'Deals with the devil always unravel': the UK blind spot for Sudan's abuses

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When Amjed Farid was transferred to a small cell in Kober prison on 5 April, he had a sense of deja vu. “I suddenly realised it was the same one I’d been in five years before,” he says. “It brought back some unpleasant memories. I spent a month in solitary, and had hoped I’d never have to see the place again.”

Farid was one of hundreds [imprisoned in Sudan in January](https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/10/dont-be-taken-sudan-prisoner-release) following peaceful protests against government austerity measures. While some were released after a few weeks, dozens were detained for nearly three months without charge, including [British citizen Sidqi Kaballo](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65051). Many were kept in a bitterly cold security centre in Khartoum notorious for interrogations and torture, dubbed “the Hotel” by officials.

“We’re going in circles,” says Farid, 36, who co-founded two of the main activist groups, [Sudan](https://www.theguardian.com/world/sudan) Change Now and Girifna. “In fact, we’re going backwards. The regime knows the international community will turn a blind eye to these violations because they now rely on its valuable services in the region, such as tackling migration. It has complete impunity.”

Politicians, activists, diplomats and NGOs have all voiced concerns about moves by both the UK and EU to normalise relations with Sudan in order to stem migration flows. Sudan is a key transit country for African migrants, and in 2016 was the [fifth biggest source of refugees](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG.OR?end=2016&start=1990&year_high_desc=true) globally.

“A young and diverse civil society in Sudan is raising its voice for change and defining the country’s future, but the UK and EU are instead focusing on engaging with a government committed to oppressing it,” says Lord Alton, secretary of the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan. In February 2017, the group [released a report](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/APPG%20Sudans%20report%20Feb%2017.pdf) questioning the approach of Westminster and Brussels.

The shift in policy from stick to carrot is designed to tackle the “root causes” of migration through a relationship of mutual trust, according to the foreign office and EU. But critics fear the main motivation is to stop refugees reaching Europe, and such engagement emboldens the Sudanese government, which has one of the [worst human rights records in the world](https://www.hrw.org/africa/sudan). Activists and journalists are routinely harassed, and newspapers shut down. Its president, Omar al-Bashir, is wanted by the [International Criminal Court](https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur)for alleged genocide in Darfur.

“History teaches us that doing deals with the devil always unravel,” says Mukesh Kapila, former UN humanitarian coordinator for Sudan. “We’ve seen this again and again. We need to engage with civil society, not get into bed with al-Bashir.”

The [Strategic Dialogue](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sudan-strategic-dialogue-communique), launched by the UK in 2016, comprises ongoing bilateral talks on issues such as migration, trade, counter-terrorism, the peace process and human rights. The EU’s [Khartoum Process](https://www.khartoumprocess.net/) – in which the UK has a leading role – began in November 2014 and focuses on “improving human rights” and tackling the “root causes of instability, irregular migration and forced displacement” from the Horn of Africa. The EU has so far given €183m (£160m) to Sudan through partner organisations.

An EU spokesperson said: “Engagement does not mean that we agree on everything. Having a dialogue provides us with an avenue where we can voice our concerns. Respect for human rights and the establishment of sustainable peace have been and remain our priorities.”

In May 2016, [Der Spiegel and German TV station ARD](http://ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/CII/CII2016/pdfs/Crime%20Statistics%20-%202016.pdf) obtained classified documents revealing the EU’s main migration policy in Sudan was border protection, including providing training and surveillance equipment. While the EU stresses that no money, support or equipment has gone to Sudanese officials, and all projects are “closely scrutinised”, concerns remain about lack of transparency and oversight.

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), known for their brutality, have already [claimed credit for policing Sudan’s borders](https://eastafricamonitor.com/sudanese-militia-group-demands-eu-payment-for-blocking-migrants/) on the EU’s behalf. Few have faith that the Sudanese government has any intention of defeating trafficking rings due to [its well documented complicity](https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/11/egypt/sudan-traffickers-who-torture) in such operations.

“The security apparatus is directly benefiting from the EU’s migration fund,” says Ahmed Hussain Adam, a prominent lawyer and negotiator in [Darfur](https://www.theguardian.com/world/darfur)peace talks. “This is no secret in Sudan. The EU’s collaboration is based on al-Bashir’s good faith and lacks scrutiny of the regime’s track records.”

Activists point out that human rights have deteriorated since the process started, including two waves of mass arrests, and the [detention and torture of British journalist Phil Cox](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/05/captured-in-darfur-south-sudan) in December 2016. Government militia groups reportedly killed at least [23 Darfuri civilians in March](https://www.cnbcafrica.com/apo/2018/04/19/attacks-by-sudanese-government-forces-on-civilians-in-jebel-marra-in-south-darfur/), while hundreds of political prisoners, including visually impaired clergyman [Sheikh Matar Younis Ali Hussein](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/8232/2018/en/), remain in prison.

Without tackling the key drivers of migration, such as conflict, rights workers say, people will continue to flee. “People are leaving because of Sudan’s abusive and genocidal models of governance,” says Maddy Crowther, co-executive director of [Waging Peace](http://wagingpeace.info/). “You cannot rely on building walls to discourage them.”

The foreign office highlights the UK’s legacy of aid and human rights work in Sudan, which included £60m of development funds in 2017-18. An FCO spokesperson said: “Human rights are a key priority in the UK’s engagement with Sudan. The Strategic Dialogue has proved to be an effective means of discussing our concerns with senior members of the government.”

Abdelbagi Jibril, executive director of the [Darfur Relief and Documentation Centre](http://www.darfurcentre.ch/), believes “intelligent yet aggressive” engagement could be effective, but warns the UK and EU to be on their guard. “The Sudanese regime are masters of deception. Negotiators must remain vigilant and place a very high bar on their demands.”