SAYYID ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MAHDĪ

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VOLUME 4

SAYYID ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MAHDĪ

A Study of Neo-Mahdīsm in the Sudan, 1899-1956

BY

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In Memory of ʿĀ'ishah Al-Amīn,
my Beloved and Caring Mother

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PREFACE

I grew up in a sectarian environment where Imām ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had been stigmatized, to say the least, as a collaborator, and often as a treacherous stooge of British imperialism. During my childhood and youth, I myself, and many of my generation, accepted this condemnation at face value. This notion of "treason" still prevails among some cliques in the Sudan and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, I subsequently came to realize the naiveté, falsity and unfairness of this accusation, thanks to my access to a wide range of British archival data in Khartoum, London, Durham, Cairo and elsewhere. I noticed that many British officials in the Sudan civil service, the Residency (later Embassy) in Cairo and the Foreign Office in London had viewed the *Imām* right from the beginning of his career with great suspicion, and often with direct hostility. They persistently alerted their government that he had been essentially and profoundly anti-British whose real loyalties were to his religion, Islam, his country, the Sudan, his father's movement, Mahdīsm, and to his own ambitions. One of them had explicitly and prophetically cautioned as early as 1915 that the Sayyid would turn the country "upside down" against the British if and when he found the chance. Indeed, this was what the self-made *Imām* eventually did, albeit in his own subtle and manipulative manner that a senior British official described in the interesting following words: "Give him [al-Sayyid] a finger and he will wrap your hand". It is by no means an exaggeration to present him in this book as the architect of Sudanese independence, and as the most important Sudanese in the 20th century. Had it not been for his wisdom and sagacity, his followers might have ran amok at certain moments of desperation and threatened the peace of the country.

This book is largely based on several articles that I published in *Middle Eastern Studies, International Journal of African Historical Studies, and Sudan Notes and Records*. I would like to thank the editors of these journals for allowing me to include these articles in the present volume.

I am thankful to the Research Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and its Director Prof. Dato' Syed Arabi Idid for their generous grants that assisted me in writing some of

those articles and in preparing the book for publication. I am truly indebted to Ms. Trudy Kamperveen for her enthusiasm and drive to publish the manuscript, in which I had been engaged for many years, in the renowned bookseries *Islam in Africa* of the reputed Brill.

I do thank the grandson of the *Imām*, Sayyid al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, for the encouragement and help he generously extended in various ways. He offered interesting views with regard to the ideology of Mahdism in a personal memorandum appended to this book.

I owe many thanks to Mr. Maḥmūd Ṣāliḥ ʿUthmān Ṣālih for his meticulous reading of the manuscript and for writing the foreword of the book. I express my gratitude to Dr. ʿAbd Al-Ḥameid Aḥmad Abū Sulaymān for directing my attention to the necessity of a comprehensive approach to the whole issue of the Mahdīyya that demonstrated the uniqueness of the Sudanese Mahdīyya compared to the many other chaotic and short-lived Mahdist movements that flared throughout the history of the Muslim *Ummah*. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the professional assistance of my colleagues: Prof. Gabriel Warburg, the late Dr. Muḥammad Ibrāhim Abu Salīm, Prof. Martin Daly, Prof. Mālik Badrī, Prof. Muddathir ʿAbd al-Raḥeim, Dr. Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Zein and Dr. Aḥmad Ibrāhīm Abū Shūk.

My thank are due to many contemporaries of the *Imām*—Sudanese and British—who are too many to be enumerated in this limited space. But I should single out the late distinguished educationalist Prof. Yūsuf Badrī, and Sayyid Amīn al-Tūm, a lifelong aide of the *Imām*, who both gave me, in extensive discussions, revealing and valuable information.

I am grateful to the librarians and staff of the Public Records Office (London), National Records Office (Khartoum), Sudan Archive (Durham), the Libraries of the International Islamic University Malaysia and the University of Khartoum, and the Centre for Contemporary Egyptian Studies (Cairo).

Rohana M. Dewa and Rozana Mohd Yusof deserve special thanks for their patience in typing the manuscript. Finally I would like to profusely thank my wife Amna and my children ʿUthmān and Muna for their encouragement and immeasurable help.

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FOREWORD
by Maḥmūd Ṣalīḥ ʿUthmān Ṣalīḥ

Dr. Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim threads his historical facts together logically and chronologically; his narration flows smoothly and elegantly. He has written scores of historical treatises, in book-form and as articles for academic journals; invariably they were well researched and documented—a true measure of scholarly merit.

In this book Dr. Ibrahim chronicles the story of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the son of the Sudanese Mahdī, during the first half of the twentieth century in the Sudan. He attempts to prove his claim that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was the most important figure in the Sudan during that period, and that he singularly shaped the future of the Sudan. He recounts in detail ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's dealings with the Sudan government governors—general, civil secretaries, governors and other officials; also his meetings with British and Egyptian kings, prime ministers, foreign ministers and other. To a great degree he succeeds in justifying that claim.

It is during the period of Wingate's governor-generalship that the story of Dr. Ibrahim's hero, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, begins. The author traces the life of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān from the time he was shot and almost killed at al-Shukkaba in 1899 until he died in 1959. He tells us that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was born posthumously in 1885; he was fifteen when Wingate assumed his governor-generalship, and thirty-one when Wingate's tenure ended. During all this period, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was harried, harassed, tormented and persecuted by Wingate and specially by his vindictive inspector-general, Slatin. He was kept destitute, made to live near the police station and ordered to report to the police daily; he was denied the use of the title of his father and the contact of his father's followers. He was humiliated, ridiculed and vilified. Such treatment would have broken the spirit of any average young man; but Dr. Ibrahim's hero was made of "sterner stuff". By his perseverance, persistence, tenacity, steadfastness, determination, constancy and indefatigability he not only managed to overcome his predicament, but succeeded in achieving his goals of inheriting the mantle of his father, of securing the leadership of his family and his sect, of amassing a great wealth, of

earning the respect of his enemies and the adoration of his followers.

He further tells us that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's task was, obviously made easier by the ineptness of Wingate and his bungling soldiers. Like "Captain Mainwaring" and his "Dad's Army" of later years—tough less funny and more vicious—their policies backfired, shooting themselves in the foot more often than doing him harm. Subsequent governor-generals did not fare better. The Great War, the events of 1924 and World War II were God sent events to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as the Sudan government needed his support and that of his followers. He provided the support, but exacted a price from the government for services rendered, or for obeying orders that were soon disobeyed when it suited him to do so. He exploited the successive governments policies to his advantage and the resentment and opposition to these policies by the Sudanese to his gain. He played the British against the Egyptians and rallied the Sudanese against both. He managed to advance his cause by feinting, parrying, attacking and retreating as circumstances necessitated.

His lifelong ambition, which he considered to be also his birth right and destiny, was to rid the Sudan of both the British and the Egyptians, to establish a new Mahdist state in the Sudan, and to proclaim himself as king of the Sudan. Unlike his father, he knew he could not achieve that by a revolution or through the force of arms; the might of the British Empire and the Egyptian army were too strong for his untrained and ill equipped followers. He set out on a different course to reach his target, by peaceful means, diplomatically and by using his immense wealth to rally support for his cause. He devoted all his energy and gambled all his wealth. He championed many worthy causes; education, the welfare of the poor, the reduction of marriage expenses and the education of women; the support of Islamic institutions and the building of mosques, the patronage of the arts and sports and the nascent graduates' movement.

But the opposition assembled against him was too formidable. The Sudan government were suspicious of him and did not trust his loyalty, although they frequently needed his support. The Egyptians hated him because he was the main obstacle between them and the unity of the Nile Valley. Al-Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, his arch rival and the leader of the influential Khatmiyya sect, was scared stiff of him and would sacrifice everything to deny him achieving his goal. The educated classes used him to gain recognition and influence and then discarded him and started opposing him.

His political party, The Umma, lost badly in the elections of November 1953 due to over confidence and bad organization. He saw his rivals assume power and declare independence on 1st January 1956. He died three years later at the age of 74, disappointed, dejected and dispirited. He succeeded in everything he set out to achieve, despite all the odds, except in his final prize. Like Shakespeare's Caesar, he was "ambitious, he desired heirs to the throne, he assumed the appearance of a king and used the language of a man who knew himself secure of power, he was master in reality and was on the point of assuming the name and the right". His opponents would, probably, liken him to Shakespeare's King Lear: "hastily rash, violently impetuous, blind to every thing but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him".

Dr. Ibrahim, however, would rather liken him to Shakespeare's Henry VIII: "He is a lordly figure, with a full, abounding strength of nature, a self confidence, an ease and mastery of life, a power of effortless sway, and seems born to pass on in triumph over those who have fallen and are afflicted".

Dr. Ibrahim concludes that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān achieved a prominent position in the Sudanese society that no other figure in the twentieth century Sudan has achieved, and could have led the Sudan to a better future had he succeeded in becoming king, probably based on the fact that, compared to the kings of Britain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Libya and Ethiopia of his day, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān stood, physically and metaphorically, head and shoulder above them.

A few people might disagree with him on the first point as the author has proved that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had moderated his ambition by realism, his valour by discretion, his cunning by humour, his generousity by unpretentiousness and his strategy by pragmatism. But his second point, which might have been stated teasingly, would set the Sudanese arguing and debating amongst themselves, until the cows came home.

Dr. Ibrahim would agree with Shakespeare that:

> Death makes no conquest of this conqueror
> For now he lives in fame, though not in life

This manuscript is unique in that it is written by a non-mahdist supporter, extensively researched, numerously documented and objectively argued.

INTRODUCTION

The 18th century is often viewed as a "dark age" of Islamic history. It was characterized by a general sense of decline, and by the disintegration under a variety of pressures of the most important Muslim political entities, particularly the Ottoman Sultanate. But some 19th century rulers, of whom the best known are Muḥammad ʿAlī of Egypt (1805–1848) and Sultan Maḥmūd II (1807–1839), and intellectuals such as Rifāʿh Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801–1871) and Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (1810–1889), "were not primarily concerned with doctrinal issues or with creating religiously oriented roles for themselves".[1] Instead they were preoccupied with the problem of inner decay, and believed that this could best be arrested by adopting European ideas and techniques. This "imitiative foreign solution", as a prominent Muslim intellectual calls it,[2] was vigorously criticized by more conservative and "fundamentalist" Muslims who viewed the reform programme of adaptionist westernizers as contrary to religion and tradition. They wanted to maintain and develop the 18th century dogmatic spirit that aimed at the socio-moral reconstruction of the Muslim society along solitary Islamic lines. They, in particular, advocated a literal return to the idealistic and romantic society of the Prophet (S.A.W.) and *al-Rāshidūn* (The Rightly–Quided) (R.A.) of the 7th century First Islamic State in history. This militant "fundamentalism" reached a peak in the Muwaḥidūn movement, founded in Arabia by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792) and commonly known by the nomenclature "Wahhābi", which is of acute importance in so far as present day evolvements in the Islamic world are concerned. The religious awakening that Wahabism brought has influenced many Muslims in many lands, notably, for our purposes here, Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbdullah (1844–1885), popularly known

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[1] Voll, John O.: *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Westview Press 1982), p. 89.

[2] I.e. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad Abū Sulaymān in his major study *Azmat al-ʿAql al-Muslim (1991)*. This book has been translated in English in 1993 by Yusuf Talal Delorenzo under the title *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*. Readers with a good command of Arabic may prefer to consult the Arabic text in order to comprehend the author's complex analysis and argumentation.

as the Sudanese Mahdī. His movement—the Sudanese Mahdiyya—should therefore be viewed within this context and framework that Abū Sulaymān again conveniently calls "the imitiative historical solution". Compared to other revivalist movements such as the Sanūssiyya, the source materials for the Sudanese Mahdiyya are fortunately rich, well preserved and easily accessible.[3]

The belief in an "expected deliverer" or a "superhuman saviour" is not restricted to Muslim communities. It is known in almost all other religions and traditions: Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Confucianism, African traditional religions, and, most importantly, Judaism and Christianity, where this presumed redeemer is known as the Messiah and the whole concept as Messianism. Long before the beginning of the Muslim era, there existed among Jewish and Christian communities in Europe and the Middle East a mass of fleeting belief in a Messiah who will come "from the unseen" towards the end of the world to fill it with justice after it had been permeated by injustice and tyranny. This Judeo-Christian Messianism appears, somehow and at an early stage, to have influenced Muslim communities, who gave this concept the Arabic term Mahdiyya, which is derived from the root *hada*, meaning to guide, and the Mahdī is accordingly the divinely or rightly-guided one. The idea of a Mahdī in Islam is therefore seemingly messianic and apocalyptic.

The Mahdist notion is central in *Shiʿite* theology, but the *Shiʿi* Mahdiyya is in many ways drastically different from that of *Ahl al-Sunah*, and has been profoundly influenced by Indian, Jewish and Persian thought and tradition. This is particularly evident in the concepts of *al-imām al-maʿṣūm* (the infallible imām), *al-ghayybah* (concealment of the imām), *al-rajaʿh* (return of the imām) and *al-imām al-ghāʾib* (the hidden imām). Unlike the *Shiʿa, Ahl al-Sunnah* do not consider the *imāmah* or the mahdiyya a basic pillar of Islam (*uṣūl al-ʿaqāʾid*), but simply a way for the return with the faith to its original purity free from all *bidaʿ* (un-Islamic practices). It is in this sense almost identical to the very well known concept of *Iṣlāḥ* and *Tajdīd* (Islamic reform and revival).

The notion of the Mahdiyya does not appear to be firmly substantiated in Islam. Neither the word Mahdī nor Mahdiyya is men-

[3] The archival data of the Sudanese Mahdiyya is available in many archival centres of which the most important is the National Records Office in Khartoum. Others are in Cairo, London, Durham and Istanbul.

tioned in the Holy Qur'ān, nor is the concept supported by any of the *aḥādīth* (Sayings of the Prophet) compiled in *al-Ṣaḥīḥayyn* of Bukārī and Muslim. Nonetheless, the advocates of the Mahdiyya cite some fifty *aḥādīth* in other *Ḥadīth* collections, the authenticity of most of which is frequently questioned and sometimes openly doubted. In addition, advocates of the Mahdiyya interpret certain *āyāt* (verses) in the Holy Qur'ān to support their view, but these *āyāt* deal with the concepts of *al-hidāyah* and *al-rashād* (guidance), and not the Mahdiyya as such. Indeed, the concept of an expected deliverer or guide is often questioned for its presumed contradiction with the basic belief that Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.) is the seal of the prophets (*khātim al-anbiyyā'*).[4] And the Mahdiyya is sometimes confused with the concept of *Iṣlāh* and *Tajdīd*, and to some scholars the line is blurred between the mahdī and the *mujaddid*—i.e. the revitalizer of the faith who is not a unique or an eschatological figure, nor a guardian of esoteric knowledge. Al-Mawdūdī, for instance, hints that the Mahdi may be the ideal *Mujaddid*.[5]

It is interesting that Ṣādiq al-Mahdī (b. 1935), a prominent Muslim thinker and the current *Imām* of the Sudanese *Anṣār*[6] and president of the Umma party, adds a new dimension to the heated religio-political and intellectual controversy over the sensitive and sensational issue of the Mahdiyya. In an unpublished memorandum annexed to this book, al-Ṣādiq maintains that Muslim religious and political

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[4] In chapter fifty two of his *Muqaddimah*, and under the title "*Fī Amr al-Fāṭimī*" (On the Issue of al-*Fāṭimī*), Ibn Khaldūn analyses many of the *aḥādīth* that are ascribed to the Prophet on the Mahdiyya. His usage of the term "*al-Fāṭimī*", rather than "al-Mahdi", may indicate his conviction that the notion of the Mahdiyya is Shi'i in origin.

For a detailed study on the Mahdiyya in Islam, see Ibrahim, H.A. and Zein, I.M.: Taṭawwur Fikrat al-Mahdiyyah fi al-Ṣinā'h al-Hadithiyyah: Dirāsah fi al-'Alaqāh bayna al-Tajddīd wa al-Taqdīs" *Islāmiyat al-Ma'rifah*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 1996, pp. 17–58.

[5] Mawdūdī, S.A.A.: *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement* (Lahore, 1986), pp. 40–45.

[6] Since the assassination in 1970 of al-Hadī al-Mahdī by Numayri's regime, the Anṣār did not elect an Imām, and this central post had officially remained in abeyance. However, al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī fulfilled the role of an acting Imām until a conference of *Ha'iyat Shu'ūn al-Anṣār* (The Anṣār Affairs Organization), held in Khartoum North during the period 20–22 December 2002, elected him to the Immamate. But his opponents rejected this decision on the presumption that the meeting was illegitimate, undemocratic and did not represent the generality of the Anṣār, particularly the youth and women sectors. Nonetheless, al-Ṣādiq seems to be firmly on the saddle and his adversaries are too weak to pose a meaningful challenge to his leadership of both the Anṣār and the Umma party, at least in the foreseeable future.

thought has interpreted the *aḥādīth* ascribed to the Prophet (S.A.W.) about the Mahdī—of which, in his opinion, twenty-three are in three of the six books (al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah and Abī Dāūd)—"in terms of ten schools of thought about Mahdism:" Three *Shiite*, four *Sunnite*, two *Sufi* and one "philosophical". But from his own reading of the literature of the Sudanese Mahdī, al-Ṣādiq maintains that his great-grandfather's position "outlines an eleventh school of Mahdism" that is significantly different from the other ten, particularly with regard to the presumed eschatological qualifications of the Mahdi. In the above-mentioned memorandum, al-Ṣādiq summarizes his view as follows:

> In summary, the Mahdi had divorced Mahdism from eschatological considerations, from end of time signs, from traditional speculations about Mahdism. He tied his message to his own pious credentials, to the urgency of reform, to the function of reviving the Qur'ān and Sunnah, and to supreme authority vested in him by Divine calling to fulfill that function.
>
> I believe that this concept of Mahdism differs from the main schools of Muslim thought and what's more, it makes room for *Imām* Abdel Rahman's role without discarding his father's mission.

Though controversial and presumably not firmly substantiated in Islam, the Mahdiyya is a recurrent theme in Islamic history that has been exploited by both *Shiʿī* and *Sunnī* claimants in order to turn various kinds of religious and socio-political tension into active opposition to an established political order.[7] But the Sudanese Mahdiyya is in many respects different from most other Mahdist movements that flared in the Muslim world. The genuine religiosity of its leader should be noted. Apart from its significance as a famous liberation struggle against European imperialism, his was essentially a movement of religious revivalism. Unlike Muḥammad ibn Tūmārt, the 12th century Mahdī and spiritual leader of the Muwaḥidūn *Dawlat* in North Africa, the Sudanese Mahdī did not emphasize the *Shiʿī* concept of infallibility. He never explicitly claimed to be *al-imām al-maʿṣūm* (infallible imam) whose appearance would be one of the Signs of the Hour (*ashrāt al-sāʿah*)—an eschatological event preceding Doomsday. Hence, he did not maintain that his manifestation would signal the end of the world, and the ensuing of the "golden age". Rather he appointed his own four caliphs whom he named after *al-rashidūn*, and showed

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[7] Blichfeldt, Jan-Olaf: *Early Mahdism, Politics and Religion in the Formative Period of Islam* (Leiden, 1985), p. 13.

interest in the day-to-day affairs. He had thus found in the title of the Mahdī a convenient basis of legitimacy to topple the corrupt government of the *Turuk* (Turks), and to establish a militant Islamic *dawlat* in the Sudan. Coupled with Muḥammad Aḥmad's outstanding piety and astounding victories, this idea of the mahdiyya "formed a psychological weapon of enormous effect on the Sudanese masses."[8]

But the Mahdist revolutionary ideology, which divided the world into the world of the Mahdiyya and that of the *kufār* (the infidels), had soon created a dangerous schism of the Sudanese Muslims. Its total commitment to the *jihād*, and unrealistic universalism that insisted on the "liberation" of all the Ottoman domains and the spread of its message to the Muslim world, and probably worldwide, proved to be an obstacle in later developments. The centrality of the *Jihād*, coupled with the failure of the Mahdist leaders to appreciate the European threat and to understand the realities of international policies, isolated the Mahdist state and dictated the perpetuation of the *jihād* with Egypt and Ethiopia even after the enemy had been expelled in 1885 from the Sudan. The coincidence of the Mahdist revolt (1881–1885) with the establishment of British control over Egypt (1882) had, furthermore, exposed the Mahdist state to the military might of Britain.[9] This endless warfare undermined the political stability of the state and profoundly frustrated its economic reconstruction. The Mahdi's pronouncement of the *jihād* as more important than the *hajj* (pilgrimage), though the latter is one of the five pillars of Islam, had furthermore, given him, and his Khalifa, sufficient justification to order the stoppage of the *hajj* to the holy places. But this unprecedented abolition provoked much bitterness and resentment among both the Sudanese Muslims and the West African pilgrims who customarily passed through the Sudan to the holy land, Mecca and Medina.

The untimely death of the Mahdī on 22 June 1885, and the succession of his principal aide ʿAbdullāh to the Caliphate had further deepened the crisis of the Mahdiyya. The latter was determined to establish an "Islamic monarchy", and had actively groomed for the succession his eldest, but inexperienced and probably malicious, son

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[8] Holt, P.M.: *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881–1898: A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow* (2nd edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 107.

[9] Holt, P.M.: "The Place in History of the Sudanese Mahdiyya," S.N.R. vol. 407, 1959, p. 189.

ʿUthmān on whom he conferred the honorific of *shaykh al-dīn* (the elder of the faith). To entrench his autocracy and sovereignty, ʿAbdullāh established the supremacy of his kinsmen the Baggara, particularly his own small and insignificant tribe the Taʿāisha, in whom he invested key government posts. His ruthless brother, Yaʿqūb, was given vast powers, including the position of *wakīl* of the Black Flag (one of the three divisions of the Mahdist armed forces), that empowered him with a special responsibility to look after the welfare of the immigrant Baggara from the west.

Resentment of the Mahdi and the Mahdiyya was particularly bitter and strong among the well organized Khatmiyya *tarīqa*, which was first introduced in the Sudan by Sayyid Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Kabīr (senior or I, 1793–1852). The expansion of the Khatmiyya in the riverain and eastern parts of the country had coincided with the Turco-Egyptian conquest (1820/21), and the socio-economic interests of its numerous urbanized adherents there, and elsewhere, were largely linked with the Egyptians. But a seemingly more important factor for the Khatmiyya's hostility to the Mahdiyya was ideological. It was related to the manifestation of Muḥammad Aḥmad as *al-mahdī al-munṭazar* (the expected mahdī) which challenged the presumed status of their founding leader, Mirghani I, as *khātim al-awliyāʾ* (the seal of saints) and *quṭb al-aqṭāb* (lord of saints) who had been "created out of the Prophet's light", and from whose descendents the historic Mahdi will appear.[10] It was therefore natural for the Khatmiyya to be the only major *ṭariqa* that opposed the Mahdiyya consistently and from day one, and for its leaders to openly denounce the Muḥammad Aḥmad's claim for the Mahdiyya, and to turn down his repeated appeals for cooperation. Muḥammad ʿUthmān II dismissed him "as an imposter", and the Mahdiyya as a "blind and deaf sedition whose advocates were at the gates of hell".[11] Many prominent Khatmi leaders were imprisoned or detained for their anti-Mahdist propaganda that continued throughout the era of the Mahdiyya. Mirghani II was forced to escape in 1884 to Cairo, where he continued his opposition to the Mahdiyya until his death there in 1886. A year later, in 1887, his younger son ʿAlī al-Mirghanī,

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[10] Warburg, Gabriel: Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan since the Mahdiyya (Hurst, London, 2003), pp. 10 and 34.

[11] Ofahey, R.S. and Radthe, Berned: "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered", *Der Islam*, 7011 (1993), p. 83, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 10.

who took over the *ṭariqa's* leadership in the 20th century, traveled to Cairo, where he lived in exile until he returned to the Sudan in 1896 with Kitchener's invading army.

Meanwhile *awlād al-balad* (a collective name given to the sedentary riverain tribes), particularly the Mahdī's own relatives, the *Ashrāf*, grumbled. They resented the dominance of the "uncouth" Baggara, and dismissed ʿAbdullāh himself as "too ignorant" for the headship of the Islamic state, which should have gone to a leading *ʿālim*, preferably from their own clan. On two occasions, 1891 and 1896, they had reportedly conspired against the Khalifia's blatant cronyism, but he reacted, in fact over-reacted, violently and mercilessly. He summarily sacked them from all senior positions, and imprisoned or killed all his adversaries, including such prominent aides of the Mahdī as his fourth Caliph and close relative Muḥammad al-Khalīfa Muḥammad Sharīf, the distinguished scholars Ismāʿīl ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī and Ḥusain al-Zahrā, and the military commander Ḥamdān Abu ʿAnja.

In their desperation these numerous malcontents blew the whistle for the invaders. Their appeal for an outside rescue operation was poeticly articulated in a poem by the famous Sudanese poet al-Ḥārdalu that says, *inter alia*,

> Oh father Negus [the Ethiopian emperor] and the British
> Come to our rescue
> We are the descendents of a noble people
> Who had been turned into slaves.[12]

This cry for redemption from the tyranny of al-Taʿāʾishī gave the British an added impetus to send an Anglo-Egyptian army that toppled the Mahdist state in 1898/99, and paved the way for the so-called Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement which had, in effect, established a *de facto* British rule in the Sudan that continued for over fifty years. The new administrators targeted the Mahdiyya, but it survived the test, and, within fifteen years or so, it gradually revived in a different form, popularly known as Neo-Mahdism.

To the best of my knowledge, the nomenclature "Neo-Mahdism", as opposed to "old Mahdism" was coined as early as 1917 by Charles

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[12] The expressive Arabic text of these two verses reads as follows:

Yā Yāba al-Nugus *Ya al-Ingilīz Alfūnā*
Awlād Nās ʿUzāz *Mitl al-Khadam Sawūnā*

Armine Willis, the *de facto* director of intelligence since 1914. In a number of memoranda and notes on the subject, Willis used this neologism to describe the Mahdists of his time, who were, in his view, noticeably different from those of 1885 and 1898. In other words, Willis drew a distinction between the "primitive and prone to fanaticism" old fashioned Mahdism and a "'modern' quiescent Mahdism that was comparable to a *ṭarīqa*".[13] This was indeed a significant departure from the previous firm policy, masterminded by the governor-general Wingate (1899–1916) and his inspector-general Slatin Pasha (1900–1914), which considered Mahdism a serious and immediate threat to the new administration that should not be allowed to revive in any form.[14] However, following Slatin's departure in 1914, Wingate realized that Mahdism was his best ally against the Turks, and hence the stage was set for a dramatic change in government policy. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi,[15] the new leader of the Anṣār, took advantage of Willis' unprecedented conciliatory tone to reorganize them, including those in the western provinces and among the Fallata.[16] Eventually, and through peaceful means, Neo-Mahdism had, however, reemerged during the course of the 20th century into a massive religo-political force in the Sudan, and their first *Imām*[17] became a leading, probably the leading, figure in the country. His message has been taken up by his successors, notably his grandson, the Oxford-educated al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī.

Since the 1970s, when research on the Condominium "started to flourish", Gabriel Warburg credibly informed us, this phenomenal, and rather miraculous, reemergence and rise of Neo-Mahdism had been elaborately, but differently, analysed by some scholars.[18] Martin Daly, who produced two major works on the Condominium, blamed

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[13] Daly, M.W.: *Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1934–1956* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 74.

[14] For a detailed study of Wingate's religious policy, see Warburg, G.: *The Sudan under Wingate 1899–1916* (London, Frank Cass, 1970).

[15] For biographical information about ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi see above, pp. 10–11 and 65–66.

[16] See above, pp. 75–80.

[17] According to Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, the title Imām was conferred on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān on the centenary of his father, 1359 A.H./1985 C.E. al-Mahdī, Ṣādiq: "'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī: Imām al-Dīn," in Ḥasan, Yūsuf Faḍl and others (editors): *Al-Imām ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī* (Cairo, 2002), p. 88.

[18] See Warburg, Gabriel: "British Policy Towards the Ansar in the Sudan, a Note on Historical Controversy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, October 1997, pp. 675–692.

the "revisionist", "ambivitant" and "mistaken" British policies, since the Great War, which "played into Mahdist hands", and enabled their *Imām* "to become both rich and politically independent". Daly had even made a mock of the Neo-Mahdists' conviction that their sudden prominence was triggered by "God's will" by sarcastically remarking "Not God, but C.A. Willis"![19] In his *Imperial Sudan*, Daly had further argued that this incoherent policy, "not ʿAbd al-Raḥmān charisma", had been responsible for the demise of traditional tribalism that the government wanted to empower as antidote of Mahdism, and for the failure of its drive to encourage secularist tendencies among the educated Sudanese.[20] But what is missing in Daly's discourse, as Warburg observed, is his own assessment of Neo-Mahdism, and a clear alternative to this presumed "adrift", "reactive" and "slapish" policy towards Neo-Mahdism. In an earlier article, Peter Woodward had, however, expressed similar views that may be summarized in his statement, "Gordon's successors had for twenty years presided over, and even assisted, the regeneration of Mahdism".[21]

Ṣādiq al-Mahdi had articulated, in a recent article, the view of some Sudanese intellectuals and politicians on the re-emergence of Neo-Mahdism, its continuous flourish in the field and accelerating popularity. This, al-Ṣādiq argued, was a natural and inevitable outcome of the ruthless destruction of the first nationalist state, namely the Mahdist state, by the colonial conquerors.[22] But this view, that hailed the Sudanese Mahdi as "*Abū al-Istiqtāl*" (Father of Independence), marginalized, even totally ignored, the fact that the Mahdiyya was extremely unpopular, particularly towards its end, among a sizable sector of the Sudanese community. Besides, strict loyalty to a Sudanese "nation" was a belated development that was largely confined to urban centres and the politically conscious elite.

Under the sub-heading "colonial administration and the Islamic sects" of his apologetic book *The Government They Deserve*, Manṣour Khālid gave an economic rationale for the rising power of Neo-Mahdism.

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[19] Daly, M.: *Empire on the Nile, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1898–1934* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 167–68.

[20] Daly, M.: *Imperial Sudan*, pp. 71–76.

[21] Woodward, Peter: "In the Footsteps of Gordon, the Sudan Government and the Rise of Sayyid Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi 1915–1935", *African Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 334, January 1985, p. 39.

[22] See Ṣādiq al-Mahdi: "'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi, Imam al-Dīn," in Ḥasan and others (editors) *op. cit.*, pp. 59–149.

While admitting that Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, as well as his counterpart Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, continued "to command large following", Khālid maintained that "these followers were increasingly drawn towards them because they could offer material gain", and "access to government and social advancement".[23] But Khālid's hypothesis does not hold water because the material temptation appealed to a small sector within the intelligentsia, of whom many were, however, seemingly shere opportunists. Besides, Khālid's discourse is conspicuously silent on the motivation of the Ansar masses in the west and the White and Blue Nile provinces to voluntarily and enthusiastically support ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.

A much more credible and crucial factor for the spectacular and sustained prominence of Neo-Mahdism is, as Warburg emphasized in his above article, religious zeal that impelled the Ansar to follow the *ishārah*[24] of their "*wasīlah li Rab al-Ālamiyyn*" (literally, intermediary with Almighty God), namely ʿAbd al-Raḥmān "al-Ṣādiq" (i.e. the honest). In the Neo-Mahdist literature, "*aqidat* (faith) *al-wasiyylah*" is, however, given a different interpretation from the above literal translation. In a proclamation, *al-Imām* ʿAbd al-Raḥmān explained this understanding by recording the following in translation from Arabic: "Nobody can grab the hand of an individual and take him to God. However, the *wasīlah* advises and quides the *anṣārī* until his heart is full with light, which will, in turn, enable him to know God. Once he knows God, he will be divinely blessed to do "*ṣāliḥ al-ʿamāl* (virtous deeds). And with these he will reach God."[25]

While accepting and appreciating these factors, particularly the spiritual bond between the *Imām* and his *Ansar*, the discourse in this book argues that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi's charisma and mastery of manipulation was probably the underlying and fundamental driving force for the resounding victory of Neo-Mahdism in the 20th century.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the son of Muḥammad Ahmad ibn ʿAbdullah, belonged to a reputable Sudanese *bayt ʿilm* (house of learning), and some of his ancestors were noted for their piety. His family claimed to be *Ashrāf* well before Muḥammad Aḥmad's pretension of the

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[23] Khālid, Manṣoūr: *The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elites in Sudan's Political Evolution* (London and New York, 1990), p. 52.

[24] In Sufi literature, the *ishārah* is a directive of the *shaykh* to his *murid* (follower) which should be obeyed forthwith and unconditionally.

[25] Quoted in al-Mahdī, Ṣādiq: "'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣādiq: Imām al-Din," in Ḥasan and others (editors), *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Mahdiyya, and the latter had repeatedly reiterated in his *manshūrāt* (proclamations) this presumed descendence from the house of the Prophet. In one proclamation, he proudly maintained, "*Fa'bī Ḥasanī min abīhi wa umihi wa umī kadhālik min jihati umihā*"[26] (I am a Fatimid from both my father and mother's sides).

Muḥammad Aḥmad had displayed at an early age an aptitude for religious scholarship and had devoted much of his time for regular study at the hands of some prominent Sufi *shaykhs* of his time in Berber and al-Gezira, including al-Shaykh Muḥammed Sharīf Nūr al-Dā'im, the grandson of *shaykh* Aḥmad al-Baṣīr, who had established the Samaniyya *ṭarīqa* in the Sudan. Muḥammad Aḥmad's religious knowledge, asceticism and *sufi* experiences qualified him to be a *shaykh* in his own right, and rapidly gained him a large following.[27] Subsequently, he made his own contribution to Islamic thought as manifested in the large amount of *manshūrāt* that addressed different issues.

But his posthumously born son ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, was deprived from his father's guidance and tuition in Islamic disciplines, and his first patron, Khalifa ʿAbdullāh, did not have the time nor the knowledge for this job. The only formal education that the child had was in the *khalwa* (Quranic school) where he, like most of his peers, memorized the Qur'ān at an early age. Educational opportunities or regular institutions were, anyhow, almost non-existing during the turbulent years of the Mahdiyya. However, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had later taken advantage of a government permission, during the early years of the Condominium era, to live, with his family, in Omdurman, where he bought a house in al-ʿAbbāṣiyyah quarter near to that of Muḥammad al-Badawī, a distinguished Azharite, Chairman of the Board of 'Ulemā' and a former *qādi* (*judge*) during the Mahdiyya. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān attended the *ḥalaqas* (study circles) of al-Badawī where he acquired some knowledge on Islamic Jurisprudence, fundamentals of religion, the *Hadīth* (Prophet's tradition) and the exegesis of the Qur'ān. Incidentally, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān showed particular interest in the exegesis of al-Shaykh Ismāʿīl Haq al-Barsawī (d. 137 A.H.) entitled *Rūḥ al-Bayān.*[28] While in Omdurman, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had also the chance

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[26] Abu Salīm, M.I.: *Al-Athār al-Kāmilah li al-Imām al-Mahdī*, vol. 1 (Khartoum University Press 1990), p. 93.

[27] Holt, P.M.: *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, pp. 45–46.

[28] Al-Mahdi, Ṣādiq: "'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣādiq: Imam al-Dīn," in Ḥasan, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

to interact with some distinguished Sudanese *ʿulemāʾ*, e.g. the Mufti al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad Hāshim and *shaykh* Muḥammad ʿUmar al-Bana.[29]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was thus not a particularly knowledgeable man, specially when compared to his learned father. His formal education was both rudimentary and local. Unlike other numerous Sudanese students of his time, he did not have the chance to proceed to al-Azhar or *al-haramayyn al-sharīfayyn* (Mecca and Medina) to continue his Islamic studies. Having this limited exposure in mind, one may wonder how did he manage to occasionally outshine and sometimes score victory, through strictly civil means, over many professional and experienced British and Egyptian politicians and civil servants. However, in Sudanese, and similar societies, success may not always be the product of school education, and some "illiterates" had occasionally won the day. It is suggested in this discourse that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's charisma, self involvement and self education constituted the key factor for his spectacular success and for the prominence of Neo-Mahdism. Indeed, by all standards, he is a typical example of an *ʿiṣāmī* (self-made) man.

[29] ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad: *Maʿa al-Imām ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Mahdī*, in Ḥasan and others (editors), *op. cit.*, p. 154.

CHAPTER ONE

MAHDĪST PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE, 1898–1920

The militant and turbulent fourteen-years' Mahdist rule in the Sudan was forcefully terminated by an Anglo-Egyptian army at the bloody battles of Kararī and Um Dibaykrāt in 1898/99. Though Egypt shouldered the bulk of the financial cost and military burden of the conquest, it was obliged to accept a minor role in the new condominium regime. The Condominium Agreement of 19 January 1899, cynically described by its architect Lord Cromer, the British Agent and Consul-General in Egypt, as a transitionary "child of opportunism", vested the supreme military and civil command in the Sudan in the hands of a British nominated Governor-General, who ran the affairs of the government virtually independent of Egypt.

Kitchener, the conqueror of the Sudan and the first occupant of this post, had neither the time nor the interest to engage himself in administrative matters. His major accomplishments were the rebuilding of Khartoum and the establishment of Gordon Memorial College. He is also remembered for his obliteration of the Mahdi's tomb, his inhumane mutilation of his body and the throwing of its bones in the river.

The task of the foundation of the new administration was undertaken by his successor Wingate Pasha (1900–1917) and his handpicked top advisor the Austrian Rudof Slatin Pasha, for whom he created the post of Inspector-General to handle religious and tribal matters. Having an ax to grind with the Mahdists, both Wingate and Slatin tried their utmost best to crush the Mahdist movement.[1]

On 24 November, 1899 General Wingate, cabled his wife boastfully and joyfully: "Hurrah Mahdism finished".[2] But this was sheer wishful thinking, and the General himself had soon realized that a

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[1] For a detailed study on the foundation of the Condominium and Wingate governor-generalship, see Warburg, G. *The Sudan Under Wingate* and Daly, M.W., *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 1–265.

[2] S.A.D. 269/11, quoted in Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p. 119.

sizeable sector of the Sudanese population was still Mahdist at heart. Hence, he forcefully and convincingly argued with his superiors in London that the Mahdist cult would certainly constitute a serious challenge to the fragile new colonial administration if not promptly and severely dealt with. With his own personal agenda, and that of Slatin Pasha, his vindictive inspector-general, in the background, the General would initiate a ruthless policy of "suppression and non-recognition" that aimed to banish Sudanese Mahdism to the annals of history, by particularly targeting the numerous surviving Mahdist *amirs* and their families, to destroy once and for all the spiritual and political leadership of this sect.

Some *amirs* had escaped to Darfur,[3] but many others were arrested. Others were also caught in later Mahdist uprisings.[4] The Condominium authorities had, however, released many unimportant *amirs* as well as those who deserted the *Anṣār* (followers of the Mahdi) before Karari. Muḥammad ʿUthmān Abu Qarja was thus allowed, on his return from captivity in Darfur in 1907, to settle on his lands in the White Nile province. A few of them were even appointed to government posts: e.g., ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abu Daqal, a minor Mahdist *amir*, received a letter of amnesty from Slatin and was appointed *Nāẓir* of the Gharaysia branch of the Hamar.[5]

Other *amirs* were, however, presumed dangerous and the government felt it absurd to regard them as ordinary prisoners of war who should be released as soon as hostilities were over. They were accused of committing, while in power, grave atrocities against the Sudanese. Consequently, if freed, their own lives might be in danger. The Mahdist *amir* Bushara Khamīs was released in 1907 and was murdered shortly afterwards. The government argued, rather unconvincingly, that this incident should convince everybody of the grave responsibility that it had to face in considering their release.[6] Furthermore, they might be "induced by fanaticism or by the prompting

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[3] Those included Karamallah al-Kurqusāwi, the first Mahdist *amīr* at Bahr al-Ghazal who was executed by ʿAli Dinar in 1903. On the advice of Slatin, the inspector-general, the government decided not to bother about their fate. Warburg, *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 52.

[4] For a study of those risings see below, pp. 31–63.

[5] Warburg: *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 53.

[6] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/2 annual intelligence report for 1908. Those were annual confidential reports by the Sudan agent, Cairo. Warburg stated that he was unable to locate them or to ascertain whether they were kept (*The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 206). But those reports for the years 1900–1913 and 1921 are available at the N.R.O.

of their own followers to again take up Mahdism and sow the seeds of rebellion".[7] They were, therefore, detained in Egypt.

They were at first imprisoned with some of their previously held colleagues[8] at the barracks of Rashīd (Rosetta). But when these were blown away in a high wind, the twenty-eight most important *amirs* and their families were sent in late 1901 to Dimyāṭ (Damietta) while another less important twenty-three were transferred to Halfa. Amongst the former were ʿUthmān Diqna, Maḥmūd Aḥmad, Ibrāhīm Mālik, ʿAbd al-Bāqīʿ Abd al-Wakīl, and Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿAlī Ḥilu. The latter included, with others, the *Taʿishi* shaykhs Muḥammad Faḍlallāh, ʿAlī Farfār, Faḍl Ḥasan, al-Khatīm Musa, Khaṭir Himayydān, and Helba Maḥsūn, and five Mahdist notables arrested in 1900–1901 either for religious fanaticism or for disobeying government instructions. These were the three "Milleniumists"[9] ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Karīm, Muḥammad al-Zākī, and ʿAlī Abu al-Qāsim, the religious agitator al-Sharīf Adam ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and Ibrāhim al-Turgumāwī, a former Grand *Qāḍī al-Islām* of the Khalifa.[10]

The imprisonment of those Mahdist leaders led to an outcry in the Egyptian nationalist press and among certain British Liberal M.P.s. Articles were written in *al-Ahrām, al-Minbar, al-Liwā'*, and *al-Mu'ayad* arguing that they suffered tremendous hardship and were inhumanely treated. The Liberal M.P. Brailsford, who visited Damietta prison on 25 March 1908 and interviewed the prisoners, wrote similar articles in the *Daily News* and *Nation*.[11] He and other Liberal M.P.s continued to question in Parliament their well-being and demanded their immediate release.

Those *Anṣār* dignitaries had in fact demanded their freedom and were most anxious to return to their country. They probably did not like the idea of being detained in Egypt, their traditional enemy. Moreover, the damp and sticky Mediterranean weather damaged their health. Some died in detention, e.g. Maḥmūd Aḥmad in 1906[12]

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[7] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/2, annual intelligence report for 1908.

[8] Before the final collapse of the Mahdist state, the Egyptian authorities detained at Rosetta some Mahdists, particularly after the battles of Tushki in 1889 and Atbara 1898. For information about those see N.R.O. Cairint 1/15/94, and Babikir Badri: *Tarikh Hayati*, vol. 1, pp. 44–110.

[9] See below, pp. 32–33.

[10] N.R.O., Int. 6/1/1, annual intelligence report for 1907.

[11] N.R.O., Int. 6/1/2, annual intelligence report for 1908.

[12] Ḥasan Dafaʿllāh claimed that Maḥmūd died of chest disease ("A note on the

and ʿĀisha and Maʿrūfa, respectively wife and daughter of Ibrāhim Mālik, in 1907. They could not even marry without government permission. While Muḥammad al-Mahdī, brother of Maḥmūd Aḥmad, was allowed in 1903 to marry Ṣafīa ʿAlī Hilu,[13] Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Ḥilu was forbidden in 1907 to marry Zahrāʾ, daughter of ʿAbd al-Bāqī ʿAbd al-Wakīl. Many of the detained *amirs* remained in leg chains until 1909 when, on the directive of Eldon Gorst, the British agent and consul general in Egypt, these were removed from all of them except ʿUthmān Diqna,[14] probably because the government feared that the "master of evasion" might try his luck again.

Faced with this embarrassing parliamentary and Egyptian campaign conducted on behalf of those prisoners, the Sudan government took several steps to impress others that it had been doing its best to provide them with all possible comfort. I interviewed on 6 April 1974 ʿUmar, eldest son of *amīr* Yaʿqūb, and ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh, who had been detained at Halfa and Rosetta respectively, and both confirmed this. The imprisoned *amirs* were frequently visited by the Sudan Agent, the Inspector-General and the Governor-General himself, who investigated their complaints and sometimes did justice to them. Slatin also claimed surprising leniency and consideration towards those men. Improved rations were given to them and each was supplied with an extra blanket for cold weather. Their quarters were regularly repaired and repainted. Though men and women lived in separate sections, husbands were allowed to stay with their wives from 4:30 p.m., until sunrise. Some children were born and the parents of each were given a blanket and an allowance of 50 P.T. They had their own pharmacy and doctor who treated them and examined their rations before they were distributed to them. Those who were seriously ill were sometimes sent for free treatment in Cairo and Alexandria hospitals. For example, in 1902 ʿAbdullāh al-Mahdī was taken to Alexandria military hospital and his mother joined him afterward.[15] On the request of the literate among them,

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political prisoners at Wadi Halfa", SNR, XL VII, 1966, p. 148). But according to an official report, he died suddenly at the age of thirty-nine because of a heart failure. N.R.O. Int. 6/1/1, annual intelligence report for 1906.

[13] N.R.O. Cairint 9/12/12, letter from Count Cleichen, Sudan agent, to Muḥammad Ghunayym, commander of the Mahdist prisoners' guard, 21 March 1901.

[14] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/3, appendix C for annual intelligence report of 1910, note by Symes on the Mahdist and political prisoners, 1910.

[15] N.R.O. Cairint 9/12/12, Letter from Sudan agent to the commander of the Mahdist prisoners' guards, 2 July 1902.

the *Qur'ān* and other books were provided for their reading. ʿUmar Yaʿqūb told me that the government had even allowed them to read *al-Rātib* (the Mahdi's prayer-book) when it realized that it was impossible to prohibit this as all of them had memorised it. Their children joined specially founded schools at Rosetta, Damietta and Halfa to which the government sent books and equipment. Unstamped letters were frequently sent to the prisoners by their relatives. The authorities paid the cost and distributed the letters to their addresses.[16]

The behaviour of certain detainees in Halfa was considered satisfactory and they were consequently freed. On his appointment as inspector-general in September 1900, Slatin ordered the release of his old friend Aḥmad Ḍai al-Nūr, of the Jubārāt branch of the Taʿisha. He was reported to "have been the only man who dared to smoke cigarettes while in [*sic*] Khalifa's service. He used to obtain [them] secretly for himself and Slatin Pasha, and [*sic*] smoked together secretly. And this was the origin of their friendship."[17] Between 1903 and 1910 Ḍai al-Nūr stayed with ʿAli Dinār in Darfur, but returned afterwards to live permanently in Omdurman.[18] Dalīl Salūm, another Taʿishi *shaykh*, was released from Halfa prison in March 1907 to live under a mild form of surveillance. He was allowed in 1912 to stay in White Nile province but instructed not to leave it without government permission.[19] On receiving a guarantee for the future good behaviour of Muḥammad Ahmad, eldest son of Khalifa ʿAlī Ḥilu, the government released him in February 1910. He and his family were given a financial subsidy to start a new life on their cultivation

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[16] N.R.O. Cairint 9/12/12, Sudan agent to commander of the Mahdist prisoners' guards, 14 September 1901.

[17] N.R.O. Int. 2/42/352, note by Saville, governor of Darfur, on Aḥmad Ḍai al-Nūr, 18 March 1924.

[18] In 1923 he was sent by Muḥammad al-Sayyid al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh, a rival to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, on a secret mission to Darfur to persuade the Taʿisha to recognize him as their religious chief and send him *zaka* and presents. Ḍai al-Nūr was consequently put under observation and warned that he would get himself into trouble if he did not stop these activities. N.R.O. Int. 2/42/352, letter No. D.I./Y/73332, from Lush, for assistant director of intelligence, to governor of Darfur province, 6 June 1923.

[19] Though Dalīl Salūm had gone to Shirkaylla, a village near Um Ruwaba in Kordofan province, without permission, the government allowed him to live there when Ḥāmid Sulaymān and ʿUmda Sharīf Adam undertook to be responsible for his good behaviour: N.R.O. Int. 2/37/313, letter from R. Gibson, inspector of Um Ruwaba, to the governor of Kordofan province on Dalīl Salūm, 20 February 1919. He continued to live there until his death on 13 February 1935 leaving a number of dependents amongst whom were six adult sons.

near the White Nile. In March 1911 he was detained once more in Halfa because he had left Kosti and toured Sennar province without government permission.[20] Some other well-behaved Mahdist detainees at Halfa were reported to have been offered their freedom but refused this "on the grounds that the provision made for them by the government was more secure and less irksome than any obtainable by their own efforts".[21]

With the exception of ʿUthmān Diqna, all the detained Mahdist *amirs* in Damietta and their families were removed to Halfa early in 1908. ʿUthmān Diqna, however, joined them in December.[22] Afraid that the Egyptian nationalist press might start a campaign against this move, Wingate, the Governor-General, suggested that the transfer should be carried out secretly. Slatin objected, arguing that there was nothing to fear as the prisoners themselves had previously requested their transfer to a less damp climate. They were therefore moved openly. At Halfa, the government hoped, they would be out of the reach of the Egyptian nationalist press and away from the eyes of inquisitive British M.P.s.[23]

While placing those Mahdist ringleaders under strict surveillance, the government tried its best to train and educate their offspring to be ordinary citizens with no religious claims. Immediately after the reconquest, a group of the sons of the Mahdī, his three Khalifas and other Mahdist *amirs* were sent to Egypt. While a few of them were trained as saddlers and carpenters in the Citadel, the majority were given a course in agriculture at the experimental farm of Mit al-Diba, near Tanta, under the superintendence of an official of the khedivial agricultural society.[24] They studied farming, surveying, some principles of veterinary medicine, Arabic, and arithmetic. Their edu-

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[20] For this relatively slight offence, he remained in detention until 1918 when the governor-general ordered, on political grounds, his release and gave him a monthly allotment of £E. 6.00 m/m. He was instructed to live in Omdurman though allowed to spend the cultivation season only with his family in Kosti. N.R.O. Int. 2/40/32, letter No. 386/17/3, from C.A. Willis, assistant director of intelligence, to civil secretary, 24 August 1918. In 1919 Willis persuaded Corby, governor of White Nile province, to allow him to stay permanently in Kosti. He was, however, warned that he would be turned out and never allowed to return to White Nile province if he made any trouble.

[21] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/3, appendix C, enclosed in annual intelligence report of 1910, note by Symes on the Mahdist and other political prisoners in 1910.

[22] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/2, annual intelligence report for 1908.

[23] Warburg, *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 105.

[24] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/1, annual intelligence report for 1902.

cation, lodging, food, medical treatment, and transport were all free, and the Sudan Agent received progress reports from their instructors. During their holidays they were taken to visit their relatives at Damietta prison. The government, however, soon realized that these youngsters might be influenced by Egyptian nationalist ideas. Consequently, once qualified, they were transferred to the Sudan. By the end of 1909, the only Mahdist boy who remained in Egypt was the reportedly insane Yūsuf Yūnis al-Dikaym, an inmate of the Cairo lunatic asylum since 1907.[25] The government encouraged other Mahdist boys to join Omdurman and Wad Medani schools and the Gordon College. They were usually accepted free and provided with school-clothes.[26]

The Mahdist boys who were educated in Egypt and the Sudan were gradually absorbed in government departments and in provincial administration. In 1913,[27] the Department of Agriculture employed Musa ʿAlī al-Ḥilu (Geteina), ʿAbdullāh ʿAli al-Ḥilu (Tokar), Abu al-Qāsim Ibrāhīm Makhayar (Tokar), Ahmad ʿUthmān Adam (Singa), Ḥāmid Ahmad ʿAli (Tokar), Muḥammad Mahmūd Ahmed (Kassala), Yahiya al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Tokar), Hamza al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Dongola), Ibrāhīm al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Tokar), and ʿAlī Ahmad (Singa). Their work and conduct was reported to be satisfactory.[28] The list of employees in other departments included ʿAlī al-Mahdī (Khartoum Province), ʿUmar al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Finance Department), ʿAbd al-Sammad

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[25] According to a medical report dated 14 March 1909, Yūsuf was then "dull, forgetful and unable to converse rationally . . . He [was] quite insane and [required] to be under constant supervision . . . He [was] certainly not to be at large." N.R.O. Int. 6/1/3, annual intelligence report for 1910. Though Yūnis al-Dikaym was naturally anxious to have his son with him, the government decided, in view of the above report, that he should continue to stay in Cairo lunatic asylum. In 1917 the medical authorities reported that he was quiet and could be managed at home by his relatives. Consequently he was transferred to Omdurman where his father had been confined since 1912. See below, p. 22.

[26] A list of those who were at schools in 1913 is found in N.R.O. Int. 6/1/7, annual intelligence report for 1913. ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī was one of them. In 1914 he was 19 years old, but still in the third year of the primary school at the Gordon College. The director of education prophetically suggested: "I think it is in the boy's interest that he should turn his attention to agriculture and cultivation of his lands in the Gezira Aba. His character is very good but he is not clever. I propose therefore to send him to Tokar to undergo a course of agricultural instruction." N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326, letter No. D.E. S/2–210–20, from director of education to assistant director of intelligence, 14 September 1914. This proposal was accepted.

[27] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/7, annual intelligence report for 1913.

[28] A note on the work of each of the above mentioned officials is found in *ibid.*

al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Stores Department), Daūd al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Veterinary Department), Ḥasan al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Posts and Telegraphs), Muḥammad al-Mahdi al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh (Halfa Province), Yaʿqūb ʿAli al-Hilu (Intelligence Department, Labour Bureau) and Al-Ṭayib ʿAlī al-Ḥilu (Steamers Department).

They were all positively reported on with the exception of Ḥasan al-Khalifa ʿAbdullāh "who [had] been given a final chance of retrieving his character",[29] and Muḥammad al-Mahdī who had previously been removed from the Gordon College for continued misconduct and found employment at Halfa.

The railways department trained another group of Mahdist boys at its workshops in Halfa to be artisans (carpenters, turners, chargemen etc.). They were moved to Atbara in 1908 when the headquarters of the railways were established there. They were supplied with free quarters, rations and clothes, a privilege that cost the department about £E340 annually.[30] They were at first temporarily employed in the railways workshops at a monthly rate of pay varying from 90 to 360 P.T., but many of them made excellent progress in their work and were later permanently absorbed in the railways administration at higher wages. Amongst others, the Mahdist community in Atbara included the families of *amirs* Yaʿqūb, brother of the Khalifa who was killed at Karari, Hilba al-Maḥsūn, Ibrāhīm Makhayar, Khatīm Musa, and Muḥammad Makkāwī. They were not to leave Atbara except by permission of the intelligence department. Sometimes, however, they were allowed to visit relatives in other parts of the Sudan for a specified period of time and on condition that they should report to the authorities there on arrival and departure. Two members of this community, al-Nūr Jād Karīm and Bashīr Ahmad were transferred in 1914 to Halfa because "they were a continual source of trouble among their own people".[31]

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Free rations and clothes were stopped in 1932 for all employees who received regular pay from the Sudan Government. The privilege of free quarters was, however, not withdrawn. N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326, letter No. FDR/540–2, from the financial secretary to the general-manager, Sudan railways, 31 March 1932.

[31] N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326, letter No. C.M./C.R./934, from the general manager, Sudan railways, to the director of intelligence, 30 October 1914. In 1916 they petitioned the governor-general requesting their transfer to another less expensive town, but this was rejected on the grounds that their pay at Halfa was quite sufficient. In 1919, however, they were released from special surveillance and allowed to settle wherever they wanted. N.R.O. Int. 2/40/333, letter No. C.S./C.G./114, from civil secretary to general manager, Sudan railways, 19 February 1919.

Perhaps the most important members of the Mahdist community in Atbara were the sons of *amir* Yaʿqūb. One of them, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, a chargeman who was described by the director of intelligence as a man of "exemplary character", requested in 1919 admission to the sub-Mamur school. But the government was reluctant to appoint any member of Yaʿqūb's family to an executive post. The pretext given was their lack of the required educational qualification, i.e. secondary school education. Though all had learned to read and write, they did not have any regular education apart from the practical training they had in the Atbara workshops. But the real reason was perhaps fear of their religious and political prestige, as Midwinter, the general manager of the Sudan railways and steamers, himself admitted, "So long as they (Yaʿqūb's sons) live here in Atbara in their own community, they are most quiet and well-behaved. On the other hand there is no one here to get at them and fill their heads with foolish ideas of their own importance which might and probably would happen if they ever found themselves posted as government executive officials in more distant and isolated stations.[32]

In 1912, on the occasion of King George V's visit to the Sudan, the government released another group of Mahdist detainees in Halfa and Port Sudan. It was then assumed that old animosities had had sufficient time to die down, and that those men's freedom was no longer detrimental either to themselves or to public security in general. The six most important of this group were confined to Omdurman while the other less important were allowed to settle in Singa, Gedarif, and other places provided that they would not reside in Kordofan and Darfur, or leave their localities without government permission. Anxious that these men should cause no trouble, the government tried its best to look after them. Each one of them was given a lump sum, proportionate to the size of his family, and a monthly allowance of £E1.[33] Some of them were exempted from taxes and given loans

[32] N.R.O. Int. 2/40/331, letter No. G.M./C.R./934, Midwinter to Willis, 30 March 1919. *Amir* Yaʿqūb left twelve sons and eleven daughters. All the men continued to be employed by the railways department until their retirement or death, e.g. ʿUmar, the eldest son of *amir* Yaʿqūb, served in the railway department at Atbara from 1901 to 31. He was then discharged, probably because of the economic crisis, and allowed to settle in Omdurman. In 1932 nine of them were still employed by the Sudan railways. A list of those, their occupations, and wages is in N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326, letter No. HQ/204–64, from acting general manager, Sudan railways, to the financial secretary, 28 March 1932.

[33] The allowances of the six confined in Omdurman were subsequently increased

to be repaid by installments from their allotments. They were also granted war bonus and *bairam* gratuity.

By 1912 some of these *amirs* were released, but told to settle in certain localities: Yūnis al-Dikaym, Ibrāhīm Mālik, ʿAbd al-Bāqī ʿAbd al-Wakīl, Ismāʿīl Ahmad, Muḥammad al-Mahdī Aḥmad, and Al-Khatīm Musa in Omdurman, Faḍl al-Ḥasan, Hilba al-Mahsūn, ʿAli Farfār, Muḥammad Faḍlallāh and Khātir Himayyidān in Singa. Ibrāhīm Makhayar, originally from Darfur, was released from Port Sudan prison and brought to Atbara to reside with his son Ṭāhir, an employee of the railways, who guaranteed his father's future good behaviour.[34]

Other Mahdist prisoners were released after 1912. Six of the Millenniumists, whose conduct was considered excellent though they remained "absolutely unshaken in their belief",[35] were scheduled for release in 1913 as soon as suitable guarantors could be found for their future conduct. Al-Sharīf Adam ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was freed from Halfa prison in early 1913. He was confined to Omdurman, but complained that this restriction prevented him from earning his living. When Bashīr Ḍirār, the *ʿUmda* of the *Danaqla* in Omdurman, guaranteed his good behaviour, Slatin, however, allowed him to trade between Um Ruwāba and Omdurman.[36] In response to the appeal of some of his relatives and because of his old age and good behaviour, Ibrāhīm al-Turgumāwi was released from Halfa prison in 1916. He was allowed to live in Omdurman and later in Singa.[37]

By 1916 the only notable detained *amirs* were ʿAli ʿAbd al-Karīm and ʿUthmān Diqna. The former remained in Halfa prison until his death in 1941. Apart from asserting that ʿUthmān Diqna was "undoubtedly insane",[38] the government felt that his "release would mean [sic]

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to £E 1.750 m/ms due to the high cost of living there. They were also granted pieces of land, proportionate to the size of their families, and financial help to build houses. This grant was made on certain conditions. See below, pp. 25–26.

[34] Ibrāhīm was reported to be idle, conceited, and impolite. Because of the frequent troubles he made with the Mahdist *amirs* at Atbara, particularly with Yaʿqūb's sons, he was allowed to stay with some relatives in Kosti. In 1930, however, he lived permanently at Omdurman with his son Abu al-Qāsim, an employee of the agricultural department. For more information about Makhyar, see N.R.O. Int. 2/39/327.

[35] N.R.O. Int. /6/1/7, annual intelligence report for 1913.

[36] For more information about al-Sharīf Adam see N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326.

[37] In 1923 al-Turgumāwī was found wondering among the Baqqara and consequently placed under surveillance at Omdurman. He was, however, allowed in 1924 to live in al-Obeid where he remained until his death in 19th November 1929.

[38] In 1915 a medical report stated that ʿUthmān Diqna was "in good health and quite clear in his mind". N.R.O. Int. 2/37/312, letter No. H.P./S.C.R./17, from governor of Halfa to assistant director of intelligence, 30 September 1915.

almost certain death owing to the hatred in which he [was] still held in the Red Sea province for the many barbarous acts committed by him in the days of his power."[39] But the main reason for his continued detention appears to have been the government's fear that his mere re-appearance might provoke excitement among some militant *Anṣār* and probably lead to disturbances and bloodshed. The government considered his influence so great that it decided that his guards should not be Sudanese Arab policemen but Egyptians changed at regular intervals.[40] In spite of long imprisonment ʿUthmān Diqna remained a staunch believer in Mahdism and, unlike other prominent Mahdist *amirs*, showed no sign of weakness or submission to the government. In 1924 the government allowed him to go on the pilgrimage,[41] and was even prepared to permit him to stay permanently at Mecca. ʿUthmān Diqna, however, returned to the Sudan to be detained again in Halfa. Some British Liberal M.P.s and the Egyptian nationalist press continued agitation for his immediate release. *Al-Siyāsa*, the organ of the Liberal Constitutional party, published a leading article on 27 July 1923 entitled, "Mercy above Justice, ʿUthmān Diqna, the Prisoner for ever at Halfa". Nevertheless, he continued to be detained at Halfa until his death from enlarged prostate on 7 December 1926.

In a memorandum to the civil secretary in 1918, C.A. Willis, the assistant director of intelligence, argued that the Mahdist attitude towards the government had gradually changed during the Great War from enmity to potential cooperation. They had opposed it in the past as the representative of the Turkish government that they or their forebears had overthrown. The war between Britain and Turkey had put the government on the same side as the Mahdists and the final defeat of the Turks had no more enthusiastic supporters than the *Anṣār*. It was only fair for the government, Willis

[39] N.R.O. Int. 6/1/5, annual intelligence report for 1912.

[40] While inspecting ʿUthmān Diqna's guards in September 1915, the *māmūr* of Halfa was extremely worried to find one of them "praying fervently in the inner room occupied by ʿUthmān Diqna, though the latter was outside at the time" N.R.O. Int. 2/37/312, letter No. 11.P./S.C.R./17, from governor of Halfa province to assistant director of intelligence, 30 September 1915.

[41] Beside his wife, a nephew and a servant, ʿUthmān Diqna was accompanied on this trip by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sughayir, an ex-Mahdist amir who fought with Diqna in most of his battles, on behalf of the intelligence department. The government spent on the pilgrimage of ʿUthmān Diqna and his party £E132. N.R.O. Int. 2/37/312, letter No. 644 M. from British agent and consul at Jedda to director of intelligence, 23 August 1924.

continued, "to recognize this and to relax the restrictions that [had] hitherto hampered the movements of many of those people . . . I ask that the restriction of movement and settlement of ex-Dervish prisoners and members of the Mahdī and Khalifa families be limited to a small number who [were] known to cause trouble and, even of those, any who [showed] by consistently good behaviour a desire to reform [might] be exempted from further disability."[42]

Since the government had restricted the liberty of movement of many Mahdist *amirs* and members of the Mahdi and Khalifa families, they were unable to earn their living in the ordinary way. Consequently, the government felt morally obliged to grant them, since the early days of the Condominium, small monthly allotments to help them in maintaining themselves and their families.[43] Amounts were originally determined by Slatin and were paid against a special item in the budget of the intelligence department entitled "maintenance of political prisoners". The estimated expenditure on this item for the year 1921 was £E3400 from which the families of the Mahdi and his three Khalifas alone received £E610. 200 m/ms.[44] Thus the removal of restrictions on Mahdist notables was expected to rid the treasury of this financial burden.

In 1919 the government divided the *Anṣār* political prisoners into three categories. The first consisted of seventy-seven and included such notable *amirs* as Yūnis al-Dikaym, al-Khātim Musa, Masā'd Qaydūm and Ibrāhīm Makhayar. They were released from all forms of special surveillance and allowed to live wherever they wished in the Sudan. "Governors of the provinces [would] have therefore no further exceptional responsibility in connection with the movements and actions of those individuals other than responsibility of the kind they would normally have in the interest of public security in respect of any other individual in their provinces."[45] The members of the

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[42] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/344, despatch No. 386/21, from Willis to the civil secretary, 6 November 1918.

[43] The members of the family of *amir* Ahmad Faḍīl, who was killed with the Khalifa, were not under any restraint, and were therefore not granted any allowances. N.R.O. Int. 2/42/350, letter No. D.I./Y/15372, from intelligence department to governor of Fung province, 25 July 1926.

[44] For a list of those receiving monthly political allowances see N.R.O. Int. 3/2/9. Sayyid 'Abd al Raḥmān received £E.5, while Abdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī, his nephew and *wakīl* (representative), received £1.250 m/ms.

[45] N.R.O. Int 2/41/344, letter No. C.G./114, from R.M. Feilden, civil secretary, to all governors of the provinces, 19 February 1919.

second category, which consisted of Sayyid ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān and nineteen other *amirs* and members of the Mahdī and Khalifa families, were to remain under "special notice", i.e. they had to regularly report to the police. The third group consisted of a few extremists, such as ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Karīm, who were to remain under surveillance. The movements of the persons in the second and third categories continued to be regulated by the intelligence department.[46]

Starting from 1 January 1922 the government stopped paying allowances to all Mahdist notables whose movements were no longer restricted except the aged among them. The allowances of twenty such members of the families of the Mahdī and Khalifa were thus abolished while that of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was increased from five to fifteen pounds "to enable him to support the old women and the incapable among those whose allowances were abolished".[47] On principle, allotment holders were to receive their allowances for their lifetimes only. Nevertheless, for the sake of the fair name of the government, it was decided that the dependents of certain deceased *amirs* should continue to receive a proportion of their late guardians' allowances until minor sons reached an age at which they would be able to support their families. Consequently, the families of Muḥammad Faḍlallah, who died on 24 July 1933, and Yūnis al-Dikaym, who died on 16 July 1935, continued to receive 100 and 150 P.T. per month respectively. In 1932, however, the government stopped paying all political allowances except for the "absolutely destitute."[48]

Due to the poverty of the families of the Mahdī and his three Khalifas, the government had reserved in 1908 two plots of land in ʿAbbāsiyya in Omdurman for their dwelling. This land was specially chosen near the *zabṭiyyah* (police station) to facilitate surveillance, and was granted on specific conditions: it was inalienable and subject to the usual taxes[49] and sanitary regulations; the occupants should settle

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[46] For the names of all persons in the three categories, their monthly allowances, and stations, see *ibid.*

[47] N.R.O. Int. 3/2/10, No. D.I./Y/4260, note by the director of intelligence on the settlement of the families of the Mahdī and Khalifa, 17 May 1922.

[48] N.R.O. Int. 2/39/327, letter No. W.N.P./S.C.R./36.M.I. from the governor of the White Nile province to the controller of public security intelligence, 18 June 1932.

[49] Though the reservation was liable to rates and taxes, these were not imposed, and the result was considerable loss to Omdurman municipality. But since this land was shown in the records as held by "the heirs of so and so", the occupants complained that their tenure was so vague that they did not feel justified in incurring the expense of permanent building. To solve this difficulty, the government obtained

on it by arrangement with the inspector of Omdurman, and the government had the power to rearrange the settlement and readjust the area reserved.[50] Similar grants were given in January 1909 to the heirs of Ḥamdān Abu ʿAnja, and in 1912 to the *amirs* confined in Omdurman.[51] To accommodate the remainder of the Mahdi's family, Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān requested in 1922 another five *hoshes* (plots of land) in ʿAbbasiyya as a grant to himself. The government agreed, but insisted that the land should be given to the family as a whole, not to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān alone.[52]

Taking these grants as precedents, the heirs of some Mahdist *amirs* (e.g. Maḥmūd Aḥmad, Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, Muḥammad Zein Ḥasan, and Yaʿqūb) applied in 1924 to the intelligence department for grants of lands in Omdurman to build residences on them. The government refused unless the applicants could prove poverty and reasonable necessity for residence in Omdurman rather than elsewhere. R. Davies, assistant director of intelligence, argued: "To admit the validity of the argument that, because land was allotted in 1914 to certain ex-*amirs* and their families, therefore the heirs of all ex-*amirs* are entitled to similar treatment, would be to invite applications for land to a number difficult to compute. It would, for instance, force the Government to gratify a possible whim to have a town house on the part of Nāẓir Mohd Dafaʿallah of the Mesiriya or Nāẓir ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Abū Dagal, both ex-*amirs* resident in Kordofan."[53] In view of the good behaviour of Yaʿqūb's heirs, Willis, however, recommended that they should be allowed to purchase land in the normal residential parts of Omdurman at such rates that the government might be able to

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in 1924 a record of the actual occupants of the land and showed each house in the name of its occupant. Since this land was not freehold, it was left to the government on the decease of the occupant to decide to whom the house should go; presumably to the head of the family who was liable to the maintenance of the numerous female relations. N.R.O. Int. 2/42/354, letter No. D.I./Y/10070, from Willis to the general manager, Sudan railways on the applications of the Mahdist *amirs* for land in Omdurman, 1 June 1924.

[50] N.R.O. Int. 2/42/354, letter No. A and L/CR.55 lands, from E.B. Bonus, director of agriculture and lands, to inspector of Omdurman on Omdurman lands for heirs of Mahdi and Khalifas, 16 December, 1908.

[51] See above, p. 22.

[52] N.R.O. Int. 2/39/324, letter No. D.I./Y/6886, from Willis, director of intelligence, to director of lands, 10 April 1923. Willis became director of intelligence in 1920.

[53] N.R.O. Int. 2/42/354, letter No. D.I./Y/10640, from Davies to the private secretary of the governor-general, 9 October 1924.

grant. By this they would have the advantage of absolute freehold, while any allotment in the reservation would not be alienable.[54]

While very reluctant to allow ex-Mahdist prisoners to settle in Omdurman, the government tried to settle them in their former districts. Willis suggested in 1918 that the unemployable members of the Mahdī and Khalifa's families should be placed in a special settlement in the White Nile province since there was adequate land and they could get labourers to assist them. But the province authorities adamantly opposed the idea that their province should be, in their words, "the dumping ground for all the most prominent Mahdists,"[55] and suggested that they should be settled elsewhere.[56] Struve, governor of the White Nile province, argued that his province was already exceptionally full of Mahdists and continued to say "there are four unruly and intriguing tribes in the area, the Dar Maharib, the Beni Garar, the Seleim and the Taisha, all in rather inaccessible country and all ready to make the most of the presence in their midst of men of this class and to utilize their names even if the men themselves do not share their intrigues. This puts a constant strain on the vigilance of my inspectors and as I am responsible for the administration of my province and the maintenance of law and order therein, I claim the right to decide if the presence of any particular person in my province is a menace to that administration."[57] Furthermore such a settlement was expected to fall under the influence of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, whose rising power and prestige in the province had already been worrying Struve and his staff. The intelligence department argued that this was most unlikely since all the persons suggested to start the settlement belonged to the Khalifa's family, or were their partisans,[58] who were bitterly opposed to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. G.S. Pletts of the intelligence department asserted that this dissension

[54] N.R.O. Int. 2/42/354, letter No. D.I./Y/10070, from director of intelligence to the general manager, Sudan railways, 1 June 1924.

[55] N.R.O. Int. 2/40/332, letter No. W.N.P./CE/22 Kosti/2/2/SCR, from Pawson, inspector of Kosti, to Struve, governor of White Nile province, 21 September 1918.

[56] The governors of Berber, Kassala, Dongola, Sennar, Kordofan, and Upper Nile provinces were all approached, but rejected the idea. While, for instance, Berber authorities argued that there was not sufficient cultivable land for such a settlement, those of Kassala claimed that it might lead to the recrudescence of Mahdism among the Hadendawa.

[57] N.R.O. Int. 2/40/332, letter No. W.N.P./C.R./22, from Struve to civil secretary, 21 September 1918.

[58] Their names are given below.

had "hitherto served to keep each party working against the other, and to keep the government well-informed of their internal intrigues".[59]

Willis, however, persuaded the governor-general to accept the idea in 1919 and al-Makhālīf village, near al-Jabalein, was chosen for this settlement. In 1921 nine families, numbering about sixty persons, were transferred from Omdurman to start it. Those were the families of ʿAbd al-Majīd, ʿAbd al-Samad, Ṭayib, and Ṭāhir,[60] all sons of Khalifa ʿAbdullāh; Manṣūr and al-Jāk, sons of Khalifa Sharīf; Ḥāmid Aḥmad, ʿAbd al-Wali Sayyid Muḥammad, and Amīn Sayyid Hāmid. The government spent £E707 to build houses, and buy cattle and seeds for the settlers. Each family was given a monthly allowance of £E2.5, but they were expected to manage eventually to support themselves. A superintendent, with a monthly allowance of £E5, was appointed to supervise the work and report its progress to the local inspector and the intelligence department. Ibrāhīm Khalifa ʿAbdullāh occupied this post until 1 December 1921 when he was dismissed, probably for pro-Egyptian activities,[61] and replaced by his brother ʿAbd al-Majīd.

This Mahdist colony failed completely, apparently because it was unhealthy and its members, who were frequently quarreling with each other, were unwilling to stay or work in it. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad was accused of openly inciting other settlers not to cultivate and was imprisoned for this. It had been originally planned that they should be interned in Halfa if they failed to take advantage of this opportunity.[62] Nevertheless, on the breakup of the colony in 1926, they were allowed to live in Omdurman and Aba Island. In view of this relaxation of the restriction on their residence, their allowances were stopped.

The government also failed in other attempts to settle ex-Mahdist prisoners in the White Nile province. The heirs of Khalifa ʿAlī Ḥilu were granted in 1919 two thousand feddans in Ashghāl village near Kosti where 150 of them where expected to settle. Since this large family was influential among the Dighaym tribe that lived there,

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[59] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/341, letter No. I.D./386–19, Pletts to civil secretary, 15 June 1918.

[60] Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's relatives were particularly unfriendly with Ṭāhir Khalifa ʿAbdullāh, whose mother was a daughter of the Mahdī.

[61] It was reported to the intelligence department that Ibrāhīm Khalifa ʿAbdullāh was distributing pro-Egyptian propaganda. N.R.O. Int. 2/41/342, report by ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ibrāhīm, an agent of the intelligence department, 15 September 1921.

[62] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/341, letter No. C.S./C.G./114, from civil secretary to the director of intelligence, 17 June 1919.

Willis hoped that this land would quickly develop into a settlement, looked after by three sons of Khalifa Ḥilu who were employees of the department of agriculture and would help their relatives by their knowledge and experience.[63] In 1920 *amīr* Yaʿqūb's sons were granted another piece of land in Abu Ramād, south of al-Jabalein, to be a settlement for the unemployed among them and a holiday resort for the employed.[64] Ex-Mahdist government officials, who left the service with the consent of their heads of departments, were encouraged to join such settlements by each being given a sum of money equivalent to half a month's pay for each year of service. This grant was considered "as a loan bearing no interest and may be written off when the person to whom it [was] granted actually [settled] down on the land and [was] well reported upon by the Governor of the Province within the limits of which the land [was] situated."[65] Only very few, however, settled in Ashghāl and Abu Ramād.

During the Khalifa's reign and by his instructions many Taʿisha had migrated to Omdurman and subsequently settled in various parts of the northern Sudan particularly Sennar, Kassala, and White Nile provinces. By 1918 it was reported that, for sentimental reasons, there was a general desire among them to return to their original *dār* (region) in southern Darfur which was then taken over by the government. This desire was felt to be stronger among the older generation than the younger. Apparently the latter did not remember their own homelands for they were either born after the tribe's migration or were infants at the time. Anxious to see their *dār* occupied again, Mak ʿAli al-Sanūsī,[66] Nāẓir of the Taʿāisha, and Savile, governor of Darfur, tried to induce the government to press the Taʿāisha in other provinces to return to their *dār*. Though willing to permit all those who voluntarily wished this, the government

[63] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/346, Willis to civil secretary, 10 January 1920.

[64] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/348, letter No. W.N.P./Lands/1–133, Corbyn, governor of White Nile province, to civil secretary, 6 July 1921.

[65] N.R.O. Int. 2/40/336, letter No. 6432, from financial secretary to director of intelligence, 28 June 1920.

[66] ʿAli al-Sanūsi was a Mahdist *amir* under Maḥmūd Aḥmad in Atbara and fought at Karari after which he escaped to Darfur to be one of ʿAli Dinār's best generals. He surrendered to the Condominium government after the fall of al-Fasher and accompanied Huddleston when he overtook and killed ʿAli Dinār. He was appointed Nāẓir of the Taʿisha in Darfur and rendered valuable service to the new administration among which were many satisfactory missions to various parts of Darfur. N.R.O. Int. 2/41/347, a note by the intelligence department on ʿAli al Sanūsi, undated.

refused to compel the uninterested. Moreover, those who returned should not demand any alleged position or property in Darfur, but should simply live as ordinary members of the tribe subject to the *nāẓirs, ʿumdas* and *shaykhs* appointed by the government.[67] In December 1919 Abakar Musais[68] and five other Taʿishi *shaykhs*, who were then living in Sennar, applied for permission to return to their *dār* and the governor of the province agreed.[69] But apparently there was no large-scale migration, probably because the long trek was expected to kill most of the animals. Nāẓir ʿAlī al-Sanūsi himself applied in 1923 to migrate with all his family to Singa where most of his relatives lived. Savile felt that al-Sanūsī was useful but not indispensable. Consequently, he was prepared to allow him to leave Darfur.[70] Al-Sanūsi, however, did not. In 1924 he was accused of corruption and dismissed from his post to be succeeded by Nāẓir Zubair Sam.

The imprisonment and strict surveillance imposed upon the Mahdist political prisoners and their families during the first generation of the Condominium rule had, no doubt, frustrated the *Anṣār* and deprived them of indispensable spiritual and political leaders. This weakened the Mahdist movement and consequently enabled the government to suppress the many Mahdist uprisings and consolidate its position in the Sudan. But the government failed to shatter belief in Mahdism. In an interview in 1974 with the late ʿUmar al-*amir* Yaʿqūb, a prisoner in Halfa and Atbara 1898–1919, I felt his strong and stubborn belief in Mahdism. Those *amirs*, as well as the *Anṣār* in general, were anxiously awaiting an opportune moment to reorganise themselves into a religious and political force. On finding this chance after the Great War, they rallied behind al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi and subsequently challenged the government as will be explained in the chapters that follow.

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[67] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/347 letter No. Dr. P./Tribes/32/3, Saville to the assistant director of Intelligence, 5 June 1920.

[68] He was one of the Taʿisha *Shaykhs* who upheld the Khalifa until the end, and was captured at the battle of Umm Diwaykarāt. With many other Taʿishi *Shaykhs*, he was placed under surveillance at Omdurman until 1913 when he was considered harmless and allowed to live in Sennar province.

[69] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/347, letter No. S.P./Pets/631, from Angus Cameron, governor of Sennar province, to assistant director of Intelligence, 9 December 1919.

[70] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/347, letter No. Dr. P./SCR/19–11–78, from Savile to Willis on Mak ʿAlī al-Sanūsī, 25 March 1923.

CHAPTER TWO

MILITANCY VERSUS SUPPRESSION, 1900–1921

Although the *Anṣār* were militarily defeated at Karari and Umm Dibaykrāt and the new predominantly British government had firmly outlawed the Mahdist sect, a section of the Sudanese community remained Mahdist at heart. With the collapse of their state and the loss of their religious and political leadership on the battlefield and in prison,[1] the majority of Mahdists were, however, too weak and disillusioned to oppose openly the ruthless new regime. Instead they expressed resentment silently by continuing to read the *rātib* (the Mahdi's prayer book) and to practice other Mahdist rituals. But a dedicated, even militant, Mahdist minority tried to topple the "infidel" government by force. With the exceptions of the war years, hardly a year passed during the first generation of colonial rule without a Mahdist rising. However, for reasons explained below, they all failed to command a popular following and, with the exception of the revolt of al-Kamlin in 1908 and that of Nyala in 1921, none of these risings constituted any real threat to the authority of the government. Nevertheless, the colonial administrators exaggerated their strength and significance.

The main source of inspiration and strength for these risings was the deviant doctrine of *nabi ʿisa* (prophet Jesus). It was generally presumed that the Mahdi would appear to fill the world with justice after it had been permeated with oppression. But his mission would be temporarily halted by *al-masīh al-dajjāl* (the anti-Christ). *Nabi ʿisa* would soon appear, however, to secure the permanence of the Mahdiyya. Though this heretic cult has nothing to do with textual Islam and is presumably inherent in the Islam of west Africa, it became popular among the frustrated Mahdists.

Some *Anṣār* apparently identified the British administration with the anti-Christ and asserted that both the Mahdi and Khalifa ʿAbdullāh had prophesied its appearance. They also appealed to the prophecy

[1] See above, pp. 13–30.

of *shaykh* Faraḥ wad Taktūk[2] that at the "end of time the English will come to you, whose soldiers are called police, they will measure the earth even to the blades of sedge grass. There will be no deliverance except through the coming of Jesus."[3] This idea was further popularized by some West Africans who, on pilgrimage to Mecca, stayed either temporarily or permanently in the Sudan. Anxious to throw out the British "infidels" and to restore Muslim rule in Hausaland, these West Africans were encouraged to believe in the imminent appearance of *nabi ʿisa*. Like the Mahdī before him, they apparently believed that *nabi ʿisa* would appear in the Sudan. Lethem, an officer of the Nigerian administrative service who visited the Sudan, Jedda, and Egypt in 1925 to investigate the source of Mahdist propaganda in Nigeria, confirmed this "missionary activity" of the Fellata (immigrants from West Africa) in the Sudan.[4] Moreover, it was generally rumored that the inscription *nabi ʿisa* was discovered on trees and watermelon seeds. False optimism inspired some Mahdists to assume the role of *nabi ʿisa* and to declare a *jihād* against the "infidel" British administration.[5]

British officials first became acquainted with the *nabi ʿisa* cult in 1900 when a group of nine men, led by ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Karīm,[6] formed a religious society which claimed that the time had come for the appearance of *nabi ʿisa*. The Condominium authorities called them the "millenniumists" because they asserted that the appearance of *nabi ʿisa* would usher in a millennium of peace and happiness. An intelligence report claimed that members of this association called themselves the "creatures of God," and believed in the following five principles: whatever is done, by word or deed, is right, as it is the

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[2] He is a famous Sudanese Sufi *shaykh* who is believed to have lived for over hundred years (1047–1147/1637–1735). al-Ṭayeb, A.M., *Faraḥ wad Taktūk Ḥalāl al-Mashbūk* (Khartoum, n.d.), pp. 24–42.

[3] Hillelson, S., *Sudan Arabic Texts* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 159.

[4] For this report see N.R.O. Sec. 6/9/52.

[5] Cudsi, A.S.: "Sudanese Resistance to British Rule 1900–1920" (unpublished M.Sc. thesis, University of Khartoum, 1969), pp. 14–16.

[6] ʿAli ʿAbd al-Karīm, a second cousin of al-Mahdī, was born in Dongola in 1841, and worked during his youth in trade with Egypt with his eldest brother, Muhammad. With his family, ʿAli, however, later joined al-Mahdi in Omdurman. The intelligence reports claimed that he was detained during the Mahdiyya as a dangerous heretic. But his relatives, in interviews with a then post-graduate student, University of Khartoum, categorically denied this. See Gafar Ṭaha Hamza, "The Movement of ʿAli ʿAbd al-Karīm" (unpublished diploma dissertation, AAS, University of Khartoum, 1977), p. 41.

act of God; God is watching and will never forsake his followers; if good or evil happens, it is God's will; if evil or good happens, God must be praised; and all actions are due to divine inspiration.[7] Though this society did not organize a rising or threaten the authority of the government in any way, Slatin, the inspector-general, was so embittered by his eleven years of captivity in the Mahdist camp and haunted by the fear of a revival of militant Mahdism that he arrested its leaders on suspicion of hostile religious activity. With the exception of ʿAlī, they were all released in 1907. ʿAlī remained in detention until his death in 1941 on the feeble assertion that his release might be looked upon as a miracle by existing millenarians. Nevertheless, the society continued to function secretly but ineffectively, and by 1920 it degenerated into a heretical cult that was condemned by Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī himself.[8]

Al-Sharīf Muḥammad al-Amīn, a Ja'li *faki* from West Africa, arrived in Khartoum early in 1902 on his way to Mecca. On the insistence of the intelligence department, he undertook in writing to abide by the pilgrimage regulations in force at Suakin, that is, to pay a deposit and his steamer fare. For this he depended on the cattle he had and the presents he seemed sure to receive on his way.[9] From Mecca, he went to *Jebel* Tagali where he declared himself *nabi ʿisa* in August 1903, and asserted that he had supernatural powers making him immune to bullets. But al-Amīn's incident was so insignificant that many of the local *shaykhs* did not even reply to his communications, though the *qaḍi* (judge) of Tagali had openly advised the people to reject his pretensions. Al-Amīn arrested the *qaḍi* and sentenced him to death as an "infidel" for his cooperation with the government, but, with support of the *mak* (tribal chief) Gayyli of Tagali, the *qaḍi* eventually escaped and reported the rising to the authorities at al-Obeid.

The overreaction of the provincial and central authorities and the extreme military and legal measures that they took to suppress al-Amīn's weak rising further demonstrated the obsession of the British officials with the resurgence of Mahdism. While Butler, governor of al-Obeid, asserted that this affair would assume serious proportions

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[7] N.R.O. Sudan intelligence report No. 67 (1900).
[8] N.R.O. Civ. Sec. 56/3/25.
[9] The Arabic text is in N.R.O. Int. 2/27/218.

"if not nipped in the bud,"[10] Colonel Nason, the acting governor-general, summoned Colonel Mahon, governor of Kordofan, who was then on holiday at Dueim, for consultation at Khartoum. Mahon was subsequently sent after al-Amīn with a whole squadron of cavalry that was reinforced en route by one and a half companies of the 12th Sudanese Battalion and one Maxim from al-Obeid. Though the insurgents were easily defeated in a skirmish in which only three soldiers were killed, the authorities hurriedly hanged al-Amīn on 27 September 1903, without a formal trial and in front of the whole population of al-Obeid, on the grounds that "the whole country will be up"[11] if he escaped. Endorsing this hasty judgment, Nason further exaggerated the significance of this isolated rising by minuting, "this action may appear somewhat unnecessarily severe, but the reports which now arrive daily, in my opinion, fully justify the action taken and I feel convinced that the effect on the country will be most wholesome."[12]

In March 1904, Adam Maḥmūd, a Dongolāwī who lived most of his life at the village of Shaykh Talha in Sennar Province, expressed his desire to liberate the country from the "infidels." The village *shaykh* tried to arrest him, but Maḥmūd escaped. Nothing further was heard of him until August 1904, when he declared himself *nabi ʿisa* and enlisted the support of ʿAbdallah Ḥasan, an ex-*shaykh* of Singa. With a small party of eleven followers and three rifles, he defied the government on 3 August 1904, knocked down the telegraphic line at Enekliba village, thirteen miles from Singa, and proceeded southwards to Suntat village. Instructed by H. Hallam, deputy inspector of Singa, *Yusbashi* Zakī Wāṣif, *māmūr* (administrative assistant) of Singa, immediately set out with a patrol of ten soldiers and several *shaykhs* to deal with Adam. The *māmūr* advised the insurgents to surrender, but instead, three or four of them "attacked him with swords and literally cut him to pieces before they were shot down."[13] Adam Maḥmūd and nine of his men were killed in this brief encounter while the other two escaped. They were captured the following

[10] Butler to civil secretary, 2 September 1903, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/218.

[11] Unnumbered telegram from O'Connell to Nason, 27 September 1903, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/218.

[12] Quoted in Bukhari, S.A.R.: "Military Aspects of Internal Security in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, with Special Reference to the Northern Sudan" (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of London, 1972), p. 66.

[13] Report by Hallam to governor, Sennar province, on Adam Maḥmūd's rising, 7 August 1904, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/221.

evening.[14] The Singa rising encouraged some other Mahdists of diverse backgrounds to declare themselves *nabi ʿisa*, including Musa Aḥmad, a Barnāwī, in Gedarif, and the Jaʾlī Sulaymān Bashīr in Wad Medani, both in 1906. They were, however, arrested before they could raise a following.

The Wad Ḥabūba Revolt

The most serious challenge to the Condominium government during its first generation was organized and led in 1908 by a distinguished Mahdist, ʿAbd al-Qādir Muḥammad Imām Wad Ḥabūba of the Halawin tribe.[15] He came from a well-known Sudanese family which for many years possessed considerable lands in the neighbourhood of al-Massallamiyya in Blue Nile Province. The Mahdī married into this family and many of its members supported him. ʿAbd al-Qādir knew al-Mahdī before he declared his mission, cultivated close relations with him, and fought in some of the Mahdist battles against the Turco-Egyptian government. He fought in Abu ʿAnja's expedition against the Ethiopians, and with al-Nujūmi's army on its advance upon Egypt in 1889, and was imprisoned on its defeat at Tushki. Though later released and allowed to return to the Sudan, he again attached himself ardently to the Mahdist cause. His absence from the Karari battle occurred solely because he was then engaged in the Gezira collecting supplies and recruiting men for the Khalifa's army.[16]

On the proclamation of general amnesty, Wad Ḥabūba returned to his property and was reported to have tried to acquire some of his relatives' lands.[17] Though this family jealousy was probably a secondary factor in his deteriorating relations with his uncle, ʿAbdullah

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[14] The names of Adam's adherents and their tribes are listed in *Ibid.*

[15] An informative pamphlet has been published on this revolt. al-Bādī, Sidīq. M.A., *Lamahāt min Ḥayāt wa Thawrat wa Madāʾiḥ Thanāʾ al-Baṭal ʿAbd al-Qādir Wad Ḥabūba* (Khartoum, n.d.).

[16] The Khalifa married one of Wad Ḥabūba's daughters. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[17] Bābikir Badrī, who dismissed Wad Ḥabūba's rising as an unfortunate movement, met Wad Ḥabūba in al-Kamlin on 1 April 1905. (They knew each other as they were both in al-Nujūmi's expedition which, incidentally, Badri had deserted en route.) Wad Ḥabūba told Badrī that he was provoked by the authorities' decision to hand over a *bilād* (cultivated piece of land) he had in al-Halawin region to his brother, Ḥasan. Badrī, Bābikir, *Taʾrīkh Ḥayātī*, vol. 2 (Khartoum, 1960), pp. 77–78. The government decision to transfer the leadership of the Halawin tribe from Wad Ḥabūba's family to that of his uncle, ʿAbdullah Masāʾd, was another reason for his discontent.

Masā'd, the *ʿumda* (village headman) of Katfia, and his brother Imām Muḥammad, the main reason was certainly ʿAbd al-Qādir's scorn for their submissiveness to the "infidel's" rule. While they were among the first of the inhabitants to welcome Sir Archibald Hunter's occupation of the Gezira, ʿAbd al-Qādir was busy planning to restore Mahdist rule in the Sudan. Thus the dominant motive for his uprising was religious, a fact that he defiantly admitted.[18] He had also proudly declared:

> My desire is that the Sudan should be governed by Muslims according to Mohammedan (Islamic) laws and the Mahdi's doctrines and precepts. . . . I know the people of the Sudan better than the government does, I have no hesitation in saying that their friendliness and flattery is nothing but hypocrisy and lies, I am ready to swear that the people prefer Mahdism to the present government.[19]

Some of his co-religionists, who were tried after the suppression of the uprising, courageously expressed their hatred and contempt for the "infidel" government, and their genuine belief in Mahdism and the "divine" mission of Wad Ḥabūba. One of them, Muḥammad Ḥaj al-Shaykh, stated to the tribunal that interrogated him, "I joined Abd al-Qādir because I am a Lover of the Mahdi. I know that we are assembled and came in order to fight the government".[20]

News of this revolt were first communicated to Major Dickinson, governor of Blue Nile Province, on 29 April 1908, in an urgent telegram from Scot Moncrieff, a deputy inspector of Rufaʿh. The telegram stated that Wad Ḥabūba had collected forty followers at Tugur[21] village and refused to explain this conduct to al-Massallamiyya's Egyptian *māmūr, Yuzbashi* Muḥammad Sharīf.[22] With a police force estimated at over thirty, the inspector and *māmūr* immediately proceeded to Katfia, a village a few miles from Tugur, to inquire into the matter. The authorities took other precautionary steps: *Yuzbashi* Muḥammad Fahmi, *māmūr* of al-Kamlin district, was directed to report with all

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[18] Report from Wingate on Wad Ḥabūba's revolt, 26 May 1908, F.O. 371/451, enclosure II.

[19] S.I.R. 166, May 1908, appendix D.

[20] Report of the proceedings at the trial of the persons implicated in Wad Ḥabūba's revolt, undated, F.O. 371/451, dispatch No. 2511.

[21] Tugur village, usually inhabited during the rainy season, had large vaults (*maṭāmīr*) of grain that formed valuable supplies for ʿAbd al-Qādir's force.

[22] Sharīf claimed that Wad Ḥabūba declared himself *nabi ʿisa*, but apparently he never did.

the police he could spare; a company of the 13th Sudanese, the battalion stationed at Wad Medani, was ordered to be ready to move at a moment's notice; and Captain MacEwen, the senior inspector, proceeded through the Massallamiyya district to collect information.

Wad Ḥabūba, however, offered to see the inspector and *māmūr* at Katfia to explain his grievances if they came unattended and unarmed. He extended this invitation to his uncle, 'Abdullah Masā'd, and three of his own brothers. But they declined and tried to dissuade Moncrieff and Sharīf from going. These officials mistakenly dismissed Wad Ḥabūba's revolt as an agrarian riot and consequently decided to go, leaving their only two camel policemen about a mile away, in the hope that they would persuade him to lay down his arms. Since Wad Ḥabūba considered the two officials "infidels," he felt justified in attacking them, and official documents report that he personally struck one of them. Learning of the critical situation at Tugur, the two camel policemen escaped to their colleagues at Katfia.

The authorities were so shocked and confused over the death of the two government officials that they overestimated the strength and impact of Wad Ḥabūba's revolt and took rather uncoordinated military measures to suppress it. The available force at Wad Medani was one Maxim and two infantry companies of the 13th Sudanese posts in the Sennar district. Leaving only one company to guard Wad Medani, Dickinson rushed to Katfia with the other, the Maxim gun, and a few camel police, on 30 April 1904. Arriving in the evening, he found Katfia already occupied by Captain MacEwen with thirty-five camel police. Dickinson was accompanied by his second-in-command, Captain Logan, and was later joined by Bonham Carter and Peacock, of the legal department, who had then been on circuit in the district.

While the Mahdist warriors entrenched themselves in Tugur and undertook to fight the "infidels," each man sleeping armed at his own door, the government force was disposed in a semi-circle on the night of 1 May. In the light of subsequent events, Dickinson's military arrangements may be criticized. But under the circumstances, Wingate was convinced that they had been based on sound principles and carried out carefully. The enemy's camping arrangements were reported to Wad Ḥabūba by a spy he sent to Katfia. On his return to Tugur, Wad Ḥabūba addressed his followers after the *maghrib* prayer and urged them to fight bravely for God. He divided them into five parties each under a *muqqadam* (officer), and on 2nd

May made a surprise night attack on the "infidels" at Katfia. The Mahdist first column, probably led by the spy, rushed on the enemy without a sound. The police lost some men in this first rush, most of them speared in their sleep. The rest of the Mahdist "soldiers of God" joined the encounter, but the government forces soon repelled their attack. The *Anṣār* withdrew, leaving thirty-five killed while government casualties were seventeen killed and wounded. Among the wounded were Dickinson and MacEwen.[23]

In response to Dickinson's appeal, Khartoum sent a force of forty-five Arab mounted infantry which arrived at Katfia at 6:00 a.m., on 2 May. Since Mr. Corbyn, the inspector of Kamlin, accompanied this force, James Currie, the director of education, who was then on a tour of inspection, took over the executive duties at Kamlin. Additional reinforcements were prepared to be sent at Dickinson's request and military precautions were taken at Getaina, Dueim, and Kamlin to guard against the spread of the revolt. Meanwhile Captain Ryan and MacEwen visited Tugur on the afternoon of 2 May; they found it deserted. Wad Ḥabūba "emigrated" on a donkey, in the Mahdi's manner, presumably to find asylum in Omdurman, where he apparently hoped to continue propagation of the Mahdist cause. By 3 May it was evident that the back of the revolt was broken. Total government casualties were seventeen killed, and thirty-nine wounded.[24] The Khedive granted the 1896 Sudan Medal to the forces engaged in quelling the revolt, and the British officers and officials who took part in the operations were allowed to wear it with a separate clasp for the successful action at Katfia.[25]

Meanwhile Dickinson issued a proclamation declaring Wad Ḥabūba an outlaw and warning all people to abstain from rendering him any assistance. Lists were made of all people who were alleged to have been present at the fight or to have allied themselves with him. Small columns were sent to each village to read the proclamation and to investigate the whereabouts of the insurgents. Suspecting that the revolt still had some sympathizers in the Gezira, the government felt that a show of force was necessary. Consequently a force, com-

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[23] Report by Wingate on Wad Ḥabūba's revolt, 26 May 1908, F.O. 371/451, enclosure II.

[24] A list of their names is contained in *Ibid.*

[25] War Office to Foreign Office, 25 July 1908, F.O. 371/451, dispatch No. Egypt/2697 (A.G.2.C.)

manded by Captain Higginson, was sent on 4 May from Khartoum to Kamlin. Wingate, however, instructed the troops en route to return to Khartoum because he now felt that this would have a far more pacifying effect than their presence in the Gezira. Apparently the returning troops were quietly received by the inhabitants, which testified that the revolt was at an end. Nevertheless, Wingate left all mounted troops and three companies of infantry at Dickinson's disposal to support the administration during the trial of the insurgents, and to prevent reprisals against those relatives of Wad Ḥabūba who were loyal to the government. They were gradually withdrawn. It is worth mentioning here that in these operations the government used motors and motor transport for the first time in Sudan warfare. They proved to be of great utility and were supervised by J. Walter, of the Sudan government roads and communication section.[26]

Meanwhile, a group of villagers from Debeibat al-Dubasin captured Wad Ḥabūba and handed him to Dickinson at Katfia on 4 May. He was hurriedly tried at Kamlin on 8 May and was sentenced to death and confiscation of property. He was hanged on 17 May at Hillat Mustafa, the marketplace of the Halawin tribe, before a crowd of some three thousand people and a parade of troops. A certain Sayyid Aṣghar Ḥusayn claimed that Wad Ḥabūba was tried by a civil judge, who had no experience of criminal justice. He also asserted that Wad Ḥabūba was hanged on a Sunday, which is not permissible by English law. Aṣghar strongly appealed to the British government against the court's decision to confiscate his property:

> If a father was found guilty of murder and rebellion, the dictates of reason and humanity do not allow that the surviving sons should be made to suffer the consequences of his acts, and in the present state of English law there will not be found a single instance in which the property of a murderer was forfeited and the civil rights denied to his children.[27]

The hurried manner in which Wad Ḥabūba was hanged and the very meager information given to the press about the trial raises suspicion that he was allowed neither right of defense nor appeal. Coupled with the cruel and barbaric manner in which he was hanged, this

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[26] Report by Wingate on Wad Ḥabūba's revolt, 26 May 1908, F.O. 371/451, enclosure II.

[27] Sayyid Aṣgar Ḥusayn to Edward Gray, foreign secretary, 9 June 1908 F.O. 361/451.

demonstrates that the authorities were more concerned with revenge than justice. This is further suggested by the unanimous and wholehearted endorsement by Wingate, Slatin, and all heads of departments for the court's harsh sentences on other alleged participants in the revolt. Twelve were sentenced to death and forfeiture of property just because they were alleged to have formed part of the force which attacked the troops at Katfia, while long terms of imprisonment were inflicted on eight others. Wingate and his colleagues were so eager to enlist the support of the British government for the immediate execution of these verdicts that they claimed that this was essential in order "to prevent a recurrence of the numerous subversive attempts to which the authority of the government [was] exposed."[28] This was an unfounded assertion, as the government did not face a serious Mahdist revolt for at least twelve years. Luckily Gorst, the British high commissioner in Egypt, firmly used all his powers of diplomacy to prevent this execution, and the British government fully supported him, not wanting to revive questions from "sentimentalists in parliament,"[29] and in the interests of the British reputation.

The British government directed that hanging should be restricted to those who had actually participated in the murder of the inspector and the *māmūr*, and who had been convicted of this offense by a properly constituted tribunal. Other leaders of the revolt, however incontestable their guilt, should be sentenced to imprisonment and/or confiscation of property. The British government insisted that it should be fully informed before the confirmation of any death sentence.[30] In a letter to Wingate, Slatin offered his resignation, protesting that in consequence of this commutation "a similar rising may reoccur and that the life of British and Egyptian officials [would] not be safe in remote districts. Considering that I am inspector general and your advisor as political officer I am more or less responsible for the peace in the Sudan, a duty that I shall not be able to carry under the new circumstances created by this act of mercy."[31] While agreeing with his views, Wingate emotionally appealed to Slatin to withdraw his resignation.[32] He did.

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[28] Gorst to Gray, 28 May 1908 F.O. 371/451, telegram No. 40.

[29] Quoted in Mellini, Peter, *Sir Eldon Gorst, The Overshadowed Proconsul* (Stanford, 1977), p. 176. Mellini has erroneously written that Moncrief was killed "by some tribes men in the *Southern Sudan*" (my emphasis), *Ibid.*, p. 176.

[30] Gray to Gorst, 29 May 1908 F.O. 371/451, telegram No. 12.

[31] Slatin to Wingate, undated, S.A.D. Box 451/124.

[32] Wingate to Slatin, 3 June 1908, S.A.D. Box 451/124.

Practically all British officials in the Sudan were united in condemning the British government decision. While Bonham Carter, the legal secretary, expressed his desire to resign, Currie wrote, "Once again England falls back on the blood-stained policy of attempting to consolidate its enemies by giving away its friends."[33] Their main objection was that by this commutation, the government had given in to Egyptian nationalist pressure which labelled Wad Ḥabūba's revolt as another Dinshawai in the Sudan.[34] The Board of *'Ulama'* supported this view and asserted that the revolt was a direct result of the government's failure to implement their advice, given in 1901, to execute all Mahdist preachers.

Wingate was so shocked by Wad Ḥabūba's uprising that he felt it to have conclusively proved that Madhism was a real and present danger to government authority. The seriousness of this danger appeared, he asserted, "when it is borne in mind that the outlying districts of the Sudan are, for the most part, peopled by savage or semi-civilized tribesmen whose raiding and fighting instincts rebel against the restraint of Government authority and who are therefore only too accessible to religious agitators."[35] Had Wad Ḥabūba been successful, Wingate wrote to Maxwell, "he would have been a prophet endowed with all sorts of miraculous gifts and he should have had most of the Gezira at his heels . . ."[36]

But the effect of Wad Ḥabūba's revolt was momentary and it was broken by lack of support from the local inhabitants, not as a result of military victory by government troops. The people had apparently been afraid of government reprisals and were more interested in pursuing their personal welfare and cultivating their land than in any renewed religious uprising. The explanation of the extremely serious view taken by Wingate and the British officers of the Wad Ḥabūba revolt should be sought in a different direction. First, it was the first Mahdist uprising since the conquest in which a British official was killed and the British government suffered a number of losses. Second, there had been no Mahdist revolt since 1904 and Wingate had therefore hoped that Mahdism was a thing of the past. Third,

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[33] Warburg, G., *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 102, quoted from Currie to Slatin, 4 July 1908, S.A.D. Box 431/50.

[34] *Al-Liwa'*, 28 May 1908 quoted in al-Rāfiʿī, A., *Muḥammed Farīd* (Cairo, 3rd ed., 1961), p. 73.

[35] Wingate to Gorst, 9 August 1908, F.O. 371/452, annex to memorandum no. 30903.

[36] Wingate, R., *Wingate of the Sudan* (London, 1955), p. 149.

and probably most important, Wingate had realized that without adequate communications the chances of attaining real security were slight. Hence he decided "to exploit the opportunities afforded by Wad Ḥabūba's rising in a manner to press the British government for a substantial loan."[37]

In August 1908, Wingate wrote a strongly-worded memorandum to the British government in which he claimed that the huge extent of the Sudan compared with the slender military force available for its protection showed the insecure basis on which British control rested. It was "only lack of combination among would-be rebels and a policy of pure 'bluff' that enable the government to uphold its authority in its outlying and isolated provinces."[38] To remedy this situation, he minuted, there were only two alternatives, both of which involved considerable expense: either to increase the military force in the Sudan or to improve its internal communications, thus giving the present garrison increased mobility. Wingate opposed the first course on financial and political grounds. The Egyptian government was likely to object to increased military expenditure in the Sudan, and it would be difficult in any case to employ Egyptian soldiers in the unhealthy western, eastern, and southern parts of the country. Since it was difficult to recruit Sudanese, the only remaining course would be to increase the British garrison in the Sudan. But British soldiers were also felt to be unfit to serve in the outer provinces. Thus Wingate advised the second alternative, namely to extend the railway to the south, east, and west in order to bring those remote areas into close contact with headquarters. Besides improving security, such railway extensions would considerably increase the material prosperity of the country. But to carry it out, considerable expenditure would be necessary. Due to the financial crisis in Egypt at that time, it was no longer possible for her to provide large special credits or loans for Sudan enterprises. Supported by Gorst, Wingate consequently advised Britain to raise a Sudan loan in order to provide capital for these railway extensions as well as other needed enterprises to maintain the security of the country and develop its resources.

While admitting that there was a security risk in the Sudan, the War Office felt that the construction of railways would not effect

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[37] Warburg, *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 103.

[38] Wingate to Gorst, 9 August 1908, F.O. 371/452, annex to memorandum no. 30903.

any real diminution of that risk, and might "actually facilitate the spread of sedition and fanaticism by bringing the inhabitants of distant provinces into closer touch."[39] Moreover, railways had to be guarded in case of trouble, and this duty itself would absorb quite a number of troops. To remedy this situation, the General Staff therefore offered an increase in the British garrison at Khartoum of an infantry battalion. After further correspondence, the War Office became unwilling to do even this, and recommended instead maintaining a striking force in Egypt which would be available for any eventuality in the Sudan.[40] In spite of protests by Gorst and Wingate, the British government endorsed this suggestion.

While the government policy of suppression and non-recognition of the Mahdist sect remained substantially unchanged until 1914, Wad Ḥabūba's revolt seemed to remind the authorities that it was unwise to continue complete alienation, and humiliation, of the Mahdi's family and the principal Mahdist *amirs*. Hence was the relaxation since 1908 of the strict restrictions imposed upon them as explained in chapter one.[41] At the same time, the government had slightly lifted its ban on al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān by allowing him, with other members of his family, to live in Omdurman, but under constant police surveillance. To earn his and his family's living, al-Sayyid was also allowed in 1908 to cut trees and cultivate a certain river area in Aba Island. Though recognizing him as the leader of the Mahdi's family, the government had sternly warned him that it would not tolerate the Mahdists as a corporate body, religious or otherwise, nor him as their leader.

Mahdist Risings, 1908–1918

With the Mahdists further demoralized by the quick and complete collapse of Wad Ḥabūba's revolt, subsequent millenarian risings were even less significant than their predecessors. Nevertheless the government, still haunted by the fear of a resurgence of militant Mahdism, gave them more attention than they deserved. Thus, although Muḥammad al-Muzzamil, a twenty-year-old *faki* (holy man) who claimed to be

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[39] War Office to Foreign Office, 13 August 1908, F.O. 371/452.
[40] Bukhari, *Military Aspects of Internal Security*, p. 311.
[41] See above, pp. 20–23.

nabi ʿisa in 1908, in Sherkila District in Kordofan Province, was repudiated even by his own father,[42] the authorities took unnecessary precautionary measures after this minor incident. They placed al-Muzzamil under strict surveillance and, in an attempt to prevent the entry of all suspected Mahdists into Kordofan, kept an eye on all who crossed the Nile to the west bank.[43] O'Sullivan, governor of Kordofan, even suggested that al-Muzzamil should be removed from the area, and arrested if he refused to go. Though overruling this hasty action, the governor-general directed that *shaykh* Sid Aḥmad al-Makī, head of the Ismāʾīliyya *ṭarīqa* which al-Muzzamil followed, should be directed to warn al-Muzzamil against any disloyalty to the government. Furthermore, O'Sullivan was cabled to go to Sherkila with an escort on an ordinary inspection tour. On his arrival there, he was to see al-Muzzamil, tell him that the government knew that he was connected to Wad Ḥabūba by marriage,[44] and warn him that "if he gives the slightest trouble or gets a swollen head he will be at once arrested."[45] Though al-Muzzamil voluntarily came to al-Obeid on 22 August and stayed with *shaykh* al-Makī, O'Sullivan saw him in mid-September, reprimanded him, and advised him to return to his father.

Though two of his uncles, Masāʾd Qaydūm[46] and Muḥammad Abu Saʾd were reported to be government agents, each receiving a monthly salary of one pound and two *ardabs* of dura, Muḥammad ʿAli Barsham, a forty-year-old ex-clerk of the Khalifa's son, ʿUthmān Shaykh al-Dīn, and a Habani *faki* from Sherkila district, rose against the government in 1908 in Raga district, Bahr al-Ghazal Province. He sent a letter to Nāṣir Andel, a local sultan, asking him to unite against the government. But the sultan refused and handed the letter to the *māmūr* of Raga. By this letter, the authorities claimed, Barsham

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[42] Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥāj Abū Ḥarāz, al-Muzzamil's father, reported his son to the authorities apparently because he feared government reprisals against himself and his two sons, a clerk and a teacher at al-Kamlin school.

[43] Ḥasan Kāmil, *māmūr* of Goz Abu Gum'a, Blue Nile province, was entrusted with this job. He prepared a list of all people who crossed the Nile to Sherkila during the period 29 May–18 July 1908. For this list see N.R.O. Int. 2/27/220.

[44] Al-Muzzamil's sister was married to ʿAwad al-Karīm, brother of the late ʿAbd al-Qādir Wad Ḥabūba. *Mukhābarāt*, Khartoum to governor, Medani, 25 July 1908, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/220, telegram no. 1839.

[45] *Mukhābarāt* to O'Sullivan, Obeid, 4 August 1908, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/220, telegram no. 1850.

[46] I do not know whether this was the famous Mahdist *amīr* (military commander) or not.

had committed two crimes punishable under sections 89 and 152 of the Sudan Penal Code. He was consequently tried on 24 August before a second-class court which imprisoned him for forty-five days, and ordered his expulsion from Raga after this period as an undesirable person. On the completion of his sentence, Barsham was, however, allowed to stay temporarily at Bahr al-Ghazal. Though preferring his departure, the governor of Bahr al-Ghazal felt that his immediate expulsion to his home at Sherkila might lead to trouble there.[47]

Mahdist agitation continued in 1909. *Faki* Gamīl, a thirty-seven-year-old native of Dongola, expressed his ardent belief in Mahdism at Geteina, White Nile province. But he failed to rally public support behind him. At his request, the government sent him to his village, Damboo, near al-Khandaq.[48] In March 1909, *faki* Muḥammad Jum'a of the Bederia tribe claimed to be *nabi ʿisa* and owner of Abu Haraz district, Kordofan Province. Its *ʿumda, shaykh* Ismāʾīl Sanduk, handed him over to the authorities at al-Obeid. Though repeating there his pretensions, he was released on the grounds that he was a harmless lunatic. The governor of Kordofan, however, cautioned him and advised his immediate expulsion to his original home in Sennar because, as he minuted, "one never knows when a lunatic of this sort may not manage to raise a following."[49] Nevertheless, Jum'a was released on 24 May 1909 after promising to stop calling himself *nabi ʿisa.* In June 1909, ʿAbdullah Faḍlallah was arrested in Tagali and escorted to Khartoum for professing to be *nabi ʿisa.* After being guaranteed by Mabrūk ʿAlī, an engineer, he was, however, released and was allowed to live in Khartoum North with his mother, Khadīga Khamīs, on condition that he should report to the police once a week. On 10 November he disappeared, but was arrested again on the 23rd. Though a medical report stated that Faḍlallah was insane, Slatin imprisoned him in Suakin until he died on 3 November 1912.[50]

While on an inspection tour in his district, the attention of the *māmūr* of Abu Delaig was attracted to a twenty-year-old man who apparently tried to hide himself. He was later identified as ʿAbd

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[47] Governor of Bahr al-Ghazal to assistant director of intelligence, 24 November 1908, N.R.O. Int. 2/17/220.

[48] Governor of White Nile province to director of intelligence, 20 March 1909, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/220 letter no. W.N.P./C.R./23.

[49] Acting governor of Kordofan province to assistant director of intelligence, 22 June 1909, N.R.O. Int. 2/27/220 letter no. K.M./C.R./862.

[50] N.R.O. Int. 2/28/223.

al-Karīm al-Amīn, who claimed to be a *sharīfi* (a descendant of the Prophet). Though both *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Badawī, head of the ʿUlama' Board, and Ahmad al-Ṭayib Hāshim, the *mufti* of the Sudan, assured the government that he was a harmless, ordinary man, the authorities escorted him to Khartoum from where he was sent home to Qina, Upper Egypt.[51]

Mukhtār al-Hāshimi was reported to have been imprisoned for four months by Khalifa ʿAbdullāh for claiming to be the fourth *Khalif*. During the early Condominium period he spent two years in Mecca, after which he returned in 1906 to al-Jabrab village, near al-Damer. Supported by a few adherents, among whom were his three sons, al-Hāshimī declared himself to be *ṣāḥib al-waqt* (the master of time) in 1910. He asserted in a letter addressed to all people that he had been instructed by God and the Prophet to declare *al-Jihād* and to rule the Sudan until *nabi ʿisa* comes. He concluded this letter by warning all his opponents of severe reprisals.[52] Expecting insurgents to listen to ʿAli Faḍl, *qāḍi* of Omdurman then on leave in al-Jabrab, the sub-*māmūr* of al-Damer, Muḥammad al-Ḥasan Sharāra, told the *qāḍi* to persuade al-Hāshimī and his followers to come immdiately to see Arthur Huddleston, acting governor of Berber province. Some of the villagers advised al-Hāshimī to surrender, apparently because they feared government retaliation, but he refused. In the brief encounter that followed on 14 August 1910, al-Hāshimī was arrested with two of his sons while the third, Abu al-Ḥasan, was killed. On the government side, *shaykh* Muḥammad Bashīr, the *ʿumda* of al-Kitayab village, and a policeman were killed, and four others wounded. The provincial court sentenced al-Hāshimī and his son, ʿAbd al-Salām, to death, on 10 October 1910, and imprisoned his other son, Abū al-Qāsim, for life. The court, however, recommended mercy for ʿAbd al-Salām on the grounds that he was entirely influenced by his father. In confirming the sentences, the acting governor-general thus commuted his death penalty to imprisonment for life. The government paid L.E. 25 to the family of the dead *shaykh* and rewarded others who helped to suppress this uprising; Sharāra was given a decoration, and *shaykh* ʿAlī Faḍl was granted a first-class religious robe.[53]

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[51] For more information about al-Sharīf ʿAbd al-Karīm, see N.R.O. Int. 2/27/219.
[52] For the Arabic text of this letter, see N.R.O. Int. 2/28/224.
[53] N.R.O. Int. 2/28/224.

Another Mahdist rising erupted in June 1910, in Ramash village, White Nile province, which had a population of five hundred Ta'āisha. It was reported to the authorities that the villagers "were repeating the fanatical *Manshur* and announcing that they were going to overthrow the government,"[54] and that they were supported by neighbouring villages. The authorities promptly dealt with this alleged threat by sending a force under the command of Captain H.C. Potter. Supported by the village's *shaykh*, Potter quickly suppressed this uprising and arrested seven ringleaders.

A group of villagers from Dum village, Merowe district, among whom was a certain *faki* Muḥammad al-Raḍi, were implicated in a Mahdist incident in 1910. Though it did not lead to serious disturbances, the government kept al-Raḍi under strict surveillance and prohibited him from teaching in Dum's local *kutāb* (school).[55]

In 1912 two men, Aḥmad al-Dirdirī and al-Ṣādiq al-Na'īm, declared themselves *nabi ʿisa* in Wad al-Turabi village near Kamlin. They were arrested, but later released on the grounds that they were insane and harmless. The official documents report only three minor Mahdist incidents during the war years. Al-Yās Mūsa Ḥusayn proclaimed himself *nabi ʿisa* in Singa, but was arrested in April 1914. A Fallati, *faki* Abakar, led a rising in Atbara in which Major Cony Bay was killed. Supported by a band of followers, another Fallati, Aḥmadu Dumbo, left Omdurman in May 1915, and, in imitation of the Mahdī, declared a *Jihād* at Jabal Qādir in the Nuba mountains. But his party was completely defeated by a small force of police under the *māmūr* of the area.[56]

The Kassala Rising, 1918

Another Mahdist rising took place in Kassala in 1918 in which a group of Hadandawa and Fallata participated. One of its two leaders was a certain thirty-six-year old Fallati, Muḥammad Sambo. This

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[54] Annual intelligence report for 1910. N.R.O. Int. 6/1/3. "Repeating the fanatical *Manshūr*" means reading the *rātib*.

[55] Governor, Dongola province to C.A. Willis, assistant director of intelligence, 6 August 1910, N.R.O. Int. 2/18/231.

[56] Report by Willis on the Sudan and the Great War, undated N.R.O. Int. 1/19/92. See also Lethem's report on his visit to Sudan, Jeda and Cairo, 1925, p. 29, N.R.O. Sec 6/9/52.

man, of obscure origins, came to the Sudan in about 1901 and worked selling water and wood in Omdurman. He visited Atbara in 1911, Sinkat in 1912, and Suakin and Tokar afterwards. In Tokar he was reported for "wild talk" and, instructed by the *māmūr*, he left to Sennar. While in Sennar in 1916, it was alleged that he was spreading reports that the British forces were defeated in Europe. But the governor of Sennar realized that Sambo "was a *miskin* (poor) half-witted creature . . . that he had no influence, nobody hears him or considers him other than (an) imbecile and beggar, and that the reports about British defeats could not be established."[57] The governor promised to keep an eye on him, but after that nothing was reported on him from Sennar. Sambo, however, left for Kassala in October 1916, where he declared himself *nabi ʿisa.*

The other leader of the Kassala rising was the Duwayyḥī and ardent Mahdist Muḥammad Ohāg Musa. He had fought with ʿUthmān Digna in the east and was imprisoned in Cairo in about 1885. Later released, Musa went to Omdurman and supported the Khalifa until the collapse of the Mahdist state. He then joined Khalifa Muḥammad Sharīf at al-Shukkaba and, on the latter's execution by the British authorities, Musa was imprisoned for five years. When his term of imprisonment ended in 1907, he was released under the guarantee of Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Karīm, a cousin of the Mahdī then living in Omdurman, and was allowed to leave for Kassala to live with his people there. But very soon he started to preach against the government and to spread Mahdism among his tribe.[58] According to local information communicated to the government by *shaykh* al-Amīn, then inspector of education at Kassala, Musa was the real engineer of the Kassala rising, but Sambo was put up as the leader "as his violent mode of speech and action appealed to the ignorant Arabs and they heeded what he said."[59]

With a group of Mahdist followers, Sambo and Musa attacked Kassala Fort on 28 December 1918 and killed a few soldiers, but were later defeated. Twelve were killed, including Sambo, Musa, Muḥammad Digna Ibrāhīm, Hāmid Gaylanī, and ʿAbd al-Mula ʿAbd al-Azīz. Karrar Ṭāhir, Bilāl Ahmad, and Maḥmūd Abū Bakr were wounded. Others fled, but, with the cooperation of the Eritrean

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[57] Report by Willis on the Kassala uprising, 1 January 1919, N.R.O. Int. 2/43/361.

[58] Note by the intelligence department on Muḥammad Ohāg Musa, undated, N.R.O. Int. 2/43/361.

[59] Record of interview with *shaykh* al-Amīn, 12 April 1919, N.R.O. Int. 2/43/361.

authorities, most of them were arrested. ʿAli ʿUthmān Digna, son of the famous Mahdist *amir*, was at first erroneously linked with the attack and subsequently detained for two weeks. In a letter to the governor of Kassala, ʿAlī completely denied his connection with this revolt and claimed that he and his people were very loyal to the government. He protested that the government had accepted whatever his enemies said and asked that in the future it should investigate any rumors against him.[60]

It is interesting to note that Lyall, governor of Kassala 1917–1921, laid the blame for the Sambo attack on the "provocative" presence of an Egyptian garrison at Kassala. In a brief note, he alleged that "the outstanding characteristic of Hadendowa is their dislike and contempt of the Egyptians and while any part of the Kassala garrison is Egyptian there is a possibility of another attempt being made on it."[61] This was apparently part of the government's anti-Egyptian drive, which was particularly strong in those days, as there was no evidence that this alleged "hatred" was behind the attack. In fact, the fundamental motive for most participants in this rising—both Hadendowa and Fallata—was religious. After taking Kassala, they seemed to have planned to proceed to Gedarif and finally to Khartoum to end the "infidels'" rule. Lyall himself admitted in another note that they were Mahdists who desired "to die a martyr's death."[62] The government was worried by this adventure, but it was hopelessly disorganized and never came close to success.

The Sennar Rising

A similar rising took place in Sennar in April 1919, when a nephew of the Mahdī, Muḥammad ibn Saʾīd Ḥāmid, announced himself to be *nabi ʿisa*. A small following quickly developed, but, on June, they were engaged by the Sennar mounted police. Forty Mahdists were quickly killed while there were no government casualties. Though this incident did not constitute a serious danger, the authorities typically considered it a "movement" capable of assuming dangerous proportions.[63]

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[60] For the Arabic text of this letter, see N.R.O. Int. 2/43/36.

[61] Lyall to assistant director of intelligence, 15 April 1919, N.R.O. Int. 2/24/345.

[62] Lyall to assistant director of intelligence, 2 January 1919, N.R.O. Int. 2/43/361.

[63] Sudan intelligence reports for June and August 1919, F.O. 371/3724, quoted in Daly, M.W., "The Governor-Generalship of Sir Lee Stack in the Sudan, 1917–1924" (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1977), p. 48.

The Nyala Revolt

While the Mahdists remained calm during the third decade of the Condominium rule in the sedentary and more sophisticated parts of the Sudan, they were still active in Darfur. Mahdist unrest, which had attracted the attention of provincial authorities there since the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1916, culminated in the Nyala rising of September 1921. Due to the remoteness of Nyala and their absence from the scene, senior officials had at first underestimated this revolt. In his first dispatch on the rising, Willis, the director of intelligence, emphasized that it was "purely local and had no political significance."[64]

Savile, governor of Darfur, who was then on leave in England, was so prejudiced that he claimed that the "people were prosperous and contented," and that "the rebels must be composed of Baggara Arabs who were liable to outbursts of religious excitement."[65] Savile's biased assertion that the people were "prosperous and contented" had indeed contradicted the fact that the rising had taken place. The authorities, however, soon realized that this revolt had gained a following from various tribes, a collection that indicated some interest and involvement. It was certainly the most important revolt against the British government before 1924. Unlike previous Mahdist movements, the Nyala revolt "nearly succeeded in its apparent immediate objective," and "fully revived the old fear of a large-scale religiously inspired revolt."[66] Though the rising failed to destroy the government, its limited success was taken as a warning.

The leader of this revolt, *faki* ʿAbdullah Muḥammad Idrīs al-Siḥaynī, a Kinani born in Dar Erenga and locally known as ʿAbdullah al-Ṣighayir, declared himself *nabi ʿisa* on 21 September 1921 and proclaimed a holy war against the government. The fundamentally religious character of this revolt was clearly reflected in a letter from al-Siḥaynī to Ibrāhīm Musa, *nāzir* (tribal chief) of al-Rizayygat:

> In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Gracious, with prayers and peace.
>
> Now then from the slave of Allah. Abdalla al-Hussein (Siheini) peace be to him, the chosen for fight against the enemies of Allah, the infidel and other hypocrites—solely for the sake of Allah, the Gracious—O:

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[64] Willis to all governors, 29 September 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/5/423.

[65] Savile to assistant secretary (Egypt and the Sudan), 3 October 1921, F.O. 3/10/21, quoted in Daly, Stack in the Sudan, p. 146.

[66] Daly, Stack in the Sudan, p. 144.

> Sultan Ibrāhīm Musa, blessing be upon you, you should rise to fight the enemies of Allah, the infidels and other hypocrites who follow them, and you are hereby told by El Sayid Abdalla El Hussein, peace be to him. O you Ibrāhīm Musa, do not do any harm to the faithful, but you should rise for the sake of religion and fight for the sake of Allah, and die. On your way with firmness, O you slave of Allah, you faithful, rise up to fight for Allah's sake without delay, and come to the place Umm Belula to El Sayid Abdalla, the Khalifa of Allah on earth and the Khalifa of the prophet of Allah on his nation. . . . Do not fail to turn up for the *jehad* quickly.[67]

Moreover, the participants in this rising, who were interrogated by the authorities, had all confirmed that it was religious in its actual genesis.

To say that this revolt was fundamentally religious does not mean, as the authorities in Khartoum tried to impress upon their bosses in London,[68] that it was purely and exclusively so. Resistance to the imposition of government control had, no doubt, greatly helped al-Siḥaynī to gain some adherents and motivated the insurgents to continue to struggle well after his death. It should be remembered here that Darfur had come under British administration only in 1916 and that government attempts (like those of their predecessors, the Turks and the Mahdists) to consolidate and extend their rule there were considered by the people, particularly the Masalit tribesmen, as an invasion. Moreover, the emancipation of slaves from their masters, the increase in the herd tax, and the overestimation for the *ʿushur*

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[67] This translation, with the original Arabic text of this letter, is in N.R.O. Int. 2/50/425.

[68] It was convenient for the authorities to put the blame for the outbreak of this revolt wholly and squarely on "fanaticism" without admitting the possibility of dissatisfaction with the government, as this protected them from embarrassing questions from London. Without proof, some government officials connected this revolt with the emergence of Egyptian nationalism, while others had even claimed that it was instigated by Sanussi agents. This procedure of looking for external causes to domestic opposition was frequently, but unconvincingly, followed by the Sudan Government. In 1926, for example, following indications of agitation among artisans and others employed in European industrial and business firms, the Sudan government wildly concluded, "the phraseology used easily betrays a foreign source of inspiration. Probably the ideas have been spread through contacts with Greek and Italian artisans who may be assumed to have learned the language of Socialism in their own country. This discontent created by the unintelligent absorption of such ideas is likely to produce suitable material for the Bolshevik agitation with which this country is threatened." Quoted in Beshir, M.O., "Abd al-Rahman Ibn Hussein al-Jabri and his Book, *History of the Mahdi*," *Sudan Notes and Records*, XLIV (1963), p. 137.

were all factors that provoked violent opposition. Grant, D.C. of Zalengi, stated that the assessment of the 1920 crop in his district "was so ridiculously high that in many cases the *ushur* assessment [had] been in excess of the total crop."[69] Indeed, Willis himself had unofficially admitted this dissatisfaction with the government's administration and economic policies. In a private letter dated 8 December 1921, he wrote that he "was always sure that the southern peoples in Darfur would give us trouble sometime as they were never really handled by anyone. Besides I think that we went a little quick with them and put them in taxation etc. too soon."[70]

In anticipation of an attack on Nyala, the district commissioner, Tennent McNeill, strengthened its defenses and reported rising danger to the authorities in al-Fasher.[71] The latter immediately sent a force of fifty mounted infantry of the western Arab Corps under the command of *Yuzbashi* Bilāl Effendi Riziq.[72] It reached Nyala on 25 September. A second infantry force of fifty-two men with two machine guns was also sent. As no combatant British officer was available at the time to go with this small force, Captain H. Chown,[73] a veterinary officer then at al-Fasher, volunteered to accompany it to Nyala to help the inspector. He arrived on the morning of the 26 September, just half an hour before the fort was attacked.[74]

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[69] N.R.O. Int. 2/50/425.

[70] Willis to "Pasha," 8 December 1921, S.A.D. 204/3, quoted in Daly, Stack in the Sudan, p. 157.

[71] Tennent McNeill, then thirty-four years old, was educated at Fetts College, Edinburgh, and Trinity college, Cambridge, where he obtained his M.A. with honors in mathematics and natural sciences. He joined the Sudan political service in 1912 and served in the Blue Nile province until 1917 when he was transferred to Darfur. Int. 2/50/423.

[72] Riziq was a Sudanese officer who joined the Egyptian army through Khartoum military college in 1907. He served in the Beir patrol, 1911–1912, and in the Darfur operations in 1916. *Ibid.*

[73] Born in January 1891, and educated at university college, Reading, and the royal veterinary college, London, Chown received his diploma as a member of the royal college of veterinary surgeons in 1914. He joined the special reserve of the royal army veterinary corps in 1914, and was appointed to a regular commission with promotion to the rank of Captain in September 1915. During the Great War he served in France and Belgium. He was seconded for service in the Egyptian army in September 1918, and appointed veterinary inspector, Sudan government. *Ibid.*

[74] Muḥammad al-Mahdī Aḥmad, a brother of the famous Mahdist *amīr* Maḥmūd Aḥmad, arrived at Kalaka near Nyala just before the outbreak of the uprising there. But the authorities were satisfied that he was not implicated in it, although he was collecting cattle from the faithful Mahdists in the west, a practice that was in itself objectionable to the government. Letter from assistant director of intelligence to governor, White Nile province, 13 July 1922, N.R.O. Int. 2/42/353.

Led by al-Siḥyanī, a Mahdist force of about five thousand warriors, organised under nine flags, attacked Nyala fort and the market on 26 September. In spite of heavy casualties they controlled the fort and set fire to a nearby building. But *Yuzbashi* Riziq and *Mulazim Awal* Ḥasan Effendi Muḥammad Zein, a district officer, organized a counter attack that drove the Mahdists out and reoccupied the fort. Al-Siḥaynī launched a second attack that could have probably driven off the enemy in confusion had he not been seriously wounded and carried from the field by his followers. This diminished the morale of his fighters who were defeated and scattered. The government casualties in this round were forty-three killed, among whom were McNeill and Chown, and twenty-one wounded, while at least six hundred Mahdists were counted dead in the vicinity of Nyala.[75] *Bimbashi* Hunt, who had been on a tour of inspection, arrived on the 27th, a day after the revolt, and took over command of the troops in the town. He repaired the defenses of the fort, and organized a system of patrols in an attempt to regain the confidence of the inhabitants in the immediate neighborhood.

Though official correspondence, let alone published reports, on this revolt never voiced any criticism of McNeill, it seems that it was generally accepted in government circles that his methods had been incorrect. In 1928, Sir John Maffey, as governor-general paying a visit to Darfur, wrote privately to MacMichael, the civil secretary, "What a bad show Nyala was! And terribly unnecessary if McNeill had only played his hand with a little common sense, poor fellow."[76] In his reminiscences, Reginald Davies, Resident in Dar Masalit at the time of the outbreak of the Nyala revolt and the Director of Intelligence after 1926, wrote that McNeill "had been slow to appreciate the magnitude of the danger which threatened. He reported the first news of the prophet's appearance in a letter which was not even

[75] *The Egyptian Gazette* (5 October 1921) claimed that the Sudan Government published only the names of the Englishmen who were killed in Nyala. When relatives of the Egyptian officials working in Darfur called at the Sudan Agency in Cairo, the newspaper added, they were turned away without being informed about the fate of their people. The Agency dismissed this as part of the recent campaign by the newspaper to foment trouble between British and Egyptian officials working in the Sudan, and demanded a published apology. Acting Sudan agent to Willis, director of intelligence, 6 October 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/50/423.

[76] Maffey to MacMichael, 25 November 1928, S.A.D. G/S 469, quoted in Daly, Stack in the Sudan, p. 157.

marked 'Urgent' and did not ask for immediate military support."[77]

After the failure of the attack on Nyala and the withdrawal of the *faki*, the authorities were informed that al-Siḥaynī had sent his adherents to their villages to collect food and join him later on the Nyala-Gareida road. Hence, they sent some "friendlies" to capture him and warned his followers that they should surrender by 15 November at the latest.[78] Moreover, the government declared rewards totaling L.E. 590 for people who handed any of the revolt's ringleaders over to the authorities. Al-Siḥaynī himself was captured on 4 October by Malek Dūd Nūr al-Dīn, of the Masalit tribe, and three other tribal chiefs. He was hanged in the marketplace on 28 October.

Al-Siḥaynī's adherents were reported to have retired to hide themselves against government retaliation, and the ringleaders were planning to escape with their cattle to Dar Kara. But apparently they realized that this was impossible as the surrounding tribes were afraid to help them. Consequently they concentrated their force, about five thousand men, some fifty miles from Nyala. They nominated Abakar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, a nephew of Sultan Tor Kusha of the Masalit, as their leader, and decided to resist any punitive measures taken by the government. They were soon joined by an influential *faki*, Muḥammad al-Tūr, who succeeded in maintaining their religious zeal. Among their other leaders were Yasīn Bakheit, Muḥammad Kortal, Ḍaw al-Bayeit al-Ṣāfi, and Muḥammad Dordeik.

The government had asserted that the leaders of neighbouring tribes were well aware right from the beginning of the contemplated Nyala rising, but they concealed facts from the authorities to give al-Siḥaynī ample time to collect followers. It was felt that he could not have secured the support of so many adherents in such a short time without the connivance, if not the encouragement, of the leading tribal chiefs. If his assault on Nyala succeeded, it was argued, a general uprising was planned in Dar Masalit. This, coupled with the dangerous developments that followed al-Siḥaynī's execution, persuaded the government to take immediate steps to maintain law and order in southern Darfur. Consequently the government sent Patrol 99, under the command of *miralai* S.T. Grigg, and No. 5 Company

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[77] R. Davies, *The Camel's Back* (London, 1957), p. 149.

[78] Stack to Khedive on the rising in southern Darfur and attack on Nyala, 28 December 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/50/425, dispatch no. MB/14/185.

Camel Corps, who were accompanied by *miralai* H.J. Huddleston, to make a show of force throughout the affected region and to restore confidence in the government. They were to arrest al-Siḥaynī's co-religionists, burn their houses, and confiscate their property. Moreover, the patrol was authorized to seize the cattle of all the villages that assisted the revolt, and to recover the forty-seven rifles and ammunition taken by the Mahdists during the attack on Nyala.[79] By May 1922, the government asserted that its forces had occupied Dar Masalit and put an end to the period of unrest in southern Darfur.[80]

As another step to maintain law and order, the Resident of Dar Masalit suggested in November 1922 that a proclamation signed by himself and Endoka, *sultan* of Dar Masalit, should be addressed to all tribal chiefs in the area which would hold them responsible for any unrest that might be attempted in their districts. On the appearance of any *faki* or Mahdist agent, they should immediately inform the authorities or be severely penalized. But Savile objected to this proposal, arguing that the lesson of the previous winter had been sufficiently learned by the various chiefs as to make such a proclamation unnecessary. Moreover, it "might give the people the idea that the government was anticipating and nervous of such approaching disturbances."[81] To get the country settled and to prevent blackmail by certain *'umdas'* of innocent persons (under the threat of denouncing them as participants in the Nyala revolt), Savile proposed that the governor-general should publish a general amnesty for all concerned in that rising and withdraw the rewards offered for the capture of its leaders. Savile, however, excluded Muḥammad Kurtāl, who had escaped while awaiting confirmation of his death sentence. The governor-general approved the declaration of a general amnesty for all

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[79] ʿAwaḍ Effendi Muṣṭafa, the correspondent of *al-Ḥaḍāra* in Kuttum, reported (*al-Ḥaḍāra*, 7 November 1921) that the inspector of Kuttum had appealed to the governor of Darfur to send him a company of troops to maintain law and order. The authorities claimed that ʿAwaḍ committed a serious breach of the regulations by publishing this material without the prior consent of the intelligence department, and advised him to "desist from sending information of a character likely to be exaggerated or misunderstood." F.C.C. Balfour, for director of intelligence, to the governor of Darfur province, 7 November 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/318, No. D.I/Y/2503.

[80] See the sketch map illustrating operations in southern Darfur in N.R.O. Int. 2/50/424.

[81] Savile to civil secretary, 5 November 1922, N.R.O. Int. 2/50/431.

except persons for whose arrest a reward had been offered. Their names should be specified.[82] Two ringleaders of the revolt, Kurtāl and Ḍaw al-Bayeit were arrested and executed at Nyala in September 1924, while a third, Daoud Ḥasan, was arrested in Aba in July 1936 and sent back to live in al-Fasher under police supervision.[83]

Though unable to obtain sufficient evidence, the Darfur authorities were convinced that the Nyala rising was somehow connected with spreading influence of Mahdism in the west. In spite of Willis's repeated assurances of al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's loyalty, the authorities in Darfur felt that the activities of his *mandubs* (agents)—self-appointed or legitimate—had disturbing effects on tribal leaders, and that their very contacts with the populace excited them against the government. Among the Mahdists in the west, it was argued, there was a general assertion that al-Sayyid would soon manifest himself as *nabi ʿisa* and overthrow the government. An intelligence report asserted that some Mahdist *fakis* had wildly interpreted certain verses of the Qur'ān in such a way as to predict the victory of their sect and to associate al-Sayyid with messianic prophecy. The report gives the following as an example:

> An account of the birth of the Virgin Mary in chapter III contains the following words: "So with goodly acceptance did the Lord accept her and with goodly growth did he make her grow." The Arabic text here twice uses the root *qabila*, whence the Mahdist interpretation understands the passage as referring to Magbulla, mother of el-Sayyid Abd el-Rahman with obvious allusion to the latter's character as Prophet Jesus.[84]

The same intelligence report claimed that belief in the supernatural character of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and in the coming of "the day" was also expressed in Mahdist hymns and songs. The following fragment, addressed to al-Sayyid, was given as an example: "They brought an aeroplane, oh Lord of knowledge, but you prayed to the forgiving God, and you came to earth with heavenly secrets, bringing shame upon the Sirdar."

According to the report, "The meaning of the verse is that when el-Sayyid ʿAbd el-Raḥmān, during his visit to England was taken for a flight in an aeroplane, it was the intention of his enemies to cause

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[82] Telegram from civil secretary to governor, Darfur province, 28 October 1928, N.R.O. Int. 2/50/427.

[83] General note on Mahdist affairs, 22 July 1936, N.R.O. Sec. 8/8/51.

[84] Secret intelligence report for October 1926.

his death, but to their discomfort he ascended to Heaven and received revelations of divine secrets."[85]

It was accepted in many government circles, however, that al-Sayyid's activities were at least indirectly responsible for the Nyala revolt, a belief that was stated in some official correspondence. An intelligence note for 1924 reported, "it is to be noted that the scene of the rising had been visited, within the year preceding its outbreak, by *fakis* newly returning from Aba island, though it would not be justifiable to infer a direct eastern instigation of the rebellion from those visits."[86]

Stack, the Governor-General, went further than this by writing to Allenby, the High Commissioner, that "it is undoubted that the Mahdist agents played their role in the initial propaganda that resulted in the Nyala rising."[87]

Though probably sympathizing with the Nyala revolt and other Mahdist risings,[88] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was shrewd enough to realize that they were too weak and isolated to challenge the authority of the government. He believed that extremism would no longer work and that both the Mahdist cause and the interests of the Sudanese nation would better be served by exhibiting cooperation with the government and developing his newly found *rapprochement* with it.[89] Hence he had publicly and repeatedly disassociated himself from those rumours that connected him with the role of *nabi ʿisa* and alerted his *mandubs* to do the same. In a letter dated 28 November

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[85] *Ibid.* According to Major Bramble, D.C. of Omdurman, these rumours that associated al-Sayyid with *nabī ʿisā* were more than ordinarily emphasized in the 1930s. It was suspected at first that this resulted from the wide circulation of *madā'iḥ* (songs of praise) of a certain Mahdist *maddāḥ (*composer), the twenty-seven-year-old *ja'li* Muḥammad Aḥmad al-ʿAjab. An informant claimed that al-ʿAjab went around in the Blue Nile province telling people that he had seen al-Sayyid in supernatural powers and that he should be *nabi ʿisa.* But investigations proved that there was nothing objectionable in his *madā'iḥ.* Reid, governor, White Nile province to controller, public security intelligence, 22 October 1931, N.R.O. Sec. 68/45. It seems likely, however, that these rumours were directly or indirectly instigated by Mahdist propaganda to strengthen the *Anṣār* loyalty to al-Sayyid and attract more settlers to Aba.

[86] Note by Davies, acting director of intelligence, on the recent history of Mahdism, 7 April 1926, quoted in F.O. 371/11613.

[87] Stack to Allenby, 20 May 1924, N.R.O. Civ. Sec. 36/4/10.

[88] The intelligence department claimed that al-Sayyid had said nothing to dissuade the religious pretentions of a number of western Mahdist *fakis* who visited Aba Island during the period 1923–1927. Secret intelligence report, No. 2, December 1927, F.O. 371/12375.

[89] See below, pp. 70–73.

1921. al-Sayyid instructed Ibrāhīm al-Sayyid Muḥammad, his agent in al-Obeid:

> I have been informed that certain persons who urge people to all wicked acts and circulate false and wild rumors against us have come to the Mudiria and possibly they may be related or in touch with administrative officials in the Mudiria or on a visit to them, so you should be on the alert. I leave the question to your discretion.[90]

In another letter, dated 24 Shawal 1338/11 July 1920, to Endoka, Sultan of Masalit, al-Sayyid dismissed all *nabi ʿisa*s as infidels.[91] On his directive, a certain al-Loweiḥ Aḥmad was handed over in 1926 to the authorities at Kosti, together with a "dangerous" document, dated 29 July 1924 and attributed by its author to al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, that contained "advice to the public" and called for a *jihād* not only against the "infidels," but also against the non-Mahdist tribes of Kordofan and Darfur.[92] When a certain Fallati, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, claimed in 1932 in Aba mosque to be *nabi ʿisa*, he was, on al-Sayyid's order, arrested and handed over to the provincial authorities at al-Dueim.[93]

Al-Sayyid claimed that his secular and religious rivals, particularly al-Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghani and al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Hindi, were behind this talk. The former may have been anxious to foment trouble; considered the chief collaborator with the government, he was presumably scared that his own position and prestige might be affected by the rise of a competitor. In a conversation with the assistant director of intelligence in January 1922, al-Sayyid ʿAlī reportedly emphasized that Mahdism was not a *ṭarīqa* but an *ʿaqida*, a doctrine, and as such was completely intolerant of any other. He added:

> This doctrine involves a belief in the Messianic character of Mohammed Ahmed al-Doungulawi and the subsequent appearance of al-*Nabi Isa* who may appear in the person of anyone to lead the faithful to victory. Thus, Mahdism is always on the tip-toe of expectancy and awaits a militant movement, and in as much as the mass of followers are ignorant and fanatical, it is a question of how long al-Sayyid Abd el-Raḥmān with the best intentions can restrain their impetuosity.[94]

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[90] For the Arabic text of his letter and its English translation, see N.R.O. Int. 2/38/319.

[91] For the Arabic text of this letter see N.R.O. Int. 1/18/89.

[92] Note by the intelligence department on Mahdism, 1924, F.O. 371/12374.

[93] Report by governor, White Nile province, 20 August 1932, N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/45.

[94] Willis to private secretary, 31 January 1922, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/319.

Al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was, however, particularly anxious to impress upon his militant followers in Kordofan and Darfur to be cooperative with the government. He instructed his *mandubs*, including ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abu Dagal in al-Nuhud, to do this. In a draft letter addressed to the governor of Darfur,[95] al-Sayyid himself had condemned the Nyala revolt and professed his "loyalty", as well as that of his followers, to the government. It read as follows:

> It is my regret to hear of the recent disturbances caused by the so-called Abdulla El-Soghayer which have a detrimental effect on the country, besides the fact that they stand an obstacle in the way of its advancement and prosperity.
>
> Therefore I beg your Excellency to make it clear to all, particularly those who attribute to us disloyalty etc. that we are loyal and sincere to this Government which is sparing, and has spared, no pains to make our country flourish and prosper and grow in wealth, which is assisting the inhabitants in every way possible and looking after their well-being and success. Anyone, however, who claims that he is a messenger from us, or who fabricates false charges against us to secure his own purposes, contrary to the things I have mentioned above, he is nothing but a liar and defamator, and we beg that he should be dealt with drastically in order that our innocence be shown.[96]

Besides professing loyalty to the government, al-Sayyid had apparently tried to exploit the Nyala revolt and the general unrest in Darfur to establish closer contacts with his *Anṣār* there. Arguing that his followers might be misled into involving themselves in the Nyala revolt, al-Sayyid proposed to send an "educated representative," Yaʿqūb Aḥmad, to al-Fasher to instruct them "that all true Mahdists have identified themselves with the government."[97]

But Savile, governor of Darfur, turned down this request on the grounds that the suggested emissary was not a "suitable person for such a mission."[98] Moreover, al-Sayyid had always argued that the government should only give him free access to Kordofan and Darfur to be relieved of all anxiety on the score of his adherents' "fanaticism". But the authorities refused to allow him to make such a journey for fear that it might develop into a triumphal procession.

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[95] Al-Sayyid handed the English text of this draft letter to Willis, director of intelligence, for approval and transmission to the governor of Darfur.

[96] Draft letter from Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to governor, Darfur province, undated, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/318.

[97] Willis to Savile, 15 November, 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/318.

[98] Savile to Willis, 1 November 1921, N.R.O. Int. 9/1/8.

Since 1917 the government had implicitly accepted Willis's view that the irreconcilable hostility of the Mahdists to the government was by that time confined to a small diehard section,[99] and consequently granted them a limited, though vague and unspecified, freedom to organize their sect and advertise their creed. Even after Nyala, Willis was adamantly opposed to any repressive measures against the Mahdists. In a memorandum dated 31 January 1922, he wrote:

> Repression of the Mahdist sect as a whole, I deprecate. Such action would alienate a large part of the population and leave them ready to adhere to any anti-Government, with fanatical hatred. Surely it may be possible so to bring home to them the advantage of peace and security that in the process of time they would all recognize (and indeed many already [did]) that their best interests are tied with those of the government. In such a policy Sayyid Abd el-Rahman could be and [had] been of great assistance.[100]

But the Nyala revolt led to a drastic change in the government's attitude toward Mahdism. First of all Willis ceased to be the sole advisor on this question, which became a matter for discussion as part of the general administrative problems of the country. Moreover, the frequent disturbing reports sent by the governors of the western provinces, which expressed their distrust of al-Sayyid and claimed that his objective was to "capture the whole west to Mahdism,"[101] and the alleged failure of al-Sayyid to restrain his followers, had all served to convince the government of the bankruptcy of Willis's lenient policy. Hence, the authorities increasingly adopted a tougher policy towards al-Sayyid. By the end of 1923 he suffered his worst setbacks: withdrawal of his agents from Kordofan, Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the southern parts of the White Nile Province; prohibition of the collection of *zeka* by his agents; and the dispersal of the colonies of westerners from Aba Island. The ultimate result of the events of 1921–1922 was the tragic downfall of Willis[102] and the appointment of Davies as acting director of intelligence in July 1925

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[99] Willis to private secretary, note on Mahdism, 17 February, 1917, N.R.O. Int. 1/18/89.

[100] Willis to private secretary, note on government policy towards the Mahdist sect, 31 January 1922, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/319).

[101] Nicholls, deputy governor of Darfur, to civil secretary, note on Mahdism and its spread as a cult in Darfur, 23 June 1922, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/39.

[102] In 1926 Willis was made governor of Upper Nile province, a transfer nearer to exile than promotion. He continued in this post until his retirement in 1931.

with Hillelson as his assistant. With his deep-rooted dislike of the "scheming" ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Davies had regarded the latter's rising influence as both a danger and an affront. Hence he stopped collaborating with him and completely reversed Willis's tolerant attitude towards Mahdism. This short-sighted and hostile policy dominated the future relations of the government with this sect during the following decade.

The Zalengi Rising, 1927

In spite of government punitive measures, unrest continued in southern Darfur, and in 1927 another Mahdist rising flared in Zalengi. Little was known about the leader of this rising, the forty-year-old *faki* Muhājir, except that his father was Digawi and his mother Furawi. In the autumn of 1926 he visited certain villages south of Zalengi where he exhorted the people to repent, to renounce their evil ways, and to take to prayers. He also forbade gathering for funerals, and had "the reputation of being immune from fire and [had] a sword tattooed on his right forearm and a book on his left."[103] He declared himself the Mahdī, though he sometimes spoke of a higher authority in whose interest he was acting.

Since early January 1927, *faki* Muhājir tried to gather followers in the extreme south of Dar Masalit for an attack on Zalengi. On the 23rd he was reported to be at Keira, the southernmost Masalit village on the Zalengi border, from which he moved on the same day to Dugga, twelve miles further north, with a following estimated at two to three hundred men. The *faki* had apparently carefully planned his rising and timed his effort to take advantage of the tribes' discontent with the relapsing-fever campaign, the absence on duty of the police in Zalengi, the recent removal of police from Zalengi to Geneina, and the absence of the western Arab Corps from al-Fasher on annual manoeuvres. Nevertheless, he was unable to command the support of the Fur and Masalit, and his movement was apparently so insignificant that the Sultan of Dar Masalit and the local *shaykhs* did not even bother to report it to the authorities.

[103] Secret intelligence report, No. 14, 26 May 1927, F.O. 371/12375.

But like their colleagues elsewhere, the Darfur administrators overestimated the significance of this rising. On receiving the news on 22 January from *Shartai* ʿAlī Bakheit, Major A.L.C. Cavendish, the district commissioner of Zalengi, sent up police escorts to collect information, and informed Kabkabia, Nyala, and various doctors in the relapsing-fever area. The Resident immediately sent twelve policemen to Zalengi with a representative of the Sultan to watch the Zalengi-Dar Masalit area and to prevent the spread of the rising there. Two sections of mounted infantry, under Qasm al-Sīd Effendi Khalafallah, were also sent to patrol Zalengi and to remain there until the situation cleared up. No. 1 Company Western Arab Corps arrived in Zalengi from Kabkabia on the 27th.

Faki Muhājir was planning to attack Zalengi on the 28th, but one of the police patrols that was sent out from Geneina, commanded by *Shawish* Faḍl Musa, located him at *Jebel* Sulla. He and two of his followers were killed; the rest were either captured or dispersed. Among the former was the *faki's* own brother, Gum'a Kurra. The bodies of the three victims were brought to Zalengi by ʿAwad al-Karīm *Effendi* Dafa'allah, the officer in charge of the police patrols.[104]

Conclusions

The centralized system of administration that had been introduced in the Sudan since the Turco-Egyptian invasion in 1820 was incompatible with the free and tribal nature of the people and was certainly the most important factor in most of their revolts against the government—any government—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this had apparently played a minor role in motivating the religiously-inspired risings under study here. Their originators, and most of their militant supporters, were dedicated Mahdists, who were determined to restore the Mahdiyya. The Mahdist motive was clearly stated in the proclamations and letters that some of those originators

[104] *Ibid*. The official documents report other rather insignificant persons who claimed to be *nabī ʿisā*: Ṭāhir al-Niʿmah, a Bargāwī, from Dār Sila, in 1928 at Kabeishab village, Fung province; Muḥammad al-Amīn, a twenty-eight-year-old *ja'li* ex-policeman, in 1931 at Atbara; and the Fallati Muḥammad al-Nūr in 1934 at al-Suki, Fung province; and a certain woman in 1936 at a village in Kordofan. But they were all felt to be harmless. For more information about them see N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/45.

addressed to the people, and in the statements that they as well as some of their followers gave to the tribunals that interrogated them. The Mahdist nature of those upheavals may further be demonstrated by the fact that they took place mainly in the Gezira and the west, the traditional and devoted centers of Mahdism, and were mainly supported by westerners and Fallata, who are still ardent Mahdists today.

Their strictly Mahdist objective was probably an important factor for their failure to obtain a large following, as the majority of the Sudanese, particularly the more sophisticated people of the towns and river regions, adamantly opposed Mahdism. They had wholeheartedly welcomed the overthrow of the Mahdist state to get rid of the Taʿisha autocracy and the unpopular puritan restrictions imposed by the Mahdist laws. The Sudanese still remembered the horrors of the Anglo-Egyptian conquest, and the famines, epidemics, and other disasters that they suffered during the last years of the Khalifa's rule. The new government had given them the chance to live and cultivate their land in peace. Though ideally preferring to see their country ruled by Sudanese Muslims instead of British "infidels", the attitude of the majority of the Muslims in the Sudan "was realistic and cautious and they probably preferred the order that existed to the anarchy that could have resulted from a general rising against the conquerors."[105] Moreover, it should be remembered that while Mahdism had abolished the authority of the *ʿulema'* and tribal chiefs, the Condominium government revived and increased it.[106] Acting in their own self-interest, these leaders discouraged their followers from joining the Mahdist risings and informed the authorities about all *nabī ʿisa* pretenders.

The Mahdists' failure to command a large following enabled the government, sometimes without resort to arms, to suppress these risings easily in spite of primitive communications and inadequate military forces. While Egyptian army units were scattered throughout the Sudan without adequate means of communication, there were very few British officers and soldiers, and they were mainly stationed in Khartoum, Thus the government assertion that a general uprising in the Sudan was only prevented by military force is unfounded.

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[105] Warburg, G., "Religious Policy in the Northern Sudan, 'Ulema' and Sufism 1899–1919, "*Asian and African Studies*, 7 (1971), p. 114.

[106] Holt, P.M., "The Islamization of Nilotic Sudan," in Michael Brett, ed., *Northern Africa, Islam and Modernization* (London, 1973), pp. 13–22.

Though realizing the Mahdist incentive behind these upheavals, the authorities, particularly Wingate and Slatin, were so obsessed by their fear of a revival of militant Mahdism and by the fact that the original Mahdist revolution had sprung from a small clash that they exaggerated the Mahdists' strength and used unnecessarily harsh measures against them. Nevertheless Mahdism withstood the test of time and gradually established itself as a dominant modern religious and political force in the 20th century, thanks to the patience and perseverance of its visionary and articulate new *Imām*, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī.

CHAPTER THREE

ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MAHDĪ: THE SKILLFUL MASTER OF MANIPULATION, 1900–1922

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the son of the Sudanese Mahdī, was born in Omdurman on 15 June 1885, twenty-two days only after his father's death. His mother, Maqbūla, was the granddaughter of Muḥammad al-Faḍl, a former Sultan of Darfur. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān joined *al-Khalwa* (religious school) at six years old, and by eleven he had memorized the Qur'ān by heart. Upon the defeat of the Mahdist state at Karari, he and a group of his kinsmen left Omdurman with Khalifa Muḥammad Sharīf for Talodi, presumably planning to join from there Khalifa ʿAbdullāhi in Qadir. They, however, faced tremendous hardship and consequently decided to return to live at Aba Island. But they were arrested en route after crossing the White Nile by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Abu Dagal,[1] who was authorized by the government to arrest all Mahdist immigrants from the western Sudan. Sharīf, al-Mahdi's sons, al Fāḍil and Bushra, and Maqbūla were detained in Halfa while ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, other minors and the womanfolk were allowed to live with the Mahdi's eldest wife ʿĀishah Aḥmad Sharfī. Sharīf and his group were, however, soon released from Halfa and allowed to live under strict surveillance in al-Shukaba village. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his group joined them there. In 1899 the government received an erroneous report that they were publicly advocating Mahdism, and its forces fired at them indiscriminately killing Sharīf and the Mahdi's two sons, while ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was seriously wounded in the chest. This inhuman behaviour must have frightened the youth who, with the womenfolk of his family, quietly withdrew to live first with a relative, Muḥammad Ṭāha Shiqidi, in the Gezira. From 1906 onward, he was lodged in Gezirat al-Fil near Omdurman[2] where he was supervised by the intelligence department

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[1] Abū Dagal was a minor Mahdist *amīr* who received a letter of amnesty from Slatin and was appointed *nāzir* of the Gharaysia of the Hamar. Warburg, G.: *The Sudan Under Wingate*, p. 53.

[2] al-Mahdi, Ṣādiq (ed.); *Jihād fi Sabīl al-Istiqlāl* (Khartoum undated), pp. 11–12.

to the point of harassment. A British official who visited him there in 1909 later described him as "an obsequious, sorry-looking youth in soiled clothes".[3]

It was extremely unfortunate for the *Anṣār* organisation that Wingate, the governor-general, accepted without question the views of his vindictive inspector-general, Slatin, in all matters pertaining to the families of the Mahdī and his Khalifa. Embittered by his ten years of captivity in the Mahdi's camp, Slatin did his utmost best to suppress Mahdism, and to humiliate its leaders. While imprisoning the Mahdist ringleaders at Rashid and Halfa,[4] Slatin bluntly refused in 1911 a written appeal by the families of the Mahdi and the Khalifa for better economic and social treatment, particularly with regard to their invitation to levees and other public functions. The reading of *al-rātib* (the Mahdi's prayer book) was strictly forbidden, and the "pilgrimage" to the Mahdist "sacred" places, except the Mahdi's tomb, was not allowed. Even at this tomb, prayers and offerings were prohibited. Slatin had particularly forbidden visits to *al-ghār* (the cave) in Aba Island in which Muḥammad Aḥmad assertedly received the call to his mission, and to Qadir mountain where he was reported to have received the *rātib*.

Nonetheless, the condominium administration, during, and after, the governor-generalship of Wingate was to a great extent run by former Mahdists.[5] For example, Muḥammed al-Badawī, a former Mahdist qāḍi in Berber, was entrusted with the chairmanship of the Board of Ulemā', and al-Ṭayib Aḥmed Hāshim, was designated the Mufti of the Sudan. His brother, Abu al-Qāsim, a former secretary of the Khalifa, was selected to the membership of the Board, and became its chairman since 1912. These, and other appointees, were presumably conferred in these positions on the advise of Slatin who seemed to have trusted some of his Mahdist acquaintances during his ten-years of captivity in the Khalifa's camp (1885–1895).[6] Besides, Slatin appeared to have been persuaded to accept the view that the appointment of experienced Sudanese notables would be in the interest of the new regime, even if former Mahdists.

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[3] Quoted in Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, p. 120.
[4] See below, pp. 15–17.
[5] Hill, R.: *Slatin Pasha*, p. 89.
[6] Warburg, G.: *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya*, pp. 60–61.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was a special target of Slatin's vengenance.[7] He gave him a humilating five-pound pension per month that was surely inadequate even for his personal household that numbered thirty-eight, and an offer of second and third class, not first class, warrants on steamers and railways for himself, relatives and dependents. Moreover, he deprived him of the title *Sayyid* (to be called *Shaykh* only), and directed that he should not sign himself in official correspondence ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi, but only ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad Aḥmad. Besides all this, Slatin repeatedly and firmly warned ʿAbd al-Raḥmān that the government would not recognize Mahdism as a corporate body, religious or otherwise, nor he as their leader.

Since his adolescence ʿAbd al-Raḥmān seemed to have been anxious to reorganise the Mahdists into a strong religious sect and to use them to capture the political leadership of the Sudan. But he was too pragmatic to expect this to be achieved in that hostile atmosphere. He therefore kept a very low profile before 1914 and only aspired to achieve two modest objectives that were both important pre-requisites for his apparent plan to emerge as the most important religo-political figure in the country.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's first objective was to consolidate his position as the leader of the Mahdi's family which would, no doubt, qualify him in future to be the undisputed religious and political leader of the *Anṣār*. Since the early years of the Condominium period he had therefore gallantly posed as its guardian and tried to support his numerous relatives and distant relations. Moreover, he volunteered to be their representative with the government. When Khālid al-Bushra died in 1916 ʿAbd Raḥmān had, for example, requested the authorities to continue paying his monthly allotment to his brother al-Fāḍil. The director of intelligence agreed to this.[8] Moreover, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān welcomed in 1909 a government loan of L.E. 94 to build a house for himself and his relatives in Omdurman.

On behalf of the Mahdi's family, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān appealed in 1908 to Lyall, governor of the White Nile province, to allow him to cultivate his father's land in Aba island.[9] By this request al-Sayyid

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[7] ʿAli was another surviving son of al-Mahdī. But he showed no desire or interest in politics. He was, however, interned at Rosetta until 1905, and later entered the Sudan civil service.

[8] N.R.O. Int. 2/39/326.

[9] For the history of the Mahdi and his family at Aba, see al-Mahdī, al-Ṣādiq: *Al-Gazīra Aba wa Dawruhā fi Nahḍat al-Sūdān al-Ḥadīth* (Unpublished Lecture).

wanted to renew his connections with the *Anṣār* and to make Aba the spiritual, social and economic centre of his movement. To enable ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to earn a decent living for himself and his numerous relatives, Lyall had, however, allotted to him certain river land in Aba Island, which included *Gazirat al-Mahdi*, on condition that he would cultivate a reasonable amount of it within three years, i.e. before the Nile flood in 1911. He was furthermore prohibited from selling or mortgaging any part of this land. If he failed to observe any of these conditions, the land would automatically become the property of the government. With the land ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was given the right to cut trees provided that he would get a license from the forest department and pay all royalties and dues[10] Al-Sayyid took advantage of this offer, which marked the beginning of his drive to build up his economic power,[11] to request in 1910 permission to go to Aba to erect a *sāqiyah* (waterwheel) on his land and to prepare it for cultivation.[12] Besides the material benefit, this and subsequent visits to Aba Island, the cradle of Mahdism, enhanced al-Sayyid's prestige among his father's followers, and played an important role in establishing him as their undisputed leader.

It is perhaps interesting to investigate here the transfer of the Mahdist "spiritual" leadership to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. According to a then popular notion, the Mahdi would be succeeded by his descendants from his eldest wife, Fāṭimah, *um al-fuqara* (mother of the poor), so nicknamed because she customarily fed the *ḥīrān* (students) and looked after them well before the Mahdiyya in Muḥammed Aḥmed's *khalwa* (Quranic school) in Aba. On the Mahdi's death she had two sons, Muḥammad and al-Bushra, who were respectively killed at Karari and al-Shukaba. The generality of the *anṣār* seemed to have assumed that Khālid, the eldest son of al-Bushra, had inherited the spirit of his father. But he too died at an early age in 1916, and this so-called "spirit" thus presumably shifted to his brother, al-Fāḍil.

But ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's shrewdness, and charisma gave him a better chance to win this leadership. To secure the personal loyalty of al-Fāḍil, he arranged his marriage to his daughter. Moreover,

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[10] N.R.O. Int. 2/37/317, Legal Secretary to assistant director of intelligence, 15 November, 1917.

[11] For the development of al Sayyid's economic power see below, pp. 114–35.

[12] N.R.O. Int. 2/37/315, letter from al-Sayyid to the assistant director of intelligence, 31 October 1910.

al-Fāḍil himself lacked interest and was too secular for this religious post. A note by the intelligence department on the Mahdi's family tree had this to say about him:

> Al-Faḍil is a very quiet and silent man, thinks much and acts very little—a well read (including the last and up-to-date Darwinian and other scientific ideas) and much enlightened. But is extremely nervous, exceedingly susceptible regarding his self respect and on the whole very sensitive—not because he is the Mahdi's grandson (he is far from being fanatical or inclined to allow people to believe in his sanctity), but the principle of self-independence and self-respect is exaggerated to him. But on the whole he is a gentleman.[13]

By 1914 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had thus became the *de facto* spiritual leader of the *Anṣār*. Though no Mahdist organization had then been in existence, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān could still count on a considerable following in the Gezira and western Sudan.

The second objective of the Mahdi's son was to discreetly counter Slatin's hostile policy and consequently prevent further government repression to himself, his family and the "silent" Mahdist majority. Though repeatedly humiliated by the British. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān intelligently chose to keep his pride in his pocket, and try to attain this very objective through demonstration of "loyalty" and "gratitude" to the government. In this field, the diplomacy of tactical collaboration, he had, in fact, excelled. While deliberately refraining from open manifestation of Mahdism, he publicly and repeatedly disassociated himself from the frequent Mahdist risings that flared before and after the Great War.[14] Moreover, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wrote letters of "loyalty" and "gratitude" to the government and encouraged members of his family to do the same.

While Slatin's policy of "suppression and non-recognition" of the Mahdist sect remained substantially unchanged until 1914, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's dissimulation and compromising attitude appeared to have partly persuaded, since 1908, some influential quarters in the government and the Residency in Cairo that not all the Mahdists were

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[13] N.R.O. Int. 2/43/357, a note by the intelligence department on the Mahdi's family tree, 25 November 1924. The accuracy of this report had been confirmed to me by some of Dr. Al-Fāḍil's relatives and friends, e.g. Amīn al-Tūm, a lifelong associate of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who had been closely acquainted with al-Fāḍil when the latter was the senior medical officer in Port Sudan during the period 1935–1940 (personal information).

[14] See above, pp. 31–62.

"fanatic". Following Wad Habuba's rising, the government considered proscription of Mahdism in an official proclamation. But the legal secretary, after consultation with the Board of *'ulemā'* and the Mufti, advised against this measure. He argued that many of the Mahdists were not really dangerous, and that punishment should be restricted to those who propagated or actively taught the Mahdist doctrine. Slatin proposed that legislation should be promulgated to try such offenders under martial law. But Kitchaner, the British agent and consul-general in Egypt, refused this.[15] Another indication of this cautious relaxation of repression was the government's decision to release in 1912 a group of Mahdist *amirs* who had been detained in Halfa and Port Sudan since 1899.[16]

It is reasonable to assume that the faresightedness and flexibility of the Mahdi's son during those difficult years was largely responsible for his gradual emergence from obscurity to prominence. In 1912 the assistant district commissioner of Omdurman noted that al-Sayyid "had taken to riding at night, unescorted and with face veiled, that he sat next to the *sheikh* of *'ulemā'* in the mosque, that he was constantly in the *zaptia*[17] for no special reason and that certain clerks used to kiss his hand". From all this, the commissioner inferred that 'Abd al-Raḥmān was "getting somewhat too large for his boots".[18]

'Abd al-Raḥmān Manipulates the British, 1914–1923

The question of Mahdism was hotly debated in official circles during the period 1914–22. Two schools of thought emerged out of this controversy. The first was that of Willis, the director of intelligence and the government's chief advisor on the subject at the time. Willis felt that the policy of persecution toward the Mahdists could not be indefinitely maintained, "Firstly because persecution is the most certain method of maintaining any superstition or faith, and secondly because there was a large part of the community in the Sudan who knew no form of prayer except the Mahdi's *rātib*, and to deprive

[15] P.R.O. F.O. 371/12374, Memorandum by Davies, the director of Intelligence, on the policy of the Sudan government towards the Mahdist cult. 11 March 1927.
[16] See above, pp. 22–23.
[17] *Zaptia* is an Arabic word for Police station.
[18] P.R.O. F.O. 371/12374, memorandum by Davies on the policy of the Sudan government towards the Mahdist cult, 11 December 1926.

them of the use of that gives the appearance of refusing a Muslim the right to practice his religion".[19] Moreover. since the British government was fighting the Mahdists' traditional enemy, the Turks, there was "a very noticeable change" in the position of the Mahdists during the war, and many were brought "into a communion of feeling with the Government". Thus, Willis concluded, "irreconcilable hostility to the government, and the desire to return to the old Dervish system was only the *ignis fatus* of a fanatical few who, being old and brought up in the Dervish regime, could not adapt themselves to the new conditions. . . . Endemic fanaticism may only, if ever, be eradicated from the Sudanese character after generations". Nonetheless, Willis maintained, the danger of old Mahdism was infinitely less. The "old followers of the Mahdi" had not only been united with the British rulers by the common ground of enmity of the Turks, "but they feel to a large extent that they have risen from the ranks of the enemy outcast to that of an effective, if humble ally".[20] Willis had thus forcefully advised the government to "absorb" and win over to permanent allegiance this large portion of the community, the neo-Mahdists as he called them, by granting them "slightly greater freedom". By doing this, the authorities would so closely identify the interests of those people with that of the government that their leaders could be relied upon to keep it informed of any adverse movements. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi, who professed his loyalty and goodwill, would be particularly helpful in this respect. Though not a man of "exceptional knowledge", he, in Willis's judgement, had an "adequate knowledge of the principles of history and Islam, and more specifically of his father's affairs. Willis was, however, well aware that the removal of the restrictions on al-Sayyid would immediately alarm his rivals in other sects, particularly the leaders of the Khatmiyya, Tigānniyya and Ismāʿiliyya, and drive the *Anṣār* in certain places "to make themselves and their beliefs undesirably conspicuous". Nevertheless, Willis urged, al-Sayyid deserves to be relieved of some of them. Otherwise he would be discontented and would sooner or later oppose the government "in order to obtain freedom".[21]

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[19] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/340, a note by Willis on Mahdism (hereafter referred to as "Note I").

[20] N.R.O. Int. 1/8/89 a note from Willis to Symes, Wingate's Private Secretary, 17 February, 1917 (hereafter referred to as "Note II").

[21] Note No. II.

On close reading of Willis's memoranda on Mahdism, we may maintain that he was rather confused with regard to the sensitive question of government recognition to this sect. While arguing in one place that the time was still not opportune, on both religious and political grounds, to recognize or encourage a Mahdist sect, he proposed in another to deal with the Mahdists as an offshoot of the Sammāniyya *ṭarīqa*. he wrote in this respect:

> The Mahdi in early days was attached to this Ṭarīqa and many Fellata adhere to the Mahdist rule and call themselves Samania. Hence it would be possible to deal with all questions of religion pertaining to the Mahdists as if they were Samania.[22]

With the active support of MacMichael[23] the *de facto* civil secretary since 1919, provincial authorities in the strong Mahdist centres of Kordofan and Darfur challenged Willis's theory of the existence of a neo-Mahdism distinctly different from and opposed to the old "fanatic" Mahdism. Both movements, they insisted, were organized on the same lines, employed the same nomenclature (e.g. *amir, anṣār*, and *muhājirīn*) and had their headquarters at Aba. Hence, they persistently maintained, the government would be "playing with fire" in allowing the revival of this "dangerous" sect, and urged that it should continue its repressive policy. Like many of his colleagues, Sarsfield-Hall, acting governor of Kordofan, expressed profound mistrust in al-Sayyid. In his words, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān "would set the country in a blaze and turn it upside down tomorrow if he felt strong enough to do it". MacMichael had not only supported this judgement, but accused ʿAbd al-Raḥmān[24] of "duplicity" and correctly protested that he was not as simple minded as he deceitfully posed to be.[25]

Both Wingate, the High Commissioner, and his private secretary, Colonel Stewart Symes,[26] had strongly opposed any form of recog-

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[22] *Ibid.*

[23] According to Brigadier Lush, an ex-civil servant in the Sudan government, MacMichael did not like ʿAbd al-Raḥmān because he felt him to be "an intruder in politics" (personal communication).

[24] MacMichael and the western officials never gave ʿAbd al-Raḥmān the title of "Sayyid" in their official correspondence. But MacMichael seemed to have realized at an early stage ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's shrewdness and skill of manipulation. He reportedly told a former British employee of the Sudan Government, "Give him (i.e. al-Sayyid) a finger and he will wrap your hand" (personal communication).

[25] N.R.O. Int. 2/38/318 letter from MacMichael to Willis, 30 July 1922.

[26] Symes became the governor-general of the Sudan 1934–40.

nition to this "exploded cult". Willis' proposal to deal with the Mahdists as an offshoot of the Sammāniyya was criticised by Symes as "going too far", "inexpedient" and "possibly dangerous". For, he maintained prophetically, "it would be in the natural order of things if the Mahdists of today became the nationalists of tomorrow" and constituted a threat to British rule in the Sudan.[27]

By his professed humility and outward sincerity and loyalty, the manipulative and articulate Sayyid seemed to have confused the government. Hence it surprisingly reached no resolution of this heated and important controversy, and the government policy towards Mahdism continued as incoherent as it had been. Nevertheless the years 1915–1923 produced an increasingly tolerant attitude toward the Mahdists. This "gradual drift",[28] of which the government was apparently unconscious of at the time, was largely produced by the persistent and calculated activities of the shrewd Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in pursuit of his drive to gradually reorganise the *Anṣār*, and eventually use them to challenge the British in order to secure the political leadership of the Sudan. He did this peacefully and piecemeal, and through initiating events rather than merely reacting to them.

The Gezira Mission, 1915–1916

The Sudan Government was disturbed that the call of the Osmanli Sultan in 1914 for *al-jihād* against Britain and her allies might find an active response among the Sudanese. But this fear seems to have been exaggerated, particularly as the Sudanese were not really fond of the Turks after sixty years of Osmanli rule in the country. Moreover Sudanese collaborators with the government—secular notables and religious leaders—were likely alone to counter any form of Turkish propaganda. The government was therefore not in an apparently desperate need for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's services, particularly if he would not be allowed—as actually happened—to visit his ardent followers in the western Sudan.

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[27] N.R.O. Int. 1/18/89, Symes to Stack on Mahdism, 4 March 1919.

[28] In an important memorandum R. Davies called this indecisiveness of the government towards Mahdism as "the policy of drift". For this memo see P.R.O. 371/12374.

Nevertheless, Wingate's desire to mobilize all possible support for Britain, coupled with Slatin's departure in 1914, led to a real change in the thusfor official policy of exclusive reliance on "Sunni" Islam leadership, and adamant opposition to Sufism in general and Mahdism in particular. The leadership of the latter had gradually converted "from suspected fanatics into prospective allies,"[29] and popular Islam has thus rapidly regained its centrality in Sudanese politics which it never lost again. On the governor-general's personal instructions, of which there seems to be no record, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was therefore asked in December 1915 to tour al-Gezira to secure the loyalty of the people there. The government was, however, aware that this change of policy involved an element of risk. For Symes had concurrently warned al-Sayyid against exploiting this opportunity to organize the Mahdists, and bluntly told him that "he would be held personally responsible if the government was kept in ignorance of any revivalist activities among them".[30]

Besides, being unrevolutionary by nature,[31] al-Sayyid was pragmatic enough to realize that the British were arrogantly supreme, and that his father's extreme tactics would not unseat them. Being an ambitious realist, he accepted the Gezira mission not out of loyalty to the British, but for sheer self interest. Alongside the historic hatred of the Mahdiyya for the "Turks" had still been a central theme of its ideology. In return for rendering the political services that the government wanted, al-Sayyid expected recognition and a measure of freedom for himself and his people, Even if the Allies were defeated in the war, al-Sayyid had apparently expected to lose nothing. On the contrary, the Mahdists would emerge stronger and better organized to compete with other political forces for the rule of the Sudan.

Though the anti-Turkish cause had been superficially served by a number of letters of "loyalty" from the Gezira notables to the government, al-Sayyid utilized this tour for a great deal of Mahdist propaganda. Though he was very cautious in his behaviour and speeches,

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[29] Warburg, G.: *Islam, Secretarianism and Politics since the Mahdiyya*, p. 64.

[30] N.R.O. Int. 1/18/89 note on Mahdism by Symes to Stack, 4 March 1917.

[31] During his long career Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had kept the use of physical force to demonstrate strength under remarkably strict control. He ordered a major show of physical force on two occasions only: in 1946 when the British had apparently recognized Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan, and in March 1954 when General Muḥammed Najīb visited the Sudan to propagate unity with Egypt at the expense of an independent Sudan.

the *Anṣār* there were too delighted to hide their feelings. An intelligence report stated, "Said [sic] Abd al-Rahman toured Dar Mahareib and Seleim. All the *hillas* (villages) welcomed him. Many people carrying spears and swords came out to greet him wherever he went, as they did in Dervish days, addressing him by "O son of our Mahdi, happy is the day in which we see you", and "offering him presents . . ." It was widely claimed by the *Anṣār* that *al-yawm atā* (the day had arrived), otherwise the government would not have allowed the son of the Mahdi to visit them.[32] The government was indeed so perturbed by al-Sayyid's activities that it urgently summoned him to Khartoum in 1916.

The Organization of Mahdism

Though the government had warned ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in 1915 that the Mahdists should not advertise their creed, or organise themselves as a religious *ṭarīqa*, evidence of such organisation soon followed, and was demonstrated in the following ways:

The System of Mandubs

A significant result of al-Gezira tour was that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had shrewdly initiated for himself the system of *mandubs* (agents) and *wukalāʾ* (local or sub-agents). This system, described by a tribal chief as "multiplicity of hands", was the chief means for the organisation and future spread of Mahdism. Al-Sayyid had carefully and modestly defined to the intelligence department that the duties of those agents were to serve his dual purposes: organisation of his sect and, at the same time, professing "loyalty" to the government. They were to notify him about all events in their regions and to guard against false rumours that may be attributed to him and to represent him with the people as well as with the local governors. Furthermore they should act as his commercial and agricultural agents.[33] To avoid government suspicion, al-Sayyid had, however, deliberately avoided precisely or publicly to define the religious and economic functions

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[32] N.R.O. Int. 2/41/345 report by an intelligence agent, 13 December 1916.

[33] N.R.O. Int. 2/38/319 letter from al-Sayyid to Samuel Atiyah, 29 November 1921.

of those *mandubs*. But this was privately conveyed to them as appears from the following *tawkīl* (authorization) to his agent in Darfur, Adam Ḥāmid: "It is hoped that all (i.e. the *Anṣār* in Darfur) will be assiduous in their prayers and in reading their *rātib* and that they will demonstrate their loyalty by paying all Government taxes punctually. **That should not delay what they wish to send in the way of presents or zekat**"[34] (my emphasis).

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān started this system in 1916 in the Blue Nile and Fung provinces. But he later gradually and cautiously extended it to other provinces including Kordofan and Darfur. His first *mandūb*, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbdullah, was sent to the town of Wad Medani while his *mandub* in Berber was first heard of in April 1917 as a representative in a "business". Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ṭalbāwī, al-Sayyid's *mandūb* in Kordofan and later Darfur, visited Kordofan in 1917, though the government knew of this visit only in June 1918. To persuade the authorities to accept those agents, or at least claim their verbal approval, al-Sayyid had well chosen his words in this respect. He, for example, told the provincial authorities in Kassala that he received reports about a claimant of the Mahdiyya there of whom he knew very little. He continued to suggest that he should be allowed to appoint agents to visit them and, if necessary, instruct them to be "loyal" to the government. The director of intelligence felt that this scheme "might have good results", while the governor of Kassala approved it provided that two government agents would be appointed to supervise the implementation of al-Sayyid's instructions. When visiting the Blue Nile province in December, 1915, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān casually introduced his agent in al-Kamlin to the acting governor of the province as his follower and "a reliable man". In reaction to this and similar recommendations, the government had not explicitly recognized these men as al-Sayyid's *mandubs*. Nevertheless their shrewd phraseology enabled ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to claim in future that tacit verbal recognition was granted. Had the authorities known the implications of their direct or indirect endorsement to the system of *mandubs*, namely recognition of an elaborate organisation of Mahdism, they would have presumably firmly opposed it. Davies, the acting director of intelligence, emphasized this by minuting:

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[34] The Arabic text of this *tawkīl*, dated 28 October 1922, is in N.R.O. Int. 2/38/318.

> The truth seems to be, by getting assent to the sending of individuals agents to particular places, and, ostensibly, for particular and innocuous purposes, Sayed Abdel Rahman gradually familiarized the minds of Government officials with an idea that would have encountered considerable opposition had it not been brusquely presented without concealment of its implications.[35]

Nevertheless, a list of al-Sayyid's authorized agents, as prepared by him on the insistence of the intelligence department,[36] was presented to the government in November 1921 as a *fait accompli*, and was reluctantly accepted as such. It included twenty-four *mandubs* of whom six were in the White Nile province, four in Kordofan, two in Fung, four in Blue Nile, three in Darfur, and one in each of Berber, Upper Nile, Nuba Mountains, Darfur (temporary agent), and Kassala provinces. This list did not, however, include what al-Sayyid called "local agents" who were known to his *mandubs* at the headquarters of the provinces.

It is clear that these *mandubs* were not exclusively religious notables, but included wealthy merchants and tribal dignitaries. ʿAbdallah Gadallāh, al-Sayyid's *mandūb* in the rural areas of Duiem and Giteina, was a distinguished tribal leader while that of Duiem itself, ʿAbd al-Qādir Karīm al-Dīn, was the *sirtigār* (chief merchant) of the town. On the initiative of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Bābikir Badrī records in his memoirs, a meeting of some Sudanese dignitaries, including Badrī himself and the *Hashmāb* brothers, was held in 1921 in al-Sayyid's house to deliberate on the current situation. It signed two documents containing statements of al-Sayyid's aims. The first minuted the Sudanese desire to be ruled by Britain rather than Egypt, and the second emphasized that Britain was only a trustee that would lead the Sudan to self-government.[37]

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[35] Davies' memorandum.

[36] By 1921 there was considerable agitation against the government in Kordofan and Darfur. When accused by officials in those provinces that his agents were behind this activity, al-Sayyed disclaimed responsibility, and claimed that it was conducted by mere imposters. In an attempt to clear up this matter, the intelligence department instructed him to prepare this list. He enclosed it in a letter to Samuel Atiyah, dated 27 November 1921, N.R.O. Int. 2/38/319.

[37] Badrī, Bābikir: *Taʾrīkh Ḥayātī*, vol. 2, pp. 174–75.

The rātib *(The Mahdi's Prayer Book)*

Though the government had accorded ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his followers a greater measure of passive tolerance in 1914–1917, the question of the status of the sect *vis-a-vis* orthodox Islam was only formally raised in 1917.[38] In this year Willis, the director of intelligence, submitted the *rātib* and the proclamations of the Mahdi for examination by the grand *qāḍī, shaykh* Muḥammad Muṣṭafa al-Marāghī. While condemning all the proclamations of the Mahdī, al-Marāghi, an Egyptian who seemed to have been sympathetic with al-Sayyid, saw nothing religiously or politically objectionable to the *rātib*. He therefore advised its free use. If the *rātib* was to be published, the *qāḍī* had, however, felt that the prophetic term "The Mahdi, peace on him" should be replaced by something like "Mercy on his soul", which could be given to any one.

By declaring that the *rātib* was politically unobjectionable, al-Marāghi had not only gone outside his religious domain, but appears to have failed to understand its real significance. The *qāḍī*'s distinction that the Mahdī had not composed this book, but merely quoted texts from the Qurʾān calling for *al-jihād* is not important. What matters is the fact that this call resulted in a *Jihād* that overthrew the Turco-Egyptian government. To the *Anṣār* the Condominium government—*al-Turkiyyah al-Thāniyyah* (the second Turkiyya)—was nothing but a restoration and continuation of that enemy government. Moreover, the *rātib* "was much more the outward and visible symbol of Mahdism than a book for devotional use".[39]

While no decision was taken on al-Marāghi's reports, the matter was again brought to the attention of the governor-general in December 1921. Colonel Balfour, then assistant director of intelligence, requested Stack to decide whether or not the Mahdists should be allowed to read the *rātib* in congregation. The latter had, however, felt that no general rule was possible in this matter, and directed that the local authorities should use their discretion in each individual case. They should not, however, interfere with small orderly meetings for read-

[38] Muḥammed Ahmad ibn ʿAbdullah's claim of the Mahdiyya provoked a heated intellectual controversy between him and the Ulema. While he insisted that the Prophet gave him the Mahdiyya in a "prophetic vision," the Ulema dismissed his pretention as false and unfounded. For details see ʿAbdullahi ʿAli Ibrāhīm, *al-Sirāʿ bayna al-Mahdī wa al-ʿUlemāʾ* (Cairo, 1995).

[39] Davies' memorandum.

ing the *rātib* unless these disturbed the peace or showed tendency toward fanaticism.[40]

The indecision of 1917 and Stack's vague and non-committal directive of 1921 both enabled ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to go ahead with his plan to encourage the *Anṣār* to hold public meetings under appointed leaders to read the *rātib*. Moreover he organised its publication and encouraged others to do so. Instructed by al-Sayyid, Sulaymān Daoud Mandīl, the son of a Sudanese Jew converted to Islam during the Mahdiyya, printed in 1924 a good edition of 5,000 copies of this book.[41] Its title was "*Al-Rātib al-Sharīf* of our Lord and Refuge the Imām the Mahdī, son of Abdallāh, on whom be peace". Davies[42] took al-Sayyid to task on this matter, but ʿAbd al-Raḥmān once more reverted to his power of manipulation to evade embarrassment and punishment. For he claimed that (the late) Stack had verbally and personally allowed him to print this edition of *al-rātib*. There was, however, no official record of this alleged reversal of policy, and the matter could not possibly be further investigated. Consequently Davies had no choice but to leave it at this juncture.[43]

A Mahdist "mosque"

In 1918 al-Sayyid requested permission to hold Friday prayers in what he called his "mosque" in Omdurman. But this was, in fact, nothing more than certain *rakubas* (grass shelters) that he built at his house without government permission for this purpose. By this manoeuvre, al-Sayyid wanted to undermine the official policy *vis-a-vis* his

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[40] *Ibid.*

[41] A cheap and badly printed edition of the rātib had been published in 1921 to the order of some people in al-Nuhud, Kordofan province. But al-Sayyid disliked this edition because its title page described al-rātib as being "composed" by the Mahdī while the *Anṣār* assert that it was "revealed" to him by the Prophet in Qadir. Moreover, it styled the Mahdī by the unacceptable phrase "al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh", and followed his name by: "May God Pardon Him" instead of the prophetic term "Peace be upon him".

[42] In July 1925, Davies became the acting director of the intelligence department with Hillelson as his assistant.

[43] However, according to O'Fahey, the ban on the *rātib* was effectively rescinded in 1925 by an order from the director of intelligence, who stated that it was unreasonable and impossible to stop its sale. O'Fahey, R.S.: "Sufism in Suspense, the Sudanese Mahdi and the Sufis", paper presented to the international conference on Sufism and its opponents, University of Utrecht, May 1995, p. 17, cited by Warburg, G.: *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics since the Mahdiyya*, p. 83.

sect by asserting the Mahdist claim for a specific mosque, and the right to assemble together for prayers. This was, in fact, what he got. For the government, again advised by al-Marāghī, accepted his application to hold Friday prayers in this spurious mosque.

In 1925 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān requested permission to build a mosque in Omdurman by public subscription, and submitted a proof of a printed appeal that he wished to circulate. While enclosing the records of the 1918 decision, al-Sayyid claimed that he had then been unable to build this mosque and deferred the idea to the first suitable opportunity. Lyall, the civil secretary, allotted a piece of land and allowed the acceptance of subscription for the erection of this mosque, though he prevented the use of the printed appeal. In the same year, 1925, the government allowed the Mahdists to build another mosque in Berber.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's historic visit to London, 1919

As a reward for his services during the Great War, the government sent ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as a member of a Sudanese delegation consisting of religious and tribal leaders that visited London in 1919 to congratulate King George V for the Allies' victory. The delegates, headed by Sayyid Ali al-Mirghanī, leader of the Khatmiyya and included al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Hindī, head of the Hindiyya *ṭarīqa*, considered taking a present to the King, but the idea was later dropped on the grounds that there was no time to prepare a worthy one. At the same time, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān seemed to have privately secured the approval of Willis to hand to His Majesty the "sword"[44] of his father as a symbol of "loyalty". He in fact, did this in a very theatrical manner at the King's reception of the delegation at Buckingham Palace. The King returned it to al-Sayyid and told him "to hold it on (his) behalf in the defence of (his) throne and Empire".[45] According

[44] On receiving the "call" of his mission, the Mahdī was asserted to have asked for a sign to convince his followers. The Prophet (S.A.W.) was reported to have answered: "Behold the mole on your right cheek, the ring on your finger, and the sword you bear, which is the sword of victory."

The history of this sword is not, however, known. While a story claims that it passed to Khalifa ʿAbdullāh after the Mahdi's death, another asserts that al-Mahdī entrusted it to his fourth Caliph, Muḥammed Sharīf. Abd al-Raḥmān's claim of its possession is often denied, while other stories maintain that it had been lost (Davies' memorandum).

[45] On a subsequent visit to Khartoum in November 1926 Slatin criticised the

to a report, the Mahdists rumoured that the King and al-Sayyid engraved the following words on the sword. "This is the sword of the Imam al-Mahdi . . . Now Sayed Abdelraḥmān presented it to the King of Britain who accepted (or approved) Mahdism and returned the sword to Sayed Adbelraḥmān in order that he might protect the Sudanese subjects."[46] ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, the leader of the delegation and then the government's most trusted Sudanese leader, had naturally viewed this manoeuvre with great dismay. On knowing of it some two days before the reception, he expressed his anger by announcing his desire to return to the Sudan immediately. It took Samuel Atiyah, the intelligence officer who accompanied the delegation, all night to persuade him to stay. Al-Mirghanī had, however, remained angry for the rest of the tour.

The "sword incident" had, no doubt, boosted the prestige of Mahdism in general and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in particular. It was a *de facto* recognition of Mahdism as a corporate sect and of al-Sayyid as its leader. According to an intelligence report, many of al-Sayyid's followers visited him in his house in Wad Nubawi, Omdurman. They "fired many shots to celebrate his alleged coming as Sultan of the Sudan".[47] Since that time al-Sayyid seemed to have entertained the idea—that he had actively pursued throughout his life—of an independent Sudan under his leadership. He had since 1920 frequently, though indirectly, hinted to government officials this ambition and his determination to fulfil it. He, for example, had recounted the following dream to Davies: "I found myself working with an Englishman in an office". Davies comments on this "dream" were: "If this dream was invented, its recital must be interpreted as a *ballon d'essai*, if genuine it may be regarded as an example of Freudian wish fulfillment. The inference, in either case, is the same."[48]

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government decision to send ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to London. He argued that al-Sayyid represented nothing but fanatic Mahdism that was a real danger to the government. Slatin described the presentation of the Mahdi's "sword" to King George as "a gross mistake and a theatrical show". N.R.C. Sec. 6/8/47, note by Davies on Slatin's observations, November, 1926.

For further information on the "Sword Incident", see below, pp. 198–99.

[46] Davies' memorandum.

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] *Ibid.*

The persistent rumours, which were not immediately denied by Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, that he aspired to the position of a crowned monarch over the Sudan had naturally alarmed his chief rival Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī who had had to live

In a personal communication, Prof. Mālik Badrī, a prominent psychologist, records the following critique of Davies' interpretation of al-Sayyid's dream:

> Freudian paychoanalysia had been [at the time (1920's)] at its zenith as a theory of personality and as the only modern psychotherapeutic technique. Moreover, Freud's book, *Interpretation of dreams*, was considered by analysts and the intelligentsia at large to be the royal road to understanding the dynamics of the human mind. It was thus fashionable for the intellectuals of that time to explain all sorts of human actions in terms of Freudian theory. However it is obvious from Mr Davies' interpretation that he is not really well-read in psychoanalysis. The use of the term "wish fulfillment" in Freudian literature on dreams refers to unconscious repressed wishes, usually of a sexual and aggressive impulsive nature, which the dreamer would be terrified to know and it would stir him up from his sleep. . . . From this it is quite clear that Davies misused the Freudian term "wish fulfillment" to describe the dream of the Imām. Al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was quite aware of his ambition and he genuinely felt that actualizing it would not go against his moral or religious duties. In fact, to him, it would have only strengthened his Islamic and national aspirations.

The "Pilgrimage" to Aba

Though the numbers of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's visitors in Aba had steadily increased since 1919, it was only after his return from London that this "pilgrimage"—so called in official documents—attracted attention. For many Mahdists had then come from the west to Aba to

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as a refugee in Egypt during the Mahdiyya, and was the major reason for the long estrangement between the two late Sayyids.

While the British never officially offered al-Mahdi the position of a Sultan or King, al-Mirghanī confirmed to both Ustādh Ḥasan Najīlah and Prof. Mudathir ʿAbd al-Raḥīm the several British offers to persuade him to accept the position of a monarck in the Sudan. But he rejected the offer, and opposed its implementation by "others". After all, he pointed, "Kingship can not be given to anyone, and if it were it would not be a genuine kingship, instead the 'king' in question would merely become the 'cast-paw' of those who installed him in office". ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, M., *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan* (Oxford, 1969), p. 131.

The British seemed to have made this offer in 1919 and again in 1922. It was naturally adamantly opposed by the Egyptian nationalists, and the prominent Egyptian journalist Fikri Abāẓah ridiculed both the idea and al-Mirghani in a sarcastic article entitled "*mawlai ṣāḥib al-Ǧalālah Mirghanī al-awal malik al-Sūdān*" (loosely translated Your Royal Highness Mirghani The First, King of the Sudan," *al-Liwā'*, 4 May 1922, quoted in Najīlah, H., Malāmiḥ min al-Mujtamaʿ al-Sūdānī, Vol. 2 (Khartoum, 2nd ed. 1991), pp. 127–28.

congratulate al-Sayyid for his successful mission in London. An official in the White Nile province noted in February 1919, "Visitors increased exceptionally of late, I am told, to Aba and the general atmosphere is more excited than it used to be".[49] To encourage this *muhājara* (migration) al-Sayyid's *mandubs* seemed to have quoted certain verses from the Qur'ān that promised spiritual benefits in the life to come to those who undergo "hardship and toil" for the sake of the faith. The following is a translation of an extract from a document, presumably written in the name of al-Sayyid, that the authorities found with one of those *muhājirīn*: "As for you my beloved ones, what is good is belief in the truth of my teaching and devotion to the world to come and abstention from the comfort and riches of this world for the sake of things which are divine".

Since 1921 al-Sayyid had also started to hold an annual show at Aba on the occasion of *Ramaḍān* festival. The most significant of those was held in May 1923 in which some 5,000 to 15,000 Mahdists were present. This congregation was apparently chiefly held to counter a tour that ʿAlī al-Mirghanī had just made to al-Gezira. Though the attitude of the crowd was reported to have been orderly the government was extremely disturbed by this concentration of "fanatic" Mahdists. Consequently it summoned ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to Khartoum and ordered him immediately to disperse his followers. He did. Moreover, the authorities prohibited any further influx to Aba, and directed governors of the provinces and tribal *shaykhs* to implement this directive.

To remove from Aba the objective of the "pilgrimage", the government had, furthermore, proposed in 1923 that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān himself should make a pilgrimage to Mecca. But the intriguing Sayyid understood the trick, and delayed the performance of this duty. He, however, volunteered to do it in a subsequent opportune year, 1926. Since the Sultan of Najd, ʿAbd al-Azīz ibn Saʿud, had by then controlled the holy places (Mecca and Medina), al-Sayyid had presumably wanted to pose in Arabia as the acknowledged representative of the Sudanese nation. But the authorities refused his request. To sweeten this rebuff they, however, allowed him to declare that he had abandoned the idea because it was too risky and costly.[50] Next

[49] *Ibid.*
[50] P.R.O. F.O. 371/11613, an intelligence report, 25 May 1926.

year, in May 1927, al-Sayyid had, however, performed the pilgrimage. He was treated with veneration by Sultan ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz who expressed his admiration of al-Sayyid.[51]

Nevertheless the "pilgrimage" to Aba continued as extensive as ever largely because of al-Sayyid's adroitness and manoeuvres. While observing the letter of the government directive to disperse colonies of westerners from Aba island, al-Sayyid had in the meantime established by his usual *fait accompli* tactics other colonies at convenient sites on the west bank of the White Nile. By 1926 the number of the *muhājirīn* working in al-Sayyid's cultivation colonies was estimated to be 12,000.[52]

A Book on Mahdism

Encouraged by the publication of *al-rātib* in 1924, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān tried to publish in 1925–1926, again through the agency of Mandīl, a more balanced book on the Mahdi and Mahdism than those published in Britain and Egypt, and simultaneously to boost his own prestige. The author of this manuscript, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥusayn al-Jābri, was a well known Muslim Yemenite scholar who arrived in Sudan after fifteen years travel in Arabia and north Africa. Since this man was invited by al-Sayyid and stayed in his house in Omdurman, it is reasonable to assume that the manuscript was written under the auspices of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān himself. The book dealt with the movement's history and its justification in Islam, and contained a great deal of Mahdist *manshūrāt* (proclamations) and literature that the author could hardly have obtained from any source other than his host.

On reviewing this manuscript[53] Hillelson, speaking for the government, reported that it contained "highly seditious" anti-British

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[51] F.O. 371/12375, secret intelligence report, 26 May 1927. Al-Sayyid was accompanied in this pilgrimage by a small group consisting of his wife, two relatives and two aides.

[52] For a discussion on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's growing economic power and his relations with those *muhājirīn*, see below, pp. 117–26.

[53] The authorities had reportedly got in 1926 two versions of this manuscript. (the whole text of Hillelson's review is in P.R.O. F.O. 11614/07873). A copy of this manuscript, which was translated with a commentary by Dr. Hain Shaked, is at the Durham University archive.

propaganda. It claimed that Muḥamad Aḥmad was the Mahdi, gave account of his works and "miracles", and alleged that *al-rātib* was dictated to him by the Prophet (S.A.W.). Moreover, it quoted what it called the Mahdi's "Farewell sermon". Other passages in this manuscript condemned British policy in the Sudan, and prayed

> Exalt Islam and the Muslims, O, Lord protect it and increase it through them (the Mahdi's sons), may their dignity be feared and their word obeyed, may their station be exalted and the station **of their enemies**[54] abased . . . and cause to rein **over us the best of thy creatures**.[55]

By "**the best of thy creatures**", the author had most likely meant ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and the "enemies" that were to be "abased" were presumably the British.

Afraid of government reprisals. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān quickly and categorically denied any connection with this manuscript. However the authorities did not want to prosecute al-Jabri as this might publicise his work. They were therefore satisfied with his deportation and the banning of the manuscript.

Besides consolidating his influence among the *Anṣār*, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had established after the Great War a new alliance with certain sections of the young Sudanese intelligentsia. To counteract the influence of the pro-Egyptian White Flag League, al-Sayyid helped to found the first graduate club in Omdurman in 1919, and was instrumental in establishing in 1920 the first Sudanese political newspaper. *Haḍārat al-Sūdān*. Edited by al-Sayyid's nephew and one of the ablest writers and orators of his day, Ḥusayn Sharīf (1899–1928), *al-Haḍāra* became the most outspoken organ of "the Sudan for the Sudanese" movement, and succeeded in drawing several of the ablest spokesmen of the younger generation to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's side. Among those was ʿAbdullah Khalīl, an army officer who later became the secretary-general of the Umma Party and a prime minister of the Sudan. Others included Aḥmad ʿUthmān al-Qāḍī, who succeeded Sharīf in the editorship of *al-Ḥaḍāra*, and *Yuzbashi* Ḥamad Ṣālih al-Mak.[56]

By the early 1920's the government was, however, seriously disturbed by al-Sayyid's consistent and ambitious drive to gain prominence

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[54] My emphasis.
[55] My emphasis.
[56] Warburg, Gabriel: "From Ansar to Umma, Sectarian Politics in the Sudan 1914–1945", *Asia and Africa Affairs*, 9, 8, pp. 110–11.

and recognition. It took numerous suppressive measures to check the growing Mahdist organisation and the rising influence of its leader. In 1922 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān received his worst setback. The government prohibited the "pilgrimage" to Aba, instructed al-Sayyid to withdraw all his *mandubs* from Darfur, Kordofan, the Nuba mountains and the southern part of White Nile province, to refrain from the collection of the *zakah* (religious offerings) by agents, and to disperse the colonies of westerners from Aba island. Two years later, when plans for the establishment of a Sudan defence force (S.D.F.) were discussed, the possibility of a Mahdist rising was not excluded. Therefore the authorities adopted a special recruiting policy aimed at drastically reducing the *Anṣār* in the different units of S.D.F.[57] Nevertheless these and other measures were hopelessly inoperative largely due to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's flexibility and fast manouverability to evade them or at least to render them far less effective. Al-Sayyid was also lucky that at this critical juncture of his career the British once more needed his services. This was in connection with the intensified Egyptian propaganda in 1924 that seriously threatened British rule in the Sudan. By that time al-Sayyid was too influential to be neglected in any effort to counter this danger. He promptly responded, touring the Gezira twice to collect petitions of support for the government against Egyptian intrigues. He did not do this out of "loyalty" to the British, but because he was ideologically committed against Unity of the Nile Valley, and in return for concessions that he expected, and subsequently got, from the British.

By 1925 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's personal status had thus grown even further. He had a saloon car in the railway, and used to borrow the steamer of the governor of the White Nile Province for his journeys there. He felt it derogatory to appear in a government office at all. Instead he invited to tea parties at his house government officials to discuss business. Besides this, al-Sayyid's wealth had pro-

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Sharīf, son of the Mahdi's Khalifa and nephew Muḥammed Sharīf, wrote a series of famous articles in *al-Ḥaḍara* under the general title "The Sudan Question" in which he defended the separate identify of the Sudan, and argued that its relations with Egypt should be viewed rationally and not sentimentally. For the text of those articles and the short career of Ḥusayn Sharīf see Maḥjūb M. Ṣālih. *Al-Ṣaḥāfa al-Sūdāniyya fī Niṣf Qarn, Vol. 1* (Khartoum, 1971) and Zayn al-ʿAbdīn H. Sharīf's two edited pamphlets about his father Ḥusayn, *Al-Saḥafī al-Sūdānī al-Awal* (Khartoum, 1979) and *Bakūrat al-Waʿi bi al-Dhāt* (Khartoum, n.d.).

[57] See Al-Awad, Ahmed: *Sudan Defence Force, Origin and Role* (M.A. Khartoum, 1979).

gressively increased. For he derived, as will be explained later,[58] a hansome income from diversified commercial enterprises as well as from the *zakah*. In short he became increasingly influential, and gradually outshone his main rival, ʿAli al-Mirghanī. His prospects became even brighter by the appointment, after the assassination of Sir Lee Stack in November 1924, of a new governor-general from outside the stubbornly anti-Mahdist clique of the Sudan civil service, Sir Geoffrey Archer. To the short-lived, but interesting, career of this governor-general, and its impact on Neo-Mahdism we now turn.

[58] See below, pp. 117–23.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEO-MAHDISM AT CROSSROADS, 1923–1926

The government's attempt to check al-Sayyid's activities in 1923 was of short duration. By the end of 1923, Egyptian propaganda against the British was intensified by the visit to the Sudan of Ḥāfiz Ramaḍān, the leader of the Egyptian National Party, and by the 1924 victory of the extremist Wafd Party. By that time al-Sayyid was vastly more influential than in 1915, and the government could not afford to neglect him in its efforts to counter Egyptian propaganda. Al-Sayyid responded immediately, touring al-Gezira twice to collect petitions of support for government action against Egyptian activities. Despite this, and his later cooperation with the government, it is unfair, indeed naive, to brand al-Sayyid as a "traitor" or an "agent", for he had pledged since the War to work for the realization of his interests and those of his country through persuasion and manipulation of the arrogant British. Moreover, Egyptian dogmatic insistence on the Unity of the Nile Valley[1] had threatened his pious belief in an independent Sudan under his leadership, if not his kingship.[2] Thus, rather than serving imperialist Britain, in his own way al-Sayyid was serving himself and his country.

In his relations with the government, al-Sayyid displayed considerable

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[1] Reading between the lines in al-Sayyid's memoirs, one assumes that he viewed the leaders of the White Flag as agents of Egypt. Al-Mahdī, *J̌ihād*, p. 22. One of his principal aids, Muhammad Ṣāliḥ al-Shingeiṭī, had apparently spoken very contemptuously of ʿAli ʿAbd al-Laṭif in 1946 by reportedly saying, ". . . his mother was a negress, his father was unknown and that he, Latif, had at one time collected old tins from barracks," record of interviews that Lord Stansgate, of the Foreign Office, had with Wingate, Udal, Shingeiti and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al Mahdī, 22 December 1946, F.O. 371/53262.

[2] It is occasionally claimed by al-Sayyid's political rivals and in official correspondence that he was aspiring to be the sultan or king of the Sudan. Though he had more than once categorically denied this, we may perhaps be justified in suspecting that he had at least considered this idea, taking into consideration his vast ambitions and royal manner of life. Kingship was, moreover, the spirit of the times in the Arab world and elsewhere. It was, however, only as late as 3 August 1953 that al-Sayyid had finally allayed the fears of his political and sectarian competitors by publicly declaring his lack of interest in a monarchy and favour for a republican regime in the Sudan. The text of this statement is in Ṭāha, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān A., *Al-Sūdān lil Sūdāniyyn* (Khartoum, 1955), p. 120.

adroitness in abandoning positions attacked by the authorities and swiftly consolidated others equally useful to himself before the government realized that he had changed his ground. Thus, when directed to disperse colonies of westerners from Aba Island, he literally complied with the order, but in the meantime established other colonies on the west bank of the Nile, on sites just as convenient as the island itself from al-Sayyid's point of view, and just as undesirable for the government. By 1926 roughly twelve thousand *muhājirīn* worked for al-Sayyid in his cultivation colonies. Similarly, though readily obeying government directives to withdraw his agents, al-Sayyid had apparently tried to capture the government's own machinery of *ʿumdas* and *shaykhs*. Mahdist intrigues were assumed to have been at the bottom of certain ethnic troubles that resulted in changes of *ʿumdas* and *shaykhs*. Moreover, al-Sayyid himself was reported to have announced to J.A. Reid, acting governor of the White Nile province, his desire to withdraw his agents from that province and to depend upon his "friends", the *ʿumdas*, to look after his cultivation.[3] By cautiously acting against the spirit of the 1923 restrictions, al-Sayyid thus somehow managed to maintain the organization and influence of his sect.

Mahdism in Nigeria, 1923–1925

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi's steadily growing influence was by no means confined to the Sudan, for he had numerous adherents in northern Nigeria who were a source of considerable anxiety to the authorities there. Mahdist influence had, in fact, come to light there in 1923 in the person of Mallam Saʿīd ibn Ḥayātu, a Fulani of the royal house of Sokoto and a great-great grandson of Shehu ʿUthmān Dān Fodio (d. 1817),[4] the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. The Nigerian authorities accused Saʿīd of acting on the instructions of ʿAbd

[3] Record of a conversation between Reid and ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān, 26 September 1926, N.R.O. File No. 8/A/5 (White Nile Province).

[4] Mallam Saʿīd's father, Ḥayatū ibn Saʿīd, identified himself with the Mahdist cause from the outset. He had been appointed by the Mahdi—and later confirmed by the Khalfia—as his *ʿāmil* (deputy) in the western Sudan. For his career and the impact of the Sudanese Mahdiyya on the various west Sudanic Mahdist movements, particularly those that emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, see M.A. al-Ḥāj, "Ḥayātū b. Saʿīd, A Revolutionary Mahdist in the Western Sudan," and Thomas Hodgkin, "Mahdism, Messianism and Marxism in the African Setting," both in Y.F. Hasan, ed., *Sudan in Africa* (Khartoum, 1971). See also Tomlinson, G.J.F. and Lethem, G.J., *History of Islamic Propaganda in Nigeria* (London, 1927).

al-Raḥmān in establishing a nucleus of Mahdist propaganda in Dumbulwa, district of Bornu. To support this allegation, they produced a letter sent by al-Sayyid to Saʿīd, his would-be Khalifa in the west, in which he advised him that when "the day" comes the guns of the Christians would not go off.[5] Moreover, when deported in 1923 to Kano and from there to Buea in British Cameroon, Saʿīd was reported to have sent several letters to al-Sayyid requesting the latter to use his influence to secure his release.[6] As part of their campaign to demonstrate that al-Sayyid was largely responsible for the spread of Mahdist propaganda in northern Nigeria, directly or through his agents in the west, the Nigerian authorities produced a number of other letters purportedly written by al-Sayyid in which he urged his followers there to join "the faith" and hinted at an imminent rising against the Christians. Three letters (dated September 1919, November 1920, and June 1921) were written to Gwoni Kattumi of Bornu, one to the *amīr* of Logone (July 1921), one to Ḥāj Bābā in Baghermi (March 1922), and another to the "faithful" in Timbuktu (June 1922). H.R. Palmer and G.B. Lethem, of the Nigerian political service, were particularly adamant in their conviction that al-Sayyid was behind the Mahdist propaganda in Nigeria. The latter had bluntly accused him. "In a word, Mahdist propaganda in Nigeria in Abderrahman's name seems to me exactly similar to that carried in Darfur and Kordofan by Abderrahman's accredited agents . . . and Abderrahman and his immediate agents are as responsible for one as for the other."[7]

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[5] The Arabic text of this letter, dated 16 January 1922, as well as others alleged to be exchanged between al-Sayyid and Saʿīd, is in F.O. 371/10065.

[6] Saʿīd, however, remained in detention at Buea for twenty-two years until he was transferred to Kano in 1946 to live in exile under the custody of its resident. In 1952 his sons appealed to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to help them free their father: "We hope your Highness would give us all possible help, being the father of all believers, the son and Khalifa of the Mahdi (Peace be upon him). May the everlasting peace of Allah be upon you. May He the Almighty overthrow your enemies and grant the Sudan its independence and your Highness to be its political leader, religious Imam and the affectionate father of its people. Amin." The Arabic text of this letter, dated 8 August 1952, is in the private papers of Sayyid ʿAbd al Raḥmān, N.R.O. Ansar 8/3, document No. 704. Saʿīd, however, remained under detention until 1959, when he regained his freedom. He continued to live in Kano as a devout Mahdist, Al-Ḥāj, "Ḥayātū b. Saʿīd." The descendants of ʿUthmān Dān Fodio had, in fact, kept close contacts with Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, whom they considered as their spiritual leader. Among al Sayyid's private papers in the National Records Office, Khartoum, are some letters from members of this family requesting spiritual guidance, and occasionally financial help.

[7] Memorandum by Lethem on Mohammadan movement in northern Nigeria,

While agreeing with the Nigerian authorities that subversive Mahdist propaganda had spread widely in northern Nigeria, C.A. Willis denied that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was behind it. In a vain attempt to defend his friend, Willis submitted a rather confused and poorly argued twenty-page memorandum. After reviewing in detail the various documents presented by the Nigerian authorities, the memorandum jumped without satisfactory evidence to the conclusion that the letters were forged by Egyptian nationalists to create difficulties for the British in both the Sudan and Nigeria. Willis claimed that:

> Apart from my personal knowledge of him (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān) and my belief in his personal loyalty to the British Empire, and assuming him capable of very great duplicity, I do not think that he would write such letters.
>
> The impression I am left with after studying these documents is that they are written by some person not Abdel Rahman el-Mahdi with the object of stirring up politico-religious trouble. . . . The conclusion I am led to draw is that the letters are from a common source, possibly and even probably Egypt, and that their object is to arouse the ambitions, political or religious or both, of the recipient against European rule and control and to adapt the appeal in every case to the circumstances appropriate.[8]

In this memorandum the director of intelligence even argued that al-Sayyid should not be blamed for the increased "pilgrimage" of westerners to Aba during the first half of 1923, or for the appearance in the west of a number of itinerant *fakis* who identified the Sudan government with *al-dajjāl* (the anti-Christ) that would be destroyed by al-Sayyid in the person of *nabi ʿisa* (the prophet Jesus). Without any proof, Willis claimed that the activities of those pilgrims and *fakis* were associated with Saʿīd ibn Ḥayatū in Bornu and Ḥāj Bābā in Baghermi.[9] However, this procedure of looking for external causes of domestic trouble was occasionally followed by the Sudan Government.[10]

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18 October 1925. N.R.O. Sec. 6/9/52. In this memo Lethem observed that the strong views on Mahdism held by the political officers in the western Sudan were similar to those expressed by their colleagues in Nigeria. But he complained that "the reports furnished to Nigeria from the Sudan reflected so very little the fact that, in the similar conditions of Darfur and Kordofan and of northern Nigeria, political officers in immediate touch with Mahdism should have found themselves driven to similar views."

[8] Memorandum by Willis on Mahdist intrigues in Nigeria and Sudan, 20 February 1924, F.O. 371/10065.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] See above, endnote 68, p. 51.

By that time the British Government seemed to have been convinced that Mahdism was still a live issue, which, if mishandled, could perhaps develop into a movement capable of menacing the British position in the Sudan and Nigeria, as well as that of the French in central Africa—an area which, it was assumed, had supplied most of the Mahdi's ardent supporters forty-five years ago. Faced by this sharp cleavage of opinion between Willis and the Nigerians authorities, the British Government deputed Lethem, who was well-acquainted with Nigerian Muslim politics, to visit Egypt, the Sudan, and Jedda in November 1924, in order to investigate this prickly problem. In his report, Lethem repeated his earlier conviction that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his *mandubs* were implicated in this propaganda.[11]

Sir Geoffrey Archer and Neo-Mahdism, 1925–1926

The political reaction in the Sudan to the murder of Sir Lee Stack, the governor-general, in the streets of Cairo in November 1924, and the subsequent British ultimatum to Egypt made it necessary for the British government to lose no time in appointing a successor. The choice of a civilian for this post had already been suggested by Stack himself and was felt to be desirable in order to mark the completion of the transition from military to civil government which had been gradually going on in the Sudan during the first twenty-five years of Condominium rule. Hence the precedent of appointing a senior military army officer to be the governor-general was set aside, and the then forty-two-year old Sir Geoffrey Francis Archer was selected for this post in December 1924. His services as a governor of British Somaliland (1914–1922) and Uganda (1923–1924) were assumed to have given him valuable experience in handling the Arab and African elements of the Sudanese population. This consideration weighed heavily in his favor over other candidates.[12]

Senior members of the Sudan Political Service, particularly members of the Governor-General's Council, were apparently jealous about the appointment of this young "outsider." Richard Hill had

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[11] This report dated 1925 gives useful information about the Fallata communities in various parts of the Sudan. N.R.O. Sec. 6/9/52.

[12] Foreign Office memorandum to the governor-general of the Sudan, 28 April 1926, F.O. 371/11612.

described the British imperial attitude that labeled men like Archer as "outsiders":

> The precise significance of the word outsider is elusive. Soldiers, though not usually eminent soldiers, were given to using the word in their private letters when describing men whom they disliked. Social origin was not the first criterion. The Great Cromer was indubitably and overwhelmingly a gentleman, yet he came not too many generations back from quite unpretentious German stock. It was something more subtle. You were an outsider if your way of life or your thoughts differed perceptibly form those of the men and women who were looking at you. . . . Anybody who looked un-English, who did un-English things, who lacked English social inhibitions and restraints, above all who was too clever by half and added to his offense by demonstrating it, was liable to be referred to as an outsider or a Jew.[13]

Perhaps some members of the council had expected to succeed to the governor-generalship on Stack's death. Indeed Archer later accused his financial secretary, Sir Wassey Sterry, of owing him "a grudge for coming to the Sudan," and claimed that he remarked at the tisme that he (Archer) had "taken the bread out of his mouth."[14] Sterry's continuous criticism of Archer's policies, and his leading role in the campaign that led to Archer's tragic downfall after only fifteen months in office, appears to have been partly—at least—motivated by this personal resentment. If Archer is to be believed, Sterry was occasionally so trivial in his criticism that at one time he objected to the presence of the manager of Barclays Bank branch at an official Palace dinner given by Archer on the grounds that entertaining members of the Khartoum commercial community at official functions was an innovation.[15]

Unlike his predecessor, Wingate, Stack had been much more of a "team player," and hence had relied increasingly on his subordinates, both individually and collectively. This can be clearly seen in the greatly increased authority and responsibilities of the governor-general's Council throughout Stack's governor-generalship from 1917 to 1924. By 1919 the Council had felt sufficiently sure of its own position to imply that the governor-general should carry out its wishes, a claim that would have been highly unlikely in Wingate's more

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[13] Hill, R., *Slatin Pasha* (Oxford, 1965), p. 73.
[14] Archer, G.F., *Personal and Historical Memoirs of an East African Administrator* (Glasgor, 1963), p. 224.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

authoritarian days.[16] With his strong belief that the responsibilities of a governor-general should not be delegated to his advisers, Archer made it clear from the outset that the Council should return to its original position as a purely advisory body whose advice could be accepted or rejected without obligation. This fundamental difference in attitude, and Archer's determination actively to review government administrative and religious policies, was repugnant to a Sudan Political Service that thought it had nothing to learn from East African methods. Moreover, Archer's flamboyance, and some of his associates, gave rise to unfettering rumours in the closed circle of Khartoum's British social life.[17]

In his autobiography Archer claimed that he set out to remedy a number of administrative defects that he perceived in the service, particularly the excessive powers of the intelligence department. To curb its power, he created a new branch office of the civil secretary's department—a secretary for native affairs—and nominated J.D. Craig, the governor of Kordofan (1922–1926), for the position. In practical terms, this meant the suppression of Willis by Craig, an eventuality unacceptable to the council, particularly Sterry.[18] In his memoirs, Archer described how "in making any changes it is easy to make enemies, and I realized that I was lodging myself open to the charge—which I should so much have wished to avoid—of coming in as the 'new broom.' "[19] But the gap between the governor-general and his advisers was particularly unbridgable on the sensitive and controversial question of Mahdism.

When he reviewed government policy towards Mahdism in November 1925, Archer felt that the tendency to treat al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān with enmity and suspicion was wrong. After all, he considered him by far the most important and influential religious leader of the

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[16] Daly, "governor-generalship of Sir Lee Stack," pp. 31–35.

[17] Personal information.

[18] Martin Daly contests Archer claim by arguing that "this work had already been set in motion by Stack with the arrangement for Ewart's secondment from India, Moreover, Graig's appointment was a slap not at the Intelligence Department but at the Civil Secretary." In any case, Daly continues to argue, "Why should Sterry—as a Legal Secretary (and about to retire)—have cared particularly?" (personal communication).

All in all, Daly does not appear to be impressed by Archer's personality or his achievements. He described him as "personally unpopular", and his governor-generalship as "unsuccessful". For details, see Daly, *Empire on the Nile*, pp. 313–39.

[19] Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, p. 217.

country,[20] and ruled out any drastic action against him, such as deportation. Apart from being risky, such a move could cause unrest and create the appearance of a breach of faith. This course could not be morally justified, for, in Archer's words:

> "On more than one occasion when we [had] been in difficulties we [had] gone to Sayed Abdel Rahman for assistance and he [had] responded with complete loyalty and courage." Thus Archer felt that there was only one course to follow, namely "to treat him, certainly with firmness, but also with the greatest personal consideration and respect as the best means of preserving the loyalty of his followers." The best thing to do, he thus concluded, would be "to gratify his immediate ambitions," and "to show him that we trust him." In this connection Archer quoted an Arab saying, "You may be able to lead us by the heart, you can not pull us by the nose."[21] In his reminiscences, Archer forcefully defended his policy, insisting that "If you hold the leader in the hand, you control the mob, if on the other hand, he is embittered by his treatment, then he might possibly drive another Dervish movement underground. So I would rather have him as a friend than a foe."[22] Both King George V and Stack, Archer argued, had accepted al-Sayyid's loyalty. The king had met al-Sayyid at Buckingham Palace in 1919 (at Wingate's request), while Stack had reaffirmed the government's confidence in al-Sayyid in a letter of 1921, and on many other occasions.

As a reward for his past services, particularly those of 1924, and as insurance of his future loyalty and cooperation, Archer recommended al-Sayyid for K.B.E. in 1925, a decoration on which al-Sayyid had set his heart. Though well aware that this action would be unpopular with the Sudan Political Service, Archer ignored their attitude

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[20] In a note on the recent history of Mahdism submitted on 8 November 1925 at the request of the new governor-general, Davies, then acting director of intelligence, stated that al-Sayyid was then "credibly reported to be the richest person in the Sudan. . . . He is even more certainly the most influential native of the country, having clearly outstripped in this respect even al-Sayed Sir Ali Al Mirghani." Davies further claimed, "There is little or no doubt that his remoter aim is to be constitutional monarch, under British guidance, in the Sudan, on the model of King Feisal in Iraq." In a counter note, Willis, then a powerless director of intelligence, expressed his disagreement with some of Daives's extreme views. For example, on the question of al-Sayyid's desire to be a monarch, Willis claimed that the idea was "no longer a serious proposition." For both notes see F.O. 371/10914. Davies's note is also in N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/47.

[21] Despatch from Archer to Lord Lloyd on Mahdism, 18 November 1925, F.O. 371/10914.

[22] Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, p. 186.

on the grounds that "Onlookers are not always in the best position to judge."[23]

In return for this high decoration, Archer planned to reach a definite understanding with al-Sayyid regarding the gravity of his responsibilities and to lay down certain conditions to curtail the activities of his followers. In practice, the governor-general added, "it looks as though the position may restore itself into this, that he is an accredited and highly-esteemed hostage in our hands, and I only hope that in the manner of the east he will appreciate that we can only judge the tree by its fruits."[24] By this policy, Archer obviously committed himself to be both cautious and reserved in his dealing with al-Sayyid, an attitude that he did not strictly observe during a visit that he paid to Aba. This, as we shall see, provoked a serious conflict between Archer and his political advisers and eventually led to Archer's downfall.

To secure personal assurances of loyalty from al-Sayyid, Archer, had what he described as "a heart to heart" talk with him. It is significant to note here that neither MacMichael nor Davies were present during this conversation and that Udal, who apparently took a neutral, if not sympathetic, stand in the Mahdist controversy, acted as a translator. It is reasonable to assume that Archer had deliberately made this arrangement to give ʿAbd al-Raḥmān a fair hearing and to weigh his arguments with those put forward by the advisers. At the outset of this conversation, al-Sayyid expressed his deep gratitude and that of his followers for being recommended for the K.B.E. Archer emphasized that he would not have done so had there been any doubt whatsoever in his mind of al-Sayyid's absolute devotion and loyalty, and that this honour carried with it definite obligations. Al-Sayyid should now be absolutely sure that his personal position would be both secure and clear. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān then offered to put a stop to the "pilgrimage" to Aba within the year 1923, but tried to

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[23] Together with al-Sayyid, Archer recommended *Shaykh* ʿAlī al-Tūm, *Nāẓir* of the Kababish and the chief and most powerful representative of the tribal organization, for a K.B.E. The award of a similar honor to al-Shaykh would counterbalance "any misconception that might arise out of the award of a high decoration to a second religious leader." [The first was Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī]. For, Archer urged, "it is in strengthening the position of the tribal authorities, as opposed to the religious leaders, that lies the best counterpoise to the danger of a recrudescence of Mahdism." Archer's memorandum to Lloyd, F.O. 371/11612.

[24] *Ibid.*

exploit this cordial atmosphere to persuade the governor-general to lift the 1923 ban and allow him to send his *mandubs* to the west. But Archer refused on the grounds that their presence there would perpetuate the jealousy of the tribal leaders and could even increase the scope of Mahdism, already overwhelmingly large. Archer, however, felt it only fair to tell al-Sayyid that he would not be held personally responsible for any trouble arising in those districts unless it could be proven that he was party to the disaffection. Finally Archer told the leader of the Mahdists that he relied on al-Sayyid to inform him at once of any impending trouble, and the latter readily undertook to do this, even if it affected his own people. Archer felt these assurances were so far-reaching and eminently satisfactory that they should allay any anxiety in the minds of his political advisers as to the wisdom of his policy of extending a hand of friendship to the Mahdi's son. As it turned out, this was a grave misjudgement.[25]

The governor-general was too new to understand the inner politics and intrigues of both al-Sayyid or his own subordinates. Though ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had shrewedly satisfied the *amour-propre* of the proud governor general by pretending to accept the role of a "hostage" to the British, he, in fact, continued his previous manipulation and resilient fishing in troubled waters. Archer's realistic, humane, and broad-minded policy toward Mahdism had, moreover, sharply contradicted the stubbornly tough, but naive and shortsighted, attitude of his advisers towards the sect. While MacMichael, the civil secretary who apparently did not wish to see al-Sayyid rise "in competition with his protege ʿAlī al-Mirghanī,"[26] openly expressed opposition to this policy, other members of the Council grumbled and conspired behind the scenes to get rid of al-Sayyid's advocate. They found their chance in a visit that Archer paid to the house of al-Sayyid' ʿAbd al-Raḥmān at Aba Island on 14 February 1926.

While traveling down the Nile on his first arrival in the Sudan, Archer passed by Aba Island where a huge Mahdist crowd gathered by the shore to accord him a friendly welcome. By this gesture, ʿAbd

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[25] The archival data for this conflict between Archer and his advisers is mainly in an important memorandum, dated 2 April 1926, that Archer sent to Lloyd, F.O. 371/11612. It has twelve enclosures and I will hereafter refer to it as "Archer's memorandum." Enclosure No. 2 gives a record of this conversation which is basically similar to that one Archer gave in his memoirs, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, pp. 243–244.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

al-Raḥmān had apparently planned to impress and win the sympathy of the new governor-general which was essential to change, or at least modify, the increasingly hostile government policy towards him and his sect. In an official document, Archer asserted that, on meeting al-Sayyid on King's Day, 1925, he "hastened" to express his regret for not being able to stop by Aba, and unwittingly committed himself to pay al-Sayyid and his people a visit. He further claimed that he made this commitment without being, at the time, aware of the political considerations involved.[27] But we may reasonably assume that the governor-general had already formed lasting impressions favorable to the Mahdi's son. He seemed to have been convinced that a visit to Aba would strengthen his personal ties with al-Sayyid and secure his absolute loyalty which he saw as the best, if not the only, way to contain the rising danger of Mahdism. In his reminiscences he stressed this conviction: I know it [visit to Aba] was the right thing to do and a wise political step."[28] By this visit, during which the new governor-general expected an enthusiastic welcome by the crowds, Archer might have calculated to demonstrate his popularity and thus strengthen his position *vis-à-vis* his advisers with whom he had found himself from the outset at loggerheads. Archer's promise, however, remained fixed in al-Sayyid's mind who repeatedly requested its fulfillment.

Though the political advisers were extremely frustrated by the governor-general's commitment to go to Aba, an action of undoubted political significance, under the circumstances they had no alternative except to accept it. Being particularly concerned by the reaction of the *Khatmiyya*, the Council, however, felt it very important that before visiting Aba, Archer should pay a visit to their leader, ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, in Omdruman. In fact Archer did so on 11 February 1926. Moreover, the Council urged that the Aba visit should be informal and kept on social lines and that the speeches on the occasion should be "confined to obvious banalities."[29]

At the outset of a long tour through the southern provinces,[30] Archer paid this visit to Aba on 14 February. Pursuing his campaign to win

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[27] Archer's memorandum.

[28] Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, p. 244.

[29] Note on a meeting held at the palace, 7 February 1926, Sec. 6/8/47.

[30] During this visit Archer planned to meet Sir William Gowers, who succeeded him as governor of Uganda, to discuss with him outstanding border questions as well as missionary and educational issues.

the confidence of al-Sayyid, Archer appears to have deliberately ignored his advisers' recommendations, and made the visit.[31] He wore levee uniform, pinned for a second time onto the breast of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān the star of the K.B.E., which had already been conferred on King's Day at Khartoum, and accepted from him the sword of King John of Abyssinia. Moreover, his speech on the occasion, which was described by Lord Lloyd as "injudicious,"[32] referred to al-Sayyid as a friend, claimed that the visit would "mark an important stage" in the relations between the government and al-Sayyid's "followers," and that it would "cement, before the eyes of your people, the ties of friendship and understanding which [had] been so happily established between us."[33] Archer asserted that he did not show the text of this speech to his advisers because the pressure of work at Khartoum made it impossible for him to prepare it in advance, and he could only do this on his way to Aba.[34] Knowing the sharp cleavage of opinion about this visit between the governor-general and his unimaginative advisers, we may perhaps be justified in suspecting that the inaccuracy of this statement was deliberate. He was apparently unwilling to show it to them.

The shrewd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, on his part, made extensive preparations and spared no effort to build up the formality of this visit and enhance his prestige. Perhaps this could best be shown by an elaborate quotation from an article written on this visit for *al-Haḍāra* by Ḥusayn Sharīf, a gifted journalist and the nephew and *wakil* (representative) of al-Sayyid at Mukwar.[35] After hailing the 14th of February as a "memorable day," Sharīf reported that many people who had "spent special pains on their appearance and dress" were gathered for this "splendid festival." On the arrival of the governor-general's steamer at Aba shore at 9.30 a.m. "the Sayyid with his household, the Governor [Nicholls, of White Nile Province], District Commissioner [Bruce Gardyne of Kosti] and Medical Inspector [Dr. Lorezan] boarded the steamer and were received by His Excellency." When

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[31] Though at the time Archer categorically denied any formality to this visit, he later admitted this in a personal letter to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, dated 9 July 1957, see N.R.O. Ansar 2/1.

[32] Lord Lloyd's memorandum on Aba visit, 20 April 1926, F.O. 371/11612.

[33] The text of this speech is in enclosure No. 3, Archer's memorandum.

[34] Archer's memorandum.

[35] The authorities prohibited the publication of this article. For its English translation see enclosure No. 4, Archer's memorandum.

he disembarked, the governor-general, who was cheered by school children, "shook hands" with al-Sayyid, government officials and the notables. On its way to al-Sayyid's house, via "a specially constructed road" that was "decorated with wooden posts wound with red and white and black cloth and carrying flags," His Excellency's "procession" included six cars, the first of which carried Archer, with the Sayyid on his left and the governor on his right. The article described what amounted to an honour guard: "The cortege proceeded; in front of His Excellency's car there were 10 of the Sayed's noble steeds commanded by Sayed Abdullah Hamid, and to the right of it 100 pure-bred horses commanded by Mohamed Ahmed el Khalifa el Hilu; to the left another 100 pure-bred horses commanded by Sheikh Abdullah Gad Allah, and in the rear 50 horses commanded by Omda Abu Andoa; these were followed by 200 camels commanded by Ghenim Muhamed, Chief of the Sabig tribe."

When they reached al-Sayyid's "palace," which had been especially prepared and furnished with costly carpets for the occasion, "His Excellency entered the pavilion by the south gate, while the horses and camels took up a position outside the enclosure. Inside the tent Nazirs, Omdahs, Sheikhs and religious notables were in attendance, wearing their robes of honour. His Excellency shook hands with them in his wonted affable manner, *Sayed Abdel Raḥmān introducing them*" [my emphasis]. The party then entered al-Sayyid's house and attended a buffet that "was excellently arranged and well stocked with delicacies; one of the visitors remarked that he really did not know whether he was in London or the Sudan. It was indeed an hour of joy and pleasant companionship."[36]

To impress the new governor-general and enhance the importance of his visit, al-Sayyid and his nephew, Sharīf, had carefully chosen their words.[37] Both of them thanked His Excellency for his graciousness in paying this "historic visit" to this "historic place." While praising Archer's "excellent policy," al-Sayyid discreetly criticized his

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[36] *Ibid.* Al-Sayyid allocated the catering services and the beautification of his *Sarāyā* (Palace) in Aba and its gardens to his loyalist Mahdī al-Badawī Kazzām (died April 2003), whom he later sent to Egypt to study hospitality and protocol, and took him with him in some of his visits abroad, to England and Switzerland. Subsequently, Kazzām excelled in the hospitality business through his famous company "Afrāḥ Kazzām" which to this day offers services during marriage ceremonies and on other occasions, *Al-Ra'i al-ʿĀm*, 5 April 2003.

[37] The text of both speeches is in enclosure No. 3, Archer's memorandum.

predecessor's hostile policy towards Mahdism, particularly the 1923 prohibition of westerners' visits to Aba. Referring to Aba, al-Sayyid said, "After being *void of population, it has now become, by virtue of your justice*, well populated, advancing in agriculture, industry and all means of development" [my emphasis]."[38] Apparently al-Sayyid wanted to exploit the basic difference of opinion on the question of Mahdism between the governor-general and his political advisers, of which he seems to have been well aware, intelligently to play them against each other, and to win further concessions for himself and his sect.

But it is legitimate to assume that the advisers deliberately overestimated the significance of this visit and made an issue of it in order to oust the new governor-general from power. On behalf of himself and George Schuster, the Financial Secretary, Wasey Sterry, hurriedly sent a letter of protest to Archer, which was delivered to him at Kosti. The protest letter probably had the tacit consent of all Council members. In this letter, which came as a complete bombshell to Archer Sterry claimed that the governor-general's acts and deeds at Aba had caused them "gravest disquietude" and "created a position fraught with serious danger." Moreover, it was incompatible with the Council's decision that the visit should be kept on a social rather than on a political footing, so that it would appear similar to the luncheon that the governor-general had with Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī. To emphasize the social character of that lunch, the letter added, the report about it in the press had been cut to a minimum. Sterry particularly criticized the terms of Archer's speech at Aba as reported in the press.[39] He felt that the speech would enormously advance ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's political ambitions and enhance his political importance. Moreover, this speech had already given the leaders of neo-Mahdism a feeling of triumph which might give further impetus to the forces of Mahdism throughout the country. Sterry exaggerated the significance of certain phrases in this speech as being more suitable for an amicable settlement of differences between independent powers, but completely out of place in the governor-general's relations with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.[40] Sterry, however, did not add that he had reported his boss (in his absence, and without a word of

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] This speech was published in the *Sudan Herald*, 20 February 1926. For this, and the newpaper's report on the visit, see enclosure No. 4(b), Archer's memorandum.

[40] The text of Wassey's letter is in enclosure No. 5, Archer's memorandum.

warning to him) to the high commissioner and had transmitted a copy of this letter to him. Throughout his life Archer remained bitter about this open disloyalty from his subordinate.[41] Since Sterry was due to retire in a month, no action was taken against him.

Archer at first underestimated the importance of this development. He dismissed Sterry's letter as expressing his "habitually extreme views," and failed to return immediately to Khartoum in order to deal with the increasingly grave situation. The worst that he foresaw was that his visit to Aba might temporarily disturb the balance between rival religious leaders. But this should be put right, he optimistically calculated, by a fully ceremonial visit he planned to pay to ʿAlī al-Mirghanī at Berber or elsewhere after his return to Khartoum.[42]

But the newly appointed governor-general had not long to wait for the repercussions. Though refusing to take any official notice of Sterry's communication, Lord Lloyd was so concerned that he cabled the governor-general to cut short his visit and come to Khartoum as soon as possible to discuss the matter in the Council. He asked that an official report be sent to him. Archer arrived at Khartoum on 25 March 1926, but felt it was inappropriate to discuss the issue in the Council, for this would amount to inviting members of his advisory council to call his actions into account. Hence he appealed to Lord Lloyd to allow him to come to Cairo and personally explain the matter.[43] By this move the governor-general apparently hoped to win the high commissioner to his side. The latter agreed, and Archer arrived at Cairo on 3 April.

Al-Sayyid had meanwhile complicated the already tense relations between Archer and his advisers by paying a visit to Blue Nile province. The ostensible reason for this visit was to look after his cultivation there, but al-Sayyid's ulterior motive was apparently to exploit the cordial new atmosphere created by the Aba visit in order to strengthen his position in that province, to minimize the significance of the 1923 check, and to demonstrate that he had scored a victory over his rivals, particularly al-Mirghani. He visited Gondal in Sennar district, Medani, al-Hasaheisa, and then through the Halawin country to his cultivation area at al-Huda in the Managil district.

Disturbed by al-Sayyid's activities, and encouraged by the civil

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[41] Archer to Lord Lloyd, 5 March 1926, enclosure No. 7, Archer's memorandum.
[42] Archer to Lord Lloyd, enclosure No. 6, Archer's memorandum, telegram No. 2.
[43] Archer to Lloyd, undated, enclosure No. 6, Archer's memorandum, telegram No. 5.

secretary, A.J.C. Huddleston, governor of Blue Nile Province and an ally of MacMichael, wrote an exaggerated report about this visit. He claimed that al-Sayyid's arrival at each place was widely announced beforehand by his agents, and that large crowds attended in each case. His manner of receiving them was alleged to be "that of one holding a levee and not of a holy man receiving his followers." Moreover, his agents sent large numbers of invitations and put extra pressure on local notables to attend upon al-Sayyid and express loyalty to him. Huddleston claimed that even the representative of al-Mirghanī felt it politic to take a share in entertaining al-Sayyid at Medani, where a number of meetings were held in front of the house of Hāj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, a leading merchant, and al-Sayyid gave a gold watch to the *ʿumda* of Wad Medani.

Huddleston expressed particular concern with regard to the wording of an invitation addressed to *Shaykh* Hagu, a reputable religious opponent of al-Sayyid in Sennar district, for it "gave rise to great offense locally on account of its patronising tone and appearance of being in the nature of a royal command." Moreover, when referring to al-Sayyid, the writer of this invitation, Muḥammad Sharīf, used the words "upon whom be peace," a phrase usually confined to prophets, though it had been habitually applied to the Mahdī himself. Those who sent this and similar invitations, Huddleston asserted, were well aware of their offensive character, but were encouraged to do this "by the feeling of swollen pride with which they returned from Aba."[44] Besides all this, the report added, a triumphal attitude prevailed among al-Sayyid's followers in the province who believed

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[44] While Huddleston claimed that the Mahdists in his province regarded Archer's visit to Aba as a "great triumph" and as another step towards making al-Sayyid "a supreme personality in the Sudan," Nicholls, governor of White Nile province, gave a completely different view.

Though naturally Archer's visit caused jealousy among rival religious sects (particularly the Khatimiyya), Nicholls felt it was extremely valuable as it demonstrated to the Mahdists in the White Nile that their leader was not only loyal but that the government had accepted his loyalty. Incidentally, Nicholls was the only senior official who had openly supported Archer's views toward Mahdism. Nicholls to MacMichael, 24 March 1926, enclosure No. 8, Archer's memorandum.

MacMichael was apparently dissatisfied with Nicholls, for he replaced him toward the end of 1926 with J.A. Reid. The latter had so actively implemented, in the White Nile Province, the government's restrictive policy toward Mahdism, that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had frequently complained of Reid's "policy of persecution" and his persistent and "unwarrantable attack" on himself. For example, see the record of two conversations that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had on the 17 and 18 February 1926 with MacMichael and Samuel Atiyah, of the intelligence department, N.R.O., file No. 8A (White Nile province).

that he had been appointed a "*ḥākim*" (governor) of some sort. In this connection al-Zubaīr Muḥammad al-Tūm, *shaykh* of the Yagubab tribe, was reported to have asked Pawson, the deputy-governor of the province, whether al-Sayyid was going to be "a Government inside the Government." Hence Huddleston, who seems to have deliberately overrated the seriousness of these events, concluded,

> There can be no doubt that the general manner in which Sayed Abdel Rahman's visit was carried out was repugnant to the feelings of all the more important persons in the province who have not come under his influence, and there is an increased feeling that it is politic to come under his influence to some extent. . . .
>
> His visit, following on the K.B.E. and the big ceremony at Aba island, had definitely advanced his political position and has in my opinion rendered it necessary to take steps to show that his actions are not agreeable to the government.[45]

Huddleston thus urged that al-Sayyid should be warned and prevented, for the time being, from visiting Blue Nile province.

This report added fuel to an already explosive situation and gave the Council added impetus to pursue its campaign against the governor-general. While expressing his agreement with Huddleston's views and recommendations, MacMichael urged the governor-general to call for an urgent meeting of the Council to discuss this matter as well as that of al-Sayyid's suggested pilgrimage to Mecca.

Though still insisting that the effects of his Aba visit itself were good, Archer admitted that in the subsequent developments in the Blue Nile, of which, he complained bitterly, Al-Sayyid had acted with "almost incredible foolishness,"[46] had cut the ground from under his feet and afforded strong argument for his advisers' opposite view. But the governor-general remained convinced, perhaps erroneously, that the activities and indiscretions of al-Sayyid

> were neither the outcome of disloyalty nor directed against the government in any shape or form. Personally I know well he has but given way to a foolish vanity arising, as I make no doubt, out of the general sequence of events rather than from my speech at Aba alone; and he had in native fashion, succumbed to the perhaps not un-natural desire to press home a temporary advantage gained over an oppos-

[45] Archer's memorandum.
[46] *Ibid.*

> ing faction. I am not attempting to minimize his errors, I am explaining the course of them. He is undoubtedly ambitious, but his aspirations are, by general consent, of a constitutional nature.[47]

In a vain attempt to save his position, on 26 March 1926 Archer reluctantly endorsed his three secretaries' recommendation for imposing a definite check on al-Sayyid. It was hurriedly suggested that he should not be allowed to visit Blue Nile province for the time being, to leave Khartoum without the prior consent of the governor-general, to celebrate the Bairam festival at Aba,[48] or to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca that year, on the grounds that he would pose there as the representative of the Sudan and turn the occasion to his own self-glorification. On reconsidering these measures the next day, the authorities, however, realized that they would lead to an undersirably sudden change of attitude towards al-Sayyid, giving him "justifiable cause for bewilderment and grievance."[49] Moreover, since the whole matter had already been referred to the high commissioner, his approval should be sought before taking such a drastic action. It was further agreed that no definite decision should be taken at that time on the question of al-Sayyid's pilgrimage to Mecca. In these circumstances the government finally decided that the governor-general should see al-Sayyid for a few minutes, during which Archer would warn him that his recent behaviour was incompatible with the instructions given to him and with the governor-general's own undertakings. The decision that al-Sayyid should not leave the capital was to be conveyed to him through the usual intelligence channels.[50]

Al-Sayyid was indeed temporarily frightened by the governor-general's hostile tone. But he soon regained his balance, and reverted to his skill in manipulation to save the critical situation. On the following day, he sent an extremely "apologetic" letter to Archer[51] in

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[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Al-Sayyid, however, was firmly told that he could only celebrate this *'Id* at Aba if he had already made preparations for the occasion there, and on the strict understanding that there should be no "undue pomp and ceremony" and that he would be personally responsible that "everything should pass off quietly." Note on a meeting at the Palace, 27 March 1926, enclosure No. 10, Archer's memorandum.

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] Being aware of the Council's hostile attitude towards him, al-Sayyid requested Craig to allow nobody to see this letter and to translate it by himself for the governor-general.

which he tried to rationalize his behaviour and acts during his "regrettable" visit to Blue Nile province. In this letter al-Sayyid denied, rather unconvincingly, that he had—either directly or through an intermediary—invited anybody to meet him. The invitation to *shaykh* Haju, he claimed, was extended without his knowledge by his nephew who did so out of "politeness." As to the present of a watch to the *ʿumda*, al-Sayyid asserted that it was worth only 120 piasters and that he gave it in return for the *ʿumda's* trouble in traveling with him from Medani to al-Hasaheisa. In a futile attempt to save himself, al-Sayyid concluded his letter with an emotional, but cunning, appeal to the governor-general, saying "It is very hard on me that anything be attributed to me which is displeasing to you, and this in spite of the fact that I have earnestly endeavoursed to gain your favour. I have made this explanation for your information trusting in your justice."[52]

Though Archer had openly associated himself with this attempt to check al-Sayyid's activities, his advisers were still determined to bring about his downfall. On 28 March the Council unanimously[53] passed a resolution supporting Sterry's views (expressed in his letter to Archer), and recorded "their regret and anxiety that on a matter of the utmost political importance, His Excellency should have publicly spoken and acted in a manner which they can only regard as completely inconsistent with the policy which had been accepted by him in consultation with his chief advisors."[54] Commenting on the seriousness of this resolution, Lord Lloyd correctly emphasized, "An appeal of this nature to higher authority against their Chief could only have been justified if lack of confidence in him was complete and universal throughout the officials in the Sudan."[55] This

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[52] Letter from al-Sayyid to Archer, 28 March 1926, enclosure No. 11, Archer's memorandum. Commenting on this letter, Huddleston argued that the method of informing *shaykh* Haju about al-Sayyid's arrival was "not polite" and that the present of a watch, worth about four pounds, to the *ʿumda* was uncalled for. See enclosure No. 11, 29 March 1926.

[53] A member of the Council, Crowfoot, was, however, absent from Khartoum on duty.

[54] Enclosure No. 12, Archer's memorandum.

[55] Lord Lloyd to Austen Chamberlain, 10 April 1926, F.O. 371/11612. In his memoirs, Sarsfield-Hall, who worked for twenty-seven years in the Sudan Political Service, had this to say about Archer: "He was a very large and impressive man with a redoubtable presence which it was said very much impressed Winston Churchill when he met him in Cairo. I think he imagined that his physical characteristics would ensure his success as governor-general, but they did not do so,

lack of confidence had in fact been further emphasized to Lord Lloyd by Sterry and Schuster, who were deputized by the Council, with the reluctant concurrence of Archer, to represent the standpoint of its members to the high commissioner.

The brief but tense interview between Archer and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān took place on 27 March 1926. Both MacMichael and Huddleston were present. When the former gave an Arabic translation of the governor-general's warning, al-Sayyid cunningly adopted an attitude of surprise and tried to explain each incident at length. However, Archer snubbed him that he could not prolong this interview because of "pressure of work."

Though Archer was at first determined to fight against his advisers, al-Sayyid's unfortunate visit to the Blue Nile and the Council's resolution of 28 March apparently convinced him that this was a lost battle. While on his way down the Nile to Egypt, he finally decided to tender his resignation. He wrote to Lloyd,

> I feel that, in the circumstances, it is difficult for me now to sustain my case adequately, and it is clear that in my conduct of native affairs, I have incurred the disapprobation of the whole of my council. This being so, I realize that there is no other course open to me but to tender my resignation. I therefore, with great respect, request that I may be permitted to relinquish my appointment as governor-general and retire on pension at an early date.[56]

Both in his official correspondence and in his book,[57] Lord Lloyd remained conspicuously silent with regard to the fundamental issue that divided Archer and his advisers, namely the policy towards Neo-Mahdism and its leader. Nevertheless, knowing Lloyd's arrogant and autocratic nature and his belief in the policy of repression, and from reading between the lines in his dispatches, we may legitimately assume that he was not sympathetic with Archer's liberal policy towards ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his sect. Archer had stated in his autobiography more than once that he did not see eye to eye with Lord

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and he thought that there was no need to pay much attention to paper work." But it is reasonable to assume that this is a biased judgement because Sarsfield-Hall himself had admitted that he made it without adequate knowledge. Sarsfield-Hall, *From Cork to Khartoum, Memoirs of Southern Ireland and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* 1898–1936 (privately published, 1975), appendix I.

[56] Archer's memorandum.

[57] Lord Lloyd's book, *Egypt Since Cromer, Vol. 2* was published in 1933. Perhaps Lord Lloyd felt that "Archer's incident" was then too sensitive to speak about.

Lloyd and was not happy with his "new regime."[58] Commenting on his appointment to succeed Lord Allenby, Archer wrote, "If Egypt and the Sudan needed a strong man they had got it. But with my firmly held belief that successful government can only be with the consent of the governed, *I admit I was anxious*"[59] [my emphasis]. Thus in spite of Lord Lloyd's official assertion that he recommended the acceptance of Archer's resignation "with regret,"[60] he was apparently relieved to see him go.

Convinced that Archer had failed deplorably in handling Neo-Mahdism, the British government promptly accepted his resignation on 23 April. However in view of the sensitive political situation in the Sudan, the government decided to suspend its announcement until the autumn, when the governor-general would normally return from England after leave, attributing the change to ill-health.[61]

Once the British government was ready to announce its acceptance of Archer's resignation, the correct procedure (under the terms of the Condominium agreement)[62] was to instruct the high commissioner to obtain the Egyptian king's acceptance and then to make simultaneous announcements in Cairo and London. This procedure was not strictly observed in Archer's case, however. Faced with press announcements that Archer had resigned, and an awkward question from an opposition M.P., the British foreign secretary was forced to announce the acceptance of Archer's resignation in the House of Commons on 6 July 1926.

After reading this announcement in Reuter, Lord Lloyd cabled the foreign office, protesting that it placed him in an embarrassing

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[58] Archer claimed that Lord Lloyd radically changed the policy of Allenby, whom he described as a "natural leader of men," which allowed the Sudan to be run by the "man on the spot," and played an active role in its administration. Where, before, most of the decisions were taken by the governor-general in council, they had, in Lloyd's era, to be submitted for approval in Cairo. Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, pp. 230–231.

[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 228–229.

[60] Lord Lloyd to Austen Chamberlain, 10 April 1926, F.O. 371/11612.

[61] Archer himself admitted that the heat of the Sudan made him less fit than he had been and his doctors certified that his "general condition was far from satisfactory." Medical certificate by Drs. R.G. Archibald and B. Giggar, 29 March 1926, F.O. 371/11612.

[62] Article III of the Condominium agreement provided that the governor-general would be appointed by the Khedive of Egypt on nomination of the British government. Consequently, his resignation would also have to be accepted by the Egyptian monarch.

situation with regard to King Fu'ād and his government. He urged that he should be authorized to tell the king that the British government had announced its "intention of recommending him [Fu'ād] to accept Archer's resignation and that I [Lord Lloyd] therefore seek his Majesty's concurrence." To ease this position, Lloyd added, it should be arranged to raise a "suitable" question in the House of Commons for which the reply would be, "His Majesty's Government's announcement of acceptance was of course subject to King Fuad's concurrence, necessary steps to secure which, had been taken."[63] The foreign secretary agreed and an oral question on the recommended lines was, in fact, put to the House on 12 July.

According to some intelligence reports from Cairo, the Wafd leadership had erroneously assumed that Archer's resignation was motivated by his belief that the British could not continue to govern the Sudan without Egyptian cooperation, an opinion with which Lord Lloyd did not agree. Certain Wafdist quarters had even expected that Archer's departure would persuade the British government to restore the *status quo ante* 1924 in the Sudan and allow Lord Lloyd to retire. This illusory British acceptance of Egyptian partnership would then enable Zaghlūl to say that he had saved the Sudan and consequently enhance his prestige. But the Wafdists soon discovered this was wishful thinking. They were particularly disappointed by the appointment of Sir John Maffey to the governor generalship, which they interpreted as a personal triumph for Lord Lloyd's repressive and separationist policy in Egypt and the Sudan.[64]

Al-Sayyid had always been legitimately apprehensive when a change in the governor-generalship was in prospect. This was particularly so in this unique case, when one governor-general was sacked for his sympathy with neo-Mahdism, and a new one was appointed specifically to check its rising influence. Resenting the anti-Mahdist attitude that prevailed throughout Maffey's governor-generalship, al-Sayyid dictated in his memoirs that "Maffey, who was well known for his bitter hatred to Islam, laid the foundation of Christian missionary policy in the Sudan, and, after Gordon, was its ardent

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[63] Lord Lloyd to Austen Chamberlain, 7 July 1926, F.O. 371/11612, telegram No. 311.

[64] Extracts from Cairo intelligence report for 28 October 1926, despatch from R.E. More, Sudan agent (Cairo) to director of intelligence, 29 October, and report from Miralai W.J.A. Blitt, for commandant, Cairo City Police, to Sudan Agent, 5 November, see N.R.O. Int. 1/12/52.

advocate."[65] Certain Mahdist quarters seem to have had a hand in the anti-Maffey propaganda that prevailed on the eve of his arrival in the capital.[66] While crediting Archer for his kindness towards Islam, and for his desires to increase the local element in the administrative machinery and to reduce taxes, this campaign claimed that his "poor harsh successor" would reverse his popular policies and "humiliate" the country's religious leaders.[67]

Perhaps it is appropriate to record here that throughout his life al-Sayyid had been grateful and generous to those British friends who offered him sympathy at critical moments during his career. When his prospects were at their lowest ebb, Willis received cordial letters from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. On 26 May 1923, for example, when both men were facing difficult times, al-Sayyid wrote an emotional letter to his "honourable, generous and lifelong friend, Mr. Willis."[68] This personal relationship continued after Willis's retirement from the government, "as he paid many visits to Khartoum, stopping at the Grand Hotel as the guest of al-Sayyid, to the profound annoyance of his ex-colleagues."[69] With Edward and Samuel ʿAtiyah, ex-officials of the intelligence department, al-Sayyid maintained cordial relations. In 1948 he gave the latter, then facing financial difficulties, a gift of two hundred pounds to cover the university fees for his son, Fu'ād. Samuel responded to this generous gesture by addressing a letter to al-Sayyid, dated 10 September 1948, in which he assured him that he, his wife and sons would remain grateful to him throughout their lives.[70] But al-Sayyid was particularly magnanimous with Archer, whose support to him cost him his office. In 1957, in recognition of

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[65] al-Mahdī, Ṣādiq (editor), *Jihād fi Sabīl al-Istiqlāl*, p. 28.

[66] Egyptian and pro-Egyptian circles were another presumable source for this campaign.

[67] In its leader, *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān*, had, however, enthusiastically welcomed the "illustrious" Maffey as being the right man for this post. It claimed that his appointment would undoubtedly be a "new" strong factor for increasing the country's prosperity, and stimulating the interests of the British people in its welfare. *Al-Ḥadāra*, 27 November 1926, quoted in a report by Davies, director of intelligence, on the vernacular press, 29 November 1926, N.R.O. Int. 2/15/52. The Khatmiyya, who, for obvious reasons, were jubilant about the enforced departure of Archer, and pleased with his successor's tough policy towards neo-Mahdism, were apparently behind, or at least strongly in favour of, this article.

[68] For the Arabic text of this letter, see N.R.O. Int. 2/37/317.

[69] Daly, *Governosr-Generalship of Sir Lee Stack*, p. 123, quoting Sir James Robertson in an interview he had with him on 18 June 1978.

[70] Letter from Samuel ʿAtiyah to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 10 September 1948. N.R.O. Ansar 8/2 (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī's private papers).

this special debt, al-Sayyid sent the then aging and sick former governor-general two handsome gifts of money, the second valued at one thousand pounds. In appreciation Archer gratefully wrote al-Sayyid from Britain, "When illness is expensive, the cost of living here these days fantanstic, my pension is small, it is hardly necessary for me to say that the additional gift would be extraordinarily helpful, and would see me to the end of my days in comfort. I am now 76."[71]

The Foreign Office recognized the existence of two schools of thought towards neo-Mahdism in the Sudan: the conciliatory school of Willis, later supported by Archer, and that represented by MacMichael and Davies which persistently argued that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had been spoiled by Willis's leniency. Nevertheless, until 1926 the British government felt no real anxiety about the subject and tried not to take sides in this conflict. After 1926, however, and particularly after the downfall of Archer and Willis,[72] the British government became increasingly concerned about the rising potential danger of neo-Mahdism and agreed with the hardliners in blaming Willis and Archer. This was first officially hinted at by the foreign secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain. In a meeting of the committee of imperial defence (C.I.D.), held on 22 July 1926, Chamberlain said that until recently he "had not been aware that there were any descendants of the Mahdi in existence at present time who might constitute a danger, and had been informed **that but for the mistake of the past** [my emphasis] this would not have been the case."[73]

The C.I.D. was so concerned that it formed a committee representing the foreign office, the war office, and the air ministry to study and report "on the arrangements for dealing with any outbreak of Mahdism in the Sudan and to make recommendations as to the best means of safeguarding the position in that region."[74] This

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[71] Archer to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, 9 July 1957, N.R.O. Ansar 8/1.

[72] Since 1925 Reginald Davies was the *de facto* director of intelligence. In 1926 Willis was, however, officially transferred to be the governor of the remote Upper Nile province where he remained until his retirement in 1931.

[73] P.R.O. Cab 2/4/ minute 7 (Mahdism) of the 215th meeting of the C.I.D., 22 July 1926.

[74] *Ibid.* At the same time the British government approached its consular officers at Jeddah, Tangier, Algiers, Tunis, and Morocco, but they all stated that there was no Mahdist danger whatsoever in their territories. R.H. Clive, the British consul at Tangier had, for example, reported, "So far as I am aware, the recently increased activity of Mahdism in the Sudan had no repercussions whatsoever in Morocco. It is almost true to say that the natives of this country have never heard of Sayyed Abdel Rahman el-Mahdi'." Clive to Chamberlain, 20 July 1926, F.O. 371/11613.

report[75] was discussed in another meeting of the C.I.D., held on 17 February 1927. If an outbreak occurred in the Sudan, the C.I.D. concluded that it would be immediately attributed to economic or administrative grievance, rather than to religious stimulus, whatever development might be expected later. Hence it was decided that the Sudan Government should not impose any additional taxes on the people. Moreover, to guard against the possibility of a Mahdist outbreak, the committee decided to increase the strength of the air force in the Sudan by stationing a squadron at Khartoum, and to secure a closer liaison with the French government in order to exchange information about Mahdism between local British officials in Nigeria and their French counterparts in French Equatorial Africa.[76] The foreign office sent a note to this effect, dated 4 March 1927, to the French ministry of foreign affairs.[77] Most important of all, with the active support of Cairo and London, the political advisers' antagonistic view towards Mahdism came to dominate government policy towards this sect until its essential errors were recognized in 1934.

On reading Archer's reminiscences, one observes that he remained for a long time self-pitying and extremely bitter about his downfall and the abrupt end of his public career. Nevertheless, he was lucky to live long enough to see that his progressive and realistic policies of extending friendship to the Mahdi's son appeared right, and that his reactionary and dead-ended advisers were wrong. For ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ultimately emerged as the most important and influential person in the twentieth-century Sudan, and he remained, along with most of his followers, a rational friend of the British, even after they left the country. With great joy and satisfaction, Archer boasted in his autobiography that he had had something to do with this,[78] and privately wrote in 1957 to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān,

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[75] Governor-general Maffey requested a copy of this report, but the Foreign Office refused because, as a matter of principle, no C.I.D. paper was sent abroad except to the dominion prime ministers and the commander-in-chief in India.

[76] Chamberlain to Lord Lloyd, communicating the decisions of the C.I.D. of 7 March 1927, F.O. 371/12374.

[77] According to a British officer who toured through the French territories, the French were not particularly helpful in this respect as they took "no interest whatever in Mahdism or its potentialities for trouble." Comment by an official at the foreign office, 20 October 1927, F.O. 371/12375.

[78] Archer, *Personal and Historical Memoirs*, p. 187.

I will enclose here a photo which will take your mind back to our first meeting when I paid a formal visit to Aba island and presented to you your K.B.E. How little of us see into the future then. But certainly time has proved you to be a man of destiny. How completely have you vindicated, and more than vindicated—now that you are supreme in the country—the trust and confidence I had when so many held contrary views.[79]

[79] Archer to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, 9 July 1957, N.R.O. Ansar 8/1s.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE POLICY OF ECONOMIC FETTERS, 1927–1934

Elements of a New Approach towards Neo-Mahdism

With the dismissal in disgrace of Archer and the arrival in October 1926 of a new Governor-General, Sir John Maffey, the government adopted a new approach to contain and ultimately drastically reduce the rising religious and political influence of the Mahdi's son. This was indicated in Maffey's marked delay in the reception of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān at the Palace and his stern warning when ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was finally introduced to him that "His Majesty's Government had been compelled to crush Mahdism once and would never tolerate its re-emergence as a temporal cult".[1]

In 1926, the 1923 restrictions were, therefore, revised and re-enforced, and new ones were imposed on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his sect. By the end of that year the authorities had found that a number of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's adherents, chiefly from the western provinces, were scattered in various villages in White Nile, Blue Nile, Fung, and Kassala provinces. In White Nile province in particular, they were found more extensively than the authorities expected. While there were then only five colonies at Aba itself, the number of colonies in neighbouring localities was twenty-eight: sixteen and twelve in Kosti and Dueim districts respectively. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān pleaded that they were there to grow grain in the *bilads* (patches of land) offered to him by the "faithful" in return for wages,[2] and that they were so dispersed to ensure against the complete failure of his crops through lack of rain in any one place.

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[1] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/49, general note on Mahdism and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, 1926–32, 3rd May, 1933. I will hereafter refer to this important sixty-page memorandum prepared by the Public Security Intelligence as Mahdism, Part I.

When Maffey arrived in Khartoum, a large consignment of the *rātib* (The Mahdi's prayer-book) was under seizure pending a decision. Maffey allowed their release, and when their distribution caused no excitement, the ban on their sale was withdrawn, though the government kept an eye on production and sale. P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, note on Mahdism, 28th April, 1935.

[2] Mahdism, part I.

The authorities felt that the profit ʿAbd al-Raḥmān made from the crops was of little importance compared to the services the colonies rendered in the collection of *zakāh*, recruitment of labour for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's farms, and the spread of the Mahdist doctrine. Moreover, their wide distribution provided a ready excuse for tours of inspection by traveling agents who canvassed for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to the disadvantage of local tribal leaders recognised by the government. The *nāẓir* of the Gimma tribe and several *ʿumdas* in White Nile province expressed, if Reid is to be believed, their dislike of these Mahdist colonies over which they had no proper authority.[3]

It was therefore decided to gather these settlements together in single villages in specified limited areas. Moreover, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was informed that visits by touring agents would not be tolerated and that the management of his cultivations should be entrusted to local *ʿumdas* and *shaykhs*. He was forbidden to visit Funj and Dongola provinces personally, or to seek in any other manner to acquire fresh adherents or spheres of influence. Besides all this, articles and poems about ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his father were to be "purged of excessive superlatives before publication".[4] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's frequent attempts to evade these restrictions brought him a sharp reprimand from Maffey on 5 December 1927 that the government "would not tolerate the reorganisation and growth of Mahdism" and that the last thing he wanted was to "water the Mahdist tree".[5]

As regards the collection of *zakāh*, the government felt it inevitable to modify in 1926 the 1923 ban in such a way as to allow ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to do so "in places where Mahdist beliefs were general".[6] For, irrespective of the 1923 embargo the "faithful" in these areas continued to send *ḥuqūq Allāh* (religious offerings) to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. This, for example, was so in the case of the Mahdists in Dar Muharib, White Nile province, who voluntarily set aside one tenth of their crop, known sometimes as *ʿushūr al-fugarā'*, and a small percentage of their camels, about one out of thirty, for this purpose. Moreover, since both ʿAlī al-Mirghanī and al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Hindī had continued for some time to collect such offerings from their devotees in

[3] G.R.O. File No. 8.A.5 (White Nile province), Letter from Reid, acting-governor, White Nile province, to MacMichael, civil secretary, 26th August, 1926.
[4] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/51, Note on Mahdism, 4 December, 1934.
[5] P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, Note on Mahdism, 28 April, 1935.
[6] *Ibid.*

certain areas, the government did not want to be charged with favouritism towards them or to appear to be discriminating against ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. In other places, where belief in Mahdism was not dominant, the 1923 ban, was, however, to be strictly maintained "in order to protect the local inhabitants from attempts to re-introduce the old semi-compulsive methods of *zakāh* collection".[7]

Similarly, in 1926 the government felt it essential to relax slightly its strict 1923 embargo on the so-called "pilgrimage" to Aba,[8] which had, in fact, remained a dead letter. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān himself had professed in December 1925 that he wanted to stop this influx of westerners to Aba within a year, but they continued to come to the island.[9] The new policy regarding this migration did not add anything to the decisions of November 1926.[10] These stipulated that the case of each newly arrived immigrant should be judged on its own merits on condition that "the criterion should be simply the desirability or otherwise of his remaining at the White Nile province at all";[11] i.e., whether or not his continued presence there would disturb the local peace or be disruptive to the tribal authority in the White Nile or his western province of origin. With this safeguard, the government expected that its main objective of preventing abnormal gatherings of "ignorant and possibly fanatical"[12] westerners in Aba Island would still be realised.

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] If official reports are to believed, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān told his followers to come to him in Aba where they would get the same *baraka*, instead of going to Mecca. Al-Sayyid and his family, however, strongly denied this charge.

[9] According to extensive inquiries made by Reid, there was, however, a temporary unremarkable increase in the number of those immigrants throughout the year 1926. This was apparently due to the expiry in 1926 of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's wood contracts and the government concentration policy that made the profitable employment of these immigrants difficult elsewhere.

Though the government directed that these inquiries should be discreetly pursued, Reid, who apparently did not see eye to eye with al-Sayyid, toured the province and put an elaborate direct questionnaire to many individuals about al-Sayyid's affairs. His tone, moreover, indicated to his hearers the government's dislike of al-Sayyid. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān protested against this "deliberate persecution" and requested that Reid's handling of the mater should be investigated. But the government ignored this complaint.

N.R.O. File No. 8.A.5 (White Nile), record of a conversation between ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and Samuel ʿAtiyah, 16 November, 1926.

[10] These decisions were taken at a meeting on 25 November, 1926. MacMichael, Davies (the director of intelligence), Huddleston (governor, Blue Nile province), and Reid were all present. For a summary of these decisions, see N.R.O.C.S./56–F.1, letter from MacMichael to Reid, 26 November, 1926.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, note on Mahdism, 28th April, 1935.

Moreover, the adoption since 1927 of indirect administration in the whole northern Sudan was partly motivated by the government's desire to check the spread of Mahdism. The authorities expected that the establishment of tribal units and the appointment of local chiefs to fill definite executive positions would prevent "outsiders", particularly Mahdist agents, from obtaining a rival influence therein. Moreover, it was calculated that this would diminish the *zakāh* to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and reduce his opportunities to gain new adherents.

The Policy of "Economic Fetters"

The most important aspect of the new government policy was its decision to build up ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi into a wealthy capitalist by assisting his agricultural enterprises in the Blue and White Niles. The authorities regarded ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's preoccupation with cultivation as an antidote to his involvement in political and fanatical religious activities, i.e. he would be more interested in his crops and profits than in fomenting religious or political trouble. In introducing this policy Maffey minuted, "I consider that as al-Sayyid is behaving reasonably in the religious and political field, we ought, as a measure of political expediency, to bind him to us by economic fetters".[13]

Before 1926 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān made a good deal of money through his wood-cutting contracts, works on the Sennar dam, his cotton cultivation at Gondal,[14] between Medani and Sennar, and the *zakāh* receipts. The last, according to an official estimate, never averaged more than L.E. 3,000 per annum.[15] But with the end of these contracts in mid-1926, and due to his heavy family commitments,[16] al-Sayyid faced bankruptcy and requested a L.E. 4,500 loan from the government.

Since the new policy aimed at occupying ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's time in money-making concerns, the government gave him this loan. Subsequently, Maffey converted it into a gift. In addition, al-Sayyid

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[13] P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, note on Mahdism, 28 April, 1935.

[14] His cotton cultivations at Abu Halima were, however, unsuccessful.

[15] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/51, note by Reid on Mahdism, 24 November, 1934.

[16] By that time there were fourteen widows of the Mahdī (including concubines), the Mahdi's son ʿAlī, and a number of his grandsons and great-grandsons with their families. Moreover there were the descendants of Khalifa Muḥammad Sharīf and their families, and a large number of more distant relatives. Al-Sayyid's cash bill for their support amounted to about L.E. 100 and L.E. 300 in 1926 and 1934 respectively. There were, moreover, constant appeals from the indigent and afflicted, and applications for loans, which were in fact gifts, from opponents as well as supporters.

was offered assistance and facilities to develop what the authorities called "his legitimate agricultural enterprises" on condition that he would loyally accept the restrictions on his other activities. In short, the new policy aimed at concentrating the activities of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and of "Mahdism as a religious cult on Aba Island with the corollary that his holdings of land, whether on lease or as a property, in the Blue Nile and elsewhere should, if they could not be reduced, not be extended".[17]

Aba Island

As a reward for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's war services, the government, besides according him public recognition, registered in 1915 in the name of the Mahdi's heirs a large and vaguely specified portion of Aba Island which contained rich forests. He made profits from wood contracts that enabled him to buy in 1918 a good European house in Khartoum from ʿAzīz Kafourī, a leading businessman and prominent member of the Sudan chamber of commerce.[18] While in London in 1919 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān requested permission to set up pumps to develop those lands. But the government shelved this project because the area of the island that was expected to be submerged as a result of the proposed new dam at Jebel Aulia was not yet known. When he repeated the request in 1927,[19] the government, in accordance with its new policy, allowed him to start in 1928 with an area of 200 acres. At the same time, at his request, a survey of the island was made to find out how much of it could be brought under irrigation after the erection of the dam. In 1930 he was allowed to irrigate an area of about 2,900 acres that was extended in 1931 to 4,700 acres, and in 1932 he was permitted to cultivate all the lands on the island over which he held rights. By these and other gifts, extensions and exchanges of land, al-Sayyid had by 1934 a gross area of some 15,000 acres on Aba on which his capital outlay was about

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[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Al-Fajr*, N. 1, Vol. 2, 17 August, 1935.

[19] Ḥasan Muḥammad Daoud, a 1927 graduate in engineering from Gordon College and a loyal aide of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, told me that al-Sayyid was so persistent in this request that a legal secretary once remarked, "If extended, the petitions that this young man sent us would cover the whole of the land in question". Interview with Sayyid Daoud, Omdurman, 5 May, 1977.

L.E. 14,000. Out of this, four to five thousand acres were under cotton each year while a further acreage was used for sorghum. These lands were irrigated by two pumps: Ṭayybah and the 16 inch *Dār al-Salām*. With government financial and technical help, they were installed in 1929 and 1930 respectively.[20]

In return for these concessions, the government imposed new rules in 1930 to check the number of settlers at Aba and secure the return of truant tribesmen to the west. These rules held ʿAbd al-Raḥmān responsible for providing twice yearly accurate lists of the Aba population for the governor at Dueim. To check these figures, the D.C. of Kosti had to visit the island more frequently than before. Moreover, the Aba rules provided that there should be no "unusual gatherings" on the island and consequently prohibited al-Sayyid from visiting the island during the two feasts *ʿid al-fiṭr* and *ʿid al-aḍḥā*.[21] Nevertheless, it was soon realised that these rules were not strictly observed and could not practically be enforced. Hence the Mahdist influx to the island continued to be as large as ever.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's Cultivations in the Blue Nile Province

(a) *Gondal*

Next in importance to al-Sayyid's Aba cultivation was his pump scheme at Gondal. Irrigation on a small scale, 600 acres, for growing American cotton, was started there in 1926 by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in partnership, which was purely nominal, with two of his principal relatives: ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil and Muḥammad al-Khalifa Sharīf. In 1929 the government extended the Gondal area to 2,000 acres and invested L.E. 28,000 on irrigation plant and canals. In return, it asked for 40 percent of the crop, although al-Sayyid was left reasonably independent in managing the scheme. After a great deal of hesitation, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān accepted this offer. His annual profit from this scheme averaged about L.E. 2000.[22]

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[20] Ḥasan Daoud has been so proud of the success of the Aba cultivations that he referred to them as 'Aba college'. *Ibid.*

[21] Mahdism, part I.

[22] *Ibid.*

(b) *Al-Huda*

Besides Gondal, al-Sayyid had considerable possessions in the Blue Nile province in the Gezira area itself. Though rain cultivation was not regularly productive, he began to acquire land there in 1920, asserting that he would need it for his relatives when Aba Island would be partly inundated after the building of the Jebel Awlia dam. Since the government-sponsored Gezira scheme was then in preparation and the government was anxious to limit his agricultural holdings, al-Sayyid was told to acquire no more. The point of this prohibition was apparently to prevent al-Sayyid's production forcing down the price of Gezira cotton, either by producing a glut, or by direct price-cutting competition, all the more dangerous as presumably al-Sayyid's production costs were expected to be considerably lower than those of the Sudan Plantation Syndicate. This prohibition was, however, slightly relaxed in 1924 to allow him to buy lands in certain defined localities.

In accordance with the government's new policy, 'Abd al-Raḥmān's agricultural holdings at al-Huda, in the centre of the Gezira, were made up in 1930 of some 2,500 freehold acres while a further 3,700 were allotted to him for cultivation on rent. Though the government warned that these boundaries should be strictly observed, al-Sayyid continued to press for further grants and acquisitions. By methods described by MacMichael as "various and sometimes devious",[23] he had by 1931 acquired 6,000 acres of freehold land and elusive cultivation rights over a further 3,600 acres. Hardly any of this land was actually cultivated, but its possession was politically important as it made al-Sayyid a local landlord on a fairly large scale, and consequently justified a series of propagandist visits, in person and by agents, to the important and densely populated Blue Nile province. Hence the government enforced further restrictive measures that absolutely prohibited al-Sayyid and his immediate relatives, whose names were often used as a cover for his land transactions, from acquiring any more land in the province.[24] The application of Kintibāi Abū Qarjah, a member of an eminent Mahdist family, for an agri-

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] In the autobiographical notes compiled by his grandson, al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *Jihād fi Sabīl al Istiqlāl*, p. 40, al-Sayyid states quite openly that he used his relatives to acquire land in restricted areas. These lands became part of the Mahdist domain.

cultural scheme was thus granted on the strict understanding that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān would not be a partner in it.[25]

(c) *Miscellaneous Enterprises*

In 1934 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān acquired the lease of four sites in White Nile Province between Aba and al-Geteina. He grew cotton there, in each case in partnership with a relative. Cultivators were recruited from the inhabitants in the vicinity of those sites and al-Sayyid took half the crop in return for irrigation and technical supervision. His annual profit from this enterprise was estimated to be L.E. 2,500.

The government was aware that there was a measure of risk in allowing ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to develop Gondal, al-Huda and the White Nile sites, for in those districts tribal organisation had been destroyed during the Mahdiyya, and there were still numerous Mahdists whom al-Sayyid might use to create political trouble there. Nevertheless, the authorities opted to take this risk because these enterprises "were certainly promising in a commercial sense, and the political trouble arising from his (al-Sayyid's) intrusion were not held to be serious enough to offset the desirability of setting him up as an agriculturist and of giving him an opportunity of earning a legitimate and satisfactory income".[26]

But the government opposed al-Sayyid's attempts to establish himself in the districts of Kosti, Sennar, Singa, Gala'al Nahal and Gadarif. This area, particularly its eastern sector, had been depopulated during the Mahdiyya. With the exception of one or two tribes that supported the Mahdiyya and consequently remained intact, the inhabitants of this area were of mixed origin and not loyal to their tribal authorities. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had, in fact, turned his attention to this area since 1923 when he was forbidden to foster his connections with the west. In 1927 he paid three visits to Singa and established *muhājirīn* colonies there. Hence the government stopped these activities and limited al-Sayyid's cultivations there to three colonies only: Wad Ḍaʿeif, al-Nawraniyyah, and Geifa, in al-Gadarif, Singa and Kosti districts respectively.

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[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

[26] P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, memorandum by the public security intelligence on Mahdism and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al Mahdī 1926–1934, 28 April, 1935.

Nevertheless, through adroit manoeuvres and discreet resistance, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī ignored the government's sharp rebukes and persistently sought fresh adherents and spheres of influence. In February 1927 he tried to send an agent from his Omdurman headquarters to superintend his cultivations in Gadarif district, and requested permission, in February 1928, to visit his settlements in the Funj province. Apparently instigated by al-Sayyid, ʿAbdullāh al Fāḍil, his nephew and an important member of his headquarters staff, asked permission in July 1928 to visit "somewhat mythical relatives"[27] in Dongola. At the end of 1928 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān made a fresh move to extend his influence. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Qurashī, the Hasahisa *qāḍī* and an active Mahdist, applied for a transfer to Nyala. Since this was one of the most unpopular stations, we may reasonably assume that this request was dictated by al-Sayyid's ambition to spread his influence among the Baggara and other western tribes. Moreover, the government felt that Qurashi's political tendencies, since he was one of the left-wing intelligentsia, would render him unsympathetic to tribal administration and might lead him to cause trouble in Nyala. Consequently, on the insistence of the director of intelligence, the legal secretary turned down this request for transfer.[28] Furthermore, the governor of Blue Nile province decided in January 1928, to revoke the sale to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān of a plot of building land in Medani on the grounds that he had failed to build a residence there and did not have the money to do so. More importantly, the governor felt that such a residence would give al-Sayyid a pretext for numerous undesirable visits to the town. Nevertheless, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān never gave up and ultimately managed to persuade the authorities to allow him to purchase his Medani site in January 1929 and build a house on it.

While offering ʿAbd al-Raḥmān much generous material help, the government, in its attempt to reduce his religious pretensions, directed that he should not have any privileges in his commercial dealings. This was particularly so after 1932, when the government fully discharged its financial obligations towards him, and its role became advisory rather than prohibitory. Hitherto, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had felt that any debts he incurred would be covered by government advances, and that his creditors would be discouraged by the authorities from taking legal action to recover their money. But in 1932 the gov-

[27] Mahdism, Part I.
[28] *Ibid.*

ernment allowed Barclays bank to sue ʿAbd al-Raḥmān for L.E. 700, though the seizure or sale of his property was not authorised without further reference. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, however, paid up.

Furthermore, the government tried to impress upon the public that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his relatives were ordinary people subject to the law of the land. This was particularly demonstrated in two trivial incidents in which al-Ṣiddīq, al-Sayyid's eldest son and heir apparent, was involved. In April 1929 an Omdurman policeman cautioned the boy for cycling on the wrong side of the road. But al-Ṣiddīq, encouraged by the passengers in a passing tramcar, pointed out that he was al-Sayyid's son and apparently accused the policeman of being drunk. The latter arrested him and took him to the police station. In spite of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's protests, which brought him a rebuke from the governor of Khartoum province, the boy was duly charged, convicted and fined. A year later, in October 1930, a British tutor at Gordon College struck al-Ṣiddīq for what he considered improper behaviour. Al-Sayyid considered this an insult. Failing to secure an apology from the tutor, he removed his son from the college. To counter the government's objections and prove his popularity and prestige, he asserted that he was urged to take this strong stand by some "strongly worded letters"[29] of protest from his adherents. The college warden, however, expressed in writing his regret for the incident, and consequently al-Ṣiddīq returned to the college to leave it again at the end of 1932.[30]

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[29] These letters, if an intelligence report is to be believed, were written by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān himself. *Ibid.*

[30] An intelligence memorandum described al-Ṣiddīq as an active keen young fellow, but hinted that he was "not much of an engineer" and therefore unlikely to succeed as a businessman, but at the same time too "modern-minded" to emerge as the leader of his father's political and religious organisation. This was a grossly mistaken prophecy, for the man, following his father's death in 1959, wisely and firmly led the Mahdists at a difficult period in their history. It suffices to mention in this respect that he refused the suggestion of some politicians to take advantage of the famous "*mawlid* incident" of July 1961, in which some 7,000 *Anṣār* violently clashed with the police, to overthrow General ʿAbbud's military dictatorship, stating "I do not wish to meet God with the blood of Moslems on my hands". His premature death in 1961 was, in fact, a terrible blow from which the *Anṣār* have not yet fully recovered. See Mahgoub, M.A.: *Democracy on Trial* (London, 1974), p. 184, and al-Mahdī, Ṣādiq, *Jihād fi Sabīl al-Dimuqrāṭiyyah*, (Khartoum, n.d.), pp. 88–111.

The Development of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's Political Power

The result of the government's new policy was indeed dramatic and spectacular. By 1935 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was a large landowner and an affluent man by even the most conservative standards. His sizable profit from agricultural and commercial enterprises was augmented by the receipts from the *zakāh* and the presents that his richer adherents voluntarily offered him during their "pilgrimage" or on the occasion of *ʿid al-aḍḥā*. While ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had this considerable annual income, that of his principal rival, ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, was less than L.E. 2,000, consisting of L.E. 1,500 from the government and about L.E. 300–400 from cultivation and mills.[31]

Apart from the government's generous material and technical help, the efficient management of al-Sayyid's agricultural and commercial enterprises was another crucial factor contributing to this prosperity. Unlike his rivals, al-Sayyid was lucky enough to have numerous able and loyal relatives to attend to his business affairs. The existence of such business-minded men as ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil, Muḥammad al-Khalifa Sharīf and al-Ṭayyib al-Khalifa ʿAlī Hilu had left him reasonably free to work up his favourite different roles of the holy man, the nationalist leader, and the loyal K.B.E. on which his reputation rested.

But jealousies began to upset this group after 1933. ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil's assumption of superior power was apparently largely responsible for the inclination of both Sharīf and Hilu to defect and set up their own business. While the former secured, with the financial backing of al-Sharīf al-Hindī, a contract for supplying sand to the Jebel Aulia dam contractors, the latter started his own cotton plantation near Aba, but on the opposite side of the river.[32] Since that early date al-Fāḍil had even been, if an intelligence note is to be believed, jealous of al-Ṣiddīq, the heir apparent.[33]

In his autobiographical notes ʿAbd al-Raḥmān insisted that the relationship between himself and the thousands of *Anṣār* "pilgrims" from the west was exclusively paternal. He denied most vehemently

[31] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/51, note on Mahdism, 4 December, 1934.

[32] According to an intelligence report, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was so disappointed with Sharīf's extravagance and "lax conduct" that in 1933 he considered dispensing with his services. N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/49, note on Mahdism 1926–34, undated.

[33] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/49, note on Mahdism 1926–34, undated.

that either he or they regarded it as motivated by economic considerations. The *Anṣār*, he asserted, undertook this long journey in order to seek spiritual guidance while he inspired them with the Mahdist mission, and at the same time provided all their material needs. He even insisted that it would have been cheaper for him to have used hired labour than to provide for the *Anṣār*.[34]

It is certainly true that these *muhājirīn* genuinely believed that the "pilgrimage" to Aba was holy, and that they voluntarily cultivated al-Sayyid's lands. But they did this in the main for the *baraka* (blessing) and were apparently satisfied with the modest supply of food and clothing that the *dā'irah* (Mahdist headquarters) gave to them and their families. Others volunteered to work two or three days a week in al-Sayyid's agricultural ventures as if for an ordinary *nafīr*.[35] According to an intelligence report, the average cost of a single *muhājir* was less than thirty piastres per month. Moreover, those who picked cotton for al-Sayyid received one piastre per thirty *ratls* as compared with the Gexira rates of 2½ piastres per 30–35 *ratls*.[36] This abundant, dedicated and cheap labour was obviously an important factor in the success of al-Sayyid's agricultural enterprises.

While the authorities realised quite early that the *muhājirīn* were cultivating ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's lands, they apparently failed to grasp the full political significance of this activity. They regarded al-Sayyid's motives for encouraging this "pilgrimage" "primarily as religious and economic, and therefore as quite legitimate".[37] When referring to the Fellata immigrants, the official reports deal mainly with al-Sayyid's alleged exploitation of this cheap labour, and occasionally refer to their

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[34] Ṣādiq, *Jihād fī Sabīl al-Istiqlāl*, p. 40. Amīn al-Tūm, a 1934 graduate of Gordon College and a reputable and loyal aide of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, fully endorsed this view. He told me that he used to spend at least ten days annually in Aba where he realised that al-Sayyid had even taken care of the education of the children of these *muhājirīn* in Aba's numerous *khalwas* and in the local *kutāb*. Interview with Amīn al-Tūm, 31st December, 1999.

[35] Al-nafīr is a special type of collective work practised in many parts of the Sudan. The person who calls for al-nafīr does not pay wages as such, but provides food and drink for all the participants (and others). For a linguistic definition of the word see Qāsim, ʿAwn al-Sharīf *Qāmūs al-Lahjah al-ʿĀmiyyah fī al-Sūdān* (Khartoum, 1972) p. 783. The concept of *al-nafīr* is studied in Aḥmad, ʿAbd al-Ghafār Muḥammed "Al-nafīr fī Manṭiqat al-Kurmuk", *Al-Dirāsāt al-Sudāniyyah*, Vol. IV, 1974, pp. 5–21, and in Barth, F., "Economic Spheres in Darfur", Firth, R., (ed.), *Themes in Economic Anthropology* (London, 1967).

[36] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/51, note on Mahdism, 1934.

[37] Warburg, *Islam*, p. 33.

religious fanaticism which was felt to be an inevitable by-product. Though, as shown above, the government issued repeated measures and orders to end, or at least reduce, this influx, it was in fact witnessing the growth and enrichment of the *Anṣār* as a result of its own policy.[38] In building up ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as a wealthy capitalist, Maffey and his colleagues enabled him to strengthen the *Anṣār*, a fact that al-Sayyid himself joyfully admitted many years later. It was apparently only in 1935 that the authorities realised that in his agricultural ventures ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was motivated by political rather than by commercial gains. Once more they tried to restrict his movements, particularly in the Fellata-populated areas of Kosti, Sennar, Singa and Gadarif.[39] But it was tool late, for the *Anṣār* were then strong enough to resist these ineffectual measures.

Contrary to Maffey expectation, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān shrewdly adhered to the basic concept of Mahdism that saw in politics a major aspect of its religious mission. His ambitions were, in fact, overwhelmingly political. He wanted both recognition and power. His immediate concern was presumably to achieve for himself a position so reputable and distinguished that the government could not ignore him in building up the administrative system of the country. He not only wanted to achieve precedence over ʿAlī al-Mirghanī, his principal rival and at that time the government's most trusted leader, but also hoped eventually to persuade the government to recognise him as the chief Sudanese adviser, i.e. the *Abrāshī*[40] of the Khartoum palace. His ultimate objective was to advance gradually towards an independent Sudan in which he, and apparently his family, would have absolute political power.

Since 1914 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had realised the strength of British ascendancy in the Sudan, and felt that his aspirations, and those of his country, would best be served by cooperating with the British. This constitutionalism did not really ring true, but was, in fact, dictated by political realities. For he had no illusions that an armed uprising, as advocated by some fanatics, would lead to anything but total destruction.

Similarly, al-Sayyid was shrewd enough to realise that political

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[38] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 33 taken from P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, note on Mahdism, 1935.

[40] *Abrāshī* was the director of the royal estates and the most trusted advisor of King Fu'ād I of Egypt.

and religious strength required financial power.[41] Rather than giving a non-political outlet to his ambitions, as Maffey had naively expected, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's wealth from cultivation was used to strengthen the *Anṣār* organisation and to advertise himself in the country. Without antagonising the authorities, whose goodwill was essential for his success, al-Sayyid discreetly exploited his religious prestige and economic power to draw supporters from three main groups.

In the first place there were the fanatics who believed in the Mahdi and regarded his son as the Muslim liberator of the Sudan from Christian domination. This group was largely composed of westerners who, in total disregard of the government's measures, flocked to al-Sayyid in mass (approximately 15,000 a year). Inevitably this led to a considerable expansion of population on Aba Island, and a corresponding extension of the area cultivated there and on the mainland. The number of houses on the island rose from 1,000 in 1925 to 4,500 in 1935,[42] an extension that brought its inhabitants into close contact with the inhabitants of Kosti, Sennar and Singa districts. Through these pilgrims, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was able "to penetrate the forbidden provinces of Kordofan and Darfur" and to establish there "branches of the *anṣār* under selected *khalifas*".[43] Furthermore, in spite of the government's concentration policy of 1927[44] in Kassala, Fung, Blue Nile and White Nile provinces, some of these *muhājirīn* settled, on al-Sayyid's directive, in many villages in these provinces. They thus opened them to *Anṣār* influence, and consequently the Mahdist doctrine took root there.

The second group whose support ʿAbd al-Raḥmān tried to gain consisted of the more sophisticated elements within the tribal population, including many *shaykhs* of the riverain tribes. It was "in this section that native administrative hit the Sayyid hardest, as it sought to establish a direct link between government and tribal leaders which

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[41] Amīn al-Tūm, a reputable politician and journalist and the administrative assistant to the secretary general of the Umma Party since 1947, told me that al-Sayyid excluded *al-Jihād* because the time was inopportune for it. Instead he asked his followers to concentrate on work and become an example in this respect. Hence he became the "Imam of religion and the state". Interview with Amin al-Tūm, 31st December, 1999.

[42] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8/51. note on Mahdism, 1934.

[43] Warburg, *Islam*, p. 34.

[44] For a discussion of this policy see above pp. 114–15. Warburg, in *Ibid.*, p. 34, erroneously gives the early 1930s as a date for the implementation of this policy.

would make the Sayyid's role superfluous".[45] He was particularly apprehensive that Aba itself would be made subject to the Baggara *Nazirate*. Therefore he was frankly opposed to tribal authorities and did everything in his power to discredit them. To achieve this he sometimes picked quite trivial and unnecessary quarrels, e.g. with the Baggara *nāzir*. By 1931, however, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān realised that "native administration had come to stay and that a reasonable attitude of live and let live was more likely to pay".[46] Moreover, he felt that tribal leadership was too weak to constitute a threat to his political ambitions. Hence, he changed his tactics, and instead of obstructing the work of the tribal leaders, tried to contain them and win their confidence, particularly by supporting them in their disputes with the authorities over taxation. His relations with them became so friendly that he asked for the establishment of a tribal administration court in Aba itself. Al-Sayyid had thus become, for witty and tactical reasons of his own, a keen supporter of indirect rule, which in his words, played a "historical role",[47] and brought the mass of tribal leaders to the independence camp as allies of the *Anṣār*.[48]

During the era of the Fung Sultanate (1504–1821), but particularly since the 18th century, Sufi Islam in the Sudan had been more popular than its Sunni (Orthodox) counterpart, and the *ṭarīqa shaykhs*, known as *fakis* or *fuqarā* (both derived from *fiqh*—Islamic Jurisprudence), were more prestigious and powerful than the government supported ʿulemāʾ. However, in their drive to consolidate their rule (1820–1885), the "Turkish" conquerors imposed an Azharite orthodox hierarchy of ʿulemāʾ which threatened the political and social status of the *fakis*. Meanwhile the Mahdi's revolutionary and militant brand of popular Islam appealed to the latter, who expected to get rid of their rivals, the ʿulemāʾ, and to regain their lost power.[49] The Mahdi, who himself was a an ardent disciple of the Sammaniyya order, had, on the other hand, found in the grumbling but well organized *ṭarīqas* useful allies to achieve his immediate objectives, namely to establish

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[46] Mahdism, Part I.

[47] One wonders whether al-Sayyid really believed this at the time or merely thought it politic to say so through *Jihād fī Sabīl al-Isliqlāl*.

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

[49] Warburg, Gabriel: Islam, Sectarianism and politics since the Mahdiyya, pp. 33–34. However, for reasons explained above (pp. 6–7). The Khilmiyya were a notable exception to this Sufi connection with the Mahdiyya.

his claim of the Mahdiyya *vis-a-vis* the ʿulemā's Sunni-based denial that categorically maintained that Muḥammed Aḥmad was a shere *mutamahdi* (false mahdi) who did not possess the requirements and attributes (*al-shurūt wa al-awṣāf*) of the historic Mahdi,[50] and to topple the Turkish rule. But the alliance of the Mahdiyya with the Sufi orders had soon diminished because the former found, since the Mahdi's *hijra* (migration) to Qadir in 1882, in the militant western tribes, particularly the Baggara, better allies. More importantly was the refusal of the Mahdiyya to tolerate the *ṭarīqas'* divided loyalties, and its insistence on complete submission first to the Mahdī and later to the Khalifia. Hence was the "historical" hostility of the embittered *ṭarīqa* shaykhs to Mahdism, their refusal to admit its adherets to their orders, and opposition to its revival during the post Mahdiyya period.[51] However, from 1933 the pragmatic ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bypassed the ideological position of the "old" Mahdiyya towards Sufism, and took considerable trouble to win the goodwill of its leaders. Al-Sayyid realised that while "continuing to fulfill their religious and social functions at the local village level", they "would not become involved in national politics". For "sectarian politics would be fought out between the Khatmiyya and the Ansar".[52] Nevertheless, though the position of *shaykh al-ṭuruq* was certainly not congenial to the ambitious ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, he felt that his patronage of this influential class would earn him "facile popularity".[53] Moreover, by winning the good will of these *sufi shaykhs*, al-Sayyid hoped to weaken the barriers around the *ṭarīqas* and draw some of their members to the *Ansar*. Hence, he assumed the role of a mediator in their internal disputes, and often helped the *shaykhs* to overcome difficulties. Towards the end of 1933 he solved a leadership dispute in the Sammaniyya, and helped al-Sharīf ʿAbd al-Mutʿāl al-Idrīsī, the head of the Aḥmadiyya *ṭarīqa* in Dongola, to win a land dispute in Khartoum. Moreover, he gave money and an elaborate *kiswah* (*quftān* or robe) to Mirghanī

[50] For a study of the heated intellectual debate between the Mahdī and the ʿulemā' on his assumption of the Mahdiyya, see ʿAbdullāh ʿAlī Ibrāhim: Al-Sirāʿ bayna al-Mahdī was al-ʿUlemā' (Khartoum, undated).

[51] Ahmad, the eldest surviving son of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, challenges this view. He told me in an interview on March 17, 1988, that he possesses a document' that supports his belief that the relationship between the Mahdī and the ṭarīqa shaykhs was cordial. I was, however, unable to see this 'document'.

[52] Warburg, *Islam* p. 34.

[53] N.R.O. Sec. 6/8 49, note on Mahdism and al-Sayyid's affairs 1933–1934, undated.

al-Makī, head of the Ismāʿiliyya *ṭarīqa* in Omdurman, and to his counterpart in Kordofan in order to draw the members of this *ṭarīqa* away from the Khatmiyya. He also came to the help of certain *shaykhs* whose *ṭarīqas* were short of funds for the *mulid* (the Prophet's birthday) celebrations.[54] By 1945 the Sayyid's effort to win the support of the smaller *ṭarīqas* produced tangible results. On his invitation, they attended the Ansar's religious festivals and their *Kora* annual marriage festival where they were allowed, in contrast to Mahdist beliefs, to perform their own *Sufi* rituals, including the *dhikr*. As Warburg put it, this "mass recruitment of members of various *sufi* orders to the Mahdist flag was a clear indication of the Sayyid's political acumen and his willingness to compromise in order to win support. In this manner, the Ansar established themselves through the rural arrears of Sudan and gained adherents in the Northern provinces whose inhabitants had traditionally been Khatmiyya supporters"[55]

Most important of all ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al Mahdī exploited his wealth and prestige to capture the political leadership of a third group, namely the representatives of enlightened urban public opinion, particularly in the Three Towns (Omdurman, Khartoum and Khartoum North). Since many of these people still maintained their traditional links with tribes and *ṭarīqas*, al-Sayyid used the same methods that he implemented in the rural Sudan to win their support. He began in 1927 a systematic and energetic campaign to advertise himself in the country's towns and cities. From that year on he extravagantly celebrated *mawlid al-nabī*, a festival that had not been recognised by the Mahdī himself. In the year 1934 alone he spent L.E. 800 on this occasion. Eventually the Mahdists put up tents for the occasion in Omdurman, Rufaʿa, Medani, al-Obeid, and Port Sudan. Their erection seemed to be more of a political maneuver than a religious duty. In 1934 the Ansar put the sign *ṣiwān al-Mahdī* in front of their *mawlid* tent in Omdurman and were only compelled to take it down when they were told that the governor-general would not visit them under this title. Before this and during the ceremony for the opening of the Mahdist mosque in Wad Nubāwī in Omdurman in 1932, Muḥammad al-Khalifa Sharīf referred, publicly and for the first time, to the Mahdist *ṭarīqa*, though the government had not yet

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[54] *Ibid.*

[55] Warburg, G.: Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya, p. 96.

recognised the religious position of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and referred to the Mahdist sect only as an *ʿaqīda* (belief).[56]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's donations to good causes, e.g. the Fung famine of 1932, were frequent and well advertised, and his entertainments were calculated to impress the public with his wealth and importance. Moreover, al-Sayyid's elaborate visits to towns, e.g. to Medani in 1931 and Jebel Aulia in 1934, appeared to be in the nature of public occasions. He invited numerous notables to the exhibition of local arts and crafts that he had in Aba in May 1933, and assembled in September a large gathering to see the inauguration of the island's new pumps. In Omdurman he announced plans for the foundation of a public library and towards the end of 1929 supported an abortive plan to set up a Sudan agricultural and commercial company.[57] The economic objectives of this company were never explained to the subscribers. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān appears to have been one of an inner circle that aimed at the creation of a recognised association of responsible merchants, officers and officials that would give, when occasion arose, authoritative expression to Sudanese moderate national opinion. Al-Sayyid had perhaps calculated that he would, by these tactics, become the spokesman of the Sudanese in the forthcoming Naḥḥās-Henderson negotiations. He even began to talk in 1930 of setting up a factory to make Sudanese clothes. While his repeated requests to be allowed to rebuild the Mahdi's tomb were promptly turned down, the government also blocked his plan to take under his patronage the workers' club in Khartoum. He was diplomatically warned that "this club is bound to become a political instrument if it survives and your Sayedship with your well known dislike of being involved in things political will, of course, decline to be associated with it".[58] The activities of this club, which had an element of trade unionism, were, however, paralysed by some strong internal dissension.

At the same time, seeing that political nationalism was beginning to supersede religion as the principal motive power in the East, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān sought to gain the confidence of the small, but increasingly vocal and influential, body of educated Sudanese. Most of them, however, were government officials. He wanted to establish a position

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[56] Mahdism, Part I.

[57] A meeting was in fact held for this purpose in the Omdurman house of ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil where a sum of L.E. 4,000 was promised in subscription. *Ibid.*

[58] N.R.O. Sec. 6.8.51, general situation note on Mahdist affairs, 22 July, 1936.

for himself as the leader of the intelligentsia. This development marked the beginning of the modern phase of Mahdism.

Though the young intelligentsia was "Muslim both in its heritage and in its education", their Islam "was of a more sophisticated brand, and they regarded the *faki* and his *ṭarīqa* as superstitious relics of the past". Therefore, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān realised that the only way to gain their support was "at the political level". With this in mind, he "helped to found the first graduates' club in 1918 and became involved in the graduates' political debates through his co-ownership of *al-Ḥaḍāra* in the 1920s".[59] Moreover, he offered financial help in 1924 to some Sudanese students in Egyptian and European universities.[60]

But the government suppression of educational progress after the 1924 uprising left the intelligentsia weak and disillusioned. Even the graduates' clubs were closed in 1926. By 1927 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was thus ready to step in and assume the political leadership of the intelligentsia. Furthermore, following the suppression of the 1924 riots, some of the once pro-Egyptian graduates became disillusioned with Egypt.[61] Consequently, they were drawn to the Sayyid's politics "of a genuinely Sudanese nationalist movement". For such a movement, "a leader and figurehead was essential", and it was in this capacity that al-Sayyid "offered his services".[62]

Apart from regularly entertaining and establishing contacts with selected individuals, such as Muḥammad ʿAli Shawqī, vice president of the Omdurman graduates' club, and Muḥammad Ṣālih al-Shinqīṭī,[63] al-Sayyid gave generous presents to the intelligentsia clubs and schools. Though themselves highly commendable social activities, these subscriptions were apparently imbued with political motives. While he gave an unconditional gift of L.E. 150 to Ahfad school[64] whose owner,

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[59] Warburg, *Islam* p. 35.

[60] Ṣādiq, *Jihād fī Sabīl al-Istiqlāl* p. 31.

[61] Amongst these was the late ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, who eventually became the secretary-general of the Umma Party and a prime minister in the independent Sudan.

[62] Warburg, *Islam*, p. 38, quoting P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, Mahdism 1935, reporting on the situation in 1927–28.

[63] When ʿArafāt Muḥammad ʿAbdullāh, "an extremely intelligent Sudanese" and the first editor of *al-Fajr*, the principal Sudanese journal in the 1930s, returned from Cairo in 1932, al-Sayyid entertained him and "displayed considerable interest in him". ʿArafāt expressed his admiration of al-Sayyid's "grasp of political issues". Mahdism, Part I.

[64] For a study of the development of non-government education in the northern Sudan during the Condominium, see ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, Suʿād *Al-Taʿlīm ghayr al-Hukūmī fi Shāmāl al-Sūdān* (M.A. Khartoum, 1979).

Bābikr Badrī,[65] and governing body were all Mahdists, al-Sayyid also tried to become the president of the Piastre Orphanage by means of a substantial donation. Being anxious to remain non-partisan, though presumably Mirghanist at heart, the promoters of this institution declined the offer.[66]

But al-Sayyid's ulterior political objectives were apparently most evident in his connection with the *Maʿhad* (Omdurman Mosque School). On the retirement of the Mahdist Abū al-Qāsim Hāshim from its rectorship and the appointment in 1933 of his Mirghanist successor, Aḥmad Abu Diqn, al-Sayyid tried to become the patron of this institute through material ties. His offer to provide a lodging house for its pupils was conditional on his retention of some control over the house and its inmates. Though the administration refused this, al-Sayyid made another attempt in the same year to secure a footing in the *Maʿhad*. This time he gave a gift of 100 loaves of bread a day, but followed it by a suggestion that Abū Diqn should submit to him a monthly statement of the distribution of the bread. However, on the strong objection of the latter, al-Sayyid withdrew his proposal.

Al-Sayyid's first real opportunity to win over the intelligentsia had, however, presented itself in 1931. This was in connection with the protest against the proposed reduction in monthly starting rates of pay in government service, i.e. from L.E. 6.5 to L.E. 5.5. One of the symptoms of agitation was the strike at Gordon College in November 1931. ʿAlī al-Mirghanī "shut himself up at his house in Sinkat", al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Hindī "relapsed into his usual silence",[67] and an intelligentsia committee, the Committee of Ten, set up by the Omdurman Graduates' Club, failed to handle the crisis. The field was thus open for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who undertook an active campaign that resulted in the students' return to college. It is reasonable to assume that he was not disinterested in taking this bold and unpopular step. Apparently he anticipated the failure of the strike and rightly calculated that he would be repaid for any temporary inconvenience of unpopularity

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[65] For his autobiography see Badri Bābikr. *Taʾrīkh Hayātī*, 3 Vols. (Khartoum, 1959, 1960 and 1961). Before his death in 1959, al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī wrote a brief introduction to the third volume of these memoirs, which were translated in English by Yūsif Badrī and George Scott.

[66] By July, 1934, this orphanage, in the words of its president at that time, Mirghanī Ḥamza, subsequently a prominent engineer and politician, had a revenue of L.E. 1,560, *Al-Fajr*, No. 7, Vol. 1, 1 September, 1934.

[67] Mahdism, Part I.

that he might suffer. In fact the attitude that he adopted on this occasion gave him a hold over the educated that he never lost. At the same time it justified his requests for further concessions from the government. The consequent allegiance to the Sayyid of two important Sudanese officials from the department of justice, Shingiṭi and Muḥammad Aḥmad Mahjūb,[68] was of particular significance. They formed the Mahdist council of intelligentsia, a propagandist association that enhanced al-Sayyid's ambition in the political field.

From then onwards the articulate Mahdi's son associated himself with every movement sponsored by the intelligentsia. While proposing in 1930 to visit Syria to meet and make himself known to the Near Eastern intelligentsia behind the pan-Arab movement, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān contemplated visiting Jerusalem in 1931 as the Sudan's representative at the Islamic Congress. The *Anṣār* set up a special committee to deal with all matters concerning the educated class. Moreover, *dā'irat al-Mahdī* purchased a printing house to publish all the *Anṣār* publications. This further enhanced the prestige of al-Sayyid *vis-á-vis* the intelligentsia, as they could now publish their political and literary works through his good offices. In 1935 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān founded *al-Nīl*, the first daily Arabic newspaper in the Sudan, as an organ of the *Anṣār*. Through it the educated became acquainted with the *Anṣār* political thinking.[69]

The *Sharīʿah* authorities expressed some concern in the early 1930's at increasing religious laxity among the educated classes. They attributed it to the obstacle of marriage because of high dowries. This revived the popular demand for their reduction and gave ʿAbd al-Raḥmān a further opportunity to lead a popular movement. He used the *kūrah* (marriage festival) ceremony, which made a special appeal to the young intellectuals, as a means of advertising himself in the local and Egyptian press. Al-Ṣiddīq's first wedding in 1932 and his second in 1933[70] were occasions for some 350 other weddings with small dowries. Al-Sayyid saw to it that these events were published in *al-Haḍāra* in spite of his then strained relations with its editor,

[68] Maḥjūb, a prime minister in the independent Sudan, was by profession a judge and lawyer.

[69] P.R.O. F.O. 371 19096. memorandum on Mahdism, 28 April, 1935.

[70] While the first was to his cousin, Ṣaffiyyah ʿAlī al-Mahdī, the second was to Rahamah, a daughter of ʿAbdullāh Jāddallāh, an ex-*nāẓir* of the Kawahla, Al-Ṣiddiq was later married to a third wife, Malka Ḥusayn Sharīf.

Aḥmad ʿUthmān al-Qaḍi. Encouraged by the success of this experiment in the Three Towns, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān sent a circular to provincial notables demanding their support for the movement of which he had become a patron.

Nevertheless, al-Sayyid's success with the *effendiya* was not universal. The older conservative element was still faithful to ʿAlī al-Mirghanī. Though the latter was jealous of his rival, he did not challenge him at that time in the young intelligentsia field.[71] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, therefore, held the stage. By the end of 1935, "it seems fairly certain that he had more adherents among the educated and politically minded young men than any other prominent Sudanese"[72] But while al-Sayyid exploited the educated for his own purposes, some of them were presumably using him too. They apparently planned to discard him when they felt strong enough to do so. Nevertheless the rapprochement with the educated increased al-Sayyid's power and prominence, and his patronage of the intelligentsia encouraged them to express more openly their dissatisfaction with the government. This was particularly so after the conclusion of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty that frustrated all sectors of the nationalists.[73]

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[71] It is repeatedly mentioned in the official reports that ʿAlī al-Mirghanī had no political ambitions. But this was a gross underestimation of his potential political role. British government officials also underestimated the extent to which he would go to prevent his rival, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, from ruling the Sudan.

[72] P.R.O. F.O. 371/19096, Memorandum on Mahdism, 28 April, 1935.

[73] For this treaty and the reactions of the Sudanese to its Sudan clause, see Ibrāhīm, Hassan Ahmed: *The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty* (Khartoum, 1976).

CHAPTER SIX

SAYYID ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MAHDĪ: A MASTER OF MANIPULATION MANIPULATED, 1935–1943

Prelude

Up to the mid 1930's the British position towards Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was on the whole guided by a loose love-hatred attitude. While appreciating his numerous political services, particularly during the Great War and in 1924, the Sudan Government soon discovered that they were not rendered without a hidden agenda, and was often embarrassed, occasionally infuriated, by his manipulative behaviour and "evasive and obstructive" actions. Nonetheless, on weighing the *pros and cons*, the British opted for a policy of engagement and accommodation, though admittedly some British circles disagreed, and even blamed Wingate and Willis, respectively former Governor-General (1900–1918) and Director of Intelligence (1914–1923), for "spoiling" the Sayyid.[1] This conciliatory attitude was, however, expected to eventually "tame" the Mahdi's son into a " loyal subject", a "yes man", and perhaps an outright agent of the British.

But a closer look at the abundant archival literature on the subject gives ample evidence to believe that by the mid 1930's the British realized, to their great dismay, their over-optimism, as the man whom they planned to control persistently advertised his "royal patronage", and expected a "royal future". Rather than being on the wane, the Mahdist movement proved surprisingly resilient, and its leader's grip on the faithful in traditional Mahdist centres had, in fact, been tightened. More importantly, he pursued an active drive to fish for new adherents in non-Madhist areas and among, what has later come to be known, *al-quwa al-ḥadīthah* (modern forces), the embryonic educated class in particular.[2]

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[1] F.O. 371/10914, comment by an official at the Foreign Office, 18 November, 1925.

[2] According to an official report, the nationally conscious educated class constituted in the 1930s only two percent of the population. The rest "rural and tribal

By the mid 1930s British officials in Khartoum, Cairo and London had thus viewed the Sayyid and his sect with great concern wrapped up in considerable mistrust.[3] This was reflected in their elaborate deliberations on the issue that bitterly accused the Mahdi's son of "dishonesty", "duplicity" and "high susceptibility". They described him by expressions like "the queer mixture", "the tricky", "devious-minded" and "semi-divine Abderahman", "the overmighty subject", and "the self appointed prophet of Sudanese nationalism". They labeled Neo-Madhism as an "explosive sect", "an infection" and a "thorn on the side of the government". Some were so obsessed by the man's stature that they spoke of contingency plans in case SAR—as his name was often abbreviated by his initials in British documents, died suddenly or lived up to seventy years! It is in this context that the new Governor-General Sir Stewart Symes (1934–1940), who considered himself an old hand on the subject, masterminded a new policy towards this "potential political danger".

The Elements of Symes' New Approach

While reflecting on the British impotent policy towards the "potentially dangerous" ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his "cancerous" sect, Symes was forced into its immediate revision by a defiant act that al-Sayyid took in the *Mawlid's* festivals (the Prophet's birthday) of 1933 and

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population as well as the lower stratton of the town dwellers" had no political consciousness or even awareness of national unity. F.O. 371/22004, note on Sudanese nationalism.

[3] Notwithstanding his previously reported anti-Mahdist policies (see footnote 44, p. 103), M.J. Reid, the governor of the White Nile province, was apparently then the only senior British official who dissented from this alarmist position that had not, in his judgement, duely considered "certain balancing factors" on al-Sayyid's behaviour. Being politically a "vainglorious rather than ambitious", al-Sayyid had no ulterior motives, but only aspired for what the governor called in Arabic "*markaz ṭayib*" viz to obtain and retain wealth and prestige. Thus, Reid advised his government not to "pinprick", but, as far as possible, to treat the Sayyid and his followers as "normal people". Sec. 6/8/51, note by Reid on Mahdism with special reference to the White Nile province, 24 November, 1934.

Reid's new conciliatory position may have been triggered by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdis mastery of persuation, or motivated by the then governor's genuine belief in al-Sayyid's loyalty to the British and admiration of his character. While Reid commended ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī's intelligence, broadmindedness, charm and acuteness, the later considered the governor a friend who, like Archer before him, was forced into early retirement because of this friendliness. British documents, however, insist that Reid retired on schedule.

1934. He exhibited over the door of his Omadurman tent a large electric sign "*Siwan* al-Mahdī" whose wording constituted a direct breach of his instructions not to advertise his father. In 1934, Al-Sayyid made this sign even "more provocative" by adding "various expressions advertising the Mahdi's prophetic standing".[4] On Symes' instructions, the Sayyid was sternly warned that his correct style and name is "Al-Sayyid Sir ʿAbd al Raḥmān al-Mahdī (KBE)", and that the Governor-General "might fail to recognize him " and omit visiting his *Sewan* if he kept this objectionable sign.[5]

Immediately after this episode, Symes discussed on 19th January 1934 the whole issue of Neo-Mahdism with Gillan, the Civil Secretary, and Penny, the Controller of Public Security Intelligence, and later with Miles Lampson, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, during a visit he paid to the Sudan in 1935. Symes gave his subordinates concrete instructions and guidelines on the issue that were subsequently conveyed to all governors of the provinces and the commissioner of Port Sudan.[6]

In his quest for a new approach to the "problem" of Neo-Mahdism, Symes had, however, ruled out any surgical action to smash it once and for all. Apart from contravening the "British fundamental principle of freedom of conscience and respect for genuine religious observance", such a drastic action was likely to backlash, "fan a flame of Muslim prejudice", and "aggravate, rather than abate," the difficulties of the present situation.[7] Moreover, it was not part of the Sayyid's plan to promote a violent rising, but rather opted for constitutional measures to achieve his ends, however "illegitimate" they were.

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[4] C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, No C.S./56.F.1, note on the status of Al-Sayyid Sir ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī 1934.

[5] C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, memorandum on Mahdism, undated.

[6] These instructions were embodied in two memoranda, the above and C.S.56. F.1, dated 22nd July, 1934. On Symes' instructions, Penny prepared a comprehensive memorandum dated 28 April, 1935 and entitled "Mahdism and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi KBE, CVO, summary 1926–1934 (F.O. 371/19096). (hereafter referred to as Penny's memorandum). It supplemented an earlier memorandum on the subject up to 1926, prepared by his predecessor R. Davies and kept in F.O. 371/12374, and dated 11 March, 1927. The year 1935 coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of General Gordon, in the early hours of 26 June 1885, at the hands of the Ansar, an occasion on which the Sudan government organized a series of emotional events to commemorate the General's "martyrdom". This could have further strained the relations betweeen the government and the Mahdi's son.

[7] F.O. 371/20886, memorandum by Symes on Mahdism and government policy, 22nd February, 1937.

But Symes criticized what he considered the hitherto "unnatural relations" between the Sayyid and the government. For it gave him the pretext to "misquote" or "misunderstand" his instructions, engaged the government in "laborious" arguments as what he might or might not do, and often involved the authorities in suggesting solutions for al-Sayyid's "self created problems". The first needed step in this respect, Symes argued, was the formulation of a "correct, consistent, and reasoned attitude" towards Al-Sayyid himself[8] that would gradually work him back into the position of an ordinary, though distinguished, citizen; and thus end this unnatural relationship. Simultaneously, however, "the onus of behaving" should be squarely transferred to him, and if he broke the rules he would be immediately "dropped on".[9]

To attain the above objective, it was worthwhile, in the Governor-General's view, to risk a progressive relaxation of certain restrictions imposed on al-Sayyid; though the ban on the collection of '*Zakah*' (religious offerings) and the 'pilgrimage (visitation) to Aba' should continue "for sometime" in the interest of public security and in order to prevent the exploitation of "piety for commercial purposes".[10] Besides, Symes insisted that the current practice of allowing ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to approach the central government on purely personal and routine matters should be substantially modified to refer these trivialities to local authorities.

However, being gifted in seeing when and where the wind was blowing, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān felt that nationalism would ultimately supersede religion as the principle motive power in the Sudan, and indeed the entire East. Since his followers were on the whole poorer and far less sophisticated than the Khatmiyyiah, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān gave early and special attention to the budding educated elite. He extended in the 1920s some friendly overtures to them, but his real campaign to win their support was intensified since 1927 through patronizing their personal concerns as well as their social and educational institutions.[11] Luckily for the Sayyid, the young elite saw no future for

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[8] F.O. 371/20919, Penny to M.S. Lush (Sudan agent, Cairo) 28 June, 1937.

[9] C.R.O. C.S. 56. F.1., note by Penny on Al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 18 July, 1934.

[10] F.O. 371/20886, memorandum by Symes on Mahdism, 22nd February, 1937.

[11] For details see my book *Al-Imām ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī* (al-Huriyah Press, Omdurman, 1998), pp. 128–34.

It may be interesting to add here that al-Sayyid had at that early time taken

themselves in the policy of indirect rule that Symes' predecessor, John Maffey (1927–1934), had vigorously pursued. Equally their bitter past experience convinced them that a pan-Egypt policy would be futile and unproductive. Encouraged by the success of some of the nationalist movements in the Middle East, they thus opted for the development of a genuinely Sudanese national movement that required a leader and a figurehead. It was in this capacity that those *shubban* (youths) looked for the prestigious and impressive ʿAbd al-Raḥmān who, anyhow, had been by the mid-1930's the acknowledged leader of a modest group of intelligentsia.[12]

Hence, the most important element of Symes' new approach was his strife to win the budding intelligentsia at the expense of both the Neo-Mahdists and the Egyptians. While reluctantly agreeing to grant the Egyptian some concessions in the Sudan clause of the 1936 treaty without which the Wafd could not sell the treaty to the Egyptian public,[13] Symes correctly forecasted an immediate and extensive drive of Egyptian penetration in the Sudan in the post-treaty eras.[14] In such circumstances, he argued, it would be idle to hope that the

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under his wing a brilliant Sudanese youth, Ḥusayn al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Hindī, who subsequently became one of the most charismatic and popular leaders in the Sudan. While unimpressed by his elder brother ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, "who could not cut any ice as a public figure", a 1942 intelligence report highly commended "the extremely intelligent and pleasant" Ḥusayn. F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for December, 1942. The late al-Sharīf Ḥusayn al-Hindī remained throughout his life grateful to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and, in active collaboration with the Neo-Mahdists, he later played a leading role in resisting the May dictatorial regime. Another promising youngster taken over by al-Sayyid was Amīn al-Tūm, a descendent of an inveterate Ansari family and a 1934 graduate of Gordon Memorial College. On the initiative of the Sayyid, coupled with a staunch belief in his leadership and admiration of his patriotism, al-Tūm resigned in 1946 from his prestigious government position to be one of al-Sayyid's passionate and lifelong aides. He is now a close advisor of his grandson and present leader of the Neo-Mahdism, al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī. See Amīn al-Tūm's memories, *Zikriyyāt wa Mawāqif fī Ta'rīkh al-Ḥarakah al-Waṭaniyah al-Sūdāniyyah* 1914–1946 (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 1987), pp. 14–16 and 25–27.

[12] Al-Sayyid steady campaign of ostentation and self-advertisement had also won him increasing popular support among two other categories: the militants who regarded him as the "semi-divine" "man of dignity" against Christian domination, and the moderates who respectfully looked for his general guidance. Penny's memorandum.

[13] For a detailed study of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, see my book *The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian* Treaty.

[14] This had, in fact, taken place, particularly since Premier ʿAli Māhir's visit to the Sudan in 1940. For a Study of this Egyptian drive in the Sudan see Taha, Fadwa, A.A.: *The Sudan Question in the 1946–47 Anglo-Egyptian Negotiations, a Study of the Background and Development of the Conflict* (M.A. thesis, University of Khartoum, 1981) pp. 5–57.

young educated Sudanese would not "look to Egypt for inspiration".[15] If the Egyptian influence was not quickly checked, they would undoubtedly ally with the Egyptians, a development that may lead, as in 1924, to anti-British activities. The best remedy for this upcoming danger was to win the confidence and support of the elite. But more importantly, in the Governor-General's judgement, alliance with the intelligentsia was a crucial necessity to counteract the alarming rising danger of Neo-Mahdism, and its ultra-ambitious leader who had already embarked an aggressive campaign to patronize them and their embryonic nationalist movement.

Another important motivation for the new firm policy against Neo-Mahdism was the government's determination to maintain the already tilted equilibrium between the two Sayyids, and, in particular, to allay the rising fear of Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī against the progressive dominance of his historical rival. To this we now turn.

The Rivalry between the Two Sayyids

While ʿAbd al-Raḥmān remained for many years in the wilderness as a "humble petitioner on the door step of Omdurman district office",[16] the British viewed the Khatmiyya sect as "politically more desirable", and acknowledged their leader as the most trusted "native" leader of the country. Al-Mirghanī had, however, hardly publicly supported the British, and the attempts of many officials to drag his feet in private meetings were unsuccessful. Instead he spoke on nothing but the weather of which he was, incidentally, admirably knowledgeable. Nonetheless, the Sudan Government considered this as "diplomatic silence" and interpreted it as tacit loyalty to the British. Al-Mirghanī was thus knighted as early as 1903—an award that his adversary had to wait for twenty four years to get (in 1926), and the British treated him with considerable courtesy and regard.

The personal animosities between the two Sayyids were so great that they for a long time never met each other except on unavoidable

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[15] C.R.O. file no KM. P./SCR/36.H.2, memorandum by Symes on the 1936 treaty, 14 November, 1936.

[16] C.R.O. Sec. 6/8/50, memorandum on Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 13 May, 1935.

ceremonial occasions. Naturally the ambitious ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was very jealous of British favouritism of his rival, and never accepted this inferior position. Irrespective of his ultimate aim, al-Mahdi's immediate objective was to achieve parity with al-Mirghanī in the eyes of the British. While constantly exhibiting, in private and public, his unconditional and sincere loyalty to the British, al-Mahdī had seemingly sought every occasion to cast doubt on his adversary's commitment to the British. He reportedly repeatedly tried to impress upon British officials that al-Mirghanī was Egyptian at heart, and from 1935 onwards accused him of pro-Italian sentiments resulting from his family commitment in Eritria.[17] Al-Mahdī had in 1940 told British officials that his rival "would welcome an Italian occupation of the Sudan because he and his family would be well treated, while the Mahdists would, on the other hand, lose everything because of their "definite commitment to the British cause".[18] The government had, however, "appreciated" al-Mahdi's war effort, but only as "superficially" helpful, as they very well knew that he was, simultaneously and behind the scene, pursuing his personal ambitions "regardless of the urgent need of the moment for internal unity and peace".[19] Through his expertise in manipulation, he had, in fact, exploited the critical time for maximum publicity by casually throwing around suggestions of his unique capability to hold the country behind the government, and of the crucial need of his followers in the west for "guidance".

But the Sudan Government remained unimpressed by these simply not believable allegations, and al-Mirghani's loyalty to the British remained undisputed—at least until well into the 1940s when he halfheartedly switched to the Egyptian camp.[20] Penny described him as "personally charming", and added, "his own and his family's record of loyalty to the Government, his quiet and dignified personality, and his unostentatious manner of living combined to secure for him a position and precedence which were unquestionable."[21]

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[17] Al-Sharīfah ʿAlawiyyah, Sayyid ʿAli's cousin and half sister of his mother al-Sharīfah Maryam, lived in Eritrea, and was reportedly so committed to the Italian cause that she was once Mussolini's quest in Rome. An intelligence report described her as "a lady of strong personality", and "modern ideas". F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for October and November, 1940.

[18] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for May–July, 1940.

[19] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for August and September, 1940.

[20] For explanation see below, pp. 146–48 and 208–9.

[21] Penny's memorandum. See also ʿAbd al-Qādir, Yaḥya M.: *Shakhṣiyyāt min al-Sūdān, Asrār Warā' al Rijāl*, vol. 1 (Khartoum 1987), pp. 38–42. Yaḥya ʿAbd al-Qādir

Unlike his arch rival, Sayyid ʿAlī remained until the beginning of the 1930's predominantly apolitical, particularly as far as partisan politics were concerned. He portrayed neither political ambitions nor an open challenge to his rival in the intelligentsia field. Moreover, he did not actively engage himself in money making in trade or agriculture, and by 1935 his annual income was less than L.E. 2000, compared to his rival's L.E. 40000–60000 which included a monthly government subsidy of L.E. 15.[22]

Since the man who can pay the piper calls the tune, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān used this vast wealth to cut off his rival with the public through generous donations to numerous charities. He even tried, under different pretexts and guises, to penetrate the Mirghanist strongholds in the capital as well as in the northern and eastern provinces. He, for example, financed in 1935 two small pump farms, established by his relative Aḥmad Sharfi in Khartoum North and his supporter *Bimbashi* Aḥmad ʿUqail in Shambat, that were feared to facilitate an influx of westerners in these Mirghanist areas. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al Mahdī had, furthermore, sent in 1936 an agent to Berber, whose Mahdist population were hardly ten percent, ostensibly to convert the Mahdist mud mosque, established there in 1925, to red brick. A Mahdist mosque committee launched a donation campaign in different parts of the country, including the Mirghanist towns of Atbara and Kassala,[23] and the laying of the foundation stone in June 1936 was made an occasion for political propaganda by the Neo-Mahdists. Sayyid ʿAlī had, however, furiously reacted to this mosque incident by threatening to build a large *hosh* (house) at Atbara for the reception of the Mirghanist faithful.

In 1933 al-Mahdī dared for the first time to challenge his competitor's precedence at a public function. This was when al-Mirghanī

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was a supporter of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān who appointed him in 1936 his publicity officer in the staff of *al-Nīl*.

[22] C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, record of a meeting between top government officials, 15 December 1934. Due to Sayyid ʿAli's precarious financial position, and, on his request, the government increased his grant in 1936 to L.E. 2000, while Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had foregone his subsidy as late as 1947. ʿAbd al-Qādir, Y.M.: *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[23] Interestingly the Kassala authorities downplayed the controversy around this incident as "a mountain out of a molehill". But this provoked an angry reaction from the security department that minuted, "it may be a molehill, but a few molehills like this will reduce even Jebel Kassala to insignificance". N.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, note on Mahdist affairs, 22nd July, 1936.

was chosen for the presidency of a tea party thrown in the honour of the departing Governor-General John Maffey. Al-Mahdī angrily reacted by demanding to be honoured as joint president; otherwise he would boycott the party. When the Mirghanist organizing committee ignored him, the pragmatic ʿAbd al-Raḥmān realized that it would be political suicide to go ahead with his threat, and once more swallowed his pride and accepted the second place. Nonetheless, in 1935 he officially demanded equality with al-Mirghani, but Symes sharply reminded him of government policy with regard to the title and precedence by forcefully saying, "His political and public services were rewarded by the King with the grant of an honourary K.B.E. But this distinction carries with it a definite precedence, inferior to the honourary K.C.M.G. possessed by his rival, ʿAli al-Mirghani".[24]

Faced with his adversary's considerable economic[25] and political precedence, al-Mirghani, became, in the words of Penny, "insanely jealous" and "hysterically anxious about the future". In 1930 when the two Sayyid were finally estranged, Al-Mirghanī decided to fight back, and since then the two Sayyids were "quite openly in the ring".[26] On the Mahdist control of Omduman graduates' club in 1933, the Mirghanist members resigned en masse. Sayyid ʿAlī achieved further successes through winning the Ahliyah school, the Piastre Orphanage, and Omduman Ma'had. His rival's success among the graduates was, moreover, far from being universal, as the older officials and merchant classes were, on the whole, adherents of al-Mirghanī. In a moment of anger, the latter openly threatened in 1935 "to bring in every mounted man in Dongala, and sweep Abd al-Rahman and his followers to the river".[27]

Nonetheless, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī continued to hold the stage. He secured another victory during the visit of an Egyptian economic mission to the Sudan in February, 1935 that was masterminded by his friend the Greek merchant Contomichalos,[28] sponsored by the

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[24] C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, record of an official meeting, 15 December, 1934.

[25] By 1936 the Mahdist land holdings in the White Nile province skyrocket, presumably with the encouragement of the provincial authorities, to 32,000 feddans, and the only proposed Mirghanist agricultural project, advanced by Khalafallah Khālid, did not even get a fair hearing, Equally al-Sayyid and his relatives acquired vast lands in the Funj district, particularly in al-Nuraniyyah (formerly Babanusah) C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, note on Mahdist affairs, 22 July 1936.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Later a tussle had, however, occurred between the two friends over a business deal. In the summer of 1940, Al-Sayyid leased for two years his two warehouses

Egyptian Royal Agricultural Society, presided by Fu'ād Abāẓa Pasha. After some hesitation that was seemingly motivated by his usual "play for safety, and techniques of hedging himself round the various defensive outworks in case of trouble", al-Sayyid extended an unscheduled invitation for a reception to the mission at Aba and in his house at Khartoum, as he knew by then that the Egyptians would welcome his gesture, and the "smiling British upon the visitors" would not snub him for it. But he smartly exploited the occasion for extensive self-advertisement. Inspired speakers and poets, as well as "arranged" articles in the Egyptian press, "extolled his wealth and influence". His satellites had, moreover, sent articles to the local press that metaphorically called his Khartoum house "the blessed Kaʿbah" to which the delegation made a "pilgrimage", and hailed al-Sayyid as the representative of the Sudanese "nation" and, the "heir apparent" to his father's kingdom.

Though the censor prohibited the publication of these articles, the government felt that this "entertainment gesture" went too far by giving this "purely commercial entente the appearance of an Egyptian-Sudanese confraternization". Thus Symes summoned al-Sayyid on 14 March 1935, and sternly rebuked him against intervention in public affairs, but should rather occupy himself with agriculture and other "useful" activities. While retiring to Aba to avoid further confrontation with the arrogant new Governor-General, al-Sayyid had, nonetheless, retained his self-assurance and remained, in the word of an intelligence report, "fundamentally unrepentant".[29] Mr. Pinik of the Foreign Office made the following revealing comment on the episode, "The Sayyid loyalty to the government appears likely to continue for as long as it suits his purpose, but his ostentation and self advertisement on the recent visit of the commercial mission shows the sort of things to be expected from the self-appointed prophet of Sudanese nationalism".[30] Indeed this was a shrewd prophecy, as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had carefully bypassed these instructions by a calculated drive

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at Port Sudan to Contomichalos for L.E. 170 annually. Shortly afterwards the military authorities requisitioned the warehouses for cotton at L.E. 480 a year. Al-Sayyid could not do anything about it until the deal was due to expire in December 1942, and early in November he communicated to Contomichalos his decision not to renew it. The latter refused to comply on the ground that the warehouses were in the hands of the military authorities, but Al-Sayyid sued him and asked for government advice. He was told to at once claim the rent from the commissioner of Port Sudan on the expiry of the lease. F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for November, 1942.

[29] Penny's memorandum.

[30] *Ibid.*

during the subsequent years to win the leadership of the intelligentsia.[31]

Meanwhile, al-Mirghanī seemed to have been genuinely convinced that British support was behind his rival's alarming prominence, and may have even suspected that the British had "written him off" in favour of his adversary. British officials have repeatedly tried to get Sayyid ʿAlī out of his "illusion", but he was not impressed, and continued to protest against British "complacence".[32] Two incidents during the course of 1940 had, however, aggravated his suspicion.

Al-Mirghanī could not believe that the then repeated references of the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) to al-Mahdī, to his total exclusion, was unintentional. The attempt of the B.B.C. on 11 November, 1940 to correct this "mishap", through a talk in Arabic on the Sudanese war effort, added fuel to the fire as it gave ʿAbd al-Raḥmān pride of place. The other more serious incident was a lecture that Sid Aḥmad ʿUthmān al-Qāḍī, a former editor of al-*Ḥaḍāra*, gave early in September, 1940 in the Sudan school club, Khartoum, in which he violently dismissed the *sufi* leaders as exploiters of ignorance. Since al-Qāḍī was a government employee and an associate of al-Mahdī,[33] al-Mirghanī, who felt personally insulted, attributed this talk to British inspiration, and his supporters organized a strong protest movement against al-Qāḍī. Whatever the merits of the talk, the government felt that it was "unfortunately worded" and blamed al-Qāḍī for committing a "political blunder" that ignited "a very awkward situation". On their instructions, al-Qāḍī published an apology in the Mirghanist organ *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* "that he had not intended a personal attack on any sect in particular".[34] But this did not allay the sweeping anger of the Khatmiyyah, and an excited faithful, by the name of Yūsuf al-Ḥasan, assaulted al-Qāḍī whose life could have been endangered had not his walking companion, the Mufti Shaykh Abu Shama, gallantly came to his support. Al-Qāḍī insisted on a Mirghanist conspiracy behind the attack, but the court found no conclusive evidence, and sent the culprit for four months jail on a simple attack without provocation charge.[35] On his

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[31] See above, pp. 131–33.

[32] F.O. 371/27382, comment by an official at the Foreign Office, 3 March, 1940.

[33] Qāḍī was then working for the political department at the civil secretary's office. On his retirement in 1944, he became an overt supporter of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, and was one of the founding group of the Umma Party.

[34] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for August-September, 1940.

[35] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for October and November, 1940.

release in February 1941, the Khatmiyyah gave Yūsuf a hero's reception that included an audience with Sayyid ʿAli himself.[36]

Being disappointed in the intelligentsia, of whom several of his former followers deserted to the Mahdi's camp,[37] Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī had by the beginning of the 1940s turned his attention to the "masses" who, in his judgement, solidly supported him. He was known to be an avid reader, particularly of contemporary history, and it was from there that an idea occured to him to organize detachments of his followers on para-military lines. He formed a coloured-shirt movement, drilled by ex-Mirghanī sergeants of the Sudan Defence Force and subsequently known as *shabāb al-Khatmiyyah* (Khatimiyyah youths), that was mainly directed against his rival and his Neo-Mahdist movement. These youngsters regularly paraded the streets of Khartoum and Omdurman chanting slogans in his praise and against all his enemies.[38] Though the Civil Secretary warned al-Mirghanī against this "foolish and ill-timed movement", camouflaged parades continued to be seen from time to time. This provoked ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī to start a few months later his own more militant *shabāb al-Anṣār* (Ansar youths). Hence the government sternly warned the two Sayyids to stop these dangerous movements forthwith, otherwise the police will forcefully interfere. They reluctantly complied, though a few years later these para-military organizations reappeared.

But the bitter battle between the two Sayyids continued to be fought in the press, notably in the Mahdist organ *al-Nīl*, edited by Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, and the Mirghanist mouthpiece *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* founded on 13 May 1940 under the editorship of Muḥammed ʿAshrī al-Ṣiddīq.[39] Each paper "blew the trumpet" of its leader in a special column reserved for his movements and receptions, and a great

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[36] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for February, 1941.

[37] One of those was the famous Egypto-Sudanese businessman, Aḥmad Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Monʿaim, who defected in 1941 to become one of the most important supporters of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī. F.O. 371/SPIS, April and May 1941.

[38] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for February and March 1940. Incidentally this report speaks of a "greenshirt's" cell established in Wad Medani by Aḥmad Ḥasanayyn, the leader of the Egyptian Party *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, on his visit to the Sudan in 1939.

[39] An official report described ʿAshrī as a "well educated young man" who "occupies a prominent position among the Sudanese intellectuals". F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for May and June 1940. By 1941, *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* faced serious financial problems that impelled its proprietors to squeeze its management committee and to reduce the salary of the chief editor fron fifteen to ten pounds. ʿAshri resigned in protest and his assistant Ḥasan Badrī took over temporarily. F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, September 1941.

battle for titles flared up between the two. The "great leader" was immediately countered by the "greatest leader" and the "leader of the nation" was likewise superseded by the "one and only one leader".[40] In the sarcastic words of an official report, this "childish drain on superlatives" was "becoming so heavy that even the Arabic language will soon be exhausted". Unfortunately, this criticism and counter criticism in the two newspapers degenerated into personal abuse, and the censor often joyfully interfered to curb it.[41] Nonetheless, this bitter feud continued to flare, particularly over the "education day" as will be explained below.[42]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī's Visit to England and Egypt, 1937

In England

British documents record that al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had entertained for some years before 1937 a private re-visit to England to see at his leisure the country and its people, an opportunity denied to him during his short and squeezed visit in 1919. But tourism was apparently not the sole reason for this project, and al-Sayyid must have thought of enlisting the support of London against the increasingly hostile Khartoum. Besides, he aspired, according to his confidants Amīn al-Tūm and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAli Ṭāha, to secure a personal assurance from the British Government that sovereignty over the Sudan, shelved in the 1936 treaty for twenty years, would ultimately pass to the Sudanese.[43]

In view of previous visits to Britain by official and unofficial Sudanese[44] and his KBE status, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān could have hardly

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[40] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for May, June and July, 1940.

[41] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for March, 1941.

[42] See below, p. 159.

[43] Ṭāha continued to claim that some of al-Sayyids' supporters advised him not to travel as the war might break out en route, or the British might block his return if they know the real motive behind the journey. Ṭāha, Fadwa A.A. (editor), *Al-Sūdān li al-Sudāniyyīn* (Khartoum University Press, Khartoum, 2nd edition, 1957), p. 30.

[44] The latest was an unofficial visit to London by a carefully selected group of seventeen notables, which included al-Sayyid's son, al-Ṣiddiq, and al-Mirghani's nephew Muḥammed ʿUthmān, to attend the coronation of king George V in April, 1937. They stayed for five weeks during which an extensive programme was carefully prepared "to bring them into the stream of European and, more specially, English culture". On its way to the Sudan, the group briefly stopped at Cairo,

been blacklisted as an undesirable visitor. While not so basically opposed to the visit, Symes was, nonetheless, of the strong opinion that it should not be given any political significance. He, in particular, adamantly opposed al-Sayyid's request for an audience with the King,[45] as it might tempt him to repeat his "conjuring sword trick of 1919",[46] and would alarm the already grumbling Sayyid ʿAli al-Mirghani.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī finally left Khartoum on 1st July 1937 via Port Sudan[47] and Port Said to London where he arrived on 13 July, and was accommodated at the Grosvenor House Hotel. He was accompanied by Samual Attiyah of the intelligence department, officially an interpreter, but presumably a watchdog too, Yaqūb al-Ḥilu, ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī, Dr. al-Fāḍil al-Bushra, Muḥammed al-Khalifah ʿAbdullāhi, al-Sayyid's son al-Hadi, and his *mulāzim* (attendant) Baballah. Despite Syme's advise not to "display too much fuss", the British Government felt it impolitic to entirely ignore the presence of the Sayyid in the country, and offered him a reasonable degree of courtesy. In response to his wish, he saw a battleship, and followed a debate in the House of Commons from the distinguished strangers' gallery. As a further gesture, he attended, with Attiyah and al-Fāḍil, a royal garden tea party during the course of which he was presented to the King. Al-Sayyid was also received for forty minutes by Sir L. Oliphant, the head of the Egyptian department at the Foreign Office. But there is no archival evidence to support Ṭāha's claim, repeated in al-Sayyid's memoirs, that he saw the acting foreign secretary, Mr. R.A. Butler, and questioned him, to no avail, about the "vexed"

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where it was also exposed to a heavy dose of Egyptian propaganda. For details about the visit to both London and Cairo, see F.O. 371/20917, acting governor-general to Lampson, 27 June, 1937. Three months later another group of seventeen Sudanese attended the coronation of king Fārouk. The excessive hospitality given to them by public as well as private Egyptian organizations was dubbed by an informant to be "too lavish even by oriental standards". F.O. 371/20886, note by Sudan Agent (Cairo), 11 August, 1937.

[45] Al-Sayyid had at first casually expressed in 16 June 1937 his desire "to pay his respect to H.M. king George", but, in the words of Penny, "then skated away as if he thought that the ice might be rather thin". F.O. 371/20919, Penny to Lush, 10 July, 1937, Subsequently, however, he pressed with the request.

[46] Ibid.

[47] An eyewitness, Amīn al-Tūm, then a government employee in Port Sudan, reports that al-Sayyid was enthusiastically welecomed by a large crowd, and the town's graduates' club gave in his honour a fabullous tea party. Al-Tūm, Amīn: *op. cit.*, p. 40.

question of sovereignty.[48] In fact the British dismissed this and other news, such as a British offer of viceroyalty or emirship to al-Sayyid and the formation of a company backed by British capital, as mere rumours spread by the Mahdist *Da'irah* (headquarters). Counter gossip had also spread in the "*sūq*" (market) that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was rushed to London for treatment from a serious disease.[49]

Interestingly al-Sayyid had subsequently in 1944 asked the Foreign Office to consider the remarks that he said in Khartoum on 26 February, 1944 to the then visiting head of Egyptian Department, at the Foreign Office, Mr. Scrivener, as a "supplement to what he said in the course of his visit to London in 1937". The 1944 remarks were, in fact, a carefully prepared statement that reiterated al-Sayyid's views on the Sudan, and added a new argument, namely that the Egyptians had forfeited their claim of sovereignty over the Sudan by their failure to contribute to its defense against the Italian aggression on Kassala in 1940. By this demand, al-Sayyid had apparently wanted to update his position on the future of his country. But the Foreign Office was rather perplexed since a direct response might embarrass the Sudan Government in view of al-Sayyid's "rather ambiguous status". It was, however, finally decided to inform ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, through the Civil Secretary Newbold, that his remarks were placed on record. But it was entirely left to the latter to pass this message to the former verbally or to withhold it altogether.[50]

In Egypt

A close observation of the post-1936 development reveals a slight, though temporary,[51] shift in the traditionally hostile positions of both the Egyptians and the Neo-Mahdists towards each other. Since the Sudan issue had been a dangerous weapon in the hands of the opposition, the incumbent Wafd government decided in 1936 to reverse this embarrassing situation by building up a list of their "Sudan's

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[48] See Ṭaha, Fadwa A.A. (editor): *Al-Sūdān li al-Sudāniyyīn*, pp. 57–58, and *Muthakīrāt al-Imām ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī* (publsihed by the Sudanese Studies Centre, Cairo, 1996), p. 52.

[49] F.O. 371/20919, Penny to Lush 10 July, 1937.

[50] F.O. 371/41363, Mayhall to Scrivener, 14 April, 1944. A resume of al-Sayyid's conversation with Scrivener in Khartoum in 1944 is in the above document, but I could not locate the official record of his talk with Sir Oliphant in 1937.

[51] See below, pp. 152–56.

successes" that would appropriately be used to counter opposition charges of "selling" the Sudan to the British. Hence they, with the active support of some interested Egyptian circles, like Prince ʿUmar Ṭūsūn (died in 1944), initiated a drive that aimed at fostering close social, political and economic relations with all the Sudanese. The Wafd felt at the time that it was unwise to exclude the powerful Neo-Mahdists, and their prestigious leader. Equally the Egyptian press refrained for a while from its earlier smear campaign that dismissed ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as a mere stooge of Britain, and an enemy of Egypt.[52] Moreover, the Egyptian Government extended some important gestures to al-Sayyid like the VIP treatment that they gave to his son al-Ṣiddīq during his visit to Cairo in May, 1937 on his way back from the coronation festival in England.[53] Though professing his "indignation" and "disappointment", ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was apparently elated and flattered by this marked prominence of his son, and looked forward for an even more glamorous and well-publicized reception during his projected visit to Egypt on his way back from London. King Farouk had also joined the chorus. He expressed his interest in the Sayyid's *Korah* marriage festival, and instructed his minister of social affairs to submit a report on it. The latter did through the good offices of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Qabānī, the Egyptian father-in-law of ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī. Fārouk extended another gesture towards al-Sayyid by meeting in 1941 the medical cost of his nephew Muḥammed al-Mahdī al-Khalifah in Cairo.[54]

While the British had by the mid-1930s seriously suspected the loyalty of the Mahdi's son, he concurrently had his own compelling reasons to question their declared intention to prepare the Sudan for a meaningful self-government, let alone complete independence.

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[52] ʿAlī al-Berier, a staunch supporter of Egypt and the president of the Sudanese club in Cairo, was particularly instrumental in this abusive campaign. Under such provocative headlines as "the simple-minded exploited" and "slavery in the name of religion", ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was accused of deceiving his followers by a false promise of "ten square meters of paradise for every cubic meter of wood". This was further emphasized by some cartoons lampooing al-Sayyid, particularly in the Egyptian magazine *Ana wa Inta*. The Neo-Mahdists shot back by articles in the Egyptian magazine *al-Rādio*, and in their organ *al-Nīl* that belittled al-Berier, and called for a new president to the club. In protest, al-Sayyid himself rejected an invitation extended to him by this club during his visit to Cairo. See F.O. 141/543, SMIS, for September, 1937, and Cudsi, A.S.: *The Rise of Political Parties in the Sudan* 1936–1946 (Ph.D., S.O.A.S., University of London, n.d.), p. 60.

[53] See above, endnote 44, pp. 148–49.

[54] F.O. 371/27382. SPIS, for September, 1941.

This was demonstrated in their position in the 1936 treaty that dictated the continuation of the repugnant condominium agreement, and gave the Sudanese nothing but the vague and insulting pledge to work for their "welfare".[55] Besides, al-Sayyid felt that Britain might forgo the Sudan altogether for the sake of a military alliance with Egypt that would safeguard her vital strategic interest.[56] It was in these circumstances that the pragmatic ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, whose "loyalty" to England continued as long as it suited his purpose, decided to cautiously use the Egyptian card to score a point with the suspicious Symes and his colleagues, and to woo Britain and to play her off against its rival co-domino. Thus he responded to the Egyptian gestures by extending his own friendly, but reserved, overtures, particularly his acceptance of an invitation of his Egyptian "friends" prince ʿUmar Ṭūsūn and Fuʾād Abāẓa, to visit Egypt on his way from London. Though al-Sayyid had received and accepted this invitation in Khartoum, it was, however, only in London that he broke the "unpleasant" news to the British authorities. The British reaction was rather mixed in nature. Both Cairo and Khartoum were convinced that al-Sayyid's request should be flatly turned down, and he should be instructed to return directly to Khartoum. Judging by the turn of events during al-Sayyid's brief stop at Port Said, they argued, the Egyptians would spare no pain in making the most out of such sojourn in Egypt. While Gillan felt that a Mahdist alliance with Egypt might be developing, Penny thought that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān might "offer the support of the Mahdist machine" to Egypt "with himself as the viceroy designate".[57] Lampson suspected a Mahdist plan to make Cairo a centre of their propaganda, and accused the Wafd of harbouring plans to use al-Mahdī in their post-1936 forward policy in the Sudan. Hence he commissioned Gillan, the Civil Secretary, to instruct al-Sayyid to return directly to Khartoum.[58]

The Foreign Office was concerned that al-Sayyid might "lose his head in Cairo", and offer support to further Egyptian political pen-

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[55] For the Sudan clause in the 1936 treaty see my book *The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty*, chapter four.

[56] This was, in fact, what they did in Ṣidqī-Bevin protocol of 1946. For details see Taha, F.A.A.; *The Sudan Question in the 1946–47 Anglo-Egyptian Negotiations*, pp. 101–43.

[57] Quoted by Daly, Martin: *Imperial Sudan*, p. 75, from letters by Gillan to Lampson, 27 June, 1937, F.O. 407/221; and Penny to Sudan agent, Cairo, 28 June, 1937, F.O. 371/2019.

[58] F.O. 371/20917, Lampson to Eden, 7 July, 1937.

etration in the Sudan, or be so "extravagantly entertained" that Neo-Mahdism "may excessively flourish at the expense of Mirghanism". Nonetheless it refused to ban the visit to Cairo on the ground that it was not political or necessary to regard Egypt, an ally and the Sudan nearest neighbour, "as an infected area in which no prominent Sudanese can be allowed to linger".[59] Moreover, such a veto was bound to be known in Egypt, and its damage would be far worse than any publicity that may accompany the visit. Besides, this presumed dual risk of a stop in Cairo would be sufficiently guarded against by al-Sayyid's conditions, already reiterated to his Egyptian hosts, that he would not come to Cairo if the visit is not strictly private and received no publicity. He was, moreover, sternly reminded of his undertaken "to play the British game", and the embassy conveyed a strong hint to Naḥḥās "to refrain from any action that might embarrass the Sudan Government".[60]

Finally al-Sayyid arrived at Egypt, and stayed for a week only (11–18 August, 1937) during which he was the guest of the Egyptian Government at the Continental and Stefano hotels, respectively in Cairo and Alexandria, and two cars and a clerk from the Prime Minister's office were placed at his disposal. While succumbing to British pressure to politely turn down an Egyptian invitation to extend his stay on the pretext of his numerous preoccupation at home, al-Sayyid seemed to have been anxious for "official" treatment. This may be seen in his dissatisfaction with hotel accommodation, and his expressed desire to be lodged in *ʿAbdīn* and *al-Ẓaʿfarān* palaces, respectively in Cairo and Alexandria. He was admittedly careful, tactful and brief in his interviews with the press. But he did not downplay the visit in the way wanted by the British, as he spoke in these occasions of the necessity of strengthening economic and cultural relations between the two "sister" countries. He, furthermore, enjoyed the glamorous treatment and prominence bestowed upon him. His elaborate and extensive programme included an audience with King Fārouq at *al-Montazah* palace, a tea party given in his honour by prince ʿUmar Ṭūsūn, and several other parties and banquets attended by ministers and other prominent Egyptians as well as Sudanese.[61]

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[59] F.O. 371/20919, note by Campgell to Oliphant, 28 July 1937.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] In celebration of al-Sayyid's visit to Egypt, an Egyptian organ, *Al-Jarīdah al-Qaḍāʾyyiah*, issued a special issue, no. 34, eighth year, dated 21 August 1937, that included al-Sayyid's photo in the front, the programme of the visit, and an editorial

On his return to Khartoum, al-Sayyid and his aides were particularly keen to demonstrate this new, but well calculated, friendly overtures to Egypt. *Al-Nīl* carried an article in September, 1937, addressed to the Mufti, calling for the cancellation of a *fatwa* (religious opinion) issued in December 1924, to omit the name of the King of Egypt from prayers in the mosques.[62] This new attitude was further demonstrated during a visit that premier ʿAli Māhir paid to Sudan, on Symes' invitation, on 18th February, 1940, and for ten days.[63] Though the British were somehow relieved that Māhir did not after all win "the potentially dangerous ʿAbd al-Raḥmān",[64] the shrewd Sayyid impressed upon them that he could, if need be, use the Egyptian card in his uneasy relation with them. While Sayyid ʿAlī was reportedly relieved for not been given a chance to entertain the Premier, al-Mahdi voiced his great disappointment. He took the opportunity of an official luncheon party, given by Māhir at the Grand Hotel on 22 February, 1940, to personally apologize to him for the regrettable departure from Arab code of hospitality that a visitor should invite before being invited.[65] Subsequently, on the afternoon of 19 February, he briefly, but enthusiastically, received the Premier in his house, and promptly availed himself in all other functions given in Māhir's honour and to which he was invited.

With the apparent blessing of al-Sayyid, but reluctant approval of the government, the Mahdist dominated Graduates' Congress gave on 21 February a well organized party, attended by a thousand guests, in honour of Māhir. The carefully worded speech, given by the Mahdist president of the month[66] Naṣr al-Ḥāj ʿAlī, reflected the Sayyid's position, namely "no fusion into one, but cooperation between two".[67] While emphasizing the separate and autonomous entity of

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entitled "*Al-Zaʿīm al-Nabīl* al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī." The proprietor and editor of this periodical, a certain lawyer ʿAbdullah Ḥusayn, was a member of the Egyptian economic mission that visited the Sudan in 1935, and had since been highly impressed by al-Sayyid's achievements and charisma.

[62] F.O. 141/534227, SMIR, for September, 1937.

[63] There is a vast archival literature at the Public Records Office on this important visit which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been exhaustively studied.

[64] F.O. 371/24633, comment by an official at the Forein Office, 7 May, 1940.

[65] F.O. 371/246633, SPIS, for February and March 1940. This report records, without giving details, that al-Sayyid "took an offence over an incident of his own making" to "withdraw before the meal on a pretence of sudden indisposition". *Ibid.*

[66] This system of monthly rotational presidency in the Congress was abolished in September, 1940, and the president was henceforth elected.

[67] F.O. 371/24633, SPIS, for February and March, 1940.

the Sudan, ʿAlī emphatically assured the guest of honour that the Congress was by no means anti-Egyptian. He, furthermore, hailed the love and brotherly ties that bound the two sister countries, and urged close cooperation between them in the cultural, social and economic fields. Al-Sayyid's men were seemingly also behind another Congress' gesture to the Egyptians that was strongly opposed by the government, namely a memorandum, through ʿAli Māhir, to "the Egyptian people" requesting material support to the Piaster Orphanage and the Ma'had, *du'āh* (Muslim preachers) for the south, an Arabic library, a hospital, and Egyptian finance for commercial and agricultural enterprises. When cornered by Newbold, the Civil Secretary, over this blatant defiance, a Congress' delegation, that included two aides of al-Sayyid, Shinqeṭi and Naṣr al-Ḥāj ʿAlī, evasively pleaded, in defence of their action, that the memo was a mere "begging letter" with no political significance whatsoever.[68]

It is also interesting to note that the Neo-Mahdist organ, *al-Nīl*, published in its issue of 29th February the full text of Māhir's politically loaded farewell message to the "noble people of Sudan". He thanked them for their generous feelings that revealed themselves "in a radiant manner whenever the hearts of the people of this faithful Valley turn to his Majesty the King. We pray the Almighty to preserve him to realize during his happy days the good wishes which his great heart holds for the good of the Sudan and welfare of its people".[69]

Nevertheless, this cool honeymoon between Egypt and the Neo-Mahdists soon ended, and hostility between the two sides reached its nadir towards the end of 1943. By then the pro-Egypt party, Azharī-Fāḍli group,[70] appeared in the Congress, and premier Naḥḥās Pasha issued a statement on 13 November, 1943 to the effect that Egypt and Sudan were one indivisible nation. On al-Sayyid's personal instructions, *al-Nīl* carried an editorial on 30th December, headed "The unity of the Sudan first", which categorically repudiated Egyptian claims in the Sudan, and emphasized its separate identity and right for independence.[71] In an apparently deliberate move

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[68] *Ibid.*

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] See below, pp. 160–63.

[71] Anxious not to associate himself with this extreme anti-Egyptian stand, the editor of *al-Nīl*, Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, refused at first to publish it as an editorial, and asked that it should be signed by Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf. When asked to resign, he, however, accepted a compromise, namely to absent himself on the

to play off the Neo-Mahdists and Khatmiyyah against each other, the authorities allowed the latter to respond to *al-Nīl's* article by a counter one in their organ *Ṣawt al-Sūdān*. It dismissed ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's "seperatist" policy as motivated by his personal ambition, and a paragraph, deleted by the censor, contained a thinly-veiled personal attack against him expressing the hope that democracies would not try to create in the Sudan "the hated and obsolete system of Sultans". A further article by Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, in his newly-founded (28 December 1943) weekly *Al-Sūdān al-Ǧadīd*, was, however, rather evasive, as it neither endorsed nor approved *al-Nīl's* views, but merely emphasized the gravity of the views discussed.[72]

The Battle over the Graduates' General Congress

To achieve his goal of winning the budding intelligentsia before it gets too late,[73] Symes quickly and energetically embarked on a policy to advance their interest both in government services and in politics. He gave them a modest participation in the government of the country, and further facilities and opportunities for higher education that included British sponsored scholarships for study in the United Kingdom. He, furthermore, persuaded them to be "African Englishmen", particularly through conducted tours for individuals and parties to England.[74] More importantly, he facilitated the devel-

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day of the editorial's publication, but concurrently inserting a notice on the same issue attributing his absence to illness, indeed a diplomatic illness. F.O. 371/41348, SPIS, for December, 1943. It is, however, interesting to note that neither ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī nor the Egyptians had completely and unrevokabley closed the door before a rapprochement between the two sides. While the former had during the course of 1944 visited the Egyptian secondary school, and attended, in person for the first time, the Khartoum Egyptian club's party in honour of King Fārouq's birthday, the Egyptian grand qāḍī, accompanied by a senior Egyptian official, visited al-Sayyid in Aba in April 1944 on board the Egyptian irrigation steamer, and invited him to have his company to Khartoum. He, however, diplomatically apologized. F.O. 371/41348, SPIS, for April, 1944.

[72] F.O. 371/41384, SPIS, for January, 1944.

[73] See above, pp. 139–41.

[74] The British authorities were extremely satisfied by the cumulative outcome of those visits. They were particularly pleased by a remark, attributed to a former pro-Egyptian Sudanese, presumably ʿAbdullah Khalīl, and voiced after his return from the coronation visit to London in 1937, viz "I see now that all these modern marvels of material progress have only been made possible by generations of experience and traditions." F.O. 371/20917, acting governor general to Lampson, 27

opment of a measure of Sudanese nationalism, and encouraged the elite to go ahead with their secular plan to organize themselves in a representative national body to work with the Sudan Government on the basis of its own version and understanding of the policy of the Sudan for the Sudanese. The upshot of this, and other effort was the formation of the Graduates' Congress in February 1938.[75]

But events soon demonstrated that Symes was playing with fire, as the honeymoon between the Congress and the Sudan Government gradually ended. By 1940 the Congress leadership passed to the Neo-Mahdists who, in turn, lost it in 1944 for some pro-Egyptian groups. Nonetheless, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was quite instrumental in this catastrophic British failure, and he should be credited for pioneering the Sudanese drive to effectively challenging Symes' plan for the domination of the Congress.

The outcome of the first Congress' election in 1938 was a remarkable victory for an alliance between the Neo-Mahdists and a militant young group of the intelligentsia (*al-Shubbān*), led by the middle-aged Ismāʿīl al-Azharī, then a professed admirer of the Sayyid and a member of his *Ṣālūn*, and Yaḥiya al-Faḍlī. The Mahdist supremacy was, however, seriously challenged in the next election (1939) in which two senior Mirghanists, al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Fīl and ʿAlī al-Berier, were elected to the Congress' executive committee, while two top Mahdist aides, Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf and ʿAbd al-Monʿaim Muḥammed were ousted from it.[76] Besides, two ultra-militants, Muḥammed ʿĀmir Bashir, pen-named al-Fūrāwī, and Muḥammed Ḥamad al-Nīl, found their way to the committee of Sixty.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī meanwhile followed his favourite policy of *quid pro quo* by asking the government, in return for his frequent

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June, 1937. Another pro-Egyptian Sudanese activist-turned-admirer of Britain was Ṣālih ʿAbd al-Qādir, a former leader of the White Flag who served a term of imprisonment for his role in this movement. Shortly afterward he became bitterly disillusioned with Egypt and Egyptian politics, and had been for many years a staunch supporter of the British, particularly through his occasional utterance in the local press against Hitlerism and in support of the Allies' cause. In December 1940, the government rewarded him by the post of a broadcasting assistant in Omdurman broadcasting service. F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for December, 1940.

[75] For a detailed analysis of Symes' governor-generalship see Daly, Martin: *Imperial Sudan*, pp. 8–126.

[76] Until well into the 1940s, the Azharites shared al-Sayyid's views on the future of the Sudan. In a summary of the Sudan history for the literary festival of 1941, Yaḥyā al-Faḍlī referred to the inefficiency and corruption of the pre-Mahdist "Egyptian" regime in the country. F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for September, 1941.

moral and material support to the allied war effort,[77] for *al-shūra* (collective consultation) through the formation of an advisory council representing the Congress, religious and tribal notables, and the merchants. Naturally, the proposal was rejected outright by the Khatimiyyah, while the Government, being not quite sure of its motivation, and lest they antagonize the Khatimiyyas, dismissed it as inappropriate.[78] Nonetheless, this political manouver brightened the prospect of the Neo-Mahdists in the 1940 elections where they made a victorious comeback in both the centre[79] and the provinces. The Congress' provincial committees included such prominent Neo-Mahdists like Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjub (al-Obeid), Amīn al-Tūm (Atbara) and ʿAbdullāh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Nuqdallah (al-Gezira).

The military setback that the allied suffered in Europe and the entry of Italy in the war on 10 June, 1940 besides Germany, and its subsequent occupation of Kassala, Kurmuk and Galabat, provoked a persistent speculation of a possible British expulsion from the Sudan, at least temporarily. Being genuinely apprehensive of a Khatimiyyah prominence through their leader's family connection in Eritrea,[80] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān inspired some of his Congress supporters, particularly ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī and Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, to solicit the support of the Azharties for an enlarged body, a national front, representing the whole nation. But the proposal fell on deaf Mirghanist ears, who, anyhow, dismissed the Azharites as nothing but cum-Mahdists.

The Neo-Mahdism won a landslide victory in the 1941 elections, a handsome majority of 44 seats in the committee of Sixty, and the only two Mirghanist in the executive committee resigned to be

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[77] Al-Sayyid contracted in 1943 an Egyptian firm to sell it his cotton crop for an attractive price, but the government compelled him to sell it to the British government at a reduced rate. Nonetheless, the smart ʿAbd al-Raḥmān quickly moved to make a political capital out of this financial loss. He persuaded the government to credit this gesture to his actual contribution to the war effort through a pretension that he originally intended to extend a donation of several thousand to this cause after the sale of the cotton crop. F.O. 371/ SPIS for March, 1943.

[78] Cudsi, *The Rise of Political Parties in Sudan*, pp. 136–37.

[79] According to an intelligence report, the actual electors in 1940 were 250 only compared to 400 and 1080 respectively in the two immediate preceding annual elections. The report attributed this presumed "diminution of interest" to a feeling of "disillusionment" among the graduates with the Congress' failure, resulting from its "passivity and moderation", to achieve tangible results. F.O. 371/24633, SMIS, for January 1940.

[80] See above, p. 142.

replaced by Neo-Mahdists. To all intents and purposes, the Congress had thus become a pure Mahdist organ.[81] This was further demonstrated in their other resounding victory in the 1942 elections in which Azharī himself was replaced by a full-fledged Neo-Mahdist president, Ibrāhīm Aḥmad. Their confidence in their position had, furthermore, been firmly established in the crushing defeat of the Italians, and the British reoccupation of Kassala in early 1941. By then ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi's stock was at its zenith, and he, in the word of Cudsi, "emerged once again as the patron of the intelligentsia and the most powerful leader of the country".[82] He patronized the Congress' activities, particularly the innovative education day for the collection of money in aid of non-government education. Al-Sayyid made a generous contribution of L.E. 500, and the firms of his supporters Abu al-ʿIla and ʿAbd al-Monʿaim Muḥammed gave L.E. 100. Through Maḥmūd Abu al-ʿIla and Shinqeṭī, the Congress elicited the support for this project the Egyptian premier Siri Pasha, who subscribed L.E. 50.[83]

Naturally, the Khatimiyyah boycotted the education day, which they dismissed as a sheer Mahdist stunt, and tried to counter it by controlling the Ma'had through boosting the prospect of its Mirghanist acting rector, Aḥmad al-Hāshim Dafaʿllah, to the rectorship.[84] Sayyid ʿAlī himself entered for the first time the public arena by paying a visit in April, 1941 to the *Ma'had*, paid L.E. 100 to its fund, and, in his speech before the staff and students, commended the institution as enjoying its "golden days". His organ, *Ṣawt al-Sūdān*, heavily wrote up this visit to suggest that no change in the Ma'had was needed or desired. This annoyed all the advocates of reform, particularly the Neo-Mahdists. ʿAbd al-Monʿaim Muḥammed wrote a statement that emphasized the need for reform and qualified leadership. In an editorial in *al-Nīl*, Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim criticized "with all due respect, the views ascribed to a "certain high quarter", as being against the consensus of the enlightened opinion of the country".[85]

According to an intelligence report, this first ever public criticism of Sayyid ʿAlī gave him a "nasty jolt"; but his followers shot back

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[81] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for January, 1941.
[82] Cudsi, *op. cit.*, p. 16
[83] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for September, 1941.
[84] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for September, 1941. The rector, the Mahdist Shaykh Abū Diqin, died halfway through his presidency.
[85] F.O. 371/27382, SPIS, for April–May, 1941.

by giving Hāshim the abusive pseudo-name *kalb al-hukūmah* (dog of the government). Nonetheless, the Neo-Mahdists ultimately won the race and their man Shaykh Abū Shāmah ʿAbd al-Maḥmūd was confirmed in 1943 to the presidency. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had, furthermore, extended his patronage, and of course his influence, to the Ma'had by initiating with L.E. 1000 a subscription drive to build a students' hostel, and his friend Abu al-ʿIla paid a similar sum. A Mahdist committee, composed of al-Qāḍī, ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil and Shawqī, was formed to collect subscriptions to the target of L.E. 7500.[86]

With ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's consent, possibly his instigation, the Congress submitted its famous 1942 memorandum that demanded, *inter alia*, the status of independence to a united Sudan after the war.[87] In a number of private discussions with senior British officials, al-Mahdī defended this memorandum, and diplomatically warned that failure to meet its basic demands would leave many Sudanese nationalists no option but falling in the arms of Egypt. He thus once more urged the British to use Sudanese nationalism as a "bulwark" against the active Egyptian drive in the country.

Meanwhile the uneasy association between the Neo-Mahdists and the Azharites soon faced serious obstacles that ultimately led to a tragic and irreconcilable split. While Azharī became increasingly hostile to the British, al-Sayyid genuinely believed that this brinkmanship was harmful to the country as it risked a head on collision with the arrogantly powerful Britain. The two leaders were at loggerheads with regard to the line of action towards Newbold's rejection of the Congress' memorandum. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān advocated moderation and the tactical acceptance of the Civil Secretary's declared assurances of "sympathy" with the nationalists, and his recognition of the Congress as representing "a considerable body of educated opinion", but not the "sole mouthpiece" of the whole nation. But Azharī and the hawks insisted on a definite acceptance of the gist of the memorandum, and the conversion of the Congress into a political assembly, a parliament of

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[86] F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for March, 1943.

[87] Though this memorandum was much of a surprise to the British themselves, the Egyptians insisted that it was inspired by the Sudan government to stimulate Sudanese nationalism at the expense of Egypt. During a six-months stay in Egypt, Qāḍī tried to get the King, Naḥḥās and other notables out of this illusion, but to no avail. For a discursion on this memorandum, see Cudsi, *The Rise of Political Parties in the Sudan*, pp. 154–178, and al-Tum, A.: *op. cit.*, pp. 46–50.

the nation.[88] The Azharite revolt was further incited by the wartime economic hardship, and the government's over-hasty decision to ban its employees from participating in the Congress' activities.

The successful attempt of the Azharite faction to split the Neo-Mahdist ranks in the 1944 elections added fuel to this bitter warfare. Anxious to achieve a landslide victory, the Azharites shrewdly courted an alliance with the grumbling ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī. It is often argued that al-Fāḍil was motivated into this militant posture by his belief that it would help him in his future contest for the leadership of Neo-Mahdism with al-Sayyid's son al-Ṣiddīq, who was strongly supported by such prominent Neo-Mahdists like Yaqūb al-Ḥilu, Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf, al-Shinqeiṭī and Shawqi. This is substantively true, but there were seemingly other forces at work too. Al-Fāḍil apparently had his own reservations against Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's collaboration policy with the British, and perhaps felt that it went too far. Besides he seems to have pro-Egyptian sentiments,[89] or at least felt that the Neo-Mahdists had not sufficiently and effectively used the Egyptian card in their struggle against British imperialism. Al-Fāḍil could also have an ax to grind with the British for their pioneering role in sacking him in the early 1930s from his prestigious position of a go-between the Sayyid and the Government in favour of Yaqūb al-Ḥilu. While commending the latter as "personally charming, well disposed and straightforward", an intelligence report forcefully condemned al-Fāḍil as "unpleasant, conceited, and potential trouble maker".[90]

Nonetheless, in a desperate attempt to prevent a rift within his camp, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī ordered his kinsman to stop these "destructive" activities. But he did not succumb and worked behind the scene, particularly with Yaḥiya al-Fāḍlī, to secure an overwhelming victory to the *Shubbān*.[91] Azhari's ticket won forty seats in the committee

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[88] F.O. 371/70371, SMIS, for June, 1939.

[89] One of al-Fāḍil's wives was Egyptian. In a fairly balanced biographical note, Yaḥya Muḥammed ʿAbd al-Qādir confirms al-Fāḍil's strong pro-Egyptian tendencies, and discreetly reports the differences in political outlook and tactics between him and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, ʿAbd al-Qādir Y.M.: *op. cit.* pp. 64–66.

[90] C.R.O. sec. 6/8/51, a general note by the public security branch on Mahdist affairs, 22 July, 1936.

[91] To degrade the Azharites, British officials often called them *al-Ṣibbyān*, and dismissed their leader as "notoriously unstable".

of Sixty,[92] and almost entirely dominated the executive committee, only Ibrāhīm Aḥmad could squeeze in, and by fifteen votes only. Shortly afterwards he, however, resigned from the Sixty, along with eighteen other members,[93] ostensibly over a matter of principle.[94] To ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's added frustratin, ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil was not only nominated and elected, in absentia, to the executive committee, but he refused his private order to quit. Besides, the Congress' committee sacked the Mahdist sympathiser Dr. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Muḥammed from the editorship of its organ *al-Mutammar* in favour of their partisan Badawī Muṣṭafa.

This catastrophic result placed ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī in an awkward position, and his dilemma was great. While at heart sympathizing with the defeated Ibrāhīm Aḥmad and the *Hashmāb* group, he did not do anything worthwhile to stop the intrigues of al-Fāḍil, and was reluctant to repudiate the powerful Azharite faction, now including his own leading aide and kinsman, and so lose their allegiance. Instead he played for a while a waiting game, wanting, as usual, to have it both ways. But he soon realized that the Azharī-Aḥmad feud became so unbridgeable that he could not "retain a foot in each camp".[95] Besides al-Sayyid grew increasingly fed up with al-Fāḍil's rebellion,[96] and strongly opposed a private-cum-political visit that Azharī, with two colleagues, Maḥmūd al-Faḍlī and ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, paid to Egypt in June 1943 on the ground that it

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[92] The remaining twenty seats were shared in about equal proportion by the Hashmāb group, the Free Congressman, and Abū Rūf parties. Azharī headed the list with nearly 200 votes more than Ibrāhīm Ahmad, while ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil ranked quite low—the thirty-second—and his son, al-Ṭayyb, was the last. F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for November, 1943.

[93] These included the Neo-Mahdists Shawqi and ʿAwad Sātī and two independents, Muḥammed ʿUthmān Mirghanī, a graduate of the American University of Beirut, and Meki Shebeika. *Ibid.*

[94] In his presidential capacity and on a Congress' notepaper, Azharī signed a letter, in which, however, the word unofficial was added in ink, to the financial secretary recommending a Sudanese official for promotion. His enemies were now all out for his blood, and, in a stormy meeting of the Sixty, they accused him of unconstitutional and irresponsible act, and asked for his resignation. The failure of the motion triggered them into this collective resignation. The independent Mirghanī had reportedly ridiculed the Congress and its leader by saying, "This Congress deserves this president". F.O. 371/35580, SPIS. For February, 1943.

[95] F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for November, 1943. See also Cudsi, *The Rise of Political Parties in the Sudan*, pp. 216–18.

[96] A senior aide of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had reportedly claimed that the latter had frequently complained, "Whenever ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī has a fianancial crisis, we have a political one". (Personal information).

would throw the Congress into Egyptian hands.[97] But the straw that broke the camel's back was the diametrically conflicting positions of the two sides *vis-á-vis* the British offer in September 1943 of an advisory council for Northern Sudan. While the Azharites promptly dismissed it as basically detrimental to national unity and aspirations, the Neo-Mahdists condemned this position as sheer myopia. They argued that the proposed council, notwithstanding its numerous shortcomings,[98] was an important step which augured well for the future; particularly so after Newbold's utterances that it will not be a "talking shop", but a "transitional phase" and a "school of self-government". Azhari's faction had, however, belittled these undertakings as nothing but a "clever piece of eyewash".[99]

It was at this juncture that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī decisively moved to sever his strained relations with Azharī, and do his utmost best to combat his growing political ascendancy. He compelled al-Fāḍil to resign from the Congress, and clipped his wings by promoting his rival Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf. Besides, al-Sayyid threw his lot with Ibrāhīm Aḥmad in his bitter battle with Azhari over the presidency of the 1944 executive committee. Despite the latter's domination of the committee of Sixty, an eleventh hour intervention by Sharīf and Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, who hurriedly came to Khartoum from Sennar and Egypt respectively, won Ibrāhīm Aḥmad the presidency by a narrow margin of one vote only.[100] But

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[97] On his arrival at Cairo, Azharī made it clear that his "delegation" plan was to conduct negotiation with the Egyptian politicians on the future of the Sudan, and, more importantly, to concert measures for eliminating British influence from the country after the war. F.O. 371/35580, SPIS, for July, 1943. But according to Qāḍī, this visit was a total failure as Naḥḥās never trusted Azharī, and the Egyptians flatly rejected his assurance that the Congress was not following a "separatist policy". Qāḍī even claimed that some influencial Egyptians circles told him that the Sudanese were British at heart, but they tactically pretend the contrary to get material benefit from Egypt.

F.O. 371/42363, note by Qāḍi on a six-months' visit to Egypt (1 May–12 October, 1943).

[98] The council legislation was criticized on the following major grounds: exclusion of the South, curb on freedom of discussion, and the appointment rather than election of most of its members.

[99] F.O. 371/41348, SPIS, for January, 1944.

[100] The result of the first vote in the executive committee was neck to neck; seven votes for each of the contenders, while the fifteenth, Muḥammed ʿUthmān Mirghanī, was neutral. After failing to secure the presidency for himself, the latter voted out Azharī, and was rewarded by the post of the accountant in the new committee. F.O. 371/41348, SPIS, for January, 1944.

this victory was short-lived. Ibrāhīm Aḥmad's vulnerability was further accelerated by the defeat of his committee's motion to the Sixty to repeal an earlier decision of the Congress, taken on 23 October 1943, to boycott the advisory council. He, as well as other leading Neo-Mahdist notables, were cornered in the embarrassing dilemma between the continuation of their Congress' membership, or the acceptance of the Governor-General's nomination to the advisory council. The disarray in the Mahdist camp could be clearly seen in their confused reaction to this perplexity. Anxious to block Azhari's domination of the Congress, Ibrāhīm Aḥmad retained the presidency, while Shawqī accepted the nomination, and ʿAbd al-Mājid Aḥmad rejected, in disgust, both the Congress and the assembly.

Encouraged by the government, which was concerned by the Mirghanist "flirting with Egypt", and in a last minute attempt to isolate the Khatmiyyah from Azharī, and to strengthen himself against an aggressive abusive Egyptian press campaign, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān tried to patch his differences with his historical adversary Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī. He discussed his proposed mechanism for rapproachement, namely the formation of a united front that would concentrate on the realization of self-government without prejudice to the eventual political issues, with the latter's top Khalifah, al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Fīl, but nothing came out of this presumably first serious attempt for reconciliation between the two Sayyids. On the contrary, an Ashiqa-Khatmiyyah coalition contested the 1945 Congress' elections on a "union with Egypt" programme. The outcome was a devastating defeat to the Neo-Mahdists,[101] and the emergence of Ismāʿīl al-Azharī as the champion of the Sudanese elite. The Ashiqa resounding victory was largely due to their wooing of the voters that failure to support them would inevitably lead to the return of the Mahdiyya, and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as the King of the Sudan. Open propagation of the "kingship" idea by Sayyid's close aides and his own failure to make any attempt to deny it, as well as his regal manner of living, had, no doubt, considerably stimulated the success of this propaganda. Faced with this total collapse of Symes' dream to contain the educated elite, the government, however, "temporarily" withdrew in early 1945 its recognition of the Congress, "as it stands", ostensibly because of the radical change in its "character and nature"

[101] F.O. 371/41363, SPIS, for November, 1944.

resulting from its departure in these elections from the "educational qualifications" of its own constitution.[102]

The unusual association between the Neo-Mahdists and the Azharī faction was indeed nothing but a marriage of convenience. It very well suited Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, whose supporters among the educated were, anyhow, not too numerous, to be "taken up" by the *Shubbān*, particularly in the prosecution of his struggle with his rival ʿAlī al-Mirghanī. The Azharites, on the other hand, were aware that they were then too weak and obscure to make an independent bid for the leadership of the country. They therefore cunningly used ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi's tremendous power and prestige to advertise themselves to the educated and public at large. Azhari's initial admiration and allegiance to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān did not really ring true, and was seemingly sheerly tactical. Once placed firmly in the saddle, the shrewd and ambitious Azharī swiftly moved to discard his patron, and ironically replaced his patronage of the Congress by ʿAlī al-Mirghanī who, notwithstanding his profound reservations on al-Ashiqa, was prepared to go to any extent to block his historical rival's serious ambition to the kingship; thus another marriage of convenience was in the making. In short, the master of manipulation had this time been manipulated, and by his own proteges.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was, no doubt, down by what he may have presumed to be a painful stab in the back, but he was by no means out. For he continued to vigoriously pursue his lifelong ambition of an independent Sudan under his leadership, preferably Kingship, under his own political umbrella, the Umma Party founded in February, 1945.

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[102] F.O. 371/45972, SPIS, for February, 1945 (quoting a letter from the governor of Khartoum to Azharī, dated 7 February, 1945).

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEO-MAHDISTS AND THE BRITISH, 1944–1947: FROM TACTICAL COOPERATION TO SHORT-LIVED CONFRONTATION

The Umma[1] *Party*

Historically the Umma party was the revival in a new form of a group of moderate Sudanese intellectuals centering around Ḥusayn Sharīf, the editor of *Ḥaḍārat al-Sūdān*, who, in the early 1920's, adopted as its slogan "The Sudan for the Sudanese".[2] With the almost total expulsion of the Egyptian influence from the Sudan after the 1924 fiasco,[3] and the death of Sharīf in 1929, this group broke up. But its slogan remained the political motto of a few government officials, and was later picked up by a small, but vocal, group of intellectuals, best known as "*al-Fajr* group", that had in turn disappeared in the mid 1930's, following the death of its leader ʿArafāt Muḥammed ʿAbdullah, and the consequential disappearance of its organ *al-Fajr*.[4] Nonetheless the slogan gained momentum on the reappearance of a sweeping Egyptian drive in the country in the 1940's that culminated in the formation of the Ashiqa (Brothers) and other unionist parties that canvassed for different degrees of unity with Egypt under the Egyptian crown. With their pious belief in the sep-

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[1] The word "*Umma*" is an Arabic word that literally means "Nation". The organizers of the *Umma* party had seemingly borrowed the term "*Umma*" from the Qurʾān, where it is defined in two ways: broadly to house all the believers in *al-Tawḥīd* (oneness of God), and specifically "*Ummatu Waṣaṭā*" (Middle Nation) to mean that of Prophet Muḥammed which embodies both the Tawhidic world-view and the Islamic Sharīʿa. Respectively *al-Baqarah*: 143 and *al-Anbiyāʾ*: 92. Their choice of this nomenclature for their party is significant as it implied a link with the 19th century Mahdist state and its belief in the establishment of an Islamic political entity (*Umma*), both in the Sudan and in other Muslim countries.

[2] This position was elaborately discussed in four pieces that Sharīf published in *al-Haḍāra* in August-September, 1920. For their full text see Ṣālih, Maḥjūb Muḥammed: *Al-Ṣahāfah al-Sūdānniyyah fī Niṣf Qarn*, Vol. 1 (Khartoum 1971), pp. 72–86.

[3] For the 1924 revolt and its immediate aftermath see ʿAbdin, Hassan: *The Growth of Nationalist Movements in the Sudan* (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, 1970).

[4] *Al-Fajr*, the principal Sudanese journal in the 1930's, continued for four years only, 1934–1937.

arate identity of their country, many intellectuals put their heads together and formed in 1945 a "Separatist" party. Thus, contrary to the long-held and widespread, but arguably grossly unfair, belief the Umma party was not a "British creation", but an automatic response to this aggressively renewed Egyptian campaign, though the British welcomed its formation for their own reasons.[5] Aḥmad ʿUthmān al-Qāḍī, a leading founding-member of this party, articulated this rationale in the following words:

> What prompted us to form this party was an urgent feeling that the time had come for the responsible indigenous Sudanese opinion to organize itself and make the real wishes of the vast majority of the Sudanese known to the world, so that the foolish and irresponsible clamour of a minority that had been won over by propaganda from outside the Sudan should not be taken as an expression of genuine Sudanese feeling, and exploited as such by Egypt.[6]

To say that the Umma party started as a reaction to this "fusionist" challenge, or "threat", is only half the truth. Its inspiration was, in fact, Mahdist, or rather Neo-Mahdist. On losing his control of the Graduate's Congress in 1944,[7] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, who commanded the allegiance of a large body of influential Sudanese, found it crucial for the realization of his vision and ambitions to have an alternative political forum. It was in these circumstances that he strongly supported, perhaps instigated, the idea of this party. The steady growth of nationalist ferment after World War II, the spell in the Atlantic Charter of the right of self-determination to all nations, and the attainment of independence by some Arab and African countries—like Transjordan, Iraq and Ethiopia—had all, no doubt, constituted a further impetus for the formation of this independence party.

Early in 1945, some thirty graduates met at Omdurman to frame the rules and programmes of this new party. They belonged to the Neo-Mahdists and al-Qawmiyyūn[8] (Nationalist) groups, and included

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[5] See below, pp. 173–74.

[6] F.O. 371/45987, letter from al-Qāḍī to Sir Stafford Cripps, a retired British employee of the Sudan government, 1 May, 1945. For an informative note on al-Qāḍī, see Bashari, M.O.: *Ruwād al-Fikr al-Sūdānī*, pp. 47–51.

[7] See Ibrāhīm, H.A. "Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī 1935–44: A Master of Manipulation Manipulated," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, number 2, April 2002, pp. 123–48.

[8] Al-Qawmiyyūn, a small group of intellectuals who campaigned for independence after a transitional period under international trusteeship, were led by Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim and Muḥammed Ḥamad al-Nīl, and their organ was *al-Sūdān al-Ǧadīd*.

such dignitaries like al-Qāḍī, ʿAbdullah Bey Khalīl, Muḥammed ʿAlī Shawqī, Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, Muḥammed Ṣālih al-Shinqiṭī, Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf, Muḥammed ʿUthmān Mirghanī, Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim, and ʿAbd al-Karīm Muḥammed.[9] A tripartite committee, consisting of al-Qāḍī, Shawqī and Mirghanī, was formed to study various views expressed in the meeting, and to come out with a draft constitution for the new party.

The constitution, endorsed in February, 1945,[10] provided that the principle of the Umma party was "The Sudan for the Sudanese," and its objective "to work for the independence of the Sudan within its recognized geographical boundaries, while preserving friendly relations with Britain and Egypt". Its headquarters was to be in Omdurman, and, unlike the Graduates Congress, the party did not restrict its membership to the graduates only, but opened it to all adult Sudanese who believed in its principle and objective. The party's management was vested in a council, under the general secretarialship of ʿAbdullah Khalīl, that was authorized, subject to the endorsement of the party's annual meeting, to enact the necessary bye-laws and clarify "unexplained" matters in the constitution within its spirit. But the annual general assembly, that should take place at least once a year (in Rabīʿa al-Awal) was the sole authority to amend the constitution. Interestingly the constitution was silent about the presidency, which raised eye-brows that the post was reserved for al-Sayyid's eldest son, al-Ṣiddīq. The finance of the party was to be derived from membership fees,—a one—off payment of five piasters per member as well as subscriptions and donations.

The constitution of the Umma party was indeed "an innovation in many respects," and the party was the first political organization based on mass membership, at least in the letter of its constitution.[11]

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[9] To check the extremist tendencies of the "hotheaded" members of the new party, the Sudan government had seemingly soon triggered some tribal leaders to join its rank: e.g. Nāẓir ʿAbdullah Bakar, Muḥammed Bahr al-Dein, Muḥammed al-Amīn Tirik, Zubair Ḥamad al-Mak, Nāẓir Muḥammed Ibrāhīm Faraḥ, Babu Nimir, and al-Mak Ḥasan ʿAdlān. By 1950 they, however, seceded from the Umma party in protest against its confrontation with the government over the issue of immediate independence, and formed their own pro-British party, the Social Republican.

[10] The Arabic text of this constitution was published in a booklet in 1945 by al-Tamadun Press, Khartoum. An English translation is provided in F.O. 371/45984 (J1457/165/16) under the heading "Constitution of the Nation Party", 1364 A.H.–1945 A.D., dated 14 February, 1945.

[11] Cudsi, A.S.: *The Rise of Political Parties in the Sudan 1936–1946*, p. 294.

Nonetheless the party was profoundly inept in terms of organization and programme, and lacked sophisticated electioneering, which, coupled with other developments, played a major role in its devastating defeat in the first parliamentary elections of 1953. Besides, like all other parties and groups, it concentrated on the constitutional issue to the tragic neglect of the pressing socio-economic problems of the country. Apart from rare visits to the South, like that of Ibrāhīm Aḥmad to Equatoria in August, 1945, and some isolated press critique of British policy in the Region, particularly its support to Christian missionaries and obstruction to the spread of Arabic, the Umma leaders failed to address the complex issue of the South and other "perephrical regions" that crippled the nation since 1955.[12] Incidentally, a leading Egyptian politician, ʿAbd al-Qawī Aḥmad Pasha, adviced al-Qāḍī in 1945 to allow the South to be incorporated in Britain's Central African possessions.[13] Aḥmad Muḥammed Khayr had also reportedly been "in favour of splitting off the South" on the grounds that it, in active cooperation with the then formed Black Front, would "take a large share of the budget, and then either secede or swamp the North".[14]

ʿAbdullah Khalīl submitted the constitution of the party to the government with a covering letter that gave the following rationale for immediate recognition:

> In asking for approval, we base ourselves on a natural right confirmed by past declarations, allowed by the existence of existing agreements, and strengthened by present circumstances, and we feel sure that these considerations will be reinforced in your eyes by understanding the hopes of the Sudanese people for the future of their country.[15]

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[12] The British authorities had, however, shelved in 1947 an application by Muḥammed al-Amīn al-Qurashī, "a somewhat turbulent follower" of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, to open an Islamic mission in the Nuba mountains. F.O. 371/63047, SPIS, for August–October, 1947.

[13] F.O. 371/45984, Sudan Agent (Cairo) to Civil Secretary 18 July, 1945.

[14] F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, summary of events for September–October, 1948.

The Black Front, a proto-nationalist group of African Sudanese, was formed in August–September, 1948. Its leader, Dr. Muḥammed Adam Adham, defined the Bloc's major aims as the formation of a free and united democratic Sudanese government that would eliminate racial distinctions, care for the poor, maintain equality and social justice between all Sudanese, and form a strong modern army. SPIS for August–September, 1948. For a note on the life and career of Dr. Adham, see Bashari, *op. cit.*, pp. 294–97.

[15] Quoted in SPIS, for February, 1945 (F.O. 371/45972)

Simultaneously, the party requested the registration of a company under the name of "*al-Ummah al-Sūdāniyyah* (Sudanese Nation) Company", and a license to issue in its name a daily newspaper called *Al-Umma*. The idea of this newspaper had, however, gone back to July, 1944 when a group of nationalists proposed the publication of another daily, quite separate from al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and his *al-Nīl* newspaper, to be unequivocally dedicated to the cause of the Sudan and the Sudanese. Being anxious to mobilize public opinion against the Egyptian claims, both al-Sayyid and the government were sympathetic, and the latter had, in fact, given the green light.[16] But its publication was delayed until 15 May, 1945. Out of several candidates, including Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjūb,[17] Yūsuf Muṣṭafa al-Tinaī was selected to be the first editor of this newspaper.[18]

Many of the founding members had, however, voiced their dissatisfaction with the nature and procedure of the government's recognition of their organization. As was the case with the Graduates' Congress, it was recognized as a "club", not a party, under section 165 of the Standard Local Government (Municipalities) Regulations of 1938. But this was interpretated as an implicit rejection of the party's political aims. Since the letter of approval came from the Governor of Khartoum, not the Civil Secretary to whom the application had been originally addressed, the party had, furthermore, suspected that the government wanted to restrict its activities to Khartoum province only. Some senior officials had, however, privately tried to allay these fears by arguing that the law did not pro-

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[16] Cudsi, *The Rise of Political Parties*, pp. 287–88.

[17] The British considered Maḥjūb to be too extreme and ambitious. An intelligence report sarcastically maintained that Maḥjūb thought of himself "Sudanese Nehru", and added that he may "drift someday into the Ashiqa camp". F.O. 371/63047, SPIS, for January, 1947. Robertson, the Civil Secretary, called Maḥjūb and his nephew Aḥmad Yūsif Hāshim "The Terrible Twins" Robertson, James: *Transition in Africa: From Direct Rule to Independence* (Khartoum 1974), p. 120.

[18] Al-Tinaī (1907–1969), a former member of *al-Fajr* Group, and then an engineer seconded from the Public Works Department to the Sudan Defence Force, belonged to a Khatmiyyah family. In the words of an intelligence report, he was "an intelligent and moderate writer of some ability". F.O. 371/45972. SPIS, for May, 1945. For a note on al-Tinaī, see Bashari, *op. cit.*, pp. 387–89. The *Umma* triggered a spate of applications for newspapers of every description. Among the applicants was Ismaʿīl al-ʿAtabānī, former editor of *Ṣawt al-Sūdān*, who requested a licence for an independent daily called *al-jihād*. But the government rejected this name, presumably because of its Islamic connotation, and the applicant replaced it by *al-Raʾi al-ʿAm* that appeared in March, 1945. Its neutrality, however, did not last long, and it soon ran a moderate anti-Umma line.

vide for the formation of parties, and that the "club status" fully cover the purposes of this association. Moreover all big parties in England and Egypt were identified with their clubs, e.g. "Carlton", "the Reform" and "the Sa'dists".

While unimpressed by these excuses, the leaders of the Umma party actively pursued their plan to organize their party in the capital and the provinces. This was particularly so in the Blue and White Nile provinces, where they sought help from local Mahdist organizations, particularly in having a sub-committee for the party in Wad Medani.[19] To counteract the fusionist activities of 'Alī al-Berier, and the Graduates' Congress in Cairo, the party had even launched a propaganda campaign in Egypt. During a visit to Cairo in August, 1945, al-Qāḍī tried to form a sub-committee and issue a weekly organ for the party, while some Egyptian writers were induced, apparently through financial grants from the *Dā'irah*, to publish pro-Umma articles in the Egyptian press e.g. a certain 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Isāwī who published a book, entitled *Aḍwā' 'ala al-Sūdān*, in which he strongly defended the Independents, and for which he got a lucrative "gift" of fifty pounds from al-Sayyid.[20]

The popularity of the Umma party suffered heavily from two charges, namely its presumed subservience to the British, and the promotion of Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān's dynastic ambitions. This was strongly reiterated in an article by Yahya al-Faḍlī, published in *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* in 15 February 1945 under the title in translation, "In Whose Interest Are These Men Working?" Without mentioning names, al-Faḍli accused the Umma leaders of being instruments to secure a crown for Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān as a puppet King under the British.

Admittedly some of the party's promoters and chief propagandists, like Sharīf and Shawqī, were ardent Mahdists, and it was sizably

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[19] According to an official report, the Umma's registered membership by the end of 1945 totalled 100,000, but most of them resided in the Gezira, White Nile and Kordofan. F.O. 371/53249, Huddleston to Lord Killearen, 8 December, 1945.

[20] The private papers of Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī that are kept in the National Records Office, Khartoum include letters from al-'Isāwī to al-Sayyid in which he offered his services, and even suggested to be his press attaché in Cairo. See N.R.O. Anṣār 8/2 and Anṣār 8/4. In their quest for financial and other help from al-Sayyid, some staunch pro-Egyptian Sudanese students and intellectuals had, however, privately written him flattering letters expressing their admiration of his "patriotism" and "wise leadership" e.g. Anṣār 8/2, 'Ali al-Berier to al-Sayyid, 29 August 1936, and Anṣār 8/1, letters from Tawfīq Aḥmad al-Bakrī and Muḥi al-Dein Ṣābir to al Sayyid, respectively dated 11 January 1936 and 10 December 1944.

financed and staffed by the Mahdist *Dā'irah*. Nonetheless, knowing the adverse repercussions of this status, the party had initially done its utmost best to distant itself from the Sayyid, at least overtly, and, as far as possible, maintain an independent path. It persuaded al-Sayyid to instruct his vocal aide Sharīf to cease his political activities, and occupy himself with his White Nile estate. But, more significantly, it deputed its secretary-general and Shaykh Surūr Ramlī to assure Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī that their party was not subservient to any "special quarter", but a *bona fide* association that was formed to work for the interest of the whole country, and to persuade him to join its ranks. Al-Mirghanī received the delegation well, and expressed his sympathy with their "project", but was quite evasive and non-committal. He told his guests that he would "reserve his judgment until their words and intentions had been translated in action".[21]

Well aware of the damaging impact of the monarchy charge, particularly among the tribal leaders and the educated, some of the party's leaders, particularly Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, urged the Sayyid to categorically repudiate the Kingship in a signed message in the first issue of the Umma newspaper. While not going that far, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had, however, mildly and indirectly, disclaimed the idea in an interview with the editor of *al-Nīl* of November 17, 1945. He claimed that his interest in the Umma party was not motivated by personal agenda, but was solely for the interest of the country. He, moreover, expressed his willingness to take interest in any other movement with the same programme. The party was, however, dissatisfied with this covertive denial, and issued a policy statement, published in *al-Umma*'s first issue, that recorded its unequivocal opposition to the setting up of a monarchy in the Sudan. Though lacking the added weight of appearing over al-Sayyid's name, this statement was welcomed by the Khatmiyyah who considered it an outright rebuff to their adversary.[22] Subsequently, however, al-Sayyid had, in an April 1951 written answer to a question from a correspondent of the Egyptian newspaper *al-Balāgh*, categorically denied "any personal ambition to be King of the Sudan", and added that this rumour had been deliberately propagated "to undermine the call for independence.[23]

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[21] F.O. 371/45972, SPIS, for May, 1945.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] For the text of this statement, see Ansar 8/2 (Private papers of al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān), Text of al-Sayyid's statement to Maḥmūd ʿAzmī al-Jawhārī, correspondent of *al-Balāgh*, April, 1951.

As suggested earlier, the long-held popular assumption that the Umma party was the brainchild of the British, and its leaders their "stooges" and "tails", is grossly erroneous and unfair. The party had admittedly tried to enlist the support of retired British officials. This was particularly so in a series of letters that al-Qāḍī sent to the "friends of the Sudan in the United Kingdom". In one of them, al-Qāḍī wrote to Sir Stafford Gripps, whose support to the Sudan was important not only because he served there but because of his membership of Churshill's government and his close association with Attlee:

> "We feel sure that our part in this war is appreciated by the British public, and we can not believe that Britain will admit any claim that Egypt may put forward at the expense of our independent national existence. We feel, however, that at this critical juncture we need the active help of all our friends in England, and this is why I am writing to you. The object of this letter is to appeal to you, as a friend of the Sudan, and as one of those who have helped to make the Sudan what it is today, to help us in every way open to you to preserve what you have given us, and to enable us to continue to develop, on the foundations which you and your countrymen have laid in our country, towards an independent Sudan"[24]

Moreover, a couple of the Umma's leaders made exaggerated public claims of government support to their party,[25] which, on its part, willingly and publicly campaigned for the British programme of gradual transfer of the administration to the Sudanese, notwithstanding its extreme sluggishness. But this was seemingly a genuine, and apparently farsighted too, starting point for a future assertive campaign to achieve the party's goal of complete independence, and a tactical move to enlist British support against the imminent danger of complete fusion in Egypt.

It is interesting to note in this respect the mixed feelings of the British towards the Umma party. While anxious not to "neglect" or "mishandle" it in order "not to find ourselves a trifle friendless when the inevitable show occurs,"[26] the Sudan Government was equally keen to disassociate itself from this party, mainly for the sake of

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[24] F.O. 371/45984, letter from Al-Qāḍī to Cripps, 1 May, 1945. On the advise of the Foreign Office, these former officials of the Sudan government had, however, replied in a non-committal form or not at all.

[25] While naively expected to popularize the party, these claims were actually counter-productive, and had further alienated the Umma from the Sudanese public.

[26] N.R.O. Dakhlia(1), Robertson to all governors, 12 December, 1945.

restraining Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī from falling in Egyptian hands. In much publicized letters, handed to the two Sayyids in May, 1945, and in subsequent conversations with them, the government insisted on neutrality towards all parties, and categorically denied "contemplating the institution of the monarchy itself."[27] This neutrality was further emphasized by Robertson, the Civil Secretary (1945–1953), in his response to a question at a press conference on 12th June: "The Government is neural towards all parties which are not subversive. Where the published aims of any party are in general accord with the Government's own declared policy of progress and development, the Government naturally sympathizes with such aims. Government looks on the various parties as representatives of small groups, not of public opinion generally, and it will continue to develop the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan and Province Councils as the constitutional channels whereby it may be advised of the opinion of the people as a whole."[28]

Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was apparently extremely frustrated by this negative British attitude towards the Umma party, particularly so after an official Egyptian demand in 23 September, 1945 to return the Sudan to Egyptian sovereignty. In protest, Al-Mahdī absented himself from the capital, and spent most of September in Aba.[29]

Robertson's above dismissal of all parties, and his subsequent insistence on a whole generation for full Sudanization angered all political parties and groups. During that anti-British mood appeared a call to heal the split in the Graduates' Congress, and to form a untied front to achieve the country's national aspirations. The Umma accepted the idea in principle, and sent three representatives[30] to a

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[27] In the same year (1945), the British extended another friendly gesture towards Sayyid ʿAli by turning a blind eye towards a propagandist tour, undertaken on his behalf, by the Idrīsī Shaykh Idrīs al-Idrīsī to Kordofan, Dueim and Kosti. Alarmed by his rival's muddling in these Mahdist strongholds that "put his nose out of joint", Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān enlisted the support of a rival Idrīsī Shaykh, ʿAbd al-Mutʿāl al-Idrīsī. But, to the great satisfaction of al-Mirghanī, the Governor of the Northern Province interfered to shepherd him back to Egypt. F.O. 371/45972, SPIS, for May, 1945.

[28] F.O. 371/45984, Letter from Sudan Agent (London) to the Foreign Office, 3 September, 1945.

[29] F.O. 371/45972, SPIS, for September, 1945.

[30] These were ʿAbdullah Khalīl, ʿAbdullah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Nuqdallah, an employee of the *Dā'irah*, and ʿAlī Faraḥ, an accountant in the Finance Department. F.O. 371/53249, text of the agreement (covenant) of the United Parties, undated.

committee of the united parties, formed in mid May, 1945, to deliberate the issue.[31] After several months of travail, this committee came out in August with a *wathīqah* (covenant) whose deliberate ambiguity rendered it acceptable to all parties, including the Umma. Its tenor was that all parties would agree to work under the standard of the Congress for the formation of a "free democratic Sudanese government with a union with Egypt and alliance with Great Britain".[32] But neither the shape nor the timing of this "unity" was defined, and the Umma reserved, during the committee's deliberations, its right to oppose it. Furthermore, it outrightly rejected the Ashiqa interpretation of "Union" to mean complete amalgamation, and took it to mean a "shadowy" cultural, economic and linguistic "association" with Egypt. Even this would only be determined when the Sudanese people attain sufficient political maturity that would enable them to decide the destiny of their country, and negotiate with Egypt on equal footing.[33]

The apparent contradiction in the Umma demand of complete independence, and its acceptance of a "form" of union with Egypt may be explained in relation to the then popular slogan of Arabism. Both the unionists and independents supported the notion of Arab Unity, particularly during a visit that Albert Ḥurāni[34] paid to the Sudan in 1945, tried to foster brotherly relations with the Arab countries, and opposed British pro-zionist policy in Palestine.[35] But while

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[31] This committee represented al-Ashiqah, al-Itihādiyyūn al-Aḥrār, al-Itihādiyyūn al-Qawmiyyūn, al-Umma, al-Qawmiyyūn and al-Ahrār. The latter two groups were close to the Umma.

[32] The *wathīqah* suggested that the Congress should ask the co-domini to implement this vague formula, draw a scheme for Sudanization of the administration in the shortest possible period, and to lift all restrictions on the freedom of press, movement and assembly within the law.

[33] F.O. 371/53249, letter from Huddleston to Foreign Office, 8 December, 1945.

[34] Albert Hourani, a Lebanese Christian born and brought up in England, was then an employee of the Foreign Office's research department, from which he was transferred in October, 1943 to the office of the Minister of State in Cairo. During this visit, Hourani interacted with many British government officials and Sudanese intellectuals in the capital, Wad Medani, al-Obeid and al-Dueim. Being a staunch supporter of Arab Unity, Hourani appeared to have given Arabism in the Sudan a considerable stimulus. Later he became an outstanding Fellow of Arab history and politics at Oxford University.

[35] The Umma Party sent in 1946 a delegation to Saudi Arabia that was cordially received by the King and his grandson ʿAbdullah al-Faiṣal; while Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, who never missed a chance to exhibit his Arab and Islamic affliation, hosted in his houses at Aba and Khartoum the Saudi Chief of staff, Major-General Muḥammed Ṭāriq Bey al-Nigmy, during a brief stop in the Sudan in 1945. British authorities had, however, accused al-Sayyid of exploiting this ethnically-

the unionist parties considered Egypt Sudan's natural link to the Arab world, and unity with her the sole gate to the Arab League, the Umma party maintained that the Sudan qualified for a "mandatory status", and subsequently independence. In the light of this understanding, the Umma's compromise appears to be "subtly coherent". For it accepted the principle of unity, but rejected subjection to Egypt. The party had, moreover, saw in the prospect of independent participation in the Arab League a satisfactory even better alternative to individual connection with Egypt.[36]

The exclusively Ashiqa Congress' committee had, however, changed both the letter and spirit of the *wathīqah*. In the name of the United Front, it submitted to the acting Governor-General a memorandum asking for "the setting up of a democratic Sudanese government in union with Egypt under the Egyptian crown". The outraged Umma and Qawmiyyūn parties reacted to the "deceit" and "dishonesty" of the Ashiqa through a series of furious press articles under such provocative headings, in translation, as "Idols of Clay" and "Our Happiness Has Not Lasted".[37]

Since the Great War, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, like some contemporary Arab and Muslim leaders,[38] had consciously and openly identified himself with the British. But, contrary to the popularly-

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Nigerian and colourful general to extend his influence over "the notoriously volatile Fellata immigrants" in the Sudan. Hence they sped the General's departure from the country. F.O. 371/45772, SPIS, for July-September, 1945. Al-Sayyid seems to have also been in contact with Ḥassan al-Banna, the leader of *Al-Akhwān al-Muslimūn*. His private papers include a letter from al-Shaykh in which he introduced al-Sayyid to the Islamic programme of his society, and appealed to him to support the call for unity of the Nile Valley. Al-Sayyisd's response was, however, diplomatic and non-committal. He acknowledged the receipt of the letter from al-Shaykh's messenger Jamāl al-Dein al-Sanhūrī, and wished his "blessed movement" all success. For the original texts of Al-Banna's letter and al-Sayyid's response, respectively dated 6 Muharram and 23 Safar, 1367 A.H., see Anṣār 8/2 (Al-Sayyid's private papers. Copies are in appendix A, pp. 243–44). The Neo-Mahdists' Arabism was also reflected in a series of fiery articles published in their press in support of the Arab cause in Palestine.

[36] Cudsi, *The Rise of Political Parties*, p. 320.

[37] The *wathīqah* had also serious ramifications on the unionist camp. Sayyid ʿAli al-Mirghani considered it "too Egyptian", and entertained the idea of disassociating himself and his sect from the Ashiqa. But a group of extreme unionists, led by al-Dirdīrī Muḥammed ʿUthmān, rejected it on the grounds that it failed to address their demand of *al-Indimāg* (complete fusion in Egypt). They broke away to form their own Wadī al-Nīl party. For details see Cudsi, Ibid., pp. 327–30.

[38] One may particularly mention here King Faisal and Nuri al-Saʿīd of Iraq. It is high time, I believe, that the severely tarnished images of these leaders, and others, should be reassessed in order to give justice to their presumably farsighted nationalist roles.

held assumption, this was apparently not out of outright loyalty or submission to the British imperialists, but a shrewd tactical move to enlist their support to his cautious efforts to revive his father's violently crushed movement, and to block the alarmingly rising hegemonic ambitions in the Sudan of the other co-domini, Egypt, the traditional adversary of Mahdism. Nonetheless, a series of actions, and lack of actions, on the part of Britain, in the immediate post-2nd World War period, had progressively distanced the Neo-Mahdists from Britain, and, by the end of 1946, they became, for all intents and purposes, at loggerheads.

Under the guise of administrative efficiency, the Sudan government recruited a limited number of Sudanese in the administration, and practically none in the political service that remained until the early 1950's almost exclusively British. Indeed the government claimed that the country needed "guidance and assistance" for a "considerable time", about a whole generation, and even then British officials may not retire as such, but be transformed into "advisors".[39] Interestingly ambassador Roland Campbell, who succeeded Lord Killearen in February 1946, criticized the sluggishness of the Sudanization programme as "out of the tempo of post-war world". He, furthermore, urged the government to forgo its "idealistic" standard of efficiency and the narrow personal interest of its officials, and "work for a detached and bold plan" for Sudanization that would allow a few Sudanese in responsible political posts, and specify a date for its completion. Otherwise, the ambassador prophesized, the "ground would be cut from under our feet" since the "moderate" and "responsible-minded" Sudanese would have no option except to accept the Egyptian offer of "immediate self-government in Union with Egypt, with the added attraction of emergence from the present indefinite condominium status with its implication of inferiority of the Sudanese".[40] The Umma party did not, however, go that much, but it expressed in the Advisory Council, the press and other public forums its extreme disappointment in the slow pace of Sudanization.

The rather compromising attitude of the British towards Egyptian claims in the Sudan in the post-war period was, however, the main

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[39] Sudanese nationalists may have been alerted by Egypt's bitter experience during Lord Cromer's consulate (1883–1905) when the British so-called "advisors" became the *de facto* ministers.

[40] F.O. 371/53251, telegram from Campbell to Foreign Office, 29 March, 1946.

factor for the gradual estrangement of the Umma party, and its patron ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, from the British. Egypt's belated declaration of war against Germany, on 24 February, 1945,[41] and its subsequential membership of San Francisco peace conference, led them to suspect that the co-domini concluded a secret deal to settle the Sudan Question behind the back of its people. They, furthermore, read a series of articles in the Egyptian and British press to mean that Egypt would represent the Sudan in this conference, and demand the recognition of her "historical rights" once and for all. The Sudan government had, however, argued that this was highly unlikely, and even if the issue of the Sudan was raised in San Francisco, the British delegation would block its debate. They, furthermore, reminded the Umma party that, by virtue of paragraph five of the annex to the Sudan Clause of the 1936 treaty, the Sudan should be represented in international conferences by the co-domini, not Egypt alone. But the party was unimpressed, and it pressed in the Advisory Council, as well as through a petition to the Governor-General, for their country's right to have a "chair" or a representative in the Conference on the same footing as other countries who declared or participated in the War against the Axis.[42] Britain's disappointing and categorical refusal of this demand had, however, encouraged the party to ultimately send in 1947 its own delegation to America.[43]

The suspicion of the Neo-Mahdists in the ulterior motives of the British was further aggravated by the passivity of the new Labour government towards a press statement given by Premier Naḥḥās, in early February 1946, to the effect that Egypt would seek in the forthcoming renegotiation "the incorporation of the Sudan in the Egyptian Kingdom".[44] Besides this, was its hesitation to issue a pronounced policy statement on the Sudan, and its indifference towards an influx in the course of 1946 of Egyptian propagandists in the country, officials and politicians as well as professors and students.[45] The Umma party

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[41] Anxious not to repeat the bitter experience of his country's exclusion from the Versailles peace conference of 1919, Premier Aḥmad Māhir rushed this nominal declaration, as the Yalta conference had restricted membership of San Francisco to the countries that declared war on the Axis Powers by March, 1945 at the latest.

[42] F.O. 371/45984, letter from ʿAbdullah Khalīl to the Governor-General, 19 March, 1945.

[43] See below, pp. 190–92.

[44] F.O. 371/53250, Huddleston to Lord Killearn, 13 February, 1946.

[45] The 1946 long list of Egyptian visitors included ʿAbd al-Razāq al-Sanhūrī, the

was particularly frustrated by the blockage of the Sudan government for its repeated attempts to initiate a debate in the Advisory Council on the sensitive issue of Sudanese nationality, and by its rejection of the party's proposal to send a Sudanese delegation to voice the opinion of the people in the forthcoming Anglo-Egyptian negotiations.[46] These extreme decisions were, however, imposed on Khartoum by London, who was anxious not to disturb these negotiations.

But the straw that broke the camel's back was the decision of the Labour government to accept the Egyptian demand, submitted in the closing weeks of 1945, to revise the 1936 treaty,[47] and its subsequent recognition, in the October 1946 Ṣidqī-Bevin Protocol[48] of the "sovereign rights" of the King of Egypt in the Sudan in return for securing Britain's vital strategic interests in a revised treaty with Egypt. This significant departure was persuasively rationalized in a series of discussions and memoranda of which one forcefully maintained, "In the present unsettled position of world affairs, and more specifically in need for a friendly Arab block in the Middle East, the concession which his Majesty's Government have made as regards the position of Egyptian Crown is more fully justified".[49] The Secretary of State, Ernest Bevin, who seemingly masterminded this policy shift, had even argued that independence to the Sudan may not be "the best solution", and that British interests would best be served "by the union of Sudan with Egypt".[50]

Minister of Education, Muḥammad Maḥmūd Jalāl Bey, an M.P., ʿAbd al-Munʿaim al-Sharqāwī, a university law lecturer, and Jamāl al-Dein al-Sanhūrī of *al-Ikhwān* al-Muslimūn; while the visit of the Wafdist leader Fu'ād Sirāj al-Dein was only averted by tactical delay in visa procedure. For a detailed account of these visits see F.O. 371/53250, a note of a visit by Dr. Sanhūrī, January, 1946, and a memorandum by Huddleston to Lord Killearn, 12 January, 1946. Annexed to the latter is the text of Dr. al-Sharqāwi's lecture, given on 4 February, 1946 to an audience of 500 in the Sudan Schools' Club, Omdurman, entitled in translation "The Sudan in the Eyes of Egyptian Youth".

[46] This rejection came in the response of the Civil Secretary and Chairman of the Advisory Council to a by-question raised by an Umma representative, ʿAbd al-Karīm Muḥammed, in the session of 3 September, 1945. F.O. 371/53249.

[47] The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty was originally intended to last twenty years. For a study of this treaty, see my book *The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty*, 1976.

[48] See below, p. 181.

[49] F.O. 371/53259, from the Secretary of State to the Governor-General, November, 1946.

[50] Bevin to Sir Orme Sarget, quoted in Daly, M.: *Imperial Sudan*, p. 211.

The Labour government had, furthermore, endorsed the opinion of the legal department of the Foreign Office that the previous British position of a shared British-Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan, established by the 1899 Condominium Agreement, was mistaken, and that Egypt's claim of sovereignty was legally sound. This "right", Beckett, the director of the legal department, argued, was never specifically denied in the past, though Britain resolutely refused to admit it in the 1930 and 1936 Anglo-Egyptian negotiations.[51] A cabinet conclusion had bluntly recorded, "There was little doubt in law about Egypt's sovereignty over the Sudan, and it was recognized in practice by the facts that the Governor-General was appointed by the King of Egypt, that the Egyptian flag was flows in the Sudan, and that Egyptian troops had been stationed there.[52]

The Governor-General, Sir Hubert Huddleston, was however, unimpressed by this "legal sophistory" which British officials would be "ashamed to admit". He, furthermore, complained of British "duplicity" in asking the Egyptians and Sudanese to read the surrender in the Protocol of "historic sovereignty" in different ways: for the Egyptians as meaning" historic and continuing", and the Sudanese "historic and obsolete".[53] What really matters, Huddleston insisted, was that both the Egyptian government and King would at once exploit this far-reaching retreat to undermine a half-century British record of progress in the Sudan, and consolidate their grip in the country at the expense of both the British and the Sudanese. The Sudanese, he continued to argue, would rush to the winning side, the Ashiqa, and "our friends", the Umma, would look "correspondingly

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[51] Mr. Beckett, the director of the Legal department, articulated these complicated legal arguments in a secret internal minute dated 26 October, 1946, and in a November letter to the Civil Secretary, James Robertson. For their texts see F.O. 371/53259. In Naḥḥās-Henderson draft treaty of 1930, Britain had, however, offered the following addition to the sovereignty article, "without prejudice to Egypt's right and material interest" F.O. 371/53233, Scrivener to Campbell, 14 September, 1946. Interestingly General Wingate, the former Governor-General (1900–1916) and High Commissioner of Egypt (1917–1919) strongly supported, in a letter to Bevin, dated 11 October, 1946, the Labour recognition of Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan as "legally sound and politically desirable". For the text of this letter see Ibid. To the best of my knowledge, Wingate had not throughout his long career in Egypt and the Sudan explicitly expressed such "conviction". Perhaps this "change of heart" was a belated retaliation from the Conservative Party that, in 1919, sacked him in disgrace from the High commissionership, and abruptly ended his public career.

[52] F.O. 371/53261, Cabinet conclusions, 14 November, 1946.

[53] F.O. 371/53255, record of a meeting at Foreign Office, 8 October, 1946.

downcast". With their fanatic opposition to any form of Egyptian sovereignty, the latter would run amok, and seriously threaten order and stability. This inevitable development would corner the government into a regrettable, but sole, option to "strafe and alienate" them.[54] To dramatise the situation, Huddleston asked for two British battalions, and reinforcements were actually send by air on the 7th November, 1946. He was strongly supported by the British staff of the Sudan government, and the Three Secretaries sent him a memorandum in which they maintained that they could not "possibly remain in the Sudan to force a Treaty on these terms on the Sudanese"[55] Interestingly, Anthony Eden, the former Conservative Foreign Secretary and future Premier, shared Huddleston opposition to any change whatsoever to the sovereignty clause, even in its "form", as the British record in the Sudan was, in his words, "second to none", and "a real example of genuine trusteeship".[56] Eden had even proposed to travel to see Bevin, then in Paris, to get him out of his position, but nothing came out of this move.

Nonetheless, the British government went ahead with its plan, and Bevin offered in London in October, 1946 his Egyptian counterpart, Premier Ismāʿīl Ṣidqī Pasha, British recognition of Unity of the Nile Valley, though the Protocol concurrently, but paradoxically, gave the Sudanese the right of self-determination.[57] London adamantly refused Khartoum's "perfectionism", and its running of the Sudan "in isolation from the rest of the world". It, furthermore, criticized the Sudan Government's "outdated" and "inefficient" publicity service, which, if modernized, could compete with its Egyptian counterpart to demonstrate to the Sudanese the advantages of the Sudan Protocol; namely its reservation of their right of self-government and self determination that would "offset the historic and redundant sovereignty clause".[58] The Foreign Office had, furthermore, angrily objected to Huddleston's repeated usuage of the epithet "our friends" to describe

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[54] F.O. 371/53259, Foreign Office to Governor-General, 5 November, 1946.

[55] Creed and Miller were at the time respectively the Legal and Financial Secretaries. Robertson, *op. cit*, p. 97.

[56] F.O. 371/53260, statement by Eden, 16 November, 1946.

[57] For a record of the negotiations that led to the conclusion of the Protocol, see Taha Fadwa A.A.: *The Sudan Question in the 1946–47 Anglo-Egyptian Negotiations: A Study of the Background and Development of the Conflict*, pp. 101–25.

[58] F.O. 371/53259, Foreign Office memorandum to the Prime Minister, 9 November, 1947.

the Neo-Mahdists. For it shrewdly and accurately realized, they "seek to get rid of us as much as the Egyptians. Only they do not want to do this by way of Union with Egypt as a first step, and, pending the day when they do get rid of us, they seem more ready than other elements to cooperate with the government".[59]

But Huddleston remained adamant, and occasionally defied his bosses as can be seen from his following violent words to H. Mc Neil, the Minister of State,

> When I gave you my written questions yesterday, you very frankly admitted that I had failed to convince the members of the cabinet, including yourself, who were at the meeting at 10 [Downing Street] Monday, 11 November, that the Sudan Independence group were, in their present state of mind, completely unmovable on the sovereignty clause. This is wishful thinking on your part, and, like all wishful thinking, at best dishonest. If you do not believe me, produce only one other person with knowledge of the Sudan comparable to me who disagrees with me. Otherwise you MUST[60] believe me. Say to me—as I said to you yesterday—"It is meet that one die for the people", and I will agree with you.[61]

The authoritative officer had even questioned the authority of London over the Governor-General, for which he was immediately and sharply rebuked by the Foreign Office. Huddleston had, in fact, on several time hinted his willingness to forgo his post over this matter of principle. His "obstinacy" and "intransigence" had, however, finally got on the nerves of his superiors in London who decided in early 1947 to "invite him" to resign in favour of a man of "broad horizon" and "wide political experience", besides "administrative qualifications".[62] Hence was their selection of "their man", the senior Foreign Office employee, Robert Howe, to succeed the outsed Huddleston in December, 1947.

The Neo-Mahdists vis-à-vis the Protocol

The resistance of the independence groups in general, and the Neo-Mahdists in particular, against the Protocol was, indeed, spontaneous,

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[59] F.O. 371/53255, memorandum by Mr. Smart, 10 October, 1946.
[60] Huddleston's capital letters.
[61] F.O. 371/53260, Huddleston to H. Mc Neil, 13 November, 1946.
[62] F.O. 371/53259, Foreign Office to Prime Minister, 9 November, 1946.

instantaneous and violent. On the initiative of the Umma party, they formed a broad Independence Front, under the Presidency of ʿAbdullah Khalīl and the secretarialship of the judge-lawyer Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥjūb, who organized an active campaign, within and outside the country, against the "betrayal" of the co-domini. Immediately after the initialing of the Protocol in London, some prominent Umma leaders held a stormy meeting on 27 October, 1946 in the *Dā'irah* that passed furious resolutions: an immediate influx of the militant *Anṣār* to the capital, the boycott of the Advisory Council as well as its administrative conference and Sudanization committee, set up in April, 1946, to cable the British Premier, Atlle, protesting against "the handing over of the Sudan to the Egyptians, and to hold a "political night" on the same day at the party's headquarter in Omduman to be followed by street demonstrations.

ʿAbdullah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Nuqdallah was the key organizer of a number of demonstrations, in which al-Sayyid's eldest son al-Ṣiddīq, and two of his prominent aides, al-Fāḍil and Sharīf, actively participated, and the protest movement spread to major towns in the northern provinces. The speakers cursed imperialist Britain, and condemned its "conspiracy". They urged their excited audience to "sacrifice their lifes" and "shed their blood" for the cause of independence.[63] This spirit of defiance was further reflected in a letter that the Front sent in 31 October, 1946 to the Governor-General protesting against the sovereignty concession and asking for the immediate termination of the Condominium, and the vesting of the right of sovereignty in the Sudanese. The letter sharply warned, "We accept nothing short of setting up an independent democratic government, and any dilatory efforts in setting up that government, or any mere juggling with the forms of the present institutions which preserve their substance [would] be resented and strongly resisted by all Sudanese".[64]

The demonstrations had, however, occasionally turned into riots, and clashed with the unionists, leading to some casualties. In one

[63] F.O. 371/53259, security report, 28 October, 1946. Another prominent speaker in those rallies was Aḥmad Ḥasoun, who later founded the Wahabi-driven association of *Anṣār al-Sunnah*, and was the preceptor of the Afro-American Muslim activist Malcom X. For a note on the career of Shaykh Ḥasoun, see Bāsharī, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46.

[64] F.O. 371/53261, text of a letter from the Independence Front to the Governor-General, 31 October, 1946.

incident the angry protesters smashed the picture of King Farouk at the Ashiqa club in Omduraman. Ṣidqī Pasha held ʿAbd al-Raḥmān personally responsible, and asked for an immediate apology, but the Sayyid adamantly refused. This and other acts of defiance to the Egyptian Monarch, including hostile statements to the foreign media, triggered the Egyptian press to label ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī as a "rebel" who should be immediately prosecuted and executed for "high treason".[65]

The authorities had officially blamed the Front for the influx of the "tribesmen" in the capital, and held it responsible for any threat to law and order. They expressed their determination to carry out their duties to maintain peace "impartially",[66] and finally imposed in November, 1946 a ban on public meetings and demonstrations. Nonetheless, being on the same boat with the protesters, it is reasonable to assume that the government encouraged them or, at least, often turned a blind eye to their excesses. But the Egyptian claim that the authorities orchasterated the whole movement for their own agenda, and their doubt of its spontaneousity, is indeed unfair. For the protesters had seemingly genuinely saw in an acknowledgement of Egyptian sovereignty in any form an eclipse of their sincere and long held hope of an independent Sudanese state.

The independence press, particularly the dailies *al-Nīl, al-Umma* and *al-Sūdān al-Ǧadīd*,[67] and the weekly *al-Hādī*, had its recognized share in this sweeping move against the Protocol. It called for a *jihād* against British "deceit" and Egyptian imperialism. Under the editorship of the militant Muḥammed Aḥmad ʿUmar, *al-Hādī* had, for example, published in 11 December, 1946 "a heavy handed and impertinent would be humorous attack upon the Civil Secretary". This was soon followed by an outrageously abusive article against the Egyptian people, entitled "The Dowry of a Prostitute",[68] and writ-

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[65] F.O. 371/53261, record of a meeting between Ṣidqi Pasha and Huddleston, 23 November, 1946.

[66] F.O. 371/53261, Robertson's statement to the secretaries of the Independence and *Wadi al-Nil* Fronts, 2 November, 1946.

[67] A 1947 intelligence report had, however, accused the editor of *al-Sūdān al-Ǧadīd*, of playing the double role of an independent and a unionist, by maintaining, "Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim is back at his old game of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds" F.O. 371/63047, SPIS, April–May, 1947.

[68] Ibid. On 29 May, 1947, the government brought ʿUmar before the court for allowing the publication of this article, and was fined LE 15. Maḥjūb, who had just resigned from the judiciary and became a licenced advocate, defended ʿUmar.

ten by ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Amīn, who took over in 1947 the editorship of the *Umma* organ from Yaqūb ʿUthmān,[69] then on a propaganda tour in England.

ʿAbd al Raḥmān al-Mahdī's Visit to London

The fanatic opposition of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī to the Protocol had been exclusively attributed in some British documents to his "chagrin at seeing his hopes of founding a dynasty on King Faisal's model in Arabia fading away".[70] But, if at all, this presumption was seemingly quite marginal, as the man's chief concern was the Protocol's imminent threat to his life long dream, and that of Mahdism at large, of an independent sovereign state in the Sudan. Whatever his motivation may have been, the sovereignty provision in the Protocol had profoundly shaken al-Sayyid's confidence in Britain, and his top aides, including such a staunch friend of the British as Sharīf, spoke openly and bitterly against British "deceit" and "dishonesty".

Immediately after Ṣidqi's boastful speech at Cairo airport on 26 October, 1946 that he had brought back *al-Sayādah*-literally sovereignty, but in Arabic can mean the authority of a master over a slave-over the Sudan to Egypt, which was not immediately denied in London, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī cabled Bevin asking for permission to visit London to put the Sudanese case before the British government and public. Anxious not to endanger the prospect of the

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This was his first case, and his line of defence was that the article attacked the Egyptian people, not their government, and that the language used was "the common coin of Egyptian political currency". The Umma Party greatly resented this prosecution which, they complained, deprived them from their only means of defence against outrageous insults launched by the unionists and the Egyptian press. They were particularly furious by a series of abusive articles against Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, published by Muḥammed Amīn Ḥusayn in 1947 in *Ṣawt al-Sūdān*. Under the pen name *Ibn al-Shaʿb* (son of the nation), Amīn Bābikr had, anyhow, retaliated by similar ones against Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī in *al-Umma*.

[69] Ibid. While refusing to entrust the Umma editorship to ʿUmar, the government appointed an interim editor, Muḥammed Muṣṭafa al-Ṭahir, and later accepted the schoolmaster ʿAbd al-Raheim al-Amīn for the job. The latter was commended in an intelligence report as being "above the average of the usual run of our local journalists", capable of "masterly vituperation", and "a reasonable and balanced man of sound judgment". Those who know *al-Ustādh*, including myself, confirm his genuine patriotism and outstanding intellectuality.

[70] F.O. 371/53258, Tel No 123, Khartoum to Cairo, 1 November, 1946.

treaty, the British government had initially decided that, if at all necessary, such a visit should follow the official acceptance of the treaty by the Egyptians. But Huddleston strongly urged that al-Sayyid should be given "a personal and fair hearing before concluding any treaty with Egypt, otherwise the journey would be "pointless, if not a mockery".[71] Failure of a positive response, the Governor-General added, may lead to catastrophic repercussions of a similar magnitude to those that took place in Egypt in 1919 after the refusal of Wingate's advice to allow Zaghlul to personally plea his country's case before the Peace Conference in Paris or the British cabinet in London.[72] Though this historical parallelism was apparently inaccurate in the sense that the situation in the Sudan was not as explosive as that of Egypt, the British government reluctantly departed from its earlier decision and allowed the Sayyid to travel to London. But this was on the clear understanding that Huddleston would make it clear to Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī and the Ashiqa that they would also be welcome to visit London if they wished, and that al-Mahdī's visit should be via Cairo to pay a call on Ṣidqi before coming to London. This was considered essential in order to correct in London any "erroneous impressions" that he may get in Cairo, and to persuade the Egyptians not to jump to the conclusion that the British were carrying ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī off for some "dark purposes" of their own.[73] Ṣidqī had, however, refused to see al-Sayyid, and he finally deparated to London on 26 November 1946, accompanied by three of his top aides: Sharīf, Khalīl and Shawqī.

During his three-weeks stay in London,[74] al-Sayyid was coolly

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[71] F.O. 371/53260, Governor-General to Prime Minister, 15 November, 1946.

[72] Huddleston had, however, insisted on this presumed close historical parallelism, and in this respect bitterly minuted at a time when he was on his way to the wilderness, "Wingate was made the scapegoat, he was replaced by Allenby, and was never re-employed again. But that is by the way. The point of my story is that, being wise after the event, everybody agreed that if Zaghlūl had been allowed at least to come to London and unburden himself of Egypt's wrongs, there would have been no rising in Egypt in March, 1919. Reading SAR [Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī] for Zaghlūl and me for Wingate, is not the case the same?" F.O. 371/53260, Huddleston to the Minister of the State, 13 November, 1946.

Ironically Huddleston expressed this sympathy towards the aging General at a time when Wingate opposed the Governor-General's position on the sovereignty issue, and perhaps welcomed his removal. See above, note 51, p. 181.

[73] F.O. 371/53260, Orme Sergeant to Prime Minister, 20 November, 1946.

[74] Initially the British government considered al-Sayyid's request for a three-weeks stay in London to be undesirably too-long. But it finally accepted it in the hope that al-Sayyid's presence outside the country may, in a way, be in the interest of

received by the Foreign Office. While Lord Stansgate, the director of the Egyptian Department, "hated to entertain al-Mahdī," the Minister of State "welcomed missing the opportunity to give him a small lunch", though a modest reception was given by the Sudan agency in London. After much hesitation, al-Sayyid was allowed to pay a courtesy call to His Majesty at Buckingham palace, who spoke to him vaguely and generally about Britain's concern for the "welfare of the Sudanese people", and the "free development" of their institutions.[75]

Al-Sayyid had two official meetings: with Primier Attle on 28 November, 1946, and the Minister of State, Mc Neil, on 5 December. In these tense interviews, in which al-Shinqīṭī helped in translation, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī forcefully emphasized the distinct and separate identity of the Sudan, and passionately argued that whatever rights Egypt might have had by virtue of her conquest of the Sudan in 1820/21 were terminated once and for all by the Mahdiyya. Following the establishment of the condominium regime, sovereign rights in the Sudan were vested in the joint Anglo-Egyptian administration on behalf of the Sudanese. The substantial contribution of the Sudanese people in the Allies' war effort, voluntarily extended at a time when Egypt did not raise a finger, and even objected to the participation of the Sudan Defence Force in the fighting, and the Charter of the United Nations qualified them for the right of self determination. Rather than remunerating the Sudanese for these gallant sacrifices, al-Sayyid protested, the Protocol recognized Egypt's insulting *sayādah* (sovereignty) over the Sudan. He further discreetly warned that such a catastrophic development may trigger widespread unrest similar to the one that had recently erupted in Palestine.[76] He firmly asked for a definite British commitment to the Sudanese right for complete self-government forthwith and independence within ten years, and to incorporate these rights in any treaty with Egypt. Otherwise, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān implicitly cautioned that he could not

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law and order at that delicate time when the Governor-General was away in London for consultation, and excitement over the Protocol was at its height in the Sudan. F.O. 371/53262, Foreign Office to the Prime Minister, 29 November, 1946.

[75] F.O. 371/53262, comment by an official at the Foreign Office, 26 November, 1946.

[76] By this, al-Sayyid meant the 1936–39 Palestinian revolt and its serious aftermath. For details on this revolt see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, A.A.: *British Policy towards the Arab Revolt in Palestine 1936–39* (Ph.D. University of London 1971).

guarantee to keep the current violence from spiraling into a destructive explosion.

In their response, both the Premier and the Minister kept conspicuously silent about their governments' conviction of the legitimacy of Egyptian sovereignty in the Sudan.[77] They evasively maintained that the word *sayādah* had never been mentioned in the draft Protocol, whose stipulation of a "union" between Egypt and the Sudan under a common crown would at worst imply "symbolic" Egyptian sovereignty that would never prejudice the right of its people to decide their future and opt for independence if they wish. But the Premier and Minister adamantly refused to give al-Sayyid the undertaken he repeatedly asked for.

While extremely frustrated, perhaps shocked too, by the insistence of the Labour government on its "cheap sell out", ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his entourage welcomed the receptive hearing of an influential sector of the British public. Many M.P.s of both parties, but particularly the Conservative, and the British press were on the whole in favour of a separate identity for the Sudan. The latter gave a fair space for concerned Britons and Sudanese to voice their support for the prospect of an independent Sudan. For example, Steward Symes, the former Governor-General 1934–1940, had already published two long articles in the *Times* of 13 March and 16 April 1946, respectively entitled "Future of the Sudan: Egyptian claims and British obligations", and "The Nile Valley: Trend of Nationalism in the Sudan", and ʿAbdullah Khalīl wrote a piece under the title "The Sudan and Egypt", in the *Spectator* of 22 November. While in the United Kingdom, the younger leaders of the Independence Front, particularly Maḥjūb and Yaqūb ʿUthmān, had also tried to build bridges with the Pan-African movement through a publicity tie up with its London association, the Pan-African Society.

Nonetheless, the Labour government actively pursued their plan to sell to the Egyptians the Protocol, and hence the draft treaty that secured Britain's paramount strategic requirements in Egypt, and the

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[77] See above, p. 180. The Sudan Agency in London sent to al-Sayyid an "unsigned" copy of the record of his meeting with Attlee, but cautioned that this was strictly "a personal and private conversation" N.R.O. Anṣār 8/3 (private papers of al-Sayyid), letter from C.G. Davies (Sudan Agent) to al-Sayyid, 20 December, 1946. For a full Arabic record of al-Sayyid's interview with the Premier, see Ṭāha, Fadwa A.A. (editor): *Al-Sūdān li al-Sūdāniyyin*, pp. 75–85.

defence of the entire Middle East region. Notwithstanding the refusal of the Egyptian cabinet to accept Britain's interpretation of the Protocol on the grounds that it did not give Egypt sovereignty in perpetuity over the Sudan, Ṣidqi's resignation in 9 December 1946, and the announcement,[78] of his successor, Naqrāshī Pasha, in parliament on 27 January 1947 to take Egypt's case to the United Nations Organization (U.N.O.), Attlee's government made a last minute attempt to save nine-month's of intense bargaining. It overruled the "uncourteous and politically unwise" decision of the Sudan government to immediately replace the Egyptian Grand *Qāḍī* (Chief Judge of the Islamic law courts) Shaykh Ḥasan Māmoun, on the expiry of his contract in January, 1947 by his Sudanese deputy, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ṭāhir, and offered to allow him to continue for an agreed period, perhaps a year or so.[79] More importantly, to allay Egypt's profound apprehension of a British "conspiracy" to separate Sudan from Egypt, Bevin expressed his readiness to make a public statement on lines suggested by the British ambassador in Cairo, Ronald Campbell, viz "His Majesty's Government have no intention of encouraging the Sudanese to separate themselves from Egypt, and, if the Sudan eventually chose to remain united with Egypt, His Majesty's Government will place no obstacle in the way, and will be happy to see this happen".[80] But to Naqrāshi, like all other Egyptian politicians of the time, a separate Sudan, however remote or far-fetched the prospect may be, was unthinkable and tantamounted to political suicide. Hence he turned down these gestures, and appealed, in a letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations Organization (U.N.O), dated 13 July, 1947, for the support of the international community.

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[78] In this speech, Naqrāshī revealed that Egypt's aim was to substitute her control for the British during the "probationary" or "educational" period before self-determination. F.O. 371/63047, SPIS, February-March, 1947.

[79] This issue of the Grand Qāḍī provoked a heated controversy between Huddleston and the Foreign Office, and strained the already tense relations between them. Nonetheless, on the collapse of the treaty, London finally gave Khartoum the green light to appoint in October, 1947 Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ṭāhir, who was reportedly "acceptable personally to both Sayyids", as the first Sudanese Grand Qāḍī. F.O. 371/63047, SPIS, review of events, August-October, 1947.

[80] F.O. 371/53262, From Cairo to Foreign Office, 18 December, 1946.

The Sudan Question in the Security Council, 1947

After an abortive attempt to form a united Sudanese delegation, and once the government decided to send its own exclusively British delegation to New York, the Umma party opted to have their own lobby group there. The party had reportedly initially looked for an "Ethiopian" subsidy,[81] but finally ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī fully financed a high-powered four-men delegation,—Khalīl, Maḥjūb, Shinqiṭi and his own son al-Ṣiddīq—that flew to New York on 9 August, 1947.[82] Though civil servants were not allowed to involve themselves in partisian politics, the government turned a blind eye to judge Shinqīṭī's membership of this delegation under the unconvincing guise that he was there during his annual leave and in his

[81] After the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1939, Emperor Hailesellasi fled to the Sudan, and al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān gave him an enthusiastic welcome and generous help during his difficult asylum years in the country. On his return to his Palace after the war, the Emperor reciprocated to the Sayyid's magnanimity by supporting the cause of independence at the international arena, and offering to have a personal envoy of al-Sayyid at his Court. Al-Sayyid hand-picked his confidant Amīn al-Toūm for this mission, but the government banned his departure on the grounds that neither the status of the Sudan nor that of al-Sayyid justified such "diplomatic" representation. Amīn al-Toūm: *Dhikriyyāt wa Mawāqif fi Ta'rīkh al-Ḥarakah al-Waṭaniyyah 1914–1969*, pp. 61–62. Al-Sayyid and the Emperor seem to have been in contact with each other. In a letter dated 16 January, 1948, the latter expressed his gratefulness to al-Sayyid, and described the Sudan as his "second country", while at about the same time al-Sayyid firmly rejected a request for political support from the Eritrean Islamic Bond Party (*Ḥizb al-Rābiṭah al-Islāmī*) due to "our close friendship with Ethiopia". Al-Sayyid had further instructed that help extended by the *Dā'irah* to Eriterian Muslims should be strictly restricted to the religious field. See al-Sayyid's private papers, N.R.O. 8/2, message 499, early 1949. For more information on the Emperor's relations with al-Sayyid and some of his aides, particularly ʿAbdullah Khalīl, see Mukhtār, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān: *Kharīf al-Faraḥ: Asrār al-Sūdān 1950–1970* (Khartoum 1978), pp. 59 and 129–33.

[82] Premier Naqrāshī had reportedly felt that the presence of a unionist delegation in New York would "do the Egyptian case very little", and was therefore reluctant to allow it to attend. Nonetheless, to counter the Umma's lobby, the unionist parties had finally persuaded the Egyptian government, and sent their representatives: Ismaʿīl al-Azharī, Ibrāhīm al-Muftī, al-Dirderī Aḥmad Ismāʿīl, the Cairo journalist Tawfīq al-Bakrī, and the pensioned Sudanese Defence officers Ḥamad Bey Ṣālih al-Mak and Bimbashi ʿUmar al-Khalifah ʿAbdullah, who was reportedly seriously considered in 1948 for the position of A.D.C. to king Farouq in place of a certain ʿAbdullah al-Nigūmī. Anxious to re-affirm the claims of the Khalifa's sons for the leadership of the Mahdist movement, ʿUmar tried, presumably with the support, if not the instigation, of the Egyptians and their satellites the Ashiqa, to compete with Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān for "the crown", or rather for a "vice-royalty" under the Egyptian crown. But, in the words of an intelligence report, "he cut little ice". F.O. 371/63047, SPIS (1947 series), review of events, August–October 1947. See also F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, for September–October, 1948.

personal capacity as a mere spectator of the proceedings of the Security Council.[83] Al-Sayyid had apparently insisted on the membership of his friend Shinqīṭī both for his renowned legal expertise, and to keep the ultra-ambitious and rebellious Maḥjūb under control.

Under the umbrella of the Independence Front, the Umma party submitted a memorandum to the Security Council, entitled *Qaḍīyat Istiqlāl al-Sūdān* (The Issue of the Sudan Independence) and dated 18 August 1947. It was signed by ʿAbdullah Khalīl, the secretary-general of the Umma party, and Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥjūb, the secretary-general of the Independence Front, though Shinqīṭī appeared to have been its architect and the real brain of the delegation. Written originally in English, but with an official translation in Arabic,[84] this memo started with a long introduction that emphasized the separate and independent identity of the Sudan throughout the ages, from pre-history until its annexation by Muḥammed ʿAlī in 1820/21. It strongly rejected the Egyptian hypothesis that this conquest established "historical" and "permanent" Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan[85] on the grounds that the "right of conquest" was, anyhow, no longer valid in international law. Besides, Egypt itself was at the time under Ottoman suzerainty, and the conquest undertaken in the name of the Emperor-Caliph, and for the purpose of incorporating the Sudan in the Ottoman Caliphate. But this "Turkish sovereignty" was terminated by the Mahdist revolution (1881–1885) that liberated the country from the "Turco-Egyptian" rule, and established a sovereign Sudanese state that continued for fourteen years (1885–1898). As argued by its architect, Lord Cromer, in 1901, the subsequent Condominium regime was a transitionary "child of opportunism" that should eventually be superseded by an authentic Sudanese government. Britain never claimed the Sudan to be part of its Empire, and Egypt admitted its independent and separate identity before the Mixed

[83] Shortly afterwards the government sacked in 15 October, 1947 the unionist Ḥamād Tawfīq from his post in the department of agriculture and forest allegedly for a similar involvement in partisan politics, namely signing a petition to the Governor-General on behalf of the Nationalist Front. Naturally this flagrant discrepancy justifiably brought the government charges of favourtism to Shingīṭī and the Umma Party.

[84] Unfortunately, I could not get hold of the English text of this memorandum, but I have a copy of its official Arabic translation.

[85] The Egyptian position on the sovereignty issue had been articulated in several works by the late Egyptian historian Muḥammed Fuʿād Shukrī. For details and a critique of those views, see my books: *Muḥammed ʿAlī fī al-Sūdān* (2nd edition, Khartoum 1991), and *Riḥlat Muḥammed ʿAlī ilā al-Sūdān* (2nd edition, Khartoum 1991).

Courts. By virtue of this very Condominium Agreement, the memo maintained, the Sudan had thus legally become a sovereign state completely separated from Egypt or any other country. This was further emphasized in the Sudan clause of the 1936 treaty (Article II) that stipulated the continuation of the administrative set up established by the 1899 Agreement, and never touched the issue of sovereignty.

After the above forceful argument that sovereignty had "naturally" and "historically" been vested in the Sudanese people, the memo highlighted the country's tremendous War effort, and the sacrifices willingly extended by its people and armed forces for the cause of democracy and freedom.[86] This well qualified her for self-determination, a right clearly spelled out in the Charter, and granted to even less deserving Middle Eastern countries. While ridiculing the "offending" Egyptian interpretation of the Protocol, the memorandum explicitly warned the British that their concurrent, but contradictory, recognition in the Protocol of symbolic Egyptian sovereignty and self determination would lead to an explosive situation in the Sudan of a similar magnitude to the one they created in Palestine by their unilateral Balfour Declaration of 1918, that promised the Jews, without consulting the Palestinians, a homeland in Palestine. The Sudanese had totally rejected this Protocol, and would never submit to any treaty in which they are not a partner. In fact they had been unanimously of the opinion that the Sudan Question should never in future be settled through bilateral Anglo-Egyptian negotiations, as this would inevitabley be at the expense of their country.

The memorandum ended by an urgent and emotional appeal from the Independence Front, representing several parties including the Umma whose then registered membership allegedly totaled half a million, to the Security Council to adhere to its principle of self-determination to all nations, terminate the Condominium regime, and recognize the complete independence of the Sudan from both Great Britain and Egypt. Any decision or arrangement against the expressed will of the Sudanese masses, the memorandum sharply warned, will be rejected and resisted.

The security council deliberated on the Egyptian appeal in eleven long sessions held between 15 August and 10 September, 1947. The Egyptian rationale for the Council's intervention in this escalating conflict, as articulated by Naqrāshī himself in his above-mentioned

[86] See above, p. 187.

letter to the Secretary General of the U.N.O., and frequent interventions in the discussions, and the response of the British representative in the Council, Sir Alexander Cadogan, may be usefully summarized. Naqrāshi's basic argument was that the presence of British occupation forces in Egypt and the Sudan was so insulting to his country's national pride that it may at any moment trigger widespread and violent reaction, and consequently pose a serious threat to security and stability in Egypt and the entire Middle Eastern region, and to world peace at large. Besides, Naqrāshī challenged the legality of the 1936 treaty that allowed this repugnant occupation and the continuation of the "unfair" and "illegal" condominium administration. This treaty, he maintained, was a mere temporary arrangement that had already forfeited its purpose by the establishment of the custodian of world peace and security, the U.N.O., whose Covenant guaranteed equality of sovereignty between all nations. Thus Naqrāshī urged the Council to take up its responsibility and diffuse this dangerous crisis by ordering the evacuation of British forces from Egypt and the Sudan, coupled with the termination of the Condominium administration so that the Sudan would revert to its "historical" and "natural" position, an integral part of Egypt. While brushing aside the Egyptian political rationale as irrelevant and invalid, Sir Cadogan insisted that the 1936 treaty was legal and binding by virtue of its own terms as well as the Covenant of the U.N.O. that obliged all nations to respect their international commitments. The Egyptians should in particular adhere to article eight of this treaty that sanctioned the stationing of British troops in the Canal Zone, and article eleven that provided for the continuation of the condominium administration in the Sudan. In view of all this, Cadogan asked the Council not only to reject the Egyptian plea, but to remove it altogether from its agenda.

Finally, however, the deliberations at Lake Success ended in a deadlock, and the Council adjourned any further consideration of the Anglo-Egyptian dispute *sine dine*.[87] In effect this was a triumph for

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[87] For an elaborate and detailed Arabic text of the Council's proceedings on the Anglo-Egyptian conflict, see *Waqā'i'a Jalasāt Majlis al-Amn al-Munʿaqidah fi lake Sacsess (New York) lil Nazar fi al-Nizāʿ al-Ingilīzi al-Miṣrī, 1947* (Khartoum, n.d.) pp. A-356.

The Egyptians took their case once more to the U.N.O. in its session held in Paris in October, 1948. The Umma sent a five-man delegation to this meeting: al-Ṣiddīq, Abdullah Khalīl, Yaqūb ʿUthmān, Aḥmad Yūsif Hāshim, and Aḥmad Jumʿah; while the Unionists' delegates to Paris included ʿAlī al-Berier and Khiḍir Ḥamad. Amīn al-Toūm: *op. cit.*, pp. 62–63.

Britain and a devastating defeat for Egypt, which was, naturally, welcomed by the Umma party. The party had also found comfort in the stress of all the delegates for the eventual right of the Sudanese for self government, which was taken to mean that the world in general was, at last, more or less "Sudan conscious". But the Umma was extremely disappointed by the Council's total disregard for its major plea for independence, that, incidentally, was not even supported by the former Soviet Union, the so-called champion of freedom for oppressed nations. The Neo-Mahdists were also fearful that the continuation of the Condominium with the co-domini at loggerheads may mean obstruction of progress towards self government, and an intensification of Egyptian propaganda, which they will not be able to combact without active British support.

Conclusion

A series of post war developments, that culminated in the Ṣidqī-Bevin Protocol of October, 1946, had placed the British and the Neo-Mahdists at loggerheads, and on the verge of total confrontation. But the New York fiasco had convinced ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his principal aides that their recent assumption of a waning British power, and dependence on the international community to attain independence, were shere wishful thinking, and that Britain was still as strong as ever. Quided by his sharp political instinct, the realist Sayyid had apparently seen another storm coming, this time in the shape of an intransigent and hostile Britain, and quickly moved to guard against this presumabley dangerous development. He ordered the immediate stoppage of his party's recent brinkmanship that, in the circumstances, was felt to be counter productive, possibly destructive, to both his movement and his country, and resumed a cautious dialogue with the British, in which he, and his chief aides, cunningly repeated their old jargon of the "honesty" and "reliability" of the British. In short politics is the art of the possible, and in politics compromise and dissimulation are inevitable. This theme will be the focus of the next chapter on the uneasy relationship between the Neo-Mahdists and the British.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAYYID ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-MAHDĪ: A FRUSTRATING FULFILMENT OF A DREAM, 1947–1956

As argued in the previous chapter, the Umma bloc reacted violently to what they considered British "betrayal" in the Ṣidqi-Bevin Protocol of October, 1946.[1] But just a couple of years later, they amazingly witnessed and experienced real and wholesale sell out by their so-called friends, notwithstanding an extensive diplomatic offensive masterminded by their leader, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, since late 1946 to exhibit his trustworthiness, and that of his movement. This chapter studies these dramatic developments over a decade or so, and highlights their repercussions on the Umma party, its aging, ailing and frustrated leader and patron, and the country at large.

Towards the end of 1946, the mercurial ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī called off his party's shortlived campaign against Britain. Instead, he retreated to his customary and favourite scenario of a "true friend" whose "genuine" advices were discarded by the Sudan Government, and his numerous services insufficiently remunerated by them, on both the personal and national levels. For the next few years, al-Sayyid had personally, and through his aides and British friends,[2] launched a diplomatic offensive to exhibit his reliability and that of his followers. This took the form of some crash visits to London, and numerous

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[1] For details, see also my article "The Neo-Mahdists and the British 1944–1947: From Tactical Cooperation to Short-lived Confrontation", *Middle Eastern Studies*", vol. 38, no. 3, July 2002, pp. 47–72.

[2] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī maintained friendly relations with some former British officials in the Sudan, of whom some came to his help at the many junctures of his strained relations with the British Government, while he often catered for their personal needs. His Private Papers include correspondence with some of those officials, of which one is from Samuel Atiyah, dated 10 September, 1948, and two, dated 15 March, 1951 and 27 June, 1953, from his nephew Edward. While Samuel expressed his profuse thanks for a 200 pounds gift from al-Sayyid (see above, p. 110), Edward offered, from his residence in London, his services to al-Sayyid. For the Arabic texts of these letters see N.R.O., the Private Papers of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, Anṣār 8/1 and 8/2.

interviews that he, and his lieutenants, had with some senior British officials in Khartoum, London and elsewhere, that were usually arranged on their initiative, sometimes persistence. While sending his son and heir apparent, al-Ṣiddīq, to London in 1948 (with ʿAbdullāh Khalīl) and later in 1954 (with Ibrāhīm Aḥmad),[3] al-Sayyid paid a visit to London during May–August, 1949. Though the British had firmly declared this visit to be strictly for medical treatment against bronchitis and had no political significance whatsoever, al-Sayyid tried, without much success, to make political capital out of it. The British Government took "no particular note" of his presence, and did not allow him to raise any political issues for fear of repercussions in the Sudan and Egypt. The only highlights of the visit were an attendance of a "communist harangue" in Hyde Park, a presence at a garden party at Buckingham Palace, where al-Sayyid was presented to Princess Elizabeth, and an admission to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot.[4] Besides, was a dinner party that Clutton, of the African department, Foreign Office, gave to al-Sayyid and his aide al-Shinqeiṭī during which "nothing particular emerged",[5] and some niceties, including an invitation to "a horse-breeding establishment near Versaillies",[6] extended by the British ambassador in France to the Sayyid on his brief stop at Paris on the way back to the Sudan.

Notwithstanding this blunt rebuff, the persistant ʿAbd al-Raḥmān tried once more in 1951 to personally represent his views to the British authorities. While on treatment in Geneva, he formally requested in April, 1951 to be allowed to come to London to "renew contact with His Majesty's Government," and, in particular, to acquaint himself with the new Secretary of State Mr Herbert Morrison. Al-Sayyid's long-time friend, the Labour M.P. Lord Macpherson, tried to use his good offices with the Foreign Office to allow the visit of this, in his words, "delightful personality. . . . The outstanding leader of the Sudanese". The Lord had even made arrangements for a dinner party in honour of al-Sayyid during his "expected" visit, to which he invited Morrison, his wife, and a "member of his staff he might wish to have in attendance". In his letter of invitation, the

[3] See below, pp. 217–18.
[4] F.O. 371/80363, annual report of the Sudan agency, London, for 1949.
[5] F.O. 371/73472, Clutton to James Robertson, 27 July, 1949.
[6] F.O. 371/73507, British embassy, Paris, to African department, Foreign Office, 10 August, 1949.

Lord told the Secretary of State, "The last time he [al-Sayyid] was over, Creech-Jones, then Colonial Secretary, and myself had dinner with him, and it was a most delightful function. I am sure it is something you would enjoy, and at the same time find interesting and valuable".[7] Nonetheless, after long deliberations, the British Government turned down the visit because of its expected adverse political implications at that time when they were embarking on serious negotiations with Egypt, and on a determined attempt to persuade the Khatmiyyah to participate in the new constitutional process.[8] An official communication diplomatically minuted, "His Majesty's Government would feel it preferable that he should not pay a visit in the near future since this would inevitably give rise to undesirable speculations in Egypt and elsewhere", and that "his views were in any case . . . well known to H.M.G."[9] Nonetheless, al-Sayyid took the opportunity of the presence of the Minister of State in Geneva for the Economic and Social Council to arrange with him an hour-long "informal meeting" in which Shinqeiṭī, and a certain S.N. Kurkjan, al-Sayyid's interpreter and chief assistant, were present. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān raised a number of heated political issues, including his claim to represent 90% of the Sudanese, but the Minister remained evasive and totally non-committal.[10]

In late September, 1952, the British government had, however, allowed ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, accompanied by his son al-Ṣiddīq and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAlī Ṭāha, to come to London. Though the British insisted that the visit was strictly private, al Sayyid saw Mr. Eden, the Secretary of State twice: on 30 September and 11 October, but their "frank" talk had further strained the British-Neo-Mahdist relations. In pursuance of its then so-called "even-handed policy" towards the two conflicting Sudanese fronts, and to counter a press report that al-Sayyid's visit was "official" to discuss the Sudan question, the British government had simultaneously received a seven-man delegation of the National Front, an uneasy alliance between the

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[7] F.O. 371/90158, Letter from Lord Macpherson to Morrison, 2 July, 1951.

[8] See below, pp. 208–9.

[9] F.O. 371/90158, William Strang of Foreign Office to Robert Howe, 22 May, 1951.

[10] F.O. 371/90158, letter from Allen of Foreign Office to Sir Cecil Cumings, Khartoum, 14 August, 1951. This document gives an official record of the meeting between al-Sayyid and the Minister.

Khatmiyyah and the Unionist parties, that was also granted an interview with Eden.[11]

The other component of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's diplomatic offensive to carry the British government with him were a series of interviews that he and his aides had with some senior British officials in Khartoum, London, and elsewhere. Amongst these were three face to face meetings that al-Sayyid had in 1948 with Robert Howe, the new Governor-General: in 30th March, 19th May and 28th December. Others included interviews with visiting British officials from London and Cairo, e.g. with the Foreign Office's officials C.E. Sandars (23 April, 1948), Clutton (26 July, 1948) and Allen (26 April, 1951), and Chapman Andrews, the Minister at Cairo embassy (26 July, 1949).[12] In April 1950, al-Sayyid sent a high-powered delegation, composed of his son al-Ṣiddīq, ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, Shinqeitī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAli Ṭāha and ʿAlī Badrī to Ethiopia, which, *inter alia*, discussed the Sudan issue with the British ambassador in Addis Ababa.[13]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had also enlisted the good offices of some of his British friends to persuade the British government to take him in their full confidence. Prominent among those was C.A. Willis, who was demoted in 1924 from the prestigious directorship of the intelligence department to the governorship of the remote Upper Nile province because of his support to the Sayyid. When accepting the Mahdī's sword from the Sayyid in 1919, Willis wrote in 1951 to the Foreign Office, "His Majesty signaled the closing of trouble", and "the end of hostility" between the British and the followers of the Mahdī. This gesture, he argued, should have "official validity" and "influence in finding a solution to the present political

[11] This delegation was composed of Mirghanī Ḥamza, Mubārak Zarouq, Dr. ʿAlī Urū, Yaḥya al-Faḍlī, Muḥammed Amīn Ḥusain, Khidir ʿUmar, and al-Dirderī Aḥmad Ismāʿīl. F.O. 371/96848, SPIS, August–September, 1952.

[12] During this visit, Andrews saw many Sudanese dignitaries, and privately interviewed Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjūb. Despite his "very humble origin", the Minister minuted, Maḥjūb earns "several thousand a year (fantastic for a Sudanese) at the Bar for he is regarded as quite the ablest native advocate in the country". Andrews added that Maḥjūb told him, ". . . if there should ever be any question of imposing the Egyptian crown or any increased measure of Egyptian control over the Sudan, he would fight against it by every means in his power, and not to confine himself to the floor of the Assembly or to speech making". F.O. 371/73506, note by Andrews on his visit to Sudan, 4 May, 1949.

[13] F.O. 371/80358, Ambassador (Addis Ababa) to Governor-General, 5 April 1950. This letter gives a record of the deliberations between the ambassador and the delegation.

difficulties of the status of the Sudan". Thus Willis appealed to the British government to give al-Sayyid "some assurances that a loyalty freely offered and accepted and subsequently displayed be not wrecklessly thrown aside". This course, in the opinion of the sentimental former director, "would be a real contribution to a solution as well as maintaining the Englishman reputation for good faith which had suffered a good deal in these parts". Otherwise, al-Sayyid "would take an affront to the Royal family, and to himself, and it might turn him into an obstructionist instead of a willing helper".[14]

Though unable to clear out all the facts about the 1919 "sword incident" that were, admittedly, open to conflicting interpretations, the secretariat in Khartoum seriously questioned the personal credibility of Willis, now and then, and the authenticity of his account to the extent of accusing him of lying on several points. They rebuked him in the following harsh words, "the whole affair was nothing less or more than an act of deliberate self-ostentation, cleverly engineered by Sayed Abdel Raḥmān, and regrettably agreed to by Mr Willis. . . . What we do not understand from Mr Willis' letter is what he exactly mean when he writes that al-Sayyid "is now told that this gesture of King George has no official validity and no influence in finding a solution to the present political difficulties of the status of the Sudan". So far as we are aware, the question of the validity of the gesture—whatever that may mean—has never been raised by Sayed Abdel Raḥmān; "certainly not in recent years", and the suggestion "that it could help towards finding a solution to the present political differences of the status of the Sudan seems to us to be meaningless."[15]

During these extensive shuttles, deliberations and correspondence, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his aides described themselves as the government's "true friends", and dismissed their opponents as "fundamentally disloyal and pro-Egyptian elements".[16] They exhibited their trust and gratitude to the British, who helped the Sudan to achieve its present stage, and would certainly stretch this generous helping hand

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[14] F.O. 371/96936, letter from C.A. Willis to Sir Charles Petrie, 28 December, 1951. Willis posted this long letter to the Foreign Office from his holiday resort, the Grand Hotel in Khartoum. He was a frequent visitor of the Sudan, apparently as a guest of the Sayyid.

[15] F.O. 371/96936, note from the Secretariat, Khartoum to the African department, Foreign Office, 19 May, 1952.

[16] F.O. 371/73472, note on an interview between the Sayyid and Robert Howe, 28 December, 1948.

in future. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had personally, and repeatedly, voiced his confidence in "his friend" and "advocate of the Sudan" His Excellency Governor-General Robert Howe. The independence envisaged by the Neo-Mahdists, al-Sayyid maintained, did not mean "severence of British connection or the departure of British officials"[17] on whom the country would rely for years to come, but would rather be instrumental in securing sustained friendship and cooperation between the Sudanese and the British "for many generations to come".[18]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī attributed this so-called "unreserved trust and friendship" to the "heartening experience",[19] whatever this may mean, he had in England during his 1937 visit to London,[20] particularly during the meetings he was "privileged" to have with the British Premier, Minister of State and, later, Secretary of State. But since we now very well know that al-Sayyid's 1937 visit to London was a total fiasco,[21] the underlying causes for this shift in "attitude"—read tactics—should be explored elsewhere. It appears to have been triggered by some adverse international developments, namely the failure of the independence bid in the Security Council in 1948, the support since 1947 of the Arab League to Egypt's claim of full sovereignty over the Sudan, and the subsequent sweeping Egyptian drive in the country, particularly since the failure in 1948 of their case in the U.N.O. Indeed, the Egyptian Premier Naqrāshī Pasha categorically stated at the time in New York "that he would leave no stone unturned to achieve the Unity of the Nile Valley and intended to intensify Egyptian propaganda by every means in his power".[22]

In these circumstances, "the master of manipulation" had seemingly felt that his best bet to achieve the country's independence would be to throw his lot once more on the side of the British, but

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[17] *Ibid.*

[18] F.O. 371/73472, interview between al-Sayyid and Howe, 30 March, 1948.

[19] F.O. 371/69163, Khartoum to Foreign Office, 19 May, 1949.

[20] For information about this visit, see my article "Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī: A Master of Manipulation Manipulated, 1935–44", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, April 2002, pp. 131–32.

[21] *Ibid.* The Foreign Office had, in fact, complained that they found al-Sayyid in those negotiations to be "an obstinate and difficult man to convince". When Premier Attlee at one point in the discussion said, "but haven't I been saying that for the last half-hour", al-Sayyid sharply responded "but . . ." F.O. 371/62947, Robert Howe to Foreign Office, 25 August, 1947.

[22] F.O. 371/62949, memorandum by Governor-General's Office, 7 November, 1947. But Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's claim that Naqrāshī budgeted two million pounds to sway the elections of the Legislative Assembly appears to be too exaggerated.

on his terms, and not those of the Sudan Government. This strategy was well explained by Robert Howe in the following passage, "The Sayyid is shrewedly and cunningly aware, and no-one better, that his best bet is the British and that his own fortune are involved in and are most likely to be enhanced by the continuation of the British connection, and he has no intention of abandoning that connection at present. But that does not prevent him from trying to make our flesh creep in the hope of extracting from us (a) financial support (b) a free hand against his rivals, and (c) Government suppression of his opponents . . . . . In short, the Sayyid is trying *a little gentle blackmail*".[23]

Though aware, and very critical too, of the limitation and sluggishness of the Government's programme of constitutional reform,[24] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his Umma bloc rallied behind it mainly because they genuinely considered it an important initial step towards independence. This support was also triggered by partisan interest, namely to get political advantage out of the setting up of the Legislative Assembly and the Executive Council in order to achieve their long cherished aim of ending the Condominium. They were stimulated to press for this objective by the decision of the United Nations in 1949 to grant independence to Libya in 1952, and the Somaliland in ten years.[25] For the following three years or so, their favourite theme was that "the Condominium worked very well when a codominus was "a sleeping partner". But once Egypt pressed hard for sovereignty—which meant absolute monarchical rule, and effective share in the administration of the Sudan, it "had no longer become a means of progress, but a strangle hold of progress". It "outlived its usefulness", they argued, and should thus be dissolved in favour of self-government "under the guidance of the British.[26]

To the Umma bloc, such a course of action was advantageous on two considerable grounds. First, the Condominium was, even in its then diminished form, abhorrent to them as it involved some Egyptian connection. They were particularly concerned that Egyptian propaganda and money might undermine the morale of the Sudanese, and thus enable the Egyptians to achieve their goal of unity and

[23] F.O. 371/62947, Robert Howe to Foreign Office, 25 August, 1947. My italics.
[24] See above, p. 177.
[25] F.O. 371/80358, Howe to William Strang, 1 December, 1948.
[26] *Ibid.*

sovereignty over the Sudan. Though sometimes exaggerated, these fears were seemingly genuine and real.[27] The second factor for their persistence to liquidate the Condominium was self-interest. While it could not but publicly pretend the desirability of the inclusion of the Khatimiyya in the Assembly,[28] the Umma party knew very well that their participation in the forthcoming elections would effectively undermine their dominance of the Assembly, and end their present almost free hand in running its business their own way. Being suspicious of a Khatimiyya's plan of unity or dominion status with Egypt, the Neo-Mahdists felt that an early British commitment to self-government would serve their goal of an independent Sudan.

But the British government adamantly refused the Umma's plea for self-government on two pretexts. First the Condominium was set up by international treaties, and could not be terminated without the joint consent of the co-domini, which was, anyhow, highly unlikely. If Britain opted for a unilateral action, it would expose herself to the serious charge of violating international law. Besides, Egypt would have sufficient ammunition to credibly accuse Britain of deliberately accelerating the process of independence to ensure that its friend, the Umma, would be "in the controlling position" at the time of independence. Secondly, such a drastic action required a visible and overwhelming backing in the country. But the Sudanese were evidently divided among themselves not only on religious grounds in the North, but also by very wide differences between the Northerners and Southerners. A decision by the Assembly to dissolve the Condominium would not be representative of the country, particularly so as the powerful Khatmiyya would not be part of it, and the strong tribal opinion, within and outside the Assembly, had, anyhow, voiced strong opposition to self-government.[29] Nonetheless, the

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[27] According to ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, the Egyptian government allocated a fund of 60–70 thousand pounds to finance the campaign against the Assembly, while the Umma's budget for the whole election campaign totaled 20 thousands only, of which al-Sayyid alone paid 16 thousands F.O. 371/69251, SPIS for July 1948. We do not have reliable statistics of the amounts spent by Egypt on politicking in the Sudan, but judging by some reports, they seemed to have been pretty handsome.

[28] While reluctantly agreeing with Howe on the desirability of including "all other shades of opinion" in the Assembly, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān forcefully added, "the ostensible agreement of fundamentally disloyal and pro-Egyptian elements should not be brought at the expense of the Government's true friends". F.O. 371/73472, note on an interview between Robert Howe and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 28 December, 1948.

[29] F.O. 371/80358, letter from British embassy, Addis Ababa to Governor-General, 5 April, 1950.

British were not known for their strict adherence to legality with regard to the Egyptian claims in the Sudan, nor for their respect of Sudanese public opinion. Their rejection of self-government appears to have been motivated by exclusive British considerations, namely to pursue their harboured long stay in the Sudan, another twenty or twenty five years, and to have a unique bargaining leverage in their crucial negotiations with Egypt over the strategic issues. Since the late 1940's at least, the Umma party had, in fact, become increasingly concerned that the British government may be entertaining to convert the Sudan into a colony. This was particularly so after their unilateral promulgation of the 1948 Executive Council and Legislative Assembly Ordinance, and the participation of the Sudan government in July 1948 in a conference in London called for by the Colonial Office, and attended by representatives of the legislative councils of all British colonies. Moreover, to the dismay of the Umma party, the staunch Khatmi Mirghanī Ḥamza was one of the two Government's observers sent to this conference.[30]

Britain Abandons ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī

With the support, if not the instigation, of the Foreign Office, Robert Howe, the new Governor-General (18 March, 1947–31 December, 1954) embarked on an extensive revision of British policy towards ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his Umma party. In a number of memoranda and letters, Howe maintained that the strategy of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was geared towards the achievement of two different, but interlinked, objectives. First, was his anxiety to get the Sudan Government committed to him "heart and soul", or, as al-Sayyid himself put it, "to have a government's vote of confidence", and to be "His Majesty Government's man". Secondly, was his ambition "to set himself or his son a Sudanese throne".[31] His royal aspirations

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[30] F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, July 1948.

Mirghanī Ḥamza, who declined a government offer in 1948 to be the minister of Public Works, had been highly praised in official British documents. One described him as "a very able man, a good and honest administrator, a man of independent mind, a balanced personality, moderate in his views. . . . Mirghani undoubtedly has that quality so rare in the Arab world—a strong sense of public duty". F.O. 371/11361, British embassy, Beirut to Governor-General Sir Alexander Knox Helm, 13 May, 1955.

[31] F.O. 371/73472, Howe to Sir Orme Sargent, 4 July, 1949.

may be detected in his outlook and luxurious life style shown by his black and yellow Rolls Royce. Besides, was his feeling, since the "sword incident," of some linkage to the British monarchy, which was reflected in the valuable diamond ring that he presented to Queen Elizabeth on her wedding in 6 February, 1952. Al-Sayyid had also maintained contact with Emperor Hailesellasi of Ethiopia, the Saudi royal family in Arabia, and King ʿAbdullāh of Transjordan. The latter sent al-Sayyid a congratulatory cable on the occasion of the opening of the Legislative Assembly in which he wrote "I congratulate you on the successful step that the Sudan has taken for independence under the guidance of God and *by your efforts*",[32] and the Sayyid responded by telling the King, "Your sincere wishes to a nation seeking its freedom and independence have left a deep and lasting impression on the peoples of the Sudan".[33] After two meetings in March 1949 with al-Sayyid in his Khartoum house, Chapman Andrews described his desire for a throne in the following interesting words:

> S.A.R. invited me to breakfast in his house which, no doubt, was intended to resemble a palace. It is, in fact, called by this name, in competition possibly with the Residence of the Governor-General which is similarity designated. There are silver framed photographs of royals in his dining room, and the old man himself with his little entrouge has quite a regal bearing. While I was there, they were working away on a very large reception room or hall on the ground floor which was being added to his residence, and the thought crossed my mind (as it has, I believe, that of many others) that this was to be a sort of throne room.[34]

Nonetheless, the Crown issue should, I maintain, be viewed in its right historical perspective. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was a son of a hero who liberated the Sudan from an over-sixty years' imperialist rule, and established an independent state at the peak of the imperialist drive in Africa and the Middle East. Besides, the monarchy was not

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[32] The italics are mine.

[33] For the text of these two cables, see F.O. 371/69172.

A message from the British embassy in Amman to the Foreign Office claimed that King ʿAbdullāh sent his cable to the Sayyid behind the back of his own Prime Minister, and added, "It is regrettable, but not surprising in view of the King's impulsive nature, and the shower of abuse to which he was subjected by the Egyptians since Jericho Congress". F.O. 371/69172, British embassy, Amman to Foreign Office, 17 December, 1948.

[34] F.O. 371/73506, minute by Chapman Andrews on two meeting with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī at his Khartoum residence during March 1949, dated 4 May, 1949.

at that time an odd institution, but quite acceptable in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. Thirdly, one may stick his neck to suggest that the present turbulent Sudan may have been much better off if a stable Kingship had then been established in it under one of the two Sayyids.

The ultra-nationalism of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his Umma party was another major factor for the growing dissension and rapid deterioration in the relations of the Neo-Mahdists with imperialist Britain. Though both sides welcomed the Executive Council and Legislative Assembly Ordinance, unanimously passed in principle by the Advisory Council on 8 March, 1948, fundamental differences soon erupted in connection with its pace, scope and ultimate objectives. The British blocked the Umma's proposal, that was backed by the Sudan Government,[35] of a speedy proclamation of this Ordinance by the Governor-General in Council, and, instead, embarked on lengthy and extensive bargaining with the Egyptian government to secure their consent to the proposed constitutional reforms. During the deliberations of the Khashaba-Campbell Committee,[36] Britain offered Egypt substantial concessions: two seats in the Executive Council, to be occupied by Egyptian officers serving in the Sudan, in addition to the captain of the chief staff officer of the Egyptian troops during sessions that discussed defence matters, a tripartite (Anglo-Egyptian-Sudanese) commission to supervise Sudanese progress in self-government, and an Anglo-Egyptian committee to oversee Sudanese elections.[37] Moreover, even after the collapse of the Khashaba-Campbell agreement over Premier Naqrāshi's insistence on equality with Britain in representation in the Council, both in numbers and status, and the Governor-General's enactment of the Ordinance in

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[35] The Foreign Office felt that the Sudan Government, "or at any rate certain members of it," encouraged, probably instigated, the Umma to make this proposal, An official at the Foreign Office minuted, "It is not only the indigenous Sudanese who took the line that their country should be left to manage its own affairs regardless of its status as a Condominium, and of its forming a part of the Middle East as a whole". F.O. 371/69209.

[36] This committee of experts, headed by Khashaba Pasha, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his British counterpart Roland Campbell, ambassor to Egypt, deliberated on the Ordinance for twenty days (11–30 May 1948). Incidentally, Britain was relieved that Sanhūrī Pasha," a tough customer and able lawyer", was not appointed to the co-presidency of this committee. F.O. 371/69161, Foreign Office to embassy, Cairo, 2 May, 1948.

[37] Daly, M.: *Imperial Sudan*, p. 264.

15 June, 1948,[38] the British government left the door open for Egypt's participation in the constitutional machinery in case she changed her mind before the Assembly's election in October, 1948. At one stage, they had even seriously entertained a proposal for the appointment of an Egyptian deputy Governor-General, but this was finally dropped under strong pressure from the Sudan Government.

But the Neo-Mahdists had repeatedly protested to the Government against this sluggishness in the enforcement of the Ordinance, and threatened "a widespread boycott of the administration"[39] if Egypt was allowed representation in the Executive Council. They also criticized the vast and still undiminished powers of the Governor-General in the Ordinance, pressed for more direct elections in the Assembly to make it "truly" Sudanese, and for four Sudanese ministers to make their total numbers seven, and thus secure a Sudanese majority in the Executive Council.[40] A far more "obstructive" demand to British policy, was the Umma's insistence to attain independence within three years only. The British government described this demand as "dangerous" and impossible of realization, particularly as it contradicted their plan of a long stay in the Sudan. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had officially asked for this time limit in an interview with Robert Howe, but, on a directive from the infuriated Foreign Office, the Governor-General had subsequently sterny warned him against such "wild" expectation.[41]

Robert Howe had, however, argued that the Government's spe-

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[38] Notwithstanding the advice of its own attorney-general that it would be illegal for the Governor-General to promulgate the Ordinance without the consent of Egypt, the British government felt that its case "in equity will be a strong one". Besides, Egypt was not expected to take the issue to an international body, but "would most likely only register a protest" because "their hands were so full in Palestine", F.O. 371/69166, minute by Foreign Office, 3 June, 1948.

[39] This "threat" was hinted at in two messages sent in June 1948, one by the Independence Front to the Governor-General, and the other by ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, Secretary-General of the Umma party, to the Civil Secretary, F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, June, 1948.

[40] The Council had already included three Sudanese ministers: ʿAbdullāh Khalīl for Agriculture, ʿAlī Badrī for Health, and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAlī Ṭaha for Education. For a short biographical note on these dignitaries, see F.O. 371/73459, SPIS for November-December, 1948, appendix A.

[41] F.O. 371/73472, letter from Howe to Sir Orme G. Sargent, 4 January, 1949. An official at the Foreign Office minuted, "I am rather disturbed to read that al-Sayyid said that he hoped that Sudanese independence would come in three years. This remark seemed to have passed without contradiction or even comment. It is dangerous to allow such unjustifiable assumptions to take root." F.O. 371/69159.

cial relation with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān had always been problematic, and fraught with danger. It's exclusive nature had, in particular, frightened other parties from supporting the Government because they assumed British support for al-Sayyid's Kingship claims, and "the establishment of a Mahdist regime that would be repugnant to a large sector of the Arabic-speaking population, and disastrous to the non-Muslim South".[42] The Khatmiyya, in the Governor-General's assessment, had no real desire in union with Egypt, nor were they at heart hostile to Britain, but were cornered into these extreme positions because of fear of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's personal ambitions and rising power.[43] It was this genuine concern that pushed them to boycott the Legislative Assembly, and adamantly refuse to cooperate in its working. Likewise, it infuriated "a pretty solid bloc" of the country opinion, represented by the Nazirs and other tribal dignitaries, who were "loyally attached to the Government", and disinterested "in independence or kingship". Thus Howe concluded, "the only way, or at least the most effective way" of restoring the confidence of this "large and solid bloc of traditional government support," and "bringing them back to the fold would be by removing their fear of Mahdism".[44]

The Foreign Office wholeheartedly agreed with Howe's analysis, as demonstrated by the following comment of a senior official:

> Our alliance with SAR [had] its dangers. This probably most powerful single personality and influence in the Sudan would alienate others and probably steadier influences. This had happened in the withdrawal of support from the Government of the Khatmiyya. It is quite easy to understand the Governor-General's reluctance to be entirely dependent on S.A.R., and I am sure that an administration based solely on him would be bound to run into difficulties.[45]

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[42] *Ibid.*

[43] An intelligence report recorded that al-Sayyid's "stock was so rising" that many "with axes to grind and seat to retain" tried to secure contact with him. These included Khatmiyya Khulafa' and a "Dinka delegation" under the leadership "of a dispossessed chief in search of reinstatement" F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, January 1949. Another report recorded the Neo-Mahdists' jubilant celebration of Karari, and their talk about the "glorious Mahdiyya" and "the Halawin hero" (Wad Ḥabūba who martyred in 1908); while their press showed a tendency, after the enactment of the Ordinance, to glorify al-Sayyid. *Al-Nīl* had, for example, referred to him for the first time as *Ṣāḥib al-ʿAẓamah* (His Greatness). F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, July, 1948.

[44] F.O. 371/73472, letter from Howe to Sir Orme Sargent, 4 January, 1949.

[45] F.O. 371/73472, comment by an official at Foreign Office, 29 January, 1949.

Robert Howe tried at first to induce ʿAbd al-Raḥmān "to retire gracefully from public life", and "announce that he was no longer concerned with politics". Though al-Sayyid had once casually made a remark to this effect, apparently out of temporary frustration, Howe soon realized that he did not literally mean it, as his outlook "was not at all consistent with retirement". Another suggestion was a categorical denial from Khartoum or London of a plan "to set up a Sudan kingdom". Though convinced that such a Crown would split the Sudan and wreck British relations with Egypt, the British Government ruled out this option as it would prejudice their previous decision "to keep open the future of the Sudan until such time as the Sudanese would be capable of making a decision.[46]

To distance themselves from this "troublesome man", the Sudan Government tried its utmost best, through persuasion, strenuous pressure and even blackmailing, to persuade Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī and his entourage to participate in the constitutional machinery. Well before the promulgation of the Ordinance, Sir Robert Howe saw him twice, and both the Civil Secretary and the secretary of the Advisory Council formally asked for his views. He was also cautioned that his sect's boycott of the Assembly's elections would in effect hand over the Sudan to his rival Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān "in a platter", and encourage subversive movements such as communism which he detested. Moreover, he was sternly warned that the Khatmiyya would never again be able to claim to be, "individually or collectively", the true friends of the Government, which may sack Khatmi notables from public posts and strip them of government honours (robes etc). Concurrently with these threats, the government tried to win al-Sayyid ʿAli's heart by supplying him with good films that he enjoyed seeing privately in his house.[47] Besides, it offered the

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī was reputed to be a highly sophisticated and cultured man, whose rich and diversified library collection had no equal in the Sudan, and probably elsewhere in the Arab World. On his hobby for good shows, Philip Adams recorded the following interesting remark, "One object of my visit [to Sayyid ʿAlī in his house on 22 June, 1955] was to let the Sayyid know that we have the Everest film again, which I have heard that he wanted to see. He jumped with almost childish delight when I told him, gave me a long lecture on the Himalaya range, and said he hoped we had more films about distant countries. He would like to see more of the world this way. We are arranging to satisfy his appetite". F.O. 371/113562, record of a conversation between Philip Adams and Sayyid ʿAli al-Mirghani, 24 June, 1955.

revision of the Ordinance to meet his reservations on it, and the appointment of Khatmi ministers to the Executive Council. Khalifah al-Fīl and other leading Khatmis were actually nominated members of the Assembly, and Mirghanī Ḥamza a minister of public works. But they all refused participation in what they considered a predominantly Mahdist Assembly. Supported by a Khatmi faction led by Khalifah ʿUmar Isḥāq, Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī seems to have been the prime mover of this intransigence, as he was determined "not to have any truck" with any institution favoured by his historical foe, and was also not yet ready for "an open rift with Egypt and the Ashiqa."[48] In his usually non-committal manner, he told the government that the majority of the Sudanese, "but not necessarily he himself", believed that the Ordinance could only have one result, the establishment of a "minority rule" for the benefit of a "certain party". He cunningly asked for one concession after the other, including the postponement of the Assembly's elections in order to "get his electoral machine working". This request had, however, trespassed the patience of the government who feared that it may have "disasterous results on public opinion", and "reduce the whole project to absurdity".[49] Nonetheless, this effort was not totally futile, as the Khatmiyya had gradually and progressively gave up their unionist call in favour of independence.[50]

Besides working on the Khatmiyya to join the constitutional machinery, the British strived to distance the Nazirs from the Umma party through the formation of a non-sectarian "kind of a centre party" to represent the "pro-British" and "pretty solid" tribal opinion within

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[48] F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, September–October, 1948. Some Khatmi leaders, like Shaykh al-Fīl and Mirghanī Ḥamza, were, however, inclined to cease the boycott if the Ordinance was amended "without undue delay", and ʿAbd al-Mājid Aḥmad accepted the post of undersecretary of economic and trade to be the only Khatmi member of the Executive Council, while the famous Khatmi merchant Muḥammed Aḥmad al-Berier was an appointed member of the Assembly. A certain ʿAbdullāh Masʿaud, reportedly a politically neutral Khatmi, occupied the position of undersecretary for the railways. F.O. 371/73459, SPIS, November–December 1948.

[49] F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, September–October 1948.

Sayyid ʿAli's admirable talent to direct a conversation the way he wanted was explained by a British official as follows, "My talk with him studiously avoided coming anywhere near the point, at his obvious desire, and whenever I tried to lead the discussion round to the Sudan we rapidly found ourselves skating gracefully away towards such topics as the nature of communism" F.O. 371/90158, minute by a British official on a seven-day visit to the Sudan, 15 April, 1951.

[50] See below, pp. 214 and 224–5.

and outside Assembly. Shaykh ʿAbdullāh Bakar was reportedly the pioneer (1946) in the array for the foundation of such an independent "rain-belt" Nazirs' party, but the project was subsequently more actively pursued by one of the Khalifa ʿAbdullāh's sons, Muḥammed al-Sayyid. From his headquarters in al-Jabalein, he toured many tribal regions, and some distinguished Nazirs had seemingly favoured the idea (e.g. Babū Nimir, Muḥammed Ḥāmid Abū Sin and al-Mak Ḥasan ʿAdlān), though the "die hard" Musa Yaqūb of Qalaʿ al-Nahal stood out for ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī. The Government looked favourably at these efforts, and Robert Howe gave Muḥammed al-Sayyid an interview to "expound his ideas".[51] The upshot of this drive was the formation of the government-inspired Socialist Republican Party (SRP) in 1951. The Government had committed a flagrant error of judgment by instigating, or at least supporting, this amateurish party, sarcastically code-named by the Sudanese as "Hawkesworth Party," to suggest that it was the brain child of Desmond Hawkesworth, the assistant civil secretary (political). ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had correctly viewed the SRP as a British ruse to undermine his influence, and was out to destroy it at all cost. However, this was not a difficult task, as the party was born dead, had no apparatus, programme or financial means, and the Shaykhs were not the authoritative figures some believed.[52] This weakness was clearly reflected in the return of many Nazirs' to the Umma's fold, and the crushing defeat of the SRP in the first parliamentary elections (1953), three seats only in the House of representatives and just one in the Senate. By 1954 it practically disappeared, and was seldom heard of. In short, this futile exercise to form a non-sectarian political leadership was another indication of the drastic failure of the persistent drive of the Sudan government to overcome sectarianism and keep religion and politics apart.

Once the constitutional machinery started to roll in late 1948, the weight of the Sudan Government's support shifted its focus from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī to the Legislative Assembly. Since then, the British gradually distanced themselves from the Sayyid, discreetly

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[51] F.O. 371/69251, SPIS, June 1948.

[52] Daly, Martin, *Imperial Sudan*, pp. 288–89.

For more information about the Socialist Republican Party, see Abu Shouk, Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, *Dār Bidayyriyya Nazirate: Traditional Leadership and Indirect Rule in the Sudan* (Ph.D., University of Bergen, 1997), pp. 184–207.

tried to undermine his political authority and personal prestige, even among his own aides. Robert Howe, who was empowered to appoint nine Sudanese members to the Assembly, three to the Executive Council, seven undersecretaries, and three ministers (ex offico members of the Council as well), made it a point not to consult ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. His nominations were, as far as possible, on merit, not necessarily because of their relationship with the Sayyid, and included some politically neutral individuals and few Khatmis by conviction or sympathy.[53] Al-Sayyid was reportedly particularly alarmed by the non-appointment of any of his relatives to high office, and by the sidelining of his nominee and son, al-Ṣiddīq, from the leadership of the Assembly to which ʿAbdullāh Khalīl was voted in, interestingly with the support of all the Southern members, against his competitor Dr. Muḥammed Adham, the founding-president of the Black Bloc.[54] The British had also prompted the Umma's holders of those constitutional posts and others not to accept the "Ansari whip", and to be "nationalists rather than Mahdists". Admittedly there were occasional differences of opinion and in outlook between al-Sayyid and some of his aides, like Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, over few issues like the Crown, but, contrary to the government's calculation, they all remained solidly loyal and respectful to their caring patron.

Ismāʿīl al-Azharī: Britain's Vigorous Enemy-turned Friend

The Umma leaders attributed their devastating defeat in the first parliamentary elections of October 1953[55] to the "huge" influx of Egyptian money in the Sudan, while certain British quarters in Khartoum and London alleged that this failure was squarely due to the "extravagant style" of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and his family, and "their whole selfish attitude to life which had made them so

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[53] For the names of those appointed members for the Legislative Assembly and Executive Council as well as the undersecretaries and ministers, see F.O. 371/73459, SPIS, November–December 1948, appendix A.

[54] F.O. 371/73459, Sudan political intelligence top summary, No. 1, 1949.

[55] While the National Unionist Party (N.U.P.) got fifty seats out of ninety seven in the House of Representatives and thirty two out of fifty in Senate, its counterpart the Umma respectively got only twenty two and seven. In the overall ballot, the independence parties had, however, received 45,000 votes more than their unity competitors.

unpopular, and done such harm to the independence cause", that they tended to regard as "an Anṣār—or a family—possession".[56] Both positions had seemingly generalized and oversimplified the complex factors that led to the Party's crushing defeat. Interestingly Graham Thomas, who had reportedly prophesized the outcome of these elections long before they ever took place, attributed the Umma's humiliating defeat to the public fear of al-Sayyid's "monarchical aspirations", the party's miscalculation and lack of proper organization, and the "heavily biased" electoral boundaries "in favour of the areas where the unionists were strongest".[57] However, we do have other reliable evidence, including some British documents, that highlighted the importance of the money factor in this respect. Khalaffalah Khālid, a former treasurer of the N.U.P., had, for example, claimed, in a testimony before a Khartoum court in 1955, that the Party received from Egypt in 1953 £E95,000 to help contesting the elections, and subsequently two other sums in January and September, 1954, respectively £E30,000 and £E42,000–45,000.[58] These British quarters had most likely deliberately underestimated the amount and significance of Egyptian money to rationalize their antagonistic campaign against ʿAbd al-Raḥmān that aimed at his total "drop" in favour of Azhari, Britain's arch-enemy[59] turned friend, and the N.U.P., a loose amalgamation of the Unionist parties and the Khatmiyyah hurriedly formed in 1952 to prevent a Mahdist victory in the elections. These officials may have also been after revenge against ʿAbd al-Raḥmān

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[56] F.O. 371/108320, comment by an official at the Foreign Office, 26 January, 1954, and F.O. 371/108324, Selwyn Lloyd to Lord Simonds, 22 July, 1954.

[57] Thomas, Graham: *The Sudan 1950–1985: Death of a Dream* (London 1985), pp. 55–59.

[58] F.O. 371/113612, testimonies given by Khalafallah Khālid and Mirghanī Ḥamza during the trial of Muḥammed Mekkī, editor of *al-Nās* newspaper, 22 June, 1955. According to this source, the Egyptian money to the N.U.P. came through different persons amongst whom were the Egyptians Major Ṣalāh Sālim, Minister of State for the Sudan, and Colonel ʿAbd al-Fattāh Ḥasan, the Commander of Egyptian troops in the Sudan. In his book *Sovereignty for the Sudan* (London 1992), Husain Zulfaqār Ṣabrī also claimed that the Unionists "thrived on regular Egyptian subsidies" (pp. 37 and 40–41).

[59] The British authorities imprisoned Azharī twice: two months in December 1948 for leading a demonstration against the Legislative Assembly, and four months in July 1949 for publishing an article in *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* that accused the government of deliberately and systematically starving the peoples in the Northern province, F.O. 371/73459, appendix B, SPIS, November–December, 1948, and F.O. 371/73461, SPIS, July–August, 1949. Robertson, the Civil Secretary, used to inappropriately refer to Azharī as "scum". Daly, M.: *Imperial Sudan*, p. 246.

for his "flirtation" or, as Luce angrily put it, "his rashness and stupidity in ganging up with the Egyptians"[60] that was largely responsible for the conclusion of the February 1953 Self-government Agreement, and the consequential sudden end of Britain's fifty-years' supremacy in the Sudan. The authoritative Sir James Robertson, who was about to lose his prestigious and powerful post of Civil Secretary, joined this jargon diatribe against the Umma and its leaders, particularly the independent-minded and anti-British al-Ṣiddīq al-Mahdī and Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjūb. While offendingly labeling the former diehard nationalist as "unpopular among the Sudanese", "mean", and "certainly often far from polite", the vexed and nostalgic Robertson unfairly dismissed the proud Maḥjūb as lacking "the stability of character, integrity of purpose and breeding to appeal to the influential better class of Sudanese".[61]

The architect of this hostile policy towards the Neo-Mahdists was apparently William Luce, the advisor to the Governor-General on constitutional and external affairs (1953–56), who had already established communication channels with some of Azhari's closest aides like Yaḥya al-Faḍlī and Muḥammed Aḥmad al-Marḍī. He articulated this policy in a memorandum, dated 13 August 1954, which constituted the backbone of an official paper on the subject, that the Governor-General, Robert Howe, submitted to Selwyn Lloyd, the Minister of State.[62]

Luce opened his discussion by minuting: "It is understood that it is H.M. Government's object that there should emerge a reasonably stable and well-governed Sudan independent of Egypt, in friendly relations with Britain and subject to British influence". He predicted that the N.U.P. will remain on the helm throughout the transitional and self-determination periods; thus the determination of the future of the country would be "heavily in their favour". Meanwhile, Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, his Umma Party and Anṣār organization were

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[60] F.O. 371/1o8320, Luce to Foreign Office, 30 October, 1954.

[61] F.O. 371/108324, Robertson to Foreign Office, 1 July, 1954.

[62] For Luce's memorandum, dated 13 August, 1954, see F.O. 371/108324, and for Howe's paper, see F.O. 371/108379. Subsequently, the Foreign Office prepared an explanatory note on "the Governor-General's Paper on Policy" dated 11 October, 1954. But this policy seemed to have been initiated in an earlier document (F.O. 371/102760, NO. JE 1051/651G (53), dated 1st January, 1953, which, in 30 November, 1982, had been "retained in the Department of origin", and is therefore inaccessible to readers.

likely to become increasingly weakened and isolated as a political force as time goes on. There were persistent signals, Luce maintained, "that the minds of the N.U.P. and the Khatmia in particular [were] moving towards the idea of independence, and that they [were] not playing the Egyptian game quite so whole-heartedly as they were. It will be against all precedent and logic if they were not nationalists before they were unionists, and as they savour power and their strength grows, their nationalism [would] become increasingly ascendant. We can expect no overt discarding of Egyptian support and influence until the N.U.P. is satisfied that they laid the bogey of Mahdism".[63] While ideally Britain should not bother whether independence is brought by the N.U.P. or the Umma, Luce was of the opinion that independence brought by the N.U.P. would achieve Britain's aims in the Sudan more than that brought by the Umma for four main reasons that he explained in the following passage:

> First the N.U.P. can rely on the support of a large majority of the S.D.F. [Sudan Defence Force] and police officers and a small majority of the men. The Mahdists and Umma could not therefore hope to dominate the Khatmi and N.U.P., whereas the latter could dominate the Mahdists, and this is probably the only real hope of avoiding a civil war. Secondly, the Umma could not run the administration of the country without the support of the educated class, the majority of whom are Khatmi and N.U.P. Thirdly, an independent Sudan dominated by the Mahdists would be the victim of constant intrigue between Egypt and the Khatmia resulting in a state of chronic instability and permanent enmity between the two countries. As the Mahdists would inevitably look to H.M. Government for support, this situation would be ruinous to Anglo-Egyptian relations. Finally, the Southerners would probably be more at home with a pro-independence N.U.P. set up than with the Mahdists.[64]

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[63] Luce's memorandum, *op. cit.* In some previous communications, Luce claimed that Sayyid ʿAlī and his principal *Khulafa'* as well as al-Mardī and other N.U.P. leaders, had assured him personally and in confidence that their parties will ultimately opt for an independent Sudan. Luce also recorded that, as early as July 1953, Sayyid ʿAlī told him that he "saw that all over the world dependent people were striving to complete freedom, and he saw no reason to suppose that the Sudanese would seek or obtain anything less than other people". F.O. 371/108320, Luce to Foreign Office, 10 January, 1954.

A few days later, al-Sayyid ʿAlī told Luce that by union Azharī meant "a relationship between two completely independent countries each with its own sovereignty and full rights". F.O. 371/Luce to F.O. 16 January, 1954.

[64] *Ibid.*

Graham Thomas, a then fairly junior British official in the department of labour of the Civil Secretary's Office (1950–1954), who had closely befriended Sayyid ʿAbd

Due to the above rationale, Luce argued that the ongoing British policy of "building bridges" with the N.U.P. while maintaining friendship with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was inadequate, its two aims "to some extent incompatible", and it amounted to "little more than sitting on the fence". While the Sudan Government was inevitably emphasizing on the "bridge building", Luce complained, "H.M. Government had, to all appearances, concentrated on the maintenance of friendly relations with the Umma and the Mahdists", as demonstrated by three meetings that the Minister of State had in June 1954 with an Umma delegation led by al-Sayyid's son, al-Ṣiddīq.[65] Coupled with some reports in the British press that doubted the capability of the Sudanese to rule themselves, this presumed friendship was taken by the N.U.P. as an indication of British unfriendliness towards them, and of their determination to bring the Umma to power.

To remove these fears and consequently disassociate the N.U.P. from Egypt, the Governor-General forcefully argued that the time has come "for H.M. Government to play down their connection with S.A.R. and the Umma", to abandon the policy of "sitting on the fence", and to adopt a more positive approach towards the N.U.P. But this should be done in an "unobtrusive manner" if it is not to defeat its own ends.[66] By so doing, the British may be "sealing the political future" of ʿAbd-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, but, Luce advised, "we must face the realities of the situation and indeed we are in no way in the debt of S.A.R. or the Umma."[67] But Britain's influence in the Sudan, Howe added, would not be retained merely by stating a policy, but had to be "followed by action and by positive evidence of her interest in the future well-being of the country".[68]

The British government endorsed Howe's policy paper, and started to implement the gist of its recommendations. Though aware of the serious security risk of the N.U.P. policy of rapid Sudanization of the military and civil British personnel, the British government had,

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al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, his family and close aides in the Umma and Ansar organizations, held different views from those of Luce and his associates. He recorded "his love" to the Sayyid whom he praised as "a truly great leader with a tremendous personality". Thomas, G.: *Death of a Dream*, p. 69. In his other book, *Sudan, Struggle for Survival* (London 1993), that condemned the current opportunist regime of the National Islamic Front (N.I.F), Thomas remarked as follows, "Perhaps next time the legacy of Mahdism will be a symbol of hope," p. XIV.

[65] For information about these tense meetings, see below, pp. 231–32.

[66] Howe's paper.

[67] Luce's memorandum.

[68] Howe's paper.

nonetheless, toned down its reservations to the programme because Azhari's government considered it crucial to reduce the Neo-Mahdists to impotence. But a more visible sign of this new friendship was a visit that Premier Azhari, undertook, on the formal invitation of the British Government, to London in November 1954, accompanied by two of his closest ministers Yaḥya al-Faḍlī[69] (Minister of Social Affairs) and ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Minister of Justice) to discuss matters of general interest.[70] The British government had also worked on Howe's recommendation to foster bonds between the Sudanese Parliament and Westminster, which had already been discussed with the two Sudanese speakers during their visit in the summer of 1954 to the United Kingdom, and formed an Anglo-Sudanese parliamentary committee. London had also agreed with Howe that the Sudan needed urgent economic aid to preserve its independence and stability, and pledged to share in providing foreign capital for some important developmental projects, The Foreign Office requested the green light from the Treasury, though it made it clear that the figure suggested by Howe, £50 million in shape of grants, or even loans, was out of the question.[71] Another positive step in this direction was Britain's sympathy with Azhari's request to encourage British technical staff to stay in the Sudan beyond the Sudanization deadline (1 July, 1955), particularly as the N.U.P. government had generously remunerated the departing British staff. But the British government declined Howe's proposal to persuade these technicians to stay through a formal plea from London or Khartoum, as this may trigger accusations of clinging to the remnants of British power in the Sudan, and would involve a moral obligation on the British government that these technicians

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[69] Yaḥya al-Faḍlī, a long ardent advocate of unionism had by early 1955 categorically changed sides. He strongly condemned Egyptian interference in the Sudan and praised Britain for her "neutrality". But Mr. Adams, the United Kingdom Trade Commissioner, Khartoum advised his government that Yaḥya was "notoriously unreliable", and his views should therefore be taken cautiously, F.O. 371/113751, Adams to Foreign Office, 3 March, 1955.

[70] Howe's paper of policy.

[71] Howe disagreed with the contention that British capital investment in the Sudan would be premature before the results of self-determination were known, as these very results may be largely determined by British willingness to assist the country during the transitional period. This sum of 50 million pounds would, in his opinion, be needed during the next ten years, over and above Sudan's own sources, to finance four major projects: the Roseirs dam, the Managil extension of the Gezira scheme, extension of the railway system to the west and south west, and for large scale development of underground water supplies in the arid areas of the west. *Ibid.*

should be fairly treated by the Sudanese. Such an encouraging announcement would thus best come from Azhari's government itself,[72] which they, anyhow, eventually gave. Nonetheless only very few British technicians stayed back.

This significant shift in British policy—"dropping" ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and "running after" Ismāʿīl al-Azharī, was as expected upraided by the Umma Bloc, but jubilantly welcomed by the N.U.P. The embittered Neo-Mahdist leaders considered it an outright "betrayal" from an ungrateful country that their long association with had tarnished the image of their party among the Sudanese people, and undermined their own pride and prestige. They were particularly furious by Azhari's official visit to the United Kingdom on 8 November, 1954 as a guest of Her Majesty's Government, and the enthusiastic welcome he received there. This, they maintained, tantamounted to British interference in the affairs of the Sudan, notwithstanding their argument that the visit was just a courtesy extended for a "Prime Minister of a country in which they [had] special responsibilities",[73] and their stern reminder to the Neo-Mahdists that their envoies were frequently received in London, even when they came to ask for financial help.

During May–June 1953, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī appeared to have personally asked Riches in Khartoum and Selwyn Lloyd in London for what amounted to a British subsidy, explicitly a "good", or "favourable" price for his cotton product (i.e. well above the market price).[74] Failing to get this subsidy, al-Sayyid instructed his aides ʿAbdullāh Khalīl and Muḥammed al-Khalifa Sharīf, and later, in June 1954, his son, al-Ṣiddīq, to officially approach the British Government for a loan of between 5 to 8 millions Egyptian pounds on the ample security of his properties and cotton product,[75] Al-Sayyid

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[72] F.O. 371/108379, Foreign Office's minute on the Governor-General's paper of Policy, 11 October, 1954.

[73] F.O. 371/108326, Governor-General's Office to African department, 30 October, 1954. From England, Azharī and his delegation visited some other European countries. All together, they were outside the country from 8 November to 3rd December, 1954.

[74] See F.O. 371/102756, tel 329, from Riches to Eden, 11 June 1953, quoted in Johnson, Douglas (editor): *British Documents on the End of the Empire, Series B, Vol. 5, Sudan, Part II*, pp. 253–56.

[75] For details, see F.O. 371/108320, D.M.H. Riches to Foreign Office on a conversation with ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, 13 January 1954; F.O. 371/10832, Riches to Foreign Office on a conversation with Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf, 8 January,

argued that his resources were not adequate to compete with those of the Egyptian Exchequer, and made it clear that this money was not for their personal luxury, but, rather, they had willingly spent their fortunes and mortgaged their property, including those of *al-Dā'irah* (Mahdist headquarter), for the sake of their principles. The loan would therefore be exclusively utilized to counter Egyptian "bribery" that had undermined the required neutral atmosphere for self-government, which Britain itself had pledged to maintain in the February 1953 Agreement. But Britain, they complained, had neither stopped the influx of Egyptian money to the Sudan nor provided the wherewithal to counter balance it. Nonetheless, the British Government declined to consider al-Sayyid's requests for a subsidy or a loan on the pretext of adherence to "morality" in politics.[76] But their underlying motive seemed to have been to prevent the overthrow of their best bet Azharī, who was likely to continue in power throughout the transitional period, and win the next scheduled polls

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1954. Al-Ṣiddīq rationalized this request for a loan by remarking that "it was quite normal for her Majesty's Government to have arrangements with other countries whereby they were granted facilities in return for a subsidy". But he was told that such arrangements were made "with governments not political parties" F.O. 371/108382, Riches to Bromley, 20 May, 1954.

On his own imitative, and apparently without the knowledge of al-Sayyid, Mr. N.R. Udal, a former warden at Gordon College who acted as a personal advisor to the Sayyid, wrote Lord Chancellor suggesting that Britain "should enable the Umma Party . . . to carry out counter propaganda in the Sudan by making them a financial grant for the purpose secretly without anybody knowing about it in the Sudan or anywhere. This could be done by paying money into S.A.R's a/c at Barclays at the same time as he sells his cotton so that he may bid against Egypt. At present anything that he can afford to do is infinitesimal compared with what Egypt is doing—for example he offers £E180 p. a. to independent candidates and Egypt buy them with £E1,000 p. a." "F.O. 371/108324, from N.R. Udal, to Lord Chancellor, 13 June, 1954. The Lord forwarded this letter to the Foreign Office, but it ignored Udal's request.

[76] Interestingly, a British document records some different reasons for their reluctance to extend a subsidy to the Sayyid, namely "that SAR's gratitude would not be assured, the money was likely to go towards his extravagant living, the subsidy would inevitably become known to the detriment of HMG, and that HMG would find itself in a bidding war with Egypt and other parties seeking subsidies, which it would be unable to keep up". See Johnson, Douglas, H. (editor) *op. cit.*, pp. 253–54. However, the British government seems to have not "entirely" ruled out extending such a subsidy if the Umma Party "openly and publicly" denounced their agreement with Najīb, come to an understanding with the Social Republican Party, form a solid independence front, and "assure the South that any independence government would look after their interest". See F.O. 371/102756, Cabinet memorandum by Selwyn Lloyd on the Umma Party and SAR, 11 June, 1953, quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 254–6.

for the constituent assembly. Britain maintained that it was in her interest, and those of the Sudan, to deal with the "secular" Azharī, who had already switched to independence, rather than with the competing and conflicting sectarian forces. Philip Adams noted, "A secular politician [had] defied the forces of sectarian influence and [had] upheld his position. This is a notable step towards lifting the constitutional issue out of the sectarian arena where all decisions tend to be taken on the basis of allegiance to spiritual leaders, and it should in the long run encourage the rising generation of Sudanese politicians".[77] In hindsight, it was rather naïve on the part of the British administration to expect Azharī in particular, and the politically immature and inexperienced educated class in general, to challenge sectarianism without succumbling to it in the process. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his elderly aides had, however, remained suspicious of a deal in London between Britain and the "unionist" Azharī that could lead to "psedu-independence" for the Sudan, but some youngsters in the Umma party were of the opinion that Azharī would ultimately be the loser from this cooperation with the imperialists.

The N.U.P. was, on the other hand, completely satisfied by this too good to be true friendliness, particularly the cooperation of the Governor-General and his staff that was vital for the safe and smooth running of their heterogeneous government.[78] They did their utmost best to avoid conflict with them, and were, in fact, reported to be "polite and pleasant in their contacts with British civil servants", and had "shown some willingness to accept advice and correct procedure in the working of the government machine".[79] Though nothing concrete came out of Azhari's visit to London, the Prime Minister had three cordial meetings with the Secretary of State Anthony Eden during which the latter explored the possibility of a treaty of alliance between the two countries in the not very distant future. He casually told the Prime Minister, "we would like to see some treaty between the Sudan and Britain", but Azharī did not react very much to the idea, and evasively remarked, "This should wait until it could be seen how things are going to develop".[80] He was, in fact, keen

[77] F.O. 371/113584, a note by Adams to the Foreign Office, undated.
[78] F.O. 371/113582, report by Philip Adams on the political situation, 11 March, 1955.
[79] F.O. 371/108320, Luce to Foreign Office, 16 January, 1954.
[80] F.O. 371/108379, record of a conversation between Eden and Azhari, 9 November, 1954.

not to commit himself on this sensitive issue in order not to expose his Party to the Egyptian charge of a sell out to the Anglo-American imperialists, besides exhibiting it as the champion of independence from both Egypt and Britain. With this frame of mind on the part of Azharī and his colleagues, Eden felt it futile to raise the British demand for air facilities and staging rights through Khartoum, and was satisfied by a general discussion with the Prime Minister on the desirability of keeping Khartoum airport efficient.[81]

Since the Egyptian subsidies to the N.U.P. had by then dried out because of the Party's virtual abandonment of its long held unity slogan, Yaḥya al Faḍlī and Ibrāhīm al-Muftī had reportedly exploited this friendly atmosphere to request from the British "a little discreet help"[82] in recognition for their Party's pro-independence stand. On another occasion, al-Faḍlī allegedly came nearer to asking for money by lecturing Philip Adams, The United Kingdom Trade Commissioner in Khartoum, on the N.U.P.'s costy campaign against the dangerous communist domination of trade unions, and, in the sarcastic words of Adams, "looked me straight in the face, and asked for my advice". When Adams said that "there would be no future in expecting H.M.G. to provide funds, al-Faḍlī reportedly asked "for a better advice".[83] In this respects Riches, Adam's predecessor, minuted, "I think that keeping our hands clean may possibly be good business in the long run, while the alternative was immoral, dangerous, and, worst of all, futile under the present conditions of the Sudan".[84]

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī Fights Back

Notwithstanding his frustration over the British steady swing away towards his opponents, the Khatmiyya and the Ashiqa, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was, also, faced by some growing dissensions within the ranks of the Umma bloc. The advocate and secretary general of the Independence Front, Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjūb, and two journalists, Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim and Ṣālih ʿUrabī, resigned from the Front in protest of its acceptance of the Ordinance, and later, in

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[81] F.O. 371/113612, Philip Adams to the Foreign Office, 10 June, 1955.
[82] F.O. 371/80344, SPIS, August–September, 1950.
[83] F.O. 371/108348, Adams to Foreign Office, 23 December, 1954.
[84] F.O. 371/10832, Riches to Foreign Office, 13 January, 1954.

April 1950, from the Legislative Assembly itself. Concurrently Hāshim launched, in series of articles in his organ *al-Sūdān al-Jadīd* an onslaught on the Assembly, and the tripartite published a joint "appeal" in *al-Raʾi al-ʿAm* "to every Sudanese who believes in his country's right for "freedom and independence" to "coordinate their demands for the immediate cessation of the Condominium rule, and the establishment of a constituent assembly to draft the ultimate constitution and system of government for the Sudan".[85] The attempts of the Sayyid and others to persuade them to withdraw their resignations were not successful at the time, as they insisted on an advance signed declaration by a majority of the Assembly's members demanding immediate self-government. Supported by few youngsters, like Muḥammed Aḥmad ʿUmar, the editor of *al-Nīl*, and the trade unionist Faḍl Bashīr, the tripartite tried to organize themselves in a "socialist" and "republican" party, the Sudanese Liberation Organization, allegedly so-called after the Sudan Movement for National Liberation, the psedu-name of the Sudanese Communist Party. But this vocal group was too elitist to challenge the popular Umma Party. By late 1953, Maḥjūb had, however, returned to the Umma's fold to be elected the leader of the opposition in Parliament, and worked "hand in glove" with ʿAbdullāh Khalīl.[86] There had also been growing differences of outlook towards the British within the Umma party itself between *al-Shabāb* (youngsters), like ʿAbdullāh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Nuqdallah, and *al-Shiūkh* (elderly, also called monarchists), like Muḥammed al-Khalifah Sharīf. One outcome of this conflict was the dismissal by the end of 1950 of the "revolutionary" Nuqdallah from the editorship of *al-Nīl* in favour of the "more sedate" Zain al-ʿĀbidīn Ḥusain Sharīf.[87] More serious was, however, the tension between al-Sayyid's son al-Ṣiddīq, who took the presidency of the Umma party around February 1949, and two of the founding members of the party, ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil and ʿAbdullāh Khalīl. While the former had his eyes on the leadership of the Neo-Mahdist movement after al-Sayyid, the latter was furious over al-Ṣiddīq's demand to replace his candidate for the editorship the party's organ, *al-Ummah*, Ḥasan Maḥjūb, by the advocate Yaqūb ʿUthmān. Khalīl

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[85] F.O. 371/80343, SPIS, April–May, 1950.

[86] F.O. 371/108320, Riches to Morak, African department, Foreign Office, 1 January, 1954.

[87] F.O. 371/80344, SPIS, August–September, 1950.

threatened to resign, but al-Sayyid intervened to confirm his candidate.[88] The Umma party and its religo-military wing the Anṣār organization were, furthermore, subjected to an abusive campaign by the communist and the leftist press.[89] ʿAbdullāh Rajab, the editor of *al-Ṣarāḥah*, published, on 1st January, 1950, an article, entitled "Paganism", in which he described the Mahdī's tomb as a grand and marvelous symbol of paganism; while Ṣāliḥ ʿUrābī authored many similar articles, including "The Return of the Mahdiyya", for which he was twice beaten by some Anṣār youth.[90] Besides, Bashīr Muḥammed Saʿīd, the *Sūdān Star*'s correspondent, wrote, during July-August, 1948, a number of articles in *Ṣawt al-Sūdān* against ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, criticizing his performance as leader of the Legislative Assembly and minister of agriculture.

These developments had, no doubt, saddened, occasionally depressed, the aging and ailing ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī. But he remained largely composed, steadfast and levelheaded, a condition that was confirmed as late as 1955 by D.A. Roberts, of the office of the United Kingdom Trade Commissioner, who said after interviewing al-Sayyid, "He looked old, but appeared to have plenty of vigour".[91] The speculation of the intelligence department of "an open clash of loyalty soon" within the Umma bloc, thought to be led by the Minister of Education ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAlī Ṭāha, "the biggest man in the Executive Council,"[92] had, moreover, proved to be shere wishful thinking. For the Umma party, and the Anṣār organization,

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[88] F.O. 371/73460, SPIS, July–August, 1949.

[89] Daoūd ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, a prominent, shrewed and widely connected Sudanese administrator-businessman suggested interesting reasons for the then "swing to the left" among educated Sudanese. For details, see F.O. 371/113581, record of a conversation between Luce and Daoūd ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, 11 January, 1955.

By 1954, the Umma leaders had, however, found it politically expedient to work with the communists in the Independence Front, as their votes were then felt to be essential for the independence cause in the towns. But this alliance was short-lived, and soon after independence the Umma Party led the onslaught against the Communist Party that ultimately led to its dissolution and the expulsion of its members from the Parliament in 1966.

[90] F.O. 371/80343, SPIS, December 1949–January 1950.

In his memoirs, titled *Mudhakirāt Aghbash* (Khartoum 1988), p. 57, ʿAbdullah Rajab had, however, highly praised Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān for his "unique nationalist role during the 1930s", but he added "repeat the 1930s"!

[91] F.O. 371/113610, Robert to Bromley, African department, Foreign Office, 10 May, 1955.

[92] F.O. 371/73459, SPIS, February–March, 1949. Contrary to the expectation of the British, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAlī Ṭāha remained staunchly loyal to the Sayyid.

remained largely cohesive, at least for the time being, thanks to their magnetic and magnanimous patron. With this pretty strong political power and military might at the background, the "master of manipulation" embarked on a strategic maneuver to counter balance the British drive to isolate him and undermine his political influence in the country. This took the shape of an attempt to set the stage and pursue some sort of realignments with his very same religious and political adversaries, notably the Khatmiyya, Egypt, and finally his former protégé Ismāʿīl al-Azhari.

Attempts for reconciliation with the Khatmiyya started as early as January, 1950 when the leadership of the Umma party negotiated with some influential *Khulafa'* a scheme for the participation of their sect in the constitutional process. They offered the relinquishment of a number of the Umma's seats in the Assembly to be filled by Khatmi members, and an increase in the number of Sudanese ministers to allow the Khatmiyya posts of responsibility in the government. Having done this, steps would be taken to amend the Ordiance to cater for their demands, particularly increased direct elections, and thus pave the way for the Khatimiyya's participation in the Assembly's next general elections. The discussions were reported to be cordial, but they collapsed over the demand of the *Khulafa'* for a prior amendment of the Ordinance. Whatever the weight of this argument may have been, the underlying factor for the deadlack seemed to have been Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mirghanī's genuine fear of a Mahdist kingship. Nonetheless, the Umma leadership continued their effort for reconciliation. While on a propaganda tour in al-Gezira, in March 1950, Amīn al-Tūm had, for example, spoken of a "better understanding" between the two Sayyids, and urged his Anṣār audience "to improve their relations with the local Khatmia".[93] But the real breakthrough came in a bold decision taken by the congress of the Umma party (21–23 August, 1953), apparently on the initiative of ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, that committed the party to a republican democratic regime. This position, a *defacto* denial of a Mahidst crown, was for the first time personally, albeit reluctantly, endorsed by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī in a public statement that he issued on 21 August, 1953.[94] Coupled with Azhari's progressively strained

[93] F.O. 371/80343, SPIS, February–March, 1950.

[94] For the Arabic text of this statement see Ṭāha, F.A.A. (editor): *Al-Sudan li al-Sūdāniyyīn*, p. 178.

relations with the Khatmiyya that reached a point of no return by his sacking of Mirghanī Ḥamza and the two other Khatmi ministers from his cabinet (23 December, 1954),[95] this unprecedented decision had gone a long way to facilitate understanding between the two sects that culminated in a historic meeting in 3 December, 1955 between the two Sayyids in which they pledged "to stand together to cooperate in the work for the good and prosperity of the Sudanese nation, and for its freedom and full sovereignty".[96] This rapprochement was certainly a tremendous boost to the cause of independence, though the Khatmiyya had declined an earlier Umma's proposal to form a national government, during the rest of the transitional period, to secure this goal.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī seemed to have become aware, since the 1920s at least, of the importance of a friendly Egypt, the strongest Arab-Muslim power in the region with whom the Sudan had strong historical ties. Had it not been for the stubborn insistence of the Egyptian Monarch and successive Egyptian governments on absolute sovereignty over the Sudan, an early understanding between the Neo-Mahdists and Egypt was probably quite feasible, and the course of events in the Nile Valley might have thus taken a different course, presumably to the better. Nonetheless, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān left the door open for such a rapprochement between the two countries that should, however, be based on *al-Maṣāliḥ* (interests) not *al-ʿAwāṭif* (emotions), as his confidant Ḥusain Sharīf, the editor of *al-Haḍāra*, put it in four articles published in 1920.[97] Even when the relations between the two sides were at their lowest ebb, al-Sayyid and his aides were careful not to touch the susceptibilities of the Egyptian people to

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[95] Relations between the Khatmiyya and Azharī were, in fact, strained for sometime. But the origin of this cabinet crisis was the old rivalry between the Khatmiyyah and the Ashiqa personified in Mirghanī Ḥamza's hatred to Yaḥya al-Faḍlī, who, with his two colleagues ʿAli ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and Muḥammed Aḥmad al-Marḍī, exercised increasing influence on Azharī. Secondly were their differences on the issue of future relations with Egypt, that were sharpened by Nasser's deposition of Najīb from the presidency of Egypt and his prosecution of *al-Ikwān al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brotherhood). But the match that lit the fuse was Azhari's choice of Yaḥia al-Faḍlī and ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān to accompany him in his visit to Europe. What added insult to injury was that the young and elegant Mubārak Zaroug, Minister of Communication, acted as Prime Minister during Azhari's absence to the great annoyance of the elderly and proud Mirghanī Ḥamza.

[96] For an English translation of the Sayyids' joint statement, see F.O. 371/113585.

[97] For the text of those articles, see Ṣāliḥ, M.M. *op cit.*, pp. 73–86.

whom they usually refered to with high regard. Al-Sayyid had, furthermore, cordially welcomed Egyptian officials and celebrities who visited the Sudan. Both the Egyptian economic mission and Premier ʿAlī Māhir, who respectively visited the Sudan in 1935 and 1940, were given a grand treat by the Sayyid. He also maintained friendly relations with some Egyptian dignitaries like Prince ʿUmar Ṭūsūn, the former Grand Qāḍi of the Sudan and Rector of al-Azhar university Shaykh Muṣṭafa al-Marāghī, and ʿAbd al-Qawi Pasha, the former inspector-general of irrigation in the Sudan. Furthermore, al-Sayyid opened channels of communications with some public and private circles in Egypt through the distinguished Egypto-Sudanese families of Abu al-ʿIla and ʿAbd al-Monʿaim Muḥammed, and the famous Greek businessman Contomichalos.[98] Some of al-Sayyid's aids like ʿAbdullāhi al-Fāḍil al-Mahdī, who was married to an Egyptian wife, and Aḥmad ʿUthmān al-Qāḍī (nicknamed *Abu al-Bayt*—the Father of the House), were instrumental in this drive, while a few Egyptian journalists were apparently in the Sayyid's pay roll.[99] But Ḥusain Zulfaqār Ṣabrī, an Egyptian officer stationed since 1949 in the Sudan and subsequently (1953–1956) represented his country in the Governor-General's Commission, should be particularly commended for his tireless efforts to cultivate friendly relations with the leaders of the Neo-Mahdists, and to persuade the Egyptian authorities to give them a fair hearing. His appropriately titled book *Sovereignty for the Sudan* is in many ways unique compared to the bulk of Egyptian literature on the Sudan Question. For it courageously criticized the obsolete, paternal and unrealistic Egyptian policy in the Sudan, and its conspicuous neglect of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Zulfaqār did justice to the cause of Neo-Mahdism and recorded his admiration of

[98] Contomoichalos' company was reported to have exported some Sudanese products to Israel, particularly cotton seeds. Egypt protested and asked the Sudan government to ban this trade on the grounds that the Sudan, as an integral part of Egypt, should not trade with an enemy country. But the latter refused arguing that, by virtue of the Condominium Agreement, Egyptian laws were not applicable in the Sudan, Egypt retaliated by stopping in 1950 a ship heading from Port Sudan via the Suez Canal to Israel, and confiscated its Sudanese products. It, furthermore, warned Contomichalos that it would dissolve his company in Egypt, Egypt's company, and confiscate his property if he did not abide by this ban. For more information on the Sudan's trade with Israel, see F.O. 371/80431.

[99] See my article "The Neo-Mahdists and the British 1944–47: From Tactical Co-operation to Short-Lived Confrontation", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, July 2002, p. 50.

the integrity and honesty of some of its leaders, particularly Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, his fellow member in the Governor General's Commission. In short, what Ṣabrī called in the above book "his self-proclaimed mission" in the Sudan, that brandished the motto "Better an independent Sudan than a British dominion,"[100] was apparently most helpful in stimulating the leaders of the new revolutionary regime in Egypt to concede the right of self determination to the Sudanese people. Ṣabri's leading role was confirmed in a British document that recorded, "Zulfaqār Ṣabri returned to Cairo on 20 June, 1955 with a detailed report on the strength of the pro-independence feeling in the Sudan, and the uselessness of continued Egyptian support to such Sudanese politicians as Nur al-Dein and a handful of disgruntled Southerners. He is said to be thoroughly disillusioned about the prospect of any constitutional link between the two countries, and to believe now that Egypt's best policy is to recognize the Sudan's independence, and to make the best terms she can do to safeguard her future interest".[101]

The British drive to marginalize, even abandon, al-Sayyid, had forced him to try playing one co-dominius against the other to reassert his position and achieve his goal of independence. Since 1950, he seriously sought, occasionally secretly, to improve his relations with Egypt which, on her part, had been progressively persuaded to strike a deal with the Sudanese as the best means for containing British imperialist designs in the Sudan. By then Egyptian policy towards the Sudan took a fresh compromising slant that downplayed the issue of sovereignty and emphasized "the psychological necessity" for the Egyptians to have a "fuller share in the works" of the Sudan.[102] Besides, the attitude of successive Egyptian Premiers—Naqrāshī, ʿAbd al-Hādī and Naḥḥās—was seemingly not so cordial with Azharī and his Ashiqa colleagues. Both the Umma and the Egyptian press freely discussed the desirability of such a rapprochement, and, on his return

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[100] Ḥusain Zulfaqār Ṣabrī: *Sovereignty for the Sudan*, pp. 21 and 67. Professor Gabriel Warburg is, however, of the opinion that Ṣabri's impact on the events in Cairo and Khartoum was far less significant, even-marginal, than he claimed in his book, which, being published more than twenty years after the events, might have been influenced by "hindsight". Warburg, G.: *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley* (London 1992), pp. 121–22.

[101] F.O. 371/113612, Luce to Foreign Office, 22 June, 1955.

[102] F.O. 371/73491, record of a conversation between Robert Howe and the Egyptian Premier ʿAbd al-Hādī Pasha (who took the Premiership on 28 May, 1949 after the assassination of Naqrāshī Pasha), 7 June, 1949.

from Cairo in 9 February, 1950, Aḥmad Yūsuf Hāshim claimed that the Wafd government aspired for "closer relations with the independents". On 12 February he published the following conciliatory statement that he attributed to Fu'ād Sirāj al-Dein, the Minister of Interior: "It is my opinion that Ṣidqi Pasha was not fortunate in closing the door for Sayed ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Pasha when he expressed his wish in 1946 to visit Egypt to confer with its government. The Wafd government wishes particularly to erase all reason for the outstanding misunderstanding".[103] Though the Umma were not in principle in favour of a strong Wafdist government as this may encourage Britain to go further in satisfying Egyptian aspirations in the Sudan, their leadership realized the political expediency to overtly welcome the Wafd's victory in the 1950 elections. Al-Sayyid had himself sent a congratulatory cable to Naḥḥās, and the Umma press expressed its satisfaction, but diplomatically cautioned that the new Prime Minister "was a reasonable man who will take no drastic action without consulting the wishes of the Sudanese".[104] Similarly, in response to Sirāj al-Dein's message "of good will", ʿAbdullāh Khalīl cabled him expressing his party's sincere desire for improved relations with Egypt, while al-Sayyid cabled Farouq on the occasion of his birthday, for which he received suitable acknowledgement from the Grand Chamberlain.[105] Further manifestations of this rapprochement were invitations sent during the course of 1950 to the Anṣār and Umma leaders to attend various Egyptian celebrations held in Khartoum in honour of King Farouq birthday. They were readily accepted, and the Neo-Mahdists leaders were cordially received by their Egyptian hosts. In return, al-Sayyid and the Umma ministers lavishly entertained some Egyptian celebrities during their visits to the Sudan, including two former ministers, Ḥusain Fahmī and Dr. Muḥammed Hāshim.

The nascent Neo-Mahdist-Egyptian rapprochement had, however, suffered from two immediate setbacks: an abusive campaign in the Egyptian press, led by *al-Miṣri*, against the Sayyid, and, more importantly, the unfortunate repudiation of the Wafdist government in October 1951 of both the Condominium Agreement and the 1936 treaty, that was followed by a declaration uniting the Sudan and Egypt in one state under the Egyptian King. Nonetheless, Najīb al-Hilālī,

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[103] F.O. 371/50343, SPIS, February–March, 1950.
[104] F.O. 371/80343, SPIS, December 1950–January 1951.
[105] F.O. 371/80343, SPIS, February–March, 1950.

who took the Egyptian premiership in March 1952 decided to talk directly to the Sudanese, and in mid May invited al-Sayyid to send a delegation to Cairo. Urged by two of his closest aides, ʿAbdullāh al-Fāḍil and al-Shinqeiṭī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān sent a "personal", but *defacto* official, delegation that conducted during June 1952 frank and fruitful negotiations with their Egyptian counterparts. The Egyptians offered considerable concessions, including the right of self-determination and a free plebiscite to determine the future of the Sudan. But the negotiations collapsed over the Umma's refusal of al-Hilāli's suggestion to accept "a temporary Egyptian Crown".[106] However, as hinted above, the dramatic momentum came in July 1952 with the accession of the new revolutionary regime that forced Farouq to abdicate, thus removing a major stumbling bloc in the way of an Egyptian-Neo-Mahdist understanding, and took the bold decision to allow the Sudanese to determine the future constitutional status of their country. Subsequently, on the invitation of the half-Sudanese leader of the Egyptian revolution, General Muḥammed Najīb, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī travelled to Egypt where an Independence delegation preceded him to conduct negotiations on the future status of the Sudan. The upshot of this effort was a major breakthrough in October 1952, formalized in a historic agreement[107] and a memorandum of understanding between the Neo-Mahdist and the Egyptians. Hence the British were cornered in an awkward position, and had no alternative except to reluctantly, and with "considerable misgivings", agree to conclude with the other codominus the 12th of February, 1953 Agreement that led to an abrupt end of over fifty years' British domination and the full independence of the country in 1st January, 1956.

The relationship between ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and Ismāʿīl al-Azharī was rather complex. Though starting his political career in the mid 1930s as a faithful disciple of al-Sayyid, Azharī had since

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[106] Arabic text of the Egyptian offer and the Neo-Mahdist response is in Ṭaha (editor) *Al-Sūdān li al-Sūdaniyyīn*, pp. 137–140.

[107] The insistence of Sanhūrī, "the authoritative "Eminence Grise" behind the Revolutionary Council in all juridical matters", on Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan led to sharp verbal exchanges between him and Ḥusain Zulfaqār Ṣabrī, and was about to lead to the collapse of the negotiations. But Sanhūrī was quietly withdrawn from the Egyptian delegation. Ḥusain Z. Ṣabri, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–84. For a detailed study of The 12th of February Agreement, see Ṭaha, F.A.A.: *The 12th of February 1953 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement on the Sudan: An Historical Study* (Ph.D. Khartoum, 1986).

1944 followed his own path.[108] We could assume that he objected to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's tactical collaborationist policies with imperialist Britain, and felt that the interests of the country would better be served by some association, but not amalgamation, with Egypt. But a more important factor for Azhari's defection from the Neo-Mahdist camp was seemingly his lust for power and determination to be the acknowledged leader of the nationalist movement, to which he, as well as a large sector of the Sudanese populace, felt uniquely competent and qualified by virtue of his distinguished family background, modern education, and rising popularity among the elite and the politically conscious Sudanese. Once he succeeded in dominating the Graduate Congress through the good offices of the Neo-Mahdists, Azharī cautiously moved since 1944, apparently with the encouragement of his top advisor Yaḥya al-Faḍlī,[109] to manipulate both the Khatmiyya and the Egyptians to dominate the political scene.

But the Umma leadership, particularly their secretary-general, the "too straight" former army officer ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, grossly underestimated Azhari's nationalist conviction, vast ambitions and shrewd political talents. For a long time, they simply, and simplisticly, dismissed him as a sheer puppet of the Egyptians who survived on their subsides,[110] and conspired to hand them the Sudan. Hence were their stun and bewilderment by the N.U.P. sweeping victory in the October 1953 elections that they interpreted as a grave danger to the cause of independence, and were thus out to fight Azhari's government by all means and at all cost.

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[108] For a study of Azhari's initial relationship with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. See my article Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī: A Master of Manipulation Manipulated 1935–1944, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 136–142.

[109] As early as 1948, an intelligence report claimed that Yaḥya al-Faḍlī, described in British documents as "Azhari's eminence grise" and "the real boss of the party", had "a very low opinion of Azhari's intelligence, and reckons that he will be able to build-up his position slowly until in two or three years time he can replace Azhari as the leading man of the *Wadi El-Nil* Parties" F.O. 371/69251, SPIS-1948 series, No. 2, February to March. It is farfetched that Yaḥya questioned Azhari's intelligence, and in any case this repeated allegation proved to be grossly wrong. Nonetheless, al-Faḍlī—later nicknamed by his many admirers *Al-Dinamo* (the Generator of the N.U.P.)—was ambitious, dynamic and an expert in political intrigues. When Azhari's dropped him from one of his post-independence cabinets, he was reported to have angrily said, "I will destroy this idol that I built".

[110] This charge was repeatedly claimed by the Umma leaders in their conversations with British officials in Khartoum and London. As late as mid March 1955, ʿAbdullāh Khalīl had, for example, insisted that Azharī had "no real following in the Sudan, and without Egyptian support would be nowhere". F.O. 371/113582, Philip Adams to Antony Eden, 11 March, 1955.

The accidental eruption of the 1st of March, 1954 bloody riots was apparently welcomed and well exploited by the Neo-Mahdists to impress upon everybody, notably the Premier and his VIP guest General Najīb, that unity with Egypt would be over the Anṣārs' dead bodies.[111] Al-Sayyid had reportedly also contemplated at some stage the declaration of a "Jihād" and the launching of a widespread Mahdist uprising, a prospect on which Luce gave the following comment, ". . . But he [al-Sayyid] appears not to realize the enormous advantage which modern weapons in the hands of S.D.F. [Sudan Defence Force] has over his virtually unarmed followers. He could no doubt create serious trouble in the more fundamental areas of the west, but he would raise little enthusiasm in the central Sudan where so many of his followers now have vested interests requiring peace and security for their maintenance."[112]

Consumed by burning, but genuine, Egyptophobia, and furious over Azhari's sacking of his representative in the Governor-General's Commission, Ibrāhīm Aḥmad, in favour of a Southern politician, Siriso Ero,[113] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had, in a rare overreaction, spoke to both D.M.H. Riches, the United Kingdom Trade Commissioner, and Selwyn Lloyd, the Minister of State then in Khartoum

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[111] The visit of General Muḥammed Najīb to Khartoum to attend the opening of Parliament, scheduled 1st March, 1954, was forseen by the Neo-Mahdists, and many others, as a grave danger to the independence call. A large crowd of unfriendly Anṣār met Najīb at the airport, and, on his arrival at the Palace, tried to force their way into the building. A clash with police followed leading to many casualties, including the British commandant of the police in Khartoum, Mr McGuigan, and his Sudanese deputy. The Governor-General declared martial law and postponed the opening of Parliament to the 10th of March. A Khartoum court imprisoned some of the Umma leaders, notably ʿAbdullah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Nuqdallah, for their role in these riots, but it dismissed the popular charge that these bloody events were deliberately organized by the Umma Party to create chaos in the country, and blamed the government for inadequate security precautions. Ṭaha, the (editor): *Al-Sūdān li al-Sudaniyyīn*. Plenty of information on the 1st of March events as well as other political developments during the year 1954 are in the F.O. files 371/108320 to 26.

[112] F.O. 371/108324, record of a conversation between Luce and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 25 July, 1954.

[113] By virtue of the, 12th February 1953 agreement, the dominantly international Governor-General's Commission was formed to be a neutral body capable of impartial arbitration in the event of conflict between the Governor-General and the government. On the dismissal of Ibrāhīm Aḥmad from this commission, the Umma party threatened to walk out from Parliament, thus provoking a constitutional emergency. But they soon backed down and accepted the *de facto* situation. F.O. 371/113575, Philip Adams to Anthony Eden, 7 January, 1955.

for the opening ceremony of parliament, of the "futility" and "meaninglessness" of the 12th of February 1953 Agreement, and asked the British government to declare a constitutional emergency, "tear up" the Agreement and declare the independence of the Sudan that should, however, be accompanied by a forthwith withdrawal of all foreign forces, both British and Egyptian. This verbal proposal was soon put in writing in a letter from the Sayyid to the Minister that his envoy Ibrāhīm Aḥmad handed to the Foreign Office in London.[114] The contents of this letter were, as the French say, "brutally" discussed in London between an Umma delegation, led by al-Ṣiddīq al-Mahdī and included Ibrāhīm Aḥmad and Muḥamed Aḥmad ʿUmar, and the Minister of State in three tense meetings on 3rd, 9th and 11th June 1954.[115] By so doing, the optimistic Sayyid told the skeptical British government, they would be killing two birds by one stone, namely achieving their ultimate objective of independence, and establishing friendly relations with the Sudan, in which the Umma would be the dominant political factor after self-determination. But the British Government, who thought that ʿAbd Raḥmān's power was on the wane and were betting on Azhari, ridiculed this "impossible plan" and flatly rejected the request. They, however, advised the Umma Party to keep up the struggle for independence through vigorous constitutional means, and reconstitute a broadly-based independence front which would win support in the towns

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[114] The Arabic text of this letter is in F.O. 371/108324.

In this letter, al-Sayyid argued that the establishment of the N.U.P.'s unionist government gave the Egyptians a *carte blanche* in the Sudan, thus flagrantly violating the free and neutral atmosphere stipulated in the February 1953 Agreement.

[115] The record of these three important meetings is in F.O. 371/108382.

On the request of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Graham Thomas made use of his connections with the Labour Party to arrange for the Umma delegation to meet Clement Attlee, the former Labour Premier. Thomas, who attended this meeting, recorded that the Premier "Listened keenly" and voiced the continuous belief of the "Labour Party. . . . in self determination". Thomas, G.: *Death of a Dream*, p. 75.

During these negotiations, and on other occasions, British officials bitterly complained of al-Ṣiddīq al-Mahdī's ultra—nationalism and tough anti-British stance. One of them minuted, "You will find Ibrahim Ahmad a much less slippery customer than Siddiq. Although the former is by no means an uncritical admirer of the British achievement in the Sudan, he is at least a very level headed and responsible person whose objective I am sure is the welfare of the Sudan. Ṣiddiq on the other hand, hardly bothers to conceal that he has no sentimental attachment to the British at all and is an "anti-colonizer" whose objective is the installation in power of S.A.R. and Siddiq. F.O. 371/108382, D.M.H. Riches to T.E. Bromley, 20 May, 1954.

and from among the Khatmiyyah. They even suggested the complete dissolution of the Umma "as a party and for their supporters to join a new party in which pro-independence Khatmiyya would be strongly represented".[116] This was, of course, unacceptable to the Sayyid and his aides who made another attempt towards the end of 1955 to overthrow Azharī. With the active support of the Khatmiyya, and the blessing of the bitter Egyptians, who were anxious to bring down the "turncoat" Azharī, they tabled in Parliament a motion of censure that defeated the government in the second reading of the budget. But only five days later, on 15 November, 1955, Azharī was defiantly re-elected to the Premiership.

Henceforth, the shattered Umma leadership appealed to the Governor-General to impose a "national government" on Azharī, but Sir Alexander Helm Knox who took the Governor-Generalship in March 1955, refused on the grounds that he was "obliged by the Constitution to appoint as Prime Minister the person whom Parliament had elected for the office".[117] Overwhelmed by disappointment, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī accused the Governor-General of favouring Azharī at the expense of the opposition. But he was told to get out of this "ridiculous" and "irresponsible illusion", and reminded that "the head of a democratic state naturally collaborates with his ministers irrespective of their policy background and allegiance".[118]

Nevertheless, the pragmatic ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī had once more swallowed his pride, and stepped up his effort to renew contact with the British government that would hopefully help him to achieve three major targets. First, he was anxious to persuade the British not to write him off, and work exclusively with Azharī, who stole the limelight from him, and whose "wooly head" had not come

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[116] F.O. 371/108382, note by Bromley for the third meeting between the Minister of State and Umma leaders, 10 June, 1954. On 11 June, 1954, an official at Foreign Office commented on this note by saying, "The main point is that no ingenuity can combine early British withdrawal from the Sudan, which the Umma and all other Sudanese want, and intervention as proposed by S.A.R. The Umma must get it within their heads that in a few months' time there will be no British in the Sudan". *Ibid.*

[117] Nonetheless, under article 102 of the 12th February, 1953 Agreement, the Governor-General was empowered, under certain circumstances, to proclaim a constitutional emergency. In such an eventuality, he would dissolve parliament, sack the cabinet, and rule by order with or without the advice of a council of state appointed by him. Hence, he could also ask for more British troops.

[118] F.O. 371/113585, Philip Adams to T.E. Bromley, African department, Foreign Office, 18 November, 1955.

up until March, 1955 with a definite position on the future destiny of the country. Secondly, British support was most needed to counter the dangerously accelerating Egyptian interference in Sudanese affairs that was masterminded by the "dancing Major" Ṣalāh Sālim, particularly their expertise in swinging elections through bribing vulnerable and immature deputies and politicians. But a third more compelling reason was apparently al-Sayyid's genuine conviction that close and sustainable relationship with Britain was in the best interest of the future Sudan. ʿAbdullāh Khalīl articulated his mentor's position in this respect as follows: "The nearer independence comes, the more S.A.R. realizes the difficulties and dangers in front of the Sudan, both in the internal government and the protection of its borders. It is therefore essential that the young Sudan should have a strong neutral friend, and Britain is obviously the choice".[119]

While declining Winston's Churchil invitation, casually extended to him in 1952, to work for the Sudan's membership of the Commonwealth,[120] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān gave his full support for a military and economic alliance with Britain. This farsighted position of the need of a poor country to a strong ally, even a neo-colonial one, was adopted by few visionary leaders, notably the late Tunku Abdul Raḥmān (d. 1990) of Malaysia and the poet-philosopher Leopold Senghor of Senegal (d. 2001).

To prepare the ground for this much needed, but problematic, understanding, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī tried first to allay the anger of the British by pretending "a bit of a guilty conscience" for the instrumental role of the Umma party in bringing about the February 1953 Agreement. He then voiced his concern about his "deprivation", since the departure of Selwin Lloyd from the Foreign Office, "of a valued personal link with Her Majesty's ministers". On getting the green light from Philip Adams, al-Sayyid sent two letters to Mr Turton, the parliamentary undersecretary of the state, in mid September and 20 November, 1955, respectively through Udal and Adams. While the former urged the British Government to stop "cold

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[119] F.O. 371/113609, record of a conversation between Luce and ʿAbdullāh Khalīl, 29 March, 1955.

[120] Churchill's reported remark on the Commonwealth issue was, at best, a personal view, as we have sufficient archival evidence to assume that the Colonial Office was not in favour of the Sudan's membership of the Commonwealth. Some Sudanese notables, including Khatmi Khalifas and the Umma leader Aḥmad ʿUthmān Qāḍī, had, however, advocated this idea.

shouldering" al-Sayyid and do "something to allay his fears", the latter advised not to exceed courtesies and niceties, which, indeed, was reflected in a "short" and "personal" letter from Turton which welcomed al-Sayyid's initiative to keep in touch, but cautioned him that this should strictly be "on personal basis" and "without coming back with any requests or ideas, which, as a member of Her Majesty's Government, he could not properly answer".[121] This reserved attitude towards the Neo-Mahdists' latest friendly overtures was, moreover, more glaringly expressed in the response of Mr Antony Eden, the new Prime Minister, to an earlier congratulatory letter, dated 5 June, 1955, that al-Sayyid sent him. Anxious not to risk offending Azhari's friendly government, Eden deliberately avoided personal correspondence with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, but directed Adams to verbally convey to him his acknowledgement and thanks as well as his interest in reading his "comments on the situation".[122]

Meanwhile a noticeable swing in favour of independence had, during the last few years, progressively dominated various sectors and groups, including the N.U.P. itself. This positive development encouraged the Umma leadership to stop viewing the call of independence as their exclusive concern and responsibility, and, since early 1955, actively cooperated with all advocates of independence irrespective of their political orientation. Hence, on the initiative of Muḥammed Aḥmad Maḥjūb, a broadly-based Independence Front was formed on 29 January, 1955. It initially included the Umma, Social Republican, Republican and Communist parties, but soon widely opened its doors for other independence elements such as the students' union of Khartoum University College and the Sudan workers trade union federation. The final version of the Front's national Charter, published on 22 April 1955, stipulated for "the realization of complete and unconditional independence for the Sudan by setting up an independent and fully sovereign Sudanese republic with its own army, flag, currency, economy and foreign policy".[123] Another significant development was the Umma's pledge to cooperate fully with Azharī for the realization of independence. Armed with this admirable, but

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[121] F.O. 371/113605, from Bromley, African department, Foreign Office to Philip Adams, 9 December, 1955. For the Arabic text and the English translation of al-Sayyid's letter as well as Turton's reply, see F.O. 371/113605.

[122] F.O. 371/113611, Foreign Office to Trade Commissioner, 28 June, 1955.

[123] For an English translation of this four-articles Charter, see F.O. 371/113610.

rather late, consensus, the Sudanese people managed to persuade the co-domini to bypass the time consuming and dangerous process of a plebiscite to determine the future of the Sudan. Hence Azharī short-circuited the process by declaring in Parliament on 19th December, 1955 the independence of the Sudan.[124] It may be interesting to note here that just a day later James Robertson, the former Civil Secretary, then Governor-General of Nigeria, privately described this historic decision as an outcome of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's "lifelong struggle". Had it not been for his "firm stand", Robertson added in a letter, from his headquarter in Lagos, to al-Sayyid, the British Government would have agreed during the period 1946–1952 to "some Egyptian proposals"[125] that would have limited, or even denied, complete independence and sovereignty to the Sudanese people.

Shortly after Ismāʿīl al-Azhari's unequivocal commitment to independence,[126] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī magnanimously declared that he would "sacrifice his fortunes and sons for Azharī". Indeed, the man was elated to a breaking point during Azhari's led flag raising ceremony in Khartoum. Yet, he should have been inwardly perplexed by the paradox that independence was achieved by a party

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[124] The real brain behind this idea of a short cut to self-determination by means of a vote by the Sudanese parliament is difficult to ascertain. But according to an official British document, the idea "was really born at the time of the Czech arms deal" (i.e. between Egypt and the then Soviet Union's satellite Czechoslovakia) that was concluded in October 1955, and picked up by the Foreign Office that was anxious to avoid the plebiscite, and "move as quickly as possible towards the end of the Condominium". F.O. 371/113622, Foreign Office to Khartoum, 17 November, 1955.

[125] For the text of this letter, see the Private Papers of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, N.R.O.; Anṣār 8/3, document number 706.

[126] Though Azharī and his group came to power in 1953 on a unity with Egypt ticket, they gradually soft-pedaled it without coming openly and immediately against their Egyptian patrons because of fears that they may "wash soiled linen in public". Besides, the Ashiqa took their time to strengthen themselves against their opponent the Umma party. Nonetheless, the calculating Azharī gradually watered down the prospect for unity. He declared that his November, 1954 visit to London helped "to iron out misunderstanding" with Britain, and, while there, gave a press release that described the policy of his government as "national". But more significantly was Azhari's shrewd statement, given on 26 December, 1954 to the appropriately chosen journalist, the strongly pro-independence editor of *al-Ayām* Bashīr Muḥammed Saʿīd, that obliged him to virtually nothing, but reassured the public that his government had not committed themselves finally to close union with Egypt. These developments had finally culminated in the 31 March, 1955 announcement of the N.U.P. "to work for the creation of an independent and fully sovereign Sudan", that "should have its own Head of State, Parliament and representation abroad". F.O. 3711/11610, memorandum by Foreign Office, 2 May, 1955.

whose very name evoked unity with Egypt, and not by the Neo-Mahdists who were historically committed to the cause, and had adhered to it at great cost since 1916 at least. It is therefore in the nature of things for al-Sayyid to be, privately, but dignifiedly, disappointed that Azharī had been acclaimed and praised for upholding what he genuinely thought of as his policy. He would have loved to have the credit and honour to announce on independence day the liberation of the country from imperialism, just as his father did in the mid eighties of the 19th century. Nonetheless, it is by no means an exaggeration to suggest in this study that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was the *de facto* forerunner and custodian of the 20th century independence movement, and the most important Sudanese during that century of national liberation. Had the shenanigans and impatient so-called ideologist elite learned from him that history, like nature, knows no leaps, and adopted his pragmatism, in politics and religion, the Sudan may not have plunged in its present catastrophic abyss of despair.

CONCLUSION

By the turn of the 20th century, both ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī and his father's Mahdiyya were at dangerous crossroads. The ruthless British policy deliberately humiliated the teenaged Sayyid, trapped the whole movement, and was about to relegate it into oblivion. It was at this unequivocally critical moment that the young but level-headed new Imām volunteered to launch a rescue operation from this historical trap that aimed at transforming the Sudanese Mahdiyya into a modern, realistic and consequently effective politico-religious force. But he was sufficiently pragmatic not to expect this to be achieved overnight, and knew very well that the process of recovery should have to take its time. His father's extreme and revolutionary tactics would, moreover, no longer work, and the revival had in the circumstances inevitably to be shrewdly peaceful and piecemeal. The first priority was that he himself should emerge from obscurity to prominence, an essential prerequisite for his self-chosen role to reorganise and lead his father's shattered, vulnerable and disillusioned followers. Since his adolescence, the Imām discreetly advertised himself to his family, his people, and, more importantly, to the arrogant and vengeful British officials. The challenge was indeed great, but the visionary Imām was greater. He eventually did it effectively and efficiently.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī was a tax-paying and law-abiding citizen. But he was not blindly and unconditionally loyal to the British. His only real loyalties, were to his religion, Islam, to his country, the Sudan, and to his own chosen politico-religious role. No doubt "loyalty" was a good emotive word to throw around in dealing with the British, many of whom tended to feel emotionally deprived unless they could find some colonial subjects who seemed to love them. But al-Sayyid's behaviour was always the result of a cool calculation that he could get further politically by co-operating with the British in order to manipulate them, than by confrontation and by making loud, but basically futile, anti-British noises. A visionary leader like him needed not to pound the table or shout to demonstrate strength, piety, and patriotism. Al-Sayyid had regarded the British as rather lacking in guile, or was convinced that in the end he would outwit

and out-manoeuvre them. But what he did not foresee—what nobody in fact foresaw—was the strong and early growth of a more radical nationalism which could and did damage him politically by stigmatising his behaviour as unpatriotic collaboration with the imperialists.

However, it is important to note that when al-Sayyid's own interests clashed with those of the government he went his own way. Through large-scale exploitation of his wealth and adroit manoeuvres, he shrewdly by-passed government restrictions, consolidated his influence in traditional Mahdist centres, and found for himself fresh adherents and new spheres of influence, particularly among what is now called "the modern forces" in towns and urban centres. Since 1935 at most, the government vividly realized that he was dangerous, for he might become the symbol of the intelligentsia and unite them with the traditional and religious elements into a strong political front with an overwhelming nationalist appeal. His lifelong motto was "no sects, no parties, Islam is our religion and the Sudan is our country".

Describing ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's character and his ability to flourish despite adverse conditions, Sir Stewart Symes, the governor-general from 1934 to 1940, wrote in April 1935:

> His character is a complex one. It has the defects of a Sudanese of his type, the liking of intrigue, vanity, irrelevance and opportunism. On the other hand, he has quick perceptions, panache, and a subtle tenacity of purpose, but without much courage, moral or physical [. . .]. One moment's relaxation of the Government's vigilance and he presents us with some *fait accompli* either in the shape of a mosque, or of a new acquisition of land in a forbidden area, or of large size advertisement of his pretensions to be a national figurehead. His favourite role is that of the loyal supporter of Government who is maliciously misunderstood and whose legitimate ambitions are obstructed and misrepresented by interested cliques of both official and unofficial enemies. His sovereign device for evading the fulfilment of his obligations or the carrying out of government instructions is to plead that he does not or did not understand what is being or was being said to him, and if his instructions are in writing, as we have now learned from experience that they have to be, to 'find' them subsequently in an unopened envelope on his office table, after he has already taken the necessary steps to contravene them and it is "too late to withdraw.[1]

But, as Gabriel Warburg shrewedly observed, Symes' above "sarcastic definition of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's shortcomings, in fact, illustrates the

[1] F.O. 371/109096, memorandum on Mahdism, 28 April, 1935.

Sayyid leadership qualifications demonstrated in adverse conditions".[2]

The new Imām maintained the basic Islamic vision of the Mahdiyya and emphasized the dual spiritual and temporal roles of its mission. But he gave them fresh interpretations, and profoundly changed their orientation. He strongly believed that Islam should no more be associated with fanaticism, superstition or miraculous personalities. One of his dogmatic followers was once so moved by a lyric (*madiyyḥ*) in praise of the Mahdī that he excitingly asked the Imām to follow his father's course, wear the patched *jubbah* (Mahdist uniform) and declare a *jihād*. But the Imām sharply rebuked him, and emphatically said, "I am the Imām of this era, and if the Mahdi himself were here today, he would have listened to what I order and direct."[3]

He did not, of course, mean belittlement of the Mahdī or a repudiation of his legacy as such, but wanted to impress upon this *anṣārī* and everybody else that extremism was inopportune and dangerous, and that the new situation required immaginative and pragmatic approach and tactics. Indeed this was compatible with the Mahdi's own famous principle that "each time has its own men." It was this very conviction in the futility of violence in politics and religion that triggered the Sayyid to distant himself and Neo-Mahdism from some militant groups and societies, notably *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*. In 1948, al-Sayyid politely and diplomatically declined a personal and passionate plea from their *murshid* Shaykh Ḥasan al-Bana to support the Brotherhood, as is clearly demonstrated from the appendixed letters exchanged between the two leaders.[4]

The Sayyid was, furthermore, of the opinion that Islam should not be viewed dogmatically as a sheer set of rules and rituals, and the concentration should instead essentially be on its noble *maqāṣid*—basic objectives and values—and the *maṣlaḥah* (interest) of the Muslims that should be innovatively applied to the rapidly-changing social set up in the country. By this realistic, far-sighted and functional *ijtihād*, he laid the foundation for the future Islamic alternative presented

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[2] Warburg, G.: *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya*, p. 91.

[3] Quoted in Khālid, Maṣūr: Al-Nukhbah al-Sūdāniyyah wa Idmān al-Fashal (Cairo, 1993), p. 123.

[4] Shaykh al-Bana's plea was embodied in a letter dated 16 Muharam 1367 (29 November, 1947) that his messenger Jamāl al-Dein al-Sanhūrī, a founding leader of the Ikhwān movement in the Sudan, handed to the Sayyid in Khartoum. In his response, dated 23 Safar 1367 (5 January, 1948) al-Sayyid evaded the call for support through vague and non-committal expression of "best wishes" to the "blessed movement". For copies of these letters, see appendix A, pp. 243–44.

by the Neo-Mahdist *Anṣār*, under the name of the *saḥwah* (resurgerence) programme, to resolve the stubborn crisis of identity in the country, and to counteract the challenge of modernization. It urges Muslims in the Sudan, and elsewhere, to view their historical legacy intellectually and critically, but never be over-burdened with it.

We have sufficient evidence to believe that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdi was intriqued by his inquisitive, outspoken and rather rebellious grandson al-Ṣādiq, the son of his eldest son and heir apparent al-Ṣiddiq (d. 1961). He seemed to have predicted for him a future leading role within the Neo-Mahdist movement and in the country at large. Thus was the Imam's close and personal care for his favourite grandson since his childhood and through his adolescence and youth to the resentment and grudge of al-Ṣādiq's peers in the family. The Imām encouraged his protégé to be well versed in the Arabic language and Islamic disciplines under the tutorship of the distinguished Sudanese *ʿālim* (scholar) al-Ṭayyib al-Sarrāj, and, at the same time, to be reasonably grounded in modern thought, first in Victoria College in Alexandria, then briefly in Khartoum University College and later in Oxford University.[5]

Al-Ṣadiq's intimacy with his mentor had, on the other hand, enabled him to observe and largely comprehend his tolerance and flexibility in matters of politics and religion, though, unfortunately, he did not acquire much of his mastery of manipulation, which is seemingly important in Sudanese politicking. However, al-Ṣādiq, who assumed the effective leadership of Neo-Mahdism after his father's sudden death in 1961 and at the early age of twenty-five, views the Imām as his role model and tries his utmost best to follow his footsteps.

In an unpublished paper entitled "Islam and the West: 11th September 2001–8th February 2002", al-Ṣadīq al-Mahdī proudly records that his "grandfather established a religious organization as a modern and moderate avatar of the Mahdist revolution", and that he "led that group, modernized its organization and democratized its decision making organs". This is a plausible statement as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's fingerprints can be seen in today's Neo-Mahdism. His political orientation may be detected in the *saḥwa* political programme of the Umma party, which had seemingly been predominantly authored

[5] Al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī elaborated on his personal relationship with his grandfather in an interview that he gave to the Egyptian magazine *al-Muṣṣawar*, issue 220, 9 June, 2001.

by al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, particularly so in its provision that *al-muwāṭanah* (citizenship), rather than religious identity, should be the basis for constitutional rights in the ethnically and culturally diversified Sudan. Likewise, the Imām's *maqāṣidi* (functional) Islamic vision is reflected in al-Ṣādiq's numerous scholarly works, both in Arabic and English, that addressed, from a creative Islamic perspective, some pressing contemporary issues. Amongst those are social change in Islam, its position towards the rights of women, the complex issue of the *jihād*, and Islam and the West. Al-Ṣadiq's enlightened, often revolutionary, views on these and similar issues has, however, exposed him to criticism from many Islamist "extremist rejectionist" groups and individuals from within and outside the Sudan.

Fig. 1. Members of a delegation of Sudanese notables visiting England for an audience with King George V (London, 28 July 1919). Seated from left to right: Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, Sayyid ʿAli al-Mirghani, Sayyid Sharif al-Hindi and Shaykh al-Tayyib Ahmad Hashim, the mufti. Standing from left to right: Ibrahim Farah of the Ja'aliyin, ʿAli al-Tum of the Kababish, Shaykh Isma'il al-Azhari, qadi of Darfur, Skaykh Abu al-Qasim, president of the board of Ulema, Ibrahim Musa and Shaykh ʿAwad al-Karim ʿAbd Allah abu Sinn, nazir ʿumum of the Shukriyah.

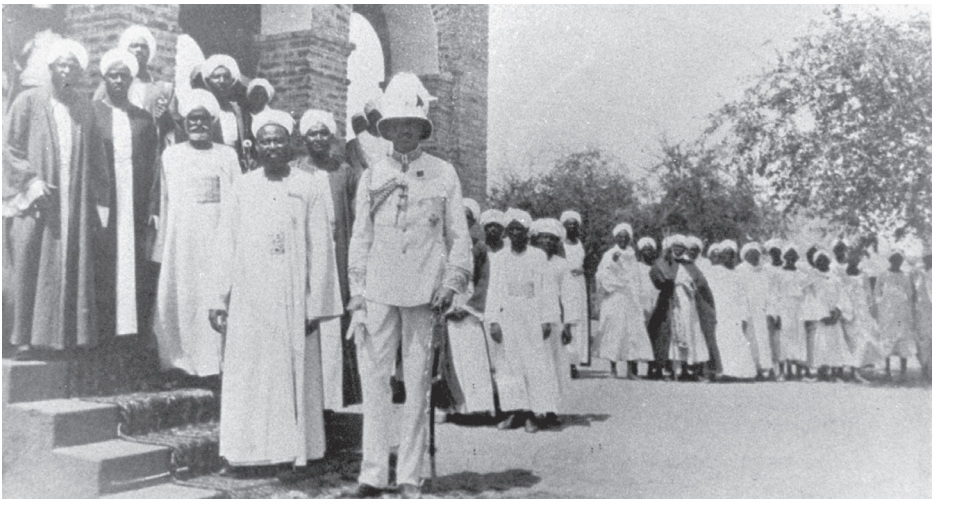


Fig. 2. Governor-General, Sir Geoffrey Archer, visiting Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi at his house on Aba Island, with a crowd of ansar followers in the background (Aba Island, Blue Nile Province, 14 February 1926).

Fig. 3. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi (right) and ʿAbd Allahi al-Fadl al-Mahdi (left) at the inauguration of the Sennar Dam (Sennar, Blue Nile Province, June 1926).

Fig. 4. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi during a visit to Cairo, accompanied by (from left to right) Muhammad Thu al-Figar Bay, Hamdi Seif al-Nasr Pasha Minister of Agriculture, and Husayn ʿUthman Pasha (Cairo, between 1930 and 1949).

Fig. 5. Opening of the Legislative Assembly, with Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi seated in the centre of the visitors' gallery (Khartoum, Khartoum Province, December 1948).

Fig. 6. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi cutting the ribbon at the opening of Ahfad co-educational secondary school, with Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿAli Taha, Minister for Education, standing on the left and Shaykh Babikr Badri standing on the right wearing two gold medals presented to him by his family on his 80th and 90th birthdays (Khartoum, Khartoum Province, 1952).

Fig. 7. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi after cutting the ribbon at the opening of Ahfad co-educational secondary school (Khartoum, Khartoum Province, 1952). See also Fig. 6.

Fig. 8. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi meeting the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, at 10 Downing Street (London, October 1952). © Crown Copyright.

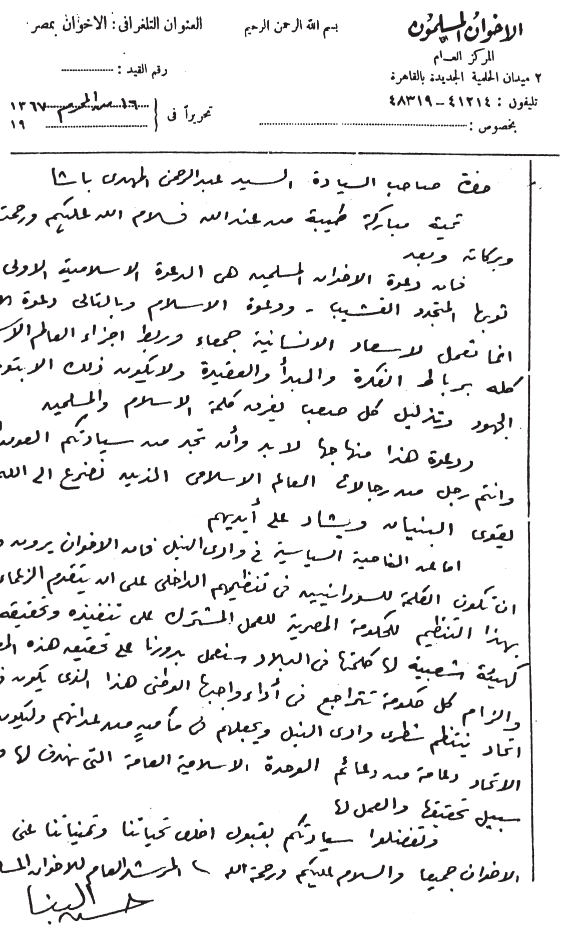
Fig. 9. Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi greeting Pandit Nehru, Prime Minister of India, during his visit to Khartoum (Khartoum, Khartoum Province, July 1957).

Fig. 10. Portrait of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, aged seventy-four years (Geneva, June 1958). Photo by P.A. Pittet.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Letters exchanged between *Shaykh* Ḥasan al-Bana and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 1947–1948



الإخوان المسلمون
المركز العام
٢ ميدان الحلمية الجديدة بالقاهرة
تليفون : ٤١٢١٤ – ٤٨٣١٩
بخصوص : ....

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

العنوان التلغرافي : الاخوان بمصر
رقم القيد : ....
تحريراً في ١٦ محرم ١٣٦٧
١٩

حضرة صاحب السيادة السيد عبد الرحمن المهدي باشا

تحية مباركة طيبة من عند الله فسلام الله عليكم ورحمته وبركاته وبعد

فإن دعوة الإخوان المسلمين هي الدعوة الإسلامية الأولى في [illegible] المتجدد [illegible] - ودعوة الإسلام وبالتالي دعوة الإخوان إنما تعمل لإسعاد الإنسانية جمعاء وربط أجزاء العالم الإسلامي كله بروابط الفكرة والمبدأ والعقيدة ولا يكون ذلك إلا بتوحيد الجهود وتذليل كل صعب لرفع كلمة الإسلام والمسلمين

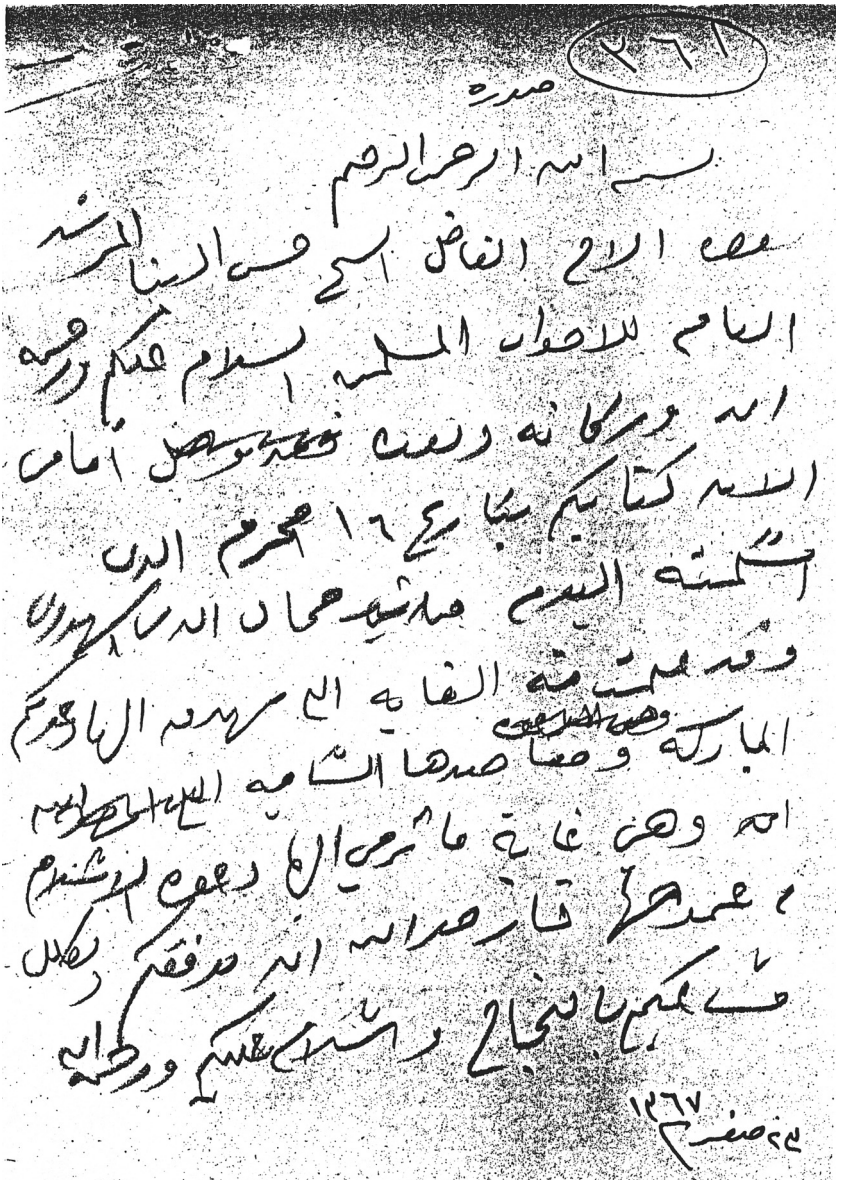
ودعوة هذا منهاجها لا بد وأن تجد من سيادتكم العون والتعضيد وأنتم رجل من رجالات العالم الإسلامي الذين نضرع إلى الله أن يقوى البنيان ويشاد على أيديهم

أما من الناحية السياسية في وادي النيل فإن الإخوان يرون فعلاً أن تكون الكلمة للسودانيين في تنظيمهم الداخلي على أن يتقدم الزعماء والقادة بهذا التنظيم للحكومة المصرية للعمل المشترك على تنفيذه وتحقيقه ونحن كهيئة شعبية لا [illegible] في البلاد سنعمل بدورنا على تحقيق هذه المطالب وإلزام كل حكومة تتراجع في أداء واجبها الوطني هذا الذي يكون في ظل اتحاد ينتظم شطري وادي النيل و[illegible] ولتكونوا هذا الاتحاد دعامة من دعائم الوحدة الإسلامية العامة التي نهدف لها ونفنى في سبيل تحقيقها والعمل لها

وتفضلوا سيادتكم بقبول أخلص تحياتنا وتمنياتنا لكم ولكل الإخوان جميعا والسلام عليكم ورحمة الله ، المرشد العام للإخوان المسلمين

حسن البنا

1. From *Shaykh* Ḥasan al-Bana to Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī, 16 Muharam 1367 (29 November, 1947).



2. Letter from Sayyid ʿAbd. al-Raḥmān al-Mahdī to Shaykh Ḥasan al-Bana, 23 Safar 1367 (5 January, 1948).

Appendix B

Unpublished Memorandum by al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī on Mahdism (Private Communication), March 1996

Summary of My View on Mahdism

I maintain that in three of the six books of true (s*ahih*) Prophetic traditions, namely the collections of the following authors, there are 23 sayings ascribed to the prophet about Al-Mahdi. They are:

Three in Al-Tirmizi's traditions
Seven in Ibn Maja's traditions
Thirteen in Abi Daud's traditions

However, Muslim religious and political thought has interpreted those traditions in terms of ten schools of thought about Mahdism. They are:

(A) *Three Shiite schools*

- The Twelvers who maintain that the Mahdi is the twelfth Imām in a specific line of succession from Ali Ibn Abi Talib through his wife Fatima.
- The Seveners who maintain that the Mahdi is the Seventh in that line of succession.
- The Zaidis who think in terms of a plurality of revolutionaries, i.e., any qualified descendent of Fatima who stands up to injustice.

(B) *Four Sunnite schools*

- The expected Mahdi who should appear before the End of Time.
- The Imām expected to restore Islam in each century.
- The Twelfth in a number of outstanding Muslim leaders starting with the four Khalifas of the Prophet and including another eight Imāms who appear in the course of time. This concept is developed by Ibn kathir.
- Leaders of the Islamic community who stand as witnesses to the Truth of the Islamic message. This concept is held by ALRAZI.

(C) *Two Sufi Schools:*

– That the Mahdi is the (**غوث**)—the chairman of the occult hierarchy of "Saints".
– That the Mahdi is the Right Hand of the Prophetic Light—(**النور المحمدي**). This is the concept of Ibn Arabi.

(D) *One philosophical school*

Namely that of Al-Farabi in his book (The Perfect City State), Al-Mahdi is the leader of this city-state.

I maintain that if we study the texts of letters and statements by the Imām Mohammad Ahmad Al-Mahdi, there may be allusions to concepts scattered about the different known schools. However, the crux of his position outlines an eleventh school of Mahdism. Its essentials are:

(a) That there is no truth in the eschatological view of Mahdism. Indeed all attempts to "time" the appearance of the Mahdi are meaningless.
(b) That there is no truth about looking for signs in connection with the appearance of the Mahdi.
(c) That the religious, political and cultural conditions of Muslims in the second half of the nineteenth century call for urgent radical reform.
(d) That the rebirth of the Islamic community is possible only by true commitment to the Quran and Sunnah.
(e) That he (the Mahdi) has been instructed by the Prophet to fulfill that function.
(f) That the Mahdi was quite clear about the fact that the Islamic community will outlive his own life span and hence his appointment of successors to the successors of the Prophet.
(g) He even stated quite objectively the credential needed for religious leadership: **من تقلد بقلائد الدين ومالت إليه قلوب المسلمين**
(h) That there is continuous movement in Islamic Reform on the basis of: **لكل وقت ومقام حال ولكل زمان وأوان رجال**

In summary, the Mahdi had divorced Mahdism from eschatological considerations, from end of time signs, from traditional speculations about Mahdism. He tied his message to his own pious credentials, to the urgency of reform, to the function of reviving the Quran and

Sunnah, and to supreme authority vested in him by Divine calling to fulfill that function.

I believe that this concept of Mahdism differs from the main schools of Muslim thought and what's more, it makes room for Imam Abdel Rahman's role without discarding his father's mission.

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The archival data from the N.R.O. is mainly derived from papers classified under INTEL, SECURITY, CIVSEC AND CAIRINT. Data from the P.R.O. is mainly from Foreign Office and War Office files (F.O. and W.O.).

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