Introduction
Conflicting Representations of al-Turabi

Since the rise of Hasan al-Turabi to prominence as the leader of the Islamic revival in Sudan, he has been seen as a saviour and at times a genius by his supporters, but as a hypocrite, a demagogue and even a megalomaniac by his opponents. Among the latter can be found individuals willing to offer a vitriolic opinion of al-Turabi at all points on the global political spectrum, from Western intelligence chiefs to Osama Bin Laden. They have variously described him as a ‘villain’, ‘the Godfather of international terrorism’, 1 ‘a Machiavelli’, 2 ‘a double-talking chameleon and cold-eyed master of realpolitik’, 3 ‘a lying, self-serving windbag’ 4 and ‘wolf in democratic clothing’. 5

Often, this scorn derives simply from ideological hostility, whether from Western neoconservatives, Middle Eastern or African Marxists, or secular nationalists. However, the various denunciations of al-Turabi are not always simply the product of an ideologically bipolar world; they also reflect the views of Western democrats initially attracted by his self-professed liberalism, members of the Sudanese intelligentsia who felt the same and even Islamists for whom he was an erstwhile ally. Their attitudes evoke a sense of disappointment, even of betrayal. As al-Turabi – who mastered romantic poetry as a schoolboy – probably knew himself, these are lovers’ emotions. Western commentators initially attracted by his apparently progressive and pacific form of Islam seethed when the Sudanese regime in the 1990s began to host militant extremists, including Bin Laden, and turn the civil conflict in southern Sudan into what appeared to be a war of religion. Similarly, many Sudanese outside his

1 See Miller, ‘Global Islamic Awakening’: 184, for both these quotations.
2 Both Sadiq al-Mahdi and Osama Bin Laden have used this term to describe al-Turabi. For the former, see his interview with Judith Miller in January 1992, cited in Miller, ‘Global Islamic Awakening’: 184. For the latter, see Cockett, Sudan: 122.
4 Scheuer, Osama Bin Laden: 102.
initial posse of campus Islamists had also been seduced by the democratic and liberal values he espoused in tirades against Sudan’s first military regime during the October Revolution of 1964, which saw him raised aloft in the streets by admiring crowds. These same individuals were mortified when al-Turabi subsequently betrayed his own democratic pronouncements by allying with two military dictators – Jafa’ar Nimeiri between 1977 and 1985, and Umar al-Bashir between 1989 and 1999 – on the pretext that the ends justified the means in establishing what was to become an increasingly brutal Islamist state.

Nevertheless, there are still many both inside and outside Sudan who find al-Turabi appealing as a political theorist. Liv Tønnesson believes that his theories constitute a valid blueprint for a future Islamist democracy, albeit one that would function better within a predominantly Muslim country, as opposed to a multi-religious society like Sudan.6 For his part, John Voll has argued that ‘the continuing civil war has made it difficult to judge the political system created by al-Turabi’, rather than attributing the perpetuation of the civil war to his ideology as do many others.7 Meanwhile, Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim has lamented the tendency of Islamic modernist and Western critics to ‘indulge in a ritual of al-Turabi bashing’, and pleaded that both academic and non-academic communities should make a greater effort to engage with the ideas of a man he considers to have found original answers to the dilemmas of twentieth and twenty-first centuries Muslims faced with the challenges of modernity.8 Since consensus (ijma) was one of the key concepts articulated by al-Turabi, it is ironic that he has not been the subject of much academic consensus himself.

One factor underlying this lack of consensus is al-Turabi’s complexity. As Muhammad Khair Awadallah has observed, to judge Hasan al-Turabi one has to assess three political personalities: al-Turabi the organization leader, al-Turabi the intellectual and al-Turabi the statesman.9 It is possible to reach a far more critical set of conclusions when judging one ‘personality’ than when judging another, as Awadallah himself does, expressing a preference for al-Turabi the intellectual. Indeed, it is striking not only that particular analysts choose to focus on either ‘al-Turabi the

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Islamism, Tradition and Modernity

statesman’, or ‘al-Turabi the intellectual’, but also that this usually defines the tone of their approach. Critical writings – such as those produced by Gallab, De Waal and Abdel Salam or Burr and Collins – tend to focus on ‘al-Turabi the statesman’ and to some extent ‘al-Turabi the organization leader’, rather than ‘al-Turabi the intellectual’, engaging only occasionally with his voluminous Arabic language writings.10 Meanwhile, the less hostile analyses, such as those of Ibrahim and Voll, tend to focus primarily on these same writings and comparatively less on al-Turabi’s much maligned efforts to apply his model of the Islamic State on the ground in the 1990s.11

Islamism, Tradition and Modernity

Although most aspects of al-Turabi’s political and intellectual personality are still open to debate, he is without doubt no simple ‘traditionalist’. It is true that a number of scholars have used his descent from a prestigious line of Sufis, saints and scholars to label him a ‘bearer of tradition’, but most recent writing on Islamism in Sudan, whether sympathetic or hostile to al-Turabi, has demonstrated that this is far from the end of his story. Gallab, Voll and Ibrahim have all shown that both he and his movement are products of the modern world and not simply manifestations of an atavistic backlash; and that they are more than adept at using modern technology and political techniques to achieve their goals.12 Just as the wider literature on Islamism overwhelmingly accepts that the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, and the Pakistani theoretician of the Islamic State, Abu’l-‘Ala Mawdudi, have produced inherently modern political ideologies in spite of having been trained as religious scholars,13 it is now well established that al-Turabi’s own descent from a line of religious scholars has not set him apart from modernity.

There remains, however, some debate about the form of modernity represented by twentieth and twenty-first centuries Islamists like al-Turabi. Many Western commentators think that Islamist modernity

10 Gallab, First Islamist Republic; Gallab, Second Islamic Republic; Burr and Collins, Sudan in Turmoil; De Waal and Abdel Salaam, ‘Islamism’.
does not, sadly, represent the liberal, democratic, capitalist and multicultural form of modernity increasingly prevalent in America, Europe and elsewhere; but rather the modernity manufactured by the twentieth century totalitarian movements that have posed such a threat to the Western world order – specifically, Communism and fascism. Olivier Roy highlights the origins of Islamist movements within the modern educational system of the various colonial, semi-colonial and postcolonial countries of the twentieth century Islamic world, imputing their intellectual indebtedness to the Marxists with whom they shared university campuses. Al-Turabi himself has been alternately labelled either a fascist or a communist by his political critics. De Waal and Abdel Salam describe him as an ‘Islamist Lenin’, while his old adversary Mahmud Muhammad Taha depicted him as a ‘pupil’ of Mussolini, and protestors attending his controversial 1992 lecture at the Royal Society of Arts barracked him by shouting ‘fascist’.

Meanwhile, al-Turabi’s champions have been eager to demonstrate that he is more than a mere copycat, borrowing from Western ideologies. For Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, al-Turabi was distinct from other educated Sudanese in that he did not see modernity as something to mimic, but rather as an ibtila – a term that might translate as tribulation, or perhaps trial or test. This ibtila, for al-Turabi, can be overcome through the practice of tajdid (renewal) and ijtihad (an independent approach to jurisprudence). Al-Turabi, like Mawdudi, one might contend, is reinterpreting Islam via Brown’s ‘prism of modernity’, but this does not necessarily mean that he mimics the Western form of modernity. As will be seen later, his education from an early age gave him ideas born of a creative fusion of ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ systems of knowledge – which themselves, as should be acknowledged more often than it is – share common roots in the religions and philosophies of the Ancient World. It will be seen here that Islamism should not simply be judged according to its capacity to assimilate the liberal capitalist modernity of the Western democracies, or the ‘totalitarian’ modernity of the Soviet or Nazi regimes. Rather, it needs to be understood as the product of a specifically colonial and postcolonial form of modernity.

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14 Roy, *Failure of Political Islam*: 60.  
15 De Waal and Abdel Salam, ‘Islamism’: 83.  
16 Taha, *Za’im*.  
17 De Waal and Abdel Salam, ‘Islamism’: 72.  
Postcolonialism, Manichaeism and Hybridity

Should Hasan al-Turabi be regarded as a ‘postcolonial’ thinker? If we understand ‘postcolonial’ in a literal sense, there would seem to be no other answer than ‘yes’: he grew up in a colony, was educated in colonial institutions and devoted his post-independence political career to the resistance of Western colonialism in its historic and contemporary forms. In these respects his life experience is comparable to that of other Islamist ideologues, among them Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; the Brotherhood’s most radical ideologue Sayyid Qutb; and Mawdudi. Yet, the founders of the intellectual school of postcolonialism often eschew engagement with Islamists as ‘postcolonial’ thinkers. Edward Said reacted angrily when accused of supporting ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, maintaining that fundamental thought was just as narrow-minded and ahistoric as the Orientalist world view he had denounced. Most of the theorists of postcolonialism are ideologically left-wing and secular and thus wary of engaging with the world views of religious thinkers, even figures such as Gandhi.20 In spite of Ibrahim Abu Rabi’s contention that the psychological reaction to colonialism ‘is as strong a component … in modern societies as the Quranic impact on the Arab mind’,21 the majority of the writings on Islamists such as al-Banna, Mawdudi and Qutb do not engage with postcolonial theory.22 An exception within Sudanese scholarship is Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, who is willing to understand al-Turabi’s ideas in the light of postcolonial theory, arguing that his network of concepts offered the Muslim community an escape from the ‘Manichaean delirium’ brought about by the onset of colonialism.23 Given that postcolonialism as a school of thought seeks to champion ideas which undermine narrow and binary views of the world, it is certainly questionable whether we should view a man who helped to empower a brutal and authoritarian regime as a ‘postcolonial’ intellectual. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that a number of the concepts developed and explored by colonial theorists are relevant to an analysis of al-Turabi, who – like a number of ‘postcolonial’ intellectuals – grew up under colonialism and then travelled to Western universities to study. Moreover, one of the flaws of current

20 Young, *Postcolonialism*: 338.  
22 For an exception, see Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*: 170, 226.  
23 Ibrahim, *Manichaean Delirium*
writing on Islamism is its tendency to assume that it is a direct offshoot of other twentieth century mass ideologies such as fascism and Communism, without understanding the specifically ‘colonial’ nature of the context in which it emerged and the grievances with which it is obsessed.

Ibrahim’s argument that Islamist ideology is a response to the Manichaean divide between the colonizers and the Muslim ‘other’ has significant explanatory potential, particularly when we seek to understand why Islamists themselves have been so obsessed with binaries. Nevertheless, in light of al-Turabi’s education at the Sorbonne, there are limitations to his argument that he responds to this Manichaean colonial modernity purely from an Islamic perspective. This study contends that al-Turabi was akin to one of the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s anti-colonial ‘mimics’, adapting to colonial values so as to subvert colonialism itself. In his wider research on the decolonization of the Sudan judiciary (in which his chapter on al-Turabi growing up in the Manichaean world of a Qadi’s home features), Ibrahim contends that Bhabha’s concept of hybridity is difficult to apply in the Sudanese case, citing criticisms of the theory and its presumed tendency towards ‘dissolving the politics of resistance’ by undermining the notion of a firm divide between colonizer and colonized.24 Indeed, Ibrahim maintains that such hybridity as did exist in colonial and counter-colonial scenarios was the product of hierarchical colonial power relationships, and not a result of conscious agency on the part of the colonized.25 However, he does not apply his dialectical analysis of the ‘hybridity vs Manichaism’ debate to his specific material on al-Turabi, and one wonders whether the future Islamist leader’s decision to seek an education in Paris – and to send members of his own movement to pursue postgraduate education in the West in later years – can really be construed as the product of colonial power inequalities. After all, al-Turabi claimed to have fought his British superiors at the University of Khartoum to get permission to travel to the Sorbonne.26

As Euben has demonstrated, it is possible to apply Bhabha’s model of postcolonial ambivalence to Islamist intellectuals. While the hegemony of Western post-Enlightenment rationalist thought in the Muslim

24 Ibrahim, Manichaean Delirium: 19–21.
world was constituted by a colonial power relationship, there was sufficient uncertainty about the connection between rational epistemologies and faith on both sides of the colonial divide for this ambivalence to be shared. Thus ‘the universalization of particular Western categories and experiences interacts with, and is transformed by, those of cultural others, engendering meanings and concerns that are syncretic, indeterminate and relational’. Perhaps the term ‘mimicry’ is unsuitable, implying as it does a certain superficiality; the term ‘hybridity’ has also been criticized for conflating cultural processes with biological ones. Al-Turabi engaged with Western political theories in more than a superfluous way. As will be illustrated later, he consciously sought to utilize the very same values and political practices of the Europeans who had colonized his world, utilizing them in his struggle against Western interventionism in the Islamic world as well as in developing an ideology to suit his own domestic political agendas. Indeed, it was one of his many ironies that he reproduced colonial modes of thought in attempting to battle them. It is for this reason that this study, while emphasizing the salience of postcolonial theory as a means of analysing Islamism, is wary of identifying al-Turabi as a ‘postcolonial thinker’ except in the most literal sense. His Islamism reproduced many of the binary and elitist world view of colonialism itself.

Islamism and the Charge of Inconsistency

In drawing on multiple cultural and intellectual traditions, Islamists are often accused of inconsistency. Critics usually attribute this either to erratic thinking and cultural confusion, or to outright duplicity. For instance, Elie Kedourie accuses the nineteenth century political activist and proto-Islamist, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, of intellectual and political hypocrisy, claiming that he presented a secular face to the West and religiously orthodox one to the East. Thus, he highlights al-Afghani’s famous debate with the French philosopher Ernest Renan, in which he dismissed Renan’s argument that Muslim society was incapable of adapting to modern rational ideas by citing the proud philosophical achievements of Muslim society and arguing that philosophy would inevitably overcome the retrogressive forces of religion in the Islamic world, as it had in Europe – and then tried to prevent transcripts of the

debate being translated into Arabic and distributed in the Muslim world, where they might have done great damage to his reputation as a Muslim opponent of Western colonialism. At the same time, Kedourie argues that private correspondence between Afghani and his mentee, the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh, shows them to have been atheists feigning religiosity in order to defeat religion. Whereas Kedourie accuses Afghani and Abduh of conscious duplicity, Roy Jackson’s biography of Mawdudi attributes his supposed inconsistency to the intellectual schisms created by his colonial upbringing. For Jackson, ‘Mawdudi’s writings are very much a product of the whole of his diverse upbringing and his own sense of confused identity’.

It hardly comes as a shock to find that a number of Western and modernist scholars have also accused al-Turabi of hypocrisy, or intellectual inconsistency, or both. Fawaz Gerges, for example, simply dismisses him as a scholar ‘not known for his consistency or intellectual integrity’, and the various critics cited above who maintain that al-Turabi was either a secret communist or secret fascist also fall into the category of those who accuse him of intellectual duplicity. For others, he is a religious ideologue feigning liberalism for the benefit of Western audiences: De Waal and Abdel Salam, for example, argue that he produced more liberal writings in English than in Arabic. Since this criticism is directly comparable to Kedourie’s criticism of al-Afghani, it is worth observing Keddie’s response to Kedourie’s text and remembering that inconsistency as a result of duplicity and inconsistency as a result of intellectual malaise are not one and the same. For Keddie, al-Afghani did have a definite set of aims – to emancipate the Islamic world from European colonialism and to strive for its political unity – and misrepresentation of his beliefs was acceptable in this context.

One might argue that these have also been the primary goals of al-Turabi, who has made so many efforts to bring together diverse Islamist trends and unite them against what he perceives to be Western Neo-colonialism. Regarding both al-Afghani and al-Turabi, tactical misrepresentation of one’s beliefs does not have to imply an underlying lack of intellectual integrity. Nevertheless, even if this is accepted, it still leaves questions. What are al-Turabi’s real beliefs?

29 Kedourie, Afghani and ‘Abduh: 43–44.
30 Kedourie, Afghani and ‘Abduh: 45.
31 Jackson, Mawlama Mawdudi: 48.
33 De Waal and Abdel-salam, ‘Islamism’: 83.
34 Keddie, Islamic Response: 37.
If ‘al-Turabi the statesmen’ has one consistent set of goals, where does this leave ‘al-Turabi the intellectual’? Al-Turabi was far more of a theoretician than al-Afghani ever was, although he is comparable to Afghani inasmuch as he was active in politics before he began writing on doctrinal and theoretical themes.

Must it be assumed that al-Turabi’s theoretical output is hopelessly compromised by his instrumental use of religion in his political career? Perhaps this is where Chatterjee’s model (originally derived from computer science) of ‘Bazaar’ as opposed to ‘Cathedral’ Islam might be of use. For Chatterjee, ‘Cathedral’ Islam is obsessed with religious authenticity, and assumes that the essential nature of Muslim society derives from dogma and injunctions provided by the Quran. Most Islamists claim that this is the Islam of Hasan al-Turabi and the various thinkers he has emulated, from Ibn Taymiyya to Mawlna Mawdudi. The Bazaar model, meanwhile, represents Islam as a civilization rather than simply a religion. Islam itself is simply what the various societies, cultures and intellectual movements that constitute this civilization make it, through interchange of concepts, beliefs and traditions in Islam’s great ‘bazaar’. The irony of the relations between these models, Chatterjee observes, is that every Bazaar tends to ‘behave like a cathedral’. Why is this? ‘While there are multiple signifiers for Islam’, argues Chatterjee, ‘each sign on its own is claimed to signify the “essence” of Islam as the referent’. No one exemplifies this phenomenon more than Hasan al-Turabi. He appears to be the classic ‘cathedral’ Islamist. His writings rarely reference any text other than the Quran, although they do occasionally mention the likes of Mawdudi. Yet, he clearly has been influenced by multiple sources other than the Quran – the Greeks, the Mu’tazilites, the French revolutionary philosophers, his Marxist student colleagues, various Islamist scholars such as Abduh, Mawdudi and Qutb, as well as the scholars that influenced them. This also explains, of course, why Islamism itself is such a diffuse phenomenon, as its apparent ideological coherence and inflexibility is often more the product of different Islamists impersonating the same ‘cathedral’.

Is al-Turabi inconsistent, then? Inasmuch as he tries to attribute direct Quranic inspiration to a number of ideas that have come to

him via other sources, yes. However, this does not mean that we must
give in to the contention that al-Turabi’s thought is essentially contra-
dictory, the product of failed efforts to reconcile mutually incompatible
epistemologies. To do so would be to agree that ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’
are essentially discrete and mutually irreconcilable categories, and thus
fall in with Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis. As will
be seen, some of al-Turabi’s most authoritarian tendencies are drawn
from Western intellectual traditions. It is probable that the fault-line
within al-Turabi’s ‘double discourse’ is not the geographical division
between East and West, but rather the social division between the
educated elite and wider Muslim society. There is a long tradition
among Islamic philosophers, from al-Farabi to al-Afghani, of offering
a rationalist message to the elite while using religious dogma to com-
 municate with the wider community. 38 Al-Turabi himself frequently
offered a discourse to educated milieus within Sudan similar to that he
preached in the West, while using far more dogmatic and, indeed,
demagogic language at public rallies.

Observers of al-Turabi often overstate the conscious element of his
inconsistency, noting the reputation for deceit he obtained after his
efforts to conceal his role in the 1989 coup. As Burgat writes, there is
often an assumption that only the ‘negative side’ of Islamists’ ‘double-
speak’ represents their real views. 39 Perhaps a more balanced approach
would benefit from the insights of psycho-history, which stresses that
individuals are ‘buffeted by conflicts, ambivalent in their emotions,
intent on reducing tensions by defensive stratagems, and for the most
part dimly, or perhaps not at all, aware of why they feel and act as they
do’. 40 The emphasis on ambivalence here is particularly salient in al-
Turabi’s case. Many of his apparent inconsistencies are just as much
a product of his own internal intellectual conflicts as they are of
a conspiratorial masterplan. In understanding the psychological roots
of his inconsistencies, Bhabha’s analysis of the ‘decentering of the self’
experienced by the colonized, which created ‘split subjects’, is
suggestive. 41 Al-Turabi, who experienced both Islamic and Western
style educations in a colonial world that discursively constructed Islam
and the West as binary opposites, encapsulates this phenomenon. Yet,

38 Euben, Enemy in the Mirror: 98. 39 Burgat, Face to Face: 5.
41 Bhabha and Comaroff, ‘Speaking of Postcoloniality’: 21.