline to a population battered by the country's economic decline. It might bring also benefits to non-Western powers. Many countries, including Gulf powers, eye Sudan's agricultural potential and see the country as a potential bread basket, but are reluctant to invest given the volatility under Bashir. A fresh direction could improve prospects for investment and provide greater food security for those countries.

The UN Security Council might consider offering to defer Bashir's prosecution at the ICC if he steps down (an idea Crisis Group initially floated in 2012).<sup>48</sup> Prominent

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<sup>46</sup> If Bashir stays in Sudan at the end of a transition process, he would still fear facing Slobodan Milošević's fate, betrayal by successors and being handed over to international jurisdiction. If he goes to a country not party to the ICC, he would fear changed circumstances that might eventually result in his delivery to an international court as occurred with Charles Taylor. Taylor reportedly received international guarantees that he would avoid prosecution before his resignation as Liberian President in August 2003. In March 2006, reportedly under U.S. pressure, Nigerian authorities, who had granted Taylor exile, arrested and extradited him to Liberia, where he was handed over to the Special Court for Sierra Leone, an international tribunal.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, western diplomats, Nairobi, December 2018.

<sup>48</sup> See, Crisis Group Africa Reports N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012.

Sudanese businessman and philanthropist Mo Ibrahim, who has also called for Bashir to step down, has echoed this proposal.<sup>49</sup> A Security Council deferral would involve the Council requesting the ICC to put off investigation or prosecution of his case for one year, pursuant to the Rome Statute's Article 16; the deferral could be extended provided Bashir stayed out of Sudanese politics.<sup>50</sup> There would clearly be enormous downsides to doing so – for justice in Sudan and potentially for the ICC itself. The Council would have to insist on some alternative form of accountability for atrocities in Darfur.<sup>51</sup> But without a pledge along these lines, it appears highly improbable that Bashir will step aside willingly. Bashir himself has cast the ICC issue as a matter of national pride so a deferral would also be face-saving; sources close to the president suggest that even though the indictment has inhibited his travel less over the past few years than previously, he still views it as a major burden.<sup>52</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

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In three decades at the helm in Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir has survived Khartoum's internecine politics, repeated wars in Sudan's peripheries, his country splitting in two after South Sudan's secession, indictment by the ICC and frequently hostile neighbours in a particularly rough neighbourhood. He has held on despite repeated predictions of his demise; indeed, his political manoeuvres in Khartoum over the past few years have done much to shield him from potential contenders. Vesting too much hope in the president stepping down any time soon would fly in the face of this record.

Yet the president is running out of road. Unable to reverse the economic slide, he must rely on repression alone to contain a population increasingly enraged at deteriorating living conditions. But the harsher his repression, the more probable his relations with the West deteriorate again and the farther the funds necessary to turn around the economy slip from his reach. Bashir may well survive this round of protests. But if he does, it will almost certainly be at the cost of further economic decline, greater popular anger, more protests and even tougher crackdowns. At some point, his departure appears inevitable. Outside powers should do everything possible to prevent violence in the meantime, work for as smooth a transition as possible and find him an exit.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 14 January 2019**

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<sup>49</sup> "ICC should drop charges against Bashir if he steps down", *Eye Witness News*, 11 January 2019. Mo Ibrahim is a member of Crisis Group's Board of Trustees.

<sup>50</sup> Article 16 of the Rome Statute governing the ICC specifies that the Security Council can pass a resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to defer an investigation or prosecution for twelve months and can also choose to renew the deferral through the same process. See "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court", International Criminal Court, 17 July 1998.

<sup>51</sup> In 2012, Crisis Group suggested that the UN Security Council engage with the African Union and the Arab League to strengthen domestic legal institutions' capacity to act against atrocity crimes and so make ICC intervention less necessary under the complementarity principle. See, Crisis Group Africa Reports N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012.

<sup>52</sup> According to one security official, one reason Bashir won't step down is because he knows "the West is waiting for him"; in that sense some reassurance on the ICC would help. Crisis Group phone interview, security official in Khartoum, January 2019.

## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Global Affairs Canada, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japanese International Cooperation Agency, Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Emirati Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Elders Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Korea Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, UniKorea Foundation and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

**January 2019**

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## Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2016

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### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### Central Africa

*Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility*, Africa Report N°233, 30 March 2016 (also available in French).

*Burundi: anatomie du troisième mandat*, Africa Report N°235, 20 May 2016 (only available in French).

*Katanga: Tensions in DRC's Mineral Heartland*, Africa Report N°239, 3 August 2016.

*The African Union and the Burundi Crisis: Ambition versus Reality*, Africa Briefing N°122, 28 September 2016 (also available in French).

*Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The "Street" and Politics in DR Congo*, Africa Briefing N°123, 13 October 2016.

*Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°241, 16 November 2016 (also available in French).

*Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures*, Africa Report N°246, 8 March 2017 (also available in French).

*Burundi: The Army in Crisis*, Africa Report N°247, 5 April 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, Africa Report N°250, 2 August 2017 (also available in French).

*Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic*, Africa Report N°253, 28 September 2017 (also available in French).

*Time to Reset African Union-European Union Relations*, Africa Report N°255, 17 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon: A Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures*, Africa Briefing N°130, 19 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Far North: Reconstruction amid Ongoing Conflict*, Africa Briefing N°133, 25 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Time for Concerted Action in DR Congo*, Africa Report N°257, 4 December 2017 (also available in French).

*Seven Priorities for the African Union in 2018*, Africa Briefing N°135, 17 January 2018 (also available in French).

*Electoral Poker in DR Congo*, Africa Report N°259, 4 April 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue*, Africa Briefing N°138, 26 April 2018 (also available in French).

*Increasing the Stakes in DR Congo's Electoral Poker*, Africa Briefing N°139, 8 June 2018 (also available in French).

*DR Congo: The Bemba Earthquake*, Africa Briefing N°140, 15 June 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°263, 14 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Helping the Burundian People Cope with the Economic Crisis*, Africa Report N°264, 31 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Election présidentielle au Cameroun : les fractures se multiplient*, Africa Briefing N°142, 3 October 2018 (also available in French).

*Chad: Defusing Tensions in the Sahel*, Africa Report N°266, 5 December 2018 (also available in French).

### Horn of Africa

*Ethiopia: Governing the Faithful*, Africa Briefing N°117, 22 February 2016.

*Sudan's Islamists: From Salvation to Survival*, Africa Briefing N°119, 21 March 2016.

*South Sudan's South: Conflict in the Equatorias*, Africa Report N°236, 25 May 2016.

*Kenya's Coast: Devolution Disappointed*, Africa Briefing N°121, 13 July 2016.

*South Sudan: Rearranging the Chessboard*, Africa Report N°243, 20 December 2016.

*Instruments of Pain (II): Conflict and Famine in South Sudan*, Africa Briefing N°124, 26 April 2017.

*Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia*, Africa Briefing N°125, 9 May 2017.

*Instruments of Pain (IV): The Food Crisis in North East Nigeria*, Africa Briefing N°126, 18 May 2017.

*Kenya's Rift Valley: Old Wounds, Devolution's New Anxieties*, Africa Report N°248, 30 May 2017.

*Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?*, Africa Briefing N°127, 22 June 2017.

*A New Roadmap to Make U.S. Sudan Sanctions Relief Work*, Africa Briefing N°128, 29 September 2017.

*How to Ensure a Credible, Peaceful Presidential Vote in Kenya*, Africa Briefing N°129, 2 October 2017.

*Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack*, Africa Briefing N°131, 20 October 2017.

*An Election Delay Can Help Avert Kenya's Crisis*, Africa Briefing N°132, 23 October 2017.

*Uganda's Slow Slide into Crisis*, Africa Report N°256, 21 November 2017.

*After Kenya's Leaders Reconcile, a Tough Path Ahead*, Africa Briefing N°136, 13 March 2018.

*Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, Africa Report N°260, 5 June 2018.

*Averting War in Northern Somalia*, Africa Briefing N°141, 27 June 2018.

*Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, Africa Report N°265, 21 September 2018.

### **Southern Africa**

*Zimbabwe: Stranded in Stasis*, Africa Briefing N°118, 29 February 2016.

*Zimbabwe's "Military-assisted Transition" and Prospects for Recovery*, Africa Briefing N°134, 20 December 2017.

### **West Africa**

*Burkina Faso: Transition, Act II*, Africa Briefing N°116, 7 January 2016 (only available in French).

*Implementing Peace and Security Architecture (III): West Africa*, Africa Report N°234, 14 April 2016 (also available in French).

*Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, Africa Briefing N°120, 4 May 2016 (also available in French).

*Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform*, Africa Report N°237, 6 June 2016.

*Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?*, Africa Report N°238, 6 July 2016 (also available in French).

*Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance*, Africa Report N°240, 6 September 2016 (also available in French).

*Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, Africa Report N°242, 5 December 2016 (also available in French).

*Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°244, 23 February 2017.

*Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency*, Africa Report N°245, 27 February 2017 (also available in French).

*The Politics of Islam in Mali: Separating Myth from Reality*, Africa Report N°249, 18 July 2017 (only available in French).

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*Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict*, Africa Report N°252, 19 September 2017.

*The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*, Africa Report N°254, 12 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, Africa Report N°258, 12 December 2017 (also available in French).

*Preventing Boko Haram Abductions of Schoolchildren in Nigeria*, Africa Briefing N°137, 12 April 2017.

*Frontière Niger-Mali : mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique*, Africa Report N°261, 12 June 2018 (only available in French).

*Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, Africa Report N°262, 26 July 2018.

*Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali*, Africa Report N°267, 13 December 2018 (also available in French).

*Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Six States to Watch*, Africa Report N°268, 21 December 2018.



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