

Rethinking the Civil War in Sudan

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A troubled country, the largest in a troubled continent, the Sudan surely tells one of the most tragic stories of war. The war is presented in the West as a religiously inspired persecution of Christian tribesmen in the south by the Islamic Fundamentalist government. The real story, however, is one of continued opposition and periodic fighting since shortly before independence in 1956 (and in other forms before then), and one in which a great variety of actors have a role. The purpose of this article is to argue that the war in Sudan has much less to do with religious intolerance and involves many other factors: regional and global politics and basic issues of food and water.

The issue of religion is widely seen as the principal cause of the conflict in Sudan, indeed often to the point of exclusion of other possible factors. Religious differences, while a central issue, are however not a primary cause of the war. The orthodox position is due partly to our post-Cold War propensity to think of such things in terms of a 'clash of civilisations', and partly to the fact that all parties to the conflict describe it as one driven by religious ideology. The headlines telling of the slaughter of Christian civilians by an Islamic fundamentalist government makes excellent copy, particularly in the United States, as do powerful and highly-charged accounts of the crucifixion of Southern prisoners of war. Such stories arouse sympathy for the southern cause in the West, and increase the likelihood of material aid being forthcoming. Likewise the portrayal of the conflict as a Christian and animist rebellion with American and Zionist backing, threatening the only Islamic state in the Sunni world, is bound to encourage support for the north in the rest of the Islamic World.

Sudan has, since the coup of 1989, been ruled by a military junta (legitimised by widely criticised elections – votes could only be cast in north Sudan) backed by the National Islamic Front (NIF). This group's leader, Dr Hassan al-Turabi, is Speaker of the Parliament, but is generally recognised to be a person of much greater political importance than this position would seem to indicate. Since December 1999, however, President

Omar al-Bashir has been the real power in Khartoum, after instigating a 'coup by stealth' against al-Turabi. The NIF has its roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (al-Turabi founded the Sudanese branch) from which it emerged as a political party shortly after independence in 1956. Four years before taking power in its own right, the NIF published its 'Sudan Charter', detailing its vision for the country. Reality in Sudan is very far removed from the letter of the Charter, and even further from the spirit. Although the most extreme in their dealing with the southern problem, the NIF are by no means unique among rulers of Sudan with regard to their tactics.

The last overlord with whom the southern Sudanese were *not* at war for a reasonable period was the British. The essential problem for these rulers has been the same. Each inherited a country but not a nation. The 31 million inhabitants are made up of over 500 ethnic groups speaking over 100 languages. Its religious composition is 70 per cent Sunni Muslim, 25 per cent traditional animism, and 5 per cent Christian.¹ While this great diversity could create a conflict of bewildering complexity, in Sudan there is a clear and distinct divide between two identities: north and south. This picture is blurred only slightly by the recognition that some Muslims live in the south as well, and form part of the southern identity, and that there are several northern ethnic groups that, while Muslim, feel marginalised and oppose the NIF government.

Since independence various Khartoum governments have tried to turn their state into a nation by forced Arabisation and Islamisation of the south. The latest means to this end is the NIF's Comprehensive Call.²

An internal NIF document described six main components to the Comprehensive Call as it was to be applied in one particular case – the Nuba mountains. These were religious indoctrination and the imposition of Islam on non-Muslims; political, social and economic favouritism for Nuba Muslims and their instigation to lead the campaign; *Jihad*³ against all those who defy the Call, whether Muslims or non-Muslims: isolation of Nuba Christians and intimidation of church leaders, also isolation of the region from international human rights, humanitarian or solidarity organisations; resettlement in peace villages to help achieve objectives one and two; a crackdown on all Nuba, inside or outside the Nuba mountains, who oppose the campaign.⁴

The Comprehensive Call is a two-pronged attack on the enemies of the government. On the one hand is a violent campaign, involving widespread killings, the rasing of villages, rape of women and abduction of children. These children are taken to any of seven indoctrination camps for re-education and political and religious indoctrination.⁵ On the other hand there are material incentives. Nuba who consent to relocation to the so-

called 'peace camps' (many of which are to be found in the desert around Khartoum) at least find peace and safety, if not prosperity. Here they are re-educated, and finally may be sent back to the front on the government side. Otherwise they join the shantytowns around Khartoum from where they take on menial work for the rich classes in the city.⁶

This document, especially point three, betrays the NIF as well at odds with conventional Muslim thinking, assuming one can take the party at face value. This section implies the state being given priority over the *Umma* (community of all Muslim believers), in that Muslims who oppose the Government of Sudan can legitimately be killed in the name of Islam. This conclusion is backed up by the text of a *Fatwa* which reads: 'An insurgent who was previously a Muslim is now an apostate; and a non-Muslim is a non-believer standing as a bulwark against the spread of Islam, and Islam has granted the freedom of killing both of them.'⁷

This is not merely a declaration by a marginalised and hawkish group: the government has followed this *Fatwa* with great zeal. Mosques (as well as churches) in areas thought to be sympathetic to the rebels have been razed, and copies of the Qur'an found therein have been burned. Walls of these mosques have been daubed with messages to the effect that if one wants to be a Muslim, one must worship in government-controlled mosques.⁸ The government has denied that the desecration of mosques has ever happened, let alone that it is their policy. Either the NIF is claiming that there is no Islam outside the jurisdiction of the government of Sudan (which is not a serious claim to make considering the rest of the Arab world), or that the provisions made in the Qur'an and the *Hadith*⁹ are secondary to the measures required to ensure the survival of the Islamic state.

It appears that al-Turabi and the NIF do make the second claim. Put simply, al-Turabi's view is that the Islamist movement is the sole legitimate candidate for political office. This is imperative, leaving matters of strategy, models, and even ideology to the discretion of the Islamists. Thus, as Abdel Salam Sidahmed concludes, 'An Islamic state is one governed by Islamists!'¹⁰ This is a position that would be unacceptable to the vast majority of Muslims worldwide, however one must recognise that the NIF has been fairly flexible over time on issues of ideology. While out of power, these issues were heatedly debated, but in modern times the NIF gives the impression of doing what is necessary at the time, and working out how to justify it afterwards. The proposal that the need for the survival of the Islamic state sanctions the breaking of the rules made explicit by the Prophet Muhammed is one which does not convince many. It is simply inconceivable that a political entity created and run by man should have primacy over the word of God as revealed to His Prophet.

Sudan's Islamic state was brought into being by means of a military coup against a democratically elected government. Sudan's coup was led by army officers and the leaders of an Islamic party, and proclaimed an Islamic state in a country which was only 70 per cent Muslim. Not only this but even within the Muslim community the NIF was not the dominant political group by any means. Al-Turabi has no claim to divine right to rule; the Sudanese citizen with the most credible claim to divine right is Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma Party and grandson of the Mahdi.

Sudan has attempted to make a success of Islamic economics, necessary because usury (the charging of interest on a loan) is forbidden in Islam. In the case of Sudan, it is of course hazardous to attempt a judgement on the soundness of an economic system by examining a country forced to spend \$1 million per day, half the national budget according to President al-Bashir,¹¹ financing a civil war. Islamic Iran too has been at war for much of its existence, eventual peace with Iraq coming in 1988. It is true that the economic systems of Sudan and Iran fit neither the capitalist nor the socialist model, indicating some sort of real 'third way'.¹² However, few outside these two countries have much regard for Islamic economics, and Iran has recently found itself with no other path open to it than to make concessions to the Western-oriented free market economy.¹³

One difference between the ideologies behind Sudan and Iran is the period inspiring them. Khomeini aimed to recreate the 'golden age' of the prophet. The re-emergence of this society is a widely held hope in Shi'ite Islam. Al-Turabi, on the other hand, proposes the reopening of *ijtihad*, the '... interpretation of the Prophet's laws to encompass issues not discussed directly in the traditional sources'.¹⁴ Some 300 years later most Muslim groups declared the period of *ijtihad* to be closed. Al-Turabi clearly considers *ijtihad* to be in order again, and this could be the tool by which Islamists arrive at their own versions of relatively recent egalitarian concepts such as human rights and individual worth.¹⁵ However the abuse of *ijtihad* opens the door for partial pragmatism such as is the result of al-Turabi's ideology of the primacy of the Islamic state.

It is clear that the issue of religion is one factor central to the conflict in Sudan. It is central, however, not because Islam is necessarily incompatible with the other religions of the South, but rather because every party to the conflict either justifies their actions by reference to it or blames it for their suffering. The version of Islam found in the rhetoric of the Sudanese government is not recognised by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide; indeed many find it deeply insulting. Hassan al-Turabi does not deny that his is a slightly unorthodox version of Islam, but rather he claims that new thinking is required to deal with the problems posed by our modern age, and that to this

end the Prophet's likely aim of continued *ijtihad* should be realised.

If al-Turabi really has decided that the Prophet's laws, when reinterpreted with reference to the twentieth century, prescribe the sort of horrendous policies he had been pursuing in south Sudan, then it is only possible to conclude that, while genuine, he is unusual to the point of being devoid of humanity. If, on the other hand, al-Turabi is little more than a brutal opportunist with Islam as his chosen means of justification, then we must discard religion as a genuine cause of the conflict in Sudan. The latter seems the most likely scenario.

WATER AND POWER, THE NILE AND REGIONAL POLITICS

In the years of empire, Britain was both the regional hegemonic power, and of course a global superpower. It had effective control over the whole of the Nile; indeed it colonised or occupied every country concerned at one time or another, most for many years. When Britain withdrew from Africa, Egypt assumed the role of regional power. Ethiopia was always a potential rival to Egypt, but never managed to summon up the resources, stability or political will to mount a serious challenge. Indeed, Egypt could never survive losing its dominance to a more assertive Ethiopia or Sudan, as it is the most vulnerable state on the Nile, and the most insecure about its supply of water, for the reasons below.

Water is short in the Nile valley. With a drainage area similar to that of the river Congo, the Nile only has an annual discharge of 84 billion cubic metres, the same as that of the river Rhine, one-fifth its length. By comparison, the Congo has an annual discharge of 1,400 billion cubic metres.¹⁶ The Nile meets 90 per cent of Egypt's water requirements, and 99 per cent of agricultural land uses Nile water. A total of 97 per cent of Egypt's water falls outside its territory. Water resources are at best stagnant, while requirements are increasing throughout the region, particularly in Egypt due to a population growth rate of 2.1 per cent per annum. It has been predicted that by 2025 the amount of water available to Egypt will be 980 cubic metres per head per year, below the 1,000 cubic metres required for Egypt to be an efficient, moderately industrialised nation.¹⁷

Ethiopia has enough water due to a high rainfall over its highland areas, but suffers due to an inability to utilise it efficiently. The soil is generally thin, and holds the water badly, and there are few permanent lakes and rivers, with the exception of the two major Nile tributaries of the Blue Nile and the Atbara. As a result large areas of the country suffer from annual droughts. However since even before the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, Ethiopia has been too unstable at best and war-torn at worst

to be able to devote much attention or money to developing its water resources. What it has done, in common with all other Nilotic states, is reserve the right unilaterally to develop and utilise its waters. Some 85 per cent of Egypt's water falls in Ethiopia.¹⁸

In order to keep its potential rival from threatening the security of its water supply, Egypt backed the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) which fought the successive regimes of the Emperor and the Dergue, paralysing Ethiopia for upwards of 30 years. Egypt also helped Somalia in its conflict with Ethiopia over an expanse of worthless desert.

However one must not attribute more significance than is reasonable to Egyptian interference in Ethiopian affairs, because the fact is that Egypt needed to do little in order to see Ethiopia in chaos, as Ethiopia's problems were almost entirely home grown. It is worth noting that the international financial organisations, which would have a large part to play in any large-scale project in Ethiopia, observe the convention that a state downstream of any proposed development has the right of veto over any project. This would clearly be a major factor in the case of a dam in Ethiopia.

If the Nile provides more water in one year, as happens, Egypt benefits, but if the flow is less, then the shortfall is borne by both countries. By this agreement, Sudan has enough water for its current needs, but a large factor in this is the vast area of farmable land rendered unusable due to the ongoing civil war. In particular the upper Nile and the foothills of the Nuba mountains have been earmarked for the government's intensive mechanised farming scheme,¹⁹ but these have been unsuitable for high-investment agriculture due to the instability of a civil war. The Nuba mountains in particular have been sealed off for many years.

This mechanised farming project is to be irrigated by the Jonglei Project. The Jonglei Canal, named after the town on the Nile, will be longer than the Suez and Panama Canals together, and is an essential part of the Century Storage Scheme, an immensely ambitious project born of British control of the whole of the Nile. It is a project that has been on the drawing board for the whole of this century. The first plan appeared in 1894 and the most recent in 1979. The project has seen the British Empire rise and fall; the emergence of nationalist movements and a sovereign Sudan and Egypt, and nearly a half-century of devastating civil war in southern Sudan.

The purpose of the scheme is twofold: first to ensure sufficient flow of water at all times, even in years of the lowest rainfall predicted to occur no more frequently than once every century,²⁰ and second to control the waters when in flood. The British envisaged Egypt being the primary beneficiary of the Century Storage Scheme, afflicted as it was by the twin problems of water shortages for much of the year and the annual flooding of the Nile

delta. The role of the Jonglei Canal is primarily to divert the water past the marshy Sudd region, thus avoiding great losses currently incurred through evaporation.²¹

Construction of the canal is currently suspended for two reasons. First, the war in the south makes such a project all but impossible. Second, the regime does not have anything like the huge economic resources required for such a project, although it has recently been reported that Libya's Gaddafi may be interested in providing the funding.²²

Egypt, the regional hegemon, has an interest in the continuance of the Sudanese war. Although the war prevents the completion of the Jonglei Canal, which would allow more water to reach Cairo, it also prevents development (agricultural and otherwise) in Sudan, which would increase Sudanese water requirements. Also, a war-weakened Sudanese government would be less likely to challenge Egypt in matters of water or anything else. The main reason, however, is Egypt's interest in the continued operation of its vital security regime. An independent south Sudan would be one more state upstream of Egypt, one more political will to be threatened or cajoled into co-operation. If this could not be done the position of Egypt would be precarious indeed. To this end of maintaining the *status quo*, Egypt has never encouraged the secession of the south, however bad relations with the north may have been.

Despite Egypt's best efforts, the Nile regime is witnessing a change of power structure, not primarily due to Sudan, but Ethiopia. Egypt depends on its ability to block international funding to developments upstream,²³ and this remains valid. However, Turkey has shown with its dams on the Euphrates the ability to fund domestically a major work, thus bypassing the financial veto of Syria. While Ethiopia is not currently in a position to emulate this, its economy did grow by 12 per cent in its second year of peace under the new government. This leaves Egypt with the military option. Egypt is currently able to exert its military might in both of the most relevant countries; Ethiopia and Sudan, but at high political cost. The regime has worked and maintained peace thus far because no state has been in a position to challenge first British and later Egyptian hegemony.

Also the stakes for the countries other than Egypt have been relatively low. Egypt worked to minimise water requirements in the other states, while not threatening the supply of what little water those countries actually needed at the time. As demands increase from all countries, a higher-stakes game will evolve, until the point is reached at which the price of compliance would be more than the price of defection. At this point a state, probably Ethiopia, will act unilaterally, which will result in tension and possible military action as Egypt simply cannot afford to lose any water at all. Indeed

the current arrangements will soon be insufficient for Egypt as well. The balance of power on the Nile could well be destined to change in the not-so-distant future.

Apart from the straightforward issue of water supply, the Jonglei Canal has another strategic purpose. There is a Pan-Arab agenda for southern Sudan, revealed in an intercepted 1978 communication between the Director of Egyptian Intelligence in Khartoum and one of his operatives in the Upper Nile town of Malakal.²⁴ This document states the higher strategic interest in Sudan of the Pan-Arab movement to be the ‘...eradication of the traces of Addis Ababa Agreement and its use for National Objectives for the strengthening and consolidation of Arab States economically militarily and to enhance unity.’²⁵ Specifically this applied to the Jonglei Canal for three reasons:

First: The digging of the Jonglei Canal will serve as a core link of the eastern and western provinces of the south with the north, thus making impossible the connection with Ethiopia and Mombasa – Kenya. This is to contradict the secret Mombasa Agreement.

Second: Digging of Jonglei Canal will store the quantity of water needed for irrigation by both Sudan and Egypt...

Third: ...to realise the common national objectives of Nile Valley in the light of the apparent changes in the world and the Arab land, particularly in the Sudan after the Addis Ababa Agreement. The basis of the Sudanese scheme (Jonglei Canal) is a traditional one.²⁶

The first point shows intent to extend the reach of Arab culture, along broadly imperialist lines. The second refers to the benefits of the Century Storage Scheme. The last sentence of point three can be taken to mean the traditional continuance of the historic spread of Islam southwards in Africa.

Thus in 1978 Egypt was fully behind the Pan-Arab agenda. Egypt stood to gain much from the incorporation of South Sudan into the Arab world. Water supply would be increased, and the number of countries upstream of Aswan would not increase. Moreover, Arab political and economic clout would be increased somewhat by the substantial oil reserves which had recently been found in the south (of which more later). All this hinged on military defeat of the south. Presumably when the US started funding the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) against General Nimeiri’s Soviet-backed regime (again, this will be further discussed below) Egypt decided that this was not a realistic hope.

As a second best scenario, Egypt accepted the *status quo* of a paralysed Sudan which would neither develop (and so use more water) nor separate

(resulting in another Nilotic state). Egypt could have been a vital ally for Khartoum, having as it does the military prowess to help win the war in southern Sudan. But this only applies if one factors out US involvement and, although a regional hegemon, Egypt cannot stand up to the US so far from Egypt's home patch. In any case, Egypt's security regime in the Nile valley may soon come under great pressure. What has been a very stable system, contributing to the stalemate in southern Sudan, could suddenly become very fluid.

TRIBAL, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POLITICS

The Sudan has over 500 ethnic groups. The members of most of these groups (particularly in the north) identify themselves not according to their tribe but rather according to their Arab culture. Indeed, many northerners claim Arab descent (or even descent from the Prophet Muhammed) but, while Arab traders certainly did settle in the area, most of these claims are fairly tenuous.²⁷ In the north, therefore, internal divisions along regional or ethnic lines are few, with the notable exceptions of the SPLA in the Nuba mountains, the Beja Congress in the Red Sea Hills and the Sudan Alliance Forces in the northwest of the country.

The situation is very different in the south. Tribal identity is still paramount, and the limited common southern identity that exists is based on resistance to domination from the north. The two main tribes, the Dinka and the Nuer, are found roughly either side of the Nile. Other smaller tribes include the Shilluk on the north-south frontier, the Fertit, Zande and Kakwa in the west, the Bari, Madi, and Latuka in the south, and the Toposa, Murle and Anuak in the east.²⁸ With this fragmented identity, conflicts between groups of southerners are much more common than between northerners. In an entirely undeveloped society, in which a large part of everyday life concerns the rearing of cattle, there are frequent clashes between tribes over grazing land. These occur most notably between the Dinka and the Baggara (actually an Arabised tribe from the north, but one which still operates according to the imperatives of a cattle-based existence), but most importantly (in terms of our political discussion) between the Dinka and the Nuer. Before the end of the historical peculiarity that was colonialism and the subsequent intensification of pressure from the north, the various tribes of the south saw themselves as different peoples.²⁹ It was this group of divided societies that was to join together to form the SPLA.

As a tactic to draw the sting of an ethnically plural rebel movement, the classic 'divide and rule' approach was ideal. The SPLA (all the various factions counted together) is predominantly Dinka and Nuer, with the Dinka

significantly outnumbering the Nuer. John Garang, a Dinka, has led the SPLA (both when unified and when as a mainstream faction) since he formed it in 1983. In 1991 the SPLA was militarily in a strong position: it controlled the whole of Equatoria except Juba and Yei, plus much of Bahr El Ghazal and Upper Nile provinces.³⁰ The mood was one of optimism for a final end to the war. Yet Garang's deputies were unhappy with his dictatorial leadership style, which was appropriate to his role in the SPLA, but more contentious when it carried over to the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). In August 1991 three members of the SPLA High Command – Lam Akol, Reik Macher and Gordon Koang Chol – attempted to oust Garang from the leadership. They failed, although many supported them, and the SPLA was split. There were other factors behind the split than simple power ambitions. The Nuer had long felt themselves to be dominated by the Dinka within the SPLA³¹ and welcomed their son Macher's move. As concerns aims, Garang was (at least in public) committed to maintaining a unified Sudan, while the splinter groups were in favour of secession for the south. Competition for limited food aid also played a part, and this will be further discussed below.

While supposedly dedicated to fighting the north, the southern SPLA factions (now roughly tribal in composition) fought each other. More southerners died at the hands of other southerners than in the war with the north.³² The NIF Government then launched its 'Peace from Within' initiative, which bypassed the official Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development mediators, and succeeded in bringing about in 1996 a peace treaty with four SPLA factions, including those led by Reik Macher and Kerubino Kuanyin. By this treaty there was to be in due course a referendum among the southerners '...to determine their political aspirations'.³³ The document was, however, full of clauses designed to give the government excuses for inaction, and also specifically ruled out southern independence.³⁴ Macher and Kuanyin joined the government and were promoted to the rank of Major General. In return their factions were to fight Garang's SPLA faction.

The peace agreement detailed above (known as the April Agreement) is but one example of the attempts of the NIF to split the SPLA. While the government was not the cause of these splits (which were due to the internal dynamics within the leadership backed up by traditional tribal rivalries), it was able to take advantage by cementing them to a certain extent. The dissident rebel commanders were said to have been frustrated by their lack of input to the decision-making process, and thus easily wooed by the government.³⁵ The NIF had no intention of reaching a political end to the war, but even so the various peace agreements they have entered into *cannot*

work because, like the Addis Ababa Agreement, they each involve only two or three of the 50 or so parties involved in the conflict.³⁶ The NIF have reneged on promises they never intended to keep, and managed to weaken the rebels. Garang's SPLA remains, however, and the war continues.

Regional politics also played a part in prolonging the war in Sudan, although factors which are genuinely more to do with regional than global power plays are rare. Without external support, regional and global, the SPLA certainly could not wage any sort of war against the Khartoum regime. Many of Sudan's neighbours (and indeed countries further afield) have complained of Khartoum's exporting an 'ideology of intolerance'.³⁷ Egypt's interests in the unity of Sudan have already been explained above. Ethiopia and Eritrea are currently too busy with their own war to pay any attention to Sudan, although they have both in the past backed the rebels in almost every way possible. Eritrea has had its regular army inside Sudan, although this has been denied.³⁸

The chaos that is Congo-Kinshasa (formerly Zaire) is more interesting. This is a conflict that threatens to engulf the whole of central Africa, with partisans on both sides sometimes found further afield. North Sudanese troops are currently in Congo in relatively small numbers, fighting alongside Zimbabwe and Chad on the side of Laurent Kabila. Ugandans and Rwandans are backing the rebels.³⁹ Khartoum's interest is clear: were a unified Congo under a grateful Kabila to be achieved, this would provide access to a new front in the south-west on which to attack the Sudanese rebels.

The major regional player contributing to instability in Sudan is Yoweri Museveni's Uganda, which supports the SPLA. The NIF in return supports the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda's own rebel group which operates out of Sudan. Museveni is backed by the Americans, who describe him as '...a beacon in the central Africa region'.⁴⁰ He is now the major power broker in the region, with more clout even than Kenya's Moi, and is currently involved in every war in the Great Lakes region. It may just be that Museveni has ideas about some sort of new central African political entity, perhaps comprising Uganda, Southern Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Eastern Zaire.

It is, however, the tides of global politics that have been the single greatest external factor contributing to the continuation of the war in Sudan. The rebel forces in the south have been armed by both the US and the USSR at different times. This has always happened through a third country, usually Ethiopia but more recently through Eritrea and Uganda as well. Sudan has a strategic location and borders with nine other countries, and has large unexploited oil reserves. Neighbouring Ethiopia was a highly-prized trophy

for both superpowers during the Cold War. The first third party to arm the rebels was Israel in the 1960s,⁴¹ which was trying to undermine Islamist movements which threatened Israel's own security. In the early 1960s Khartoum was armed by the Soviets. In 1974 the pro-Western Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was removed from power. He was replaced by the Dergue, a Communist regime headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, and the superpowers switched sides. The US alone is supposed to have provided over \$2 billion in arms through third countries.⁴²

With the end of the Cold War, however, US assistance to the rebels has continued. In 1996 \$20 million in military aid was sent to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda.⁴³ It is reasonable to assume what an SPLA commander (who must remain anonymous) has told the author – that much of this was (by private arrangement) diverted to National Democratic Alliance (NDA) forces based in these countries. US support for the rebels continues for at least four reasons.

First, the US is a strongly Christian country, one which persists in subscribing to the 'clash of civilisations' view of the world. With communism defeated in 1989, Islam is the likely new target. We must not forget the reason given above for the war being characterised as one of religious intolerance. This reason is that each side gains support from different quarters as a result of a media portrayal of religious conflict.

Second, the US regards Sudan as a 'rogue state' and one which sponsors international terrorism. Carlos the Jackal spent many years there before finally being handed over to France, and the world's most wanted man, Osama Bin Laden, has well-known links with Sudan. It is now generally accepted that America's August 1998 bombing of a supposed chemical weapons plant in Khartoum was carried out on the basis of inaccurate information, and was more the result of Clinton's domestic problems. Former presidential aide George Stephanopoulos has said as much.⁴⁴

Third, Sudan supported Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War, and is suspected of harboring Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Fourth, Sudan is also close to Iran, the other country concerned in America's 'dual containment' policy.⁴⁵

The rebels, then, have never lacked a powerful foreign backer. The US currently fills that role, with lesser regional allies, and yet the SPLA has not defeated the NIF. Indeed they have had to accommodate some very unusual bedfellows within the NDA in order just to achieve what seems to be a protracted military stalemate.

FOOD AND POWER IN SOUTH SUDAN

It is death by famine, not war, that brings the conflict in Sudan to the attention of the West. The death of the unarmed innocent always outrages more than the death of an active participant in a conflict. The people of southern Sudan have been victims of famine for many decades, at some times much more acute than others. It is important to point out that famine and starvation are not synonymous, contrary to the common Western conception. Devereux claims (convincingly) that famine has occurred ‘... (1) with no food shortage (Bangladesh, 1974) [which was more to do with food hoarding and a counterproductive international input], (2) where excess mortality was caused by disease, not starvation (Darfur [Sudan], 1984, and (3) with perhaps no excess mortality at all (Sahel, 1972–74).’⁴⁶

Devereux quotes Walker as providing the best definition of famine: the latter states that ‘...famine is a social-economic process which causes the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful groups in a community, to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood’.⁴⁷ Thus famine can cause starvation, but this is not a necessary result. It is true that in Sudanese famines more people have died of disease than starvation.

So why is there famine in Sudan? Theories of famine fall into three categories: food availability decline (FAD)⁴⁸ theories cite such causes as adverse climate or demography, economic theories focus on various market failures, and political economy explanations blame such factors as natural resources, underdevelopment, misguided government policies, adverse effects of the international relations system, and finally war.⁴⁹

The claim that drought (or equally any other climatic problem) causes famine would seem to be common sense, but on closer examination a more complex scenario will be found. Drought disrupts food production, but not distribution. The climatic theory fails to explain why food does not come in from elsewhere. It assumes an economy closed to both aid and trade.⁵⁰ If a society is not closed to other means of acquiring food, then it may not be vulnerable to drought. It is this vulnerability which causes famine. South Sudan is vulnerable to the effects of famine because alternative sources of food such as aid and trade are limited due to the war.

The second common ‘supply side’ theory is that of demography. Malthusian and neo-Malthusian theorists claim that death by famine is nature’s check on an exponentially increasing population. This school of thought may or may not be right in certain hypothetical circumstances, but it clearly fails to account for famine in today’s world, where (because of agricultural advances) there *is* enough food for everybody. The problem,

again, is distribution. Lack of delivery trucks makes the people of a crowded refugee camp vulnerable to a limited food supply. The refugees' close proximity to each other is not an intrinsic problem.

The most important economic theory of famine, Sen's entitlement theory,⁵¹ states that some groups within a society can be more vulnerable to famine than others. This appears to be the case in Sudan, where rebel soldiers are often better provided for than civilians in the area. Sen identifies four possible causes of differential access to food.⁵² Applied to Sudan, soldiers have a *de facto* entitlement to food above that of everybody else, not because they trade for it ('exchange entitlement'), nor because they produced it ('direct entitlement'), nor yet because they are given it ('transfer entitlement'). They get food because they have the power to take it, and this only partially fits Sen's final option, that they exchange their labours (fighting the northerners) for food. The problem is that they are supposedly fighting for the benefit of the starving, not primarily for the protection of those with the food (the aid agencies).

The other economic theory of famine, that of market failure, blames food hoarding for exaggerating the effects of a food shortage. However as Devereux points out, in rural Africa the markets are small and isolated, and thus rises in demand for food is both localised and temporary. This is certainly not a significant cause of the widespread famine we see in Sudan today.

The first political economy explanation is that of government policy. This theory holds that misguided governmental policies (such as urban bias, or overly liberal policies, or overly interventionist policies) are a cause of famine. As south Sudan has had no effective government and thus no development policies implemented for several decades we can ignore this theory. A government can also simply fail to intervene to prevent a famine. While the Khartoum regime has certainly done this, it is not *because* they lack the will, rather that they are not in control of the famine-afflicted territory.

A second version states that ecological problems are causing a shortfall in natural resources. This is obviously closely linked to the Malthusian and neo-Malthusian view. South Sudan, however, is actually underpopulated and, being almost totally undeveloped, has no problem with pollution. Lack of resources available from the environment is not a factor.

The last major political economy explanation is war, which seems rather obvious in the case of Sudan. But war, is not in itself, a cause of famine. Rather it enables some of the other factors listed above to come into play by making a population vulnerable to them. When a populace is forced to flee from advancing troops, they are unable either to gather their harvest, or to

sow for the next year. As a result, assuming restricted access for the aid agencies as is often the case in Sudan, the population may be made vulnerable to conditions described by a version of the Malthusian theory.

Food production in southern Sudan is disrupted in several ways: people are forced to move from their homes, men are conscripted into all the various forces; food is simply taken by the soldiers, and most significantly, both sides exercise restrictions on the distribution of aid supplies in their areas.

In their book *Food and Power in Sudan*,⁵³ Alex de Waal and Rakiya Omaar argue that the logistics and abuses of humanitarian aid supply are a major factor behind the continued nature of both the war and the famine in south Sudan. They are largely right, and their arguments deserve space in this summary.

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) umbrella body, formed in 1988–89. This was after the severe famine and attendant media attention of September–October 1988 exposed the shortcomings of the previous system, in which individual agencies operated autonomously and negotiated their access individually. A UN operation, OLS was mandated to bring relief aid to every needy group in the country, and this caused a major problem of procedure and precedent. Most of those in need of humanitarian aid were situated in the south, which was largely under the control of Garang's SPLA rather than the government of Sudan. The UN negotiating access with Khartoum, while being the correct thing to do in terms of international law, would bring no agreement with any actual effect on the ground. The national sovereignty of Sudan had to be breached, so that the UN could negotiate access with the SPLA, the *de facto* government in south Sudan. Never before had the UN had official dealings with a rebel group.

During the Cold War, relations with governments were all important, but had resulted in much of Ethiopia being inaccessible to the UN in the mid-1980s.⁵⁴ The rebel EPLF controlled the north of the country, and the UN could not come to any arrangement with a rebel force. Lessons were learnt, and the UN was willing to press Khartoum for permission to negotiate for access to southern Sudan. The idea of ceding authority to the UN in order to allow it to negotiate with the rebels was anathema to Sadiq al-Mahdi's hardline government of the Umma Party and the NIF. In 1989, however, an extraordinary document was presented to the government by large sections of the army, to the effect that the war could not be won. Discredited, the government resigned and was replaced by a new regime (with Sadiq al-Mahdi still as president), now including the DUP, the Communists and a group known as the Peace Coalition alongside the Umma Party.

Domestic and international pressure soon persuaded an already

amenable government to hand over to the UN authority over the humanitarian crisis in the south. For the SPLA, effective political recognition from the UN was an immense coup, and Garang agreed immediately to set up 'corridors of tranquillity' along which aid supplied could move in safety. The OLS coalition was optimistic about the prospects of carrying out an effective relief operation.

OLS has, in one form or another, been in operation ever since, but the level to which it benefits the people of south Sudan is a matter of debate. In the rebel-held areas there has been widespread misappropriation and diversion of aid supplies by the SPLA, prompted not only by the desire of commanders to provide for their own troops, but also for their own people.⁵⁵ Here the particularly southern factor of tribalism comes in again. Whenever a resource is scarce there will, as with grazing for cattle, be intertribal competition to secure it. The same has been true of the relief aid, with individual commanders diverting food to their 'own' people. Inter-tribal suspicions and tensions were raised over the issue and, when the split in the SPLA came in 1991, the aid community was accused of involvement.⁵⁶

The available evidence fails to sustain this allegation, but the suspicion was enough. The SPLA was split and its cause set back indefinitely. The politics of aid supply in a tribal area contributed to the split, and weakened a rebel movement that none the less could not be defeated. Thus OLS prolonged the war in Sudan.

There were other problems in government controlled areas of the south. The NIF (by 1989 in power in their own right) resented the loss of sovereignty OLS entailed,⁵⁷ yet allowed it to continue for two reasons. First, OLS assists the government's policy of forced assimilation. The government can effectively control where the refugees assemble, by allowing aid to go only to designated locations in a region. Without approval from Khartoum no airdrop can take place because the Sudanese Air Force has complete control over the skies of Sudan. This could only be challenged by the supply of Stinger missiles to the rebels, something the US will not do due to the lessons learnt from arming the Mujahedin in Afghanistan. Once the refugees are gathered together in one camp, the government has total control over their movements. This is the platform from which the Comprehensive Call⁵⁸ can be launched.

The second reason for the NIF's allowing OLS to continue is that it absolves the regime of responsibility for dealing with the needs of the victims of famine. The continued existence of any government is dependent on the maintenance of a certain level of satisfaction among the empowered sections of the populace. This threshold is of course lowest in a liberal democracy such as ours, and considerably higher in a state in which an

authoritarian military backed regime is in place. Even in the latter case, if popular dissatisfaction is high to the point at which it spreads also through the military, the *status quo* will be unsustainable.

One of the most effective ways to bring about such popular discontent is to allow the existence of a widespread famine in one's country, and thus such an eventuality must be avoided by any regime interested in keeping power. In the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s, large parts of the country were excluded from the relief effort, and as a result more people joined the EPLF out of desperation. Thus, the Mengistu regime was finally brought down due partly to its failure to satisfy a dangerous part of its population.

In Sudan in the 1990s, by contrast, OLS has been able to operate some sort of relief operation to every region (with the exception of the Nuba mountains), and is now seen by the north Sudanese (who are the regime's power base) as the organisation whose job it is to relieve suffering in Sudan. Thus the regime is not perceived by the northerners to have failed in its duties as spectacularly as it has in fact done. OLS has lifted the burden of democratic responsibility from the shoulders of the NIF, who have thus remained in power. Government self-interest has been factored out, and the crisis in Sudan remains unresolved.

CONCLUSIONS

The Sudanese civil war is the result of several factors, but the most obvious and the one on which the conflict is blamed by all parties, religion, is not one of them. The issue of differing religions between the peoples of the north and the south is only relevant as a part of the issue of differing cultures and identities. There is nothing in Islam (or indeed in Christianity) which demands that one wage perpetual war against those with beliefs different from one's own. The animists of south Sudan do not appear to have such a requirement placed upon them either. There is therefore no intrinsic religious incompatibility between the protagonists. There is, however, a necessary predisposition to conflict based on two incompatible cultures in Sudan. In the north there is a culture of domination, and in the south a culture of resistance. This incompatibility, coupled with the fact that the southerners are a strong enough group to wage war against those who seek to dominate them, is a sufficient cause of war.

This war, with the end (as far as Khartoum is concerned) being a unified, homogeneous nation-state of Arab-Islamic character, has continued virtually without respite since before independence. It is one of the longest running conflicts in recent history. The reason for this is that the rebels have always had a powerful foreign backer, which ensures that they are always

too strong to be defeated. At the same time (in terms of the conflict with the current and previous regimes) the government of Sudan has managed to remain in power and avoid the secession of the south because the rebel movement has been split along tribal lines. This has happened due to the government itself (by means of its divisive peace deals with certain SPLA factions) and also due to the failure of the UN to ensure that OLS was not interfered with by partisan rebel commanders.

It is also true that the US, Garang's principle backer, would not welcome the secession of south Sudan, for two reasons.

First, the US is very sensitive to the views of Egypt, due to its key role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Egypt has been totally opposed to the establishment of another state on the Nile, for the reasons explained above.

Second, the US along with the rest of the world, fears that the redrawing of the eccentric colonial boundaries of Sudan would open a 'Pandora's Box' of boundary conflicts, independence struggles and internecine warfare across Africa. An entire continent could be the scene of the settling of 40 years of post-colonial scores.

This may be the reason why the SPLA has not taken the principal southern town of Juba, despite the author having been given credible off-the-record assurances that they have the military capacity to do so at will.⁵⁹ It is generally accepted that if Juba falls the momentum for secession would be irresistible. Also the SPLA has not taken the strategic Rosieres Dam, which supplies Khartoum with electricity. If this were to be taken, the position of the NIF would be untenable. The same unattributable source maintains that the reason for the failure to take the dam is due to SPLA misgivings about its NDA bedfellows. Garang suspects that, were the NIF to fall now, the traditional Northern Islamic parties would be in a position to renege on commitments made in the Asmara Declaration. We must remember that these parties (particularly the Umma Party) also bear a large part of the responsibility for the bloodshed in Sudan. The military situation would appear to be a politically-induced stalemate. Garang's fears appear well-founded. In December 1999, following al-Bashir's marginalisation of al-Turabi, the Umma Party defected from the NDA and were reconciled with Khartoum. This currently weakened the NDA politically, but the Umma Party appears to have gained little from this move.

Khartoum is in the midst of a power struggle, with President al-Bashir currently in the ascendancy. Al-Turabi, however, has been a political player in Sudan since 1965, and is now talking in terms of bringing his supporters onto the streets. Either way, one lesson to be taken from 50 years of war in Sudan is that leaders must be judged according to actions rather than words. Despite friendly noises, al-Bashir has yet to prove himself the pragmatist he

needs to be for peace in the south.

There seems to be at least a glimmer of hope. There have been several significant developments, and it may just be that they are the result of a round of high level confidential international negotiations. What has happened is that Sudanese President al-Bashir has reiterated his willingness to let the South go if it is the only way to end the war.⁶⁰ The Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did meet representatives of the NDA at Cairo in August 1998,⁶¹ and talked not of the absolute necessity of the unity of Sudan, but rather of a more general regional integration based on the Nile Basin. The Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi, eager for Western favour while negotiating to have sanctions lifted, has become involved in the search for a lasting peace⁶² has also offered funding for the Jonglei Canal project,⁶³ which might become feasible in times of peace, and is about the only way to increase the volume of water available to Egypt which is now bypassing the IGADD and mediating itself between the Khartoum regime and the NDA.⁶⁴

While it is perfectly possible that these news reports are little more than a coincidence, it is possible that Egypt, looking to its long term rather than short-term water needs, has decided that the sooner south Sudan is peaceful the better. The conclusion that this cannot happen in a unified Sudan is one which is hard to avoid. With a concrete offer of funding for the massive Jonglei Canal, we could soon see an independent south Sudan. Egypt could be putting its faith in an improbable project born of cooperation between north Sudanese Islamists, south Sudanese rebels, American hegemonists and a rehabilitating pariah state. On the other hand, with its Nile security regime likely to unravel sometime anyway,⁶⁵ what realistic long-term alternative does it have?

NOTES

1. Data from the *CIA World Factbook* (The CIA, www.odci.gov, 1998).
2. Abdel Gadir Mohamed Zein, Secretary General of Nidaa al Jihad organisation, quoted in Alex De Waal and Rakiya Omaar, *Food and Power in Sudan* (London: African Rights 1997) p.186.
3. Interpretations of the politically-loaded term *jihad* vary from that which is widely understood in the West (*Jihad* as holy war) to the more literal translation of 'striving for Islam'.
4. Quoted in De Waal (note 2) p.191
5. Alex De Waal and Rakiya Omaar, *Sudan's Invisible Citizens* (London: African Rights 1995) pp.17–20.
6. *Ibid.* pp.26–35.
7. *Fatwa* issued by religious leaders, Imams of mosques and Sufists of Kordofan State, 1992, quoted in *ibid.* pp.191–2.
8. Alex De Waal and Rakiya Omaar, *Facing Genocide: the Nuba of Sudan* (London: African Rights 1995) pp.286–95.

9. Secondary Islamic texts, recordings the deeds of the Prophet.
10. Abdel Salam Sidahmed, 'Sudan: Ideology and Pragmatism', in idem and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.) *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview 1996) p.196.
11. President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, quoted in Associated Press report 3 Feb. 1999.
12. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Islamic Governance in Post-Khomeini Iran' in Abdel Salam Sidahmed and idem (note 10) p.144.
13. Ibid. p.153.
14. William Langewiesche, 'Islamic Radicalism in Sudan' (on-line article at www.theatlantic.com 1994).
15. Ibid. p.6.
16. Terje Tvedt, *Water and Politics: A History of the Jonglei Project in the Southern Sudan* (Bergen: Derap 1986) p.12.
17. Peter Gleick, 'Water and Conflict', *International Security* 18 (1993).
18. Gregory Shapland, *Rivers of Discord* (London: Hurst 1997) p.60.
19. Waal and Omaar, *Food and Power in Sudan* (note 2) p.97.
20. Shapland (note 18) p.62.
21. Tvedt (note 16) p.44.
22. 'Kadhafi Shows Interest in Sudan Canal Construction Project' (PANA newswire, 1 Feb. 1999).
23. International Law grants a state a veto over IMF funding for any major water project in a state upstream of it. See El-Atawy, p.55.
24. Egyptian Intelligence, *Arab Secret Policy in South Sudan and Duty Paper on Pan Arabism in the Sudan*, 1978. Source: personal papers of Bishop Allison. Sudan Archive, Durham, Ref. 803/5/85-99.
25. Egyptian Intelligence, *Duty Paper on Pan Arabism in the Sudan*, page Ref. 803/5/92 .
26. Ibid. page Ref. 803/5/95-96.
27. Francis Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington DC: Brookings 1995) p.40.
28. Godfrey Morrison, *The Southern Sudan and Eritrea: Aspects of Wider African Problems* (London: Minority Rights 1974) p.6.
29. Deng (note 27) p.186.
30. Peter Adwok Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View* (Kampala: Fountain 1997) p.74.
31. De Waal and Omaar (note 2) p.276.
32. Deng (note 27) p.229.
33. Article III, quoted in De Waal and Omaar (note 2) p.291.
34. Ibid. p.291.
35. Ibid.
36. Nyaba (note 30) p.152.
37. Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi, quoted in 'Ethiopia says Sudan Exporting Intolerant Ideology' (Reuters newswire, 9 March 1998).
38. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki once admitted sending his army into Sudan. This was at a private party in 1997 which included among the guests Ruth Simon, a friend of his wife but also a journalist from AFP. She reported his statement and has been in an Eritrean jail without charges ever since.
39. 'Confusion Reigns in Battle for Central Africa' (ANS newswire, 28 March 1999).
40. Madeleine Albright, quoted in 'US Backs Uganda Against Sudan' (New Vision newswire, 11 Dec. 1997).
41. Martha Honey and Tom Barry (eds.) *Foreign Policy in Focus: Sudan* (Inst. of Policy Studies, www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org, 1997).
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. 'Clinton Aide Admits Sudan Bombing Could've Been "Wag the Dog"' (Fox Newswire, 17 March 1999).

45. Stephen Hubbell, *The Containment Myth: US Middle East Policy in Theory and Practice* (Middle East Research and Information Project, www.merip.org, 1998).
46. Stephen Devereux, *Theories of Famine* (NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1993) p.181.
47. P. Walker, quoted in *ibid.* p.181.
48. As labeled by Sen (note 51), quoted in Devereux, *ibid.* p.182.
49. *Ibid.* pp.184–90.
50. *Ibid.* pp.182–3.
51. A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Clarendon 1981).
52. Devereux (note 46) p.184.
53. De Waal and Omaar (note 2).
54. *Ibid.* p.122.
55. *Ibid.* p.91.
56. *Ibid.* p.273.
57. *Ibid.* p.236.
58. See section above.
59. From a personal conversation with a prominent intellectual allied with the Sudanese Alliance Forces, in Asmara, Eritrea. Aug. 1998.
60. 'Sudan President says ready to let South secede' (posted by sudan-news.org, date not posted, but believed to date from mid-March 1999).
61. See Appendix IV, the Cairo Declaration.
62. 'Kadhafi Speaks on how to End Sudan Conflict' (PANA newswire, 12 March 1999).
63. 'Kadhafi Shows Interest in Sudan Canal Construction Project' (PANA newswire, 1 Feb. 1999).
64. 'Egypt Trying to Mediate an End to Sudan's Civil War' (AP newswire, 27 March 1999).
65. See section on Water and Power, the Nile and Regional Politics.