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Sudan and Iran: A Journey of Rapprochement in Light of the Current Arab Landscape

Dr. Elnour Hamad | May 2013

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Abstract

This study examines Sudan's relationship with Iran in light of the numerous Israeli air raids being launched against it, and explores whether the Sudanese regime has a preference for Iranian or Arab aid in resolving its political and security concerns, or whether it sees no contradiction in benefiting from both. Within this context, key issues are analyzed, including Hassan al-Turabi's dreams of an Islamic leadership, his transnational revolutionary tendencies, and the effect of his legacy on his disciples in their relations with Iran. The study also analyzes Iranian support for Islamists in Gaza via Sudan; the rise of Islamists to power following the Arab revolutions, and the potential emergence of transnational revolutionary ideas, as echoed in Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric, and the impact of this resurgence on the relationship between Arab states, and on Arab-Iranian relations.

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Introduction

The Iranian Revolution broke out at the zenith of the Cold War, leading Arab Islamists to rekindle dreams of a “third bloc”. On the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement, Azmi Bishara writes: “the Jihad Movement was influenced, from its beginnings, by the principles of the Islamic revolution, like many other Sunni movements that were entranced by the revolution in Iran, including the Muslim Brotherhood.”¹ It is possible that Arab Islamists endorsed the Iranian Revolution as a result of both parties’ enthusiasm to create an effective Islamic bloc that could stand up to the Western model, and be free from Western domination.² Haydar Ibrahim Ali also writes that the Sudanese Islamists’ enthusiasm for the Iranian Revolution was expressed, in their early years in power, through a rapprochement with the Islamic Republic and a desire to benefit from its experience as the only available, realistic model for an Islamic state.³

In this preface, it is important to point to Iran’s nationalist, geostrategic, and sectarian components, dimensions that are often overlooked by Iran’s Arab Islamist allies, who tend to see Iran exclusively from the viewpoint of a unifying “Islamic brotherhood,” without taking into account the broader picture. Iranian history, doctrine, and geostrategic vision all point to the fact that Iran deals with its regional surroundings as a complex centrifuge. This is best exemplified by Talal al-Atrissi’s assertion that the new Iranian identity assimilates to the nation, Islam, and the world, simultaneously and with a high level of complexity.⁴

Olivier Roy argues that Iran’s failure to infiltrate the Sunni world has prompted it to act as a regional power along very similar lines to the behavior of the late Shah,⁵ which proves that nationalist, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and rational interests all lead to confusion within Iran’s complex nature. As Azmi Bishara notes, Iran is domestically investing in an inclusive Iranian identity, though it does not completely neglect its Persian imperial past,⁶ which has, for the most part, been characterized by its tendency

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¹ Bishara, “The Arabs and Iran: General Remarks,” p. 24.

² Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 118.

³ Ali, *Fall of the Civilizational Project*, p. 35.

⁴ Atrissi, *The Difficult Republic*, p. 24.

⁵ Roy, *Failure of Political Islam*, p. 176.

⁶ Bishara, “The Arabs and Iran,” p. 10.

to expand and conquer. Thus, Mahjoob al-Zweiri argues that the history of the 20th century has proven that religion and identity remain strongly present in Iran and that even the establishment of a secular monarchy, such as that of the Shah, was incapable of effacing the Shia religious identity with its Persian nationalist overtones.⁷

On the same topic, Wajih Kawtharani notes that the relationship between Arab nations and Iran is based on a multitude of perspectives, on both sides, that vacillate from Islam, to nationalism, to sectarianism to a relationship that is shaped by geopolitical, economic, and demographic considerations. Kawtharani adds that none of these perspectives is exclusively accurate, as the shape of the relationship between Arab nations and Iran is incessantly colored by new issues:

Sometimes (the relationship) is based on an Islam that assimilates the nationalist factor; in other instances, it is centered on a notion of nationalism that is based on Islam, and it may even be based on a form of chauvinistic nationalism that denies Islam, or on a strictly instrumentalist perspective that not only views the state's interests and its geopolitical sphere as part of its "national security," but also appeals to both Islam and nationalism. The general picture is sometimes composed of a complex mixture of all these factors."⁸

Some Islamist movements in the Arab world, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Islamic regime in Sudan, view Iran as an important Islamic ally that constitutes a source of support in the ongoing battle against Western hegemony.

Strategy and Tactics

This study is premised on the existence of a unifying Arab body with shared geostrategic interests. It goes without saying that the creation of a voluntary organization that groups all Arab states, known as "the League of Arab States," points to the existence of an Arab body that is homogeneous in terms of its structure and historic nature, and imposes shared security concerns upon these countries. Despite their unity, major divergences nonetheless exist in terms of the political vision of these governments. These disagreements, with their shifting contours, entail a mix of broader Arab nationalist principles and local interests specific to each country. In this mixture,

⁷ al-Zweiri, "Iran and the Arabs," p. 70.

⁸ Kawtharani, "The Mutual Awareness between Arabs and Iranians," p.166.

tainted by the interference of non-Arab forces, the tactical and the strategic tend to intersect, and sometimes stand in opposition to each other. The gradual unison between some Arab states and Iran expresses this dilemma. Olivier Roy is of the opinion that Iran should exit its Shia “ghetto” and open up to Sunni centers in the region; on the other hand, and while Islamist political leader Hassan al-Turabi may benefit from Iran in specific fields, it is not likely that the Muslim Brothers, who are opposed to Shiism, would establish a permanent strategic alliance with Iran.⁹ Therefore, the alliance between Iran and the Sudanese, in addition to some Islamist factions in Gaza, reflects this contradiction between tactical interests and strategic considerations. This differs from Hezbollah’s model in Lebanon, where the tactical and the strategic dimensions tend to be compatible. The links that were established between the aforementioned parties will probably remain a tactical arrangement in the long term given the acute sectarian opposition between the two sides and their conflicting interests.

There is no doubt that both Iran and the Sunni Islamist factions in Arab countries are aware of the pitfalls of this temporary cooperation. Each of these parties, however, seems to believe that it will come out as the major winner from this tactical, provisional state of alliance, and that it will end up in a better strategic position in the long term. As a result, these tactical benefits may prompt these Arab Islamist movements to turn a blind eye to Iran’s ambitions, the historical nature of the Iranian state, and Iran’s relentless desire to radically influence events in the Arab and Islamic regions.

A look into Islamist organizations—such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which are blockaded by Israel, the US, Arabs, and other Palestinians—would show that these organizations are forced to accept Iranian financial and military aid. Recently, Hamas was compelled to take a stand in opposition to the Iranians regarding the Syrian revolution, which led to tension between the two. This difference was to some extent glossed over by diplomatic language, though it undoubtedly unbalanced the tactical plans of both parties. Azmi Bishara explains Hamas’ dilemma in dealing with Iran as follows: “The Hamas movement, given its current situation, its ideological leanings, and its social base within the Arab world, would have preferred the support it currently receives from Iran to come from an Arab state instead, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰

⁹ Roy, *Failure of Political Islam*, pp. 119-188.

¹⁰ Bishara, “The Arabs and Iran”, p. 25.

This pressing need for aid and support may be the reason why Sunni Islamist leaders avoid commenting on the religious core that defines the Iranian Revolution, which centers on the doctrine of the occult Imam and the Guardianship of the Jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqeeh*).¹¹ Generally speaking, the Shia doctrine and its historical narrative are not compatible with the Sunni frame of reference, but the urgent need for financial, military, and political aid may cause the concerned parties to resort to pragmatism and sacrifice principles; this applies to Sudan's government as well as Hamas. Countries that are capable of providing support—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman—fear the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in these times, as much as they fear Iran, if not more. This aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood has intensified after the organization declared its support for Iraq following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

In the mid-20th century, the Muslim Brotherhood took refuge in Saudi Arabia, escaping the Arabist, leftist tide in their countries, whose governments were openly persecuting Islamists. At the time, Saudi Arabia hosted the brotherhood due to its own fear of the Communist and leftist tide in the Arab region represented by the Marxist and nationalist Arab, leftist currents. In that period, the Muslim Brotherhood was seen as an antidote to the communist tide, which the Saudis and their American allies feared as they were the main stakeholders in the project to halt Communist expansion in the Arab region. More recently, with the entire geopolitical scene undergoing radical changes, Saudi Arabia changed its position on the Brotherhood. Their anti-Brotherhood position was clearly stated by the late Saudi Minister of the Interior Nayef Bin Abdel-Aziz.¹²

An anti-Brotherhood tone was even more pronounced in the statements of the UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah bin Zayed, and those of Dubai's police chief, Dahi Khalfan.¹³ Tensions escalated between UAE officials and key figures in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement following UAE's announcement of the arrest of a group of Egyptians who the Emirati authorities described as a "Brotherhood cell" working from

¹¹ Mubaideen, *Islamic Political Thought and Reform*, p. 119.

¹² See *al-Riyad* daily, issue 12578, November 28, 2002. In an interview with the former Saudi Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, the Saudi royal explained: "When the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took place, we received many scholars, headed by Abdul-Rahman Khalifa, [including] al-Ghannushi and al-Turabi and al-Zindani and Arbakan and others. As soon as they arrived [in Saudi Arabia] they met with the King and the Crown Prince; we asked them: "Do you accept that one state invades another? Was Kuwait threatening Iraq?" They answered that they were here only to listen and to hear [the host's] opinions. Subsequently, they went to Iraq and we were surprised to see them issue a statement supporting the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait." In the same interview, Prince Nayef said: "I say without hesitation that all our troubles and complications came from the Muslim Brotherhood."

¹³ Khalifa, "The thought behind the Muslim Brotherhood's," October 9, 2012.

inside the Emirates.¹⁴ Fear of the Muslim Brotherhood increased in some Gulf states after the Arab revolutions gripped Tunisia in 2011, which then engulfed the Arab world, including the Gulf countries of Bahrain and Kuwait and, to a lesser extent, the Sultanate of Oman.

Sudanese–Iranian Relations

The relationship between Sudan and Iran should be examined within the context of a relationship between, on the one hand, a radical Sunni political movement represented by the Islamic Movement in Sudan, and a radical Shia political movement represented by the Islamic revolution in Iran, on the other. Despite their shared theme of radical Islamism, relations between the two are not stable, as they do not garner general approval in Sudan.

Relations between Sudan and Iran are relatively recent, expanding under the Shah, who gave Sudan some naval military vessels as part of his Red Sea strategy. However, these ties were temporarily severed after the 1973 War, when other Arab states also cut their diplomatic ties to Iran, and were recommenced later. Diplomatic relations steadily continued until the eruption of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran War, in which Sudan stood by Iraq, regularly sending Sudanese soldiers to the front as well as large numbers of volunteers to fight alongside the Iraqi forces.

Generally-speaking, one could argue that Sudan's foreign relations from the time the British left in 1956 until Jafar Nimeiry's ascension to power in 1969 were largely non-aligned.¹⁵ Nimeiry was also supportive of Egypt's former president Anwar Sadat when he signed the Camp David Accords with Israel, and cooperated with Israel during the transfer of Ethiopian Jews (Falasha) to the Hebrew state. With these actions, Nimeiry distanced himself from his leftist past to the point that he became a close ally of the United States in the late years of his regime.

The Sudanese Islamic Movement, led by Hassan al-Turabi, is the group that promoted Iran within Sudan. Al-Turabi and his allies eventually reached power in Sudan through a military coup in 1989, and, since the late 1970s, the Islamic Movement in Sudan began to perceive Khomeini's revolution as a source of inspiration. This was confirmed by Islamist leader Al-Mahboub Abdel-Salam, who highlights how the emergence of the

¹⁴ al-Sayigh, "The apprehension of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," January 1, 2013.

¹⁵ al-Afandi, "Sudan, where to?," p. 86.

very first Islamic state in the world prompted the Sudanese to take the streets in demonstrations supportive of Iran's revolution. Abdel-Salam adds that these were the first such demonstrations in the Arab world and in Africa, and that following these popular demonstrations, the Sudanese Islamic Movement visited Tehran, where they met with the revolution's leader and guide. Subsequently, Iran's ideology and revolutionary symbols were later adopted by the Sudanese Islamists and were widely promoted in Sudan.¹⁶

According to a former Sudanese diplomat, al-Rashid Abu Shama, the major leap in Iranian-Sudanese relations had happened before the Islamists reached power in Sudan. Relations increased significantly in Sadiq al-Mahdi's time (1986-1989), during which he proposed the notion of "the unity of those who pray toward Mecca". Al-Mahdi was closer to Libya than he was to Egypt, and preferred to establish relations with Iran rather than Saudi Arabia. Moreover, he visited Tehran several times, and halted the Sudanese military participation in supportive of Iraq, showing no sympathy for the Sudanese soldiers and volunteers who had already fought and fallen into captivity—Sudanese prisoners of war were not released by Iran until the late 1990s. Sadiq al-Mahdi also had strong disagreements with his Foreign Minister Husain Suleiman Abu Salih, who leaned toward supporting Iraq. Al-Mahdi's stances and his visits to Tehran angered the majority of the Gulf governments.

In a bid to gain recognition and aid from the Arab states, the Salvation government that came to rule Sudan in 1989 created a diplomatic crisis with Tehran that ended with the recall of the Sudanese ambassador from Tehran and the severing of relations with Iran.¹⁷ Former diplomat Abu Shama asserts that this move was planned, which affirms Sudanese Islamist leader Al-Mahboub Abdel-Salam's claims that the Sudanese government purposely provoked the entire confrontation in order to sever diplomatic relations with Iran.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the majority of the Sudanese Islamic movement's chroniclers assert that their party was enamored with the Iranian Revolution, and that they were impressed by its approach and model. The same notion was echoed by Abdul-Rahim Omar Muhi al-Deen, former leader of the Sudanese Islamic Movement, who recalls that the Islamic movement at Khartoum University was deeply influenced by the Iranian Revolution's

¹⁶ Abdel-Salam, *The Sudanese Islamic Movement*, p. 320.

¹⁷ Mubarak, "After the arrival of Iranian military vessels," October 31, 2012.

¹⁸ Abdel-Salam, *Sudanese Islamic Movement*, pp. 319-320.

slogans, and strongly attached to the personality of the Imam Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini's photo adorned the dorm rooms of most Islamic students at Khartoum University, and it seems that these students (some of whom became politicians, executives, and leaders in the Sudanese government) used to call the dorm room where the most religious student leaders resided as "Qom," in reference to the holy Iranian city.¹⁹

Cutting diplomatic ties with Iran was short-lived as the Salvation government reinstated an ambassador, Abdul Rahman Mohammed Said, in Tehran shortly after it assumed power. Said was later replaced by Qutbi al-Mahdi, who was the former head of the Sudanese security services. In addition to admiring Iran's revolutionary model, it seems the Salvation government was also impressed by the Iranian security institutions, which it saw as a potential source of inspiration for the protection of its newborn regime that faced conspiracies and plots from all directions. The Iranian president at the time, Hashimi Rafsanjani, visited Sudan as the head of a large delegation that signed a number of economic, security, and defense agreements with Sudan. Iran also supplied the Sudanese government with funds, weapons, and training in various fields, including security and the judiciary.²⁰

Al-Turabi and the Creation of an Inclusive and Revolutionary Islamic Entity

In the early phase of Islamist rule in Sudan, Hassan al-Turabi used dissimulation, or *taqiyyah*, as a tactic.²¹ While he was the main person behind the military coup that did away with the democratic regime, he agreed with Omar al-Bashir, the coup's leader, to being put in prison along with the leaders of other political parties, hoping to hide the identity of the real conspirators behind the coup. It was reported that on the eve of the coup d'état, al-Turabi told al-Bashir: "go to the palace as president, and I will go to prison as a prisoner". As soon as things settled for the new military rulers, al-Turabi reappeared on the scene and the identity of those behind the coup became evident. Historian Robert Collins says that, since 1991, al-Turabi has been able to entrench his position in the Islamic Front and the ruling regime. Later on, he founded the "Popular

¹⁹ al-Deen, *The Struggle between Desire and Identity*, p. 38.

²⁰ Burr and Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan*, pp. 81-82.

²¹ In Islam, *Taqiyyah*, is the practice of concealing one's belief and foregoing ordinary religious duties when under threat of death or injury. Derived from the Arabic word *waqa* (to shield oneself).

Islamic Conference,” which was designed to replace the “Organization of the Islamic Call”. Collins adds that the 1991 Gulf War played a helping role in the formation of the “Popular Islamic Conference,” which sought to serve as a medium that would carry the Islamic Revolution to the global level and coordinate anti-imperialist movements in 50 Muslim countries.

Collins also recounts that, in its first convention, the conference founded the so-called “Armed Islamist International”. Sudan’s Islamic government commented on the first general assembly of the Popular Islamic Conference—attended by 300 personalities from Sudan and 200 participants representing 45 countries, including the Abu Sayyaf group from the Philippines—stating, “[T]his is the most important event to take place since the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate.”²²

Since the conference was founded, Sudan has become a center for the training of Afghan *Mujahideen* seeking opportunities for *Jihad* in other Muslim territories, including Algeria, Bosnia, and Yemen; for a number of years, al-Turabi also hosted Osama Bin Laden. The Popular Islamic Conference was joined by Jihadists from the Islamic Jamaa in Pakistan and India, the Islamic Party and the Islamic Jamaa in Afghanistan, the Kashmiri Mujahideen Party, Egyptian Islamist groups, Hezbollah, the Algerian Salvation Front, and the Islamic-National Front in Sudan, the ruling Islamic party of the host country. Writer Khalid al-Mubarak elaborates on this concept of “empowerment” and that of the state that serves as a platform for the dissemination of the Islamic model in other countries. In his book, he refers to a conference in which Jamal Barzinji argued that Iran, after its popular revolution, and Sudan, after the military coup of the Islamists, represent the platform toward Islamic “empowerment”. He also quoted Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, who spoke along the same lines as Barzinji, questioning: “as long as we have the two states that can serve as the launching platform, then what are we waiting for?”²³

Collins also writes that a general secretariat, headed by al-Turabi, was formed at the end of the convention, and claims that al-Turabi supervised the recruitment of fighters from South Asia to train in the *Mujahideen* camps near Peshawar in Pakistan, noting that, in September 1991, al-Turabi visited Pakistan, and by December 1992, his cassettes, publications, and television and radio interviews had made him into a famous

²² Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan*, p 195.

²³ al-Mubarak, *Turabi's Islamist Venture*, pp. 30-31.

personality throughout the Muslim world.²⁴ Since that moment, al-Turabi began to promote the notion of a transnational Islamic revolutionary tide, of which he claimed himself leader, declaring that he does not acknowledge national borders between Muslim countries. In 1992, al-Turabi spoke in front of the Royal Association for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce in London, condemning the establishment of nation states at the expense of Muslim society, which he termed “the Adobe of Islam”.²⁵ It appears that his hold over the regime in Sudan prompted him to adopt this transnational perspective, and to make rapprochement with Iran into a step toward building an influential Islamic bloc.

Hassan al-Turabi and the Iranian Model

Al-Mahboub Abdel-Salam says that the relationship between the Sudanese Salvation government and Iran markedly improved in their first decade (1989-1999) to such an extent that Iranians began to call Sudan and its Islamic government “the first contemporary Islamic state in the Sunni world”.²⁶ During the Salvation government’s rule, Iranian cultural and Islamic activities abounded in Sudan. Many Iranian books and publications became available in the Sudanese market, and conversion to Shiism began to appear among the youth for the first time in Sudan’s history. It appears that Iran began to perceive Sudan as a bridgehead for Iranian policy to infiltrate Sub-Saharan African countries through the dissemination of Shia thought and the provision of different forms of aid.²⁷ The Iranians were particularly friendly with the Islamist rulers in Sudan. Haydar Ibrahim Ali recounts that the Iranian ambassador in Khartoum, Kamal Majeed, used to issue statements and offer advice and proposals on Sudanese affairs in the early years of the Salvation government, as if he were a Sudanese official.²⁸

What is striking in Sudanese-Iranian relations is the fact that the two most educated, prolific, and active political leaders in Sudan, Hassan al-Turabi and Sadiq al-Mahdi, were characterized—more so than any other Sudanese leaders—by their admiration of the Iranian model and experiment. This may have to do with the fact that the two men presented themselves as international Islamic leaders, and not merely as local leaders of a peripheral Arab-Muslim country. Abdel Wahab al-Afandi stresses that, despite the

²⁴ Collins, *History of Modern Sudan*, p.196.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

²⁶ Abdel-Salam, *Sudanese Islamic Movement*, p. 320.

²⁷ al-Sanhuri, “Iran is in Africa,” April 29, 2010.

²⁸ Ali, *Fall of the Civilization Project*, p. 35.

fact that Sudan is a peripheral country that has often been excluded from the balance of power at the Arab and African level, its deep-rooted Sufi traditions has made some of its religious leadership believe that they have a central role to play in the Muslim world. In order to prove his theory, al-Afandi pointed to the Mahdist Revolt in the 19th century, which was led by Muhammad Ahmad Bin Abdullah, later known as Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, a self-proclaimed Mahdi who expelled Turco-Egyptian rule from Sudan. Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi intended to launch military campaigns to conquer Muslim countries and to put the Muslims back on “the path of true religion” according to the Mahdist vision. Al-Afandi argues that this belief in a central Islamic role is deeply entrenched in the Sudanese Sufi tradition.²⁹ In keeping with al-Mahdi’s plans, his successor, Abdullah Bin Muhammad al-Taaisha, launched two military campaigns against Ethiopia and Egypt. In this regard, historian Collins makes an interesting observation:

In the political life of North Sudan, we find that the strong personalities that were forged either by talent or by family legacy, such as Ismail al-Azhari, Sadiq al-Mahdi, or Hassan al-Turabi, are absorbed in their own personal interests, which have very little connection with the concerns and interests of the Sudanese people.³⁰

Indeed, the texts and practices of Hassan al-Turabi show that he was obsessed with the notion of revolutionizing the Muslim world, and that his focus went beyond Sudan, a vision that he makes clear in his writings:

[I]t has become among the most important global Islamist movements, which may be due to the fact [...] that the movement has a broad global perspective, and is deeply linked to challenges of a global nature[;] moreover, the growth of the movement has increased its need and ability to take on an international character that increases its might, and constitutes a global tool of influence (for the movement).³¹

It is worth noting that the term “global,” in its different formulations, was repeated five times in al-Turabi’s text. In his eyes, his Islamic movement is primarily a movement that cares for the affairs of Muslims and those of the world, which he views as a single,

²⁹ al-Afandi, “Sudan, where to?,” p.61.

³⁰ Collins, *History of Modern Sudan*, p. 301.

³¹ al-Turabi, “The International Dimension,” p. 80.

tightly-connected region. Al-Turabi argues that the early Muslims, despite their limited numbers and weakness, had their eyes on the Persians and the Romans and brought down their empires, extending the Muslim call beyond the borders. This is, for al-Turabi, the path and model of the Islamic movement in Sudan.³²

This perspective conforms with the Iranian notion, as coded in the Islamic Republic's 154th constitutional article, which states that the Islamic Republic of Iran, while committing to non-interference in the affairs of other countries, believes that it is tasked with supporting and protecting the disinherited (*Mustadafin*) from the despots (*Mustakbirin*).³³ Al-Mahboub Abdel-Salam, a close disciple of Hassan al-Turabi, interprets al-Turabi's notion of the Islamic revolution as follows: "[T]he interpretations of Sheikh Hassan al-Turabi, which were included in his lecture presented in the 1970s in Doha, Qatar under the title 'Models for a Contemporary Islamic State,' express the essence of his idea, which views political borders as mere barriers that prevent the movement of peoples and their free interaction."³⁴ Abdel-Salam further emphasizes al-Turabi's desire to have a universal influence by noting that the Salvation government, in its first few years, canceled the visa requirement for Arab Islamists in neighboring Arab countries, which was a preface for the abolishment of visa requirements for Islamists in neighboring African states after the stabilization of the new Islamic regime in Sudan.³⁵ This view is in line with that of Egyptian Islamist theorist Sayyid Qutb, who believes that faith, not national belonging, is the true nationality of the Muslim.³⁶

Al-Turabi's Influence on his Disciples

Arguably, al-Turabi's universalist ideas were not limited to his followers, who left the government in 1999. His ideas were also planted among the leadership of the opposition, which currently holds the reins of power. For example, Ghazi Salah al-Din al-Attabani, the Sudanese Islamic movement leader and former minister of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, addressed the foreign ministers of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and those countries ruled mainly by Christian elites, stating: "our message is not to reinforce Islam in Sudan, but to spread it in Africa. This is our message, which

³² Ali, *Fall of the Civilization Project*, pp. 186-187.

³³ al-Samadi, "Iran and the Resistance," p. 117.

³⁴ From 1990-1995, Hassan al-Turabi represented the sole intellectual and political reference for the regime in Sudan.

³⁵ Abdel-Salam, *Sudanese Islamic Movement*, pp. 326-327.

³⁶ al-Baghdadi, "The 'Homeland' in the Ideology," p. 195

was set back by colonialism, and we shall begin where colonialism stopped us”.³⁷ Amin Hassan Omar, one of the most notable academics among the ruling Islamists in Sudan today, was quoted saying:

Those who claim to represent the Arab and Islamic civilization do not demand a seat among the civilized nations; they want this seat to be in the front. They are not competing over an empty seat among the advanced nations. Instead, they propose an alternative project to the existing one, and they present themselves as an alternative global leadership through social and civilizational progress.³⁸

As Islamists took power in Sudan, they began their attempts to export their model abroad. Saudi Arabia was a prime target for their harassment, and was often harshly attacked in Sudanese media. Sudanese Islamists began to interfere in their neighbors' affairs; in fact, in Algeria, its interference was such that Algeria was prompted to withdraw its ambassador from Sudan in 1992.³⁹ The quest of Sudan's Islamists to export the revolution was not only theoretical, or the mere advocacy of a model that personifies social and civilizational progress; it also extended to their involvement in military operations. In addition to the training camps for global Islamic fighters, organized by al-Turabi in Pakistan and in Sudan, there was a failed attempt in Addis Ababa in 1995 to assassinate former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. The investigation into the attack showed that senior Sudanese Salvation political leaders had ordered the assassination in cooperation with “al-Jamaa al-Islamiya,” an extremist Egyptian organization.⁴⁰ The attempt to assassinate President Mubarak in Addis Ababa was not an isolated operation, but part of a wider effort that the Sudanese Islamic government launched in order to destabilize neighboring countries, mainly Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Eritrea was forced to sever ties with Sudan in 1992 in response to the support extended by the Sudanese government to the Eritrean Islamic Jihad organization.⁴¹ Ethiopia's relations with Sudan soured after the assassination attempt against Mubarak in the Ethiopian capital. On a different front, relations between Iran and Algeria underwent a period of tension, and controversy prevailed in Morocco surrounding Iranian activities in the country. Al-Hussain al-Zawi says that the Iranian

³⁷ Khalid, *South Sudan in the Arab Imagination*, pp. 65-66.

³⁸ Omar, *The Sudanese Islamist Project*, p.23.

³⁹ Khalid, *South Sudan in the Arab Imagination*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ al-Daw, *The Trench: Secrets of the State*, pp. 82-88.

⁴¹ al-Daw, *Sudan: The Fall of the Masks*, p. 365.

diplomatic mission in Algeria was active among Algerian parties, following the declaration of multipartism in the country, including the Salvation Front. Iranian diplomats also attended some political assemblies in Algeria, with Al-Zawi claiming that the Algerian government believed the wave of violence that struck Algeria at the time would not have been as tragic had it not been for the support that Algerian Islamists received from multiple foreign sources, including the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴²

Sudan and Iran after al-Turabi

While al-Turabi led the main effort in pushing for rapprochement with Iran, and in unifying the Iranian vision and goals with those of the Popular Islamic Conference, his exit from power did not weaken the government's inclination to cooperate with Iran. If anything, it could be argued that relations with Iran improved after al-Turabi was ousted from the Islamic Sudanese regime in 1999. Following his departure, the Salvation government adopted an overly pragmatic approach, not shying away from contradictory or even illogical initiatives in order to maximize its interest. For instance, news of Sudanese rapprochement with Iran would spread whenever Gulf governments took a harsher stance toward Iran. An example of the maneuvers performed by the Sudanese government, following al-Turabi's removal from power and the improvement of Sudanese relations with Mubarak's Egypt, was its attempt to rebuild ties with the United States. Khartoum's desire to establish ties with the US was so overriding that the chief of the Sudanese intelligence agreed to fly onboard an American plane sent specifically to bring him to Washington to meet with the CIA, and hand its officials sensitive files regarding Islamist extremists and their movements and plans—including those who participated in the first World Trade Center attack, the attacks against the US Embassy in Nairobi, and the September 11 attacks. The visit angered some Americans, who saw it as a lenient stance toward a government the US previously accused of sheltering terrorists and committing acts of ethnic cleansing against its own citizens.⁴³

Furthermore, the Sudanese government fully cooperated in the enactment of the provisions for the 2005 Naivasha Peace Agreement, and consented to the referendum that led to the secession of South Sudan from its north. The Sudanese government hoped that these concessions, particularly its recognition of South Sudan as a state,

⁴² al-Zawi, "The Arab Maghreb and Iran, p. 195

⁴³ Sheen, "CIA's Meeting with Sudan's Top Security," June 20, 2005.

would lead to normalized relations with the US, a lifting of sanctions against Sudan, and a cancellation of the debts that have crippled the Sudanese economy. None of these actions, however, led to a change in the US's position toward the Islamic government in Sudan, nor did they put an end to the sanctions, or the accompanying isolation, imposed on the country.

While Sudanese support for the Palestinian cause has remained constant over time, and the Sudanese Islamists' support for the Palestinian cause has remained consistent with past Sudanese policies, there is reason to doubt that the facilitation of Iranian support to Hamas through Sudan may be related to the government's frustration regarding the failure of the normalization efforts with the US. In recent years, the movement of Iranian weapons into the Gaza Strip has noticeably increased, with weapons being shipped from Sudan through Egypt, making their way through the Sinai and onward to Gaza. In 2009, Israeli warplanes targeted and destroyed a convoy of 23 trucks loaded with weapons. In the raid, around 40 people in the convoy were killed.⁴⁴ Israeli air strikes multiplied against arms convoys and individuals suspected of being part of weapon-smuggling operations through Eastern Sudan. The largest Israeli strike was directed against the Yarmuk military factory in Khartoum toward the end of October 2012. *The Guardian*, a British newspaper, published leaks indicating that the assassination of the Palestinian leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in a Dubai hotel, and Mossad's acquisition of important documents that were in his possession, has allowed Israel to obtain considerable information regarding Sudan's role in the smuggling of Iranian "Fajr" rockets into Gaza.⁴⁵

The Israeli strike against the Yarmuk factory in Khartoum represented an important shift in the scale of Israeli operations against the Sudanese government. Israel believes that Sudan has contributed to creating a new front against Israel in the Gaza Strip, as they are supplied by missiles sent via Sudan. This front also extends to the Red Sea, after Iranian military vessels began receiving facilitation in Red Sea ports, especially Sudan's. Israelis claim that Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir gave the Iranians the green light to establish military bases on Sudanese soil. They also claim that Iranian missiles, were they to be installed in Sudan, would be capable of reaching Israel's south and the center.⁴⁶ When Iranian military ships visited Port Sudan, on the Red Sea coast,

⁴⁴ "How Israel foiled an arms convoy," March 3, 2009. Read more:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1888352,00.html>

⁴⁵ Black, "Israeli attack on Sudanese arms factory," October 25, 2012.

⁴⁶ Waltz, "Iran and Sudan deepen cooperation," December, 13, 2012.

following the Israeli strike against the Yarmuk factory in Khartoum, the Israelis claimed the visit was part of an effort to establish an Iranian naval base around Port Sudan.⁴⁷ The Sudanese government denied these claims, stating that the visit of Iranian warships was routine. There were also reports that the same ships, which were refused entry in Sudanese ports in February 2012, docked in the Saudi port of Jeddah, with a Saudi Foreign Ministry statement describing the visit as routine. The Iranian Press TV news channel quoted Iranian Admiral Habibollah Sayyari as saying that Iran began increasing its military presence in international waters over the last few years, deployed ships to the Indian Ocean, and sent two naval ships, for the first time, through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean in February 2011. Sayyari asserted that the objective behind these deployments is the protection Iran's interests.⁴⁸ It goes without saying that this expansion cannot be isolated from the ongoing crisis over the Iranian nuclear program and the potential that a military strike could be directed against Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

Dissension within the Sudanese Government

Following the Israeli bombing of the Yarmuk factory in Khartoum, heated political debates gripped Sudan regarding its relationship with Iran, and sharp disagreements among the ruling group began to surface. On November 3, 2012, in a televised interview on Sudan's Blue Nile channel, Sudan's Foreign Minister Ali Ahmed Karti said that his ministry had no knowledge of the Iranian destroyers' entry to the Sudanese port, and that he heard about the entry from the media.⁴⁹ He added that Iran had previously filed a request for a naval entry of two destroyers, but that his office denied the request. Sudanese reporter Adil al-Baz commented on the issue, saying:

[I]f the government has refused to receive the destroyers, who permitted them to reach our territorial waters and to remain there for four days? Is there an entity, outside the government, that makes decisions? Or are there powerful government figures who are connected to Iran that have

⁴⁷ Praszczuk, "Khartoum allowing Iran," November 12, 2012.

⁴⁸ "The Iranian Navy spreads in international waters," September 3, 2012.

⁴⁹ "Hatta Taktamil al-Sura," interview with Minister Ali Karti conducted by al-Tahir Hasan, Blue Nile Television, November 3, 2012. See the emission on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rC9EnG0agHQ>.

become capable of passing their agenda despite the will of the government, or behind its back?⁵⁰

Al-Baz adds that the foreign minister affirmed that “there are differences within the government over cooperation with Iran,” commenting:

It is natural to find disagreement within the government over secondary matters in foreign policy, such as a decision-maker’s assessment of constantly-changing situations. However, it is really strange to have a disagreement over the state’s strategy on a major issue, such as regional alliances.⁵¹

A New Geostrategic Landscape

The Middle East’s geostrategic landscape began to change following the Arab revolutions that have imposed a new geopolitical reality, which is not yet clear. The rise of Islamist currents in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, in addition to Islamist groups holding a grip in Sudan since 1989, and the prospect of Islamist power in other countries, such as Jordan and Kuwait, are all factors that concern Arab governments, especially in the Gulf. The rise of Islamists also poses a number of key questions. Firstly, to what extent is the Muslim brotherhood ready to give up on their wish to instigate revolutions beyond the confines of the countries they now rule? This dilemma became clear during the war in Kuwait when the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood stood against the expulsion of the Iraqi Army from Kuwait, causing great embarrassment to the Kuwaiti Brotherhood members, who declared that they froze their membership in the International Organization.⁵²

Generally-speaking, the Brotherhood’s hidden agenda keeps resurfacing, even if by accident. For example, Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, was quoted as saying: “the Arab Spring will open the door for the Just Caliphate, and the fallen regimes were focused on preventing the return of this caliphate and guaranteeing Israel’s security.”⁵³ Will the Muslim Brothers, then, openly acknowledge the borders of the national state and refrain from exporting revolutions and destabilizing other Arab

⁵⁰ al-Baz, “Thank You, Karti,” November 6, 2012.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² al-Baghdadi, “The ‘Homeland’ in the Ideology,” p. 203.

⁵³ “Haniyeh: The Arab Spring,” July 20, 2012.

states? The answer to this question may be pivotal for a potential cooperation among Arab countries in a new regional political system. On the other hand, it could also open the way for a new struggle between the Islamist movement, which rose on the back of the recent democratic tide, and Arab monarchic regimes. The region may face a new division not too dissimilar from that which reigned at the height of the Arabist tide in the 1960s, when Arab nationalism also sought to export its own notion of revolution. Nasserist Egypt and its Arab allies effectively split the Arab world into two entities: a “progressive” and a “reactionary” camp. Based on this distinction, former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to send Egyptian troops to support the republicans in their war against monarchists, leading Yemen to witness a proxy war for Arab powers that lasted for seven years. During Nasser’s time, the United Arab Republic, a short-lived political union between Egypt and Syria, built a media machine that was the largest and most effective in the Arab world, focusing attacks on Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchical regimes. Predictably, Saudi Arabia also attacked Nasser’s regime in Egypt. In short, a great polarization took place among Arab countries, leading them to split their loyalties between the two major global camps led by the US and the Soviet Union. Therefore, it is natural to ask whether the Brotherhood’s rise to power in some Arab countries will lead to a new polarization. One could also ask if the spread of the Arab Spring revolutions, and the transformation of slogans into actual, practical policies, will leave each country to adapt according to its needs, and whether this would, subsequently, facilitate Arab solidarity without foreign interference.

With the rise of Islamists, came the opening of the passage of Iranian warships through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, which represented an exceptional event by any measure, one that would have never have occurred under the Mubarak’s presidency. While the event represents a new variable in Egyptian-Iranian relations, as well as a bounty for the central Arab cause in Palestine, Iran continues to publicly support policies of a sectarian nature that are destabilizing the Kingdom of Bahrain, which is in dire need for democratic reform. Iran is also supporting the Huthi movement in Yemen and Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Even more significantly, it is steadily increasing its military presence in the Red Sea, particularly in Sudan and Eritrea. On the other hand, the ships’ passage into the Mediterranean constituted a form of pressure against Israel, and exhibited Egypt’s liberation from Israeli-American dictations in making its national and foreign policy decisions. Additionally, the cooperation between the Sudanese state and the Iranians in the smuggling of Iranian weapons into Gaza has afforded Hamas a better military position and a better situation at the negotiations’ table with the Israelis,

which was evidenced during the recent Gaza War. At the same time, however, Sudanese-Iranian cooperation necessarily stirs the fears of the Saudis and the Gulf governments who, on their part, did nothing to protect or to support Gaza during the siege. The new landscape comes with a lot of complexity, and its benefits and risks are difficult to weigh.

On the Sudanese front, the Islamic government, the only Islamic government in the Arab world not to reach power through the ballots, benefits from Iranian support in order to entrench its rule, particularly in terms of securing the arms supplies that are aiding the government in its ongoing wars with armed movements in peripheral regions, such as South Kordofan and the Blue Nile region. This support also weakens the influence of the Sudanese political opposition and strengthens armed secessionist tendencies, thus increasing the potential for the fragmentation of Sudan. Iran's unconditional support of Sudan's Islamic government also heightens the aversion felt by Sudanese minorities toward Arab and Muslim countries that have consistently stood with the Arab-Muslim component in Sudan in its longstanding conflicts with marginalized Sudanese minorities demanding their rights.

The implication of Sudan's government in smuggling weapons into Gaza, and reports of Iranian intentions to establish land and naval military bases on Sudanese soil, effectively makes Sudan part of the military front against Israel and a target of the Israeli military machine. This situation will no doubt cause worries among a broad segment of Sudanese political factions who, while supporting Arab rights in Palestine, do not find it wise for Sudan to place itself into a military confrontation with Israel given its limited resources and abilities. Furthermore, the increase in Sudanese-Iranian rapprochement will lead Israel to escalate its activities directed against Sudan in Africa, seeking to fragment the country and prevent it from playing any role within the Arab-Israeli conflict. Will Iran, then, be capable of defending Sudan, regardless of risks and costs? Does it intend to do so in the first place? Is Iran genuinely a capable ally that can be relied upon, or is it merely exploiting Sudan while providing it with whatever aid it can spare? These are key questions in light of Iran's current situation under the weight of escalating sanctions, which has led to the decrease of its oil production by an average of one million barrels per day, in addition to a significant devaluation of the national currency.

Finally, many Sudanese wonder how Egypt's Islamic government, an elected government, will deal with the Islamic Sudanese government, which is unelected and came to power through a military coup d'état whose claim to legitimacy originates from

elections similar to those held in Egypt under Mubarak. Where will the Egyptian government stand in the protracted conflict between the Sudanese government, on one side, and the opposition forces and armed peripheral movements, on the other? How does Egypt perceive the Sudanese-Iranian rapprochement, particularly in light of the Iranian military presence, existing and prospective, on Sudan's soil and waters? It goes without saying that Egypt and Sudan's security are entangled; how, then, does Egypt perceive this multifaceted Iranian encroachment in Africa, with Egypt being proposed as a candidate to become the fourth regional power alongside Israel, Turkey, and Iran? At the time of writing, news reports abound on the Egyptian government negotiations with the Iranians through General Qassem Suleimani, head of Iranian intelligence, during his visit to Cairo. Rumors claim that the objective of these talks is to establish cooperation on the intelligence and security level in order for the Muslim Brotherhood government to control the Egyptian Army and entrench its position in power.⁵⁴ The Egyptian government, however, has strongly denied these claims.

Amid all these contradictions, interferences, and entanglements of the geostrategic reality with tactical considerations, which provide Iran with a powerful position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, one must ask if there is an opportunity for an Arab-Arab accord parallel to an Arab-Iranian accord on how to best manage the region on the basis of a partnership to reach the ultimate goal: liberation from the chains of hegemony and Arab weakness and fragmentation that are fuelled by the US. Are there signs for a real recession in the tendency for Arab-Arab and Arab-Iranian conflicts to flare? Will the Arab effort to resist hegemony march along two parallel routes: one directed against Western hegemony and the other against Iranian hegemony? Or in a manner that attempts to restrict Iranians to the logic of regional partnership and mutual benefits, and not that of hegemony.

Conclusion

Iranian-Sudanese rapprochement began during the 1970s, when the Iranian Revolution revived the dreams of revolutionizing Muslim societies through political Islam among Sudanese Islamists. One can contend that Hassan al-Turabi's vision, which became the foundation for the Sudanese Islamic movement, is a deep-rooted, transnational tendency among the founding theorists of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Sayyid Qutb, and is still among the slogans of the Muslim Brotherhood's International

⁵⁴ Tomlinson, "Iranian spy chief's visit to Cairo," January 9, 2013.

Organization. Al-Turabi's main quest was, and remains, the founding of a third Islamic bloc that can confront Western hegemony, an objective that is in line with the Iranian approach to confront the so-called American "colonial arrogance" (*Istikbar*). Al-Turabi, however, was ousted from power, and the Islamist coup in Sudan failed to achieve its objectives domestically, regionally, and internationally. The regime was further isolated on the Arab, African, and international levels, and the country remains in the throes of the sanctions' regime; at the same time, Iran also became isolated and besieged because of its nuclear program.

Currently, Sudan is suffering from international and regional isolation and a crushing economic crisis after the South's secession and the loss of oil reserves. The Islamic regime in Sudan is in need of foreign sponsors today more than any other time. The government is fighting armed rebellions in numerous Sudanese regions and is in dire need for funds and weapons. These factors combined have led to further Sudanese-Iranian rapprochement, particularly in light of the suspicion held by the Gulf toward the Sudanese government. One might ask how Arabs will be able to disentangle tactical from strategic considerations in containing Sudan's Islamic government, while providing funds and support to preserve the Sudanese nation.

Iran found a suitable passageway for the smuggling of weapons into Gaza in Sudan, which provided a regional weight and Islamic stature after Iran appeared to be the only power actively supporting the Palestinian cause. Iran, however, is helped in this by the Arab League's retreat from the arena of resistance against Israel. Iran, on the other hand, has determinedly striven to acquire this Islamic leadership.

In the Red Sea, Iran saw a potential base, and an opportunity to expand the range and diversity of the dissuasion mechanisms protecting it from Israel. There is no doubt that Iran's role, made evident in South Lebanon through Hezbollah's military capabilities during the 2006 War and in 2012 during the war between the Israelis and Hamas, has shifted the power balance between Israel and its immediate regional surroundings. With the presence of the Islamists in power in Egypt, this shift is likely to increase further. Arguably, the impact of this tactical alliance between Iran and the Islamists in Gaza and Sudan will not be limited to the Arab-Israeli front; it will have wide-ranging repercussions that will deeply affect Arab national security, unless Iran becomes a complementary part of the Arab national security matrix according to a balanced formula that does not exchange a Western hegemon for a regional hegemon. Such a balanced formula, however, is not an easy feat.

Arab states have consistently conspired against each other, spied on each other, and weakened each other's security. In the case of Sudan, some Arab countries have contributed to supporting the protest movements in South Sudan, especially Gaddafi's Libya as he was extremely active in supporting the rebellion in the South and in Darfur.⁵⁵ This is in addition to the Gulf-supported conference for opposition forces, "The Asmara Conference on Fundamental Issues" in 1995. Walid Abd al-Hayy says that available data shows that the Arab states have subjected each other to security risks a total of 37 times between 1947 and 2010, an average of once each 1.7 years, a rate that reflects the state of instability in inter-Arab relations.⁵⁶ Based on this history of mutual enmities, the current situation presents new, unprecedented challenges. If the Islamist current continues on its course of flaring revolutions in countries that have not yet experienced them (along the lines of Hassan al-Turabi's thought), instead of focusing on building the national state, the door will re-open for new polarizations and struggles, which typically leads to a waste of energy, resources, and time. In such a conflict, the West will not stand idle, but will attempt to influence the course of the struggle in a manner serving its strategic interests in the region. Similarly, other powers that have begun to resist American unipolarity, such as Russia and China, would also attempt to influence the situation, as would other influential regional powers, such as Iran and Turkey. In such a fashion, the Arab Homeland may fall into a new precipice of wasteful wars and conflicts that is similar, in many ways, to that of the last three decades of the Cold War.

The Arabs and Iran have much in common: they are both victims of Western hegemony and Western attempts to impose their imperial agenda and place their own interests above all regional ones. Arabs and Iranians are also partners in drawing the region's geostrategic map, and no regional security can be achieved without taking this partnership into account. Azmi Bishara argues that "the major deformation in any form of relationship, whether it be one of competition, cooperation, or even conflict, is the absence of a unified Arab side that is in a strategic position to compete with, struggle against, or cooperate with, Iran."⁵⁷ This analysis argues that as soon as the Islamists, who rose to power through Arab revolutions, gain a measure of wisdom, vision, and

⁵⁵ Statement by Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Ahmed Karti to the Kuwaiti news agency on November 28, 2012 upon his visit to the city of Benghazi in Libya.

⁵⁶ al-Hayy, "The Arab System," December 15-17, 2012.

⁵⁷ Bishara, "The Arabs and Iran," p. 26.

liberation from dogmatism and revolutionary dreams, Arab-Iranian relations can be placed on a straight, positive, and productive path.

When it comes to Sudan, however, the country is in dire need of a solution, as governments that do not enjoy genuine popularity—and those that are likely to fail in their attempts to achieve development and stability, as well as live up to the aspirations of their citizens—are often forced to follow pragmatic calculations and do away with principles. With such “pragmatic” policymaking, illogical decisions are bound to be made, and strategic interests are likely to be sacrificed for the sake of temporary, tactical gains.

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