

Asharq Al-Awsat talks to US Special Envoy to Sudan Princeton Lyman



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Washington, Asharq Al-Awsat – Asharq Al-Awsat spoke with US Special Envoy to Sudan, Princeton Lyman, in Washington, on a number of issues including Darfur, the conflict that is raging in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile, as well as US – Sudanese relations. Lyman was involved in mediation talks between north and south Sudan prior to the secession of South Sudan. He previously served as US Ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa, and is a former Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs.

The following is the full text of the interview:

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The US administration has welcomed the Arab Spring which has overthrown a number of dictatorships in the Middle East and led to free and fair elections being held. Are you calling for the Arab Spring to encompass Sudan, as well?

[Lyman] This is not part of our agenda in Sudan. Frankly, we do not want to see the ouster of the [Sudanese] regime, nor regime change. We want to see the regime carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Would you not characterize Omar al-Bashir as a military dictator?

[Lyman] We are not dealing with al-Bashir directly, particularly as the International Criminal Court [ICC] has accused him of violating human rights and being responsible for war crimes and genocide in Darfur.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] How is it possible for Washington to engage with the al-Bashir government, but not deal directly with Omar al-Bashir himself?

[Lyman] Our position is clear with regards to the ICC accusations [against Omar al-Bashir] but we are now concentrating on fostering stability in all parts of Sudan and South Sudan, as well as establishing friendly relations between the two after long years of conflict.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The opposition Sudan People's Liberation Movement [SPLM] in northern Sudan recently said that it expects to receive US support to overthrow the al-Bashir regime, in the same manner that Washington helped the SPLM to secure the secession of South Sudan. What is your opinion of this?

[Lyman] As I said, it is not in our interests to see the ouster of the regime in Sudan, for this will only create more problems. The current problems are more than enough. What we are interested in is developing the democratic system [in Sudan]. Yes, we helped them in the past, as this was in our interests. However what is in our interests now is stability in Sudan and South Sudan.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The SPLM has said that it wants to bring the Arab Spring to Sudan. Do you oppose this?

[Lyman] We want to see freedom and democracy [in Sudan], but not necessarily via the Arab Spring.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What is your opinion of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front [SRF] that recently stated that it wants to forcibly overthrow the al-Bashir government?

[Lyman] The US government opposes any military action against the Sudanese government, and believes this will only incite more conflict and problems, and will threaten the existence and unity of Sudan, and may even spread to South Sudan and threaten its existence and unity as well. Therefore, we are committed to the unity of [northern] Sudan, and we call on all parties to work peacefully to ensure this.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Has the US put pressure on organizations such as the SRF?

[Lyman] We have not put pressure on them, but we are trying to convince them. We told them that they must put forward political programs via constitutional and democratic means to reform Sudan. We told them that expressions such as “forcibly overthrowing the regime” and “the new South Sudan in the north” are not helpful. We asked them: how can you expect the Khartoum government to negotiate with you when you say that you want to forcibly overthrow it?

[Asharq Al-Awsat] There are claims that the South Sudan government is providing aid and support to such groups. Is this true?

[Lyman] Last month, following a request by President Obama, we – US Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough and myself – visited Khartoum and Juba. In Khartoum, we told them [the Sudan government] of our concern regarding the continuance of the fighting in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile. Whilst in Juba, we informed them [the South Sudan government] of the necessity that they respect the sovereignty of Sudan, including ending their support of the SPLM in the north, in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Can you tell us what happened during the Washington Workshop on Peace in Darfur which took place recently behind closed doors?

[Lyman] Yes, the deliberations were closed, but I can tell you that they were successful. We wanted to hear the opinions of all parties following the Doha Agreement. The most important note for us was that the differences between the Darfur movements – those that support the government, and those that oppose it –

were less than they were in the past. These were not like the sharp differences that were present during the Abuja Summit [in Nigeria in 2006].

[Asharq Al-Awsat] We have heard news that Washington intends to seek to solve the Darfur crisis away from the Qatari efforts in this regard. Is this true?

[Lyman] This is not true. We welcomed the Doha Agreement, and we paid tribute to the role played by Qatar and are prepared to cooperate with it. However we have repeatedly stated that the most important things in such agreements is not their signing, or celebration, but rather their implementation.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What is the next step to resolving the Darfur crisis, following the Qatari efforts in this regard?

[Lyman] We told the Sudanese government not to close the door to the movements that refused to sign the Doha Agreement. Whilst we told these movements to focus on a political solution, rather than a military one.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] When will Sudan be removed from the US State Department's list of "state sponsors of terrorism"?

[Lyman] This all depends on the policies of the al-Bashir government.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Omar al-Bashir has said that Washington changes the goal-posts whenever his government comes close to achieving this. Is this true?

[Lyman] On the contrary, whenever we are close to resolving these problems – including when we looked at removing Sudan from the state sponsors of terrorism list – al-Bashir creates another problem. This began with the problem in South Sudan, and then Darfur, and now we are seeing the problems in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] So, what must al-Bashir do to secure Sudan's removal from the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism?

[Lyman] There must be an end to the war in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan, negotiations with the opposition there, as well as the door being opened to humanitarian aid. Yes, I said that we oppose military action on the part of the opposition; however on the other hand, the al-Bashir government must be committed to solving these problems peacefully.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] If the problems in Darfur and South Kordofan are resolved, will the US Congress withdraw the sanctions it has imposed on Sudan?

[Lyman] This is a complicated issue. As for removing Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, the President – based on the recommendation of the Secretary of State – can do this. However the majority of sanctions that have been imposed on Sudan were the result of decisions made by the US Congress regarding the Darfur crisis, and only Congress can remove these [sanctions].

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Is there any hope that Congress might do so?

[Lyman] I recently met with members of Congress, and they said that there is no chance of this happening so long as there are problems in Darfur, the Blue Nile, and South Kordofan.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Can you confirm that the South Sudan delegation walked out of the negotiations with Sudan in Addis Ababa yesterday after Khartoum cut off Juba's oil exports?

[Lyman] I am not certain of this. There is some information claiming this is what happened, whilst other information has said the opposite. Whether this is true or not, both sides should be aware that closing the oil pipeline will be very harmful. In any case, I believe that there have been many positives in the Addis Ababa negotiations.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Can you give us an example?

[Lyman] For the first time, both parties put forward a number of clear proposals to solve the oil problem. South Sudan has proposed to pay 5 billion dollars [to Sudan] over the next three years, including two billion in oil and three billion towards the external debt of both countries. Whilst Sudan's proposal was for 7 billion dollars. Of course, there is a clear difference between the two proposals, but so long as clear and definite proposals are being made, this represents progress in our view.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Members of the National Umma Party of Sudan, and the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP], have finally joined the al-Bashir government, whilst the sons of [DUP leader] Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani and [National Umma Party leader] Sadiq al-Mahdi were sworn in as aides to Sudanese President Bashir al-Assad. Do you have any comment on these developments?

[Lyman] I welcome this development...within the scope of my previous comments, namely that we need a constitutional and democratic transition in Sudan.