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Romney advisers are zealous on Sudan, but is he?

By Guy Taylor

Two of Mitt Romney's top foreign policy advisers slammed the Obama administration this week for failing to address a mounting humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan, saying Mr. Obama's mishandling of the region's ongoing crisis offers a window into how a Romney White House would do things differently.

The administration's soft posture toward Sudanese President Omar Bashir has paved the way for continued atrocities against civilians, the advisers said. They added that Mr. Obama's habit of taking U.S. allies for granted also is on full display when it comes to South Sudan - which commemorated its first anniversary as an independent country this week.

"I think the South Sudanese feel they've been abandoned and the United States is working more as a neutral mediator than as an advocate on their behalf," said Andrew Natsios, a special adviser to the Romney campaign who headed the U.S. Agency for International Development under President Bush in the early 2000s.

Were Mr. Romney president, added Richard Williamson, another of the campaign's foreign policy advisers, he would "provide political leadership" in confronting Lt. Gen. Bashir, who continues to hold the Sudanese presidency despite having been indicted on war-crimes charges by the U.N.-backed International Criminal Court.

Differences with Obama

Mr. Romney also would push for an accelerated deployment of U.N. peacekeepers in an attempt to "crowd out the violence" in key areas between Sudan and newly independent South Sudan, Mr. Williamson said.

Fighting has erupted along the border between the two nations since last year, when South Sudan's secession from the north triggered a dispute over revenue from the region's oil fields.

Tens of thousands of people have become refugees as a result of violence in the Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains - regions of northern Sudan that were aligned with the south during the 22 years of civil war that preceded South Sudanese independence.

In addition to blocking the flow of humanitarian aid to regions now, Gen. Bashir's northern Sudanese fighter jets have pounded villages in the two regions during the past year.

That the Romney campaign homed in on the issue this week raised the eyebrows of close Sudan watchers in Washington, including some Democrats critical of the Obama administration for not following through on its 2008 campaign promises to take a hard-line stand against Gen. Bashir.

But the extent to which Mr. Romney would take a truly different approach from President Obama's remains to be seen, and questions swirled this week over how closely aligned the former Massachusetts governor is to his advisers on the Sudan issue.

Former Bush team members

Mr. Natsios and Mr. Williamson served as special envoys to Sudan under Mr. Bush. Before they were tapped as advisers by the Romney campaign, both were out front on the Sudan issue, advocating for the deployment of some form of U.S. anti-aircraft to bolster the south's defenses against strikes carried out by the north.

Neither has been willing to get behind that position on behalf of the Romney campaign.

In his statement commemorating the one-year anniversary of South Sudan's independence, Mr. Romney offered some firm generalizations but appeared to balk at the opportunity to distinguish himself aggressively from Mr. Obama.

"I believe America must play a leadership role in this process and speak clearly on the ongoing atrocities of the regime in Khartoum and the resulting refugee crisis," the presumptive Republican presidential nominee said. "I am committed to protecting innocents, ensuring access to humanitarian aid and achieving a just and sustainable peace between South Sudan and Sudan."

Talk is cheap

Mr. Romney's adherence to generalities prompted some to suggest that his true posture might not be so different from that embraced by Mr. Obama, who has put as much blame on South Sudan as on the north for the ongoing violence.

Mr. Obama went further than Mr. Romney in criticizing the Bashir government in April by asserting that Khartoum "must stop its military actions, including aerial bombardments."

The president also said "South Sudan must end its support for armed groups inside Sudan" and "cease its military actions across the border."

"The Obama administration has not done nearly enough, so they are to be condemned," said Eric Reeves, a leading Sudan researcher at Smith College and a staunch critic of the Bashir government. "But unless Romney comes up with a specific set of proposals, he's just mouthing platitudes and generalizations with which nobody could disagree."

"How is Romney creating space between himself and Obama? He is highlighting some of the Obama administration's failures, particularly around the humanitarian crises, but he could have gone a lot further."

"The U.S. policy should be to say that for every time one of Khartoum's aircraft attacks civilians, we will respond by destroying one of their aircraft on the ground with a cruise missile," he said. "That would immediately create a de-facto no-fly zone."

"Would Romney support that?" Mr. Reeves asked. "That would be a great question."

When that question was posed to Mr. Williamson, he said: "I don't want to put the governor in a box, and he has not taken a position on surface-to-air defense missiles, something that I pushed for in the Bush administration and Andrew Natsios has written in support of."

The Muslim Brotherhood

As for what Mr. Romney would do, Mr. Williamson said that "when atrocities are committed, he'll speak out against those who commit them, whereas the Obama administration has been quiet."

Second, we'll demand humanitarian access, and that's one of the tragedies. Right now, Khartoum is preventing it."

Mr. Natsios, meanwhile, suggested that Mr. Obama's neutral posture toward Gen. Bashir likely stems from a sense that "the Muslim Brotherhood is taking power in the Arab world."

Mr. Obama has "made a decision that the Muslim Brotherhood is inevitable, so we need to get along with them and cultivate them," Mr. Natsios said.

Gen. Bashir, who seized power in Sudan via an Islamist-backed coup in 1989, is commonly blamed for carrying out human rights abuses and is accused of unleashing genocide in the nation's Darfur region. He also is condemned often for carrying on a close relationship with Osama bin Laden before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

What people don't realize, Mr. Natsios said, is that "Omar Bashir is the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan."