

# The US Terrorism Designation of the Sudanese Islamic Movement:

## *Its roots and political repercussions*

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On March 8, 2026, the US State Department [designated](#) the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and announced its intention to list it as a Foreign Terrorist Organization effective March 16, 2026. The designation described the Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade, which has been fighting alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces in the ongoing war in Sudan since April 15, 2023, and the Sudanese Islamic Movement as constituent elements of the Muslim Brotherhood. The statement [contends](#) that the organization “uses unrestrained violence against civilians to undermine efforts to resolve the conflict in Sudan and advance its violent Islamist ideology.” It also highlights the group’s support from Iran, claiming that the Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade, which has contributed more than 20,000 fighters to the war in Sudan, received training and support from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

This paper seeks to lay out the complex landscape and history of Islamists in Sudan, with a view to informing analyses of the potential impacts of this decision. There are many in Sudan who could be considered Islamist in the sense that they believe that Islam should guide political life, but they include a complex array of factions and tendencies which over time have allied and split in different pattern. This diversity will inform the impact of sanctions.

Although the US State Department designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon in January 2026, the designation of the group in Sudan came two months later. For some observers, this delay was linked to the Sudanese war and the efforts of the Quad (composed of the US, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) to end the war. However, the outbreak of the US-Israeli war against Iran changed the landscape, with prominent SIM/Muslim Brotherhood members publicly supporting Iran and calling on Muslims to join them in doing so. These statements closed space for the Quad's efforts and revived for the United States the memory of the three-decade history of SIM's control of both the state and society in Sudan. During that period, Sudan remained under US sanctions for twenty years (1997–2017) and was not [removed](#) from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism until 2020, after a popular uprising (December 2018 - April 6, 2019) caused the complete collapse of the Islamist “Ingaz” regime.

While Muslim Brotherhood branches across the Arab world have adhered to the original name, surrounding it with an aura of sanctity, the Sudanese chapter has undergone numerous name changes since its founding in 1947. These included the “Islamic Liberation Movement,” which marked the first



emergence of the movement as a small student movement in a secondary school. It then adopted the "Islamic Charter Front" with its first mass expansion in 1964, adopting, for the first time in the history of political Islamic movements, the formula of front-based action in an alliance that involved various Islamic currents, from Sufi orders to its rivals in the Salafist movements and Ansar al-Sunna group. During its alliance with Jaafar Nimeiri's authoritarian regime (1977 – 1985), the same group began to use the name "Islamic Trend" in universities and higher institutes, as the constitution at the time did not permit a multiparty system. After the fall of Nimeiri and the introduction of multiparty politics, the group operated under the name of the "National Islamic Front" (NIF) to contest the general elections held in March 1986, winning approximately 52 parliamentary seats and rising to the rank of the third largest party in Sudan. That was a historical shift in Sudanese politics, which had previously been dominated by the two traditional parties representing the Umma Party, founded on the Ansar Mahdist sect, and the Democratic Unionist Party linked to the Unionist movement and supported by the Khatmiyya Sufi order.

For seventy years, the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed the support of a broad range of university educated professional groups. Many of its leaders earned degrees, including a significant number of master's and doctoral degrees, at Western Universities. The movement benefited from its alliance with Jaafar Nimeiri's regime and from short-lived democratic periods, assuming central ministerial positions and gaining considerable governance and administrative experience. This has distinguished it from other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. When it seized power through a military coup in June 1989, it became the first Islamist movement to govern in the Sunni world, ten years after the Iranian Shiite clerical regime seized power following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The US designation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan as a terrorist organization is likely to place a heavy economic burden on the SIM, which managed to expand continuously during its three decades in power by establishing local and transnational economic enterprises, banks, insurance companies, and a military-industrial complex. However, the political implications of the US move may be far more severe. Over seven decades, the Muslim Brotherhood has evolved into a multi-generational community spanning fathers, sons, and grandsons, all currently participating in Sudan's ongoing war. Five years after they lost power, they returned, defeating the popular uprising through the October 2021 military coup and regaining control over key military, diplomatic, and judicial institutions. This laid the frame for the start of the war and obstruction of all de-escalation and peace efforts.

The phrase Muslim Brotherhood, which appeared in the US statement, caused some confusion, even among Sudanese, due to the group's long history of shifting names. After the group assumed power, it identified itself through three branches, including the Sudanese Islamic Movement (SIM), the National Congress Party (NCP) and the government. The confusion further increases when we realize that there is a small Sudanese group officially called the Muslim Brotherhood, that is not affiliated with these groups, nor intended to be designated. This group is affiliated with and committed to the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood across the Arab world and which includes all MB branches except for the Sudanese Islamic Movement, which affirmed its organizational independence in 1979 and remained so ever since. However, the reference in the US decision to Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade clearly indicates the intention to name the clandestine organization that ruled Sudan for thirty years and bears the name of the SIM. Today, it is highly active and influential in military and security operations, diplomatic decisions, and judicial affairs. This organization is also waging, through its broad community, a social media campaign no less fierce than the military one. This exacerbates Sudanese divisions and fragmentation, threatens the cohesion of society, and even threatens its disintegration due to the prolonged war.

In addition to its ever-changing names, the SIM has retained another characteristic: a duality between its public face and its inner workings. Despite its remarkable ability to create political, economic, and social facades, it maintains, at its core, an undeclared organization that controls and directs them all. Since its first alliance in the 1960s (with the establishment of the Islamic Charter Front (ICF) in 1964), it has maintained a clandestine organization named "the Muslim Brotherhood". While the MB outwardly

integrated into the ICF, it controls and manages all its components from within, determining its policies and writing all its literature. This duality persisted throughout the life of the National Islamic Front (NIF) (1985-1989) and continued in the same vein even after it seized power and established a ruling party called the National Congress Party (NCP) (1990-2019).

The collapse of the Islamists' rule following the popular uprising in 2019 added further complexity. A fierce race intensified between various SIM centers to inherit the legacy of seventy years of tireless work in gaining supporters, accumulating political and economic achievements, and consolidating control over the state apparatus. With the detention of the regime leaders who had ruled since 1989 on the eve of the uprising's victory, the NCP and SIM factions vied for control of the SIM's legacy and membership. More than one center of power has emerged within the SIM and NCP. Ali Karti, the former foreign minister, officially holds the position of Secretary-General of the SIM and controls the internal center that manages politics, finances, and jihadist activities. Meanwhile, the NCP, which disavows its dissolution, is embroiled in a power struggle between Ahmed Haroun, the former governor of South Kordofan State and wanted ICC suspect, was official party leader at the time of the fall of the regime. He is rivaled, though not recognized, by Mr. Ibrahim Mahmoud, the former Minister of the Interior, who resides outside Sudan; and also by Dr. Ibrahim Ghandour, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who also resides outside Sudan.

The Quad has attempted to break the deadlock of previous failed mediation initiatives. Its formation was announced in May 2025, with the aim of ending the war in Sudan and supporting the democratic transition by resuming the political process and reaching a comprehensive settlement was a three-month ceasefire to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to millions of affected people. However, this clause ultimately failed, although the Rapid Support Forces and the Tasis government welcomed the initiative, and despite the support of the international community and all regional and local powers. The hesitation of the Sudanese Armed Forces, the main opposing party, brought the Quad's efforts to a standstill. This paved the way for the US decision to designate the Islamist movement as a terrorist organization, a decision that coincided with the escalation of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran. The designation clearly reflects an understanding that the SIM was behind the obstruction of peace efforts.

The Sudanese Islamist community, often referred to as the Muslim Brotherhood recalling its historical origins, stands in opposition to diverse Sudanese civil society. The animosity between them has intensified over decades. Various political forces, along with all factions of civil society, maintained continuous and fierce opposition to the Islamist regime, known as the National Salvation Revolution, until they succeeded in overthrowing it. A new phase of reciprocal exclusion then began, dividing the nation and exacting a heavy toll on the Sudanese people through a series of failures that culminated in the ongoing war. The US resolution merely described the Islamist movement's actions since it ignited the war in Darfur in 2003, two years before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with South Sudan was signed in 2005. However, since the fall of their regime, the conflict has escalated to include accusations of the excessive violence used to disperse the Khartoum peaceful sit-in in June 2019, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of young protesters. This was followed by accusations of staging a coup against the transitional government, obstructing the revolution's path to civilian rule, and finally, involvement in the war. Will the US resolution, which may have ushered the crisis into a new phase, allow for serious and in-depth consideration of new solutions that will end Sudan's wars once and for all?

It is imperative to examine the reference to Iran and the Revolutionary Guard within the official US designation, particularly given the history of Iranian relations with the SIM. Broadly speaking, the SIM is an integral part of the Islamic revivalist movement that swept through various centers of the Muslim world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The concept of Pan-Islamism and Muslim political unity has remained the theoretical and practical axis around which most of the ideas and actions of political Islam revolve. While Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) was a direct student of those pioneers, the idea permeated all schools of political Islam. It was from this perspective that the SIM welcomed the

Iranian Revolution since its inception, and it prides itself on being the first in the Muslim world to stage a popular demonstration in the streets of the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, in support of Khomeini's revolution. It was also the first to send a delegation to meet him in his French exile in the Neauphle-le-Château suburb in 1979, before the revolution's victory was complete. This was done despite significant reservations from other Arab branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, who feared a new Shiite expansion supported by a wealthy and powerful state in the predominantly Sunni region. The SIM was also the first to send a delegation of leaders from the Khartoum University Student Union to congratulate him on his triumphant return to Tehran.

Despite a shaky start to the relationship between the SIM and Iran and the SIM's disappointment at the Iranians' reluctance to support the urgent needs of the Islamist regime in its early days, the relationship evolved a decade later into one between two states when the SIM assumed power in 1989. The strategic cooperation started after Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani's visit to Sudan in 1996, which contributed significantly to achieving important milestones in the military industrialization project, fulfilling the dream of the SIM regime for self-sufficiency in weapons and energy. This project is linked to all political Islamist groups seeking weapons and military cooperation, specifically Hamas, Hezbollah, and others. This project was the reason behind several Israeli airstrikes targeting weapons depots and factories, and sometimes individuals involved in transporting and distributing weapons, for example in 2012.

Generally, political Islamist movements, particularly in a highly diverse country like Sudan, have represented, since their inception, a schism within the nation. They have often signaled a departure from the institutions and norms of peaceful democratic struggle, while their extensive international connections frequently compromise vital national interests. The Sudanese people have paid a price for the opening of Sudan to the presence and activity of foreign extremist groups, leading the US to bomb the largest pharmaceutical factory in Sudan when it suspected it of producing military materials that Osama bin Laden used to attack the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Sudan had hosted bin Laden for several years before his September 11, 2001 operation. Will the US designation of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization allow the Sudanese people, and the Brotherhood itself, to confront its past with the necessary self-criticism and complete a psychological and intellectual break with its horrific history, however distant this hope may seem?

Successive American administrations have a long history of dealing with the Islamist movement targeted by the US terrorist organization designation. Since the first session of the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference in April 1991, following the first Gulf War that same year, Sudan, according to American newspapers, became a haven for Islamists, sheltering those targeted by Arab countries on charges of belonging to Islamist and extremist groups (as documented in the book "Osama: The Making of a Terrorist" by the American journalist Jonathan Randal). Sudan also rose to the top of the list of states accused of backing Al Qaeda as it attacked US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. This was compounded by the failed assassination attempt against then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in June 1995. Evidence supporting Ethiopia's accusation that the perpetrators launched their attacks from the Sudanese territory and returned there after the failed attempt further supported the claim that Sudan was a state sponsor of terrorism.

The US relationship with the Islamist regime at the time entered a new phase of designation, which government leaders themselves described as a "tsunami of sanctions." Sudan was not removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism until 2020, after the fall of the Islamist regime. There is little doubt that the current designation refers to the Islamist movement led by Karta and Haroun. This designation also extends to its military formations, starting with the Popular Defense Forces (PDF), coordinated at the national level by Karta himself. The PDF played the same role in the 1989-2005 war in the South as the Al-Baraa bin Malik Brigade is playing today in the current war, supporting the SAF. The resolution explicitly named this brigade.

In contrast, the term "Islamic Movement," as some commentators have argued, is a broad concept encompassing a wider spectrum than the group targeted by the American resolution. This includes, of course, the small group that has maintained the name "Muslim Brotherhood" since 1977. Its leader is Professor Sadiq Abdullah Abdul-Majid, one of the movement's founders in Sudan and virtually the only one who met its founder, Hassan al-Banna, when he was a student at an Egyptian university. Other prominent figures who have led the movement include Dr. Jaafar Sheikh Idris, Dr. Al-Habr Yusuf Nur al-Daim, and Dr. Issam al-Bashir. Although this group has allied itself at times with the Islamist movement targeted by the decision, it remains objectively closer to the Muslim Brotherhood groups that were designated as terrorist organizations last January, including the group's branches in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. It is also possible that the same name includes the Popular Congress Party, which in 1999 broke away from the Sudanese Islamic Movement now designated by US and has opposed it ever since. Today, under the leadership of Dr. Ali al-Hajj, it stands among the forces calling for an end to the war and is engaged in the Sudanese-Sudanese political dialogue.

Regardless of the repercussions of the US designation of the Sudanese Islamic Movement as a terrorist group, the most important question for the Sudanese people and all regional and international powers is how this decision will contribute to ending the war that has been ravaging the country for three years and prolonging the world's largest humanitarian crisis? To what extent can this decision help the Sudanese people establish a modern state and a democratic national project? However simple the question may seem, it involves significant complexities that require in-depth consideration to develop new visions that can extricate the Sudanese state from its ongoing predicament. Just as the decision offers Sudanese people a new path to support a democratic civilian transition, it also provides Islamists with an opportunity to re-examine their history, which has repeatedly led to their designation, sanctions, and isolation. This will help them develop alternative visions that complete the process of intellectual and psychological rupture with the concept of political Islam, as has been partially achieved by movements that are younger and less experienced than theirs. This will be discussed further in a follow up to this article.