

# Darfur and the Arab League

Aug 28, 2006



## Brief Analysis

On August 20, 2006, the Arab League committee on Sudan backed Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir's refusal of a UN peacekeeping force in the war-wracked Darfur region. At the UN Security Council, the only open critic of the proposal to send such a force is Qatar, the only Arab member of the Council. Within the week, President Bush responded by sending Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Fraser to Khartoum as his special envoy carrying a personal letter to al-Bashir urging him to permit the presence of a robust UN peacekeeping force in Darfur. This decision by the Arab League has been a discouraging development, given that in June, Arab League secretary-general Amr Musa had urged Sudan to accept UN peacekeepers to replace the fragile 7,000-person African Union (AU) African Mission in the Sudan (AMIS). The Arab League's position represents a stark about-face. In the past, the Arab League had supported Sudan's refusal to agree to a UN peacekeeping force. The change of heart exposed the ambiguities that have long characterized relations between Sudan and the Arab League—particularly Sudan's neighbors Libya, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

## The Chad Basin War

While journalists and nongovernmental organizations have produced volumes of articles and reports about the disaster in Darfur, little attention has focused on the geographical fact that Darfur lies not within the Nile valley, but in the great basin of Lake Chad, most of which is in Chad, but some of which is in Sudan's Darfur Province, and some of which is located in Libya. The current disaster in Darfur is yet another episode—the most violent, bloody, and sorrowful, to be sure—in the tragic forty-year struggle for control of the Chad Basin.

Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi tried for thirty years, from 1963 until 1993, to create an “Islamic State of the Sahara,” which included Darfur. During that period, the Arab League was studiously reluctant to be drawn into the conflict. The European Union and the United States have generally shared that attitude, though periodically Washington and Paris would come to the aid of the Chadian government, the former acting to check Qadhafi and the latter to assert its role in Francophone Africa.

## The ‘Arabness’ of Sudan

The Arab League's reluctance to become embroiled in Darfur can best be explained by the long history of ambivalence by some of its members, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, regarding the “Arabness” of the Sudanese. Although Sudan was theoretically an Anglo-Egyptian condominium to be ruled jointly by Britain and Egypt prior to its independence in 1956, the British were the de facto rulers of Sudan and followed a conscious policy to contain and reduce any Egyptian influence among the Sudanese.

Since 1956, the Egyptians have sought to play a major role in Sudan, but with little success, in no small part due to their discrimination against the Sudanese. This discrimination comes in many forms. Culturally sophisticated Egyptians and many Saudis, despite their rhetorical patina of politeness, have long regarded most Sudanese Arabs as, at best, rustic cousins and, at worst, uneducated peasants who speak a mutilated form of modern literary Arabic. Even in enormously popular Egyptian cinema, the Sudanese, usually Nubians, are nearly always portrayed as

blackfaced buffoons. In popular Egyptian fiction, too, Sudan is portrayed as a vast and hostile wasteland, the Saharan equivalent of Siberia.

Moreover, the orthodox Sunni Muslims of Egypt as well as the fundamentalist Wahhabists of Saudi Arabia regarded Sudanese Islam as theologically corrupted by the dominant role of Sufi brotherhoods (tariqah) in the Sudanese practice of the Islamic faith. This ambivalence has been pronounced during the crisis in Darfur, where the Islamist government in Khartoum has sought to impose fundamentalist Islam upon a Muslim people who practice a syncretic faith interlaced with a host of African rituals.

Race, more than culture, has historically been the defining characteristic for discrimination in Sudan. Since the arrival of the Arabs in the sixteenth century, Sudan has been a melting pot in which the African and Arab ingredients have been stirred by generations of African slave concubines and intermarriage, making a mockery of the frequent claim of racial purity by northern Sudanese ethnic groups. The passionate assertion by some northern Sudanese Arabs, equipped with ancient but spurious genealogies, to be unblemished Arabs is a myth. In fact, the Sudanese themselves, particularly in racially mixed Darfur, distinguish between *zurga*, a pejorative term for Black Africans, and Arabs, a difference defined largely by facial features (the shape of the nose or the thickness of the lips) but also by ethnicity. A very black *Baqqara*, for example, will be considered "Arab," while a pale non-Arab *Zaghawa* remains "African."

#### Sudan's Arab Thrust

In 1989 al-Bashir, then a brigadier general in the Sudanese army, and the northern Sudanese of the National Islamic Front (NIF) took power. They were determined to demonstrate their Arabness by transforming the four hundred separate ethnic groups in Sudan, one-third of whom are not Muslims, into what they regarded as proper Arabs and Islamists. In the early 1990s, Sudan was the only member of the Arab League to grant Osama bin Laden and thousands of Afghan-Arab mujahedin a safe haven and permit terrorist training camps surrounding Khartoum to continue their jihads throughout the Muslim world.

Financially supported by al-Bashir, the prominent Sudanese theological jurist, Islamist ideologue, and politician Hassan al-Turabi organized two Popular Arab and Islamic Congress (PAIC) meetings in 1991 and 1993, which he saw as gatherings of the world's leading proponents of Islamist states. Many of the participants in these meetings were leaders of terrorist organizations who advocated seizing power by any means necessary. The activities of al-Bashir and al-Turabi made Sudan a pariah in the Arab League for nearly a decade. Sudan's isolation was well illustrated by the 1996 U.S. missile strike at what it believed to be a chemical weapons plant in the Khartoum suburbs.

By 2000, Sudan sought to end its international isolation and its ostracism within the Arab League. Bin Laden and the Afghan-Arab mujahedin were forced to depart in 1996, and in early 2001 al-Turabi was placed under house arrest. Information about terrorists and their organizations was shared with the CIA by Sudan's security chief, Lt. Gen. Salah Abdalla Gosh, and negotiations on a comprehensive peace agreement moved into their final stages to end twenty-two years of civil war with the southern Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA). Sudan appeared to be on the cusp of peace when the crisis in Darfur exploded.

#### Insurrection in Darfur

On February 26, 2003, Fur insurgents of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM) and soon joined by the non-Arab *Zaghawa* Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), inflicted heavy casualties on Sudanese army garrisons throughout western Darfur and destroyed its helicopters and bombers at al-Fashir. Convinced that the SPLA had succeeded by armed force, the SLM/JEM resorted to arms to end the years of neglect, discrimination, and maladministration by the Islamist government that in turn sought unsuccessfully to contain the insurgency. The army was a rabble, more theologically correct than competent to fight an insurgency in Darfur, home to 40 percent

of the troops. To stem the SLM/JEM offensive, the government armed and unleashed northern Baqqara Arab militiamen, the Janjaweed, to kill, pillage, and rape insurgent supporters just as Sudanese prime minister Sadiq al-Mahdi had armed and unleashed southern Baqqara Arab militias, the murahaleen, in 1985 to crush Dinka supporters of the SPLA. Darfur subsequently plunged into uncontrolled anarchy; more than 2 million people have been displaced and 200,000 killed. There followed several years of inconclusive international efforts, mostly through the African Union and the UN, to end the conflict.

After great pressure by the U.S. government, a peace agreement was signed May 6 in Abuja, Nigeria, by the Khartoum government and several of the major insurgent groups. The Arab League has played little role in the peace process. On the other hand, Amr Musa has spoken out in support of that agreement and has urged Abd al-Wahid Nur, the leader of the Fur faction who had refused the agreement, to sign it now.

#### Limited Prospects for an Arab Role

By its firm support for al-Bashir's intransigent opposition to a UN peacekeeping force, the Arab League chose not to become directly involved in a conflict in which its members had no immediate self-interest in a land populated by a people for whom their historic perceptions and prejudices gave them no reason to lend anything but minor assistance. Unfortunately, Bush's special envoy, Jendayi Fraser, has little leverage in her diplomatic satchel, which will enable al-Bashir to respond as usual with pious pronouncements that, in turn, will soon disappear into the sands of the Sudan and confirm the Arab League's decision to reverse its secretary-general. Having refused to intervene in the past, Arab League members will continue to distance themselves from any responsibilities in Darfur. As the Abuja peace agreement continues to unravel, the Arab League—despite Musa's urgings—will continue to remain aloof, preoccupied by other issues.

Robert O. Collins, emeritus professor at University of California Santa Barbara, has published eight histories concerned with the Sudan, southern Sudan, Darfur, and the Nile, of which the most recent, co-authored with Millard Burr, is *Darfur: The Long Road to Disaster*. ❖

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