

THE MUSLIM WORLD AND DARFUR

Providing an outline of Sudan's domestic dynamics and international engagement in recent years, the author makes the case that the Muslim world should play an active role in the situation of Darfur. So far, hundreds of thousands of Darfurian Muslims have been killed and 2.5 million have been displaced. By characterizing the slaughter in the South as a "war in the defense of Islam" and the war in Darfur as "a war in defense of Arab identity," Khartoum has driven a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as Arabs and non-Arabs throughout Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, the author argues, it is especially the Muslim countries of the world that should stand up against this carnage, and it is also them that will have the most effect over Khartoum.

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The Muslim world is not monolithic, except in the imagination of some who subscribe to the “clash of civilizations” theory. From Bosnia and Herzegovina in the west to Indonesia and Malaysia in the east, Muslim majority nations exhibit remarkable diversity in culture, political perspectives, and attitudes towards government. They also span the human rights and democracy spectrum, with some countries enjoying vibrant multi-party political systems while others are some of the most repressive and autocratic regimes in the world today.

Yet, despite this diversity, there are shared issues of iconic value about which Muslim populations tend to be collectively concerned. The anti-apartheid struggle was one in which Muslims everywhere engaged, as was the case virtually everywhere except for a few notable exceptions. The genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a highly emotional personal issue for many Muslims, even as some of their governments supported the Belgrade regime during the war. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a primary concern for Muslims everywhere as does the continuing bloodshed in Iraq. Less pronounced, but also in the public conscience, the fate of Muslims in Chechnya and Kashmir remains a concern throughout the Muslim world.

I will argue that the fate of Sudan, and in particular, that of Darfurians in Sudan, is an unarticulated yet deeply felt concern that the Muslim world must take a more active role in addressing, especially as the threat of more widespread carnage, and even the prospect of secession, become increasingly likely.

Sudan’s Existential Threat

Sudan is facing an existential threat, but it is not from “colonial powers,” climate change, or the United Nations. Since the Anglo-Egyptian occupation and colonization of Sudan, the country has been run from the center in collusion with a small coterie of elites, while the peripheries of Sudan have been ignored and unrepresented.¹ While over-concentration of political power and financial assets in the capital city is typical of many underdeveloped nations, in Sudan, a country a quarter the size of the United States, it has been unusually rapacious and has led to the most disastrous of consequences. Two full-scale wars, and at least as many minor ones, in the last twenty-five years have resulted in over 2 million and well over 200,000 deaths in the South and the West, respectively. The modalities have been the same each time, and if current trends continue, will likely result in another North/South war, this time with the territorial integrity of Sudan — and the very existence of the regime — on the line.

The Modalities of Total War

The model starts with demands by marginalized groups from the periphery for political and economic representation. Demands are ignored or repressed, and

¹ Aleksi Ylonen, “Grievances and The Roots of Insurgencies: Southern Sudan and Darfur”, *Peace Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol.7, July 2005, <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk/docs/July05Ylonen.pdf>

when considered a serious threat, are repelled by divide-and-conquer policies on the part of the central government. In the case of the North/South war (1981-2005), Khartoum attempted to transmute the conflict from one demanding equality for all to one pitting Northern Muslim Sudanese against Christian and animist Southern Sudanese. Under the guise of attempting to enforce a particularly narrow (and many would argue inaccurate) interpretation of Sharia (Islamic Law) throughout Sudan, the government tried to force Southerners to concede or else be labeled “opponents of Islam.” The result was one of the deadliest and most brutal civil wars anywhere in the world in the past three decades.

Khartoum’s characterization was for the most part successful. In the Muslim world, the Sudanese government proclaimed its “jihad” against “Christians and idolaters” who were rebelling against “Muslim rule.” This assertion is baseless on multiple grounds: the government of Sudan, from a doctrinal perspective, is not qualified to declare “jihad” in the first place; secondly, those fighting Khartoum were doing so for a proportionate role in the affairs and wealth of their country.

The modalities of warfare in the South were also precursors of the fighting that would break out in Darfur in 2003. The Sudanese government used its army, but also created, financed and armed paramilitary units from various tribes in an effort to exploit tribal rivalries. Despite the government’s professed “Islamist credentials,” it used tribal, even pre-Islamic norms of “absolute war,” where women are considered booty to be appropriated, raped and otherwise tortured as the victors saw fit. Children, women, and men from defeated tribes are taken as slaves.

Khartoum discovered, however, like the Interhamwe in Rwanda or the Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo before them, that once soldiers are ordered to rape and kill, their reintegration into society becomes difficult, if not impossible. The psychopathic behavior necessary to sustain such a campaign of wanton brutality inevitably stains society as a whole, particularly if no attempts at restitution, transitional justice or accountability are made.

Khartoum, unable to deal a decisive blow to the insurgency in the South and having lost control over many of its best military units, negotiated an agreement designed to end that 24-year old conflict, and to transform Sudan into a citizen-state with a multi-party system. The agreement, among other things, called for nationwide elections in 2009 and a Southern referendum in 2011, giving the South’s voters the option of secession. The two provisions were designed to offer Khartoum a choice: devolve power or risk losing a significant portion of the country.

However, even before the agreement between Khartoum and the South was signed, fighting erupted in the western region of Darfur. Unlike Southern Sudan, Darfur’s population is exclusively Muslim. Historically, Darfur has been a center for Islamic learning; for centuries the cloth used to drape the Kaaba in Mecca had

been crafted by Darfuri artisans. In fact, one of the primary rebel groups in Darfur, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), is an Islamist organization with well-documented links to Sudan's iconic Islamist leader, Hassan al-Turabi.²

Propaganda as a Tool of War

Khartoum needed a propaganda campaign if it were to rely on diplomatic cover from the Muslim world. Since the Darfurians were explicitly not calling for secession, but rather equality, Khartoum knew it had to define the conflict in radically different terms from that with the Southerners. For a number of complex reasons that are beyond the purview of this paper, Khartoum's choice was to present the conflict as a tribal and "racial" one, and in short order actually to make it one.

Khartoum, and eventually its allies, enablers and apologists, began to characterize the tribes from which the rebels were drawing recruits and support as "African," in contrast to the "Arab" government. Employing nomadic tribes as paramilitary units, as it had previously done in the South, Khartoum argued that these were "Arab" tribes fighting for the integrity of an Arab Sudan, or alternatively that these were "popular defense forces," that were legitimately suppressing an insurgency.

Again, this is baseless because neither "Arab" nor "African" identity is racially or tribally determined; rather, an "Arab" is defined throughout the region as an individual from an Arabic speaking culture and/or one that self-identifies as such. Arabic is the lingua franca in Darfur, alongside a number of tribal languages. Being "African" is similarly viewed as being from the continent of Africa. In Darfur specifically, the people use the term "Arab" to refer to nomadic herders, and "African" to describe sedentary farmers- all Muslim, all Arabic-speakers, all black Africans. It is not based on racial or tribal consideration, neither explicitly nor implicitly. As such, Caucasians in South Africa or Zimbabwe self-identify as African, with no regard to pigmentation or tribal affiliation. By any reasonable definition, all Darfurians are Arab and African.

In an effort to placate international outrage at the slaughter in Darfur, Khartoum smears those who advocate for an international responsibility to protect vulnerable civilian populations everywhere as agents of neo-imperialism. Khartoum also manipulates widespread international displeasure at U.S. policies in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East to deflect attention from its war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, and to dissuade international actors from considering any meaningful intervention in Darfur; Khartoum's intimate partnership with U.S. intelligence agencies in the "war on terror" is conveniently absent from the narrative.

² Martin Plaut, "Who are Sudan's Darfur Rebels?", 5 May 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3702242.stm>

The Anatomy of Total War in Sudan

First paramilitary groups are created and are aligned with the army. The regular army provides support to paramilitary units in an effort to create the perception of inter-tribal warfare. Paramilitaries are encouraged to loot and destroy; they are told that there are no civilians – only enemy tribes; everyone is a target. Rape is encouraged and soldiers tell women that they are being impregnated with "Arab" babies as they rape them. Settlers are brought in from other countries to help resettle Darfurian villages with promises of free land and citizenship.³

Paramilitary groups soon realize that they have no choice but to completely wipe out those they are fighting because they know, even if only subconsciously, that their crimes cannot be forgotten and will be forgiven only with difficulty, if at all. Instead of winding down, the conflict grows more intense. As a result of this and other dynamics, today, aside from the hundreds of thousands killed, an additional 2.5 million Darfurian Muslims have been displaced from their homes—that is roughly one third of the total population of Darfur.

What Will Sudan Look Like Tomorrow?

Today, conflict continues in Darfur, odds of a new North/South war seem increasingly high in light of Khartoum's failure to implement crucial elements of the peace agreement and signals that it has no intention to conduct free and fair elections in 2009.⁴ The situation elsewhere in Sudan, most notably in Kordofan and the Red Sea provinces, is less tense but still it is potentially explosive as different marginalized communities vie for what they rightly view as legitimately theirs. Khartoum's unwillingness to implement its agreements with the Government of South Sudan, its continued scorched earth campaign in Darfur, and its consistent refusal to recognize the inherent diversity of the Sudanese population present imminent and growing threats to the stability and territorial integrity of Sudan.

For Muslims the world over, a number of very important principles are at stake.

1. Innocent civilians continue to get brutalized and die. Viewed through a theological prism, it is irrelevant whether those being killed are Muslim or not. All mainstream interpretations of Islam decry the killing on innocent civilians, regardless of faith or lack thereof. Will Muslims speak out; will they signal their respective governments that such horror shall not be exercised in their name? Muslims have an additional responsibility that others may not share. The Sudanese government consistently asserts that its policies are widely supported by Muslims. It relies heavily on the diplomatic cover it is provided by its allies in

³ UNHCR News, "Report recommends refugee status for Chadians arriving in Darfur," 7 August 2007 and The Independent, "Arabs pile into Darfur to take land 'cleansed' by janjaweed," 14 July 2007.

⁴ Simon Apiku, "Sudan in danger of reverting to north-south war" 13 September 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/reutersEdge/idUSAPI25818020070913>.

the Organization of Islamic Countries and the League of Arab States. Unequivocal denunciation by influential Muslim actors will almost certainly have greater impact on Khartoum's calculations than any amount of disapproval from Western capitals.

2. The fighting in Darfur has great potential to undermine the already shaky Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the North and South. Khartoum's resources will be tested like never before if it must fight a two- (or even three-) front war. Muslims do Khartoum no favors by enabling it to pursue self-destructive policies that have wide-reaching repercussions throughout Africa and the Middle East.
3. Khartoum has caused more damage to African/Middle East relations in the last decades than any other actor. By characterizing the slaughter in the South as a "war in the defense of Islam" and the war in Darfur as "a war in defense of Arab identity," Khartoum has driven a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as Arabs and non-Arabs throughout Africa and the Middle East. Rather than cooperating together to resolve issues of common concern, African and Arab countries (as well as Muslim countries outside the Arab world) find themselves having to deal with competing loyalties, distrustful and fearful. Intense diplomatic involvement by Muslims everywhere is crucial to reversing this trend.

Do Muslims Really Care?

In an April 2007 poll commissioned by the Save Darfur Coalition, and conducted by the Arab American Institute and Zogby International, Muslims in four Arab countries and in Malaysia and Turkey were asked about their opinions on the crisis in Darfur.⁵ The results provide some illuminating insights.

More than three quarters of Muslim respondents in the six nations surveyed thought Arabs and Muslims should be equally concerned about the situation in Darfur as they are about the Arab-Israeli conflict with results ranging from a high of 95% in Morocco to 76% in Turkey. Strong majorities in each of the six nations also support the intervention of other Muslim nations in Darfur. When asked if their country should do more to help in Darfur, overwhelming majorities responded favorably. Rates were particularly high in Morocco (94%), Saudi Arabia (91%) and Malaysia (91%).

This indicates that the silent acquiescence coming from the Organization of Islamic Countries, the League of Arab States, and from heads of states is not a reflection of public attitudes, but of political and strategic calculations. Neither official acquiescence nor popular concern, when unarticulated and silent, will save lives and help save Sudan. It is vital that Muslims raise their voices in unison before there is nothing left to save. Khartoum's short-sighted policies do not represent Sudanese, Arab, Muslim, or African interests. Muslims must lead

⁵ Press Release, 30 April 2007, <http://www.aaiusa.org/press-room/2949/aaizogby-poll-muslims-across-globe-concerned-about-crisis-in-darfur>, Arab American Institute.

the way by engaging with their national press, local humanitarian groups, and by urging their governments to contribute to the United Nations/African Union "hybrid" force for Darfur.

There is no shame in joining a just cause late. The United Kingdom, the United States, and others supported the South African apartheid regime nearly till the very end, while the majority of their populations took strong anti-apartheid positions. At the end, both countries reversed their policies, due in large part to grassroots pressure from millions of concerned citizens. It is still possible that years from now all Sudanese, and not just Darfurians, will think back of 2007 and 2008 as the years that Muslims around the world came to their aid. Let us not let this opportunity go to waste!