

THE SUDANESE ARMY: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION ON RELIGIOUS POLITICIZATION

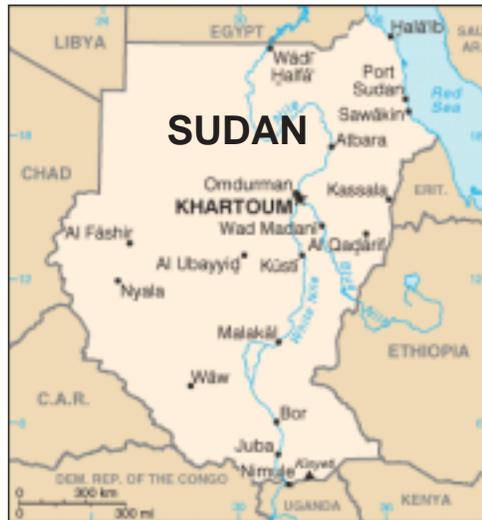
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER YOUSSEF ABOUL-ENEIN

Precious little has been written on the Sudanese Army, yet Sudan remains an area of interest in the war on terrorism. Africa's largest nation has sponsored training camps financed by Bin Laden, and its leadership had warmed up to the Al-Qaeda leader, making Sudan his base of operations from 1991-1995. Sudan still remains on the U.S. list of states that sponsor terrorism, and the Sudanese regime is a military dictatorship on the brink of lapsing into Islamic radicalism and is home to perhaps the most eloquent Islamic fundamentalist thinker today — the Sorbonne-educated Hassan Al-Turabi leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF). Among the few Arabic books available on the Sudanese Army is a single volume written in 1990 by Muhammad Muhammad Ahmed Karrar. His book entitled *Al-Jaysh Al-Sudani Wa Al-Inqaz*, which is translated as *The Sudanese Army and National Salvation* (Khartoum, Sudan: Dar Al-Balad Publisher, 1990) is an important volume for Middle East Foreign Area Officers and those wanting to understand how the Sudanese Army, which effectively rules the nation, can easily fall victim to the aspirations of Al-Qaeda. The book also shows the gradual religious fervor that crept up on Sudanese politics and infected the Army leading to generals searching for an Islamist cause they found in engaging in a civil war against Christians and non-Muslims in southern Sudan and allying themselves with the National Islamic Front in 1989.

Muhammad Karrar is a Sudanese intellectual who has published over a dozen books on Sudanese politics, nationalist movements, revolutions, and communism. Although an agricultural planner by education, his books are known to Arabs, Egyptians, and Sudanese readers. It is important to realize the author is pro-Islamist and wrote his book as a tribute to General Omar Al-Bashir and his Army. Nevertheless, American military planners ought to take time to analyze his works, which is the best treatise on the Sudanese army, its history, and political machinations to date.

Early History of Sudan's Army (1899-1925)

Karrar, begins his book with the destruction of Mahdist forces in 1899 and the establishment of an Anglo-Egyptian condominium



over Sudan. The highest-ranking British officer in Egypt known as the Sirdar also served as Governor General of the Sudan. British Sirdars of Egypt included the likes of Lord Kitchener and General Edmund Allenby. In 1922, after nationalist riots stimulated by Egyptian leader Saad Zaghlul, Egypt gained quasi-independence from Britain, and Ahmed Fuad was declared King Fuad I. The Egyptians wanted more oversight in the Sudan and created specialized units of Sudanese auxiliaries within the Egyptian Army called Al-Awtirah. This became the nucleus of the modern Sudanese Army.

In 1922, Sudanese First Lieutenant Ali Abdul-Latif refused to salute a superior British officer, arguing this violated the sovereignty of Sudan and the oath he took to serve under King Fuad of Egypt. This act of insubordination led him to be cashiered and imprisoned. In 1924, he became the focal point of mass riots and a revolt known as the White Flag Revolt. The Sudanese military school rioted and urban battles occurred in Khartoum and Omdurman. First Lieutenant Abdul-Fadeel Al-Maz acquired weapons at an armory and led an armed insurrection, starting at the military training academy, against British authority and Vice-Sirdar General Huddleston. British patience on pacifying the Sudan and the murder of Governor General and Sirdar Lee Stack in November in broad daylight in Cairo, Egypt, led to London imposing harsh measures on Egypt and using the assassination as a pretext to assert imperial authority over the Sudan. Among the reparations, Egypt reluctantly submitted to compensation of 500,000 pounds and the evacuation of Egyptian forces in Sudan. This action by England only made matters worse and eroded the authority of King Fuad I of Egypt, leading Egypt towards its own path of nationalism and anti-British sentiment.

Finding Sudan to be difficult to govern without Egyptian troops and their Sudanese auxiliaries, the British established a stand-alone Sudanese army on January 17, 1925. The Sudanese army was made up primarily of Egyptian-trained Awtirah and was charged with internal security. Five regional commands were created (Eastern, Central, Western, Northern, and Southern). After the 1924 Revolt in the Sudan, the British closed the military

school and reduced the ranks of the Sudanese army from 13,000 to 5,000 troops; Sudan's military training school would not reopen until 1935.

World War II (1935-1945)

To the Sudanese, World War II began not in Poland but with the arrival of Mussolini's forces to Ethiopia in 1935. British planners in Cairo were obsessed with Axis encroachment on the Suez Canal and its links to India and possessions in Asia and Africa. It was decided to reopen Sudan's military school and even include an officer's academy. The British selected Sudan's officers from (Chinese) Gordon's High School, an elite preparatory school that produced Sudan's future officer corps. In 1938, Sudan graduated its first group of officers and between that date and 1944, an average of 50 officers a year were trained. About 25,000 Sudanese enlisted troops would participate in World War II.

Sudanese troops played an important role augmenting allied forces engaging Italians in Ethiopia and in 1943 were deployed to Libya where the Sudanese joined Allied forces in pushing Italians and Rommel's Afrika Korps out of North Africa. This demonstrates a pride to be part of fighting fascists, and this history can be used today as part of an effort to bring Sudan's military leaders to play a constructive role in fighting terrorism.

Evolution of Sudan's Armed Forces (1947-1985)

In 1947, the Sudanese military schools were closed, and the number of Sudanese troops was reduced to 7,570. In 1948, the first Arab-Israeli War broke out. Sudanese Colonel Hamid Saleh Al-Malik selected 250 combat-seasoned soldiers who had seen action in World War II. They arrived in Cairo to participate in a parade and were then dispatched to various units of the Egyptian army. This was a grave mistake, for the Sudanese had fought together in World War II and this broke unit cohesion. The decision was indicative of Egyptian military planners of the period. Forty-three Sudanese were killed in action in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. On July 26, 1952, events in Egypt



were followed closely in the Arab world, discontented officers from the Palestine War led by Nasser and his Free Officers overthrew King Farouk and established a Republic. In 1953, the British and the new Egyptian government reached an agreement that Sudan was to be put on the path of independence. General Ahmed Mohammed became Sudan's first army chief in August 1954. This is significant for the Sudanese, for it was the first time it had an independent army that was not governed by Britain or Egypt.

Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul-Nasser sent Salah Salim, a member of his Free Officers, to Sudan between 1952-1954 to aid the Sudanese in their quest for independence. Sudanese senior officers met and agreed to send a vague message to the timid parliament in Khartoum that if legislatures did not vote positively on a referendum for independence, then the army would take control of the nation by force and declare independence. The referendum was passed unanimously in December 1955, and Sudan became independent on New Year's Day 1956. Sudan's politics were shaped by Nasser's fiery speeches on Arab nationalism, the Algerian War of Independence against the French, and the Suez Crisis. Karrar noted that the army became shaped by leftist politics.

In 1958, Egypt made a gift of four aircraft, which established the Sudanese air force. From 1956-1960, Sudan military assistance came primarily from Egypt. Cairo provided armored vehicles to equip Sudan's first mobile infantry division and by 1960, the Sudanese army possessed the Saladin Armored Division, Commando Regiment, and three artillery battalions. The air force was also provided planes from Britain. Germany gave Sudan its first fast-attack watercraft in 1962, which was the basis for Sudan's Navy. The Germans also established Sudan's first military manufacturing

capability, giving them the ability to manufacture ammunition and the G3 rifle, according to Karrar's book. During this time, Sudan's forces were concentrated in the North and Commando units fought a bush and jungle war in Equatoria in the South. The Arab Muslims of the North who strove for independence were determined to Arabize the Christian south, and a civil war that continues to this day ensued.

After the 1967 Six-Day War, Sudan and Egypt came under firm Soviet influence and the Sudanese People's Armed Forces received a large infusion of weapons from Moscow. It included T-54 tanks and MiG-17 and 19 fighter-bombers. The years 1967-1968 were pivotal to Sudan's armed forces' development. Aside from Soviet weapons systems, the Sudanese achieved the following:

- Sudanese artillery began integrating 105, 120, and 122-millimeter cannons in its infantry formations;
- A combat engineering section was established;
- Specialized combat units that dealt with maintenance were formed;
- Sudan integrated surface-to-air missiles and anti-air guns into radar command and control net; and
- An armed forces general staff was established.

The heyday of Soviet equipment and military assistance came to an end in 1971 and Sudan's generals turned to North Korea, China, and Egypt for assistance. After the April 1985 revolt that ushered in a more radical government, weapons and military aid came exclusively from Arab states with the primary donors being Iraq, Syria, and Egypt.

Problems of Constant Military Intervention in Sudanese Politics

Karrar's treatment of Sudan's 1956 independent government is unclear, except to say that the threats from the Sudanese army to unilaterally declare independence if the Sudanese legislatures did not vote on a referendum to grant the nation self-rule did not bode well for the new nation. The author's main focus is the 1989 (National Salvation) revolt that removed the civilian government of Sadiq Al-Mahdi and his

Umma Party, bringing in General Omar Hassan Al-Bashir and his Islamic fundamentalist ideologue Sheikh Hassan Al-Turabi, leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), to power.

In 1956, Sudan established its first experiment with democratic governance. It lasted less than 24 months before Sudan's second prime minister tired of political division, labor strikes, and a mutiny of a Southern Sudanese regiment led him to invite General Ibrahim Aboud to take power and impose martial order. Once invited, the Sudanese Army never really left the political scene; in 1964, however, the military was forced out by a popular uprising. Khatim-al-Khalifa became Sudan's prime minister but the inability of civilian leaders to deal with economic problems, famine, and widespread poverty led to a fractionalization of Sudanese society that had its most direct impact on the Sudanese armed forces. The army became divided according to parties (Maoist, Marxist, Communist, Arab Nationalist, Baathist, and Islamist) between 1964 and 1967. During this time, the Sudanese military academy revised its admission procedures and began accepting cadets based on merit, not tribe and family connections.

The factionalism of Sudan's army imploded after the 1967 Six-Day War. Searching for answers to the failure of Arab forces, Sudanese began to tilt away from socialism and Arab nationalism towards Islamic fundamentalism. In May 1969, amidst political chaos, the prime minister dissolved the National Assembly and called for new elections. Public discontent was so great that General Jafar Al-Numeiri seized power and kept it in military hands for 13 years. He dissolved political opposition and thwarted several coup attempts; Numeiri's success in remaining in power was his ability to consolidate Arab nationalist and Islamist groups to battle socialists, Marxists, and communists.

Numeiri's effect on the Sudanese army was to religiously radicalize it to answer the inadequacy of Arab forces in its dispute with Israel. In 1969, the Sudanese military academy offered a degree in Islamic Studies and Dawa (Evangelism). This strict and intolerant brand of Islam charged the army's morale and gave its conflict in the South against non-Muslim Sudanese a new impetus. Between 1973 to the present, Sudanese military officers became indoctrinated in Islamic fundamentalism and became part of what they called a global Islamic Sahwa (Trend).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 confirmed Sudanese beliefs and many Arab nations began to combat the trend in Islamic radicalism. Sudanese Sufi Muslims became targets of attack, yet Numeiri did nothing to stem the tide that would soon remove him from power in 1985 and usher an Islamic radicalized government into Sudan in 1989. In 1983, he imposed Islamic law on Sudan, which stiffened resistance in southern Sudan. Persian Gulf funds flowed into the country, hard currency Numeiri desperately needed. The armed forces became awash with radical Islamic commentaries like Ibn Katheer, Sayid Qutb's literalist interpretation of the Quran entitled *Fee Zilal Al-Quran* (In the Shade of the Quran), and a treatise on early Islamic war fighting skills authored by Major General Mahmoud Khalab of the Sudanese army. The current senior

leadership of the armed forces grew up in Numeiri's Islamic Sahwa. It was a only a matter of time before cleric Hassan Al-Turabi was able to influence events and be a behind-the-scenes power broker for Sudan's generals who seized power in 1989 and allowed many Jihadist groups to find safe haven in the country.

In 1985, Numeiri was overthrown and power was handed over to civilian control under Sadiq Al-Mahdi. His government would be charged with having its own militia in the Umma Party. He appointed his son to a top military position, and his efforts to curb the army led to losses against non-Muslim insurgents in southern Sudan. Discontent within the ranks bubbled to the surface with an attempted coup that failed in December 1988, and Al-Mahdi was saved by his loyalist Defense Minister Field Marshal Abdul-Majid Khaleel. However, the prime minister resigned in February 1989, leading to 250 senior Sudanese military officers convening a meeting to discuss the political situation. Food riots worsened, and in June 1989, General Omar Al-Basheer seized power and formed a 15-person Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) for National Salvation. The coup was bloodless and invoked Article 15 of Sudan's 1985 Constitution that asserted the military right to defend the Sudanese people and its territorial integrity. Although wanting to resolve the conflict in the South, it became impossible with General Al-Basheer's Islamic puritanical views and his closeness to the National Islamic Front and its leader cleric Hassan Al-Turabi.

Talks are currently ongoing in Kenya, and Egypt is playing a constructive role in bringing the parties together to resolve this war that is approaching its fifth decade. Between 1996 and 2000, the cleric Al-Turabi and General Bashir battled one another, with Turabi seizing control in 1996 and placing religious fundamentalist officers in key posts. After popular elections though, Bashir returned to power and had Turabi arrested. Bashir refused to consider a separation of religion and state in a nation of one million square miles, the largest in Africa with a population of 600 ethnic groups. The demography speaks for the need for Sudan to secularize its political institutions. The Sudanese army can take pride in its accomplishments in World War II, yet years of radicalization will require many more years to professionalize the armed forces and reintroduce a new generation to proper civil-military affairs. Although pro-military and pro-religion in state affairs, Karrar's book offers a unique glimpse into the devolving of Sudan's military.

Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein is a Middle East Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense. For the past several years he has worked with *Military Review* to highlight works of military interest by Arab authors to the pages of the journal. The translation and analysis from Arabic represents his understanding of the material.

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