Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan Since the Mahdiyya

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In Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya, Gabriel Warburg traces the role that Islam played in Sudanese politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the preface he describes this book as the culmination of thirty years’ research on Sudanese history, and notes that it follows on the heels of several earlier books and articles, including his The Sudan under Wingate (1971), Islam, Nationalism and Communism in a Traditional Society (1978), Historical Discord in the Nile Valley (1992), and others. Warburg’s long commitment to Sudanese studies is apparent. The scholarship displayed in Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics is as deep as it is broad, making the book a must-read for Sudan specialists.

The book falls into three main parts. In a concise fifty-six pages, the first part provides a brilliant survey of developments in the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdist periods (1821-1898). Distilling the English and Arabic scholarship of historians such as Hill, Holt, Abū Salīm, al-Qaddāl, Bjørkelo, O’Fahey, Spaulding, and others, Warburg points to major developments in Sufism, the Mahdist movement, and the Mahdist state, commenting along the way on major economic, political, and social trends. This first section offers a fresh synthesis of extant scholarship on the nineteenth century and will be particularly useful and valuable to historians. The second section covers developments in the Anglo-Egyptian period (1898-1956), considering, for example, British policy towards Sufism and neo-Mahdism, the organization of Sharī‘a courts and of Islamic personal status law, and the emergence of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-
Mahdī and Sayyid ʿAlī al-Mīrghanī as sectarian political rivals. In this second section, Warburg draws extensively on British sources from the Public Record Office in London and the Sudan Archive in Durham, as well as on Sudan Government intelligence reports. The third section of the book covers the postcolonial period from 1956 until 2000. In great detail, it examines sectarian politics, parliamentary interludes, and the policies of the ʿAbbūd, Numayrī, and Bashīr military regimes. It also traces the growth of the Sudanese Muslim Brothers movement, which has assumed various names and guises over the years (e.g., as the Islamic Charter Front, the National Islamic Front, and more recently the National Congress). In this third section, Warburg pays close attention to the politicking of Šādiq al-Mahdī and Ḥasan al-Turābī. Drawing upon newspaper reports, interviews, and other sources, this third section offers a dense analysis that will appeal to readers who have a solid background in contemporary Sudanese history and politics. Those who are new to the subject (and who want, for example, an overview of the dynamics of the Sudanese civil war) should consult more general accounts, such as Ann Lesch’s *The Sudan: Contested National Identities* (1998).

The two-century scope of *Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics* enables Warburg to draw out some interesting parallels in modern Sudanese history. For example, he notes the similarities in Turco-Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian policies towards Sufism. Both colonial regimes regarded Sufi shaykhs as backward yet potentially dangerous figures who could excite their loyal followers against foreign rule; both regimes therefore tried to outmaneuver Sufi leaders by cultivating a more legalistically-trained cadre of ʿulāmāʾ to serve in a centrally organized Islamic judiciary. (The British, for their part, only warmed to Sufi leaders during World War I when their support became useful to the regime.) Warburg also draws some parallels between the Mahdist era (1881-98) and the NIF-Bashīr era (1989-present), two periods of autocratic Islamic rule. He notes, too, that Jaʿfar
Numayrī may have been consciously harkening back to the Mahdist enterprise when he made his turn to political Islam in the late 1970s and early ’80s, and assumed the quasi-messianic title of imām.

In describing British policy towards Islam in the Sudan, Warburg asserts that the British throughout their empire were guided by the principle of separation of church and state. On this point, I disagree somewhat with the author. I would suggest instead that this British policy of church-and-state separation was not uniform across the empire, but was applied only in African and Asian communities that followed scriptural religious traditions and that had literate indigenous classes of scholars (whether religious specialists or bureaucrats) who were capable of organizing anti-colonial resistance. In other words, this policy applied notably to Muslim and Hindu societies. It appears that British policies were quite different in regions inhabited by traditionally non-literate practitioners of local religions (peoples who tended to be politically atomized). Indeed, in the southern Sudan, as in Kenya, southern Nigeria, and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, British regimes worked closely with the church—or more precisely, with a variety of churches that were organized as missions—in arranging education and medical services. In this regard, British policy towards Islam in the northern Sudan was dramatically different from policy towards traditional religions in the southern Sudan—British policies in the latter region in fact facilitated Christianization. Bearing these patterns in mind, I would suggest that in the Muslim-majority northern Sudan, British policy towards religion was more a matter of imperial pragmatism than principle. By distancing the government from Islamic affairs—even while supporting and supervising from on high Arabic and Islamic education, the Sharī‘a personal-status court system, and the Meccan pilgrimage—the British hoped to appease Muslims or to make the prospect of rule by Christians less odious.

Concluding his chapters on the crisis-afflicted post-
1956 period, Warburg draws two conclusions. First, he suggests, sectarianism in its neo-Mahdist and Khatmiyya versions looks set to remain a strong political force in future Sudanese politics, even if the Bashīr regime has been working since 1989 to suppress sectarian elements. And second, Islamic law and government, while perhaps not inimical to democracy in theory, are unlikely to work democratically in a unified and culturally pluralistic Sudan, particularly given the presence of significant Christian minorities in the South and in northern cities. Otherwise phrased, the Sudanese civil war is unlikely to end if northern-dominated regimes continue to insist on the nation-wide application of Arab-Islamic precepts.

As an Israeli citizen, Warburg has never been able to visit Sudan. It is all the more impressive, therefore, that he knows the country’s history and politics so intimately, as Islam, Sectarianism, and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya makes evident. This book makes a forceful contribution to the Sudanese historical literature: readers, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese, should take note.

Heather J. Sharkey