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THE CURRENT: What's the significance of the US-Israel-Sudan normalization deal?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Friday afternoon, the Trump administration announced that Sudan and Israel have agreed to the normalization of relations between the two countries, following similar agreements with the UAE and Bahrain earlier this fall.

With us to explain how this deal came about and what it means for Sudan, Israel, and the U.S. is Zach Vertin, nonresident senior fellow in Foreign Policy here at Brookings. Zach, thanks for talking to us today.

VERTIN: Thanks, glad to be with you, Adrianna.

PITA: This deal was just announced earlier today. What can you tell us about how it came together and what are the details known so far?

VERTIN: Yes, just finished up a call between President Trump, Bibi Netanyahu in Israel, and the Sudanese prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok. This whole deal is prompted by the White House campaign to secure more normalizations between Israel and the countries of the Arab world, a sort of follow-on to the Abraham Accords, which you know has been one of its signature foreign policy pursuits, an effort overseen by Donald Trump and heavily shaped by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

While there has been some effort to delink the two issues, the reality is that Monday's announcement that Sudan would finally, at long last, be removed from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, and the announcement of just an hour ago, that [of] a trilateral deal between the United States, Israel, and Sudan, these are in fact part of the same deal. In sum, Sudan gets removed from the terrorism list – again, a win for its ailing transitional government as it removes a scarlet letter that has long prevented political and economic engagement there, and allows for really desperately needed access to international finance and debt relief as the new government attempts to navigate a really pivotal transition to democracy. And that news on its own should be celebrated.

Secondly, Israel of course gets normalization with another country, thus joining the UAE and Bahrain as you mentioned, growing that list to three. I would put normalization in quotes here because this doesn't necessarily yet represent full normalization, but I'll come back to that. And finally, for the Trump administration, this is about being able to grab a positive headline on the eve of a U.S. election, and that's really what has prompted this to happen today. For team Trump, we're 10 days or so from the election, it's obviously do-or-die time, and I see them throwing whatever they can muster at the wall and hoping something sticks, whether it's a revised nuclear treaty with Russia or an expedited troop drawdown in Afghanistan, or today's announcement about another normalization with Israel, that's what's motivating this now. I'm skeptical that this, like the other 11th-hour gambits, delivers the president much in the way of an electoral bump at so late a juncture, but that was really what brought us here today, and the

White House objective in all this, again, to secure a headline around one of its signature initiatives on the eve of November 3.

PITA: You mentioned that a significant part of this deal is removing Sudan from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Maybe you can remind our listeners of the history there and how Sudan found itself on that list.

VERTIN: Well, the previous regime in Sudan, which finally succumbed to popular protests last year, that regime had been on the list since 1993. That was, in short, on account of its flirtations with various unsavory actors at a time when hardline political Islam was really ascendant in Sudan, as advanced by its National Islamic Front. However, the regime evolved over the course of the next decade or so and largely did away with its ties to designated terrorist entities, really by the early 2000s, including ultimately kicking out Osama bin Laden, who they were playing host to at the time, but it remained on the State Sponsors of Terrorism, or SST as we call it for shorthand, list nonetheless, and somewhat controversially. Why? Because the Bashir government was still waging war against South Sudan at the time, it was still pursuing a devastating campaign of violence in Darfour, and while that didn't necessarily fit the bill for a state sponsor of terrorism, it also made it politically very difficult and very undesirable for successive U.S. administrations to lift the designation.

In the years thereafter, there were various attempts to try to lift SST in exchange for something else – the U.S. leveraging progress on Sudan's domestic disasters in exchange for removal. This turned out to be very risky business and turned out to be a real problem for American credibility, not only in Sudan, but more broadly.

PITA: As you mentioned, the Sudanese prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, is currently presiding over a transitional government. Any transitional government is usually in the middle of a very delicate balancing act between all the different population constituencies, trying to rebuild an economy, not to mention trying to bring a whole new system of governance online. How has that affected their position in these negotiations and how the deal was managed?

VERTIN: Great question, and to be clear, this deal -- Sudan was put under intense, intense pressure from the White House to do this deal. As I mentioned, this government comes to power, a transitional government, in the summer of 2019, and it's tasked to try to right the ship after decades of Sudan's internal devastation but also its isolation from the world. And one huge piece of that puzzle was delisting the terrorism designation and returning Sudan to the community of nations. So, delisting is essential not only to providing U.S. assistance, but also to allow other creditors to normalize, and for the World Bank and IMF to offer financing and facilitate debt relief, as those things are all blocked by that designation. The Trump administration, however, when negotiations began with the new government over SST delisting and normalization more broadly, the Trump administration added another wrinkle, and that was a demand that Khartoum settle a series of outstanding court judgements against it for past acts of terrorism.

This is a little tricky. In short, Sudan was found to be complicit for aiding and abetting those that conducted terrorist bombings in 1998 against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania as you remember, and also the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. So those led to a series of months of complex negotiations, but prior to this week's deal, Khartoum had in fact met those requirements for removal from the list, and already negotiated a settlement of some \$335 million to pay American victims of terrorism, and thus atoning, really, for the sins of a bygone regime. But as that was happening, the Abraham Accords were also coming to fruition, as was the U.S. election season coming, so Trump was desirous to see another foreign policy win, so he really puts the Sudanese government under pressure, offering SST delisting, but only in exchange for some kind of normalization with Israel.

PITA: How has the Sudanese public reacted to this yet, knowing their government was under this kind of pressure?

VERTIN: Great question, because the Sudanese public very much wants to come off the terrorism list, but also has historically been deeply skeptical of normalizing relations with Israel. If you go back in history, Khartoum played an important role in sticking up for the Palestinians. It was, of course, the place where the famous “Three Nos” were first agreed to by the Arab States, and so it has long been estranged from Israel, much like its neighbors. So, the transitional government in Sudan knew this deal could be politically unpopular. Given that it’s only an hour old, we’re going to have to wait to see what the impact of this is going to be in Sudan. On the one hand, the transitional government will get a political bump because of the SST delisting, which has become sort of inflated as the ultimate prize for normalization, but we’ll have to see how that news plays against today’s news of normalization with Israel.

One last bit on that, which is, we did see the Sudanese authorities resist White House pressure for full normalization. You saw some unique language in today’s agreement, and that is because what this entails is the beginning of a normalization process with Israel, not the end of one. In that sense, it is different than what we saw previously with the UAE and Israel. That I think is a wise move on the part of the Sudanese authorities, being able to pursue normalization on their own terms, in a cautious manner, both pursuant to national interests but also conscious of popular opinion.

PITA: Great, well, looking forward, what will this mean, the beginning of this process, for each of the major players, whether that’s the Trump administration, which as you mentioned is facing election in just a little over a week, as well as, more importantly, for the people of Sudan and Israel?

VERTIN: For Trump, as I mentioned, this gives him a chance to announce another foreign policy victory as he tries to squeeze some electoral juice out of this – again, I’m skeptical that that will work. In a longer-term sense, this could be a legacy item in the context of the Abraham Accords. More importantly, for the Sudanese, this gets the monkey off their back. If Trump were to win the election, maybe Khartoum also will receive some additional economic support before the end of the year, and help in pushing for legal peace legislation, such that it’s no longer vulnerable to additional claims against it. But it’s important to note also that a number of the sweeteners the White House offered to the Sudanese government are not things the administration alone can deliver, so they’ll also need support from Congress, and it’s not at all certain that they’ll have it, especially on that legal peace legislation. We’ll have to watch. And lastly, for Israel, this would appear to put another country from the wider Middle East on the board, one where there were not only historical concerns about political Islam, as I mentioned, and loose ties to Iran, but one where there was strong support for the Palestinians. So Israel is set up to gain further recognition and legitimacy, with each normalization seemingly improving its position in its ongoing rivalry with Iran. But again, I would emphasize, this is slightly different, as you might more accurately call it the beginning of a normalization process, not the end.

PITA: Well, we’ll keep watching and wait and see what happens. Zach, thanks very much for explaining this to us today.

VERTIN: Thank you, glad to be with you.