



# Khartoum Encyclopedia of Islam

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► **To cite this version:**

| Marc Lavergne. Khartoum Encyclopedia of Islam. 2019. halshs-02133502

**HAL Id: halshs-02133502**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02133502>**

Submitted on 18 May 2019

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by Marc Lavergne

Summary : Khartoum, founded in 1824, forms now a huge metropolis of ca. 6 millions inhabitants, at the confluence of the two Niles. It consists of three different urban cores, which represent the colonial origin (Khartoum proper), the indigenous upheaval of the Mahdia (Omdurman) and the industrial development of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (Khartoum-North). Urban growth accelerated tremendously due to the influx of migrants from rural areas of central Sudan hit by successive droughts and later by displaced persons from the war-torn South and Darfur. Huge unplanned settlements now surround the initial square urban frame, but despite its access to oil revenues, the State has been unable to provide basic infrastructure and services to these new urban dwellers.

Key Words : Sudan, Turkiyya, Mehemet Ali Pasha, Mahdia, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, Kitchener, Khartoum, Omdurman, Khartoum-North, Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah al-Mahdi, Charles Gordon, khedive Ismaïl Pasha, Jaafar Nimeiry, Hassan al-Turabi, Omar al-Bashir, civil war, drought, displaced persons, refugees, unplanned settlements.

Text :

Khartoum, the present capital of the republic of Sudan, was founded in 1824, in the aftermath of the conquest of Sudan by a Turkish-Egyptian army sent in 1820 by the viceroy of Egypt, Mehemet Ali Pasha (1768 ?-1849), under the command of his son Ismaïl. The fort and its garrison which were established at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles soon became the siege of the administration of the new Sudanese provinces of the Ottoman Empire. It is not before the reign of Khedive Ismail Pacha (1830-1895) that the Sudan turned into a profitable economic asset, and that Khartoum asserted itself as the political center of the conquered territories.

But the rebellion launched in 1881 by Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah *al-Mahdi* (1844-1885) in Kordofan overran Khartoum despite the helpless resistance of the besieged British Governor-General, Charles Gordon (1833-1885). Instead of settling in Khartoum, which was abandoned and razed, the Mahdi decided to strengthen his military encampment in the small fishermen's village of Omdurman, on the western shore of the Niles' confluence. This settlement was to develop as the capital of his successor, the *khalifa* Abdallahi (1846-1898), who attracted there his kinsmen of the Taaisha tribe of Darfur. The central quarters of Omdurman still recall the memory of this period : they still bear the names of their activities or inhabitants ("Al-Mulazimin", who were the personal guard of the *khalifa* in his final years of reign, "Al-Masalma", the Christian who remained under the Mahdist' islamic regime, "Beit al-Mal", the location of the Treasury, "Wad Nubawi", etc.), around the Central Mosque, the Mahdi's Tomb, the *khalifa's* simple "palace" and the Central Suq. The center of Omdurman, the "native city" therefore presents a "traditional" aspect, with curved and narrow lanes and raw clay blind walls, and still works as a gateway of the capital towards the Sahelian belt of Sudan, from the White Nile to Kordofan and Darfur. On 1st september 1898, at Kereri, north of Omdurman, was fought the last battle of the *khalifa's* reign. The victorious British-Egyptian expedition led by General Horatio Kitchener (1850-1916) opened the British-Egyptian Condominium period (1898-1956), in which Khartoum was to recover its primacy, flanked by Omdurman and by a new town, Khartoum-North, built to accommodate the new industrial activities of the metropolis.

The British-Egyptian Condominium over Sudan (1898-1955) witnessed a tremendous growth of the capital of what was to become the largest country in Africa. Total population rose from 245 000 inhabitants in 1956 to 750 000 in 1973, 1.34 million in 1983, 2. 9 million in 1993 to approximately 6 million in 2017, thus doubling its population every decade. By the eve of the XXIst century, it broadly covers a square of 1600 sq km, expanding on 40 km from west to east and north to south, from the alluvial plain of the Niles to the sandy soils of the Goz Abu Dulu to the west to the clay soils of the Jezira to the South.

Despite their gathering in the frame of a "Khartoum State", entrusted with the management and planning

of the capital's growth, within the institutional frame of Sudan as a Federal State after the military seizing of power in June 1989, the Three Towns still present very distinctive features :

- Khartoum, the "modern city", retains the political and administrative functions (Presidential palace, Ministries, Government offices and foreign Embassies), and most intellectual and cultural institutions (foremost University of Khartoum, the former British Gordon College, founded in 1902 and the Khartoum Branch of the University of Cairo, founded in 1955), while the Sudan Armed forces Headquarters are located at the eastern outskirts close to the international Airport. While the city center remains a commercial hub, around the Great Mosque, residential quarters extend toward the south : "colonial" villas in Khartoum 2, multi storey buildings in Amarat, and a square streets frame extending far south with middle-class developments of Sahafa and Jabbara... The agricultural land further south have been squattered by huge amounts of refugees and displaced people following the drought and wars since the 1970's. Unplanned extensions (Hillet Mayo, Mandela...) have thus developed on and behind the "Green Belt" deemed at protecting the city from the seasonal dust storms ("*haboob*"). The official policy of expulsion or forced relocation ("*kasha*") has proven a failure on the long run, and the new generations of rural origin, Arabs or non-Arabs of all brands, have become city dwellers with a deep sense of belonging to the urban world, and reject any idea of returning to their homeland. So the two axes of urban extension toward the south, along the Wad Medani or Jebel Aulia roads, entail a huge mix of population, with very different cultural features than the economic and political dominant community originating from the riverine Arabized tribes of the Nile valley.

- Omdurman presents more "traditional" Arab, Islamic and "African" features, despite the fact that it hosts the National Assembly and the National Radio and TV broadcasting premises : it is the most populated of the three cities, with over 2.5 million inhabitants, having received most of drought and war hit people from Western Sudan since the 1970's. It has extended deeply into the Bayuda desert on the N-W, while reaching along the Nile the military airbase of Wad Sayyidna. Its main activity is the trade of goods through the vast reaches of the steppic and desertic areas of the West : cattle, arabic gum and other traditional products are exchanged again consumer goods imported and dispatched in thriving popular suqs, like the famous "Suq Libya" which long used to be the entrance gate of Omdurman from the desert. The industrial zone consists mainly of slaughterhouses, which work for the internal market but also for the Arabic peninsula affluent market.

- Khartoum-North (in arabic "Bahri" which means "Nilotic" or by extension "Northern") was originally home to Egyptian (along them Christian Copts) and Nile riverine Sudanese workers and technicians. This professional and human background remains till today. The city entails an important industrial zone (building material, small industry of transformation of imported goods). It is linked to the Main Nile valley and to the major eastern towns of Gedaref, Kassala and Port-Sudan by tarmac roads through the Butana desert. If the railway does not play any more a major role as the link between Khartoum and the Sudanese provinces, a pipeline from the Kordofan and Southern Sudan oil fields feeds the oil refinery of Geili, 60 km north of Khartoum-North, on its way to the terminal of Bashaïr, near Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

.If Omdurman remains the stronghold of the Mahdi's movement, Khartoum-North quarter of Hay Khogali holds the siege of the Mirghani family, heir of the founder of the Khatmiya (or Mirghaniya) rival brotherhood on the Sudanese political scene, who traditionally keeps close ties with Egypt.

But this original human settings has been completed by the inflow of large amounts of displaced people originated from the impoverished Central Sudan and war torn South from the 1970's to the end of the XXth century. The makeshift camps of Hillet Kuku, Hajj Yousif or Cartoon Kassala have now been integrated into the urban fabric, but they are still economically and socially marginalized.

The dramatic spatial extension of the Khartoumese metropolis since its foundation has been accompanied by deep socio-cultural transformations. This was attested by a series of events which became landmarks of contemporary Sudanese history.

Among them, are to be recalled two popular and pacific *intifada*-s, who resulted in the ousting of two military dictators, with huge demonstrations of people taking to the street : Marshall Ibrahim Abboud (1900-1983) in October 1964, Marshall Jaafar Nimeiry (1930-2009) in April 1985. Also bloodless had been the seizing of power by the then Colonel Jaafar Nimeiry in May 1969, and would be the coup d'Etat of Brigadier-General Omer al-Bashir (1944- ) on the 30th of June 1989.

Khartoum has from then on been the siege of military regime inspired by an islamic thinker, Dr Hassan al-Turabi (1932-2016) ; this regime has consistently tried to maintain the previous ethnic, religious and social homogeneity of the capital's population. It has thus re-shaped the urban planning in order to

strengthen the control over land use, resorting as the previous governments to mass expulsion of displaced dwellers originating from Southern Sudan or Nuba Mountains, but also from Western Sudan, namely Darfur. But the all out counter-insurrection launched against rebel movements has in return triggered a mass exodus toward the capital. The independence of Southern Sudan has not led to the return home of all natives of the new State : the capital keeps its human diversity, enriched by the settling of a large and active community of Eritreans and Ethiopians since the wars and famines which hit these neighboring countries during the 1970's and 1980's.

But the start of oil exports in 2000 gave the government the means to embark in an ambitious campaign of modernization and refurbishing of Khartoum, with a new Central Business District at the confluence of the two Niles ("Al-Mogren"). New industrial districts have developed as satellite cities at a distance in the north (Geili) and south (Al-Massid) . But the oil bonanza has been shortlived, due to the lasting instability and internal warfare, after the independence of Southern Sudan.in July 2011.

Khartoum is one of the most extended and populated African metropolises ; it still commands a vast national territory, without competitors in terms of population or functions. But this huge concentration still lacks basic infrastructure and services accessible to all. Despite the above mentioned trend to urban integration, it still retains a distinct rural feature in the way of life and culture of most of its inhabitants.