



THE MAHDI OF SUDAN — PART 2

Filippo Donvito

On June 29, 1881, two years after the end of the slaves' revolt, Muhammad Ahmad, a poor Sufi from the region of Dongola in Northern Sudan, publicly announced he was the *Mahdi*, "the guided one".

According to several *hadiths* (Prophet's sayings and deeds), the Mahdi is the great eschatological figure, the redeemer who will restore Islam to its ancient purity and start a new era of justice before the Second Coming of Jesus and the Day of Judgment. He will come from the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*) and bear certain markings and distinctive physical traits which ensure his identity¹. Muhammad Ahmad was indeed the son of a humble boatman who traced his descent back to the Prophet Muhammad; moreover, his full name - Muhammad Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah - was the same as the Prophet's, another clear distinctive feature required by tradition.

Foreseeing the start of a rebellion, the Egyptian government sent a small force of soldiers to arrest the Mahdi and reassert the official authority on Aba, the White Nile island where the mystic lived with

¹ D. Cook, *Understanding jihad*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 129-132; H. Laoust, *Les schismes dans l'Islam* (Paris: Payot, 1983), pp. 313-316.



his followers. Clearly, this measure was expected by Muhammad Ahmad, as the military were ambushed and massacred by 200 of his followers.

The Mahdi was safe, but acting in such manner he had drawn all the attention to himself. To escape the vengeance of authority, the Mahdi drew inspiration from the story of the Prophet Muhammad. He started a new *Hijra*, the migration of the Prophet from his original home, Mecca, to a new place, the city of Yatrib (Medina), a safer place for him and his companions.

The Mahdi thus fled to Kordofan, in central Sudan, where he gained the loyalty of many *Baggara* tribesmen. At the beginning, the main adherents to his cause were from north and west Sudan, but in a couple of years also the region of *bahr al Ghazal*, in south Sudan, joined his movement, the *Mahdiyya*. By then, the original religious protest of the poor sufi had turned into a national insurrection against the Egyptians and their European masters. Possibly the Mahdi's ambition was not only liberation, but conquest: the entire house of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) must come under his rule, and only then his mission would be complete.

It is interesting to note some aspects of the *Mahdiyya*, notably its many recallings to the story of the Prophet Muhammad. As we saw, the Mahdi consciously emulated the Prophet's flight from Mecca to Medina when he was forced to leave his home city and take refuge in another region. These *Hijras*, or escapes from a place to another in order to continue the religious preaching, are a common feature among many Islamic revolutionary movements, like the Abbasids in the VIII century and the Ismaili Fatimids in the X.

Another parallel to the story of the Prophet of Islam can be traced by looking to the organization of the followers of the Mahdi. The word by which they were called, *ansar* ("auxiliaries"), was the same used for the historical inhabitants of Medina who helped Muhammad and his early followers after their flight from Mecca.



Furthermore, the Mahdi's headquarter was formed by four Caliphs who had the task of helping him to shape a new era of Islamic purity, a deliberate imitation of the four well-guided Caliphs of the early Islamic conquest. In summary, everything around the Mahdi must remind Muslims that the ancient splendour of their religion was about to start again.

Completely transformed from a simple religious man into a true charismatic leader, the Mahdi took position also on more secular topics, and in particular on the slave trade in Sudan. Very cunningly, Muhammad Ahmad found a way to use his message both as a promise of redemption from a miserable life and as favor to the local elites. He forbade the enslavement of all his followers, including non-Muslims, but allowed the enslavement of all the free Muslims who refused to accept him.

In November 1883, the *Mahdiyya* achieved one of its first and greatest successes. A swarm of several tens of thousands *Ansar*, armed only with spears and swords, ambushed and defeated a body of 10.000 professional Egyptian soldiers commanded by the British officer William Hicks, who perished in the battle. The spoils of victory considerably increased the military potential of the Mahdist warriors, who had now at their disposal 10.000 remington rifles and even several cannons with lots of ammunition.

The Mahdi's forces grew steadily until they reached - it was said - the spectacular size of 200.000. True or not, the power of the dervishes (poor mystics in the original meaning), just another name for the Mahdi's followers, increased so much that the Sudan was deemed as almost lost and Egypt directly threatened. But if Egypt was in such danger, its masters would not sit and watch for too long².

² The first successes of the mahdi are widely described by Romolo Gessi, Gordon's Lieutenant in the Sudan, in his book *Sette anni nel Sudan egiziano (Seven years in the Egyptian Sudan [Milan: Messaggerie Pontremolesi 1989])*; and by the Austro-Hungarian officer, and colonel of the Egyptian High Command Rudolf Carl von Slatin, who fell prisoner of the mahdi and wrote a



While the Mahdi was getting his first victories, the British Empire had managed to extend its protectorate over the Egyptian *Khedive*. During the reign of the *Khedive* Tewfik Pasha (1879-1892), the first seeds of a constitutionalist and nationalist movement had spread throughout Egypt. The movement had various components and different goals, but among its many adherents were the group of the natives, who were mainly minor officers in the army of peasant stock. Their leader was colonel Ahmad 'Urabi, who called himself a *Fellah* ('peasant'). In his speeches 'Urabi often railed against the government's incompetence and the greed of its European masters.

In 1882, the year after the Mahdi had publicly announced himself, 'Urabi was appointed minister of war and the situation rapidly worsened. Some Turkish dignitaries were exiled and several incidents broke out in Alexandria where many Europeans were killed. France and Britain immediately sent their warships in the harbour to bomb the city, then the French chose to retire, while the British decided to land the troops on the ground. 'Urabi tried to stop them but was defeated in the battle of Tell el Kebir.

Consequently, he was tried and exiled. The Egyptian army was considerably downsized and came under the English command. In the meantime, the Mahdi's revolt was gaining ground in Sudan. The British, now full masters of Egypt, were the only ones who could take on the task of freeing Sudan. Apparently, they opted for a compromise at first. The Gladstone government, fostered by the press and the public opinion, decided to send general Gordon back to Sudan to organize the evacuation of Khartoum, the capital which was already threatened by the siege of the Mahdi. Gordon, the hero who quelled the slaves' revolt some years before, can be considered the Christian counterpart of the Mahdi and, as such, his nemesis too. He was not only a war hero who had fought in China and Crimea, but also a true believer or, better, a gnostic who felt

monumental history about the mahdist revolt, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan* (Cairo: Edward Arnold, 1898).



that his body and life were only means by which to test his soul before God. Actually, it was a bit naive to think that such a man would simply retreat calmly before the Mahdi, as prescribed his instructions.

In reality, there are various indications suggesting that Gordon was just the pawn of a bigger game. Was it not possible for the general to find himself in serious difficulty, surrounded and cut off from Egypt by the Dervishes? And if that would happen, how could the British government refrain from sending an expedition to save him? In short, the sending of Gordon to Khartoum would not have inevitably led to the conquest and occupation of the Sudan by British troops? The British had a need to justify their recent occupation of Egypt, an eventual conquest of the Sudan - for humanitarian reasons of course - would have made them impossible to withdraw from the Nile.

Certainly Gordon did his part. After he arrived at Khartoum, in January 1884, he organized the evacuation of some women, children and sick people, while at the same time started preparations to resist the siege of the Mahdi. His declared intent was to suppress the rebellion and to resist until the end, if necessary. As months passed, Gordon did not change his mind and the Mahdi's forces continued to make progresses in the siege of Khartoum. The general resorted to all the war tricks he knew to slow down the final attack, but it was clear that he could not face such a battle with a handful of European officers and some Egyptian soldiers. Finally, in August the British government decided to take steps to relieve Gordon and organized a relief force under Lord Wolseley, one of the leaders of the government's imperialist wing.

The Wolseley expedition, though, advanced slowly and with extreme caution down the Nile and the nearby desert. Gordon's situation, in the meantime, was rapidly getting worse. On September 9, 1884, an armoured steamer called *Abbas*, which



Gordon had sent on the Nile to Cairo to ask for help, was captured by the *Ansar*. All aboard were killed, including the *Times* journalist Frank Powers, Colonel Stewart – Gordon’s Chief of Staff – and the French Herbin, consul in Khartoum. One day Gordon received a personal letter and a small pack of clothes from the Mahdi. *“In the name of God”* said the letter, *“here is jibbah, cloak, turban, headdress, belt and rosary. This is the clothing of those who have renounced the world and its vanities and wait for the world to come for eternal happiness in Paradise. If you really want to come to God and try to live with devotion, you must wear these clothes immediately and go out and accept your eternal good fortune”*³.

Gordon and the Mahdi never met, but the two men who saw themselves as religious soldiers fighting for God had developed a mutual respect and, perhaps, even a sort of admiration. By the end of 1884, the people of Khartoum were starving to death and the British relief force had not yet arrived. Gordon told the civilian population that everyone who wanted to leave and join the Mahdi was free to do so. Approximately half of the city immediately left. At that point, Gordon was weaving between the despair of the man abandoned by all and the exaltation of the martyr. All those who knew him were convinced he wanted to die, rather than secretly running away like a thief and leaving the city to the enemy. Only the timely arrival of the British troops would have prevented him from facing destruction.

The expedition reached Khartoum on 28 January 1885 at last, but it was too late. The city had fallen just two days earlier, and Gordon with it. There are different versions about the circumstances of his death, but all agree that he faced it with courage and contempt⁴. The subsequent history of the Mahdist state of Sudan resemble more a war bulletin from Central Africa than a romantic adventure. Almost as his destiny was linked to that of the Christian hero, the

³ L. Strachey, *Eminent Victorians. General Gordon* (New York 1918), pp. 295-296.

⁴ S. Churchill, *General Gordon. A Christian Hero* (London-Edinburgh: Nisbet, 1905), pp. 242-258.



Mahdi died only six months after the fall of Khartoum and was succeeded by his caliph Abdallah ibn Muhammad.

The Mahdists consolidated their control over Sudan and gained even some sporadic successes in the following years, but they no longer had the impetus, nor the strength to embark on the conquest of Egypt. On the opposite part, the British calmly rebuilt Egypt's army and state finances. Then, when France's colonial expansion was dangerously approaching the Upper Nile regions, they decided the time had come to avenge Gordon and "help" the Egyptians regain their old province. The final battle was fought at Omdurman, in 1898, where an Anglo-Egyptian army of 20.000 with more than 50 quick-firing guns utterly defeated 52.000 *Ansar* warriors. The caliph Abdallah perished in the battle and Sudan became part of the British Empire. It stayed a British dominion until 1956.

The revolt of the Mahdi is not only the stage for a spectacular historical drama. In some way it is the birth of modern Middle East. The nationalist and revolutionary ideas of XIX century Europe had begun to sow seeds in the desert of the East, reviving, at the same time, the ancient thirst for equality and justice that had always pervaded the spirit of Islam. For the first time in Sudan, a religious leader opposed the influence of a modern Western power. When faith and progress blind man, fanaticism can no longer be distinguished from greed.