

THE GAP BETWEEN NARRATIVES AND PRACTICES

DARFUR: THE RESPONSES FROM THE ARAB WORLD

1. DARFUR AND ARAB PUBLIC OPINION: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

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A COLLECTION OF PAPERS TO PROMPT AN INTER-ARAB DIALOGUE ON POLICIES TOWARDS THE CONFLICT IN DARFUR

This paper is part of a collection of seven research papers published within the framework of the project '*The Gap between Narratives and Practices. Darfur: Responses from the Arab world*' undertaken by FRIDE from October 2008 to March 2010.

The project aims to develop an understanding of Arab states and society, as well as their attitudes and policies towards massive violations of human rights in their region. The research conducted for this purpose is manifold and aims at facilitating an inter-Arab dialogue; as well as the generation of ideas about how other actors may play a positive role to engage the Arab world in redressing the massive violations of human rights in the particular case of Darfur and beyond.

The project undertaken by FRIDE and funded by the Ford Foundation has gathered together a number of researchers and activists to develop background research, meet in an international conference in Tunis in October 2009 to discuss their findings and draw conclusions and recommendations in different thematic areas, including Arab perceptions of the crisis, Arab policies as individual states and within the framework of regional and international organisations, and other external responses related to or that influence what Arab actors could do regarding the Darfur conflict.

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DARFUR AND ARAB PUBLIC OPINION: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT¹

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ABSTRACT

Debate about Darfur in the Arab world is characterised by ignorance and distrust of the West. The Western parameters for the debate, which have centred on the concepts of 'responsibility to protect' and 'international justice', fail to engage Arab public opinion. Instead, policy makers ought to facilitate the flow of credible information, emphasise the Islamic identity of Darfur, and attend to regional development and security. Most importantly, Arab attitudes to Darfur point to the urgent need for fundamental US and EU policy shifts in the Middle East and North Africa.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly held by both Arab and foreign observers that the Arab world has been largely passive in face of the conflict in Darfur since it erupted in 2003. While numerous pressure groups, humanitarian organisations and the media have highlighted the plight of Darfur's people in Europe and the US, the issue has remained rather peripheral in Arab civil society. Considering the scale of the conflict, the fact that Sudan is an Arab country, and that most of the warring parties and their victims are Muslims, it would seem important to engage the Arab world on this issue. Yet, with the exception of Qatar, Arab regimes have avoided getting involved in the conflict; strangely enough given the regional and religious aspects of the conflict, this has also largely been the case with the Arab media. To the extent that Darfur is discussed in Arab public life, it is more often than not in the context of the larger issue of relations between the Arab-Islamic world and the West.

What is the reason for this? Perhaps even more importantly, what strategies should be used to raise awareness and concern in Arab countries about the situation in Darfur? This article seeks to answer those two questions by giving an overview of the different attitudes to the Darfur conflict that have come to the fore in the Arab media; by analysing the motives and background for the attitudes that prevail; and, finally, by identifying the challenges that attempts to engage Arab public opinion on the issue of Darfur can expect to face.

International coverage of Darfur and the subsequent debate it has led to has highlighted two concerns in particular. The first of these is the need to protect the region's civilians, an issue which has quickly moved up the agenda due to the scale of the suffering inflicted on the people of the region, and the resulting activities of Western aid agencies in Darfur. The second concern is with international justice, an issue made central by pressure groups in the West, and one which took on a whole new dimension when the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted key government figures in Khartoum as well as Darfur rebel leaders. These two issues have also set the parameters for the debate in the Arab media, but the points of reference in this case are fundamentally different from the ones in Europe and the US. Consequently, the following analysis pays special attention to how the protection of civilians and the question of international justice are conceptualised and discussed in the Arab debate.

THE FACTS

On 4 March, 2009, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Umar Hasan al-Bashir and other senior Sudanese officials, charging them with crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur.² This decision broke the relative silence in the Arab world on Darfur, sparking unprecedented debate about Sudan, international justice and the ongoing conflict in Arab media outlets. It thus serves well as a point of departure for discussing Arab views on Darfur in general. The following analysis is based on Arab media editorials and op-ed articles gathered together from the period March 1st – 20th, during which time the ICC arrest warrant and Darfur were being hotly debated in Arab public opinion.³ In addition to the press, the analysis draws on interviews with six Egyptian intellectuals and policymakers in Cairo during May, 2009, in order to complement and expand on the picture that appears from the media.

Between 1 March and 20 March, 2009, a total of 37 op-ed articles about Sudan, Darfur and the International Criminal Court appeared in the seven selected news outlets. In addition, there were numerous news reports and background articles. While it is outside the scope of this paper to compare this figure with newspapers in other parts of the world, it is safe to say that the ICC indictment was actively discussed by Arab public opinion.

DIFFERING ATTITUDES TO THE DARFUR CONFLICT

There are three groups of opinion discernible in the 37 articles I analysed: those writers who question or reject the ICC decision and who make up a sizeable majority; the handful of writers who support the Court's decision; and finally, those who refrain from expressing an opinion about the ICC indictment, but prefer instead to analyse the political implications and scenarios to which it might lead. Since the focus of this article is on public opinion, we will disregard the third group in the analysis which now follows.

Twenty of the thirty-seven articles are clearly against the ICC's indictment of al-Bashir to greater or lesser degree, and most of them are sceptical of the *raison d'être* of the institution itself. The concerns and arguments in these articles overlap to some degree, naturally. Nevertheless, it is possible to separate critics of the Court into two different camps; those whose criticism rests on pragmatic, political grounds; and those who object to the Court on grounds of principle. It is necessary to describe both these viewpoints to understand the dynamics governing Arab public opinion on the issue of Darfur.

The pragmatic-political line of argument rests on the premise that the political independence of the ICC was inevitably compromised from its inception, since the institution does not have the power to enforce its decisions by itself and has to rely on member states to ensure compliance of its rulings. In practice, this means that powerful countries in the international system, first and foremost the USA, can use the court for its own ends. As the London-based Sudanese intellectual Abd al-Wahab al-Afandi puts it, the ICC 'lacks its most important elements and moral authority. For it is not a true international court, but rather one of deficient legitimacy: if the weak commit a crime they are handed over to it, but when the powerful do the same they remain safe from its reach.'⁴

Against this background, those sceptical of the ICC argue that the Court's decision will only worsen the situation in Darfur by antagonising the Khartoum regime and encouraging the rebel groups. In addition, they warn of serious regional security problems, like the growth of more extremist groups.

Despite their objections to the ICC, however, these writers do not support the regime in Khartoum. Their attitudes are based on an assessment of the security situation in Sudan and the realities of international politics - not feelings of sympathy with the Sudanese authorities. Thus they openly criticise the regime for incompetence,

² The warrant of arrest is available at the ICC's website: <http://www.icc-cpi.int/Menu/ICC/Situations+and+Cases/Situations/Situation+ICC+0205/Related+Cases/ICC02050109/Court+Records/Chambers/PTCI/1.htm> (accessed on the 14th of August 2009).

³ Four pan-Arab sources were surveyed: the dailies *al-Hayat*, *al-Quds al-'Arabi* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and *al-jazeera.net*. In addition to this, two Egyptian sources, the semi-official daily *al-Ahram* and the web site of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Saudi daily *al-Riyadh* were also monitored during the same period. All quotations were translated from Arabic by the author.

⁴ Abd al-Wahab al-Afandi, 'Sudan: And they ask you about the International Criminal Court', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 3 March 2009.

arrogance and cynicism in dealing with the Darfur crisis. Yusuf al-Kuwaylit, the editor of *al-Riyad*, states that Sudan's main problem is that the government has not managed to come up with a successful formula for pluralist unity. In a similar manner, the Egyptian intellectual Jamil Matar states that 'armed groups closest to the intentions and interests of the ruling class in Khartoum were, and still are, hard-hearted people who treated the other tribes badly, killing, plundering, burning and destroying.'⁵

The double standards in international justice are by no means overlooked by those whose criticism is based on the political-pragmatic rationale. However, the second group of ICC critics, those who object to the ICC on principle, focus almost exclusively on this issue. They angrily contrast the ICC's decision to prosecute al-Bashir with the absence of any kind of comparable action against US and Israeli military and political leaders with either direct or indirect responsibility for a number of documented war crimes. Iraq, Afghanistan and the recent war on Gaza in January 2009 are all used as potent symbols of international injustice and bias against the Arab and Muslim world. The degree of vehemence of the condemnation is certainly varied. One author describes Israel's crimes against the Palestinians as "exceeding those of the Nazis"'.⁶ Another writes that only when current and previous Israeli leaders are brought before an international court 'will it be possible to speak of international justice in Sudan and of a humanitarian intervention deserving of the name.'⁷ But nuances in tone notwithstanding, a common indignation at the discrepancy between the ICC's indictment of al-Bashir and the absence of a similar kind of sanction against Israeli and US officials is certainly palpable enough.

Those who object to the ICC on principle do not at all see its decision to prosecute Sudanese leaders as an attempt, however flawed, by the international community to force the Sudanese regime to redress the situation in Darfur. Instead, the ICC decision is construed as just another attack on the Arab and Islamic world by the imperialist West. With the focus solely on this question, the Darfur conflict itself is downplayed or even disappears from the picture altogether. The Khartoum regime is subjected to some mild criticism for its 'neglect' or 'errors' at the most; more typically, it is regarded as a victim of Western and Israeli aggression, and President al-Bashir is hailed as one of the few Arab leaders able to stand up to the new Western imperialism.

In this discourse, two distinct political tendencies come together: Islamism and Arab nationalism. While in other questions they might often be at loggerheads, the discourse of one and the other on the question of Darfur is virtually indistinguishable. Consider the following two examples. First a short excerpt from an article by the famous Islamic preacher Dr. Raghīb al-Sirjani which appeared on the Muslim Brotherhood's web site the day after the ICC decision:

They want to convince the world that the ICC members, the Security Council, American and European politicians, are heartbroken for the sake of the civilians in Darfur! They also want to convince the world that Omar al-Bashir is more aggressive and vicious than Livni, Olmert, Barak and Shimon Peres. In addition, they want to convince the world that the Earth's armies will converge on Sudan for the sake of justice and truth, in order to prevent that some African villages are subjected to injustice – according to what they say!!⁸

The same accusation of Western double-dealing is made by the Kuwaiti member of the Arab National Conference, Dr. Muhammad Salih al-Musaffar:

The ICC has issued an arrest warrant for the President of the Sudanese Republic on the basis of a number of accusations (...). Those accusations are made by organisations that are hostile to the political regime in Sudan, and financed by countries which have an interest in weakening Sudan, shattering its unity and doing away with its regime (...).⁹

⁵ Jamil Maar, 'The International Courts: Houses of Justice or tools of hegemony?', *al-Hayat*, the 9th of March 2009.

⁶ Mahmud al-Mubarak, 'The abundant production and poor distribution of international criminal courts', *al-Hayat*, 2nd of March 2009.

⁷ Wahid Abd al-Majid, 'Sudanese errors and Zionist crimes!', *al-Ahram*, the 10th of March 2009.

⁸ Raghīb al-Sirjani, 'The arrest of al-Bashir', www.ikhwanonline.com, the 5th of March 2009.

⁹ Muhammad Salih al-Musaffar, 'For the sake of Sudan, not President al-Bashir', *al-Quds al-Arabi*, the 10th of March 2009.

Both the Arab nationalists and the Islamists view the international concern over Darfur as no more than an excuse for meddling in Arab and Islamic affairs and trying to weaken the Arab-Islamic world. For both, the humanitarian aspects of the conflict are trivial; what matters is that Darfur is just another way for the West to destroy Arab and Islamic independence. To prove their point, they bypass regional politics and the political dynamics of international relations, and instead rely on well-rehearsed conjectures: the West is really after Sudanese natural resources; there is a plan for dividing Sudan up into several small and powerless states; and the Islamic world is being attacked from one of its peripheral areas, paving the way for attacks against the Islamic heartland. Such accusations are easy to make and hard to refute by virtue of their general character.

A shared characteristic of these articles is the strong concern with ethnicity and Arab unity. This is of course only natural for Arab nationalists. But it is striking that the Islamists largely ignore the fact that nearly all of Darfur's inhabitants are Muslims. Given the Islamist concern with Muslim unity, one would perhaps expect them to lament the fact that the nominally Islamic Sudanese regime is at war with fellow Muslims in Darfur, but this aspect is neglected in Islamist articles on the conflict. Instead they insist that the West is trying to gain spheres of influence in the southern and western parts of Sudan in order to weaken the country's Islamic character. To some extent they even treat the Darfurian non-Arab tribes as an ethnic fifth column in the Arab and Islamic world, seemingly attaching no importance to their Islamic faith. This is in stark contrast to Arab Islamic outrage at the treatment of non-Arab Muslims in Kashmir, Chechnya and Bosnia, which have all served as rallying cries for Islamists in Arab countries. The dismissive comment by al-Sirjani about injustices against 'some African villages' above is a particularly blunt expression of this tendency, but other and less crude examples abound. For example, in an early official statement about the ICC decision, the then Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mahdi Akif, did not dwell on the sufferings of the Muslim civilian population in Darfur at all. Instead, he used most of the statement to argue that a Euro-American plot to 'westernise' not only Darfurians but the entire Sudanese people has been hatched to create 'barriers between them and Islam'.¹⁰

If the trend that opposes the ICC on principle excludes some important aspects of the overall picture in their presentation of the Darfur conflict, so do those who back the ICC's decision. Only three articles among those surveyed support the decision to issue an arrest warrant for al-Bashir. Two of these are written by Arab analysts with the International Crisis Group, which has been a vocal supporter of a more interventionist attitude to Sudan by the international community.¹¹ In fact, the ICG has been so eager to pressure the Khartoum regime that they have drawn criticism from independent, academic quarters.¹² The only independent intellectual in this material who supports the ICC decision is the Lebanese *al-Hayat* columnist, Walid Shuqayr, who argues that the ICC is really politically independent, and that all regimes in the region, the Israelis included, must now take into account the existence of a new legal and political reality protecting civilians from state oppression. However, Shuqayr's hopes seem to be fuelled as much by the case against the suspected murderers of Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, as by the Darfur case. In any event, what all the three pro-ICC writers have in common is that they fail to address the real and justified feeling among Arab intellectuals that there are double standards at play in the international justice system. They hail the prosecution of the Sudanese president as a victory for universal justice, while seemingly closing their eyes to the fact that gross violations of human rights in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian territory go unpunished. In this way they marginalise themselves in the public debate.

All in all, it can safely be said that in terms of engaging Arab public opinion on the issue of Darfur, the preoccupation with justice and the responsibility to protect has had very negative results. The ICC indictment against the Sudanese regime has become the major axis on which discussions of the Darfur conflict revolve in the Arab world, with Darfur itself overshadowed; the question of justice, for its part, is discredited, seen as merely another example of international double standards, while the plight of Darfur's long-suffering civilian population is hardly mentioned at all.

¹⁰ Muhammad Mahdi Akif, 'An attack on Sudan and the *umma*', www.ikhwanonline.com, 12 March 2009.

¹¹ See its statement 'The ICC Indictment of Bashir: A turning point for Sudan?', issued the day after the ICC decision on its web site (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5959&l=1>, accessed 2 July 2009).

¹² Julie Flint and Alexander de Waal (2008), *Darfur: A new history of a long war*, London: Zed Books, p. 196.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIABLE INFORMATION

There are four comments to be made regarding the debate about Darfur and international justice outlined above. First of all, the superficial approach among many opinion leaders to the serious humanitarian situation in Darfur reflects the lack of reliable information about the conflict in the Arab media. Although the situation seems to have improved somewhat over the last year or so, Arab public discourse is still characterised by distrust of foreign news and analyses about Darfur, combined with insufficient media coverage of the conflict by Arab news sources.¹³ The lack of information was a recurring theme, explicitly or inadvertently, among the policymakers and intellectuals I interviewed as part of this study. Several commentators mentioned the need to provide knowledge about civilian suffering in Darfur in order to change Arab public opinion, while others made statements that showed them to be very poorly informed about the Darfur conflict.¹⁴

Accordingly, Arab media coverage of Darfur should be improved in order to reach informed opinions about justice and the humanitarian situation. The obvious problem is that the few Arab organisations that work to achieve this have small resources, and that regimes in the region are disinclined to contribute to the effort. In addition, attempts to improve Arab coverage of the conflict from outside can easily be construed as unwarranted foreign meddling in Arab affairs and are likely to be viewed with distrust. Human rights groups in particular are often viewed as local agents of European and US agendas and concerns.

There are small but vigorous environments in the Arab world that work actively to spread information about the conditions of civilians in Darfur. Perhaps the best organised resource in Arabic on Darfur is the website *ifhamdarfur.net* (which is Arabic for 'understand Darfur'), which provides a wealth of detailed and balanced information. However, although the website gives the impression of being a purely Arab venture, it is in fact an American initiative, hosted by the Save Darfur Coalition. The absence of Arab members on the staff and the small number of Arab organisations in the coalition obviously does not help the web site's credibility in Arab society, and that is perhaps the reason why no information about *www.ifhamdarfur*'s affiliation is given on the website.¹⁵

As for Arab initiatives, one of the most long-standing and comprehensive efforts has been carried out by the Egyptian organisation, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. The organisation's web site has a substantial section on Darfur in its Arabic edition, where it offers reports, comment and background information. It has been a vocal critic of Arab silence on the situation in Darfur in Egypt.¹⁶

Recently, other actors in the Arab public sphere have also called attention to Darfur, and in particular the Arab silence in response to the crisis. One initiative was a roundtable discussion about the Sudanese and Arab media coverage of the Darfur crisis on the 28th of August, 2008, in Amman. The discussion gathered several important newspapers and television channels in the region, and the participants were highly critical of both the Arab press and Arab regimes. Among their policy recommendations were a call to Arab media to pay more attention to the conflict in Darfur, and an invitation to media organisations and Arab journalists to diversify their sources of information by searching for alternatives through the community and humanitarian organisations operating in Darfur.¹⁷ The conference was organised with the help of the Danish NGO International Media Support, which has as one of its aims media and dialogue activities in relation to the Arab world and Iran.¹⁸

¹³ See 'Closing Statement, Roundtable on Media Coverage of the Darfur crisis', at [\[http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/Statement%20Amman%20Aug%2028%202008%20%28final%29.pdf\]](http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/Statement%20Amman%20Aug%2028%202008%20%28final%29.pdf), accessed on the 5th of June 2009.

¹⁴ They would, for example, state that the refugees were probably better off in the camps than in their villages due to the massive amount of aid they receive. One official claimed that reports of rape were exaggerated, since, in his own words, 'some African tribes regard holding hands as a kind of rape.'

¹⁵ Strangely, no information about *ifhamdarfur.net* is easily available on Save Darfur's own web site www.savedarfur.org. This is perhaps testimony of the difficulties Western organisations have in gaining credibility in Arab society.

¹⁶ See its web site: [\[http://www.cihrs.org/arabic/default.aspx\]](http://www.cihrs.org/arabic/default.aspx).

¹⁷ See [\[http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/Statement%20Amman%20Aug%2028%202008%20%28final%29.pdf\]](http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/Statement%20Amman%20Aug%2028%202008%20%28final%29.pdf), accessed 5 June 2009.

¹⁸ [\[http://www.i-m-s.dk/\]](http://www.i-m-s.dk/).

In general, the Arab initiatives to raise awareness about the Darfur crisis come from the human rights activist milieu. For example, the Arab Coalition for Darfur, which was set up by the Egyptian organisation The Arab Program for Human Rights Activists, held a workshop in Cairo in April, 2009, where human rights activists, journalists and parliamentarians from a number of Arab countries met to discuss ways the Arab countries can help relieve the situation in Darfur.¹⁹ The workshop resulted in a document where both parliamentarians and activists committed themselves to a number of concrete tasks, like pressing for an end to attacks on civilians, readmitting international aid organisations, and joining forces to pressure Arab governments to react to the situation in Darfur.²⁰

There are also Arab voices that are more radical with respect to Darfur, but these typically keep a lower profile. For example, the Egyptian political analyst at al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Khalil al-Anani, states that he supports the ICC decision both on moral and political grounds. Taking a pragmatic approach, he concedes that international justice is hopelessly biased, but his position is that one should at least try to implement it when the chance offers itself. In addition, he argues that Arab countries cannot complain about discrimination as long as they turn a blind eye to injustices in their own backyard.²¹ This was also essentially the line of argument put forward by the well-known Egyptian journalist and intellectual Hani Shukrallah on BBC World's popular Doha Debates program that was broadcast on 2 and 3 May, 2009.²² However, such views tend to be presented in English rather than by the Arab media, and are thus accessible to only a small elite of Arabs.²³

Nevertheless, in regard to Doha Debates, it is interesting that after a discussion where two supporters and two opponents of a motion to hand over al-Bashir to the ICC were allowed to discuss the issue freely, the Arab audience ended up voting for the motion. That result was unexpected, and it hints at the power of sound information and uninhibited debate. Doha Debates is the result of cooperation between independent journalist Tim Sebastian, the BBC and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. The audience is composed mainly of Arabs, and the issues discussed always pertain to the Arab world. Like the roundtable discussion on Arab media and Darfur mentioned above, Doha Debates' combination of foreign facilitation and Arab concerns and participants exemplifies a fruitful approach to creating constructive debate in the Arab public sphere. If similar kinds of programs were to be aired on pan-Arab cable networks such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, popular awareness and concern for Darfur might increase dramatically.

THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAMIST AND NATIONALIST RHETORIC

The second point is that efforts to engage the Arab public opinion on the question of Darfur must also take into account the strong position of Islamist and nationalist sentiments in the media. Islamism in particular is an important voice in the public sphere, regardless of its changing fortunes as a political force in the Middle East.²⁴ It is clear from the material studied here that the Islamists are prone to construe the Darfur conflict as fundamentally an attempt to weaken the cohesion of the Islamic nation, or *'umma'*. The alleged objective of this effort is to spread Western political and cultural hegemony and secure control over Sudan's natural resources, such as oil and apparently uranium. Given the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, the US sanctions against Iran, and the long-standing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, these ideas and attitudes are widely held in Arab societies.

¹⁹ [<http://www.aphra.org/Html/home.asp>].

²⁰ The final statement of the workshop can be read at Ifhamdarfur's web site: [<http://www.ifhamdarfur.net/node/925>].

²¹ Interview with the author, Cairo, the 5th of May, 2009.

²² The motion to be discussed was 'This House believes that Arab states should hand over the Sudanese president to the International Criminal Court'. See [<http://www.thedohadebates.com/debates/past.asp>] for details about the participants and their positions.

²³ al-Anani published a carefully balanced article in the English-language weekly *al-Ahram Weekly*, which has a very small Arab readership. See Khalil al-Anani (2009), 'Dangerous denial', *al-Ahram Weekly*, during 12-18 March. *Doha Debates* is an English-language programme.

²⁴ For recent literature on this subject, see Asef Bayat (2007), *Making Islam Democratic*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; Olivier Roy (2004), *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, London: Hurst; and Samia Mehrez (2008), *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, London, New York: Routledge, Prologue and chapter 12.

A corollary of the Islamist/nationalist rhetoric is that there is almost no focus on the fact that Darfur has a predominantly Muslim population, and on the fact that several regional forces, including the Arab state of Libya, have been and are involved in the conflict. This fact stands in stark contrast to public awareness and aid campaigns in Arab countries in the past. The plight of Bosnian Muslims especially during the 1990s was the focus of intense mobilisation among the general public and received widespread coverage in Arab media. One explanation for the lack of such concerns in the case of Darfur is undoubtedly the fact that the aggressor is not a European ethnic supremacist, an Indian Hindu nationalist, or an American government; instead, it is the Khartoum government that fails to stop the killing of Muslim civilians in Darfur. The religious and ethnic identity of the perpetrator evidently matters more than the identity of the victims, exposing double standards in Arab nationalist and Islamist discourse.

The Islamist interpretation of the Darfur conflict as just another scene of confrontation between the West and Islam entails that Darfur's Islamic identity is either neglected or simply unknown in Islamist and nationalist discourse on the subject. Instead, the material studied here shows that Islamists simplify the conflict in terms of Arab/African rivalry for resources, and present the non-Arab Darfurians as an ethnic fifth column in 'Islamic' Sudan. In addition, there is a conspicuous lack of attention to the regional aspects and actors in the conflict, including the roles of Chad and Libya.²⁵ Instead, all foreign involvement is attributed to 'Western' countries with imperialist agendas.

These facts suggest that efforts to engage Arab public opinion on the issue of Darfur should pay special regard to the religious and regional factors. The Islamist discourse on Darfur, and not least the one coming from Khartoum itself, is based on ideologically driven truisms more than the tangible reality. The less detailed information there is, the easier it is to propagate these truisms. If it becomes widely known in Arab society that in Darfur, Muslims are killing other Muslims, and that Arab and Islamic countries either try to take advantage of instability in Sudan or sit idly by and watch the suffering, the black-and-white Islamist picture of the conflict would be harder to sustain. In addition, emphasis on the fact that Darfur is a Muslim region might combat the widespread, implicit dehumanisation of Darfurians as basically gangs of troublemakers that is also part of the Islamist/nationalist version of the conflict.

An interesting example in this regard is Egyptian journalist and blogger Abd al-Mun'im Mahmud. Not only has Mahmud gone to Darfur personally together with Egyptian medical missions in order to find out what is really going on there, he is also a self-professed sympathiser of the Islamist movement.²⁶ Mahmud states that his two visits to the area made him perceive the conflict in a wholly different way than before. His deep sympathy for the civilians in Darfur and his devastating criticism of the Khartoum regime is mingled with a highly critical attitude to international justice. At the same time, he acknowledges that his attitudes to Western aid agencies changed for the better after seeing their work in the field.²⁷ This kind of nuanced and informed attitude, based on first-hand experience, is rare in the Arab media. Identifying intellectuals such as Mahmud, who speak from a position on the 'inside', and contributing to making their critical voices heard, is undoubtedly the most effective way of drawing Islamist circles into a serious conversation about Darfur. Islamist journalists like Mahmud are not tainted with the damaging 'secularist' label, and enjoy credibility since they tend to agree with Islamist criticism of Western policies in general.

²⁵ Their roles are amply documented. See, for example, Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *op.cit.* pp. 47-48, 113 and *passim*.

²⁶ His critical articles about the Muslim Brotherhood at his blog, Ana Ikhwan (I am Brotherhood), made the leadership revoke his membership of the organisation, but he still considers himself a sympathiser of the movement.

²⁷ Interview with the author, Cairo, 6 May 2009.

ARAB PRAGMATISM AND WESTERN IDEALISM

Not all opposition to current attempts at solving the Darfur crisis come from Islamist and nationalist quarters. As shown above, there is a substantial current of criticism based on pragmatic-political grounds. The same people who voice such criticism tend to raise development and security issues in relation to Darfur and Sudan that are vital to them, but have been largely neglected in the Western public arena, where pressure groups have campaigned hard to 'get tough' on the Khartoum government. It seems obvious that one has to address these concerns seriously in order to have any credibility in Arab public opinion. Arab suggestions for a resolution of the Darfur crisis focus on political stability, more negotiations, long-term development and the need for transition to a democratic system for Sudan. They are for the most part strongly opposed to any kind of forced solution. One diplomat and human rights activist who played a central role in Egyptian diplomatic efforts in the Darfur crisis even regretted the establishment of the hybrid African Union/United Nations force UNAMID. The money should have been spent on development instead, he said, because without material development people will not take up agriculture again and hopes for stabilisation of the situation on the ground disappear.²⁸ Like commentators from different political camps he argued that what is needed to relieve the suffering in Darfur is more diplomatic pressure on both government and rebels to return to serious negotiations combined with resources from the West to facilitate human development in the region. He described the pressure groups in North America that advocate confrontation and intervention as 'spoilers' in the work for a viable solution to the Darfur conflict.

This comment goes right to the heart of current conflicts in the US administration's Sudan policy. Striking a conciliatory note, the special US envoy to Sudan, Scott Gration, recently stated that Darfur should no longer be described as 'genocide'. Like several Arab commentators, he turned attention to human development instead.²⁹ His comments aroused anger in other parts of the administration, and he later backtracked. One of the reasons for this is probably the opinion of some voices in the Democratic Party that the crisis in Darfur represents a key rallying point for justice against humanitarian abuses worldwide.³⁰ Pragmatic approaches to solving the Darfur crisis inevitably clash with this principled concern with justice, making it unlikely in the short run that the USA will adjust its policies to Arab concerns to a greater degree.

THE NEED FOR FUNDAMENTAL WESTERN POLICY CHANGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

But the most important point is that the Darfur conflict in itself continues to be overshadowed by a feeling of Western oppression of the Arab world. As shown above, this feeling is expressed in moral outrage at the double standards of international justice and/or suspicions of Western conspiracies to weaken the Arab and Islamic world.

This is a basic and long-standing problem that poisons all Western attempts to contribute to 'change' in the Arab world. If it is not resolved, efforts to improve the flow and quality of information about Darfur and more attentiveness to Arab concerns will be only of limited help in nudging Arab public opinion in the direction of attending to the human suffering in Darfur.

Arab grievances in relation to international politics need to be taken seriously. Anger at double standards in international justice and suspicions about European and American motives are by no means confined to Islamists and Arab nationalists. Most independent Arab commentators think that the West's treatment of the Arab world is grossly unfair. In their opinion, the EU and US systematically support regimes that oppress their own population; they fail to react to the ongoing and illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip; they single out Arab and Muslim countries for international sanctions and interventions; and their own leaders and military officers enjoy immunity which they are not prepared to grant to those of other countries.

²⁸ Interview with the author, Cairo, 7 May 2009.

²⁹ Howard Lafranchie, 'Is Darfur still a genocide? White House isn't sure', *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 July 2009, retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0731/p02s09-usfp.html> (accessed 12 August 2009).

³⁰ Alan Boswell, 'Conflicting Priorities Complicate US Policy Toward Sudan', *VOAnews.com*, 11 August 2009, retrieved from <http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-08-11-voa34.cfm> (accessed 12 August 2009).

A substantial part of this criticism is well-founded and is well documented by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the long-standing support by the West of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. The continuing failure at the official level in Europe and USA to acknowledge that criticism, let alone to address it, is one major reason for the lack of vital public debate about justice and accountability from a regional perspective in the Arab world. The mistrust and anger of Europe/USA in Arab public opinion will continue to colour Arab views on Darfur until they see fundamental policy changes on the part of the West. In this situation, the tendency to view Darfur as a test case for the principle of international justice is likely to alienate Arab public opinion.

CONCLUSION

The Euro-American focus on justice and the protection of civilians is not at present the best way to engage Arab public opinion in order to raise awareness about the difficult situation in Darfur. These concepts are by no means irrelevant in Arab public debate, but they are entangled in a web of grievances against the USA and Europe, and use of them unleashes angry and unproductive discussion about international double standards. This is a fundamental policy challenge that will have to be addressed at some point. In addition, there are less ambitious strategies which could contribute to raising awareness in the Arab world about Darfur, paving the way for greater popular Arab engagement on the issue.

First, European and US political bodies and NGOs should help facilitate Arab media initiatives that aim to improve independent coverage of Darfur, even if this results in reports that are not supportive of Euro-American approaches to the Darfur conflict. The most pressing need is simply to spread information about the situation in Darfur. Second, more emphasis should be placed in official discourse about the Islamic identity of Darfurians on the one hand, and the involvement by regional powers, including Arab countries, in Darfur on the other. This could contribute to puncturing some of the Islamist/Arab nationalist claims about Western conspiracies, even if the big challenge remains the fundamentally mistaken Western policies in the Middle East. Third, more attention should be given to those Arab approaches to the conflict that in fact exist in the public sphere, and that are determined less by concepts such as justice and civilian protection than the wish for stability, development and good governance.

Although Arab public debate offers certain openings towards a more constructive role for the Arab world in the conflict, there seems little Western policymakers can do beyond facilitating debate, otherwise they run the risk of discrediting themselves and local actors. A more ambitious programme of dialogue with Arab public opinion on Darfur and other thorny issues in the region requires that the US and European governments seriously attend to Arab grievances in regional and international politics. Any European and American attempt to engage the Arab world on the question of Darfur is, currently, compromised by the selective application of justice and protection by the West.

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“The Gap Between Narratives and Practices. Darfur: Responses from the Arab world”

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