"Waging Peace in Sudan: The Inside Story of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Prospect for Sudan's Future"

The Brookings Institution
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The Brookings Institution hosted a panel discussion on Thursday on the upcoming referendum on independence in southern Sudan entitled, "Waging Peace in Sudan: The Inside Story of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Prospect for Sudan's Future." Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings moderated and introduced the panelists: Hilde Johnson, former Norwegian Development Minister and current Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, Gayle Smith, special assistant to President Obama and senior director at the National Security Council, Richard Williamson, nonresident senior fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings and former US special envoy to Sudan under President George W. Bush. The fourth panelist, Congressman Donald Payne of New Jersey (D-10), was called back to the House floor before the session began and was unable to participate.

Hilde Johnson began the discussion with remarks from her recently published book, Waging Peace in Sudan: The Inside Story of the Negotiations That Ended Africa’s Longest Civil War. Johnson stated that Sudan is currently on "the brink" with the upcoming referendum and likely partition. While there is excitement in the South many in the North remain weary and worried. Further, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), was not a "North/South agreement." Its purpose was to create a "just Sudan, a new Sudan" with the possibility of unity as a viable option. However Dr. John Garang, leader of the SPLA, made conscious efforts to make independence a more attractive option to southerners than unity.

Johnson emphasized that the CPA itself was primarily the result of two individuals: Ali Osman Taha, the First Vice President of Sudan, and Dr. John Garang, the leader of the SPLA. This peace agreement was negotiated entirely by Taha and Garang without third parties. The formation of the agreement took 16 months of closed negotiations and Johnson described the process as "painstakingly slow" with the final agreement a result of "digging with bare hands." Negotiations were almost derailed by the ongoing violence in Darfur.

The role of the international community, particularly the US, UK, and Norway, was fundamental to the peace agreement in Sudan. Johnson, an integral member of Norway's delegation involved in overseeing negotiations, singled out the US for praise commending the Americans' "fundamental engagement at all levels." She mentions in particular the efforts of former Secretary of State Colin Powell and Charles R. Snyder, former Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.

Johnson further elaborated on different post-referendum scenarios. In the optimistic scenario, the results of the referendum are respected regardless of outcome. If the vote ends in independence for the...
South, the North will support the decision and the two sides can further negotiate peacefully on border issues (the Abyei region), shared resources, and citizenship issues. However, if the vote is not respected the prospect of renewed conflict and war will be high. The Abyei border region remains a "hot spot" and any violence there could spread in a "domino effect." The fact that the region was due to have its own referendum this year, which has been delayed, increases the prospect of potential violence. The situation in the North remains fragile and other areas in the east and the Blue Nile and South Kurdufan regions could also erupt in violence. This could lead to a scenario of a failed state in Sudan.

Johnson was optimistic that the referendum will be successful, in that neither the South nor the North wants to reignite the civil war. Each party's own interest in keeping the peace will prevent further outbreaks of violence. She further argued that managing the post-referendum space will be where the international community is needed the most. The US, UK, Norway, as well as other countries must remain engaged in Sudan to ensure success. The engagement of the international community must be "continuous, coordinated, and forceful" at the highest levels. Johnson concluded her remarks stating the job of the international community "really begins now."

Gayle Smith relayed how the stories of war and violence and the representation of Sudan in the media mask the generosity and warmth of the Sudanese people. The people, she said, "fiercely love their country." Even so, the challenges to peace have been "enormous" and it is "extraordinary where we are today." Just a few months ago, Smith maintained, a referendum seemed unlikely and Sudanese leaders should be congratulated for their progress. The referendum is also a credit to Sudan and its people as whole.

Echoing Johnson's remarks, Smith reiterated the call for the international community to stay engaged in Sudan. The post-vote situation will be more difficult to manage than the interim period between the CPA and the referendum. The CPA acted a roadmap for all parties during this period and with new issues to negotiate the staying power of the international community will be tested. As Africa's largest country and a potential regional leader in the Horn of Africa, ensuring the economic future and political stability is paramount. In addition, both North and South must reshape the "political space" to ensure the diversity of views of the Sudanese people can be fairly addressed. Smith ended her remarks with a call to her Sudanese friends and colleagues in the audience telling them that the Sudanese people have more power now than any time since independence. "Seize it, seize it for the good."

Richard Williamson commented on Congressman Payne saying that he had been "dedicated to East Africa" throughout his career and further praised Charles Snyder as well. Although he admitted differences with the way the Obama administration has handled East Africa policy over the last two years, he praised the administration's efforts over the last few months but emphasized that upcoming efforts must be "redoubled." The referendum voting registration went "better than anyone expected" and there has been a relatively low level of violence in the country, he maintained.

Williamson also cautioned that it was important to remember the length of the civil war in Sudan and how it was prosecuted. No party involved has "clean hands" and atrocities were committed on both sides. He highlighted the particular role of the United States and President George W. Bush in Sudan, who met with Salva Kiir, the current President of the Southern Sudan government, on four different occasions, the last being Bush's final Presidential meeting with a foreign leader.
In spite of the CPA and the upcoming referendum, the key issues remain unresolved. Agreements on borders, resources, and citizenship must be negotiated, particularly oil issues in which both the South and the North will be dependent on each other. Barriers to agreement will arise over the transit and shipping of oil from the South to be exported from the North. Both sides, he argued, will tend to be "more greedy" and the US will need to be "aggressive" in discussions and arbitration. He further cautioned that the North has repeatedly refused to accept border recommendations despite Southern acceptance.

Williamson said he thought the referendum will go relatively well and there will be enough of an international presence and monitoring to certify credibility. However, the North will try to claim the election as illegitimate, he warned. This presents the possibility of violence as stress on Khartoum will be "enormous" as rebels in Darfur may try to launch a breakaway movement if the South votes to secede. He further reiterated that he believes that Salva Kiir will show restraint and hopes the North will as well if sporadic clashes break out as a result of the referendum.

Michael O'Hanlon posed a question to the panel asking how any agreement with Omar al-Bashir, who is under indictment by the International Criminal Court for genocide and corruption, is trustworthy. In response, Hilde Johnson remarked that the international community must deal with whomever is in the Sudanese government. There is no other possibility to try and end the violence without al-Bashir as he speaks and acts on behalf of the government. She further reiterated her earlier point that no leader in Sudan has an interest in "stoking violence and fragmentation." In response to a question about independent civil society forming in southern Sudan, Johnson argued that there is already a civil society in the south based on the churches.

Richard Williamson responded to a question about the potential for violence in Abyei and other regions in the North stating that al-Bashir's government has been arming Arab militias in the country, particularly in the Nuba Mountains/South Kurdufan region. He further argued that the North will use Abyei to pressure the South and that it has been a mistake for the U.S. and the international community to not force this issue on both sides.

All three panelists provided comprehensive answers to a question on "unmet expectations" in regards to development aid for southern Sudan. Gayle Smith and Hilde Johnson both commented that aid needs to be focused specifically on key aspects of development. Smith said that the international community and southern Sudan need, "to pick two or three things and do them well" and that not everything can be fixed at once. Johnson further called for the first phase of development aid to be focused on health, education, and roads as these are recognized as most important by ordinary people. Williamson stated that there has always been an "excessive expectation" of peace dividends in African peace deals. He argued that "habits, history, and heritage are hard to change," and that in order for development aid to work, a common identity must be developed to facilitate political power sharing.