



The Arrival of Islamic Fundamentalism in Sudan

Lorenzo Vidino

Most studies analyzing the history of al-Qaeda have focused on the importance of Afghanistan which, under Taliban rule, became the quintessential sanctuary for a terrorist organization. Yet it can be argued that Sudan had an almost equally important role in al-Qaeda's formation. During the first half of the 1990s, when al-Qaeda was still taking shape, the organization's center of gravity was in Sudan and linked to the powerful Sudanese cleric and religious leader Hasan al-Turabi.

In fact, from April 1991 to May 1996, Osama bin Laden, along with hundreds of al-Qaeda members, lived in Khartoum laying the foundations for his formidable organization. At a time when Islamic fundamentalists and veterans of the Afghan *jihād* were *personae non gratae* in most of the Muslim world, Sudan was the only country that opened its doors to them, providing them with the perfect environment in which to continue their activities. Protected by the most ideologically-driven factions of the Sudanese regime that gained power in a bloodless 1989 coup, al-Qaeda ran training camps, established operational ties with other terrorist organizations, conducted business activities, and planned attacks

in other countries. Although their time in Africa was beneficial to al-Qaeda, for Sudan it bore heavy economic and political costs.

Hasan al-Turabi and Political Islam in Sudan

One of the Muslim Brotherhood's first recruits at the University College of Khartoum was the bright young law student Hasan al-Turabi, son of a *qadi* (religious jurist) from southern Sudan. Upon graduation in 1951, Turabi decided to continue his studies in Europe. There he obtained graduate degrees from the prestigious University of London and the Sorbonne in Paris.¹ By 1965, Turabi was back in Sudan where, thanks to his credentials, he was appointed dean of University of Khartoum's Law School.² An eloquent and charismatic man, Turabi masterfully took advantage of his new position to further the cause of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood and become the organization's secretary-general.³ The university soon became the movement's Sudanese headquarters, with Turabi as the spiritual guide of the new generation of the Sudanese elite. The cadres of university graduates who joined the Brotherhood as students were later deployed to be the vanguard of the movement outside the academic world.⁴ Some of them ran missionary and charitable organizations, aimed at gaining the sympathy of the urban masses. Others infiltrated the institutions of power, obtaining positions in government, media, and the military.

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Turabi was deeply involved in the tumultuous events that characterized Sudan's political life in the 1960s and 1970s, and after leading various Islamist political formations he spent seven years in jail for opposing Colonel Jaafar Numeiri's government. By 1977 Turabi was back in politics as Attorney General and chairman of a special committee tasked with returning "the laws to the compatibility with the *sharia*," established by Numeiri as part of his return to "the Islamic path."⁵ After years spent studying secular law, Turabi always made the implementation of a strict form of *sharia* in Sudan one of the priorities of his political activism. "The Islamic code of *sharia* provides the people with higher laws and values," wrote Turabi in 1992, and "...under *sharia*, no ruler could suppress his own people."⁶ By 1983 many of Turabi's recommendations had been accepted by Numeiri in the September Laws, a first attempt to establish full *sharia* law in Sudan. Still, many provisions were never applied and others were almost immediately abrogated.⁷

Numeiri, fearful of Turabi's growing power, dismissed him from the government in 1983, and Turabi again found himself working from outside political system.⁸ In 1985 Turabi founded the National Islamic Front (NIF), a political party that obtained meager electoral results but managed to wield a certain influence through its elite members. By 1986 Turabi was back in the government and by 1988 he was again Attorney General where he used his influence to re-introduce *sharia* law and derail the peace process in the North-South civil war.⁹

By cooperating with President Mahdi and the parties in power Turabi was ostensibly working through democratic processes. At the same time Turabi began to work on a parallel project to obtain absolute power through a meticulous, long-term NIF plan to infiltrate the state's instruments of power. They focused on the military, something previously done only on a smaller scale. After being dismissed from the Numeiri government, Turabi learned the importance of having the military on his side. He thus designated establishing links with the Army as the NIF's utmost priority. The party set aside

funds to sponsor the education and careers of selected members of the military establishment, devoting particular attention to young and ambitious officers of modest backgrounds. The Brothers even institutionalized their paramilitary branch, the "Special Organization," and opened it to serving military officers.¹⁰

The idea of establishing a NIF fifth-column in the army soon paid dividends. By spring 1989, the NIF strongly opposed President Mahdi's attempt to completely abrogate the September Laws. NIF's leadership understood that the time was ripe for unprecedented actions. Ali Osman Mohammed Taha, NIF's second in command, spent weeks with a young army officer who had received financial support from the NIF throughout his career, Brigadier Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir.¹¹ The NIF decided that Bashir, an ambitious man with no strong ideological convictions, would lead a group of officers in a coup against Mahdi. By June, as tensions over the September Laws were dividing a country already plagued by civil war and famine, the plot had been finalized in all its details. On the night of June 30, the army went into action and within a few hours the government was overthrown, and Mahdi and other top politicians incarcerated.

The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), as the new regime called itself, had very limited political experience and no vision, ideological inclination, or plan for the future. Most of them had been groomed by the NIF for a long time and were effectively puppets of the NIF leadership. As soon as it obtained power, the RCC made radical changes: the old elite was pushed aside, political parties were banned, and intellectuals opposed to the government were imprisoned. NIF and Turabi loyalists occupied most key positions and began Islamizing the country with unprecedented intensity.¹² While officially all these moves were made by the RCC and President Bashir, the role of the NIF was apparent to all. Despite official claims, various reports indicated that decisions were made by an NIF-dominated *majlis* rather than the RCC.¹³ As Gabriel Warburg noted, "the NIF's ideology and political program were implemented by President Bashir and his fellow-offices, while al-Turabi and

his colleagues soon became the power behind the throne.”¹⁴

The 1989 bloodless coup was a personal triumph for Turabi. By indirectly seizing power he could finally impose his political vision on the country. His first targets were those Muslims who embraced a different vision of Islam, such as secularists and the *turuq* (Islamic mystics). Turabi, like all revivalists, was a dogged opponent of the separation of mosque and state and considered that various sects, such as the Sufi *tariqa*, deviants from the righteous path. His convictions, which clash with centuries of Sudanese traditions, are enshrined in the NIF’s official Charter: “Muslims are a majority in the Sudan, and they are unitarian in their religious approach to life, and they do not espouse secularism or accept it politically.”¹⁵ His next steps included the re-introduction of a strict interpretation of *sharia* law, and the intensification of the conflict with the rebels in the South, which was increasingly defined in a religious term as a *jihad*.¹⁶

And while at home occupied with crafting Africa’s first Islamic state from behind the scenes, Turabi also focused on relations with the outside. Now that he had obtained power in Sudan, Turabi’s plan was to use his country as a base for Islamic revivalism worldwide. An analysis of Turabi’s thinking explains why this move was predictable. While most Sudanese perceived themselves primarily as members of a certain *tariqa*, Turabi transcends this limited affiliation and regards all Muslims only as members of the Islamic *Umma*. Moreover, the concept of nation is foreign to Turabi’s mentality, which views African nations as “only the legacy of colonialist cartographers,”¹⁷ man-made entities that break the unity of the Muslim nation. Throughout his life Turabi had kept close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood’s global network and, by his own admission, he knew “every Islamic movement in the world, secret or public.”¹⁸ It is not surprising

that Turabi would open Sudan’s doors to his affiliates throughout the world. “Fellow Muslims living in alien countries have to be supported,” declared Turabi, “...Islamic movements, already emancipated from nationalist ideology, are interacting more intensively across the world.”¹⁹ Turabi saw his country as the ideal place where this interaction among various Islamist groups could take place.

In 1991 Turabi realized his dream of uniting Islamist movements from the entire Muslim world by creating the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress (PAIC), a pan-Islamic organization that met annually in Khartoum. The creation of the PAIC was “the culmination of a quarter-century of study, political activity, and international travel by Turabi,” was described by Turabi himself in grandiose terms as “the most significant event since the collapse of the Caliphate.”²⁰ The list of participants to the PAIC’s first assembly, which was held in Khartoum in April of 1991, reads like a who’s who of modern terrorism. It encompasses radical groups such as the Philippines’ Abu Sayaf, the Algerian FIS, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and the Palestinian Hamas.²¹ The participants voted a resolution pledging to work together to “challenge and defy the tyrannical West.”²²

Turabi’s vision of pan-Islamic unity also included a successful attempt to bridge the gap dividing Sunni and Shi’a. In 1991 Turabi invited the President of Iran, Hojatoleslam Rafsanjani, to Sudan. Rafsanjani’s visit, the first of an Iranian head of state to Sudan since the 1979 Islamic revolution, was part of Tehran’s attempt to mend relations with the rest of the Muslim world and end a decade of isolation. Turabi, who had always expressed his admiration for Khomeini, saw the visit as an opportunity to create a larger Islamic front and to obtain support for his own Islamic project. The Iranians were happy to comply. After stating Tehran’s support for the jihad Khartoum

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was fighting in the south and declaring Sudan “the vanguard of the Islamic revolution in the African continent,”²³ Rafsanjani signed various protocols, including one with which he pledged

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\$300 million in weapons to be delivered to Sudan within a year.²⁴ Over the next months, strategic cooperation among the two countries intensified. Eventually, Tehran sent hundreds of *Pasdaran*

(Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) to Sudan to train both the Sudanese army and Arab militants training in local training camps.²⁵

By 1992 U.S. authorities talked of a “Tehran-Khartoum axis.” Analysts at the State Department warned that the NIF, “under the leadership of Hassan al-Turabi, has intensified its domination of the government of Sudanese President General Bashir and has been the main advocate of closer relations with radical groups and their sponsors.”²⁶ Sudan, traditionally playing only a marginal role in the history of Islam, found itself suddenly propelled at the forefront of the Islamic revivalist movement.

Bin Laden Moves to Sudan

Reports on the early days of Osama Bin Laden are somewhat sketchy and often conflicting. However, it is certain that by the second half of the 1980s Bin Laden had become one of the foreign *mujahedeen* leaders fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. As the conflict came to an end, Bin Laden and his spiritual mentor, Abdullah Azzam, agreed that the organization which so successfully brought together thousands of committed *jihadis* should continue its operations beyond Afghanistan. The men decided their group would be a sort of foundation, a base (“*al-Qaeda*”) for a larger movement involved in a larger *jihad*. According to the 9/11 Commission, by 1988 Bin Laden was the undisputed *emir* of al-Qaeda, which ran training camps between Pakistan and Afghanistan and organized itself into a more functional structure.²⁷ Nevertheless, the civil war that broke out in Afghanistan as the

Soviets left forced Bin Laden to leave the country and return to his native Saudi Arabia.

Bin Laden became increasingly disaffected with the royal Al Saud family, seeing it as corrupt, un-Islamic, and pro-American. When Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Bin Laden approached the royal family and suggested that the *mujahedeen* could be deployed to defeat Saddam’s forces. When the monarchy chose instead to permit American troops on its soil, Bin Laden joined part of the Saudi clergy denouncing this agreement as un-Islamic because it placed non-Muslim forces on sacred land. Riyadh, determined to silence opposition, took away Bin Laden’s passport. He then emigrated with the help of a dissident member of the royal family, landing in Peshawar.²⁸ Pakistani authorities, however, were cracking down on Islamic fundamentalists; and Bin Laden himself was allegedly targeted for assassination by the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Afghanistan was now ravaged by the civil war and could not have been used as a base of operations by al-Qaeda.

As Bin Laden began to look for a new base of operations, a delegation from the Sudanese NIF visited him in Peshawar and suggested he relocate to their country. The Sudanese offer could not have come at a better time. Bin Laden was desperate to find a new sanctuary for his growing but baseless organization, and Sudan, with its newly established Islamist government, was his best and perhaps only choice. Bin Laden had known Turabi for a long time. The two men respected each other and shared the same militant interpretation of Islam. The Saudi knew that Sudan was in desperate need of money, and Bin Laden was glad to provide in the name of founding a truly Islamic state. The 9/11 Commission Report says, “Bin Laden agreed to help Turabi in an ongoing war against African Christian separatists in southern Sudan and also to do some road building. Turabi, in return, would let Bin Laden use Sudan in preparations for *jihad*.”²⁹

In May 1991 Bin Laden flew on a private jet from Peshawar to Khartoum where, according to the State Department, “he was welcomed by NIF

leader Hasan al-Turabi.³⁰ After a short stay in a hotel, Bin Laden established his headquarters in a rented villa in the fashionable Riyadh section of Khartoum, which was heavily populated with Saudis.³¹ In the following months Bin Laden rented other villas and some office space for his family (three wives and four sons) and his closest collaborators. A few days after Bin Laden's arrival in the Sudanese capital, Turabi held a lavish party in his honor. In his speech Turabi reportedly praised Bin Laden's endeavors in Afghanistan and announced that the Saudi would be a member and adviser of the NIF. At the very same gathering Bin Laden allegedly announced a \$5 million donation he had made as an initial fee for the membership.³² The personal relationship between the two charismatic leaders grew progressively closer. Bin Laden married Turabi's niece as his third wife³³ and began to befriend Turabi's son Isam, with whom he shared a passion for pure-bred Arabian horses.³⁴

The close relationship between Bin Laden and Turabi, the *de facto* ruler of Sudan, allowed al-Qaeda to flourish. Turabi appointed a senior member of Sudanese intelligence, Colonel Abd al-Basit Hamza, as a liaison to al-Qaeda, and cooperation between the two parties became very close. The Sudanese government immediately provided a few hundred genuine Sudanese passports for al-Qaeda members, and some of them were given actual Sudanese citizenship. While the rest of the world was hunting for them, large groups of Afghan Arabs soon settled in the friendly African country and, reportedly, by the end of 1991 there were between 1,000 and 2,000 members of al-Qaeda in Sudan.³⁵

Economic Symbiosis

While the ideological link between Turabi and Bin Laden constituted a clear motivation for Turabi's hospitality, more ordinary reasons also contributed to the decision. Turabi, a visionary with a very pragmatic mind, had long realized the importance of financial backing for his desired Islamic revival, which required a dynamic effort that encompassed education, propaganda, and overt and covert military activities. The underdeveloped Sudanese economy could not

sustain such efforts, and so Turabi looked abroad for like-minded sponsors. Bin Laden--extremely wealthy, well-connected to the Gulf elites, a fervent believer in the most conservative version of Islam-- must have been Turabi's ideal choice to bankroll his Islamic project. Turabi's reasoning was correct: From a purely financial point of view, Bin Laden's sojourn benefited the Sudanese economy, at least initially. Knowledgeable Sudanese businessmen estimate that Bin Laden brought \$350 million.³⁶ The figure is probably exaggerated, but the Saudi financier invested heavily in the Sudan.

Bin Laden had reportedly visited Sudan and met Turabi in the mid-1980s. He claimed to have surveyed business and agricultural investment opportunities in Sudan as early as 1983.³⁷ By 1990, Bin Laden had invested in "several business ventures" in Sudan.³⁸ While still in Afghanistan, Bin Laden dispatched one of his most trusted lieutenants, Mamdouh Salim, to Sudan to explore investment opportunities there.³⁹ Upon his return to Afghanistan, Salim urged that Bin Laden establish activities in Sudan and relocate his organization there. In 1989 al-Qaeda incorporated Wadi al-Aqiq Company, Ltd., a Khartoum-based import-export firm, and dispatched Jamal Ahmad Muhammad al Fadl, a Sudanese member of the organization, to Sudan to "purchase property and rent office space."⁴⁰ More substantial transactions began as soon as the Saudi settled in Khartoum.⁴¹

Reportedly, the day after the party where Bin Laden donated \$5 million to the NIF, Turabi ordered all government officials to grant complete customs exemption to the Saudi tycoon and his associates.⁴² Later, the Sudanese government ordered that all imports by Bin Laden be exempt from inspection or taxation.⁴³ Close business cooperation with the NIF and the Sudanese government immediately followed. According to the State Department, Bin Laden formed "symbiotic business relationships with wealthy NIF members by undertaking civil infrastructure development projects on the regime's behalf."⁴⁴ The first large project Bin Laden worked on in Sudan was the construction of the 700-kilometer Tahaddi road, linking Khartoum with the

northern cities of Um Durman, Shindi, Atbarah, and Dangala. The road was built by 600 men working for a company set up by Bin Laden in Sudan, the Al-Hijrah for Construction and Development, Ltd.⁴⁵ By using the Quranic term *Hijrah*, referring to the temporary exile of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, Bin Laden highlighted how he saw his situation as leader of “true Muslims” forced into exile by infidels (the Saudi monarchy). Al-Hijrah also participated in a consortium that built Port Sudan’s new airport, the country’s second-largest. The airport was financed by the Saudi Development Bank in cooperation with one of Osama Bin Laden’s brother, Umar Mohammad, and Abu Bakr al Humayd, a top executive for the Saudi Binladen Group, the multi-billion dollar holding of the Bin Laden family.⁴⁶ According to *Al Quds al Arabi*, Bin Laden was the guest of honor at the airport’s inauguration ceremony and donated \$2.5 million to operate it.⁴⁷

Over the next few months of his sojourn Bin Laden opened more companies that operated in various commercial fields. For the Sudanese Government, custom exemptions were a small price to pay in exchange for all the benefits derived from partnering with Bin Laden. The Saudi began to invest in various fields and regions of the country, providing a much-needed boost to the depleted Sudanese economy. Bin Laden’s economic support became even more important after 1993, when the country was put on the list of state supporters of terrorism by the United States. According to reports, Bin Laden loaned the regime \$80 million to import wheat, just as a shortage was forcing millions of Sudanese to stand in line for a meager ration of bread.⁴⁸ The Saudi billionaire often paid the bill for Sudan’s oil imports and personally guaranteed the payment of some weapons purchases made by the Sudanese government. When sanctions against Sudan caused problems exporting cotton, Bin Laden reportedly stepped in and purchased large quantities of it in hard foreign currency.⁴⁹ And when the government did not have the money to pay him for the construction of infrastructure he was given rights in perpetuity to

a million acres farmland by the delta of the river Gash.⁵⁰

To conduct such high-level transactions, Bin Laden could count on a relatively efficient banking system which, more importantly, responded to the religious standards he demanded. Since the early 1970s Turabi had understood the need to develop and modernize the country’s traditional Islamic banking system and reached out to his powerful connections in Saudi Arabia for help. At the same time, leading businessmen from the conservative kingdom established the first large financial institutions that attempted to combine the needs of modern banking with the respect of traditional Islamic law (chiefly the prohibition of *riba*, interests on money lent). By the beginning of the 1980s Turabi had managed to attract various wealthy investors from Saudi Arabia, who incorporated several banks that operated under *sharia* principles. In many cases these banks were run by Sudanese *mughtarbin* who had embraced a more conservative strain of Islam while living in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The Perfect Base for Jihad

Complacent banks, customs exemptions, tax privileges, and, more generally, full support by the Sudanese government, allowed Bin Laden’s commercial activities to flourish. But money has never been Bin Laden’s highest aspiration. He used his newfound advantageous position to solidify his nascent organization, al-Qaeda. As Don Petterson, U.S. Ambassador to Sudan during the Bin Laden era, explains in his memoir, *Inside Sudan*, “the support [Bin Laden] received from Bashir, Turabi, and the Sudanese intelligence services and military was crucial to both his business and his terrorist activities.”⁵¹ Al-Qaeda’s commercial activities were to be used simply as a tool for the more important goal of building a stronger al-Qaeda, not to make profit. If profit were made, it was reinvested in the organization.

Bin Laden worked to relocate as many “Afghan-Arab” veterans as possible from Afghanistan to Sudan, setting aside \$2 million for the task in an effort that continued at least three years.⁵² When the Pakistani government launched

a crackdown against Afghan Arabs operating on its territory in May 1983, Bin Laden financed the travel of 300 to 480 *mujahedeen* to Sudan.⁵³ The men, experienced *jihadis* who would have faced either prison or death in their home countries, found a safe haven in Sudan and many of them began to work for the companies set up by Bin Laden.⁵⁴ Their new positions as officers for Bin Laden's companies allowed many al-Qaeda operatives to travel the world and do business for the organization posing as legitimate businessmen. In this fashion, members of al-Qaeda acquired weapons, explosives, and technical equipment for terrorist operations from Belarus to China and from Malaysia to Austria.⁵⁵ Al-Qaeda even managed to have one of its operatives buy an airplane in Tucson, Arizona, and fly it all the way to Sudan. The aircraft was intended to transport American Stinger Anti-Aircraft missiles from Pakistan to Sudan, although that missile transport never took place.⁵⁶

While some Afghan Arabs worked in Bin Laden's companies, others began to organize training camps for recruits coming from throughout the Muslim world. By 1994 Bin Laden had set up at least three terrorist training camps in northern Sudan "in cooperation with the NIF."⁵⁷ Other reports suggest that al-Qaeda ran up to 23 camps in the country and that the volunteers were divided by nationality into different facilities.⁵⁸ Run by veterans of the Afghan conflict, the camps trained the new generation of *jihadis* in forgery, covert communications, weapons, and explosives. While the exact number of recruits trained in Sudan is unclear, it is known that more than 2,000 trainees came from Egypt alone despite legislation passed by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that made it illegal for Egyptian citizens to receive unauthorized training abroad.⁵⁹

Despite claims to the contrary, the Sudanese government's involvement in Bin Laden's terrorist activities was profound. Sudan played a key role in relocating of hundreds of Afghan Arabs and militants from various Middle Eastern countries, as it was one of the few countries that allowed Arabs to enter without a visa.⁶⁰ At a time when Afghanistan was engulfed in civil war and most Arab countries were jailing returnees from

the Afghan jihad, Sudan's hospitality became crucially important. "This is a safe haven of choice," commented a U.S. official in 1992 to the *New York Times*. "They can come and go as they please. They operate here with impunity."⁶¹ Sudanese officials also made sure that al-Qaeda members traveling to Sudan could enter and leave the country without having their passports stamped. A stamp from Sudan, known for supporting terrorists, would garner attention from immigration officials elsewhere.⁶²

Cooperation also extended to chemical weapons, an endeavor that interested both parties. Jamal al Fadl, a former high-ranking al-Qaeda operative who testified at the 2001 African Embassies bombings trial, recounted a meeting in a Khartoum suburb with al-Qaeda and Sudanese army officials to discuss the joint manufacture of chemical weapons.⁶³ Al-Fadl's testimony also revealed how Sudanese intelligence officials routinely handled any problems between al-Qaeda and the local population.

Protected by the Sudanese government, Bin Laden was laying the foundations of a global terrorist movement, establishing connections with organization from throughout the Muslim world. He created the Islamic Army Shura which, according to the 9/11 Commission, was to serve as "the coordinating body for the consortium of terrorist groups with which he was forging alliances."⁶⁴ The Shura was composed of al-Qaeda's leadership and top members of terrorist organizations from throughout the Muslim world, including of the Egyptian Gamaa Islamiya; the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front; Palestinian Hamas; insurgents from Libya, Yemen and Eritrea; militants from Jamat-e Islami and other Pakistani groups; and Somali tribal warriors. All trained together in al-Qaeda's Sudanese camps. Reportedly, every Thursday the groups' leadership would meet at a large farm purchased

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by Bin Laden on the banks of the Nile to discuss future operations.⁶⁵

Iran also played a significant role in providing financial and military support at the training camps to “spread the message of Khomeini in Sudan,” as the Iranian Ayatollah Yazdi claimed.⁶⁶ The Iranians sent several top members of the Revolutionary Guard as trainers in various Sudanese camps. Members of the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah taught bomb-making skills. Tehran sent Majid Kamal formerly Iran’s ambassador to Lebanon and a key participant in

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founding Hezbollah, to supervise its Sudanese operation.⁶⁷ Al-Qaeda immediately established relations with both Iran and Hezbollah, clear proof that “Sunni-Shi’a divisions did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist activities,” as the 9/11 Commission noted.⁶⁸ Islamic internationalism, as preached by Turabi in the PAIC, materialized on

the ground in the training camps, as militants from various groups began to work side by side and establish enduring ties.

A Base for Attacks

While al-Qaeda’s Sudanese era focused primarily on creating a solid structure, the organization did manage to generate attacks from Khartoum. While not particularly sophisticated compared to the attacks that followed, they already bore the hallmarks of al-Qaeda.

After a few months in Sudan, al-Qaeda’s *majlis al shura* began issuing *fatwas*, or religious decrees, that justified the group’s operations and, in most cases, preceded an attack. The indictment of two al-Qaeda operatives charged for their role in the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* reveals that “[a]t various times in or about 1992, coconspirator Osama Bin Laden, working together with members of the fatwa committee of al-Qaeda,

disseminated *fatwas* to other members and associates of al-Qaeda that the United States forces stationed on the Arabian Peninsula, including both Saudi Arabia and Yemen, should be attacked.”⁶⁹ The operation came shortly after the religious decree.

In December 1992 Islamic extremists attempted to bomb two hotels in Aden, Yemen that housed 100 U.S. servicemen billeted there to support UN relief operations in Somalia. The perpetrators, Yemeni radicals who had graduated from al-Qaeda’s camps in Sudan,⁷⁰ were led by a Yemeni member of the group’s Islamic Army Shura and claimed that Bin Laden financed their group.⁷¹ The failed operation, in which only two Austrian tourists died because U.S. forces had already left, was only the first attack against U.S. forces planned in Sudan and an ominous precursor to the bombing of the USS *Cole*.

A more favorable opportunity to attack U.S. forces came in 1993 with increased American engagement in the Somali civil war. By spring, thousands of U.S. troops were stationed in Somalia, providing al-Qaeda with an unprecedented opportunity to attack. The group did not have the strength to face the U.S. army directly and thus limited its activities to active support for the most radical Somali militia groups. According to the 9/11 Commission, a Nairobi-based al-Qaeda cell smuggled weapons to Somalia and “scores of trainers,” including some of the most senior members of al-Qaeda’s military committee, entered the war-torn country and worked closely with Somali warlords.⁷² Al-Qaeda’s involvement in Somalia, unknown at the time, was confirmed by Bin Laden himself during his first historic interview with a Western media outlet. In 1997 Bin Laden told CNN that one of his proudest achievements while based in Sudan was the role of his Afghan Arabs played in the 1993 killings of more than a dozen American soldiers during the famous Black Hawk Down incident.⁷³

In June 1993 five Sudanese nationals were among those arrested on suspicion of plotting to bomb the United Nations, the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, and the FBI headquarters in New York⁷⁴ as a follow-up to the February bombing of the World Trade Center. According to

news reports, U.S. intelligence officials came to “believe that the highest levels of the Sudanese government were involved in the bombing plot.”⁷⁵ U.S. intelligence apparently concluded that Siraj Yousif, counselor to the Sudanese U.N. mission, and Ahmed Mohamed, the third secretary to the mission, were actually Sudanese intelligence officers.⁷⁶ Both Yousif and Mohamed allegedly helped the five Sudanese men arrested for plotting the “Day of Terror.”⁷⁷ While denying that he aided the plotters, Yousif admitted that he had met “several times” with Siddig Ibrahim Siddig Ali, the alleged ringleader of the plot,⁷⁸ who had boasted of “connections” that he had in Sudan’s UN delegation.⁷⁹

Evidence of official Sudanese government involvement in the plan was culled from two months of electronic and physical surveillance of the Sudanese mission. In one taped conversation between Siddig Ali and Emad Salem, a U.S. government informant, Salem asked, “The brothers who are in the Sudanese embassy – are they going to be with us?” Siddig Ali responded, “God willing, yes. There is someone who is going to help me, high-level man.”⁸⁰ The plotters planned to enter the UN garage in the Sudanese mission’s van, whose diplomatic plates would enable the vehicle to bypass security. After the attack, the Sudanese mission would help with the escape. When Emad Salem asked Siddig Ali whether they would need a visa “to get away from the scene for awhile” after they finished their “little event,” Ali replied, “Yes. For you, personally, you should have no problem because I will take you during the next few days to the office of the ambassador, have you met the consul and his deputy?”⁸¹ Federal investigators also learned that when Sudan’s ambassador to the UN, Ahmed Suliman, found out about the plot, he confronted Hassan Turabi.⁸² “Turabi told the ambassador to mind his own business.” In February 1995, federal prosecutors placed the Sudanese mission to the UN on the list of 172 people and institutions “who may be alleged as co-conspirators” in the bombing plot.⁸³

Before 1989 Sudan had been considered a close ally of the United States, but this position was reversed immediately after the coup. All

military and economic aid was cut off immediately by Washington.⁸⁴ The State Department had warned since 1992 about Sudan’s support for terrorist groups, and the House Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare had revealed that Sudan, along with Iran, had begun “active preparations for long-term terrorist operations in Western Europe.”⁸⁵ The evidence from the thwarted New York plot, combined with a wealth of information the various Islamist groups operating in Sudan, led the U.S. government to place Sudan on the list of states sponsoring terrorism. Sudan protested vehemently, claiming to be targeted because of its Islamic orientation and its support of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War.⁸⁶

Sudan’s Political Isolation and Bin Laden’s Departure

While the United States led efforts to isolate Sudan in the global community, many Middle Eastern countries also grew increasingly hostile toward Khartoum. Tensions between Egypt and Sudan had been mounting since the 1989 coup, as Cairo was troubled by Khartoum’s Islamist direction and friendly relationship with Iran. Egypt repeatedly accused the Bashir government of supporting terrorist groups operating inside Egypt. The amount of evidence collected by Egyptian authorities was overwhelming. Cairo became aware that thousands of Egyptian militants were training inside Sudan, and that Ayman al Zawahiri, then head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (and al-Qaeda’s second in command since the two groups merged in 1998), had opened three camps inside the country with the blessing of Turabi and the financial support of Tehran.⁸⁷ But intelligence also revealed that al-Qaeda, from its Sudanese refuge, was sponsoring anti-Mubarak activities worldwide. In May 1993, a joint Egyptian-Saudi investigation revealed that Bin Laden was funneling money to Egyptian extremists to buy weapons, printing presses, and other equipment.⁸⁸ Bin Laden was also believed to have been the key financier behind the Kunar training camp in Afghanistan, providing terrorist training to Egyptian militants.⁸⁹

Sudan's relations with most other Arab and African countries also deteriorated due to terrorism. Eritrea and Ethiopia vigorously accused Sudan of supporting radical activities on their soil,⁹⁰ and Tunisia recalled its ambassador to Khartoum because of the Sudanese government's alleged support of a cell planning attacks against Tunisian targets in Europe.⁹¹ Saudi Arabia, one of the country's top sponsors, also began to voice its complaints over Sudan's open door policy towards terrorist groups. In 1994 the Saudi government revoked Bin Laden's citizenship and began to urge Khartoum to stop hosting him, intensifying its pressure after the November 1995 bombing of the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh.⁹² Pressured by their paymasters, Sudanese officials began to reassess their policies, and Bashir stated that Bin Laden's presence in the country constituted a great embarrassment to him, jeopardizing Sudan's relationship with Saudi Arabia.⁹³

Throughout the first half of the 1990s Turabi and the Sudanese government vigorously refuted the international community's allegations that terrorist organizations were operating on Sudanese territory. "As for harboring terrorists," Turabi wrote in 1992, "Let me say this: We have no interest in terrorism. The Koran is very explicit against individual acts of terrorism"⁹⁴ In some cases, though, Bashir had problems keeping his constituency and declared that it was Sudan's duty to protect *mujahedeen* who sought refuge.⁹⁵ But there is a deeper meaning to Turabi's denial: the Western-educated lawyer has always been extremely gifted in the art of *taqiya*, the art of double-speaking, and his claim that no terrorist organization was operating in Sudan was a quintessential exercise in it. From Turabi's perspective, in fact, organizations like Hamas, al-Qaeda, or Hezbollah, are not terrorist groups, but simply Islamic movements fighting for a legitimate cause. Commenting on a 1994 bombing carried out by Hamas in Israel in which 22 people

were killed, Turabi defined the attack "an honorable act."⁹⁶ Given this approach, Turabi's claim seems to be covered in a veil of *taqiya*. Technically Turabi was not lying: no group that corresponds to his definition of "terrorist" was actually operating in Sudan.

When Sudan realized its ravaged economy could not possibly withstand the international community's pressure, less ideological factions decided to sever the ties to the most extreme terrorist groups

Nevertheless, complete denials and exercises in *taqiya* had no effect. By 1996 Sudan was virtually isolated in the international community, and its friends included only other pariah states such as Iran and Afghanistan.⁹⁷ In April, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning Khartoum and began to implement sanctions.⁹⁸ When Sudan realized its ravaged economy could not possibly withstand the international community's

pressure, less ideological factions decided to sever the ties to the most extreme terrorist groups. A few days after the UN resolution, President Bashir, increasingly independent from Turabi, issued a stern warning to all foreign militants based in Sudan, threatening them with deportation if they continued activities against foreign governments.⁹⁹

In the weeks following the UN resolution, the pressure on Bin Laden became unbearable. Sudanese officials reportedly approached the Saudi government and offered to expel Bin Laden to Riyadh if the Saudis promised to pardon him.¹⁰⁰ Sudanese government sources later claimed that Khartoum also approached the CIA and offered to deliver Bin Laden to the United States, even though the claim has been officially denied by CIA Director George Tenet.¹⁰¹ Whatever the circumstances, it is clear that the less ideological—and, by that time, prevailing—faction of the Sudanese government were more than willing to give up Bin Laden in exchange for an end to the country's international isolation. Turabi kept repeating that Bin Laden was an ordinary man who was "striving for the sake of Islam" and had been unjustly accused of being involved with terrorism.¹⁰² Yet, at the end, he

realized he was fighting a lost cause and gave up. Turabi's son succinctly noted: "There were parties in the government that arranged his [Bin Laden's] departure with the United States. These parties are against my father's trends."¹⁰³

Most likely afraid of being deported to Saudi Arabia, Osama Bin Laden quietly boarded a chartered flight in Khartoum on May 19, 1996, along with his family and few bodyguards. After a refueling stopover in the United Arab Emirates, the party landed in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.¹⁰⁴ After five years in Sudan, Bin Laden found himself financially weakened, as most of his Sudanese businesses were liquidated by the Sudanese government (Bin Laden would later describe the NIF as "a mixture of religion and organized crime," claiming to have lost more than \$160 million in Sudan).¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the time

spent in the African country was crucial to the development of al-Qaeda. In the following years, al-Qaeda benefited immensely from the experience and contacts it developed in Sudan and grew to be the world's most dangerous terrorist organization. Al-Qaeda's five years in Sudan show just how much a terrorist organization can benefit from receiving state support and sanctuary.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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