

# Is Sudan turning into a hotbed for terrorism?



*The convicted in the murders of the US diplomat John Granville in one of the court sessions (Social media)*

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## Executive Summary

Sudan risks becoming a hotbed for terrorism. It has a long history of Islamic political organization and has historically hosted extremist groups. The prolonged political instability gripping the country, exacerbated and intensified by the ongoing war and divisive ethnic and religious rhetoric that has been used in prosecuting it, has only increased this risk. With its porous borders and weak security forces, it would be easy for foreign terror groups to infiltrate and take up residence.

Recommendations to address these issues include:

**Redouble efforts to stop the Sudanese war**, which has exacerbated the risk of terrorism and violent extremism by allowing extremists to return to Sudan and reorganize through the establishment of militias with an extremist Islamic orientation.

*The geopolitical reality of Sudan, in addition to the instability of political turmoil, the dominance of the extreme Islamist over the reins of power for three decades, Islamists ability to create a social incubator identified to their ideology rendering Sudan land to the world's terrorists from ISIS, Boko Haram, Takfiris and others, made Sudan a candidate to be an incubator for violent and extremist terrorism.*

**Build institutional capacity to monitor and respond to extremist threats:** Enhance law enforcement capacity to respond to extremist threats. This can be done *inter alia* by increasing intelligence capacity to monitor the threat, leveraging modern surveillance technologies to ensure that the threat is understood. In the longer term, domestic capacity to counter this threat should be developed, enhancing intelligence-sharing capabilities domestically and internationally and improving operational and training standards for security forces.

**Enhancing governance and rule of law:** Develop a robust counterterrorism legal framework; ensure its effective implementation; uphold human rights; define responsibilities between various concerned agencies; improve transparency and accountability within government institutions; and strengthen coordination between intelligence agencies at national, regional, and international levels.

**Addressing social and economic disparities:** Combat economic and social marginalization by enhancing income, employment, and education opportunities; address radicalization drivers such as poverty and unemployment; promote inter-faith and inter-culture dialogue; and support inclusive community development.

These measures are critical for Sudan to manage and mitigate the risks associated with terrorism and to work towards a more stable and secure future.

## Introduction

In late September 2024, former Sudanese Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok noted that Sudan was becoming a haven for terrorism, saying “I really feel quite frightened about this. With Sudan bordering on seven countries, it will become fertile ground for terrorism in a region that is quite fragile.”<sup>1</sup> In early October, the US Coast Guard imposed new restrictions on ships arriving from Sudan, based on the assertion that national

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<sup>1</sup> Andres Schipani, “Sudan becoming ‘fertile ground’ for jihadis says ex-prime minister,” *Financial Times*, September 30, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f8e0b947-c78f-4d80-85c2-50aa98bde9f7>

actions to address terrorism were insufficient.<sup>2</sup> A few days later, Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid, leader of Sudan's National Congress Party returned to Sudan amid the war. In his return speech, he praised the Taliban, suggesting both a resurgence of Bashir-aligned Islamists in Sudan and their willingness to host groups designated as terrorists internationally.<sup>3</sup> Rumors of a deal with Israel further bolstered such suspicions to allow Palestinian Hamas leaders into exile in the country.<sup>4</sup>

These recent concerns about the growth of extremism take place against the backdrop of insecurity, violence, hatred, ethnic and regional discrimination, and other social distortions both before, and exacerbated by, the ongoing war which have increased the chances of Sudan turning into an incubator for terrorism and violent extremism.<sup>5</sup> The failure to address the deteriorating economic situation further increases the risk. However, the threat is not new. It is rooted in the history of the National Islamic Front (NIF)<sup>6</sup> military coup in 1989 overthrowing a democratically elected government, declaring an Islamic state characterized by the perpetration of human rights violations, suppression of opposition, and incitement of violent conflicts until it was overthrown in April 2019.

The outbreak of the April 15, 2023, war has caused political and economic deterioration, lawlessness, and increasing religious and ethnic rhetoric in some areas. Such rhetoric can facilitate recruitment into extremist groups, especially in a context in which the security services are unable to fully control the borders. This allows the infiltration of terrorist groups into Sudan from its unstable neighbors. The Islamists have taken advantage of the war to revive their presence and mobilize young people in a campaign reminiscent of their efforts to recruit youth for the "*jihad*" against rebels in South Sudan. They are stirring up emotions with rhetoric revolving around protecting honor and property and calling for resistance against an existential threat. They have launched extensive campaigns under the guise of a Popular Resistance controlled by the Islamist movement, urging youth to take up arms, but also priming them for recruitment into extremist groups.

Further, due to the weak governance and accountability in state institutions, the absence of transparency, and the spread of corruption and illegal activities, it is likely that extremist groups will escape oversight and accountability. Government officials have stated<sup>7</sup> that many hardened terrorists, some of whom have been sentenced to death, have escaped from prisons. Reports on violent and extremist terrorism have indicated

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<sup>2</sup> United States Coast Guard News, "Coast Guard Announces Conditions of Entry of Vessels Arriving from Sudan to Enhance US Port Security," October 7, 2024, <https://www.news.uscg.mil/maritime-commons/Article/3929102/coast-guard-announces-conditions-of-entry-for-vessels-arriving-from-sudan-to-en/>

<sup>3</sup> Sudan War Monitor, "Islamist leader's return sparks fears of NCP resurgence in Sudan," October 9, 2024, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/3/#inbox/FMfcgzQXJZsNsdFtDzHhHDKQNbdhNtdG>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Lis, "Israel Considers Option of Exiling Sinwar, Hamas Leaders to Sudan as Part of Hostage Deal," *Haaretz*, October 5, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-10-05/ty-article/.premium/israel-is-considering-exiling-sinwar-top-hamas-officials-to-sudan-as-part-of-hostage-deal/00000192-5e2b-da6d-afda-5efbd0a40000>

<sup>5</sup> Violent extremism refers to the use of violence to achieve political, religious or social goals, based on an extreme ideology. This type of extremism involve call to violence, participation in or support for it in any form. Violent extremism can be linked to many issues including political, religion, and social issues, and it is not limited to a specific region or nationality.

<sup>6</sup> The National Islamic Front (NIF) (1986-1989) was founded by Dr. Hassan Abdullah al-Turabi, who became its Secretary-General. It was a political organization that had derived its ideology from the literature of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, in which al-Turabi had held the position of General Supervisor for some time, and most of NIF's membership was affiliated with the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the Minister of Interior, General Adil Basha Sayreen, with Al Arabia and Al Hadath TV channels, July 20, 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/AnLta>.

that Al-Qaeda considers the state of war in Sudan a favorable opportunity for *jihād*: "Sudan's moment has come; chaos is our chance to sow the seeds of *jihād*."<sup>8</sup>

This study presents a theoretical framework for analyzing the possibility of Sudan turning into a hotbed of terrorism unless the matter is addressed. It will discuss the conditions and factors that contribute to the buildup of extremism, the history of terrorism in Sudan and the region, and explore how to confront this through recommendations that would contribute to reducing the potential threat of terrorism in Sudan and its regional surroundings.<sup>9</sup>

## Factors that contribute to the buildup of terrorism



Sudan is located at a crossroads of Africa and the Gulf. Like most countries, it shares 6,819<sup>10</sup> kilometers of borders with seven countries. Most of these neighbors suffer from internal unrest, instability, and extremism but with shared ethnicities, lifestyles, and cultures stretching borders, which made these areas of risk that require a balanced and well-established administrative, legal, political, and security model.<sup>11</sup>

The geopolitical reality of Sudan is also that extreme Islamists have dominated the reins of power for three decades. Islamists can create a social incubator for their ideology rendering Sudan attractive to the world's terrorists from ISIS to Boko Haram, Takfiris, and others. It has become necessary to pay attention

*Sudan is bounded by seven countries, most facing instability (UN Geospatial)*

to the imminent danger, which will not be confined to Sudan but will extend throughout the region and the rest of the world. Considering this, it is necessary to track the danger of increased terrorist activity in Sudan by considering the basic characteristics of extremist groups, the driving factors that contribute to the growth of terrorism, and how to address it.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Harmouch, "Sudan's descent into chaos sets stage for al-Qaida to make a return to historic stronghold," *The Conversation*, May 10, 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/CNblw>.

<sup>9</sup> Shailender Arya, "Sudan: Conflicts, Terror, and Oil," *Journal of Defence Studies*, October 2009, available at: <https://shorturl.at/u1FW5>.

<sup>10</sup> Sudan's borders are 6,819 km long. The countries bordering it are the Central African Republic (174 km), Chad (1,403 km), Egypt (1,276 km), Eritrea (682 km), Ethiopia (744 km), Libya (382 km), and South Sudan (2,158 km).

<sup>11</sup> "Sudan Population Live," *World Population Review*, Retrieved June 1, 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/97RMf>.

Most extremist organizations share ideologies that are spread in their literature. They strive to establish religious justification and support. Key elements of these ideologies be summarized as:

- **Violence is the means of assuming power:** Extremists embrace violence as a means to power and reject peaceful means. They claim that this brings them closer to God and may delude the man in the street. Therefore, they are antagonistic to civilian action. They believe in military coups, armed alliances, and violence that weaken the nation-state and help to realize their goal.
- **The sanctity of the group's own law:** Members of extremist organizations believe that they can infringe on opponents' rights based on rules that they decide, implement, and grant sanctity. These rules can allow killing, destruction, and unlawful detention, and legitimize illegal means of gaining money, including drug, human, and weapons trafficking.
- **Denial of territorial jurisdictions:** Extremist groups deny national borders and the territorial jurisdiction of states. Their literature emphasizes the non-compliance with the systems and controls enacted by national governments.

Despite the efforts made by the international community to reduce the threat of extremism, many factors play a role in stimulating terrorism and violent extremism, both regionally and specifically

## Local factors that stimulate terrorism

- **Weakness of security institutions:** Sudanese security institutions are characterized by professional weakness and lack of accountability, allowing corruption and nepotism to spread.<sup>12</sup> This weakens the security services' ability to monitor and effectively address terrorist activities. It also undermines public confidence. Also, security services in Sudan have proliferated and do not coordinate effectively, even within a single site. At Khartoum Airport, for example, many security agencies operated as isolated islands, and often without a technical mechanism for the exchange of information, especially on the movement of terrorists, making security at this airport among the weakest in the region.<sup>13</sup> Terrorist groups tend to infiltrate areas that suffer from neglect and economic and social marginalization, which makes it easier for them to recruit. Also, high crime and violence rates and the absence of the rule of law help to spread the culture of violence and extremism.<sup>14</sup>



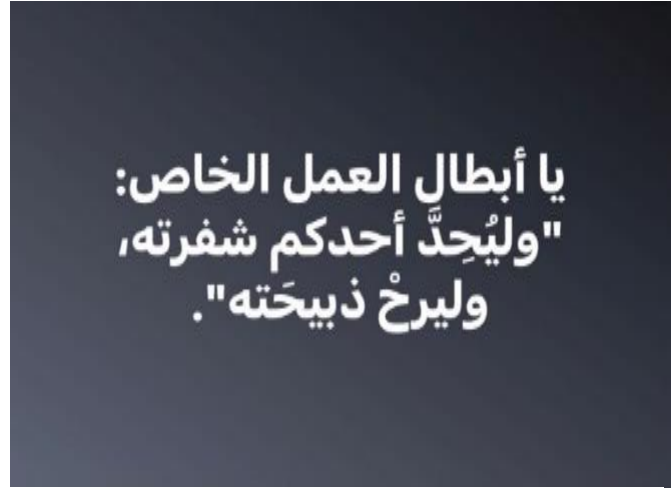
*Mustafareen, or mobilized volunteer fighters in a village in River Nile State (social media)*

<sup>12</sup> Maira Martini, "Corruption and anti-corruption in Sudan, Anticorruption Resource Centre, Transparency International," *Transparency International*, January 22, 2020, available at: <https://shorturl.at/7nUfa>.

<sup>13</sup> In September 2021, the US administration, in cooperation with the civilian-led transitional government, began to collaborate with the Ministry of Interior's technical teams to prepare studies and operational requirements for the installation of the PISCES system designed to coordinate the work of security agencies at air, land and sea crossings.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Myrntinen, "Security Sector Governance, Security Sector Reform and Gender," Gender and Security Toolkit, DCAF and UN Women, 2019 (Arabic), available at: <https://shorturl.at/7GZ83>.

- **The spread and illicit trafficking of arms:** The calls issued by the *de facto* government in Sudan since the start of the war urging citizens to carry weapons and mobilize<sup>15</sup> to repel attacks by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which are the same steps that RSF has taken in the areas under its control and among its social base, have led to the proliferation of weapons.<sup>16</sup> This has increased the culture of violence, and enhanced the capabilities of criminal elements to use advanced weapons. With the ease of transferring weapons across international borders, such calls have played a decisive role in increasing illicit trafficking in arms, especially as it generates quick money.



*An example of an incitement message by an Islamist movement leader: "Let one of you sharpen his blade and spare suffering to the animal [victim] he slaughters." (Social media)*

- **The spread of extremist mobilization rhetoric supporting terrorism:** Sudan witnessed a breakthrough in freedoms after the success of the December Revolution. This pushed extremists out of the spotlight, but many maintained a presence in mosques, which they used to diffuse their messages. Since the war, they have spread inflammatory discourse for mobilization and have even legalized beheading and disembowelment describing these barbaric acts as an essential part of religion.<sup>17</sup>
- **Economic and social imbalances:** Sudan is rife with economic and social imbalances, including uneven development, centralized government, marginalization, and weak service provision in remote and peripheral areas. Unemployment, low living standards, poverty, and social deprivation, inequality, lack of social justice, increasing class differences, and social exclusion have contributed to the creation of an environment in which terrorism can expand.<sup>18</sup> These factors have exacerbated frustration and anger towards the authorities and the existing political system.
- **Defects in identity document systems:** Sudan had a traditional identity document system for many years, necessitated by the ethnic overlap across borders and the lack of sufficient documentation. Due to the number of cross-border ethnicities and lack of documentation large numbers of non-Sudanese have been able to obtain Sudanese ID documents. In mid-2011, Sudan

<sup>15</sup> In a speech on the occasion of Eid Al-Adha 2023, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan described what Sudan is being subjected to as a conspiracy aimed at unravelling its social fabric. He called on everyone capable of carrying a weapon to obtain one at the nearest military unit or by any available means.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Khalid Mohammed Taha, "Weapons Proliferation in Eastern Sudan: Harbinger of a Coming War," *Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker*, July 2024, <https://sudantransparency.org/weapons-proliferation-in-eastern-sudan-harbinger-of-a-coming-war/>

<sup>17</sup> A poster available on FB at: <https://shorturl.at/vf7Ds>.

<sup>18</sup> Peacebuilding Commission Working Group on Lessons Learned, "Economic revitalization in peacebuilding and the development of service-based infrastructure," Background Paper, November 22, 2010, available at: <https://shorturl.at/c2ePM>; Ballentine, Karen & Nitzschke, Heiko. Beyond Greed and Grievance: Policy Lessons from Studies in the Political Economy of Armed Conflict, October January 2006: <https://shorturl.at/jrg1f>.



implemented a digital identity system that uses biometrics to identify the person, which has increased Sudan's ability to control identity papers and associated immigration documents. This in turn prompted the US administration in December 2018 to remove Sudan from its list of countries with weak identity systems under its National Strategy to Combat Terrorist Travel. Despite this, the head of state has spoiled its reliability by naturalizing large numbers of citizens from countries suffering from terrorism and extremism, namely Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Myanmar. Official records indicate that 16,000 were naturalized on the orders of the President<sup>19</sup> from 2014 to 2018. After the eruption of the April 15 war and the loss of many systems and data, and the rush to issue identity and travel documents without adequate verification via civil fingerprinting led to the creation of a serious security breach that may enable people to obtain fake identity documents, including passports and personal identification documents, which constitutes a regression to the period before December 2018. However, a greater risk is the possibility that the banking system becomes a haven for financing terrorism due to the lack of an electronic "Know Your Customer" (eKYC) system.

## Cross-border risk factors

In addition to the local factors, regionally the country's geopolitical location and insecurity and weak security cooperation in Sudan's immediate neighborhood increase terrorism risk. These factors can be summarized as follows:

- **Ease of movement across international borders:** Sudan's open borders with seven countries suffering from insecurity facilitate the spread of extremist Islamic groups. To the West, Sudan borders Chad and the Central African Republic, where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara is active,<sup>20</sup> ethnic groups overlap the border, and state control is weak. The same applies to Sudan's southern borders with the Republic of South Sudan. The danger is even more evident on the northern and northwestern borders, where the Islamic State in Sinai Province (IS-Sinai)<sup>21</sup> and in the Arab Maghreb and the *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims) operate.<sup>22</sup> Sudan's eastern borders are the most fragile due to the unresolved border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia over Al-Fashaga, the activity of Ethiopian armed movements, and the infiltration of fighters loyal to Al Shabaab.
- **Weakness of law order and surveillance systems in the region:** The weakness of the system is manifested in the limited checkpoints, lack of modern equipment,<sup>23</sup> and lack of coordination and

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Akhbar newspaper, "Ministry of Interior: 17,000 national numbers were granted to foreigners, prison and traffic records were restored, and understandings were reached regarding vehicles that crossed the borders," May 20, 2024 (in Arabic), available at: <https://alakhbar-alsudan.com/?p=12732>.

<sup>20</sup> The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), now Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), is a Salafi jihadist militant group. It is the branch of the international Islamic State. It is primarily active in the border areas between Mali and Niger.

<sup>21</sup> Islamic State in Sinai Province is a branch of ISIS that uses the Sinai region in Egypt as a base for its operations. Its members claim that they aim to annex Sinai to the Islamic Caliphate and implement Sharia law.

<sup>22</sup> *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* is a jihadist military organization, formed on March 2, 2017, after the merger of four armed movements involved in the conflict in northern Mali.

<sup>23</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman and Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, "Arms Flows to Sub-Saharan Africa," SIPRI, December 2011, available at: <https://shorturl.at/xlCXd>.

exchange of information among the intelligence agencies of these neighboring countries.<sup>24</sup> The harsh desert nature of the border areas also makes them difficult to control, exacerbated by conflicts and instability.

## The history of terrorism in Sudan

The April 15 war is not Sudan's first civil war. The country experienced bloody conflicts even before its independence, with the violence reaching its peak in 1989 when the Islamists seized power and declared a *jihadi* war to impose their extremist ideology. To consolidate its rule, the *Ingaz* (Salvation) regime gave refuge to Osama bin Laden, the Al-Qaeda leader who established training camps and expanded his terrorist financial network, making Sudan a fertile ground for extremists, a playground for their activities, and a haven for their militants. As a result, Sudan witnessed many terrorist incidents, including those listed below.

### *The attack on Ansar al-Sunna Mosque*

In 1994, Khartoum witnessed a terrorist attack on the Abu Zaid Mohammad Hamza mosque, a symbol of Salafism in Sudan in Al-Thawra neighborhood in Omdurman. It left 20 people dead and thirty others injured. The attack was led by Mohammad Abdullah al-Khalifi<sup>25</sup> and other extremists. Some intelligence reports indicated differences between al-Khalifi and Osama bin Laden, while others indicated al-Khalifi remained loyal to the al-Qaeda leader, but latter and his Sudanese jihadist companions decided to get rid of the former to distance themselves from the incident.<sup>26</sup>

### *The attempted assassination of Egyptian President Mubarak*

The attempted assassination of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the OAU summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on June 26, 1995 led to UN Security Council sanctions on the Sudanese government for failing to comply with requests to hand over suspects.<sup>27</sup> Fingers pointed to the ruling organization in Sudan with support from global extremist organizations. Attempting to divert suspicion from the Sudanese Islamic organization, Dr. Hassan al-Turabi formed an investigation committee headed by Ali Ahmed al-Bashir, who is affiliated with the military industry establishment. After pointing a finger at several senior officials, the committee recommended their dismissal. The Director of the External Security Service, the Director of the Operations of the Internal Security Service, the Deputy Director of the External Security Service, and the Special Operations Director of the External Security Service were removed. To bury the traces of that crime, the head of the investigation committee, Ali Ahmed Al-Bashir, was later assassinated by members of the National Intelligence and Security Service in 2001. He was one of the few who were aware of all the details

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<sup>24</sup> Mona Abdelfattah, "Sudanese version of ISIS," Alnilin news site, July 9, 2015 (in Arabic), available at: <https://shorturl.at/7f2Xp>

<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Abdullah Al-Khalifi is a Libyan extremist who came to Sudan with the extremist Takfir wal-Hijra group. He led the attack on worshippers at the Ansar al-Sunna Mosque in Omdurman on February 4, 1994. Al-Khalifi was arrested, sentenced to death, and executed on September 19, 1994 in Kober Prison in Khartoum.

<sup>26</sup> Mona Abdelfattah, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> M. H Sharfi, "Sudan and the assassination attempt on President Mubarak in June 1995: a cornerstone in ideological reverse," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12(3), pp. 454–472, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2018.1462983>



of the incident.<sup>28</sup> This incident confirmed the relationship between the Sudanese security services and the ruling Islamists at the time.

### ***The Al-Jarafa Mosque Incident***

In 2000, a massacre known as the “Al-Jarafa Mosque Incident” took place in northern Omdurman. The massacre left 25 dead and more than 20 injured. The massacre was committed by members of the *Takfir wal-Hijra* group, led by Abbas Al-Baqir.<sup>29</sup> Takfir wal-Hijra group is an extremist Islamic group<sup>30</sup> that originated in Egypt and spread to many African and Middle Eastern countries. It has a history of antagonism with Ansar Al-Sunna, including over the application of Islamic Sharia, as the Takfir wal-Hijra group believes that it must be applied by force, while Ansar Al-Sunna disagrees.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Al-Salama Cell, South of Khartoum***

In 2007, the security services uncovered a cell of more than 40 fighters in a house in the Al-Salama neighborhood, south of Khartoum. The cell planned to target foreign embassies, diplomatic missions, and UN forces in both Khartoum and Darfur. The security services arrested all members of the cell and found explosive materials, weapons, storage containers prepared for storing weapons and ammunition, and a facility for making explosives and bombs.

### ***Assassination of American diplomat John Granville***

In early 2008, American diplomat John Granville was assassinated. Abdul Raouf Abu Zaid Mohammad Hamza, Mohammad Makkawi Ibrahim Mohammad, Abdul Basit al-Hajj al-Hassan Hajj Hamad, and Muhand Osman Yusuf Mohammad were sentenced to death for the killing, but they escaped from Kober prison in Khartoum a year later. Muhand reportedly died in Somalia in May 2011, and Abdul Raouf was re-arrested by the Sudanese authorities, while Makkawi and Abdul Basit are still at large and believed to still be in Somalia within the ranks of Al-Shabaab.

### ***Extremist activity among university students***

Al-Qaeda and ISIS successfully recruited students from several Sudanese universities and Sudanese students studying in Britain to pledge *al-Bay'ah* (allegiance) to them and joined the fighting in Syria, Iraq and Libya between 2014 and 2018. In late June 2015, the University of Medical Sciences announced that about 12 students had joined ISIS after leaving for Turkey,<sup>32</sup> and authorities were only able to return three of them. Reports also indicated that several Sudanese students holding British passports had joined ISIS.

### ***Arrests of terrorist cells***

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<sup>28</sup> Al-Marifa, “The attempt to assassinate Hosni Mubarak, Addis Abba, 1995”, (in Arabic) available at: <https://shorturl.at/roAK1>

<sup>29</sup> Abbas Al-Baqir Abbas (1967 - December 8, 2000) was a terrorist from Gezira State. Sources reported that his mother left their home because of his religious fanaticism and his abuse of his sister, who he accused of blasphemy. He studied economics at the University of Tripoli but was forced to leave Libya due to security harassment. He was a former member of the Popular Defence Forces in Sudan.

<sup>30</sup> The *Dawah wal-Hijra* Group, the *Takfir wal-Hijra* Group as known in the media as the *Muslimin* Group, as it called itself originated inside Tora Prison, among Muslim Brotherhood prisoners in Egypt. After the release of its members, the group consolidated and recruited new followers especially in Upper Egypt and among university students. It also spread to many other countries such as Morocco, Sudan, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Marifa, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> See the statements of the Minister of Interior, General Ismat Abulrahman, October 12, 2015 regarding several Sudanese joining ISIS in Al Hurra, “Khartoum: 70 Sudanese joined Da'esh in Syria and Libya”, October 12, 2015, available at: <https://shorturl.at/jeTvw>.

The security authorities arrested a radical terrorist cell known as the “Dinder Cell” conducting military training in Dinder Wildlife Park,<sup>33</sup> located near the border with Ethiopia preparing to dispatch its fighters to Somalia, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Mali. Later, in 2014, the authorities released 23 of the 30 accused members of the cell on the pretext that they had recanted their ideology as a result of dialogues and intellectual *murajaat* (de-indoctrination).

Another incident occurred on September 28, 2021, in Jabrah neighborhood, south of Khartoum, when a Sudanese security force clashed with an ISIS (Daesh) cell holed up in a residential building. The raid resulted in the killing of five security personnel and four cell members (two men and two women of Egyptian nationality). The cell that was arrested after the confrontation was armed with machine guns. They operated out of four houses in Block 14 in Jabra, Block 18 in the same neighborhood, in the Azhari suburb south of Khartoum, and Arkweit neighborhood east of Khartoum. More than twenty members including Somalis, Egyptians, and other nationalities were arrested. Weapons, explosive belts, and bombs were found on the premises. Only a few days later, a similar incident occurred in the same neighborhood with armed clashes that resulted in deaths and injuries on both sides. In mid-June 2022, sources reported that the authorities had handed over the accused Egyptians to Egypt and kept the others, who may have been released alongside other inmates following the outbreak of the April 2023 war.

The Sudanese police forces raided a hideout in Al-Haj Youssif suburb in East Nile district, Khartoum in February 2020. They found maps of Sudanese towns, detonators, highly flammable explosive devices, weapons, ammunition, and military equipment. The raid resulted in several arrests, including of members of the banned Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement who entered the country using forged Syrian passports to conduct terrorist acts to influence the internal political turmoil in Sudan.<sup>34</sup>

In 2021, the Sudanese authorities arrested an armed terrorist group using Darfur as a base. The members of the terrorist cell were Chadian and Nigerian affiliated with the terrorist organization Boko Haram, coming from Lake Chad.

The security services arrested a terrorist group of nine Syrian and Chadian Al-Qaeda members in possession of ammonium nitrate. Some of them had been accused of planning to attack foreign tourists in Sousse, Tunisia, and had been wanted there for several years. Investigations revealed that the detainees were also wanted for involvement in terrorism in their home countries. The group had sneaked into Sudan and received advanced military training. They planned to target the Arabian Gulf. The UAE requested that the Sudanese government hand over those individuals, but is unclear how the Sudanese responded.

### ***Recruitment of Sudanese Youth***

Youth were involved in terrorism during the transitional period. These recruits were usually deployed to Somalia, Libya, and West African countries. Faced with the growth of this worrying phenomenon, the General

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<sup>33</sup> Dinder Wildlife Park on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia is one of Africa's largest and most biodiverse nature reserves.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Hurra, “Discovery of a terrorist cell affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement that planned for attacks in Sudan,” 13 February 2020, in Arabic, available at: <https://www.alhurra.com/2020/02/13/الكشف-خليفة-ارهابية-تتبع-اخوان-مصر-خططت-لاعتداءات-في-السودان>; See also Sky News Arabiya, “Sudan announces discovering a cell affiliated with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Movement that planned for bombings,” 13 February 2020, available at: <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1320640-السودان-يقرر-قضايا-بشأن-شبكة-المتفجرات-الاجنبية>

Intelligence Service (GIS) established a specialized unit to combat religious extremism, which used de-indoctrination. An informed source informed us that no less than 300 young men were subjected to this program, some while in detention and others with their families who were strictly monitored and obliged to participate in the program.

## Terrorism in the region



*The Chad Basin (Wikimedia commons)*

Security institutions across the region view borders as a potential weakness, inhabited by vulnerable citizens and communities and prone to security breaches. Therefore, they are neglected by the central authority, and consequently, become targets of increased movement. The challenge of infiltration of terrorists across borders requires a deeper understanding of emerging threats and robust responses. Sub-Saharan African countries have seen a significant increase in extremist activity in recent years. In the Sahel, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Chad, and East and Central Africa, there are extremist groups that are hostile to the Western presence and local government systems alike. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab is intensifying its terrorist attacks. In 2023, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI)<sup>35</sup> noted:<sup>36</sup>

- Burkina Faso was the country most affected by terrorism for the first time, as deaths resulting from terrorism increased by 86% to 1,907 people, a quarter of all deaths from terrorism worldwide.
- Sub-Saharan Africa remained the region most affected region by terrorism in 2023, followed by the Middle East and North Africa.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel is the most affected sub-region, accounting for nearly half of all deaths from terrorism and 26% of attacks in 2023. Five of the ten countries most affected by terrorism are in the Sahel.

## From manufacturing terrorism to combating it

The Islamist regime could not withstand the enormous international pressures in response to its harboring of extremists and carried the failed attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Mubarak. The regime quickly

<sup>35</sup> The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) is a report published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace and was developed with a view to provide a comprehensive summary of the key global trends and patterns in terrorism.

<sup>36</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism', Sydney, March 2023, available at: <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

adjusted its strategy, especially after the regime's split from Al-Turabi in 1999. It then cooperated with the West to show its seriousness in getting rid of the legacy of the Islamic extremists. This was evident in:

- **Exchange of intelligence:** After 1999, the Bashir regime began to distance itself from armed groups and sought to improve its image internationally. This included the exchange of intelligence about terrorist activities and networks in the region with Western countries, especially the United States. After the expulsion of Osama bin Laden in 1996, the Sudanese government provided important intelligence to the US about Al-Qaeda in the region. Cooperation with the CIA extended to counterterrorism operations and included the exchange of information about terrorist groups and extending logistical support for joint operations led by Western intelligence agencies against ISIS cells in Khartoum and other cities.
- **Expelling terrorists:** In the late 1990s, Sudan expelled several prominent terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, members of the Abu Nidal Organization, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas under pressure from the United States and other Western countries.
- **Counterterrorism operations:** Sudanese security services carried out operations against terrorists in the country, often in coordination with Western intelligence agencies. In September and early October 2021, for example, security services, led by the General Intelligence Service (GIS), carried out raids on ISIS in Khartoum and Omdurman, resulting in the killing of a number of GIS officers and the arrest of 11 foreign terrorists.
- **Sudanese border patrols:** Sudanese forces patrolled Sudan's borders to intercept suspected terrorists and to prevent arms trafficking and other illicit activities. Sudan's vast area and dilapidated technology posed challenges to these efforts. During the civilian-led transitional period, the government requested US assistance to implement the border control system known as PISCES (Personal, Identification, Secure, Comparison, Evaluation System) but it had not yet been implemented before the October 25, 2021 coup suspended cooperation.
- **Developing a national strategy to combat terrorism:** The strategy developed by the transitional government combined security and social dimensions. In collaboration with civil society, it used a social, economic, and religious approach to enhance the protection of citizens from the influence of internal and external extremism. Counter-extremism programs in Sudan worked in synergy with the national strategy and focused on reintegrating and rehabilitating those embracing terrorist ideologies. Sudan has returned a small number of women and children connected to terrorist fighters, mostly spouses and children of ISIS members killed in Libya.

## The possibility of increasing terrorism

The security conditions in Sudan, the spread of violence accompanied by extremism and hatred, and other factors have increased the chances of Sudan turning into an incubator of terrorism and violent extremism unless the political, economic, and security challenges are addressed in genuine and comprehensive manner. The risk of terrorism is linked to the ability to address political instability and economic challenges. In addition, instability linked to ethnic and religious tension in some areas of Sudan, facilitates recruitment into extremist groups, especially where security services cannot control the border areas, allowing the infiltration of foreign terrorist groups. Considering the weak governance, the lack of transparency and the spread of corruption, it is likely that extremist groups will evade oversight and accountability.

***"Sudan's moment has come, chaos is our opportunity to sow the seeds of jihad."***

***Abu Huzaifa Al-Sudani, a senior leader in al-Qaida***

A recent statement by the Sudanese Minister of Interior discussed factors that could make Sudan a haven for terrorists in an interview with *Al Arabiya* and *Al Hadath* TV channels<sup>37</sup> on July 20, 2024, saying that due to the war, Sudan is considered a fertile environment for the growth of terrorism. The reasons he mentioned included the authorities' failure to update the register of terrorists since 2022 when about 100 individuals, from about 12 nationalities and affiliated with three terrorist organizations (ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hasm) were arrested. Some were sentenced to death, but authorities lost control over them following the outbreak of the April 15 war. The minister indicated that terrorists choose not to carry out terrorist operations in Sudan, but use it to equip and train, exploiting weak state security and financial controls.

The social and economic conditions of citizens, including high rates of poverty and unemployment, also draw terrorist groups to Sudan. The sense of exclusion and injustice may also push some to extremism as a means to express their discontent.

Discussion of the regional dimension would be incomplete without looking into what has happened and is happening in Egypt. No doubt all Muslim Brotherhood activism in the world is affected by their "compassionate mother"<sup>38</sup> i.e., the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>39</sup> When the Muslim Brotherhood government fell in Egypt, the organization engaged in armed terrorism<sup>40</sup> with the aim of weakening the Egyptian state, forcing it to release its detained leaders, ease its security grip, and establish itself as a force to be reckoned with. The organization established military formations including *Liwaa Al-Thwara* (Revolution Brigade)<sup>41</sup>, *Sawa'id Misr* (Egypt's Arms) (Hasm)<sup>42</sup>, and *Ajnadu Misr* (Egypt's Soldiers).<sup>43</sup> Although the

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<sup>37</sup> See the interview with the minister of Interior, General Khalid Basha Sayreen on with *Al Arabiya* and *Al Hadath* TV channels, July 20, 2024, available at: <https://youtu.be/FZk7hustcBs?feature=shared>.

<sup>38</sup> A copy saved on <https://shorturl.at/UtZIm> on Way Back Machine <https://shorturl.at/yryJK>, March 8, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt formed the Freedom and Justice Party, and their candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won the 2012 presidential election, becoming the first democratically elected civilian president in Egypt's history.

<sup>40</sup> France 24, "Egypt: Interior Ministry accuses Hasm movement of booby-trapping car that caused deadly Cairo explosion," August 5, 2019, (in Arabic) available at: <https://rb.gy/dgay0h>.

<sup>41</sup> *Liwaa al-Thawra* is an arm of the *Jaish Al-Murshid* (the Supreme Guide Army). It was founded by Mohamed Kamal and its first appearance was in the "Al-Ajizi" ambush in Sadat City, Menoufia, on August 21, 2016, which resulted in the killing of two policemen and the wounding of three police and two civilians.

<sup>42</sup> The *Sawa'id Misr* Movement, better known as Hasm, is an armed movement active in Egypt. The Egyptian authorities consider it a military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. The British and American governments have classified it as a terrorist movement.

<sup>43</sup> *Ajnadu Misr* is an Egyptian militant organization formed in 2013. It is mainly active in Sinai but has claimed responsibility for several attacks on security forces in Cairo and other cities.



Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood did not enjoy the official support of its Sudanese counterpart, its coherent organization and extremist ideology quickly engaged it in bloody armed operations.<sup>44</sup> These formations carried out organized terrorist operations including bombing infrastructure such as electric facilities, communications towers, and transportation; carrying out assassination; and other violent acts. These terrorist units also conduct military training, manufacturing of explosives, field combat, and intelligence work.

In the same vein, the activities of extremist Tigrayan groups on Sudan's eastern borders cannot be ignored. Some press reports accuse them of participating alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in its war against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). On May 4, 2024, RSF issued a statement on its official X account accusing Tigrayan groups of fighting alongside SAF, a charge the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)<sup>45</sup> denied.

## Opportunities to control terrorism and extremism

The expansion of terrorism and violent extremism in Sudan cannot be viewed as only a domestic issue, it rather extends to regional and global spaces. Therefore, the strategy to combat it must also go beyond the local to the global. Many international and regional institutions concerned with combating terrorism have prepared studies and developed strategies to support national institutions in sub-Saharan Africa to control this growing threat. However, Sudan has not received its fair share of cooperation due to unwillingness to engage the *Ingaz* regime for many years, and then Sudan's return to dictatorship again after the October 25, 2021 coup, which ended many ambitious cooperation projects. Violent extremist organizations in Sudan adopt violence, legitimize it, and use it as a vehicle to implement extremist ideologies. Involvement in violent extremism takes different forms, ranging from individuals or groups who support, plan, or incite ideologically motivated crimes, to those who carry them out. There are also anti-democratic movements based on ethnic or regional identities and not linked to extremist organizations but working to promote undemocratic goals, such as establishing a totalitarian or theocratic form of government or eliminating the basic rights and freedoms of certain segments of the population. By tracking terrorist activity in Sudan and analyzing it, the four integrated processes to combat it: safeguards, preventive measures, expanding the use of modern information technology, and ensuring that counter-terrorism measures do not harm citizens, can be refined.

- Safeguards:
  - ❖ Identifying, studying, and analyzing the root causes of terrorism and extremism in Sudan, such as mistaken religious beliefs, political and sectarian polarization of youth, lack of social justice, and the spread of extremist discourse and political marginalization.
  - ❖ Strengthening religious awareness programs as well as economic, social, and educational development in the regions most vulnerable to terrorism and extremism.

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<sup>44</sup> Hussam Al-Haddad and Laila Adel, "Terrorists and Killers: Hasm, *Liwa El-Thawra*, *Ajnadu Misr*, and *Katayeb Helwan*, the Terrorist Arms of the Muslim Brotherhood after the June 30 Revolution," *Al-Bawaba News*, June 15, 2021, available at: <https://shorturl.at/s5KUG>.

<sup>45</sup> The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an old political party in Ethiopia, has turned into an ethno-nationalist paramilitary group. It was founded on February 18, 1975, and is headquartered in Mekelle, in Dedebit, northwestern Tigray, according to official records.



- ❖ Encouraging intercultural and interfaith dialogue to promote understanding and tolerance.
- Preventive measures:
  - ❖ Building the capacity of the security establishment and developing surveillance and intelligence systems to detect and control terrorist cells.
  - ❖ Enhancing security and intelligence cooperation between countries to prevent the movement of terrorists and weapons by improving and developing immigration control systems, digital identity and exchange of information.
  - ❖ Tightening border controls and the movement of individuals and goods to prevent the infiltration of terrorists.
  - ❖ Developing effective judicial systems to prosecute and penalize those involved in terrorist acts.
- Employing information technology and modern technical trends.

Modern information technology such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data and the Internet of Things (IoT) can play a pivotal role in counterterrorism efforts in the following ways:

No.	Usage	Description
1	Threat detection and surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing communications, financial transactions, social media activity, etc., to detect suspicious behavior patterns and potential threat sources through machine learning.</li> <li>• Identifying individuals, vehicles, and activities associated with terrorism.</li> <li>• Scanning textual data to identify words, entities, and sentiments associated with extremist ideologies or planned attacks through natural language processing software.</li> </ul>
2	Intelligence collection and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing data from multiple sources, including government databases (identity systems, security records, immigration and travel data, etc.) and the dark web.</li> <li>• Predicting the likelihood and timing of future attacks or extremist events using analytics.</li> </ul>
2	Improving counterterrorism operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing operational processes based on real-time risk factors via IT-based decision support.</li> <li>• Simplifying complex tasks such as criminal background checks, biometric screening and matching, and crime scene analysis.</li> </ul>

## Risk detection, analysis and mitigation

Procedures to control terrorist cells usually entail risks that must be dealt with carefully to avoid human rights violations, especially as terrorists often operate in vulnerable communities. The following table provides a list of expected risks and mitigation measures.

Risk	Mitigation
<p><b>Political risks:</b> The possibility of misusing counter-terrorism measures to suppress political opposition and civil liberties.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The possibility of fostering new conflict in local communities targeted by counterterrorism operations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establishing strict legal and judicial controls on counter-terrorism operations to prevent arbitrariness.</li> <li>- Involving civil society and relevant actors in formulating and implementing counter-terrorism policies.</li> <li>- Enhancing transparency and accountability in counter-terrorism operations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social risks:</b> The possibility of exacerbating social and sectarian divisions by targeting terrorist groups through their tribal or regional incubators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The risk of strengthening the sense of marginalization and injustice among the communities of the targeted groups.</li> <li>- The possibility of increased crime rates and terrorist activities as a response to counter-terrorism measures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthening community outreach programs and building trust between government and local communities.</li> <li>- Implementing initiatives to promote social integration and reduce disparities between groups.</li> <li>- Providing rehabilitation and social integration programs for those affected by counter-terrorism measures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Economic risks:</b> The risk of halting production in the communities living on the border.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The risk of loss in vital economic sectors such as trade and transportation due to security measures.</li> <li>- The possibility of increased cost of living and government spending as a result of security measures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full coordination between authorities and communities.</li> <li>- Developing incentive programs to encourage economic activity in affected areas.</li> <li>- Implementing targeted security measures and reducing the impact on the economy.</li> <li>- Preparing emergency plans to address negative economic impacts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Security risks:</b> The possibility of increased violence and extremism in response to security measures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthening security coordination between the government, civil society and relevant actors.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The risk of some targeted groups turning to more extreme terrorist activities.</li> <li>- The possibility of the spread of weapons and explosive materials because of the misuse of counter-terrorism measures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developing rehabilitation and social integration programs for extremists and armed actors.</li> <li>- Tightening control over the illegal circulation and storage of weapons and explosive materials.</li> </ul>
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## Recommendations

Recommendations for mitigating the risk of creating a haven for terrorists in Sudan can be grouped around four key pillars. It is incumbent on the *de facto* authorities in Sudan, their regional and international partners, an eventual post-war transitional government in Sudan, and international counterterrorism bodies to prioritize the following interventions.

First, **ending the war**, which has exacerbated the risk of terrorism and violent extremism by allowing extremists to return to Sudan and reorganize through the establishment of militias with an extremist Islamic orientation.

Second, improving the institutional capacities of security agencies:

- **Developing intelligence capacity:** Strengthening the capabilities of national and international intelligence to detect and monitor terrorist threats.
- **Improving cooperation in law enforcement:** Exchanging intelligence information between security agencies at the local, regional and international levels, and benefiting from modern technologies in surveillance and intelligence analysis.
- **Building operational and training capabilities:** Upgrading security equipment and facilities, developing the capabilities of security forces, training security personnel on methods and the means of counterterrorism, and sharing experiences and good practices with international partners.

Third, strengthening governance and the rule of law:

- **Developing a solid legal and regulatory framework to combat terrorism:** Strengthen and effectively implement counterterrorism legislation, defining the responsibilities and powers of the various concerned government agencies, and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law in all measures.
- **Strengthening transparency and accountability in government institutions:** Apply standards of good governance such as accountability, integrity and transparency, and making information accessible to the public on a regular basis. Strengthen the role of civil society in oversight and accountability, coordinating security and intelligence efforts and enhancing information exchange and coordination between the various security and intelligence agencies.
- **Improving the capabilities of security agencies to respond quickly and effectively** and enhancing international cooperation in the field of combating terrorism.

Fourth, addressing social and economic imbalances and promoting inclusive development:

- **Increasing economic and social inclusion:** Increase employment and income generation programs for the poorest regions and communities. Provide equal opportunities in education, health care, and social services, and promote the participation of marginalized communities in decision-making and development.
- **Addressing the causes of radicalism and extremism:** Addressing unemployment, poverty, and marginalization which may attract individuals to extremism, promoting dialogue and understanding between different religious and cultural groups, and developing social and educational programs that spread values of tolerance and coexistence.
- **Building more harmonious and stable communities:** Strengthening social cohesion and shared citizenship, developing urban planning and housing policies that observe different needs, and enhancing the role of community institutions and popular organizations in the development.

## Conclusion

Combating terrorism and violent extremism requires concerted local, regional, and global efforts, especially among Muslim communities that are most affected by the expansion of terrorist activities. Sudanese society, due to its influence on the region and in close cooperation with its Arab and African neighbors, can adopt innovative and effective mechanisms to combat extremism. Identifying and analyzing the underlying causes of the spread of terrorism will enable security policymakers to develop a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that combines security operations with efforts to address the root social, economic, political, and governance risk factors. There is a need to establish close cooperation and build trust with local communities by giving attention and priority to community policing, counter-extremism, and rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former extremists. The rule of law should also be promoted so that corruption and the absence of the rule of law do not create conducive conditions for terrorist groups to grow. Regional cooperation and information exchange as well as building the capabilities of the security establishment based on information technology and modern technical trends to control terrorism and violent extremism should also be promoted.

## About the author

Dr. Issameldin Abbas Ahmed is a dedicated civil activist deeply immersed in Sudan's diverse cultures. He is committed to advancing civil society, democracy, good governance, and justice. Dr. Ahmed leads campaigns and activities to combat hate speech, discrimination, and the negative impacts of war and violence through humanitarian and community work. Driven by a vision of building a cohesive civil front based on inclusion, diversity, acceptance, and justice, Dr. Ahmed actively participates in the activities of the Coordination of Civil Forces through the Civil Humanitarian Aid Organization. His research contributions span areas such as

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In addition to his civil society work, Dr. Issameldin is a recognized regional and national expert in digital transformation, data management, information technology, and emerging technologies. He has extensive knowledge, skills, and experience in digital economy, social protection, population management, and change management. Dr. Issameldin has held distinguished leadership positions, including serving as a Short-Term Consultant to the World Bank in the fields of digital identity and digital transformation, Director General of the Digital Transformation Agency at the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning Sudan, and Director General of Information Technology and Digital Transformation at the Ministry of Interior, Sudan.

Dr. Issameldin holds a Bachelor's degree in Statistics from Juba University, a Master's degree in Information Technology from El-Neelain University, and a Ph.D. in Computer Science from the Sudan University of Science and Technology. His research publications and papers cover topics such as civil registry and vital statistics, population statistics, information technology security, terrorism, digital crime, digital onboarding, conflict resolution, smart economy, and advanced data analysis for smart policing.