

Sudan: Al-Bashir Assesses Domestic, Regional Issues

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Interview with Sudanese President 'Umar Hasan al-Bashir by Sawsan Abu-Husayn during the limited African conference in Tripoli; date not given

(Abu-Husayn) What were the results of the Libyan mediation between you and Eritrea, particularly in the light of the current escalation of the situation along the borders between Sudan and Eritrea?

(Al-Bashir) The Sudanese-Eritrean issue was the principal, basic, and main issue discussed during the meeting between the Libyan leader, Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. Evidently the Eritrean president sought to defend his own views concerning the policy he has lately been pursuing toward Sudan. Likewise, we are confident that for his part the brother colonel explained and defended Sudan's position because he knows us so well.

Consequently, the Libyan mediation sought the improvement of relations between Sudan and Eritrea and the elimination of tension between them, on the basis of historical and geographical facts and the eternal relations that existed between Eritrea and Sudan even after Eritrea's independence.

The positive Libyan attitude has epitomised all these aforementioned facts and concentrated on exerting efforts to defuse the situation between Eritrea and Sudan.

(Abu-Husayn) Has agreement been reached on specific measures to be implemented in the near future?

(Al-Bashir) The brothers in Libya listened to what the Eritrean president had to say. On our part, we expect Libya to now work to bring the two sides closer and end the current disputes.

(Abu-Husayn) What is Sudan's present position toward Eritrea?

(Al-Bashir) We maintain a very constant position toward Eritrea. We have supported the Eritrean people and their government and revolution. We bolstered Isaias Afwerki personally for over 30 years until Eritrea attained its statehood. Sudan has fully

endured the consequences of its support for the Eritrean revolution so much so that the major part of the problems Sudan has suffered and continues to suffer were due to its attitude toward Eritrea. Even the African countries were angry with us because we supported the Eritrean revolution for secession from Ethiopia.

This Sudanese support for the Eritrean revolution has been the cause for Ethiopia's championing of John Garang's rebellion in southern Sudan as an act of retaliation for our support for Eritrea both during and after its revolution. We have bolstered the basic process of building the Eritrean state's infrastructure from nothing, contributed to the establishment of Eritrean institutions, bolstered Eritrea's agriculture, and fully financed the referendum operation. We have also sponsored the introduction of President Afwerki to the Arab countries and defended him. However, after all that, he began to seek pretexts to provoke Sudan.

(Abu-Husayn) What is the reason for this change in the Eritrean position?

(Al-Bashir) This change in the Eritrean position in fact came as a surprise to us. For this reason we maintained silence at the beginning and refrained from replying to many of the Eritrean provocations, utterances, and even complaints to the United Nations and the Security Council against us and indeed all the measures they have taken, even when the Eritreans closed down the Sudanese embassy in Asmara.

(Abu-Husayn) Why did Sudan keep silent toward Eritrea at the beginning? Was it because you expect a change of heart on the part of Eritrea?

(Al-Bashir) Yes. For what has happened and continues to happen constitute an unnatural situation. We believe that we should transcend this state of affairs so as to preserve the relations between our two countries. However, it was evident from the start that the Eritrean leadership was determined to continue with its attitude.

(Abu-Husayn) What is the reason for this Eritrean persistence. Is it due to any premeditated intention?

(Al-Bashir) No. We were surprised by the Eritrean attitude and particularly by the timing of Eritrea's decision to escalate the situation against us, which was when tension was mounting between us and the United States and things had reached a difficult stage, particularly in the aftermath of the second war in the gulf. This state of affairs in which Sudan found itself prompted Eritrea to try to exploit it and the mounting tension between Sudan and the Arab countries. To this day President Afwerki continues to maintain his constant stances toward Arabism and Islam, as is evident from his opposition to both and his refusal to join the Arab League. President Afwerki attacked Sudan on the grounds that it wants to install an Islamic regime. In

reply to his position, we would like to ask him what prompted him to attack Yemen, which did not send any elements to bolster the Islamic movement in Eritrea. Indeed, Yemen was one of the countries that constantly supported the Eritrean revolution an(Abu-Husayn) But President Afwerki has not accused Yemen of any of the things of which he accuses you; indeed, he purses a neutral attitude toward Yemen.

(Al-Bashir) No. He does not pursue a neutral attitude toward Yemen.

He has attacked Yemen and occupied part of its territories, namely the island of Greater Hanish, which he claimed to be Eritrean. The Hanish group of islands has never belonged to Eritrea at any time whatsoever.

Even when Eritrea was still an Italian colony, these islands were not under Eritrean control. Eritrea was once part of Ethiopia. Historically these islands have always been part of Yemen. Consequently Eritrea's actions toward Yemen were nothing more than a flagrant provocation aimed at the occupation of important islands. I believe the whole issue was formulated within the framework of the Zionist plan aimed at besieging the Arab countries.

In other words, because Eritrea has a long Red Sea coast, the West and Israel feared that due to the support it enjoyed from the Arabs, Eritrea would become a part of the Arab homeland and later join the Arab League and consequently the entire Red Sea would then become an Arab lake. It was for this reason that they began to plot against the Arab nation by prompting Eritrea to take tough positions toward the Arab countries, refuse to join the Arab League, and harbor animosity toward Sudan.

Even Eritrea's statements about Egypt have not been so good. For example it attacked the Cairo peace accord, which was endorsed by the Somali groups in Egypt, just because the accord was reached in Cairo, at a time when the whole world was saying that this accord was a very positive step because it brought together a number of the basic main combatant groups. Thus the Eritrean position was contrary to that of the whole world concerning the Somali peace accord.

(Abu-Husayn) But the Eritrean Government has made it clear that it does not oppose the Somali accord signed in Cairo except for one point, namely its exclusion of a number of Somali combatant factions. Is it not so?

(Al-Bashir) Since the start of the Somali revolution there has never been a conference of Somali groups attended by all the Somali factions, and this includes even the conferences held in Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Yemen.

What we are saying is that the Cairo conference succeeded in rallying together all the Somali groups that the whole world considers to be the principal Somali groups. When we talk about Somalia, we do so on the basis that 'Ali Mahdi and Hussein Farah Aidid were the two basic elements. Cairo succeeded in bringing these two men together on several occasions prior to the signing of the Cairo Accord.

For this reason, we believe that the Somali reconciliation conference held in Cairo produced 75 percent of a solution and this ratio has been on the increase following the implementation of the accord reached for the Somali problem and the building of the Somali state.

(Abu-Husayn) But Eritrea feels that the regime in Khartoum has been seeking through the Islamic Front to change the regime in Eritrea. Is it not so?

(Al-Bashir) If what is meant is that the Islamic Front controls the government in Sudan, I would say that under the auspices of the present government we have given President Isaias Afwerki more support than at any time in the history of his struggle. Consequently, it would be illogical for us to build a structure and give it all the support we could and then try to destroy it in order to replace it with a new structure. I am talking about facts here. We have given Afwerki full support, from food, through the establishment of institutions, to the supply of funds. Having done all that, it would be illogical for us to now come along and change his regime.

We could have given all this support in another direction. But as soon as Eritrea attained its independence, problems began to confront Asmara from all sides, so we rushed to help resolve all these problems, because President Afwerki had entered Asmara without possessing any power or capability to manage things and he did not possess the necessary constituents of a state at the time. Hence it should not be easy for Afwerki to accuse us or the Islamic Front of trying to change his regime or undermine security and stability in his country.

(Abu-Husayn) Is Sudan prepared to open a new chapter with Eritrea, and what would be the necessary constituents of this chapter so that it may last?

(Al-Bashir) We have always been anxious to improve relations between Sudan and Eritrea because conflicts and disputes are abnormal. It is not a natural thing for the Sudanese and Eritrean peoples to enter into military confrontation with each other, as this will not serve the interests of either of the two countries. For both sides are in need of hard work and time for building and reconstruction. The natural thing would be for relations between Sudan and Eritrea to develop into a state of integration and not merely a state of neighborliness. Consequently we are seeking within this

framework to improve and develop relations between our two countries, starting first with the resolving of our problems.

(Abu-Husayn) Does the northern (Sudanese) opposition's use of Eritrean territory as a base for its operations constitute the basic problem between Sudan and Eritrea?

(Al-Bashir) It is the basic issue. As can be testified by the whole world, it was he (Afwerki) who created this problem by setting up camps in the Eritrean territories for the Sudanese opposition and provided it with training. This is a public knowledge and not a secret. He used to invite the media to visit these camps and has personally visited them too. A few days ago a constant barrage of shelling was started against our frontier posts, and he occupied part of our territory. For this reason, we believe that the establishment of a normal situation necessitates the following: (1) The ending of the armed tension on the borders, which is the start.

(2) The conclusion of an agreement ending the opposition's activities in both countries.

(3) The withdrawal of arms from the border areas.

Conditions would then return to what they were and there would be borders of communication and exchange, particularly as there are people who belong to the same tribe living in the two countries.

(Abu-Husayn) Did President Afwerki accepted these reconciliation points during his talks with Libyan leader al-Qadhdhafi?

(Al-Bashir) We believe that the Libyan efforts will be conducted along these lines.

(Abu-Husayn) Are you prepared to meet face to face with President Afwerki?

(Al-Bashir) There is no reason to prevent me from meeting with him.

We have done nothing to be ashamed of. For we are confident of the soundness of our position and we are anxious to improve relations between the two countries.

(Abu-Husayn) Has a date been fixed for your visit to Egypt?

(Al-Bashir) Everybody is talking about this visit as though it is something out of the ordinary. But we consider it a natural, vital, and necessary thing to take place even if there was tension between the two countries, which is not the case.

There are groups who are operating in all sorts of directions in the field of relations between the two countries. We have confidence in the work of these joint committees, which have achieved positive results and made important developments in the various political, economic, security, and technical fields. Things have begun to move toward their normal course. We support all this so that relations between the two countries can become normal in all fields.

(Abu-Husayn) When precisely will you visit Cairo?

(Al-Bashir) I have not discussed the question of fixing a date for the visit with President Husni Mubarak. However, the visit might take place at any time.

(Abu-Husayn) Are there still some pending points which the joint committees are trying to iron out prior to the visit?

(Al-Bashir) I believe that we have made and are continuing to make very positive strides forward. We have achieved good results with regard to river navigation and security issues. The political will exists in both countries for the normalization of relations between them.

(Abu-Husayn) What are the latest developments with regard to the situation with John Garang?

(Al-Bashir) Garang is not free to make his own decisions. Matters do not depend on John Garang, a fact which became clearly evident during the last meeting held in Nairobi, particularly as we began by negotiating on the basis of a specific and previously agreed agenda and within the framework of the positive proposition made by the government, which convinced all the IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) mediators with the exception of those of Uganda, which harbors animosity toward Sudan. What happened was that Garang presented a new map which was not included previously in the agenda.

(Abu-Husayn) But Garang has affirmed that the Nairobi talks failed because of the Sudanese Government's rejection of the whole agenda for peace in southern Sudan. What would you say to that?

(Al-Bashir) We would never reject the established agenda. For example, we have agreed that a solution would be achieved through the exercise of self-determination with the South enjoying its right under it.

So there is no room for outbidding by any side. The borders of the southern region are historically known. All the agreements reached in the southern provinces fell within this framework.

(Abu-Husayn) But Garang has expressed his readiness for unity within the framework of a government that would comprise all the elements, those of his movement and the Democratic Grouping and the Islamic Front. Why then the opposition to this?

(Al-Bashir) The agenda of the Nairobi negotiations held under the auspices of the IGAD is clearly known. It provides for negotiations between John Garang's movement and the Sudanese Government. Any proposition that falls outside this scope should be left for constitutional organizations to deal with. Why? Because we have an already agreed agenda, namely the principles that were approved by the IGAD member countries.

Thus there is evidently a force backing and supporting Garang and that force does not want peace to prevail in southern Sudan.

(Abu-Husayn) But Garang has not opposed unity and has not rejected peace, as is evident from his previous statements to al- Sharq al-Awsat newspaper. What would you say to that?

(Al-Bashir) We adhere to the IGAD agenda, which spoke of no plurality or sharing in government. It only spoke of finding a solution between the Garang movement and the Sudanese Government in its present form.

Consequently the paper he submitted to the recent meeting came as a surprise not only to us but also to members of the delegation and John Garang's own supporters. This is because they were aware that the provisions of the Khartoum Peace Accord meet all the demands of the people of the south. The IGAD agenda contains seven items, the last of which states that "Should there be no agreement (in other words should the negotiations fail) the south would be granted its right of self-determination." The Sudanese Government has agreed to this.

(Abu-Husayn) But there are some positive indications stemming from the dialogue, or rather the meeting with Dr. Garang, for resolving all problems en bloc before next April's meeting. What would you say to that?

(Al-Bashir) So far there seem to be no positive indications. For the position remains the same as it was. But the brothers in Kenya, by virtue of their acting as the secretariat for the IGAD negotiations, will embark on a shuttle operation between the

Sudanese Government and the Garang movement. These efforts have not started yet and consequently we cannot talk about any results.

(Abu-Husayn) Will Kenya carry out any mediation between you and Garang prior to the April meetings and, if so, when?

(Al-Bashir) The mediation is scheduled to take place prior to the April meeting to prepare the ground and thus ensure the success of negotiations.

(Abu-Husayn) Sadiq al-Mahdi (leader of the Ummah Party) visited Libya recently. Has Libya embarked on mediation between you and the northern opposition?

(Al-Bashir) Yes, efforts are being made to arrange for the holding of a meeting between the government and the northern opposition. These efforts are being carried out by Egypt and Libya, and we have welcomed them. We said that we were prepared to attend and negotiate because we are confident that negotiations can resolve all problems. We support this line -- namely that all sides could bring their agendas and submit them for discussion and thus there would be room for agreement -- without any preconditions.

(Abu-Husayn) What results have the Egyptian and Libyan efforts with the northern opposition achieved so far?

(Al-Bashir) The brothers in Libya listened to Sadiq al-Mahdi and discussed his position with him. I believe that the meeting was positive and that an agreement was reached on a number of principles such as the unity of Sudan, keeping it away from foreign and external interference, and unity of ranks through either participation or coexistence. All these create a favorable climate for agreement.

(Abu-Husayn) Has the Sudanese Government fixed the venue of the reconciliation talks with the northern opposition?

(Al-Bashir) We believe that there is currently a favorable climate in Sudan for the achievement of reconciliation, particularly with the holding of the dialogue on a permanent constitution. This dialogue has created a very positive climate for free exchanges. Some people have begun to note a climate of complete freedom being enjoyed by the press in Sudan covering all matters. This is in addition to the existence of dialogue with the remaining supporters of the opposition parties inside Sudan. We do not object to holding dialogue in either Egypt or Libya.

(Abu-Husayn) Do you expect to meet with the northern opposition in Egypt?

(Al-Bashir) No arrangements have yet been made for a meeting with the opposition in Egypt, and consequently we feel that it is essential to make the necessary arrangements for these meetings in advance.

(Abu-Husayn) Are there any new developments in the field of the development of relations with Ethiopia?

(Al-Bashir) We are anxious to improve relations with all our neighbours. We have constantly sought to improve relations with Ethiopia.

These relations have actually improved now and reached an advanced stage.

However, they have not yet reached the desired level.

(Abu-Husayn) Ethiopia announced few days ago that it has supplied Khartoum with the addresses and telephone numbers of those involved in the attempt on the life of the Egyptian President Husni Mubarak (at Addis Ababa airport). How true are these reports?

(Al-Bashir) Nothing of this sort has happened, and that is a fact.

(Abu-Husayn) The Arab arena has recently witnessed active contacts between the Arab kings and heads of state. Do you think that these contacts will culminate in the convocation of an Arab summit conference?

(Al-Bashir) The contacts that have taken place in this respect consisted of nothing more than the mere expression of wishes that have manifested themselves here and there. No official contacts have taken place for the convocation of a summit conference.

(Abu-Husayn) What would you say about the Western military threat to Iraq?

(Abu-Husayn) The situation is no longer acceptable. Intervention was initially aimed at the liberation of Kuwait. Today the situation is different because the agenda has become clear, namely the destruction of Iraq's strategic weapons and the elimination of the people. We feel that the present foreign intervention cannot be justified and constitutes Western preparation of the ground for the implementation of the Zionist plan in the Arab region.

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