Trump Administration Officials Try to Coax Sudan into Normalizing Ties with Israel During Talks in the United Arab Emirates

This week, U.S. officials attempted to coerce Sudan into normalizing relations with Israel to follow the precedent set in recent weeks by Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. The Trump administration has made mediating Arab normalization agreements with Israel its top foreign policy priority ahead of the November election, and President Trump has been criticized for politicizing the Middle East peace process during an election year. Representatives from Sudan's transitional government met with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and members of the Emirati government this week in Abu Dhabi, where the Sudanese leaders were encouraged to normalize relations with Israel. In exchange, Secretary Pompeo hinted at removing Sudan from the United States' blacklist of countries who are state sponsors of terrorism, and the UAE offered up to $3 billion in immediate financial aid to Sudan. Despite these enticements, no deal was reached for Sudan to normalize relations with Israel.

Secretary of State Pompeo had previously identified Sudan as a key target in the Trump administration's objective of securing Arab normalization agreements with Israel. One reason for that is Sudan has been blacklisted on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1993, when dictator Omar al-Bashir provided safe haven for members of Al Qaeda. However, al-Bashir was overthrown in 2019 after months of popular protests against his rule, and a transitional government currently presides over Sudan until scheduled elections in 2022. Despite this, Sudan remains listed as a state sponsor of terror, which severely restricts economic expansion in the country, as companies can become entangled in complicated legal battles. During the negotiations in Abu Dhabi, Secretary Pompeo was essentially willing to engage in a quid pro quo agreement, where Sudan normalized relations with Israel in order to be subsequently removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Sudan's transitional government remains divided on the decision to normalize relations with Israel. As part of the agreement formed between the military and civilian leadership following the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir, the transitional government is comprised of both military and civilian leaders. The civilian Prime Minister, Abdallah Hamdok, is against normalization because he believes it will cause civil unrest. However, the military faction believe Sudan should normalize their relations with Israel, and view it as a way to improve the country's economic situation. Primarily, this would be because Sudan would be removed from the state sponsor of terror list, and Sudanese citizens would be allowed to enter the United States' green card lottery. However, both of these are based on promises made by the United States to coerce Sudan into normalizing relations with Israel. Resultingly, any Sudanese-Israeli agreement would come to fruition because of bribes from the United States, instead of a genuine agreement between Sudan and Israel.

With the presidential election just over a month away, President Trump has been seeking to improve his standing among his base as he continues to trail Democratic nominee Joe Biden in the polls. Securing Arab normalization agreements with Israel has become a vital part of Trump's campaign strategy, as he seeks to appeal to right-wing Jews and Evangelicals who view Israel's international standing as hugely significant. Despite the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain abandoning the long-held Arab tenet that any agreement with Israel must coincide with the establishment of a legitimate Palestinian state and other fair concessions, Sudan has refused to join them even with significant U.S. coercion.