

Sudan's Al-Bashir on Arab Tour, Peace

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Interview with Sudanese President 'Umar Hasan al-Bashir by Al-Majallah correspondent Mahir 'Abbas in Riyadh; date not given

(FBIS Translated Text) ('Abbas) What are the aims of this tour?

(Al-Bashir) The current tour is aimed at enhancing brotherly cooperation between the Arab countries and us in all fields and seeking to establish the proper frameworks for promoting bilateral relations with all the Arab countries in all fields. The tour is also aimed at briefing the leaders of these countries on the ongoing developments in Sudan and our efforts to achieve national accord and accomplish economic development. This is in addition to discussing the causes of the Arab nation and ways of strengthening Arab solidarity, especially under the major challenges that this nation is facing.

('Abbas) The internal situation in Sudan has dominated the tour. How is the situation after the recent changes?

(Al-Bashir) I believe that we have made progress toward achieving national accord. We currently have complete political freedom that can be enjoyed by all the political groups. This is reinforced by climates of media openness and unprecedented freedom of the press. This is in addition to the return of the confiscated properties of the opposition members. Subsequently, the climate is now conducive to the convening of the comprehensive national conference to reach agreement on future steps toward the launch of a new democratic experiment that would overcome the obstacles that thwarted past party experiments. We hope this will lead to political stability in the country.

('Abbas) An Egyptian-Libyan initiative has been launched to resolve the problem of the south. How do you view the chances of the success of such an initiative?

(Al-Bashir) The Egyptian-Libyan initiative is aimed at finding a comprehensive political solution and resolving the political differences between the Sudanese through dialogue. As you know, the Sudanese government and all the Sudanese political forces, except for the rebel movement, have accepted this initiative. The rebel

movement is continuing to maneuver and refuses to declare a clear and frank position of accepting or rejecting the initiative. However, we believe that its real position on this initiative is one of rejection and it has previously expressed this in various ways.

('Abbas) A few days ago some indicated that the United States is seeking to abort the Egyptian-Libyan initiative. How true is this?

(Al-Bashir) Of course, the United States had previously expressed its rejection of the Egyptian-Libyan initiative through its secretary of state during her visit to Kenya last year. However, we still hope that the acceptance of this initiative by the Sudanese sides and the accelerating steps toward achieving national accord along with the Egyptian diplomatic efforts will help convince the US side of the importance and suitability of this initiative. We hope that all of this will lead to a positive change in the US position on this initiative and on Sudan in general and peace efforts and accord.

('Abbas) Is it true that some have an interpretation of the IGADD (Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development) initiative that differs from the interpretation of the Egyptian-Libyan initiative and what are the differences between them?

(Al-Bashir) The IGADD initiative concentrates only on the issue of the south while the Egyptian-Libyan initiative is comprehensive. It aims to resolve the political dispute between the government and opposition and help the Sudanese sit down together and reach agreement on the future of their country. Therefore, the two initiatives do not contradict but complement each other.

('Abbas) A Sudanese official has talked about separating religion from the state. What do you think of this?

(Al-Bashir) I do not know which official you are talking about. At any rate, the concept of separating religion from the state is a vague and impractical concept because there is no such thing as complete separation between the religion and state even in the most secularist countries. As you know, the so-called Christian democrat or Christian socialist parties in Europe are the most powerful parties there and often assume power and the clergy have an influential and effective presence in the legislative establishment. In Britain for example, the queen is the head of state and she is also the patron of the church. Subsequently, it is not possible to separate religion from the state in Sudan because it is impractical to do so.

Moreover, I believe that the issue of the relationship between the religion and the state in Sudan has been settled. It has been settled by what the permanent constitution endorsed and by the agreement between all the political forces that citizenship is the

basis for the rights and duties in Sudan and not religious, racial, or provincial affiliation. Of course, this does not contradict with the right of the Muslim majority in Sudan to live in accordance with the dictates of its religion and sharia.

('Abbas) There are currently extensive campaigns in search of foreigners in Sudan. What is the reason for these campaigns and for the timing?

(Al-Bashir) It is normal for measures to be adopted every now and then to inspect and revise the conditions of foreigners living in Sudan and organize these conditions. This is a measure that is adopted by all the countries around the world.

As you know Sudan has open borders with nine countries and remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees and most welcoming of guests and visitors.

('Abbas) Are there any obstacles to the convening of the comprehensive conference between the opposition and government? When will it be convened?

(Al-Bashir) As I have previously indicated, the government, for its part, has adopted all the steps expected of it to pave the way for the convening of the national dialogue conference. In our estimate, there are no obstacles that would prevent the convening of this conference. We hope the brothers in the opposition have the same spirit and willingness toward the convening of this conference as soon as possible. As you know, the joint Egyptian-Libyan technical committee is handling the preparations for this conference and we are waiting for a signal from it to fix the expected date on the basis of its contacts with the two sides.

We hope that this will take place soon.

('Abbas) The situation of Dr. Hasan al-Turabi and the dispute with him remain unclear until now. How do you view the situation following the decisions that were taken on Ramadan?

(Al-Bashir) The dispute with Dr. Hasan al-Turabi was not a personal one and the decisions of 4 Ramadan were not aimed at him personally.

However, they were intended to settle the issue of the dual leadership, defining the authority and jurisdictions of the general secretariat of the National Congress Party, and enabling the executive body to exercise its authorities and jurisdictions without interference from any other side. This has been endorsed by the comprehensive treatment plan, which has become binding to everyone.

('Abbas) Will parliamentary elections be held under the new circumstances?

(Al-Bashir) of course there will be elections in accordance with the rules that govern this and also the outcome of the current efforts that are aimed at convening the national dialogue conference and achieving accord.

('Abbas) The relationship with Egypt awaits your second visit. How do you view this relationship and will the border dispute on Halayib be resolved?

(Al-Bashir) Egypt was the first country that I visited during my current Arab tour. During this visit I discussed with President Husni Mubarak ways of normalizing relations and we arrived at complete agreement over this matter and all the unresolved issues and we are now implementing what we have agreed upon.

('Abbas) Let us now turn to the Middle East issue. How do you view the peace process now and the strikes that Israel has launched against Lebanon?

(Al-Bashir) The strike that Israel launched against Lebanon was aimed at the innocent brotherly Lebanese people and at destroying the infrastructure in Lebanon and depriving it of its natural right to stability and development. It is the biggest proof of the falsehood of the Israeli claims about peace. The international community must realize that peace in the Middle East would not be achieved by the will of a single party without the other. Moreover, the Arabs have proven their eagerness and seriousness about peace and the thing that remains is for Israel to also prove its desire and seriousness.

('Abbas) How do you view the situation in the Gulf and the issue of lifting the blockade that is imposed on the Iraqi people?

(Al-Bashir) We hope that everyone will be able to overcome the effects of what happened in the gulf and look to the future and to what it holds for us as an Arab and Islamic nation and developing countries in terms of major challenges.

('Abbas) How are your relations with the neighboring African countries, especially Uganda, Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia?

(Al-Bashir) As for our relations with Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, they are progressing, praise be to God, as we want them to do, and are constantly developing and improving. As for Uganda, we had hoped that the recent agreements we signed in Nairobi and Tripoli and the subsequent meetings would represent the beginning of resolving the differences between the two countries. For our part, we have complied with all that was stipulated in these agreements, including refraining from making hostile statements and propaganda campaigns against Uganda. However, the brothers

in Uganda have not complied with this and the Ugandan leadership is continuing to level accusations and false allegations against Sudan.

('Abbas) Do you believe that the Islamic popular conference has outlived its usefulness and why?

(Al-Bashir) We had agreed to host the Arab and Islamic popular conference because we believed that it could contribute to the restoration of Arab and Islamic solidarity after the sedition of the recent Gulf war. We felt it would bring the various trends and organizations in the Arab and Islamic World closer together. However, this was not achieved for various reasons. And, in the view of a number of sisterly countries, the presence of this conference in Sudan became an obstacle to the development of relations between these countries and Sudan. Subsequently, this became in conflict with the message that we had hoped to achieve from the conference. In addition to this, the activity of the conference in practice ceased some time ago and consequently the decision to abrogate the headquarters agreements that were signed between the government and the conference was a natural and expected development.

('Abbas) Why have you allowed the Al-Ummah Party and other parties to operate openly inside the country?

(Al-Bashir) As I have already mentioned, there are now complete political freedoms in Sudan. All political groups can openly practice any political and peaceful activity in accordance with the regulations that organize these activities, which were adopted during all the democratic eras in Sudan. We believe that this is the best preparation for convening the comprehensive national conference and we are committed to establishing real democracy in Sudan that would enable everyone to participate in the political life and contribute to the establishment of political stability in the country.

('Abbas) Have there been any secret messages exchanged between you and the United States through a third party? What is new in these relations in view of the reports about a breakthrough in these relations?

(Al-Bashir) I do not know what you mean by secret messages. This is because it is known that the correspondence and letters between countries are conducted in a manner that involves some kind of secrecy so that only the concerned parties can have access to them.

The issue of our relations with the United States is clear and there is also a need to overcome the current situation in these relations.

There is no need for secret agreements or messages, in the commonly used meaning and which is perhaps what you meant by your question. We have affirmed on several occasions that we are interested in having good relations with the United States. This is because it is a superpower and an influential force in the world and in our region and it can positively contribute to the attainment of peace and stability in Sudan.

There are contacts currently under way between the United States and Sudan at various levels and we are completely willing to discuss all the differences with the United States. Moreover, a number of sisterly and friendly governments, and political figures in the United States itself, which are eager to see stability and peace established in Sudan, have started talking to the US Administration. The aim is to make this administration revise its position and policy toward Sudan and adopt a more realistic and positive method. You may have seen the reports that were published in major US newspapers about the criticism that current US policy towards Sudan has come under and the calls for revising and reassessing this policy. We hope to see this happen soon.

('Abbas) How is your relationship with Iran?

(Al-Bashir) We have a good and developing relationship with Iran and there is an exchange of visits and meetings that are proceeding in a satisfactory manner. Iran is an important and sisterly Islamic country and we are eager to develop our relations with it.

('Abbas) It has been noticed that your Arab relations have witnessed a tangible breakthrough after the adoption of the 4 Ramadan decisions.

Was Al-Turabi an obstacle to progress and transparency in these relations?

(Al-Bashir) There is no doubt that settling the issue of dual leadership and the unification of the official rhetoric with regard to foreign relations have positively contributed to the development and improvement of our relations with Arab and other countries. I think that before the 4 Ramadan decisions, some countries were unsure of the real position of Sudan towards them because of the statements that were sometimes made or the positions that were attributed to a number of political parties in Sudan. I believe that this is all finished and our positions are now clear and known to everyone.

('Abbas) How do you view the African Common Market and the invigoration of its role and finding a mechanism for activating it? What is your opinion of the assertion that the position of Sudan on this market is not serious, that you were late in joining it, and the fact that you are ranked eighth in terms of the contributions to it?

(Al-Bashir) We believe that this is the age of regional and economic blocs under globalization and world free trade and economy. The African and developing countries in general badly need this and it is with this understanding that we view the establishment of a common market for eastern and central Africa. It is not true that our position on it is not a serious one. On the contrary, we take our membership in this market seriously and endeavor to benefit from all that this membership facilitates.

We are also striving to contribute to its development so that it may perform its required role. As for the size of our contributions to the organization, the economic situation in Sudan is known and dictates this state of affairs.

('Abbas) Has your visit to Kuwait erased the effects of the second Gulf war? When will the Sudanese airline, Sudan Air, resume its flights from Khartoum to Kuwait?

(Al-Bashir) Before this visit we had managed, praise be to God, to erase the effects on the relations between the two countries following the Gulf war. This visit was not intended to erase these effects and to usher in a new phase of positive cooperation on all issues that concern the two countries. It is worth mentioning that this improvement started in 1994 and the two countries have a strong and urgent desire to proceed toward what is good for the two peoples. As regard the resumption of the flights of the Sudanese airline to Kuwait, we hope that this will take place very soon after the necessary technical and administrative arrangements are made.

('Abbas) What can you tell us about your visit to Saudi Arabia and your meetings with the custodian of the two holy mosques and Crown Prince 'Abdallah?

(Al-Bashir) This visit was aimed at briefing the brothers in Saudi Arabia on the developments in all the political and economic fields in Sudan. It was also aimed at holding consultations with them on issues of mutual interest since Saudi Arabia has a major and influential role at the Arab and Islamic levels. Moreover, during the past period, there was good coordination between the two countries on several issues that were discussed at the podiums of international and regional organizations. We hope that this coordination will continue and benefit the common interests of the two brotherly peoples.

('Abbas) Is there a Saudi mediation regarding the Sudanese accord?

(Al-Bashir) The efforts to achieve accord in Sudan through the Egyptian-Libyan initiative have made progress and this initiative is supported and backed by the Arab countries, foremost of which is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was among the first countries to affirm their support for the initiative. However, we welcome and leave

the door open for any Saudi efforts in this regard in backing the accord efforts in the manner that the brothers in Saudi Arabia may deem fit.

('Abbas) Can you tell us about your new decisions to attract the investments of Sudanese expatriates to Sudan?

(Al-Bashir) The government has realized the grave burdens that expatriates have had to put up with during the past 10 years and also their major role in supporting the development and essential services projects at the Pan-Arab and national levels.

Thus, we announced the decisions in the independence speech and these were endorsed by the council of ministers. They stipulate major cuts in customs duties and the fees of consular and immigration transactions. We are not saying that we are giving them this but it is only a small repayment of gratitude for all that expatriates have given to their kinfolk and country.

The decisions also stipulate that expatriates are not obliged to transfer their money into the national currency.

Also, a social security system for Sudanese expatriates has been launched and would provide a source of income for the family in the event of the retirement or death of the family breadwinner. On the domestic level, a new investment law has been passed and it offers numerous privileges to those who want to invest their money in Sudan.

('Abbas) The abolition and reduction of taxes for Sudanese expatriates have been received with satisfaction by some.

However, some believe that this is unfair to the expatriates who have been regularly paying their taxes. That is, they have not been rewarded as those who have been late in paying their taxes. What is your response to this?

(Al-Bashir) Those who have been committed to the payment of their obligations and contributions deserve to be honored. In this regard, we will consider the suggestions that will come whether from our embassies or from the department of the Sudanese working abroad or the organizations of expatriates. We will pay every care and attention to these suggestions.

('Abbas) What is the truth about the lists of Sudanese who are banned from traveling or entering Sudan? There has been a great deal of talk about this and we would like a clarification of the fact.

(Al-Bashir) There is currently no list banning either travel or entry.

('Abbas) How long will the case of the blowing up of the oil pipeline continue to be unresolved? Will it be recorded as having been perpetrated by unknown sides in the event accord was achieved? Do you have any conclusive evidence against a certain culprit or culprits? Some opposition sides find a link between the scenario of this incident and that of the bombing of the Omdurman radio station during the region of former President Ja'far al-Numayri in 1980s. The latter was recorded as having been perpetrated by an unknown side and the identity of the aircraft that carried out the attack was never revealed.

(Al-Bashir) The legal proceedings will take their course since the case of the pipeline blow-up represents a blatant criminal transgression against the capabilities of the Sudanese people. Moreover, the incident was denounced and condemned by all sectors of the people, including some opposition factions. In other words, the incident will be treated as a criminal incident through the customary legal means and it has nothing to do with the efforts to achieve accord and political developments in the country. There should be no confusion between these issues.

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