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Mar 7, 2008 - 7:51:51 AM

Breaking a Taboo: Mr Nur and his SLM Office in Israel

By Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

SLM leader Abdelwahid Mohamed Nur is not new to controversy. His February 08 gamble of opening an SLM office in Israel will certainly not be the last. His action however attracted hostile debate both inside the Sudan and in the Arab world. The National Congress Party of Albashir (NCP) went for the kill and there was no shortage of hand-givers. Those who rallied to join in the political assassination included NCP supporters, members of opposition but equally Darfur poppets who have long sold to Albashir.

Mr Nur's decision to open an office in Israel is surely at odd with northern Sudanese culture including that of Darfur . We should concede that political leaders have to yield to public opinion of their constituencies. But leaders also have to lead and that invariably means crossing new frontiers in political thinking. Mr Nur has taken a grave risk but has certainly not committed a cardinal mistake, let away strayed into a political suicide threshold as his foes would like to think.

Mr Nur did break a taboo in northern Sudanese culture but that taboo has long passed its sell-by-date. In some ways, that taboo had long been destroyed by none other than the same northern based governments in the country. As some readers might recall, Sudan was responsible for exporting several thousand indigenous Ethiopian Jews to Israel . The incident took place during the reign of Dictator Nimeiri in the early 1980s and under nose of the same Islamists who are now controlling the country. It happened at the time when Sudan 's government along with all Arab countries were condemning Israel for its policy of granting automatic citizenship for any who could claim a Jewish descent. Surprisingly, Elfateh Irwa, the chief personnel who took charge of ferrying out the Ethiopian Jews through Sudan , was elevated by Albashir to act as his Sudan 's Envoy to the United Nations and later as a lead security advisor. Irwa was acting under instruction from Omer Mohamed El-Tayib, a close confidant of Dictator Nimeiri. He too was a recipient of Albashir's favour who released him from prison where he was serving time for corruption relating to the same Jewish episode.

If Albashir and his NCP care to know what drove the SLM-Nur to open an office in Tel Aviv, they need to go no further than the Presidential Palace in Khartoum . Five years of near annihilation war, targeting mostly innocent citizens and with the connivance of the Arab Islamic world has paved the road to Tel Aviv.

Like the rest of us in Muslim Sudan and particularly in Darfur , Mr Nur must have inculcated immense hatred, not only of the Jewish State but regrettably of Jews as a race. I still recall the Friday prayers sermons in Darfur to that effect and Darfur is no different from other parts of Muslim Sudan . Referring to Jewish people the imam would preach: "May Allah ruin their homes, make their children orphans and turn them and their wealth booties for the believers". And we would respond "Amen, Lord of the two Worlds".

Cultural conflation of the Jewish race with the Israeli State is not confined to poorly educated imams. Islamists of Sudan like Albashir and who normally count among the educated elite of Sudan stand testimony to my point. In their demonstrations in support of the Palestinians, they clearly reflect just that.

A popular chant in these demonstrations and rallies reads: "God is Great, you Jews, the army of Mohamed will come back". (Allahu Akbar ya yahood, jaishu Mohamed sawfa Yaood). Oh no; that part of our culture must go and we must thank Mr Nur for giving us the opportunity to debate that change.

I was flabbergasted and disgusted to witness intense attack of the Arab media on Mr. Nur. The attack is led by the reputable Egyptian Newspaper Al-Ahram and the Al-Ahram Centre for Strategic Studies, under leadership of Hani Ruslan whose office must be a mere stone throw from the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. When it comes to support of Albashir, the Arab-Islamic world has shown no limit to its hypocrisy. From the Atlantic Ocean at Morocco to the Indian Ocean at Bahrain, there is hardly a single Arab airport that has a place for self-declared Darfur refugees. Darfurians who are seeking refuge have to take advantage of other laws or elsewhere be deported to the same country they are fleeing. Mr Nur must have compared that with the actions of the State of Israel towards the plight of Darfur people. The Arab must take note that Israel is the only country in the entire region, including North Africa, which allocated a Parliament debate on Darfur.

On January 15th 08, the reputable Sudantribune.com published an article under the title “ Israel delivers residence permit to 500 Sudanese”. Needless to say, most of these Sudanese are from the beleaguered Darfur region of Sudan. The news came at the time when Albashir was finalising the appointment of Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal to act as a Presidential Advisor. The Israeli commendable act came despite its State law that “denies Israeli asylum to any one from an enemy states” like the Sudan. The granting of residence for these Sudanese came in fulfilment of the promise of the Israeli Prime Minister in October 07 when he declared:

“.. the government would grant transient residency to nearly 500 refugees from Darfur, The non-Darfur asylum seekers in Israel were economic migrants and not deserving of a protected status”

An overjoyed recipient of one of these permits and who is from Darfur declared: “Finally, I will not have to worry about being deported. Now I can sleep safely at night”. But Ahmed’s new status goes further than that. His new status allows him to receive state assistance including social benefits health and educational care.

But the State of Israel has to do more than that. An estimated 3,500 asylum seekers are kept in harsh detention camps and in defiance of international refugee conventions. These are Sudanese but not necessarily all from Darfur. They too need to be assessed in line with international conventions and should not be kept in detention indefinitely.

Ahmed and his fellow recipients of the Israeli residency permits must count themselves among the lucky. In the past three years, over 4000 others like Ahmed have crossed illegally into Israel from Egypt, and arrived there alive if I may say so. What is despicable is the way Egyptian border guards treat these unfortunate Asylum seekers. The ugly and unmerciful treatment of Sudanese asylum seekers, most from Darfur and South Sudan was chillingly demonstrated to us in December 2005. 20 to 26 were shot dead when they went into a sit-in protesting their situation in Cairo. Few weeks ago, the commission investigating the incident cleared Egyptian Police personnel of any charges pertaining to the massacre. This is despite wide protest from numerous international human rights organisations, including Arab branches.

If Darfur asylum seekers do not feel safe in Cairo, they cannot fare any better at the Israeli-Egyptian border. Their enemies are not “the evil Jews” as we have been taught at schools since early childhood. Rather, it is the lethal weapons of the Egyptian border guards that are responsible for the damage. Occasionally, border guns are saved and the killing is done by hand. Here is a testimony of an Israeli border guard describing actions of his Egyptian counterparts:

“The Egyptian passed the two refugees from one to another, beating them. We saw them gang up on them and beat them on the ground until they stopped moving.... They killed two men with their own hands and sticks and rocks. .. We heard them crying and screeching in pain until they died” (Sudantribune, AP. August 2nd, 2007).

That some Sudanese fleeing Egypt get killed at the border by the Egyptian guards is well documented. What is sad and equally perplexing for many Darfuris is their realisation that they are safer in Israel than

in Egypt , even if that involves risking their lives at the Egyptian-Israel border. Nothing could be more painful for the people of Darfur than this basic ugly fact. For many Darfuris, they expect Egypt to be their safe heaven at times of need. After all, Darfur 's relationship with Cairo precedes its contacts with Khartoum by over 300 years. Darfur traded with Cairo since the 16th century. Its contacts with Khartoum span over less than 200 years. Darfur people deserve better treatment in Cairo than what they get today.

The Egyptian inhumane treatment of their fellow Muslims is no exception in the Arab Islamic world. Almost every single Arab country seems to have abandoned Darfur and closed rank with Albashir's government. The lesson that Darfur people are to learn is plain and simple: that Arabism transcends Islam and that "race" prevails over Islam and culture, full stop.

The case of the Arab Emirate is illustrative here. Darfur people have been harassed, detained, tortured and deported even when they are able to maintain themselves and at no cost to the host country. I hasten to add that most of the Arab-Islamic countries have no regard for international human rights conventions and hence the possibility of asking for asylum is simply not a viable option. Abdel Jabbar Sahraf Eldin, January 8th, has some embarrassing news for us in this regard. Talking about Emirate State , he says:

"The Emirate State has opted to show enmity to Dafur people, to detain those who go there seeking refuge; .. to destroy their businesses without them having committed any crime. The Emirate State has so far deported Dr. G. I. M, the Director of Sky Leader for Air Transport; Mr. I. A, the Director of Loader for Transport and Mr. A. G. A, Director of Bamshi Company for Transport (Sudanjem, January 8th, 08).

The same author also gave names of three other darfuris who were deported after suffering lengthy solitary detention. Moreover, the author also gave names of two Darfuris who have been in an Emirate prison since October 07 without being charged. Such is the fate of Darfur people in the Arab world.

But it is not only Arab countries that display such an impressive array of inhumanity. The Arab League itself has a lot to answer for when it comes to the plight of Darfur people; never mind that by virtue of their belonging to Sudan, the Darfuris are in effect members of the Arab League. In one of its recent meetings on Darfur , the Arab League was able to mobilise a sum of no more than \$50 million for Darfur . Yes, \$50m only, from one of the wealthiest regions on earth and for those who can justifiably claim cultural affinity with the Arab world. To add insult to injury, this money if it ever comes, will be channelled through the government of Khartoum , the same body which has caused the problem in the first place. The kindness, if the not the meanness of the Arab world is further exposed by Mr. Sharaf Eldin in the same article. He claims that the sum of \$50m is in fact half of what Kuwait donated for victims of Hurricane Katrina of the USA; the USA which is now shouldering the greatest burden of feeding Darfur people.

As far as I can gather, and as a close observer of Darfur issues, I can say that up to the moment, none of Darfur Movements, or more precisely JEM and SLM factions have taken stock to actively debate Sudan's future relationship with the State of Israel. It is high time for them to do just that. Over the years, successive governments of Khartoum have so far based their policies towards Israel on emotionalism but much more on their deep inferiority complex towards the Arab world. I will be the first to admit that, we Darfur people, have also shared that complex, although not any more following our current crisis. As the result, Sudan , or rather its ruling elite have always wanted to demonstrate that they are more Arabs than the Arabs themselves. In line with that, Sudanese governments have chosen to ignore Israel as a formidable State in the region and much more to pretend that it simply does not exist. For mere fear of alienating Khartoum , the SPLM has also become acquiescent in this policy.

But the world is changing fast around us and we, Sudanese cannot freeze ourselves in the past. Establishing diplomatic relationship with Israel should neither threaten our sympathy to the Palestinian people nor weaken our cultural links with the Arab Islamic world. In fact, we do not have to agree with policies of the Israeli State before establishing diplomatic relationship with it. One only has to examine the love and hate relationship with the USA in the Middle-East. Turn on into any official media outlet in the Arab world and they are, almost all, official, and you will be shocked by the level of demonization and hate-generating reference to the USA . Nonetheless, these same counties take great pride in exchanging large embassies with the same, and to use their common terms "evil, imperialist, crusading, decadent

and even infidel” United States of America. If Egypt, the indisputable leader of the Arab countries, not to mention many others, exchanges diplomatic relationship with Israel; and if the Palestinians themselves find it feasible, and justifiably so, to engage the State of Israel directly, why not us in Sudan. It is time for us, we Sudanese and not only Darfuris to grow up and mature. It is time for us to reflect on what is inscribed in every Sudanese passport: “Valid for all countries except Israel”. Albashir’s recent declaration that Jerusalem / Alquds “should be regained by Jihad and not by diplomacy” is fit for birds only. No self-respecting adult would take that seriously.

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Dublin 5/2/2008

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