



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# The Killing of Khalil Ibrahim: Repercussions and Implications for the Conflict in Sudan

**Al Jazeera Centre for Studies**

19 January 2012



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies  
Tel: +974-44663454  
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net  
<http://studies.aljazeera.net>

Crucial developments marked the scene in Sudan in 2011. The beginning of 2011 witnessed a referendum around self-determination for the south. This referendum saw popular support in favour of the secession of South Sudan, with South Sudan officially become an independent State in mid 2011. Innumerable challenges saw a series of political, military and economic crises erupt as a result of the country's division. With the return of conflict in what is known as the 'new South', that is in Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile area, chances for a sustainable peace were dealt a severe blow. Additionally, the formation of the Coalition of Revolutionary Forces resulted in the spread of armed opposition. This latest rebellion extends from the Blue Nile on the eastern border, to Darfur on the western border.

In the midst of these rapid developments that flagged the failure of peace in favour of the division of Sudan, heralded the worst-case scenario: an end to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement witnessed both a loss of the country's unity and of sustainable peace. The conflict was reignited, and with an announcement by the armed opposition that its goal is to overthrow President Omar al-Bashir, suggestions are that the conflict will be wider and closer to the centre of power. While the Darfur Peace Agreement was plodding its way towards confirming its feasibility, the killing of Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, head of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), has re-shuffled the cards and added more questions to what the repercussions will be to his sudden absence on the scene, as well as on the future of the situation in Sudan.

### **Who Killed Ibrahim?**

The mysterious killing of Khalil Ibrahim has been shrouded in controversy. The difference between both the government of Sudan and the JEM's versions of what happened adds more mystery to the incident. Due to a lack of reliable information from independent sources it is hard to get a clear sense and piece together what happened. This is of particular concern when we consider the implications and impact of his death on the conflict in Sudan.

The Sudanese Armed Forces were the first to announce Ibrahim's death in the early hours of Sunday morning, on 25 December 2011. The Army spokesman said Ibrahim had been killed in direct clashes between the Sudanese army and rebel forces he was leading. The statement read: 'Ibrahim and a group of his forces were killed in battle while they were trying to cross into South Sudan through the Wad Banda area in North Kordofan, a border area with North Darfur'. However, Sudan's Defence Minister announced later, before the National Assembly (parliament), that Ibrahim had been killed in a targeted bombing carried out by the Sudanese Air Force after a telephone conversation that was being tracked made it possible for them to locate his position.

JEM issued a statement, subsequent to the Sudanese Army's statement, confirming the news. In its version the movement stated that 'an aerial bombardment by an unidentified jet directed its missile with unprecedented accuracy – not typical of the modus operandi of the regime's army - that led to his immediate death along with one of his bodyguards.' In its statement the movement accused, without explicitly naming them, 'some regional and international parties' who they went on to state 'have colluded and conspired with the Sudanese government to assassinate Khalil.'

### **Was it Murder or Assassination?**

Was the leader of JEM murdered or assassinated, and who orchestrated it? This question seems trivial given that the result is the same; he was killed and is now absent from the scene. However the response of Ibrahim's movement and their rendering of the incident will significantly impact on their response to his death, and will undoubtedly inspire various possible scenarios around the consequences and repercussions of his death.

In the context of the Sudanese army's modified version of the incident, as presented by the Minister of Defence, and the statement by the movement, there is mutual agreement between the two parties that Ibrahim was killed in an aerial strike. However, the difference between the two versions is derived from the government forces' claim of responsibility for the whole process - considering it to be a legitimate combat operation against a rebel. On the other hand the movement blamed it on regional and international parties in collusion with Khartoum, and thus classified it as a political assassination.

The difference around how Ibrahim's death has been demarcated and portrayed, by the government and movement respectively, is important in tracking the repercussions of this event. These differences may directly change the nature of the conflict in the coming period. On the one hand, the movement's definition of the incident as assassination holds the possibility of reprisal assassinations against the leaders of the regime in Khartoum. This means that the culture of political assassinations that was previously an unknown practice in Sudanese politics may become a future conflict weapon and practice. This will have serious repercussions, which may add to the already complex situation in the country. Should threats made by some JEM spokespeople about targeting major officials in the Sudanese regime be real, this would certainly rub more salt into the wounds, and potentially jeopardise the political game in Sudan as well. The implications and severity of this scenario increases with the level of importance of the targeted person.

On the other hand, should it be true, as JEM has claimed, that regional and international third parties are behind what they have deemed to be an assassination, it would raise important questions about who these parties are, and the nature of the agenda they are seeking to achieve. The fact that they sought to remove Ibrahim from the scene indicates that they are looking to influence the Sudanese scene and they saw the JEM leader as an obstacle to their agenda.

### **The Impact of Ibrahim's Death on JEM**

Perhaps the most important question is to what extent the sudden absence of Ibrahim will affect JEM, which he had founded and led since 2001 - two years before the outbreak of the crisis in Darfur? Certainly Ibrahim demonstrated personal charismatic leadership qualities which greatly impacted not only on his movement but also on how events played out in the country over the past decade. The shock of their leader's death on the one hand, and the great celebrations of his death by the government in Khartoum, on the other, indicate how pivotal Ibrahim's role and influence was on the course of events within both his movement and the country.

Khartoum is capitalising on the fact that Ibrahim's absence will most likely lead to the demise of JEM. Deprived of its powerful and effective leadership, it will potentially lead to its fragmentation, or a weakening of the movement to the point of it being cornered and left with limited options. This may see JEM forced to subscribe to the Darfur peace process, or otherwise, find itself isolated and out of the game completely. However, despite the huge shock over the loss of its leader, JEM has notably shown robust coherence in dealing with this sudden development. The movement has intensified its efforts to reorder its house in the post-Ibrahim era by demonstrating its commitment to its constitution and internal regulations. Thus, the chairman of its legislature, El-Tahir El-Faki, has taken over the leadership of the movement for a transitional period pending the election of a new president within three months. As such, it is too early to predict the real impact of Ibrahim's absence on the movement and its ability to maintain cohesion. How things transpire with the movement is dependent, to a large extent, on its success in overcoming its difficulties and living up to the challenges of the transition period.

There is another crucial indicator that suggests JEM's determination in maintaining its cohesion. This is its success in penetrating Sudanese territories and being able to enter South Sudan - just a few days after the death of its leader - with a contingent of its forces and military machinery. This was confirmed by the Sudanese government's filing of a complaint to the United Nations against the Government of South Sudan for

harbouring these rebel forces. Given the movement's critical loss of its leader who was leading the process of transfer to the south, it was expected that its forces would disperse or become too demotivated to pursue the success of its mission amidst siege and pressure from the Sudanese Armed Forces. However, the movement was able to overcome this unexpected shock, thus giving an indication of its ability to cope with a sudden change in leadership, whilst being able to maintain cohesion and achieve the main goal of the movement.

This coherence may possibly reflect an institutional capacity that can be enhanced through a smooth transition to new leadership. It may possibly be a temporary manifestation of resilience that accompanies the death of a charismatic leader – a case where the movement displays a tenacity and stubbornness when faced with challenges that test their ability to survive the government's attempts to wipe them off the political map.

However, the movement is not immune to divisions. It has already had its fair share of splits in the course of its history, even under Ibrahim's firm and decisive leadership. Some of these fissures and splits emerged as a result of disagreements over his tightened grip on the management of the movement's affairs and around disagreements over his political choices and stances toward the peace process in Darfur that were seen as too rigid and against the peace settlement.

Ibrahim's absence may provide an opportunity for the emergence of a new more flexible leadership, one less inclined to impose complete control of power. This may potentially mitigate tensions among the leaders who may be looking to implement a more effective role. This may increase the possibility of potential synergies among them that will enable them to avoid scenarios that may result in splits. However, his absence may also create a dilemma for the movement, especially in the case of them being unable to agree to an alternative leadership that is acceptable to all. Meanwhile, Ibrahim's successor will find himself faced with serious challenges in filling the vacuum left by a leader endowed with political and military capabilities, not to mention his extensive contacts, as well as personal leadership charisma which won the recognition of his supporters and opponents alike.

### **JEM in the Equation of Rebellion against Khartoum**

Although JEM is widely known as one of the most prominent parties in the conflict and a key player in the Darfur crisis, and despite that the scene of its political and military presence is Darfur, it does not consider itself a regional movement addressing demands related to Darfur alone. Rather it considers the crisis in the region as part of a comprehensive national crisis centred in Khartoum, and sees that the Darfur issue cannot be resolved in isolation of the restructurings of the central authority. Therefore, the movement considers itself a nationalist movement and, as can be seen in its founding statement, the movement has commissioned itself to lead a 'revolution of the suppressed and marginalised against the hegemony of the centre'. Its diagnosis of the political crisis in Sudan frames it as control of the 'minority' from the north of Sudan, that has been dominating wealth and power since the independence of the country, over the marginalised majority. This has caused an imbalance between the centre and the periphery. The movement is of the view that the solution to the Sudanese crisis begins by addressing and restructuring the central power in order to achieve political, economic and development balance among all the regions of the country.

This central idea to the political vision of the movement helps explain JEM's strong resistance to the outcome of its negotiations with the Sudanese government as being limited to the solution 'to the Darfur crisis', since its agenda pointed to the restructuring of the government in Khartoum. Therefore, it pulled out of the Doha Peace Agreement for Darfur, although it was the main party to initiate these negotiations with the government.

However, the movement's penchant for nationalist rhetoric, which received support from rebel groups advocating the rights of the marginalised against those in power, is viewed with suspicion by and remains unacceptable amongst the northern elites across diverse political orientations. Despite its nationalist trend, the movement's political discourse, organisational structure and leadership cadres have been accused of being tribally-oriented and more representative of the 'Zaghawa' tribe than being a cross-ethnic movement that embraces everyone. This makes it hard to argue that the movement has received recognition from all government opponents, given that it has been accused of representing the military faction of the opposition Popular Congress Party, led by Hassan al-Turabi. Although these accusations are mainly government-driven, accusations of exclusivity echoes the position taken by the governments. These similarities are relevant in the eyes of certain sectors of public opinion.

### **The Junction of the Revolutionary Front Alliance**

The killing of Khalil Ibrahim happened a few weeks after four armed opposition movements announcement, on 11 November, the formation of the coalition, the Sudanese Revolutionary Front. The coalition includes three Darfurian armed movements: the Justice and Equality Movement led by Khalil Ibrahim, the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Minni Arko Minnawi, the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Abdul Wahid Mohamed al Nur, and the Sudan People's Liberation Army - North - led by Malik Agar (this faction represents the northern sector of the main SPLA which won independence in southern Sudan last July).

Ibrahim's death raises a question about what impact his absence will have on the future of the Sudanese Coalition of the Revolutionary Front and its ability to achieve its main objective, as declared in its founding statement, of 'overthrowing the ruling National Congress by all means available'. It also raises questions around their ability to re-structure and build the Sudanese State along the lines of a new constitution 'to found a democratic Sudan, decentralised, liberalised and united on a voluntary basis'. The impact of Ibrahim's absence stems from the fact that JEM is the most organised faction, particularly among the rest of the armed movements in Darfur.

Of course, reading the likely impact of Ibrahim's death on the coalition will depend primarily on the direction of the developments the movement will go through while trying to internally reorganise its house over the next few months. The movement's cohesion will inevitably enhance the capacity of the coalition. Similarly the fragmentation of JEM will weaken it.

In the last radio interview conducted with Khalil Ibrahim, he stressed that the goal of his movement was to overthrow the rule of President Omar al-Bashir and the ruling National Congress Party, ruling out any attempts of reconciliation. He called on the Sudanese people to take to streets akin to the revolts of the Arab Spring. However, he stressed that his movement would work to bring down the regime by military force, whether there was popular revolution or not. It is of interest to note that the movement's leaders reaffirmed the objective of toppling the regime in their statements that followed the death of their leader. In that there is a sign of a common goal among the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front. Besides, the movement's insistence on the transfer of troops to the south, even after the death of Ibrahim, indicates that they are capitalising on the continuation of JEM's coalition with other rebel groups.

Some analysts are of the view that Ibrahim's absence is perhaps more of a positive factor for the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front than a weakening one. Here they point to Ibrahim's dominant and uncompromising character that would have potentially caused conflict among the leaders of the new coalition, and would thus render it ineffective, and might have led to the coalition's dissolution. Therefore, the existence of a flexible non-controversial figure in the leadership of the movement as an alternative to Ibrahim will make the potential of cohesion among the components of the coalition more likely.

## Transformation of the Theatre from Darfur

It has been said that even before the death of Khalil Ibrahim developments in Sudan had seen a qualitative shift from events in Darfur to what has become known as the 'new south'. This has seen the return of conflict in the states of Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile, adjacent to South Sudan. Then came the formation of the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front, that includes, besides the SPLM in northern Sudan, which is an extension of the ruling popular movement in the south, the three armed movements in Darfur that oppose the Doha Agreement, that is ostensibly looking to foster peace in the region. This has reinforced a shift in the path of political conflict in the country, in Darfur and the 'new south', in the direction of an all-out war aimed at the overthrowing of government.

This shift is confirmed by the recent declarations by the National Assembly (the Sudanese parliament). After deliberations on a report by the Emergency Commission on the security situation in the country, they stated that the State of South Sudan represents a 'key security threat to the country', and considered it a party to an 'Israeli – American plan' using the political Opposition Alliance, and the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front, to wage war against Sudan.

Sudan's Defence Minister told parliament: 'Ugandan troops are on the border with Central Africa under the pretext of fighting the LRA and are preparing for an attack on the north as part of a plan led by SPLA from several areas of Blue Nile, the borders of Bahr el-Ghazal with South Darfur, along with the forces of the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front in Upper Nile and Unity state neighbouring South Kordofan'. The minister announced that a 'two-pronged Israeli-American plan is in process to destabilise the country,' accusing the opposition parties of leading the political component of the plan, while the military aspect was being led by the Coalition of the Revolutionary Front, 'with technical and logistical support from Israel.'

However, the shift of events towards the south does not necessarily mean that Darfur will be outside the circle of influence. Rather the three movements from the region that joined the Coalition of Revolutionary Front would be interested in maintaining contact with the grassroots, and will continue to obstruct the peace efforts led by both the Sudanese government and the Liberation and Justice Movement, signatories to the Doha Agreement, to prove it ineffective. Then again, JEM may take advantage of Ibrahim's death to mobilise support among the people of Darfur and of those who are upset about the incident and see it as being ethnically motivated.

## U.S. Calculations

Despite the central role of local players and their influence in shaping the political and military situation, the intensity of international political and military intervention experienced by Sudan over the past years, particularly with the internationalisation of the issues of war and peace in the south and in Darfur, has made the role of external forces, especially the United States and its European allies, decisive and sometimes crucial in determining the course of events in Sudan. The death of Khalil Ibrahim, which is viewed by the Sudanese government as a victory and would put an end to its stubborn opponent, the Justice and Equality Movement, will not change the equation on the ground, even in the scenario of the movement being removed from the scene. This is because the issue of Darfur has gained international attention, regardless of the said strength of the armed movements. The consequences of the conflict in Darfur will continue to be a source of concern to the Sudanese leadership; The Western-backed ICC (International Criminal Court) has just added Minister of Defence Abdul Rahim Hussein to the list of indicted. According to the current equation of power in Khartoum, the move by the ICC needs to be read in the context of trying to mount external pressure to circumvent the symbolic military circle of power – that is the president and his close aide, the defence minister. This needs to be understood in light of the U.S. looking to avoid an outbreak of an all-out war that may threaten U.S. interests.

Keeping this in mind, it should be noted that the U.S. presidential envoy to Sudan, Princeton Lyman, announced last month that 'the government of the United States opposes military action against the government of Sudan ... more wars and problems, threatens the entity and the unity of the Sudan, and can be transported to the south and threatens its existence and unity. Thus, we are keen on the unity of Sudan (north). We call on all parties to work towards achieving this peacefully. '

Lyman stressed that his country does not encourage a change in Sudan similar to what is happening in countries in the wake of the Arab Spring, saying: 'This is not part of our agenda in Sudan. Frankly, I do not want to overthrow the regime ... We want to reform the procedures for constitutional democracy.'

It seems that what prompts Washington to oppose armed action against the regime may mainly be due to it wanting to avoid developments that may go beyond its control, and jeopardise plans it prepared for 'the reform of the regime through constitutional democracy'. The American move to quell armed action against the regime may culminate in a deal with influential elements within the regime to move forward towards developing the regime democratically, which means restructuring it on new balances under American supervision and regional agreements similar to what had happened in Naivasha. This of course would have to take into account the demands by political opposition parties and armed movements, and establish a new constitutional status in an inclusive, steady and incremental manner. The various parties may discover common interest in the absence of some of the influential elements at play - that are fairly unpredictable and at the centre of power in the different parties- preparing the Sudanese political scene for new rules of engagement. In light of this scenario, it is necessary to search for the relationship between the successive developments that recently took place which are not logically interconnected: The Attorney General of the International Criminal Court suddenly summons the file of the Sudanese Defence Minister, the assassination of Southern rebel leader George Athor in Kampala and then the killing of the leader of the Justice and Equality Movement. All this creates innumerable scenarios around developments that may transpire on the Sudanese scene in the foreseeable future.

---

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

*Copyright © 2011, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.*