The Mahdi revolution in Sudan 2

Surrounding the Mahdī

Surrounding the Mahdī were his followers, the *anṣār* ("helpers," a Qurʾānic term referring to one group of Muhammad's early followers), and foremost among them was ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad, who came from the Taʿāʾishah tribe of the Baqqārah Arabs and was designated the caliph (*khalīfah*, "successor"). Included among the followers were the holy men, the *faqīh*s, who had long lamented the sorry state of religion in the Sudan brought on by the legalistic and unappealing orthodoxy of the Egyptians and who looked to the Mahdī to purge the Sudan of the faithless ones. Also in his following, more numerous and powerful than the holy men, were the merchants formerly connected with the slave trade. All had suffered from the campaign against the trade by British general Charles George Gordon (who had been appointed governor-general of the Sudan in 1877), and all now hoped to reassert their economic position under the banner of religious war. Neither of these groups, however, could have carried out a revolution by themselves.

The third and vital participants were the Baqqārah Arabs, the cattle nomads of Kordofan and Darfur who hated taxes and despised government. They formed the shock troops of the Mahdist revolutionary army, whose enthusiasm and numbers made up for its primitive technology. Moreover, the government itself only managed to enhance the prestige of the Mahdī by its fumbling attempts to arrest him and proscribe his movement. By September 1882 the Mahdists controlled all of Kordofan, and at Shaykān on Nov. 5, 1883, they destroyed an Egyptian army of 10,000 men under the command of a British colonel. After Shaykān, the Sudan was lost, and not even the heroic leadership of Gordon, who was hastily sent to Khartoum, could save the Sudan for Egypt. On Jan. 26, 1885, the Mahdists captured Khartoum and massacred Gordon and the defenders and subsequently founded the Mahdist state.

The reign of the Khalīfah

Five months after the fall of Khartoum, the Mahdī died suddenly on June 22, 1885. He was succeeded by the Khalīfah ʿAbd Allāh. The Khalīfah's first task was to secure his own precarious position among the competing factions in the nascent

Mahdist state. He frustrated a conspiracy by the Mahdī's relatives and disarmed the personal retinues of his leading rivals in Omdurman, the Mahdist capital.

Having curtailed the threats to his rule, the Khalīfah sought to accomplish the Mahdī's dream of a universal jihad (holy war) to reform Islam throughout the Muslim world. With a zeal compounded from a genuine wish to carry out religious reform, a desire for military victory and personal power, and an appalling ignorance of the world beyond the Sudan, the Khalīfah sent his forces to the four points of the compass to spread al-Mahdiyyah and extend the domains of the Mahdist state. By 1889 this expansionist drive was spent. In the west the Mahdist armies had achieved only an unstable occupation of Darfur. In the east they had defeated the Ethiopians, but the victory produced no permanent gain. In the southern Sudan the Mahdists had scored some initial successes but were driven from the upper Nile in 1897 by the forces of the Congo Free State of Leopold II of Belgium. On the Egyptian frontier in the north the jihad met its worst defeat, at Tūshkī in August 1889, when an Anglo-Egyptian army under Gen. F.W. (later Baron) Grenfell destroyed a Mahdist army led by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nujūmī.

The Mahdist state had squandered its resources on the jihad, and a period of consolidation and contraction followed, necessitated by a sequence of bad harvests resulting in famine, epidemic, and death. Between 1889 and 1892 the Sudan suffered its most devastating and terrible years, as the Sudanese sought to survive on their shriveled crops and emaciated herds. After 1892 the harvests improved, and food was no longer in short supply. Moreover, the autocracy of the Khalīfah had become increasingly acceptable to most Sudanese, and, having tempered his own despotism and eliminated the gross defects of his administration, he, too, received the widespread acceptance, if not devotion, that the Sudanese had accorded the Mahdī.

In spite of its many defects, the Khalīfah's administration served the Sudan better than its many detractors would admit. Certainly the Khalīfah's government was autocratic, but, while autocracy may be repugnant to European democrats, it not only was understandable to the Sudanese but appealed to their deepest feelings and attitudes formed by tribe, religion, and past experience with the centralized authoritarianism of the Ottomans. For them the Khalīfah was equal to the task of governing bequeathed him by the Mahdī. Only when confronted by new forces

from the outside world, of which he was ignorant, did ʿAbd Allāh's abilities fail him.

British conquest and the demise of al-Mahdiyyah

British forces had invaded and occupied Egypt in 1882 to put down a nationalist revolution hostile to foreign interests and remained there to prevent any further threat to the khedive's government or the possible intervention of another European power. The consequences of this were far-reaching. A permanent British occupation of Egypt required the inviolability of the Nile waters from rival European powers. Consequently, the British government, by diplomacy and military maneuvers, negotiated agreements with the Italians and the Germans to keep them out of the Nile valley. They were less successful with the French, who wanted them to withdraw from Egypt. Once it became apparent that the British were determined to remain, the French cast about for means to force the British from the Nile valley. In 1893 an elaborate plan was concocted by which a French expedition would march across Africa from the west coast to Fashoda (Kodok) on the upper Nile. After inordinate delays, the French Nile expedition set out for Africa in June 1896, under the command of Capt. Jean-Baptiste Marchand.

As reports reached London during 1896 and 1897 of Marchand's march to Fashoda, Britain's inability to insulate the Nile valley became embarrassingly exposed. British officials desperately tried one scheme after another to beat the French to Fashoda. They all failed, and by the autumn of 1897 British authorities had come to the reluctant conclusion that the conquest of the Sudan—and therefore, the Mahdist state—was necessary to protect the Nile waters from French encroachment. In October an Anglo-Egyptian army under the command of Gen. Sir (later Lord) Horatio Herbert Kitchener was ordered to invade the Sudan. Kitchener pushed steadily but cautiously up the Nile. His Anglo-Egyptian forces defeated a large Mahdist army at the ʿAṭbarah River on April 8, 1898. Then, after spending four months preparing for the final advance to Omdurman, Kitchener's army of about 25,000 troops met the massed 60,000-man army of the Khalīfah outside the city on Sept. 2, 1898. By midday the Battle of Omdurman was over.

The Mahdists were decisively defeated with heavy losses, and the Mahdist state was brought to an end. The Khalīfah fled and was killed nearly a year later.

The Mahdist War in Sudan Images:

Kitchener's campaign against the Khalifa and his army in Sudan – the warriors of which Kipling famously referred to as the 'Fuzzy-Wuzzy' in his Barack Room Ballads – was the last of a series of conflicts that some today collectively refer to as the Mahdist War, which began as early as 1881. This almost 18-year conflict has its roots in the rise of the Mahdi of Sudan, a fanatical Islamic religious leader by the name of Muhammad Ahmed Ibn Al-Sayyid Abdullah. The Mahdi, by which title historians simply refer to him, proclaimed himself to be the one true Mahdi – the redeemer of Islam – on 29 June 1881. He was not the only individual to make such a claim, but his charismatic personality drew many to his cause.

A rebellion followed,

A rebellion followed, led by the Mahdi himself, against the hated Egyptian authorities in Sudan. Despite being better armed and equipped, the Egyptian Army suffered numerous defeats against the Mahdi's followers, and it would not be long before Muhammad Ahmed would command an army – which he later called the 'Ansar', meaning 'helpers' – of many thousands. A man who was once deemed little more than a religious nutcase had managed to firmly establish Mahdism, and it was a powerful threat to the Khedive of Egypt.

Right: *Ahmed Arabi, who led a nationalist uprising in Egypt that resulted in the British invasion of the country in 1882*

The British became involved in affairs in Sudan – and ultimately clashed with the Mahdists – following their invasion of Egypt in 1882. This seizure of Egypt had nothing to do with Muhammad Ahmed; indeed, the British had no interest in Sudan, but wanted rather to deal with the threat posed by Ahmed Arabi's nationalist uprising against the weak Khedive. The British had loaned much money to the Egyptian ruler and wanted to protect their investment, not to mention

securing the Suez Canal, the all-important gateway to India.
For the British, the problem of the Mahdi was one they attempted to ignore, but eventually what was a headache for the Egyptians would become a migraine for the occupying British. Famously, General Charles Gordon was sent to Khartoum in order to extract beleaguered Egyptian troops and Europeans from the city, but he would become besieged and subsequently killed by the Mahdi's warriors. An outraged British public demanded that his death be avenged.
Despite having ordered a substantial military expedition, under the command of Sir Garnet Wolseley, to rescue Gordon from his predicament at Khartoum, the British government at the time had little desire to become further involved in Sudan. When the expedition failed to reach Gordon in time it was ultimately withdrawn, and the calls to avenge Gordon's death had to wait for over a decade.

When, in 1896, the British did finally decide to act in Sudan against the Khalifa – the successor to the Mahdi, who had died in 1885 – their reasons had little to do with exacting revenge for the loss of their beloved general but rather to come to the assistance of Italy. The Italians had suffered a heavy defeat at the Battle of Adwa in northern Abyssinia on 1 March. Over 6,000 Italian troops had become casualties and another 3,000-4,000 taken prisoner by the Abyssinians. This defeat left the Italians weak in Eritrea, a fact not lost on the Mahdists who now saw an opportunity to seize Kassala in eastern Sudan. Fearing further defeat, the Italian ambassador to London asked the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, for help.

Salisbury agreed, although his decision to commit military resources in making a demonstration in northern Sudan – thus distracting the Mahdists from their bid to retake Kassala – was born more out of territorial ambition than charity towards a fellow European power. The so-called scramble for Africa was well underway, and the British wished to extend their influence south of Egypt's borders, particularly down the Nile Valley as far as Uganda. However, other European powers were at work in the region, and Salisbury was determined to keep the French out, as he believed they were ready to carry out an advance towards the Upper Nile.
The Sudan remained of little interest to the British; it was after all mostly desert and full of hostile Mahdists. However, the Nile promised to be quite profitable and could not be allowed to fall under the influence of a European rival. The coming British campaign in Sudan, then, began with its roots firmly in European politics, and the Battle of Adwa merely determined when to set the wheels in motion.

Following the British invasion of Egypt, there was a need to rebuild the Egyptian Army. The British, throughout the 19th century, raised local forces to bear the burden of military operations rather than deploy large numbers of British soldiers. Prior to 1882, the lot of the Egyptian soldier had not been a happy one: the vast majority were drawn from the fellahin – the Egyptian peasantry – who would resort to drastic actions to escape military service, such as cutting off their trigger fingers. This was a response to the poor conditions in which the soldiers lived, the fact that they hardly ever received their pay on time, and knowing that they were unlikely to see their home villages ever again.

To solve this problem, far-reaching reforms of the Egyptian military were introduced. Soldiers were better fed and clothed; they received their pay on time and were granted leave in order to visit friends and family back home. Better training for officers was introduced and equipment improved, such as the issue of the Martini-Henry rifle. Many of the Egyptian battalions would be commanded by British officers, although some also had Egyptian officers. By the time of Kitchener's campaign in 1896, a number of Sudanese battalions were also raised, which incorporated Mahdist deserters, and a second army also existed in Egypt, made up of regular British regiments, which continued to provide a backbone to local forces.

However, perhaps the most formidable weapon employed against the Mahdists was the Sudan Military Railway (SMR). For Kitchener's huge army to operate effectively it needed to be supplied, and the most efficient way to do this was by rail. The railway was also used to transport men and animals. The building of the SMR was largely down to one man, the Canadian-born Edouard Girouard of the Royal Engineers, who had been a railway builder before joining the army. His talents and hard work were key to success in Sudan.

The troops assembled for the campaign numbered around 9,000, the vast majority of whom were Egyptian and Sudanese, although a handful of men from the North

Staffordshire Regiment and the Connaught Rangers formed a Maxim machine gun section. In addition, some 900 men of the North Staffords were retained in readiness at Wadi Halfa in case they were required. Since the force was to operate in the Sudanese province of Dongola it was named the Dongola Expeditionary Force. Although the railway would be extended to facilitate the advance, a number of Nile steamers were provided by Thomas Cook, which were stripped of their niceties to become troop vessels.

On 1 May 1896, the first clash between Kitchener's army and the Mahdists occurred at a place called Akasha. Major John Burn-Murdoch was commanding three squadrons of Egyptian cavalry, conducting a reconnaissance of the surrounding area, when he sighted a force of around 1,300 Mahdist footmen and 300 horsemen. Since he had no infantry support, the major took the decision to retire, but as he did so the Mahdists spotted his cavalrymen. A fight ensued, during which a number of Egyptians became casualties in close-quarter combat. Eventually the Mahdists broke off when a battalion of Sudanese infantry suddenly appeared.

On 2 June, Kitchener's expeditionary force was finally concentrated at Akasha and he felt ready to go on the offensive. A march to Firket was begun, for which the Sirdar – Kitchener's title as commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Army – split his force into two, including: a River Column under Major-General Archibald Hunter and a Desert Column under Burn-Murdoch. Kitchener knew the bulk of the Ansar was at Dongola, but he first needed to deal with the Mahdist force at Firket under Hammuda Idris.

The River Column advanced to Firket along the Nile, while the Desert Column headed towards the east. The plan was for both columns to arrive at Firket at the same time for the attack; Hunter would attack from the north while Burn-Murdoch blocked any possible line of retreat for the Mahdists to the south.

On 7 June the Action of Firket began at 5am, when a group of Ansar marksmen opened fire on Kitchener's force from the heights of Jebel Firket. With these warriors cleared off, the advance resumed and the three brigades of the River Column assaulted the main Mahdist camp. The Desert Column also became engaged when Burn-Murdoch's artillery opened fire. The Mahdists put up a

determined fight, but eventually they were defeated after little more than two hours. Kitchener had achieved victory at the cost of 20 killed and 83 wounded, while Ansar casualties stood at 800-1,000 killed or wounded and a further 500 captured.

Kitchener's gunboats would clash with Mahdist forces at Hafir on 19 September, but the Sirdar would finally march into Dongola on 23 September. The Dongola campaign had been short but highly successful.

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With the capture of Dongola, both Lord Salisbury and Lord Cromer, the British consul-general of Egypt, felt the Sirdar's operations were at an end. Kitchener, however, did not! The Sirdar believed it wise to continue to advance rather than leave the Egyptian Army in Dongola to stagnate while the Mahdists regrouped. Cromer had no objection to the campaign continuing, but he knew Egypt could not afford it. The Sirdar, therefore, returned to England to argue his case. He received help from an unlikely quarter, when it was learned that the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Marchand was set to conduct an expedition to the Upper Nile. In response, the British Government agreed to foot the bill and the campaign was extended.

Pushing further into Sudan, the Egyptian force next clashed with the Mahdists at Abu Hamed on 7 August 1897. Commanding Egyptian forces was Major-General Archibald Hunter, who had with him three Egyptian infantry battalions and one Sudanese, supported by artillery, Maxims and cavalry. Opposing them were 1,350 Mahdist footmen, of which around 500 were armed with rifles, and 150 horsemen. Hunter gave the order to conduct an assault of Abu Hamed, which was again met with stiff resistance from the Ansar. Ultimately, however, the Egyptians were victorious, at the cost of 23 killed and 64 wounded; Mahdist casualties were estimated to be around 250-450 killed.

A far more serious action, the second largest of the entire reconquest, came on 8 April 1898. The Battle of Atbara, as it was known, was different from the former actions of the campaign because it involved substantial numbers of British troops that Kitchener had requested to reinforce the expeditionary force. Kitchener commanded the battle himself, with four brigades of infantry, including one British and three Egyptian, supported by artillery and cavalry. The battle involved a heavy

assault of a Mahdist zariba near the Atbara River, the latter commanded by Mahmud Ahmed. For the first time, British troops were greatly involved, although the Egyptian and Sudanese troops were heavily engaged. Again, the action ended in victory for the Sirdar, although Anglo-Egyptian losses were high, including: 82 killed and 478 wounded. Mahmud's losses were estimated at 3,000 killed.

The largest and most important action of the entire campaign was, of course, the Battle of Omdurman, fought on 2 September 1898. Kitchener advanced towards Omdurman and made camp at a place called Egeiga on the Nile. To protect his force a zariba was built. The battle can be seen to have three phases. The first was the Mahdist attack of Kitchener's force within the zariba, where thousands of warriors charged towards the Anglo-Egyptian troops, only to be gunned down by rifle and Maxim fire. Also adding their firepower were the gunners of the artillery and the gunboats on the Nile.

Following the repulse of the first attack, the 21st Lancers conducted their famous charge against a group of warriors in Khor Abu Sunt. Unfortunately for the brave cavalrymen, they fell into a trap organised by Osman Digna, and a virtual disaster ensued when the lancers suffered many casualties amongst both men and horses. One notable participant of the charge was a young Lieutenant Winston Churchill.

Phase two began when Kitchener recommenced his advance, during which the Mahdists again attacked. A further disaster might have struck the Sirdar's force when Brigadier-General Hector MacDonald's 1st Egyptian Brigade became separated from the main body of the Anglo-Egyptian force and faced over 20,000 of the Khalifa's warriors. Nevertheless, MacDonald's men held their own and repulsed their attackers.

The final phase of the battle commenced when Ya'qub Muhammad Turshain committed the Black Flag – the Mahdist reserve – to the fight. Again MacDonald's brigade came under immense pressure, and again the Egyptians and Sudanese soldiers made ready to meet their enemy. On the verge of defeat, MacDonald breathed a sigh of relief when soldiers of the Lincolnshire Regiment arrived just in the nick of time to help. Eventually the Mahdist attack fizzled out, and a general retreat of the Ansar towards Omdurman ensued.

The Khalifa was defeated, although operations continued. Kitchener next took the city of Omdurman, but he was too late to catch the Khalifa, who managed to flee. (He would eventually be killed at the Battle of Umm Diwaykarat on 25 November 1899.) Omdurman had cost Kitchener 45 killed and 425 wounded. Mahdist casualties were estimated at 10,800 killed, 15,000 wounded and 5,000 taken prisone