

ERA Conference: Darfur and its Impact on Sudan and the Region

Story Summary of Panel 2 – Is Darfur a Proxy War?

Dr. Mudawi El-Turabi

[Chairman of Sudan's Parliamentary Defense and Security Subcommittee, and Deputy Secretary General of the Democratic Unionist Party. El-Turabi has a PhD in political science and his masters in military science from Hartford University in the US.]

Opening his presentation by way of a definition El-Turabi ventured that: "When we talk about war by proxy, we mean by nature directed and driven by the interests of the country or other political entity that does not wish to be seen as destabilizing the so-called target country".

He said it was "time consuming" and "often expensive" to create proxies from scratch; the "cheaper and quicker route" is to infiltrate existing political organizations and to transform them into proxies, even though "full control" over the created entity might be "impossible" in the end: "Unless proxy wars are brought under control, proxy forces could develop their own momentum and political status, like we are having in Darfur" and this would make it very difficult to end the resulting conflict.

El-Turabi said countries against which proxy wars had been unleashed, usually responded by creating proxy forces of their own in order to combat the threat.

"The crisis in Darfur is.... a regional problem, and it also involves the use of multiple proxies. A number of Sudan's neighbors are involved, including Chad and the Central African Republic.... The conflict is characterized by cross-border activities by the combatants (who have) fluid loyalties."

He added that armed combatants "who may easily shift allegiances" across borders to further their "political-military careers" was characteristic of the current conflict, and had "major implications both on the local and transnational level."

El-Turabi stated that the contention that the Darfur conflict was being "exported to eastern Chad via janjaweed militia" was a "dangerous oversimplification of the ethnic and political dynamics of the region. It most especially neglects the importance of the political crisis in Chad...."

He also dismissed the claim that the Khartoum government was behind the violence in Darfur, through its alleged ordering of Arab militia to attack other Arabs in the region.

He maintained that it would be impossible to end the conflict in Darfur “without involving the whole region, particularly Chad and the Central African Republic, and other neighbors of the Sudan.”

El-Turabi acknowledged that conflicts in both Darfur and Chad influenced each other, and were also complicated by the ethnic links between groups in Sudan and Chad. “Sudan and Chad have been (wracked with) conflict via rebel groups and proxy militias intensively since the end of the 2005 attempts by both states (to end the fighting). (Efforts) to set up a rebel coalition.... have failed, leaving the field open to a multitude of armed factions which are increasingly local and increasingly divided along ethnic lines and are degrading the security situation even further.”

He blamed the Darfur situation largely on Chad. The “chronic conflict, reactivated in 2005, between the Chadian government” and political groups there who felt that they had no other alternative than to take up arms against the government, meant that the Darfur crisis was “rooted in the failure of democratization in Chad.”

El-Turabi said it was clear that Chad and Sudan were engaged in a proxy war by means of the various rebel groups and militias each was sponsoring.

The situation, he maintained, was exacerbated by “ethnic conflict” in Chad and Darfur between “long-settled land-owning groups and newcomers with no traditional rights (to) the land.” As a consequence, the conflict in Darfur was more than a mere proxy war, and the failure to recognize this was undermining the effectiveness of current peace initiatives and “could see the proxy war phenomena spreading further out of control.”

Throughout his address, he attributed responsibility for the Darfur situation to Chad: “The problem of Darfur was caused.... due to the Chadian wars in Darfur” which had resulted in a flood of small arms being available to Darfurians: “That will (allow) conflicting groups in Darfur, whether they have got their conflict with the government of Sudan or (other ethnic groups), to resort to arms to solve their conflicts.”

El-Turabi added that the Sudan government had on a number of occasions tried to initiate peace with Chad, but that these efforts had failed due to Chadian resistance, and to Chad’s willingness to resort to violence.

“As one who is in charge of the (Sudan parliament) subcommittee on security and defense, we have got thousands of evidence (sic) that the last attack of the JEM on Omdurman was supported, financed and logistically done by the Chadian government.”

He acknowledged that neither Sudan nor Chad were “democratic havens,” but added that unlike Khartoum, which was “in a process of democratization,” Chad was inflaming its population by constantly suggesting that Sudan was “invading” Chad.

El-Turabi also suggested that it would be foolish for the Khartoum rulers to cause conflict in Darfur, as in so doing the government would risk reversing the economic growth that Sudan had achieved in recent years.

He, however, added that “retaliation” by Sudan Armed Forces was sometimes necessary in order to stem “border conflicts,” and his essential point was that Sudan was only defending itself against aggressors.

This did not detract from his view that there is a kind of a proxy war in this region involving CAR, Sudan and Chad.

He again accused Chad of constantly undermining peace efforts, suggesting that “every time” an agreement between the Sudan government and rebel groups in Darfur was about to be reached, the Chadians would give the rebels a “wrong signal” for the rebels to “raise up the ceiling of their demands” or simply to “walk out” of the talks.

El-Turabi repeatedly emphasized that Khartoum wanted peace, whereas all other players were bent on a course of war. He further suggested that peace efforts in Darfur were complicated because there were so many disparate rebel groups in the region.

“Today in Darfur we have got 26 armed groups. They don’t have coherency, and they don’t have (a) unified political agenda, and they don’t have unified leadership. So sometimes it’s rather difficult to (know) with whom are you talking.”

He was also dismissive of calls on the government to allow “international forces” into Darfur to maintain peace. He said the presence of two of the “mightiest” armies in the world, those of the US and Britain, in Iraq and Afghanistan, had failed to quell insurgencies there, and that this offered evidence that sending foreign troops into Darfur was not the answer. Instead it required a “political will to end the violence by those who carried the arms and the people behind them.”

He stressed that Sudan was ready to “coexist” with Chad, subject to “democratic transformation” taking place in Chad and in Sudan.

Nurane Bashir

[A spokesman for the Chad government, being Charge de Affaires at the Embassy of Chad in Washington D.C.]

Bashir denied that Darfur was a proxy war, branding it “completely and absolutely an internal issue of Sudan. Chad has no relation to this issue, in any way.... The Sudanese government tried to link Chad to the problem, in order to solve the problem.... Chad has not any interest to be part of this conflict.”

He maintained that it was the government in Khartoum, and not the Chadian authorities, who was to blame for the ongoing violence in the region. “Throughout history, there are problems coming from Sudan to Chad, not vice versa....” He claimed that Khartoum had sponsored several coups and attempted coups to overthrow “democratically elected” Chadian leaders ever since Chad had received independence in 1960. For example, Bashir said Hissene Habre, who came to power in a coup in 1982 and allegedly killed thousands of people perceived to be his opponents, was “Sudan’s person.”

The Chadian government spokesman said before staging his coup, Habre and his forces were based in Darfur. Bashir suggested that Sudan had allowed a number of anti-Chad government rebels – “proxy forces of Sudan” - through the years to be based in Darfur, from which they launched their attacks against N’Djamena.

He added that current Chadian President, Idriss Deby, had been forced to enter Sudan in order to fight Habre’s forces: “All the fighting between the former dictator and the current president took place inside Darfur, not inside Chad.”

Bashir claimed that because Deby was refusing to agree with everything the Sudanese said, Khartoum was now using proxy forces against Deby in an attempt to overthrow him. He said the recent political history of Chad was “directly linked” to Sudan, and that the Sudanese administration often “boasted” about this.

Bashir alleged that the current Sudanese authorities are very proud to “talk loudly” that any (leadership) change in Chad will take place in Khartoum. On nine occasions, “Sudanese government supported artificially-created mercenaries from Chad to attack Chad.”

It was in Khartoum’s interests, said Bashir, to attempt to convince the world that they were not training and funding the Janjaweed militia to attack Darfurians, but that the violence was rather as a result of a local “tribal conflict, a dispute of land and grass, and.... water resources....”

He denied that Chad was in any way supporting Sudanese rebels, and fomenting the war in Darfur. He said this didn’t make any sense, as “Chad has suffered from the conflict of Darfur more than the Sudanese” as a result of all the refugees spilling over into it, and the fact that Chad had been “occupied and attacked by Sudanese supported mercenaries nine times in two years.”

In addition, Bashir maintained that Chadians and Sudanese were “really well-related” and it was therefore against Chad’s principles to foment war in Sudan: “We have 1 200 kilometers of border with Darfur. We have 36 tribal groups inter-existed (related) between the two countries. You can’t differentiate (between) the eastern part of Chad and western part of Darfur. We have not any interest to destabilize Darfur or Sudan.”

He added: “Some people they think there is a problem between Sudan and Chad. Actually there is not any problem between Sudan and Chad! Sudan and Chad are historically linked to each other, tribally linked to each other, culturally – everything is similar; you can’t differentiate yourself if you are in Khartoum or N’Djamena. The ladies wear the same dresses, have same traditions, same food; everything is (the same) there.”

However, he said Khartoum wanted to destabilize Chad, as N’Djamena opposed the Sudanese government’s “concept of Arabization” and “Islamization” of the region.

He agreed that the Darfur problem was extremely complex, and that what had been a local issue had grown into a regional issue and then into an international issue. He felt that whatever the international community (does), whatever the region (does), if there is no will, there will be no solution.”

Bashir said the onus was on the Sudan government to end the violence: “If there is no true will from the Sudanese government to solve this problem, there will be no solution.”

He stated that the biggest problem at the moment was the Sudanese government’s “mindset. They believe that they have to lead the region, they have to dictate the policies to the surrounding areas, they want to post (into power) whom they want to post. That culture, unless it changes, you can’t solve such a problem (of Darfur).”

Bashir laid out a “few steps” that the Sudan government should embark upon if it was serious about gaining peace in Darfur and the region: “Declare to the international community and your people that you have done a mistake. It’s a mistake to kill your people.... Stop killing your people, by stopping supporting and training the Janjaweed.

“Number two: Stop.... the idea of influencing your other neighbors. Let them alone.... Don’t interfere in their internal sovereignty” and “stop funding rebels” to overthrow the Chadian government.

Dr. Alex de Waal

[The Programme Director at the Social Science Research Council, de Waal has been a respected commentator and analyst on Sudanese affairs since the 1980s. He is the co-director of Justice Africa in London, a distinguished Harvard University academic, and a former member of the African Union mediation team for Darfur.]

De Waal said successive Sudanese political administrations had specialized in prevaricating and never making decisions: "This is a skill that I've seen practiced not only by Darfurians but by certain other Sudanese politicians in more recent years."

He said the Sudanese did this in order to preserve power, and to also "extract the best possible price from a whole range of far away patrons.... They use strategic delays, prevarication, stalling...."

De Waal maintained that it was cash that was keeping the conflict in Darfur going, and that vast amounts of money were being spent by the various parties involved on subsidizing proxy militias and rebel groups.

"The main instrument that is actually used by security officers on the different sides is cash. They do provide weapons but cash is the number one (instrument)."

De Waal said the Darfur situation could definitely be viewed as a proxy war, but also as a "direct war" that was taking place in a "marketplace of loyalties in which there are different bidders. And the preferred solution for the Sudan government is that it is the.... only purchaser of loyalty...."

He added the successive governments in Chad were installed with the assistance – financial and military and diplomatic – of the Sudan government. "For successive Sudanese governments, as with their forebears in the 19th century, the frontiers don't really mean much; the security and mercantile peripheries of Sudan reach well beyond the frontiers of the country, into Chad, Central African Republic, Congo – all neighboring countries.... The way in which those in power - security and mercantile elites who have run the Sudanese state - deal with the heads of state in CAR, Chad, and local potentates in all neighboring countries, is not dissimilar to the way in which they deal with the groups in Darfur: They try and buy their loyalty. And very often the elites of these groups are very willing sellers in this game. They want to push up the price as high as they can. One way of doing it is by violence; another way is by bringing other competitors into the market - be they Libya, the international community, France, etc. It then is more expensive to buy loyalty. More guns move into the area from all sides, and the level of violence tends to increase."

But De Waal said that Sudan's strategy in Chad had run into problems in recent years for a number of reasons: "Number one: Chad acquired oil, and that made Idriss Deby not so much a seller of loyalty but he had the potential with that cash

to buy loyalty. So he became a much more powerful, independent player because of that cash – some of it controlled by him, some of it controlled by his close relatives.”

The analyst maintained that one of the factors resulting in instability in the region, and therefore fomenting the Darfur conflict, was the political instability in Chad itself, where President Deby did not currently have the power to “enforce his writ on his close relatives. The lack of trust that he could do that is one of the reasons why the government of Sudan has been keen to remove him.”

De Waal said Khartoum had largely “provoked” Chad into entering the arena of conflict in the region. “We do have a very complex arena in which the international borders really don’t matter that much in terms of flows of weapons, flows of money and indeed flows of individuals. A single individual can have loyalties that bring him into armed formations in Sudan, Chad (and) CAR, depending on circumstances, depending on what rewards are on offer at that particular moment.”

All of this, said De Waal, had ensured that the Darfur situation would be “complicated” to resolve, not least because: “The international involvement, the international engagement, putting in troops, putting in (peace) efforts - plays into the hands of those who are the local armed elites, whether they call themselves militia, whether they call themselves tribal leaders, rebels, armed movements, who want to prevaricate and delay and get a better price” in order to suspend or halt their activities.

He added: “Meanwhile, this skill of.... prevarication, outlasting your adversaries, has also been a strategy perfected by those in power in Khartoum who I strongly suspect are intending simply to sit and outlast the energy and attention of the international community in this area, such that in their view hopefully the government of Idriss Deby will be replaced, the price of loyalty will go down and it’ll be easier to buy more Darfurians and more Chadians.”

De Waal was convinced that the international attention on Darfur was set to wane, “and therefore the increase in price of loyalties – an outcome of international engagement – will be reversed and the (government of Sudan’s) security officers and their mercantile allies in Khartoum will be the last ones left standing.”

Instead of all the emphasis on placing thousands of peacekeepers in Darfur, forces of which had so far proved “entirely ineffective,” De Waal advocated a much more hard-headed regional political solution which doesn’t try and transform the politics of this area in a utopian way. “I don’t think that can be done in short order, I think it has to be done over a long period of time and it has to be a local and locally-driven solution in both Chad and Sudan. And it has to work with the grain of that political system to try and find mechanisms across the entire

region of coming to agreement and dampening down the violence and laying the foundations for good neighborliness, civility, people returning to their homes and so on.”

De Waal said that Libya’s role in the Sudanese conflict had so far largely been ignored, even though Tripoli had historically “played a dreadful role” in the region. “It ignited Arab supremacism in Chad and Darfur.”

He commented that Libya’s current role in the Darfur crisis was “more mysterious. If you look at this area as a political marketplace, it seems that (Libyan leader) Muammar Gaddafi is a sort of binge shopper. Every now and again he goes out and spends to the limit of his credit card.... on whatever takes his fancy, and it seems as though his strategy is simply to remain relevant in the region.”

De Waal speculated that perhaps Libya had other reasons for becoming involved in regional conflict: “(Gaddafi) doesn’t want a solution to the problems in Chad and Darfur that brings the Americans and NATO and the European Union to his doorstep. He would rather have continuing problems than have that solution.”

He suggested that the international community’s response so far to the Darfur crisis, in trying to foist a set of “very high principled ideals about civilian protection, about justice, about achieving a complete equitable solution” on Sudan was not realistic. Pressuring all the actors involved, especially the Sudan government, De Waal suggested, “would require a quantum leap in the commitment of money, of diplomatic resources, of pressure, of troops - and we’re already spending over four billion dollars on three peacekeeping missions, two in Sudan, one in Chad.”

This said of unrealistic expectations, he said, may have resulted in the international community becoming embroiled in a “terrible trap, because we have raised the expectations among Darfurians and particularly amongst the rebels that this sort of thing will be delivered, that genuine civilian protection will be delivered, that complete justice will be delivered, etc, etc. And we have raised the fears of those who will lose out, those who are in power in Khartoum in the National Congress Party and in the (Sudanese) security agencies.... So we end up with the worst of both worlds.”

De Waal said a “much smarter approach” would be to work for a regional, and not an international, solution to the crisis. All peace efforts, he maintained, should “go with the grain of national politics because the solutions to these problems do not come from (the international community), they come from Sudan and Chad and Central African Republic.”

He said he had not seen any “real strategic game coming from Khartoum for achieving stability in Darfur and Chad, beyond various slogans” which he did not

think holds very much water. He felt that it was a responsibility of Khartoum to come up with a better game plan.

Comments and Questions after the panel

During the question and answer session, the question of genocide was broached and panelists were asked to respond on the issue.

Due to the “unprecedented” level of world attention on the Darfur issue, El-Turabi said a number of international events had resulted in great focus on the situation in Sudan. This included the 2005 commemoration of the Rwandan genocide, and the fact that “three of the top leaders in the world” at the time when conflict in Darfur escalated were of “African origin,” namely, Colin Powell, who was then US Secretary of State, present US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was then a member of the US National Security Council, as well as Kofi Annan, who was UN secretary general at the time Darfur became an international issue. These individuals, said El-Turabi, “had been under a very heavy and deep pressure from the black caucuses (in the US and other parts of the world to do something about Darfur). This also caused the escalation of the conflict, and it went beyond control in the regional arena, and now it got this kind of international dimension.”

He suggested that various factors had conspired to create an atmosphere that was ripe for human rights groups and Washington to unfairly label the Darfur conflict a “genocide” that was being perpetrated by the Arab Sudan government. Twice the UN had sent in fact-finding missions to the country and not one of them had managed to determine that what is going on in Sudan is indeed ethnic cleansing or a genocide.

Despite the presence of 27 000 refugees and humanitarian workers and almost 130 NGOs in Darfur, he added, “not a single mass grave (has) been found.... to determine this is a genocide, or an ethnic cleansing. It is a conflict; there’s people dying; yes of course....and the government of Sudan is doing its best to negotiate and we will continue negotiating with any armed groups.”

Regarding the characterization of Darfur as a genocide, De Waal commented: “The findings of an international commission of inquiry.... (used) these words: ‘crimes no less heinous than genocide’. And I don’t think that any government should seek to hide behind that as exoneration. I don’t think that really stands up.”

On the question of proxy support Sudan government representatives at the conference claimed that Bashir himself was a relative of a prominent leader of the JEM rebels, Tajjidine Bashir, who participated in the attack on Omdurman in May.

The Chadian Charge d' Affaires responded: "Of course, he's my brother." Most Sudanese and Chadians had relatives on both sides of the border.

Sudanese government representatives at the conference said while this was indeed true, most Sudanese and Chadians with relatives in both countries were not blood relatives of rebel commanders.

Address by Congressman Ed Royce

[Royce is a senior member of the US Congress House committee on Foreign Affairs, and a ranking member of the Subcommittee on Terrorism. He has maintained an interest in Sudan for a long time, and has made a number of trips to the region, including Darfur, to investigate the situation there.]

Congressman Royce said he was pessimistic about the prospects of peace in Darfur. "We've lost hundreds of thousands of lives in this theatre and the situation especially with regard to the difficult conditions now for the humanitarian workers there means that thousands more are going to die simply because we can't guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers on the ground."

Royce said American political leaders remained focused on Darfur. "I don't think there's any lessening of congressional interest in this, despite the enormous frustration over the years of trying to find a way to produce results. The legislation that's been passed has been helpful, but it's not been sufficient, obviously."

Royce added that despite Washington spending about four billion dollars so far trying to end the violence, "clearly, we're not in a position where we're gaining ground."

He said the international community had for years been focused on increasing numbers of peacekeepers in Darfur, and he suggested that this focus had been misguided.

"To everyone I think except the Sudanese government, the African Union and the United Nations effort has been disappointing.... Too few troops, too little equipment, too timid a presence. I visited the AU force there on the ground in Darfur who shared with me just how they were so outmatched, and just how their mandate was so tied up that they couldn't take the actions that they felt were necessary in order to their job. So this effort remains very, very feeble."

According to Royce, the “constant struggle to beef up the peacekeeping force, unfortunately, has taken attention away from the political situation” in the region: “The ordeal of trying to get peacekeepers into Darfur has become the story, when what we need as the critical story right now is the political crisis (in Sudan) that has led to the brutality in Darfur.”

He suggested that increasing numbers of peacekeepers in Darfur was only a short-term solution: “More hardware is not going to end this calamity. A political solution is what is essential.”

Royce stated that peace in Darfur would not be sustained unless there was an “overall political agreement and settlement” among the players in the conflict.

The Congressman acknowledged that this would be very difficult to achieve: “It looks intractable on the surface....”

He said he’d met previously with the leadership of the rebel Justice and Equality Movement and the SLA (Sudan Liberation Army), but that all he’d heard then was “bickering” between the rebels: “My fear then was that this would go in the direction that rebel groups usually take, and sure enough: now there are reports that there are up to 50 independent rebel groups operating in that theater. Overlying this is the Chad-Sudan rivalry. This makes Darfur look like a kaleidoscope.... There’s no one to negotiate with, there’s too many to negotiate with and there appears to be no John Garang (deceased leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement) who you can sit down and cut a deal with. It doesn’t help that the rebel groups offer very little to the people of Darfur.”

Royce, though, added that he wanted it to be clear that he was not suggesting Khartoum did not bear the “ultimate responsibility for the killing and dying; it does. In fact, it’s divide-and-rule ploys have worsened the situation.”

He suggested that the international community, including the US, had very limited knowledge of what was motivating the rebel groups and the government of Sudan as regards Darfur.

Royce agreed that the problems in Sudan had to be addressed “comprehensively. The north-south situation affects Darfur, and Darfur affects the north-south situation, and unfortunately, the north-south agreement needs a lot of help if it’s to last. Ultimately, enough Sudanese need to want to make peace, to make a difference.”

He acknowledged that a “small, powerful minority” of Sudanese, who were “profiting” from war in Darfur, and some of who were motivated by “radical Islam,” still had the upper hand in the whole situation: “I don’t know if we’re near tipping that balance.”

He stated that the issue of the sharing of oil revenues had helped to end the war in southern Sudan, but that he didn’t see a “similar windfall-type incentive in Darfur” and it was hard to envision a “win-win” scenario being created to appease all those involved in the conflict.

Ultimately, Royce said, it was up to the Sudanese to make the peace, although the US did possess “some tools to alter the balance to have them do that.”

He pointed to US sanctions on the Khartoum government and said they’d been “frustrating” but necessary. However, said Royce, the international community had largely failed to cooperate with Washington regarding sanctions, and more cooperation in this regard was required.

“The (Bush) administration has said that no options should be off the table (to pressure Khartoum), and I think that’s right.”

He suggested that the international community should no longer be prepared to “sit and watch innocent civilians being bombed by government aircraft” and said this “may be reason enough to take forceful action and to take out these bombers, or to install no-fly zones (over Darfur). These Antonovs (bombers) should be taken out.”

Royce said solutions to the Darfur problem would not be easy to achieve: “I know how difficult it will be to produce the focus and sustained engagement, but we cannot give up, because those of us who have been there on the ground and have seen the cost to humanity know that we’ve got to persevere in this.”

ENDS