

The Fate of Darfur: Race, Ideology and Conquest

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Introduction

In February 2003, the western region of Sudan known as Darfur thrust itself upon the international radar screen from its previously understated existence. Focused almost entirely on the North-South nexus of Sudan, the international community largely missed the signs of impending doom in Darfur, another act in the drama of violent conflict in the region. As observed by Alex de Waal, “[a] separate centre of state formation from that of the Nile Valley, at times more powerful than its riverain competitors, the [Dar Fur] sultanate has been grossly neglected in the ‘Nilocentric’ historiography of Sudan.”¹

The stages of violence initially covered by the western media in 2003 involved two rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), who formed in response to political and economic marginalization by the ruling party in Khartoum, the National Congress Party. The rebels attacked a number of government installations in Darfur in February 2003 to express their frustration with decades of being politically and economically marginalized. The response to the rebellion was harsh; the government of Sudan armed and supported proxy militias called the *Janjaweed*, Arabic for “men on horseback.” While simultaneously negotiating a settlement to the twenty-year conflict between the North and the South in Sudan, the Sudanese government unleashed a military campaign against the civilian population in the Darfur region. Aerial bombardments, rape, abduction, mass execution, and the destruction of food and water sources have become signature tactics of the *Janjaweed* and

¹ Alex de Waal, “Who Are the Darfurians? Arab and African Identities, Violence, and External Engagement,” *African Affairs*, 104/415, 2005, p.183-4.

the Sudanese Armed Forces. The Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit tribes have been the primary victims of this violence.

While many cite these rebel attacks as the beginning of what is now being called genocide by a chorus of international actors, the conflict in Darfur actually has quite complicated historical roots. The disruption of local institutions by colonialism; the ambitions of Muammar al-Qaddafi in the region; the influx of modern weaponry into Darfur; Chadian President Idriss Déby's domestic ethnic dilemmas; the ideology of Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist movement; and successive regimes' political and economic marginalization of Sudan's periphery; all have played into the fate of the Darfur state.

Definition of Terms

The terms often used to describe the conflict in Darfur are blurry at best. "Arab" and "African" identities in the region are not nearly as clear as one would come to believe based on the common descriptions of the conflict. Intermarriage has rendered the color of one's skin almost indistinguishable from another, limiting racial identification primarily to different facial features such as the shape of one's nose or the fullness of one's lips. Even the Arabs of northern Sudan have significantly darker skin than the Arabs of the Middle East and the Gulf states, and are often viewed with contempt by Arabs in those region that consider themselves the "purest" of their kind.

But for purposes of this analysis, the terms “Arab” and “African” will be used rather loosely. Fluid ethnic categories exist in virtually every culture, but the instrumentalizing of these differences can rigidify identities and render them conflictual. The various tribes in Darfur are Muslim, and most speak Arabic. The distinctions between Arab and African are based mostly on each group’s location of origin – migrants from the Sudanic belt; the Nilo-Saharan from the northwest; the Nubian speakers from the northeastern part of the Nile Valley; and the Arab groups from the northeastern region or perhaps even from the East. In Darfur, the terms “Arab” and “African” have become militarized and are the nexus of extermination or preservation of different tribes; despite their phenotypic ambiguity, they have become very real to both the attackers and the victims.

Historical Context

The Pre-Colonial Era

Medieval Muslims named the belt of territory in Africa south of the Sahara from the Atlantic to the Ethiopian plateau “al-bilad as-Soudan,” meaning “the land of the blacks.” After the decline of the Kush civilization around 330 A.D., what is today called the Republic of the Sudan was broken up into smaller principalities from which three major powers emerged – Maqarra, Nubia, and Alwa. During this period, Islam first began to have an impact on the region through the gradual migration of immigrant tribesmen and Arab traders. According to northern Sudanese scholar Mansour Khalid, “[t]his process fundamentally altered the power relations within the country over the subsequent years To the [local peoples], adhesion to the new faith was made easy by the fact that the

Islam propagated by those immigrants ‘demanded neither learning nor literacy but only a profession of faith and the performance of a few simple obligations.’”²

Darfur’s Arab tribes began arriving in significant numbers in the fourteenth century. These developments culminated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the establishment of the Fur and Funj sultanates, which provided a Muslim centralized authority in the region. However, Khalid continues, “this process of Islamicization and Arabicization is without documentation, apart from a notable passage in the Arab author Ibn Khaldûn, and its importance has in the past often been over-inflated; for the Funj and Fur sultanates were first and foremost African, specifically Sudanese states.”³

Dar Fur means, quite literally, “Home of the Fur” in Arabic. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Fur sultanate consolidated its influence in the region, and by 1800 was the most powerful state within what is known today as Sudan. The distinctions between the various ethnic groups were largely political, as opposed to phenotypic, and categorization of identity was still relatively fluid. Intermarriage, trade, and cooperation regarding grazing rights and the division of precious natural resources such as water were common between tribes. In the Fur kingdom, Arabs and Africans were treated as equals, with the blend of Islamic and traditional elements the key to the success of the kingdom.

The Ottoman Empire annexed Sudan in 1821. The Turco-Egyptian regime developed a centralized administrative system in modern-day Khartoum, allowing for slaves and other

² Mansour Khalid, The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan’s Political Evolution, p. 25.

³ Ibid.

exploited goods from the periphery to be shipped northward along the Nile through Egypt. This regime was the model confronting the British colonizers when they seized control of the region at the turn of the century. The Turco-Egyptian administration had profoundly altered existing power structures, and, together with the subsequent colonial framework, caused a highly fragmented regional dynamic within Sudan that has resisted centralized authority ever since.

The Turco-Egyptian regime fell in 1881 when adherents of the Mahdist movement revolted against the Turkish administration, leading to an era commonly referred to as the Mahdiyya. Muhammad Ahmad Ibn ‘Abdullah al-Mahdi, a zealous Islamic leader from northern Sudan, entered the scene in the late 19th century and proclaimed himself the Mahdi – “the Expected One” – who, under Islamic eschatology, is the divinely guided leader and a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammed. Expectations for a messianic figure were running high in the Muslim community, and al-Mahdi attracted a large following. After proclaiming his mission of purging corrupt Turkish forces from the Sudan, the administration in Khartoum attempted, but failed, to arrest him. Joined by his supporters, he withdrew to Kordofan, and by 1883 controlled the western provinces of Darfur as well.

After al-Mahdi’s death in 1885, his successors – also his blood relatives – were left with the responsibility of putting into effect the Mahdi’s vision: the formation of a pure Islamic society. His son, Abd al-Rahman, perpetuated a sect of Islam called the *Ansar*,

styled after the earliest Muslim community at Medina.⁴ Al-Mahdi's great-grandson, Sadiq al-Mahdi, became prime minister of Sudan in 1966 and today remains the head of the Umma Party. Members of the *Ansar* movement were ardent followers of the Mahdi, and later participated in an attempt to overthrow President Nimeiri in 1970, after his 1969 coup.

The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium

In 1899, the British colonial power restored Egyptian rule in Sudan through joint authority exercised by both Britain and Egypt. Darfur was annexed into the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, as it was called, in 1916. The colonial administration followed the tenants of "indirect rule," largely administering the region through its Governor-General nominated by the British and rubberstamped by the Egyptians. Certain aspects of the Fur sultanate were allowed to continue administering the affairs of the region, but the complexity of the sultanate system drove the British to install many of its own candidates in positions of authority. The British rulers deliberately excluded large segments of the population from education and health care rights, in an effort to prevent challenges to its authority by better-schooled indigenous populations.

The patterns that developed during the Condominium era turned out to be quite damaging to the peripheral regions in Sudan, and continued into independence. Dr. Mansour Khalid, himself a member of the northern elite and yet one of the first northerners to join the SPLM, noted:

⁴ Richard A. Lobban, Jr., Robert S. Kramer, and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, The Historical Dictionary of The Sudan, Third Edition, p. 23.

The period of the Condominium forms an extremely important backdrop to the political events outlined in this book; not only was the political framework of post-independence Sudan established in this period, but it was during these years that several of the country's most pressing social and economic problems found, if not their origin, then certainly their expression in terms of the modern state. Chief amongst these are the problems of the unequal distribution of wealth present in the modern Sudan, the irregular spread of modern development throughout the country, the rise of the educated elite and the problems of regional integrity, particularly as they have occurred in the south.⁵

The arrival of Anglo-Egyptian forces in Sudan disrupted existing patterns of traditional social and cultural ties in the region. Even under the previous Turco-Egyptian domination, the various tribes in Sudan's peripheral regions had enjoyed relative autonomy from central administration. The changes wrought by British rule meant that questions such as arbitration of inter-tribal disputes, trade, language, religion, education, and recruitment of soldiers for the a national army were no longer left to the discretion of regional indigenous authorities.

Although this system of central administration was allegedly intended to serve the people, "it failed, throughout its lifespan, to achieve any development for the poorer rural people who represented the majority of the population. This failure trapped those poorer regions in a cycle of poverty from which they could not escape."⁶ The disproportionate distribution of resources to the center of Sudan is evidenced quite clearly in the following chart:

⁵ Mansour Khalid, The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution, p. 39-40.

⁶ Mansour Khalid, The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution, p.59.

Regional distribution of Gross Domestic Investment, 1955/6 (Sudanese pounds 000's)

<i>Provinces</i>	<i>Total investment</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Govt Investment</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Public corps</i>	<i>% of total</i>	<i>Private enterprise</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Khartoum								
Northern & Kassala	11,906	56	4,770	64	1,276	52	5,860	60
Blue Nile	4,178	20	1,147	15	721	18	2,310	23
Kordofdan & Equatoria, Upper Nile	3,533	17	1,035	14	1,325	34	1,173	12
Bahr al Ghazal	1,616	7	514	7	610	16	492	5
All Sudan	21,233	100	7,466	100	3,932	100	9,835	100

Source: C.H. Harvie and J.G. Kleve, *The National Income of Sudan, 1955/6* (Department of Statistics, Khartoum, 1959), p. 88.⁷

By the time Britain left in 1956, a gross imbalance of resources between the center and the periphery was in place, sowing the seeds for future claims of marginalization and discrimination.

Post-Colonial Sudan

Successive Sudanese governments, from independence on, have toyed with policies to Arabize and Islamicize the peripheral populations outside of Khartoum. Adherents to a doctrine of Arab superiority, the elite in Khartoum from administration to administration looked down on those believed to be of non-Arab descent, in particular the southerners, whom they called *abid*, Arabic for “slave”.

The regime that took power during Ja’afar Nimeiri’s military coup in 1969 announced that it would pursue a radical path along the lines of Nasser’s revolutionary pan-Arab ideology in Egypt. It imprisoned the leaders of traditional parties with the exception of

⁷ For a more complete description of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and its long-lasting effects on political, social and economic development in Sudan, read chapter two, “The Condominium: We Divide and They Rule,” in Mansour Khalid’s *The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan’s Political Evolution*.

the Communist Party, which declared its support for the Nimeiri regime, and Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi fled to Libya. Nimeiri seized all banks and private companies, and adopted a pro-socialist foreign policy.⁸

In coordination with the *Ansar* sect, Islamic leader Hasan al-Turabi and other members of his Muslim Brotherhood attempted to revolt against Nimeiri in 1970. Nimeiri crushed the rebellion, and the surviving leaders fled and set up training camps in Libya, where Sadiq al-Mahdi was in exile. In 1976 the rebellion again attempted to overtake the government, but was defeated by the Sudanese army in Omdurman.

After surviving the coup attempt by Turabi and others in 1970, Nimeiri amended his approach to win favor with western governments. He held a “presidential referendum” – in which he was the only candidate – and was re-elected. With the help of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, Nimeiri then opened a dialogue with the SPLM, which culminated in the 1972 Addis Ababa Accords granting the South regional autonomy.

After another staged election, Nimeiri was reelected to the presidency in 1977. Unhappy with the increasingly obvious dichotomy between the goals of the center and those of the peripheral areas of Sudan, Nimeiri began turning to Islam both for personal comfort and political leverage. Increasingly, he appeared in public wearing a turban and *jallabiya*, and made sure he was photographed frequently praying in a mosque. He liked to encourage the idea that he had undergone a personal religious conversion; in 1981 he

⁸ See Kamal Osman Salih’s “The Sudan, 1985-9: The Fading Democracy” for a more complete account of the consolidation of power under the Nimeiri regime.

published the book *al-Nahaj al-Islami Limatha* or *Why the Islamic Way?*, in which he outlined his personal admiration for his new-found religion.

In spite of such posing and perhaps because of it, the imposition of Shari'a smacks of political opportunism rather than religious conviction. Sudan's Islamic revolution came at a time when Nimeiri was seeking a new support group amongst the religious fundamentalists. He also wanted to deprive the sectarian leaders of their only *raison d'être*; Nimeiri could now say that he alone had achieved what both al-Mirghani [DUP] and al-Mahdi [Umma Party] failed to achieve in generations – the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. Nimeiri, the Imam, was strengthening his own personal control by championing the forces of Islam.⁹

Nimeiri eventually bowed to these internal Islamist pressures and his own megalomania by abrogating the Addis Ababa agreement by instituting *shari'a* law in 1983. The years of repression under his rule crushed the traditional power structure in Sudan. "His attempts to usher in a new system were dismal failures: the first was based on Nasserist socialism; the second aimed at a decentralized one-party state oriented towards free enterprise; and a third conformed to an idiosyncratic version of *sharia*," writes James Chiriyankandath. "All were the products of a combination of the President's erratic personality and shifting political alliances . . . As such they proved to be shallow experiments. Nimeiri's real legacy was one of economic ruin, social dislocation and political confusion."¹⁰

In 1985, Major General and Defense Minister 'Abd al-Rahman Suwar al-Dahab staged a coup against Nimeiri following widespread demonstrations against the government, involving an estimated one to two million people, against the increasingly dictatorial

⁹ Mansour Khalid, The Government They Deserve: The Role of the Elite in Sudan's Political Evolution, p. 310.

¹⁰ James Chiriyankandath, "The 1986 Elections," p. 78, Sudan After Nimeiri, ed. Peter Woodward.

practices of the Nimeiri regime.¹¹ Al-Dahab set up a Transitional Military Council (TMC) with a civilian Council of Ministers and promised to hold national elections within a year. The 1986 elections returned Sadiq al-Mahdi to office as prime minister and head of the national coalition government, after years of exile in Qaddafi's Libya.

The shifting sands of Sudan's political scene are in part a product of the relationships between two small, interwoven Arab tribes from which come most of Sudan's modern political elite. Politics in Sudan is the politics of family; most of the key players in Sudan's political realm are related to each other. "They attend the weddings of one another's sons and daughters, who frequently marry within the two tribes," wrote Emily Wax of *The Washington Post*. "They are neighbors and rivals, nephews and cousins. Politics in Sudan is often a family affair, and as in any family, there are occasional feuds."¹² Sudan's first and last democratically-elected prime minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi, was overthrown by his own brother-in-law, Omar al-Bashir, in the 1989 National Islamic Front coup.

The Fall of Nimeiri and the Rise of the National Islamic Front

The coalition government elected in 1986 did nothing to rein in militant attitudes toward non-Arab populations, but instead allowed them to continue seeping into official policies. Transitional president al-Dahab mobilized the Arab Baggara tribes in Darfur against the SPLA, providing them with military support and arms to raid Dinka and Nuba

¹¹ Richard A. Lobban, Jr., Robert S. Kramer, and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *The Historical Dictionary of The Sudan*, Third Edition, p. 73.

¹² Emily Wax, "Sudan's Unbowed, Unbroken Inner Circle: Tight Web of Savvy Leaders Withstands International Criticism," *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2005, A01.

populations suspected of supporting the southern rebels. These militias became well-known for their massacre of more than a thousand displaced Dinka in the town of el Da'ien in 1987, an alleged retaliation for a series of battles during which SPLA forces killed a number of Rizeigat militiamen. Over the next fifteen years, they were notorious for their "slave raids" into northern Bahr el-Ghazal, in which countless women and children were taken into Darfur and Kordofan, or sold north into Egypt.

Although some Sudanese officials claimed to be interested in forging a unified Sudanese identity, official policies spoke louder than these words and further exacerbated the tensions. The policy of *shari'a* law was continued under the Bashir regime after the NIF seized power in its 1989 coup. "The introduction of Shari'a law in the Sudan and its application to everyone present on Sudanese soil regardless of region or religion, cast doubt on the country's claim to act as a bridge between the Arab and the Black African worlds and to seek unity in diversity," writes Paul Doornbos.¹³

The evolution of the Islamist movement continued throughout the transition of regimes in post-colonial Sudan. Hasan al-Turabi, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1965, was the brains behind the Islamist movement in Sudan. He removed the formerly civilian leadership of the Brotherhood and transformed it into the National Islamic Front, which came into power under the 1989 coup. His influence over the development of the NIF regime was unparalleled; he was considered the ring leader of the Islamist movement and the father of the NIF. "After Turabi was released from Kober Prison in

¹³ Paul Doornbos, "On Becoming Sudanese," Sudan: State, Capital and Transformation, ed. Tony Barnett and Abbas Abdelkarim, p. 99.

August/September 1989,” says Dr. Robert Collins, “all the members of the RCC, including Bashir, sworn to him the bay’a, the Islamic oath of allegiance fully and formally recognizing him as the leader.”¹⁴

The groundwork was set for a new Islamic state under the political leadership of Bashir and the religious guidance of Turabi. By manipulating the state apparatus, these two individuals managed to turn the government of Sudan into what many analysts consider the most fearsome authoritarian regime in the history of Sudan.

In Khartoum the Revolutionary Command Council was “systematically dismantling the modern state of Sudan . . . in a dictatorship without a dictator” to build a theocratic state espoused by Hasan al-Turabi as a “new Islamic Model.” The state was to be directed by Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Basir to consolidate the religious revolution through a pervasive security force and a relentless intelligence service dominated by the ideology and personnel of the National Islamic Front, the NIF.¹⁵

Khartoum’s objectives following Bashir’s rise to power were aligned in some ways with those of their Libyan neighbor. Despite the fact that many Sudanese Islamists considered Qaddafi a fool who could at best produce oil, cash, and support against their socialist enemy Nimeiri,¹⁶ Khartoum formally opened relations with Libya after the 1989 coup and publicly declared Libya to be among its closest allies. The Arab supremacists who wanted the region to evolve into a unified Arab state began their efforts to either forcibly move or destroy populations incompatible with their goals in order to change the ethnic

¹⁴ Author email communication with Dr. Robert O. Collins, co-author with J. Millard Burr of Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989-2000, on March 6, 2007.

¹⁵ J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, Darfur: The Long Road to Disaster, p. 270. The Revolutionary Command Council, shortened from its original name of National Salvation Revolutionary Command Council, consisted of fifteen officers that staged the bloodless 1989 coup at the leadership of Bashir.

¹⁶ Email communication with Dr. Robert O. Collins, co-author of Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989-2000, on March 4, 2007.

composition of the area. This ideology, to which the elites in Khartoum subscribed, was indeed part of the region's politics.

The efforts to impose these ideological objectives included not only the Khartoum regime's policies in Darfur but also its policies toward the insurrection in southern Sudan. Khartoum's domestic and regional objectives could not be served with an incipient rebellion on its hands. "Since 1991 the number of internal civil wars has multiplied," writes Sudan scholar Doug Johnson, "paralleled by a deepening involvement of the Sudan government in the internal politics of neighboring countries, whether in pursuit of its policy of Islamic expansion or for reasons of military expediency."¹⁷ The NIF was prepared to pay any price to retain its hold on power in Khartoum.

In what some observe believe was another genocidal campaign conducted by the NIF, Khartoum cordoned the Nuba Mountains off to outsiders, including relief officials, and implemented a policy of "cultural liquidation" through mass killings and forced Islamicization of the population. Former US Special Envoy to Sudan Roger Winter, who slipped into the Nuba Mountains during the height of the violence there, observed that after the NIF regime declared *jihad* against the South in 1992, "it was clear that even Nuba Muslims were targeted, with the rationale that Muslims in SPLA areas were not true Muslims." Raping Nuba women was a "central component" to the government's military strategy in its efforts to destroy "the social fabric of Nuba society."¹⁸ The

¹⁷ Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*, p. 127.

¹⁸ "The Nuba People: Confronting Cultural Liquidation," Roger Winter, *White Nile, Black Blood: War, Leadership, and Ethnicity From Khartoum to Kampala*, ed. Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick, pp. 185-186.

government's objectives in this case were clearly to eliminate or completely change the cultural composition of the Nuba region. The campaign had in some ways the opposite effect of what Khartoum intended: home to dozens of different ethnic groups and diverse cultural traditions, the Nuba people unified themselves around their common defense and found great solidarity in their grievances.

When the fighting between the North and the South resumed in 1983 after reinstating *shari'a* law, Khartoum employed a strategy also evident today in Darfur: divide and conquer. Wooing factions away from the southern movement and providing them with money and weapons, Khartoum fought its war with the South through many proxy militias and created a constantly-shifting set of alliances in the theater.

Similarly, disagreements between political leadership and field commanders within both Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) rendered the two groups largely paralyzed at recent peace negotiations in Abuja, Nigeria. Khartoum could not let this opportunity pass; just as various southern militias were wooed by the NIF with money and weapons, so also have the main rebel groups in Darfur. Factions from the JEM and the SLA have been persuaded by elites in Khartoum to abandon their compatriots and accept Khartoum's assistance.

Members of one armed group now known as the National Movement for Reform and Democracy (NMRD) have been seen wearing new uniforms and carrying weapons. "Initial reports suggested that the NMRD was created by the government of Sudan in

order to undermine the SLA and JEM,” wrote Ted Dagne of the Congressional Research Service. “Regional officials and Sudanese opposition figures note that the NMRD is being backed by the government of Chad and that the rebels wear uniforms and carry arms similar to that of the Chadian army.”¹⁹ Regional players as well as domestic ones were clearly at work in this instance.

The elites in Khartoum have managed to retain their grip on power through violence, intimidation, control of resources, and clever politics. With their support base relatively weak outside of the capital, the military advisors and security apparatus send strong signals to peripheral groups that might take up arms in the hopes of achieving a power- and wealth-sharing agreement, particularly after having been cornered into signing an agreement with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement on January 9, 2005.

These internal dynamics illuminate further the NIF’s decision to respond with such disproportionate violence and brutality to the rebellion in Darfur. By fall of 2003, SLA commanders began to observe in the pattern of *Janjaweed* attacks a change “from rebel positions in the mountains and foothills to villages far from the rebels. Fighting between the government and the rebel groups declined, but *Janjawiid* [sic] attacks on civilians increased, closely coordinated with air force bombardments” – a capacity the *Janjaweed* clearly would not have had without assistance from Khartoum.²⁰

¹⁹ Ted Dagne, “Sudan: Humanitarian Crisis, Peace Talks, Terrorism, and US Policy,” Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, report #IB98043, p. 3.

²⁰ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War, p. 104.

The Resource Dilemma

The politics of the region are tied also to its resources. Darfur has suffered from dwindling resources in recent decade; the resulting tensions have often been capitalized upon by those with other goals for the area. Historically, the Arab and African camel herders in Darfur shared three major migration routes that provided grazing and water for their livestock. In the late 1960s, disputes began to arise over land ownership as the northern portion of Sudan became more densely populated. The desert in Chad was inching slowly southward, and herders encroached more frequently on farming land. Fur farmers began refusing access of the Arab herders to the migration routes, forcing them to range further south in an effort to find pastures for their livestock.

The realities of regional politics affected resource allocation within Darfur as well. Beginning in 1960, Chad experienced a series of crippling droughts that put in motion significant changes in the ecology of the region. This phenomenon ricocheted around the Sahel, eventually making a year of average rainfall an anomaly. In desperate search for water and food, many Chadians drifted eastward into Darfur, sometimes engaging in violent disputes in the markets of Kutum and al-Fasher over the sale of livestock.

Darfur did not escape this pattern of drought and famine. In the early 1980s, Darfur began experiencing not merely a one- or two-year failure of rainfall, but a relentless cycle that lasted for a decade or more in parts of the region. In addition to rainfall shortages, the wind patterns changed, resulting in deforestation and degradation of pasturelands. In an interview with social anthropologist Alex deWaal, Jaluli Sheikh Hilal described

the wind blowing off the desert, taking sand from the hillsides and leaving it in the *wadi* beds, so that when it rained the water failed to run along the proper watercourses and instead wandered in the *gos*. In the mountains, meanwhile, the water had not stayed on the terraced farms but rushed down to the *wadi* and caused a flood which had taken away gardens at Fata Borno. . . The theme was that order is disturbed, and things are in the wrong places. Sand that ought to be on hillsides was in *wadis*, water that ought to flow in the *wadis* was flowing instead in the fields, water that should be feeding the gardens was taking them away.²¹

The order of things was indeed disturbed; the strained relations and grazing disputes that emerged in Darfur during the 1984-85 famine were hints of the impending violence in 2003. The changing ecology of Darfur deeply disturbed the social fabric of its communities. Ethnic categorizations that had previously served primarily administrative purposes – the resolution of disagreements, granting of land titles – became more rigid during this period, and eventually served as the locus for a broader regional war of Arab supremacism.

Darfur also suffered from economic exclusion at the hands of successive rulers in Khartoum. Although all Darfurians are Muslim, after decolonization, the discriminatory policies practiced by the British were continued by the Islamist movement in Sudan. These policies have not been confined to the Darfur region; in fact, the lifestyle of the modern elitist bourgeois class in Khartoum has in part been at fault for the self-interested management of economic enterprises and the modern state apparatus. This reality combined with the more nefarious objectives held by the Islamist movement and those who subscribe to regional doctrines of Arab superiority – who, incidentally, are often also

²¹ Alex de Waal, Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan, p. 87.

in control of the military and security sector – has resulted in decades of economic and political marginalization of all parts of Sudan outside of the center.

Changing Ethnic Composition and Categorization in Darfur

The people of Dor, which lies along one of the three all-season migration routes, often say that “conflict defines origins.”²² Indeed, Darfur’s tribal distinctions could potentially have become explosive due simply to the resource dilemma. But the conflict over water and grazing rights was exploited both by the elite in Khartoum and by external actors, who rigidified Darfur’s ethnic boundaries by pitting tribes against one another.

By the time Bashir had taken over the government in 1989, Arab supremacist ideology in the region had taken a strong hold. The damage done by successive droughts embittered the population, and advanced weaponry and the ideology forming in the region gave the Arab tribes a new confidence. The government in Khartoum saw an opportunity: not only could they use existing tensions in the region to establish military control, but they could also use the cover of “deep-seated tribal conflict,” as if there was no civil war occurring in Darfur at all.

After a series of devastating attacks on the Zaghawa tribe by Arab militias, and the reorganization of the home of the Masalit tribes, Zaghawa elders sent a letter in May 1991 to President Bashir, asserting that Khartoum was establishing apartheid in Darfur by committing crimes against humanity and manipulating the tribal hierarchies.²³ The

²² Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War, p. 5.

²³ Ibid.

Zaghawa saw the writing on the wall; the NIF was widening existing tensions, and it was not in favor of the African tribes.

The increasingly violent attacks were made possible in part because of the introduction of advanced weaponry in Darfur. The availability of Kalashnikovs, which could be bought in a Darfur market for \$40 by 1990, changed the dynamics in Darfur forever. Previously capable of ensuring accountability when only spears and similar weaponry was available, tribal leaders were at a total loss when raiders began spraying bullets with automatic weapons. Communities were unable not only to accurately ascertain the perpetrators, but they were also completely unequipped to respond in defense of their own lives.

The weapons came from a number of sources. Successive Sudanese regimes, who felt an affinity for the Chadian Arab Muslims resisting rule by Tombalbaye's southern African government, began providing refuge in Darfur to Chadian rebels in 1964, and supplying arms to the rebels by 1966.²⁴ After Colonel Qaddafi overthrew King Idriss in Libya, he also began supporting the Chadian rebellion with machine guns and mortars.

Ethnic categorization continued to accelerate in Darfur in the 1990s. Musa Hilal, a commander of the notorious *Janjaweed* militia, was already regarded by local authorities in the 1980s as a troublemaker who took northern Sudanese attitudes of Arab superiority to an inflammatory level. Before being recruited by the government to help lead the *Janjaweed*, Hilal had a reputation in Darfur for being ruthless and violent, and for

²⁴ J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, Africa's Thirty Years War: Libya, Chad, and the Sudan 1963-1993, p. 37.

viewing himself as a protector of Arab tribes against African tribes in the region. He speaks with pride at being a government agent now, and describes himself as “a big sheikh, not a little sheikh.”²⁵ As commander of the *Janjaweed*, Hilal acts with government support and complete impunity in Darfur. His name is first on the list of genocide suspects produced by the US Congress and the US State Department, and is suspected to be on the list of 51 suspects in the Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General.²⁶

Musa Hilal is known for his arrogance, rashness, and militant Arab supremacism. His public stance is that he raised his tribal militia at the request of the government in Khartoum. Known for recruiting fighters under the condition that they be Arab and willing to fight in exchange for all the loot they can carry, Hilal articulated his ultimate intention in an August 2004 directive from his headquarters: “Change the demography of Darfur and empty it of African tribes.”²⁷

Hilal is a member of an elusive, secretive movement called, among other names, the Arab Gathering. Qaddafi hosted many members of this movement, giving them military training in the south-eastern part of Libya.²⁸ The Arab Gathering had sympathizers in Khartoum, and in 1987, an open letter was sent from 23 prominent Darfur Arabs to Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, signed by “the Committee of the Arab Gathering.” Although three of the signatories later claimed their names had been used without their permission,

²⁵ Emily Wax, “In Sudan, ‘a Big Sheik’ Roams Free,” *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2004, A01.

²⁶ See Appendix A for the letter from the US Congress and for the State Department list; for the full commission report, visit http://www.un.org/News/dh/sudan/com_inq_darfur.pdf.

²⁷ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War*, p. 39.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

the content of the letter was frightening: it claimed that more than seventy per cent of Darfur's population consisted of Arab tribes, and that if they continued to be "deprived of true representation in the leadership of the Darfur region," there would be "catastrophe, with dire consequences."²⁹

The efforts by local troublemakers like Musa Hilal were compounded by the central government's administrative interference in the region. Sudanese Minister of Federal Affairs Ali al-Haj, also a critical player in the Islamist movement, made it a point in 1994 to dissolve Fur influence in Darfur. He divided the Darfur region into three states, turning the Fur population into minorities in each state in the hopes of establishing Arab control over the population. He also instituted the practice of assigning administrative principalities in the region on the basis of ethnicity. This action created additional tensions between Darfur's ethnic groups as they competed for dwindling natural resources as well as scarce state resources.

Dar Masalit, the home of the Masalit tribe, also underwent administrative reorganization at the order of the government in Khartoum in the early 1990s. Similarly to Dar Fur, the Masalit tribe had previously been ruled by a sultan. In reorganizing the sultanate, eight new Arab *amirs* were appointed by Khartoum, even though Arabs constituted less than one-fourth of the population in Dar Masalit. Most of these new *amirs* were from Chad. The West Darfur governor at that time, Ibrahim Yahya, remembers President Omar Bashir came to Geneina personally and gave ceremonial flags to the new Arab *amirs*.³⁰

²⁹ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War, p. 52, 54.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

Violence against the Masalit tribes by Arab militias became common, and as the migration patterns changed, the Masalit gardens were eaten up by camels whose herders were pushing them further south for grazing pastures.

Even as recently as 2004, the NIF continued to lay claim to the territory of Darfur amidst its bloody campaign against the civilian population. Citing an obscure law, the Sudanese government argued that the land vacated by displaced civilians should be up for grabs after the land had sat empty for a year. The 1984 Civil Transaction Land Act states that residents forfeit ownership of their land after abandoning it for one year, and subsequent residents can claim ownership of the land after occupying it for ten consecutive years.³¹ Those who had been raped, pillaged, and driven from their homes in Darfur could no longer have a place to return to, even if the security situation improved.

Qaddafi also used the porous Libya-Chad-Sudan border to work toward his goal of a unified Arab state. Thousands of Libyan Arabs poured into Darfur in the 1980s and 1990s at Qaddafi's directive, settling on rapidly shrinking cultivatable land and taking up arms against the Habré government and the non-Arab Darfurian populations. In response, Fur militia contacted Habré's government and began smuggling their own weapons into Darfur. Khartoum largely ignored the civil war that was developing in Darfur, despite three Fur Members of Parliament – also members of the National Islamic Front – resigning from their party whip in protest over what they saw as a conspiracy to

³¹ "Sudan's Land Act Could Thwart Darfurians' Return," Voice of America, December 1, 2004, retrieved from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2004/12/mil-041201-307bd39e.htm> on April 4, 2007.

reshape the ethnic composition of the Darfur region. The ethnic composition of Darfur was indeed changing, and changing rapidly.³²

Regional Dynamics

A number of external actors stood to benefit by keeping the *Ansar* movement alive. Qaddafi had long had designs on the region prior to the Islamist movement's coup attempts in Khartoum. Qaddafi envisioned annexing Chad as a precursor to establishing a vast Sahelian empire. Turabi willingly accepted Qaddafi's offer of military assistance to plan another coup against Nimeiri, which would simultaneously further Qaddafi's objectives in western Sudan. Qaddafi could then use Darfur as a rear base in his military campaign to overthrow President Hissene Habré in N'Djamena, Chad.

Qaddafi's meddling in the region and on the continent as a whole was quite widespread. Many African leaders feared his radical influence on the continent and expressed both privately and publicly their objection to his interference in the internal affairs of his neighbors. "Most African leaders could not distinguish between Qaddafi's territorial ambitions in Chad in the 1970s and those of Mussolini in the 1930s," writes Sudan expert Dr. Robert Collins. "They were particularly incensed by his blatant efforts to pit Arab against African, a tactic that the majority of the 800,000 Arabs in Chad found not only distasteful but not sensible."³³

³² Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War.

³³ J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, Darfur: The Long Road to Disaster, p. 168. The 1990s saw a decline in Qaddafi's political influence in northern and western Africa, following a series of diplomatic rebukes by the Organization of African States (OAU) and numerous heads of state in West Africa. For a thorough analysis of the decline of Qaddafi's legitimacy in the region, read chapter 8, titled "The Libyan Counterattack," in Darfur: The Long Road to Disaster.

The situation in Chad had been deteriorating for some time as well. The government of the first Chadian president François Tombalbaye enraged the Arab herders in eastern Chad by exacting high levels of taxation, suspending traditional tribal rights to adjudicate disputes, and responding to incipient rebellion with indiscriminate brutality against civilians. With these conditions exacerbated by agonizing drought, rebellion was fomented in eastern Chad as the herders responded to the “new restrictions imposed upon them by southern, African administrators, whom they regarded as slaves.”³⁴

Qaddafi was eager to exploit the simmering fury of eastern Chadian Arabs. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who seized power in a 1989 coup, was more than willing to help Qaddafi overthrow their black African neighbor. In exchange for his cooperation, Bashir was given military assistance by Qaddafi to prosecute the NIF’s war against the southern Sudanese rebel movement. In 1990, Idriss Déby staged a coup in N’djamená, bringing Tombalbaye’s rule to an end.

But Déby did not come without his own baggage. From the Zaghawa tribe himself, Déby encountered a domestic problem: unwilling to accept his authoritarian style, rigged elections, and constitutional changes to accommodate his political ambitions, Déby’s enemies were growing in numbers. Déby refused to use oil money from the Chad-Cameroon pipeline for poverty reduction programs, as he had promised to the World

³⁴ J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, Africa’s Thirty Years War: Libya, Chad, and the Sudan 1963-1993, p 36.

Bank, instead using it to finance military operations.³⁵ A group of his own relatives began to oppose him, angered by Déby's spending habits and his public appeal for his son to succeed to the presidency when Déby retires.³⁶

A rebellion once again began forming in eastern Chad. A US Institute of Peace stated that Déby's efforts to mediate between the SLA and JEM in the fighting that began in Darfur in 2003 seemed directed by Khartoum, leading Déby's supporters to believe he was not interested in protecting his Zaghawa neighbors in western Sudan. According to the report, out of solidarity with the Government of Sudan, which helped him seize power in 1990, "Déby sent troops to support the Government of Sudan (GOS), but many of his soldiers . . . provided rebel groups with information and even weapons, leading Khartoum to request the removal of Déby's forces."³⁷

Presidents Déby and Bashir then began exchanging tit-for-tat about the other's involvement in the other's incipient rebellion. As Darfur sank into chaos and spilled across the border into eastern Chad, Chadian opposition groups began taking advantage of the crumbling internal support for Déby. The situation deteriorated so badly that Déby encountered two coup attempts in a matter of weeks during 2006, one of which brought heavy gunfire and mortar shelling into the capital of N'Djamena and killed several hundred people.

³⁵ "Chad 'needs oil money for arms'," *BBC*, 19 April 2006.

³⁶ Emily Wax, "Chad's Leader 'in Fight Mode,'" *The Washington Post*, A8, 17 April 2006.

³⁷ "Sudanese-Chadian Relations: A New Dimension to the Conflict in Darfur?" US Institute of Peace briefing, April 2006, http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0417_sudan_chad.html?enl.

By the time the current war in Darfur broke out in 2003, it was clear that Darfur had become inseparable from the politics of the Sahel.

Conditions Ripe for Conflict

Major structural, political, and economic conditions in Sudan created an environment in which evolving tensions could be utilized by the NIF, and in which government-sponsored militias in Darfur could then operate with such impunity in the current conflict. The seeds for these conditions were sown long ago through migration patterns, changing ecology, modern weaponry, and the disruption of local administration. Colonialism watered these seeds, as Britain employed exclusive policies to control the level of challenge they might encounter from tribes with centuries-old administrative structures in Darfur.

The policies of deliberate marginalization continued even after Britain left. Roads, health care system, education, and many other basic services the modern state is expected to provide have been withheld from this region. Teachers frequently go without pay, and heavy taxes are imposed upon the region. A vast swath of territory surrounded by desert expanse and the Jebel Marra mountain range, Darfur is largely isolated from any areas of high population density, a prisoner of its own geography.

During interviews with rebel officers, Alex de Waal observed that

[t]hese were not the ‘armed bandits’ the government insisted they were. They were farmers who had been driven from their smallholdings by men wearing army uniforms. Their attacks so far had been precise, against military and security targets. Some had served in the police or army, turning a blind eye to ethnic

discrimination until the government they served began attacking their villages and killing their families.³⁸

They had clearly reached the tipping point: these itinerate farmers concluded that, after losing their land, their property, and in many cases their loved ones, they had nothing left to lose in organizing against the government.

Despite the fact that a number of Fur politicians served in parliament in Khartoum, political marginalization was widespread as well. In the face of continued insecurity in the Darfur region in 2001, the Zaghawa refused to pay taxes since the government was providing no security services, medical care or education. That summer, a coalition of Zaghawa and Fur met to work together against the government's policies in Darfur. Seventeen Fur Members of Parliament signed a petition demanding to debate the *Janjaweed* attacks on their homeland.³⁹

Bashir gave them an unexpected opportunity to present their case. After witnessing their documentation of hundreds of attacks and destroyed villages, Bashir established a committee for the "Restoration of State Authority and Security in Darfur." The committee's first action was to arrest activists on both sides, including 66 prominent Fur lawyers, teachers, and elders. Clearly, political representation would not be the solution for the burgeoning crisis in Darfur. Local dispute resolution mechanisms stood no chance in the face of either modern weaponry or such an agenda. In the absence of any system of normal politics, in which the rebels could count on their grievances being

³⁸ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War, p. 67.

³⁹ Ibid.

expressed and heard, the rebels concluded that continued resistance by force was the only option. It had become a zero-sum game.

The stage of consolidation among the rebels in Darfur has gone on for so long that tactical questions have been reopened. Fur leaders began grumbling that their leader, Abdel Wahid, had become a “hotel guerrilla,” setting up offices in Addis Ababa and Nairobi and spending his time lobbying international actors to assist the movement, all the while not communicating with his officers in the field. By 2004, the movement was barely recognizable. Multiple splits and fights among leadership had rendered the movement largely ineffective – and, in the eyes of the international community, rapidly losing credibility.

Minni Minnawi, leader of the largest faction of the SLA, was the only rebel leader to sign a US-brokered peace agreement in May 2006 known as the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in Abuja, Nigeria. As a reward for his signature, Minnawi was made top Sudanese official in the Darfur region, as well as Senior Assistant to the President of the Government of National Unity. Minnawi stated in September 2006 that he does not object to a UN peacekeeping force detailed in UN Security Council Resolution 1706, but many believe Minnawi has become complicit in the government’s attacks on civilians, aid workers, and African Union troops.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ “Darfur Fighting Rises, Humanitarian Crisis Deepens,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, September 1, 2006, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5751624>.

The division among rebel leaders in the Darfur region is one that Khartoum and other regional actors have proven eager to exploit. With little military expertise, and united only by their marginalization, the Darfur rebels have been easily split apart. The NIF wooed various rebel leaders with money and weapons, and the National Movement for Reform and Democracy (NMRD) faction emerged, sporting new weapons and uniforms.

The absence of coherent and ethical leadership on the part of the rebels is also obvious in the increasingly disturbing reports of rebel attacks on humanitarian convoys and international aid workers. The UN reported in early February of this year that attacks on aid workers increased by 67 per cent in Darfur in 2006.⁴¹ The rebels are fighting amongst themselves for power and control over strategy and resources, and are increasingly lawless in their behavior. The failure to abide even loosely by international humanitarian law has undermined the rebels' credibility with international actors. This certainly serves Khartoum's purposes.

Darfur: The Way Forward

The ideology propagated by the Islamist movement in Sudan and specifically the National Islamic Front, a curious hybrid of Islamic fundamentalism and Arab supremacism, has been a driving force for the virtually unbroken cycle of conflict in Sudan and its neighborhood in recent decades. The historical failures of conquest and colonialism, each of which devastated indigenous social networks in Sudan as in many parts of Africa, and successive regimes that were in turn authoritarian, dictatorial,

⁴¹ "Attacks on Aid Workers in Darfur Doubled – UN," *Sudan Tribune*, 6 February 2007.

discriminatory, violent, and sometimes megalomaniacal, have created seemingly irreconcilable divisions in Sudanese society.

Popular assumptions about Darfur and how best to approach the crisis there have arisen out of a view of Darfur as a stand-alone, isolated situation, separate from the politics of the country and of the region. The Darfur crisis begs a comprehensive view; that of another act in a drama of regional conflict, and one that does not treat the chaos in the region as a humanitarian crisis, but rather one that needs a political solution.

The international community has largely failed to understand Darfur in this way. Although it has been generous with humanitarian assistance as well as words of condemnation for the violence, most donors have tiptoed around the political underpinnings of the Darfur conflict, in part out of ignorance of its complex history, and in part out of fear that pushing the NIF too hard on Darfur would cause the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the South to come unglued. The balance is indeed delicate; one could understandably suspect that the government's acceleration of violence in 2003 and 2004 was in fact intended to distract from the North-South peace talks taking place at that time in Naivasha, Kenya.

Regardless, it is clear that the current coalition government in Khartoum, which is a product of the power-sharing agreement with the South, does not have the will or capacity to address the claims of economic and political marginalization and violence at

the hands of the NIF. Given this reality and the layers of complexity already illuminated in this analysis, policy prescriptions are particularly hard to come by.

But one thing is certain: slapping a humanitarian band-aid on the Darfur crisis will ultimately only add insult to injury for the civilian population struggling to survive there. Assessing the most effective policy options requires one to place Darfur squarely in its enormously complex domestic and regional context. The violence in Darfur is a symbol of many things, including the disruption of colonialism; the political and economic failure of successive Sudanese regimes to develop and modernize the state; the National Islamic Front's capture of the security, intelligence, and military apparatus; and the politics and personalities of Sudan's neighbors.

With only vague demands for accountability from the international community, the government in Khartoum can satisfy its critics with token steps while maintaining the course it has set for itself. Without viable internal opposition in Sudan, coupled with strong insistence by international actors on concrete actions to address the political problems in the western part of the country, the Islamist movement will continue its reign of terror in Darfur and perpetuate its hold on power in the center of the modern Sudanese state.

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