As the only country in the Horn of Africa included in the U.S. list of state sponsors of international terrorism, Sudan is key to understanding radical Islamism. It played a major role in the expansion of Islamism since the 1950s, serving as the first country to which the Muslim Brotherhood was exported from its neighbor, Egypt. For decades, Hassan al-Turabi, arguably Sudan’s most prominent and recognizable political figure, led a largely-successful process of state Islamization. This openness led directly to Sudan’s hosting of Osama bin Laden and his network during the early- to mid-1990s. Sudan’s cooperation in the U.S.-led war on
terror, by contrast, is comparatively recent. This role, coupled with the country's history as a defender of Islamism and terrorism, serves to create a muddled vision of Sudan's association with—and attitudes toward—radical Islam.

**ISLAMIST ACTIVITY**

The turn of the 20th century witnessed the politicization of religious movements in Sudan. In the country's first Islamic rebellion, which lasted from 1881 until 1885, Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdullah proclaimed himself the *Mahdi* and declared *jihad* against local rule, which at the time was administered by the British Empire. After defeating the British ruler of Sudan, Major-General Charles Gordon, in the Battle of Khartoum, Abdullah's resulting *Mahdiyya* ruled the Sudan until 1898, when the British retook the country and set up the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.

Islamism in Sudan was truly born, though, in the 1950s, when the ideas of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood seeped through the shared border between the two countries. Sudan's Hassan al-Turabi, born in 1932, was especially inspired by the Brotherhood's Islamist rhetoric, and went on to become secretary general of the newly-created Islamic Charter Front, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1964. Beginning as an Islamist student group, the organization worked for reform through politics with the same goals as its Egyptian progenitor—namely, to create an officially Islamic regime governed by *sharia* law. The group was later renamed the National Islamic Front (NIF), and has also been known as the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood.¹

To fully understand Islamism in Sudan, one must be acquainted with the country's political history, and Turabi's role in it. Turabi has been a key religious and political figure since the 1960s, his ideas influencing the evolution of Islamism both within and outside of Sudan. A politician, intellectual, religious cleric, and sponsor of terrorism, Turabi is today one of most famous Islamist leaders in the world. After studying in London and Paris in the 1950s, Turabi returned to Sudan and quickly decided to enter politics. He then married Wisal al-Mahdi, the sister of Sudanese politician Sadiq al-Mahdi, who led the *Umma* Party and served as prime minister. His first taste of politics took place during the October 1964 revolution against the military government of Ibrahim Abbud—a revolt which returned the country to civilian rule.²

Because of his academic training and familial ties, Turabi was able to rise to prominence in the realm of politics, becoming secretary general of the Islamic Charter Front.³ Echoing the call of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turabi unified disparate Islamic movements (mainly student organizations) in Sudan. The Islamic Charter Front's strategy was to throw its

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¹ 2 WORLD ALMANAC OF ISLAMISM
support behind nationalist leaders who also accepted Islamist principles. Because of this, in 1984, the organization allied itself with Gaafar Nimeiry, the military dictator who, during his second term, had proclaimed his own highly personal version of *sharia* in competition with the Islamists.⁴ They fell out; Turabi was jailed and Nimeiry later overthrown by a coalition of forces that included the NIF. Turabi then undermined the democratically-elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi and picked Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, an unknown brigadier in the Sudanese Army, to conduct a *coup d'état* on June 30, 1989. The coup marked the birth of what one scholar has called “the First Islamist Republic” of Sudan.⁵

After Bashir came to power, Turabi renamed the NIF as *al-Hizb al-Mutammar al-Wataniya* (National Congress Party or NCP) to distinguish it from too close an identification with radical Islam. In 1995 he was elected speaker of the National Assembly. Turabi and the NIF were the real leaders of the government.⁶ But after ten years in power Turabi was overthrown and jailed when he attempted to wrest control from Bashir through radical modifications of the constitution and governmental process. Turabi was released and then re-arrested several times on a variety of charges. He consequently became a sworn enemy of the regime he had created, and launched a rival Islamist party, the Popular Congress Party, which presented an increasingly liberal version of his former beliefs.

Currently, Turabi’s discourse and theory illustrate the evolution of Islamism in Sudan. Because Turabi participated in an attempt at an Islamic government and was frustrated in his efforts, he has a unique perspective. In 1983, he wrote that “[t]he ideological foundation of an Islamic state lies in the doctrine of *tawhid*—the unity of God and human life—as a comprehensive and exclusive program of worship.”⁷ In the mid-1990s, his views were markedly progressive for an Islamist from his time: he publicly supported women’s rights and condemned the killing of apostates. Specifically, he denounced Ayatollah Khomeini’s death sentence against the writer Salman Rushdie. He began advocating the gradual implementation of *sharia*, which he also believed should be binding only to Muslims.⁸ Turabi’s belief in the value of political consensus is apparent, given his concern over the crisis in Darfur, which has shattered Sudan’s unity.

Over the last three decades, Sudan has experienced, on many occasions, terrorist attacks in the form of violence against resident foreigners. However, radical Islam was largely introduced into Sudan in 1991, when Turabi welcomed Osama bin Laden and his followers into the country, partly to help him build an Islamic republic and partly to support international *jihadists*. Bin Laden went on to establish a network of some 23 training camps in the
country and create a business and financial empire there. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Sudan’s army, called the Popular Defense Forces, are known to have used these camps to train militants. The IRGC is also known to have built an additional 12 camps of its own in Sudan. Bin Laden also started businesses, agricultural plants, and import-export activities. Some well-known places such as Port Sudan’s airport and the 700-kilometer al-Tahaddi Road were built by the al-Qaeda leader, who also ran some Sudanese charities. During this period, the Sudanese government and Turabi repeatedly denied any knowledge of bin Laden’s terrorist ties or violent goals. In 1996, however, bin Laden and his followers relocated from Sudan to Afghanistan. (It is rumored that offers from the Sudanese government to turn bin Laden over to the Clinton administration contributed to bin Laden’s decision.)

Yet the association between al-Qaeda and Sudan did not end there. The ongoing links between Khartoum and the bin Laden network were exposed some five years later, following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11th attacks on the U.S. Although many of bin Laden’s supporters remained in the tribal areas of the Afghan-Pakistani border, many insurgents and leaders fled to more hospitable locations, including Yemen, Mauritania, and Sudan. Moreover, before Operation Enduring Freedom, large quantities of al-Qaeda’s gold and gemstones were moved from Afghanistan to Sudan, where they are believed to be held in Khartoum’s Islamic Banks.

Within Sudan itself, a handful of other radical groups also exist, committing acts of violence against what they term to be “enemies of Islam.” These elements believe that Turabi and the NIF are no longer the leaders of the Islamist movement. For example, members of the Ansar al-Sunna sect attacked mosques in 1994, 1997, and 2000 at Omdurman and Wed Medani. During the year 2000 incident, one man belonging to the group Takfir wal-Hijra, another extremist and violent organization, was discovered among the assailants. It is also highly probable that some members of Takfir attempted in the mid-1990s to kill bin Laden while he was in the country—a reflection of the group’s sponsorship by Saudi Arabia, which by that time had turned on the bin Laden network and was seeking its destruction.

Despite this domestic anti-establishment activism, Sudan as a whole serves as a notable exporter of Islamist ideology. Because Sudan hosted numerous training camps for jihadists before the attacks of September 11, 2001, it has become known globally as a refuge for radicals. For instance, many Hezbollah members or fighters from African countries, such as Mauritania and Nigeria, have spent time in Sudan learning guerilla warfare. Following their
training, these fighters are given false documents, money, and means of communication and are sent to fight in “lands of jihad” such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq or southern Sahara countries.

The National Islamic Front and Turabi were also implicated in the Islamist attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995. Backed by al-Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian group Gamaa Islamiya planned the attack, which was to take place during the summit of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa. The group was able to send weapons to the Ethiopian capital from Khartoum on a Sudan Airways flight. When the assassination plan failed, some of the plotters fled to Sudan, where they successfully hid from authorities. Some historians point to this event as the beginning of the disintegration in Turabi and Bashir’s relationship.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Sudan is a nation of 597 tribes and subgroups, 175 major ethnic groupings, and more than 400 linguistic groups and various religious traditions. A deep ethnic cleavage has divided Sudan’s North and South for centuries, most obviously manifested by the enslavement of southern Black Africans by northern Arabs. From a religious perspective, 30 percent of the 8 million people in the south are Christians, and 5 percent are Muslim. By comparison, 90 percent of northerners are Muslims. While religious diversity is not the key factor in the current conflict, the growing popularity and influence of political Islam has certainly aggravated tensions and given them a religious color.

The South resents any imposition of sharia; even moderate Muslims fear they ultimately will be forced into a second-class citizenship status. Given the generally more pious nature of the population, acceptance of sharia in Northern Sudan has been more prevalent. Much of this trend is attributable to the fact that the North has historically been a more religiously and linguistically homogeneous area, compared to the more religiously-diverse South. This divide was widened after the 1989 coup, which initiated a deeper process of Islamization because of the influence of Hassan al-Turabi. For example, from 1986 to 2001, al-Bashir’s government imposed strict Islamic legislation, but the Popular Defence Force tortured, kidnapped into slavery and raped southern inhabitants, who have also suffered from numerous forced evictions and displacements.

Another point of contention is oil. Most of Sudan’s oil is located in the South, but the North had reaped the benefits of the industry until the secession of the South into a new separate state in 2011. The North has had extensive interaction with Russia, China, and Iran, as well as their state-controlled

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companies, and through these associations receives weapons and support in its struggle against the South. The 2011 separation between North and South had been seen as a way to end the war, but although this purpose was achieved it also led to a displacement of the conflict inside the North, where the forgotten third of the population, the Black African Muslims, revolted in turn against Arab domination.

It is difficult to quantify how much of a foothold radical Islam has in Sudan. While Turabi clearly is not the most radical Islamist among the national elites, he has never condemned the use of violence in the name of Islam. However, while Sudan has supported Islamist causes all over the world, its political leaders generally do not see these causes as terrorist ones. Moreover, since September 2001, the Sudanese government has cooperated extensively with the U.S.-led War on Terror (see below).

**ISLAMISM AND THE STATE**

Since its birth in the 1950s, the Islamist current in Sudanese politics has taken a number of forms. The Sudanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was created in August of 1954, making Sudan one the first countries in Africa to include Hassan al-Banna’s worldview as an element of its political landscape. Thereafter, other Islamist organizations began to appear. The Islamic Charter Front was created in 1964, and has been deeply influenced by Brotherhood thought, albeit with a more open, politically inclusive bent. From 1964 to 1969, the ICF operated as a pressure group, agitating in favor of an Islamic Constitution for the country, even unsuccessfully putting forth a moderate draft of such a document prior to the 1969 coup. Following the military takeover, Turabi at first attempted to oppose it militarily by participating in the Front for National Salvation organized by his brother-in-law Sadiq al-Mahdi. In July 1976, the Front attacked Khartoum from its bases in Libya but was defeated. A year later, Nimeiry pardoned the opponents and through the *Mussallaha al-Wataniya* (“national reconciliation”) reintegrated the Islamists, among others, in the national political game. After he was deposed in April of 1985, Turabi won the third largest block of seats in parliament in legislative elections the following year. Turabi described the NIF at that time as “an advanced stage in the development of the Islamic movement… from a simple group to an integrated social organization and from a religious faction to a state institution.” After the subsequent 1989 coup d’etat the NIF dissolved of its own accord, reappearing in 1991 under the name National Patriotic Congress, which was described by Turabi as a “national structure” rather than that of a political party.

In August 1989, leaders of the international Muslim Brotherhood gathered in London and decided that Sudan should serve as a base and safe haven
for Islamist movements from throughout the Muslim World. After Bashir’s coup, the NIF became the first agent for Islamization in Sudan. Turabi expanded and pluralized the ideological make-up of the shura, the regime’s main religious institution, by facilitating the entry of new officials who had not been part of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood initially (having been religiously educated and indoctrinated by other groups). A new Islamic organization known as “the Special Entity” (al Kayan al Khas) was also created following the 1989 coup and eventually joined al-Bashir’s National Congress Party. (This organization would become a grouping of nationalists and Islamists who remained faithful to the president following the 1999 Bashir-Turabi split.)

Turabi’s efforts to enlarge Islamism in the Sudan, and connect it to other movements in the Muslim world, predominated throughout the early 1990s. In 1991, for example, the Sudanese government launched an effort to establish an inter-religious dialogue—an effort that culminated in April 1993 with the first inter-religious conference in Khartoum. A second such event took place in October 1994, and brought together hundreds of people from 30 countries and 50 churches and associations. Turabi’s purpose was, in his own words, to make “Christians and Muslims [stand] against the irreligious in a common front.” On the other hand, however, Turabi sought to increase intra-Arab and Islamic solidarity. Following the Gulf War, he was active in the creation of the Popular Arab Islamic Congress (PAIC), an umbrella organization that sought to represent all major Islamic movements. By 1997, PAIC had branches in 55 Islamic and non-Islamic countries. Its brief success did not survive Turabi’s elimination from power in 1999.

September 11, 2001 served as a turning point for Sudan. Afraid that the Sudan would be invaded like Afghanistan, Bashir began to collaborate with the U.S. government in its War on Terror. For instance, in 2002, the Sudanese government embraced the Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s initiative to discuss how to deal with terrorism, and in 2004, it signed all 12 international conventions against terrorism (seven of which have been ratified by the Sudanese parliament). Regionally, Sudan has signed counter-terrorism agreements with Algeria, Yemen and Ethiopia, and co-hosted (with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime) at least one workshop on regional terrorism and transnational crime. These efforts led the State Department in 2007 to compliment the Bashir regime, calling it a “strong partner in the War on Terror.” This assessment needs to be balanced by the fact that, although Khartoum desisted from actively supporting terrorist organizations abroad, its radical implementation of a particularly brutal vision of Islam survived its international moderation and eventually triggered the new Muslim post-2011 rebellions in the North.
Bashir’s political opponents, by contrast, have aligned in opposition to counterterrorism cooperation with the West. Specifically, Turabi has bristled at American intervention in the area, and led the criticism against the Bashir regime’s cooperation with the United States. He has additionally demanded that the United States, Britain, and France not meddle in the Darfur issue. Nevertheless these positions should be seen as largely formal and part of a political struggle within the ranks of the formerly united Islamists. With the passage of time, the Sudanese regime, under its thin Islamic veneer, has evolved into a classical military dictatorship which uses the Islamic line of argument when advantageous to do so and neglects it when otherwise motivated.
ENDNOTES


[10] Ibid.


[15] Jaber, “Iran and Sudan Behind Mubarak Assassination Plot?”


[22] Sorensen, *The Islamic Movement in Sudan*, 34.


