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**The Rise and Fall of the Sudan Alliance Forces (1)**

Posted on [October 8, 2009](http://africanarguments.org/2009/10/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-sudan-alliance-forces-1/) by [Ahmed Hassan](http://africanarguments.org/author/ahmed-hassan/)

In this two-part posting I chart the rise and fall of the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF), which at its foundation in 1996 was heralded as the most hopeful progressive force in the Sudanese political spectrum. This posting outlines the rise of SAF, as a product of the interventionist policy of the U.S. and the â€˜frontline statesâ€™ against Sudan.

On September 29, 2009, and in response to my posting â€œNo Peace with Hostile USâ€, Abd Al-Wahab Abdalla commented â€œOn both left and right of the Sudanese political spectrum equally there is a proclivity to assume conspiracies driven by major but obscure political and material interestâ€.

Based on some first-hand experience that I gained from very frequent visits to Asmara, Eritrea, in the period 1996â€“2003 and also based on various direct and indirect contacts with most of the left and right of the Sudanese political spectrum; as well as direct and indirect contact with a few persons within the U.S. Clinton Administration with specific reference to Roger Winter and John Prendergast, I would like to take this opportunity to confirm the statement of Abd Al-Wahab and to reflect on the rise and fall of the Sudan Alliance Forces, which is a strong case in point. I will also to show that how this was linked to U.S. Policy on Sudan during that turbulent period.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which was composed of the political parties, trade unions, and officers of the Legitimate Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces, the armed factions and independent national personalities, was the largest political alliance in the history of the Sudan and was basically formed to lead the popular struggle against the new dictatorship in Sudan and the fundamentalist regime of the National Islamic Front (NIF) that came to power on June 1989. The NDA’s National Charter, which was formulated by its various members, was signed on October 1989. The number of the signatories of the NDA Charter reached 13 parties, 56 unions and federations, armed factions and other groupings and national personalities.

Following the tensions and the subsequent secession of the diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Sudan in December 1994, the NDA moved to Asmara officially in 1995 and based its operations in the same building that used to host the Sudanese Embassy just few months previously. Tension between Eritrea and Sudan stemmed primarily from traded accusations that both Sudan and Eritrea were supporting opposition groups of the other country.

Most importantly, Sudan was viewed at that time by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the U.S. as a destabilizing factor within the region posing serious threats with its adoption of a political Islamic agenda and the subsequent support to Islamic militants from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. That period also marked honeymoon of the relations between the U.S. and the â€˜new breedâ€™ of African leaders represented by Isseyas Afewerki, Meles Zenawi and Yoweri Museveni.

The military efforts of the NDA started with the formation of the Legitimate Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces (LCSAF), founded by army officers who were dismissed by the government straight after the coup d’etat of Omer El-Bashir in 1989. LCSAF was led by the late General Fathi Ahmed Ali, the chief of Staff of the Sudanese Army before the coup (who died suddenly in Asmara on April 28, 1997). For quite a while the LCSAF experienced a hesitation to actually start effective armed activities due to the Northern Sudanese political culture that prefers the non-use of force and preferred shyly entertaining discussion on â€œmilitarily supported Intifadaâ€ as the farthest that the northerner parties can afford to offer..

In 1996 the pragmatic Brigadier Abdel Aziz Khalid, former commander of the air defence force in Khartoum, supported by General Issam Mirghani, former second in command of the Sudanese army, in charge of operations and intelligence, implemented a coup on the LCSAF by splitting and forming the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF). Abdel Aziz was able to see the new opportunities for introducing a new qualitative change to the political formula of the NDA. This was a direct result of contacts at three levels, with the Eritrean leadership, with SPLA/M, as well as from hints that were brought to him through the direct contacts of Dr. Taisier M. Ali with John Prendergast related to the potential support of the U.S to armed interventions by Northern Sudanese factions that could lead to the destabilization of the government in Khartoum.

SAF Leadership brought together, according to their Poland webpage, the â€œliberal wing of the Sudanese military,â€ represented by Abdel Aziz Khalid the chairman and Commander in Chief of SAF, General Abdel Aziz El-Nur, Intelligence Chief (a very popular leader who died under mysterious circumstances among allegations that he was challenging the authoritarian leadership of Abdel Aziz Khalid), and General Issam Mirghani, the Chief of Staff. SAF also included the Trade Unions represented in Abdel Aziz Ahmed Daffa Alla, member of the Command Council of SAF in addition to academicians such as Dr. Taisier M. Ali, a historian, previously professor of political sciences at the University of Khartoum and then a visiting professor at the University of Toronto, Canada, turned politician, who was assigned member of the Command Council of SAF, and given the foreign relations portfolio, and who presented the link between SAF, the SPLA/M and the U.S Administration through his colleague John Prendergast who was the Administrationâ€™s National Security Adviser on Africa at that time. The Women and students were represented in the SAF Bureau by Nada Mustafa. The political Military Bureau of SAF also included other leftist representatives such as Dr. Jamal Hashim Khalil, a medical doctor who volunteered to work with the Eritrean ruling party, the Peopleâ€™s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) following the independence of Eritrea and who maintained and developed the relations of SAF with the PFDJ. Other members of the leadership bureau included Mr. Anwar Adham, an ambitious Sudanese Lawyer, based in the Sultanate of Oman.

SAF was then considered a progressive movement including several groups, persons, universities, peace and student movements associated with the New Sudan Forces and who participated in the 1985 popular uprising that toppled the military dictatorship of General Numeri. According to the U.S. Policy, New Sudan Forces represented the only viable alternative to the NIF in Khartoum that propose to reconstruct the nation on a sectarian democratic basis, however, these New Sudan Forces were doubtlessly way under the radar and overshadowed at the diplomatic and the international media arena by the better-bankrolled traditionalist Umma Party and DUP leaders, who were widely discredited at home, according to Dan Connell in his article in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, (2.41), August 1997.

The New Sudan Forces or “Modern Forces” of the Sudan politics have been around as the nucleus of a potential modern secular party for more than forty years and have never managed to transform their often brilliant analysis and daring conspiracies into anything that is stable and durable. They took part in the October 1964 movement, and they were at the heart of the April 1985 uprising, but they never managed to give birth to a serious political organization and kept being the jellyfish of Sudanese politics, potentially dangerous but ineffective and hopeless.

â€œAs far as the Northerners are concerned, they donâ€™t have a mentality of rebelsâ€, One Eritrean official was quoted as saying in, in frustration. â€œFor a long time they were against armed struggle, saying that the regime would be overthrown by a popular uprising. Now they have changed, but they donâ€™t know how to take up weaponsâ€. That was definitely the role Eritrea decided to take in the mid-1990s. Teach them to fight and support them in their fight.

Coming from a military background, and by declaring armed struggle against the NIF government, SAF was thus able to separate itself from the crowd, as a serious representative of the Modern Forces, determined to bring the term of the â€œArmed Struggleâ€ instead of the shy and non masculine â€œarms-supported-Intifadaâ€ to the traditional and conservative Northern Sudan political agenda, and promising to open, for the first time in the history of Sudan, a military front in the north similar to, but also hand in hand (or hand in glove) to the SPLA in the south. The setup was complete, the Eritrean regional aspiration of having an allied movement in Khartoum, and the plans of the U.S. to escalate the efforts to destabilize and topple the NIF regime in Khartoum by opening new military fronts in the north, and the personal aspirations and agenda of the SAF leadership, all came together.

In 1996 the US government decided to send over $20 million of military equipment through the ‘front-line’ states of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda to help the Sudanese opposition overthrow the Khartoum regime. US officials denied that the military aid for the SPLA and SAF, described as ‘non-lethal’ — including radios, uniforms, boots and tents — was targeted at Sudan. The Pentagon and CIA considered Sudan to be second only to Iran as a staging ground for international terrorism. CIA Director John Deutch made a 3-day visit to the Ethiopian capital in April 1996, where he noted that funds had been significantly increased for a more activist policy including pre-emptive strikes against terrorists and their sponsors. Reportedly, several Operational Detachments â€“Alpha teams (also called A-Teams) of the US army were operating in support of the SPLA, together with Ugandan Peopleâ€™s Defence Force uUnits in the south of Sudan at the same time. (FAS – Intelligence Resources http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/spla.htm.)

Thanks to the efforts of Prendergast, in 1997-98, U.S humanitarian support through USAID to the conflict areas in Sudan and areas under the control of the SPLA reached a total of around 80 million U.S dollars distributed as follows: BHR/OFDA Assistance FY 1997- Feb-1998 ($13,354,078), BHR/FFP Assistance FY 1997- Feb1998 ($26,420,300), and USAID Assistance FY 1997-Feb 1998 ($39,774,378) as presented in the U.S. Congress Report of the 105th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, February 1998. Most of this support went directly to the SPLA/M and its ally-in-arms SAF.

In July 1998, the Roman Catholic Church in southern Sudan publicly stated that the SPLA was stealing 65 percent of the food aid going into rebel-controlled areas of southern Sudan. (See, ‘Aid for Sudan ending up with SPLA: relief workers’, Agence France Presse, 21 July 1998; ‘Theft hampers Sudan aid efforts’, News Article by BBC, 22 July 1998, at 23:45 GMT.) This was definitely one way of indirectly channelling CIA funds for arms purchase to supply the conflict on both the southern and northern fronts. With simple calculations, that put over $50 million in the hands of SAF and the SPLA for their military preparations within one year (1997).

As results, and in a concerted effort, the invasion of Sudan was set in motion, with direct involvement of the Ugandan forces in the South, the Ethiopian forces at the Blue Nile and in the South, and the Eritrean forces at the eastern front, in full support to the SPLA, SAF and the smaller NDA armed groups.

The Ethiopian army support for the SPLA and SAF involved cross border military assistance that permitted the SPLA to capture the border town of Kurmuk and Qessan, a town in Sudanâ€™s Blue Nile region just across the border from Ethiopia in a surprise attack on Sunday January, 12 1997.

Simultaneously, SAF and the Tana Brigade of the SPLA, managed to capture the army garrisons at Yakuru, Babsheer and Menza in the northern Blue Nile area. In less than a week, the SPLA/SAF joint forces had advanced to within 30 km of the key eastern town of Damazin, site of the main hydroelectric dam which supplies Khartoum with most of its power. En route, the NDA forces managed to seize several towns and garrisons in the Blue Nile area which also include Al-Kali, Daim Mansour, Shali al-Fil, Ora, Abu Shanena, Maban, Kotneb, Togan, Yarda and Darfa.

SAF was eventually given the administration and control of the liberated areas of Menza north of the Blue Nile while the SPLA took control over the liberated territories south of the Blue Nile that include Yagur and Yabashar.

In April 1997, SAF lead the attack that overran the NIF camp at Togan Near the strategic Port Sudan to Khartoum road. Few months later the joint forces of SAF and the SPLA took control of Hamishkoreb, a town of a significant religious value for the whole of north Sudan, and on a separate occasion, the NDA forces attacked along the Eritrean border near the town of Kassala and captured the army garrison of Gadamayeb.

French military officials who followed the events from Djibouti were convinced that early 1997 offensives, by SAF and the SPLA, were supported by tanks, multi-rockets launchers and artillery belonging to Eritrean and Ethiopian units. (See: http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/Sudanese%20opposition.htm)

August 1997, SAF opened a new front south of El Gadarif and liberated Basunga area. On February 1998 it was attacking the government garrison in Gallabat (Reuters, 9 February 1998).

With the increased support of the U.S. and its allies within the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative, the advance of the SPLA and SAF seemed unstoppable. SAF leadership was extremely intoxicated with feelings of a near victory, and actually in March 1997, the leadership of SAF was giving the regime in Khartoum a maximum lifespan of 6-12 months before it collapsed upon the advance of the New Sudan Forces led by General Abdel Aziz Khalid. (Dan Connell, â€˜Sudan: In the Eye of the African Storm,â€™ *Contributions in Black Studies*, Vol. 15 (1997).)

As part of their role in implementing the U.S policy, it was not surprising that in February 1997 – Abdel Aziz Khalid, under the direct influence of Dr. Taiser who was leading a feverish campaign and advocacy with various groups against Canadian oil companies in Sudan, and also maintaining the interests of the U.S oil companies in direct relation with his associations with John Prendergast, issued warnings to all foreign companies involved in Sudan to pull out or their installations and personnel would be considered legitimate military targets. A statement by SAF described Arakis and IPC as ‘vultures and merchants of death’. ‘They have offered direct help to the fanatics in Khartoum to murder, enslave and oppress our people. As such, they have allied themselves with the enemies of freedom, democracy and peace. They will be treated as enemies’, the statement said. That was a direct attempt to protect what the U.S oil companies believe is their rightful investment interest that should be kept for them until the government is toppled by the combined efforts of SPLA/SAF.

Out of fear of the growing popularity of SAF and the its military approach to resolving the Sudan issue, the traditional parties were forced to follow suit and established their own military units so as not to be left behind. The military effect of their operations, was however quite insignificant and was always second to that of SAF and the SPLA.