

Getting Darfur Wrong

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**Saviors and Survivors:
Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror**
by Mahmood Mamdani
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The Darfur genocide has the perverse distinction of being the longest and most fully chronicled genocide of the last century. Our contemporaneous knowledge of what happened and what is happening comes from dozens of comprehensive human rights reports dating from 2003 and earlier, accounts from international humanitarian organizations, and detailed research by policy and advocacy groups such as the International Crisis Group and Refugees International. And there is extraordinary congruence in the accounts. Although some, such as Human Rights Watch, have found it difficult to come to consensus on the question of “genocidal intent,” there is broad agreement about the ethnically targeted nature of the crimes and the role of the Khartoum regime in orchestrating the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of some three million Darfuris, overwhelmingly from the non-Arab, African tribal populations of the region.

To be sure, there are disagreements: over mortality levels, the designation of “genocide,” and preeminently over the appropriate international policy responses. But the narrative of what has occurred is remarkably consistent, and collectively the accounts reflect thousands of interviews of Darfuris, both in Darfur and in the refugee camps of Eastern Chad, as well as countless individual reports by on-the-ground observers. The fullness, consistency, and authority of the narrative has guided many of the Darfur advocacy efforts, both in the United States and Europe.

And yet there is a growing effort in some quarters to rewrite the “Darfur narrative,” an effort that entails a wholesale revision of key features of this vast catastrophe. There are corresponding efforts to excoriate the Darfur advocacy movement as a primary culprit in prolonging the crisis, to downplay the suffering and destruction that have occurred over the past seven years, and most notably to diminish the Khartoum regime’s responsibility for what has occurred. The most aggressive and pernicious of these efforts is Mahmood Mamdani’s *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that I am the target of several pages of Mamdani’s account of mortality totals for the genocide, even as I would argue that this account is filled with error and incomprehension, demonstrating no familiarity with either the statistical or the demographic and epidemiological issues that I and others working on mortality totals must confront in the absence of comprehensive cluster sampling (something the Khartoum regime has long refused to allow).

But Mamdani’s harshest criticism is of what he refers to as the “Save Darfur movement.” Because there is an organization with the name “Save Darfur Coalition” (SDC)—which indeed has a good deal to answer for—as well as a much broader American advocacy effort on behalf of Darfur that is not represented by SDC, Mamdani has an easy time conflating the two whenever he finds it convenient. There are also moments in which his reference is simply ambiguous, as in his extraordinary suggestion that Darfur advocacy is complicit in the “War on Terror”:

Only those possessed of disproportionate power can afford to assume that knowing is irrelevant, thereby caring little about the consequences of their actions. Not only is this mind-set the driving force behind the War on Terror, it also provides the self-indulgent motto of the human rights interventionist

recruited into the ranks of the terror warriors. This feel-good imperative can be summed up as follows: as long as I feel good, nothing else matters. It is this shared mindset that has turned the movement to Save Darfur into the humanitarian face of the War on Terror. (page 6)

The suggestion that the various individuals and organizations that have called for humanitarian intervention in Darfur are ignorant, “feel-good” recruits is simply astonishing. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights, Human Rights First, Refugees International, and the International Crisis Group—all these are strong advocates of robust protective action on the ground in Darfur. And these are some of the most deeply informed and principled organizations in the world. How can they all be so wrong? Mamdani’s answer comes in a single phrase: “historical ignorance.” These groups—as well as many genocide scholars, specialists in international relations and military affairs, and even students of Sudan—simply don’t know their Darfur history and have been seduced into accepting a series of propositions that Mamdani presumes to demonstrate are in error.

But the problems with Mamdani’s own history of Darfur are so serious, his research so dependent on secondary sources, his methods so obviously and tendentiously selective, that in the end he provides not so much an account of the origins of the Darfur conflict as a highly ideological version of this conflict—a version with gaping holes, consistent overstatement, and scandalous errors of fact. Most dismayingly, he fails fundamentally to come to terms with the role of the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party (NIF/NCP) regime in Darfur’s destruction.

Indeed, at one moment in his concluding discussion of international justice and the War on Terror, he refers to “[Omar al-] Bashir’s own little war on terror in Darfur in 2003-4.” It is impossible to judge the tone of this extraordinary phrase, although its context suggests that Mamdani is arguing that only Western interference has made Darfur more

than a “little” conflict. No matter that there are solid statistical and epidemiological grounds for believing that hundreds of thousands of people died during this time period alone, and that the destruction of 80 percent to 90 percent of all African villages has now uprooted millions, leaving them precariously dependent on an international humanitarian operation that was brutally curtailed by the Khartoum regime in March 2009. Few of these displaced people have any confidence that they will be returning to their lands in the foreseeable future, and Darfuris regularly tell me that despair is growing in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and the refugee camps in Eastern Chad. A search of Mamdani’s index for humanitarian and human rights reports predictably yields virtually nothing. Physicians for Human Rights doesn’t make an appearance, even as its 2006 study (“Darfur: Assault on Survival”) remains our best and most detailed account of the genocidal character of destruction in Darfur. Despite the overwhelming responsibility of the NIF/NCP regime, Mamdani chooses to minimize its role in this ghastly story.

To all of which Mamdani may reply that this wasn’t his purpose: he isn’t trying to characterize the suffering of Darfuris or give an account of humanitarian efforts. His purpose, announced decisively in his introduction, is to declare that Darfur is not the site of genocide, that the fighting is local in character, and to the extent that tribal and ethnic identities have defined the fighting, this is largely a result of British colonial administration. His two major claims are first, that the postcolonial conflicts in Darfur are best understood as the consequence of colonialism and second, that these conflicts long predate the nonexistent genocide.

It is impossible in the compass of this review to rehearse the vast number of errors—some of very considerable significance—in the history Mamdani has fashioned from the large number of secondary works he has apparently read (there is no evidence of significant reading in primary sources). Fortunately, two of the preeminent historians of Darfur—Sean O’Fahey and Martin Daly—have weighed in with a catalog of these errors in an ongoing Web site review

that offers a range of assessments of *Saviors and Survivors*, "Making Sense of Darfur."^{*}

Consider now his two major claims, both of which, I shall argue, are demonstrably false. The first is colonial "retribalization"—what Mamdani argues was the British effort to re-introduce tribal and ethnic identity as a means of ensuring the effectiveness of "native administration." Whatever the British may have done in the South and elsewhere in Sudan, such "retribalization" was not the case in Darfur. As O'Fahey notes, the British "simply tinkered with the boundaries they had inherited from the sultanate." The instrument of "retribalization," according to Mamdani, was the *hakura* system of land tenure. He fails to realize that the *hakura* system was not co-extensive with the Darfur sultanate itself, but only with parts of it. This undermines the claim that the sultan's ethnically ecumenical use of the *hakura* was a means of breaking down tribalism throughout Darfur. Hence his corollary argument that the British "retribalized" Darfur during British colonial rule makes no sense: he is wrong about differences in the awards to Arab cattle nomads (*Baggara*) in the south of Darfur and those to Arab camel nomads (*Abbala*) in the north; and he is wrong about any broader ethnic redefinition of Darfur. As O'Fahey bluntly declares, "What the *hakura* or estate system meant in ethnic terms is almost impossible to decipher from the [primary historical] documents." Mamdani clearly has not read these documents.

Second, Mamdani's claim that the ethnic violence that emerged so intensely in the 1980s was a result of British colonial rule is a radical misreading of what happened in Darfur. Certainly, the spread of the Sahara southward through the Sahel and periods of drought in Darfur significantly increased the potential for conflict, and the war between the Fur and Arab groups (1987-1989) may be a useful starting point for discussions of the nature of the genocidal conflict that began in 2003 (or perhaps earlier if we look at the destruction the non-Arab Masseleit people endured from 1995-

1999). But to say that ethnic tensions, and the growing insistence on ethnic self-identity, increased from the 1980s onward does not begin to explain the realities we confront today. Ethnic rivalry and environmental degradation were perhaps necessary but they were not sufficient causes.

Notably, Mamdani pays almost no attention to non-Arab or African grievances against the National Islamic Front regime, which came to power by military coup in 1989. He barely mentions the 1994 administrative division of Darfur into three states—a means of denying the Fur (the largest ethnic group in Darfur) a political majority in any of the new divisions. There is no mention of Khartoum's increasingly asymmetrical disarming of African village protection forces or the collapse of the justice system for those with grievances against regime-sanctioned Arab militia violence. And of course all in Darfur suffered from acute political and economic marginalization as the NIF/NCP increased its stranglehold on national wealth and power.

Mamdani's thesis about the re-introduction of ethnic tensions as a result of British policies is, as O'Fahey suggests, "absurd." But beyond this, it is morally irrelevant to the clear ethnic targeting of African tribal groups by the Janjaweed militia, working in close coordination with Khartoum's regular military forces. Here our most important sources are human rights reports, in particular Human Rights Watch's (HRW) "Entrenching Impunity: Government Responsibility for International Crimes in Darfur" (December 2005). No honest reader can escape the conclusion of this painstakingly detailed and authoritative account: "There is irrefutable evidence of a Sudanese government policy of systematic support for, co-ordination of, and impunity from prosecution granted to the 'Janjaweed militias,' a policy that continues to this day."

In turn, the actions of the Janjaweed are all too well documented: the vicious and brutally destructive attacks on the villages of the Fur, Massaleit, and Zaghawa—perceived as the primary civilian base of support for the two rebel groups that had scored significant military victories in the first half of 2003. Mamdani has

^{*}<http://blogs.ssrc.org/darfur/2009/04/20/prof-mamdani-and-darfur-some-comments-on-the-land-issue/> and <http://blogs.ssrc.org/darfur/2009/04/14/mamdani-contra-mundum/>.

virtually nothing to say about this “little” war of terror against civilians. Although he provides a long and wide-ranging account of the origins of the term “Janjaweed” going back to the 1970s—an overview of the complex politics and military developments involving Chad, Libya, Khartoum, and Darfur, as well as the distinctions among various Arab groups—he offers virtually nothing that has not already been more perspicuously and objectively rendered by others (especially in the superb reports from the Small Arms Survey [Geneva] on Darfur and Eastern Chad).

In his blunt, unqualified dismissal of genocide in Darfur, Mamdani is obliged to exclude a wide range of evidence, and he does so without compunction or apology. He never mentions, for example, the destruction of African villages with no military presence, even as adjacent Arab villages only a few hundred yards away were spared; he is not interested in the insistent, repeated, hate-filled use of racial epithets, especially during the gang-raping of African women and girls (often in front of their families); and he has nothing to say about the comprehensiveness with which African villages and livelihoods have been destroyed (the burning of food- and seed-stocks and agricultural implements; the looting of livestock; the cutting down of mature fruit trees; the poisoning of wells with human and animal corpses). There is only silence about mass executions of African men and boys by the regime’s forces—for example, the notorious massacre of some 150 Fur males in one location in the Wadi Saleh area of West Darfur, reported by both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in spring 2004.

Documentary evidence is excluded as well: Mamdani dismisses the “Arab Gathering” that emerged publicly in the 1980s; it is, for him, anything but the ominous ideological tool that many believe it to be. But Alex de Waal and Julie Flint, in *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War*, offer a more substantive assessment:

[The] ultimate objective [of the Arab Gathering] in Darfur is spelled out in an August 2004 directive from [Janjaweed chief Musa] Hilal’s headquarters. “Change the demography of Darfur and empty it of African tribes.” Confirming the control of

[Khartoum’s] Military Intelligence over the Darfur file, the directive is addressed to no fewer than three intelligence services...” (page 39)

What we see today in Darfur is the terrible success of this “changed demography.” Half the total prewar population of the region has been displaced into camps or is dead. And while many Arab groups, even those that attempted to stay out of the conflict, have suffered grievously, the victims are overwhelmingly African—two-thirds of Darfur’s population. It is necessary to say again: the numbers bear no comparison to the Fur/Arab war of the late 1980s that Mamdani repeatedly invokes as the start of the present conflict.

And yet despite all this, despite the evidence that he must know about—even if he refuses to cite it—Mamdani offers only the most condescending description of American advocacy efforts attempting to halt Darfur’s ethnically targeted violence. In truth, these efforts have given the events in this exceedingly remote region a visibility and urgency that has—in the form of sustained humanitarian assistance—likely saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Mamdani explains the efforts this way:

One needs to appreciate that Iraq makes some Americans feel responsible and guilty, just as it compels other Americans to come to terms with the limits of American power. Darfur, in contrast, is an act not of responsibility but of philanthropy. Unlike Iraq, Darfur is a place for which Americans do not need to feel responsible but choose to take responsibility.... Darfur appeals to Americans who hate to pay taxes but love to donate to charities.... For Americans tired of Iraq, Darfur is a place of refuge. It is a surrogate shelter. It is a cause about which they can feel good.” (page 60)

Despite the reading and research that went into the writing of *Saviors and Survivors*, it becomes clear in passages like this that Darfur is really a secondary issue for Mamdani. His last chapter—“Responsibility to Protect or Right to Punish?”—offers us a view of his larger target. For Mamdani, it has always been wrong to

advocate forceful intervention in Darfur—but his aim is to universalize this argument.

Humanitarian intervention does not need to abide by the law. Indeed, its defining characteristic is that it is beyond the law. It is this feature that makes humanitarian intervention the twin of the War on Terror. (page 274)

It would be helpful if Mamdani gave some evidence of understanding or even trying to understand the impressive thinking and the scholarly work of the last few decades about the “responsibility to protect” and “just war” theory. But there is no such evidence. National sovereignty trumps human rights, according to Mamdani, because the “international humanitarian order” comes at the expense of “citizenship,” whose rights can only be defined and extended by the state:

Today, the overwhelming tendency is for the language of rights to enable power. The result is to subvert its very purpose, to put it at the service of a wholly different agenda. (page 282)

Iraq is, of course, Mamdani’s recurring example of what this “different agenda” includes, and so long as “humanitarian intervention” is seen only through the lens of the American-led invasion, we are hardly likely to find many enthusiasts for it. But even Rwanda isn’t for Mamdani an example of the need for urgent military action. Lt. General Roméo Dallaire, who commanded the UN force in Rwanda, argued at the time that a clear demonstration of international military will would have prevented the killing. No matter. Mamdani is more interested in American support for Paul Kagame of the Rwandan Patriotic Front: this is the “real” intervention, in the service, no doubt, of a wholly different agenda that has nothing to

do with humanitarianism. It is striking that he has little to say about the earlier U.S. effort to block UN intervention, which helped ensure the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Given this skewing of interest, it is no surprise that Mamdani has only contempt for those who have argued for intervention in Darfur by invoking our failure in Rwanda.

Corresponding to his wholesale opposition to humanitarian intervention is Mamdani’s disdain for the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its ideals. Detaching “war crimes from the underlying political reality,” he writes, “has turned justice [as represented by the ICC] into a regime for settling scores.” Indeed, Mamdani’s final statement is his real argument, his largest claim about both Darfur and Western ambitions for international justice: “In its present form, the call for justice is really a slogan that masks a big power agenda to recolonize Africa.”

There could be no greater disparity between what Darfuris insistently tell me about their desperate desire for justice and what Mamdani argues here. So, too, with the characterization of ethnically-targeted violence: “genocide” is a term that he rejects. But genocide is the virtually unanimous conclusion of African Darfuris. Mamdani purports to speak for Africans, purports to speak even for the people of Darfur, if they only knew their own history better. *Saviors and Survivors* is a display of arrogance, tendentiousness, and error that may prove impossible to surpass in any future account of Darfur.

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