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## **Darfur: A View from the Arab World**

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According to Lawrence Pintak, publisher and co-editor of *Arab Media & Society*, "Darfur has been the biggest untold story of the Arab world". Arab media coverage of the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan during 2003-07 was marginal, he said, in comparison to the treatment of events in Iraq and Palestine, notwithstanding the fact that the conflict in Darfur is widely recognized as the first genocide of the 21st century. Pintak blamed Arab journalists for providing their audiences with "selective information", i.e., information that reflects their governments' agendas, at the expense of a fuller and more balanced picture. Their stories also tended to focus more on political machinations than on the human dimension of the crisis. Moreover, he stated, Arab journalists and intellectuals frequently employed "conspiracy rhetoric". Hiding beyond incessant claims regarding Zionist plots and Western conspiracies, they tended to avoid critical discussion of the Darfur conflict's complex internal and regional dimensions.

The Arab media's coverage of Sudan's previous internal conflict fails to help explain its indifference to the Darfur tragedy. Sudan's North-South conflict was the longest (1956-1972; 1983-2005), and one of the bloodiest civil-wars in post-colonial Africa. This nearly continuous conflict not only possessed clear regional features - the northern-based government against the rebel south - but was also perceived as racial ("Arabs" against "Africans") and religious (Muslims against Christians and animists). As such, Arab media attitudes almost automatically tended to justify the government's cause against the rebels. The Darfur conflict possesses regional features as well (North versus West) and even some racial ones (again "Arabs" against "Africans"). However, a key difference is that in Darfur's case, all the protagonists are Muslims. One could have perhaps assumed that Arab

attitudes towards Darfur, as reflected in both the media and Arab League declarations and activities, would have therefore been more ambiguous, and less unequivocally supportive of the regime than during the earlier North-South conflict. For the most part, however, this was not the case.

On February 26, 2003, the *Fur* insurgents of the Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) inflicted heavy casualties on Sudanese army garrisons throughout western Darfur and destroyed helicopters and bombers at al-Fashir. Soon they were joined by the *Zaghawa* Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The Sudanese government responded to these blows directly, conducting air raids on Darfurian villages, and indirectly, by supporting the *janjaweed* semi-governmental militias. The estimated numbers of fatalities in this unfolding conflict range between 250,000-400,000, and approximately two million persons have been displaced from their homes.

The international response to the escalation of the conflict in Darfur led to the signing in April and May 2004 of cease-fire agreements in N'djamena and Addis Ababa, respectively, between the Sudanese government and the two rebel groups, paving the way for the deployment of a multi-national African Union force (AMIS). The decision of the African Union to intervene in an intra-state conflict was a historic one. However, the minute size of this force (eventually reaching 7,000 personnel in 2007) severely constrained its ability to act against the Sudanese army's and *janjaweed* militias' aggressive violations of human rights. Meanwhile, the Sudanese government successfully rebuffed international efforts to deploy a larger and more effective international force (the current size of the UN mission, including the AU component, is just over 9,000). In addition, the international community refrained from imposing any kind of meaningful sanctions on Sudan,

Initially, Arab League attitudes were almost entirely at one with those of the Khartoum government, a League member-state. During 2004, the League rejected any notion of international military intervention or sanctions, and called on the UN to give Sudan more time to resolve the conflict. It continued to back the Sudanese claim that a viable solution for the crisis could be achieved only through the AMIS presence there, rejecting a larger UN-sponsored mission. Moreover, the League's support for the AMIS budget was in fact quite limited. At the Khartoum Arab summit conference on March 2006, in the face of international criticism regarding their passivity, Arab League states pledged to allocate \$150 million to AMIS. One year later, however, only about 10% of the promised funds had actually been tendered, and the European Union remains the source of most of the funding for the AMIS force. As for personnel, the contributions of the

African Arab states to AMIS have been negligible.

The Arab League's passivity regarding the events in Darfur can be also be explained from an additional angle - the marginality of Sudan in Arab eyes. Robert O. Collins, one of the best-known historians of Sudan, put it thusly: "The Arab League chose not to become directly involved in a conflict in which its members had no immediate self-interest in a land populated by a people for whom their historic perceptions and prejudices gave them no reason to lend anything but minor assistance". Of course, this general assumption glosses over the varying interests of individual Arab states. For example, Egypt has unique and abiding concerns regarding Sudanese affairs, deriving first and foremost from the geo-strategic importance of the Nile Valley, as well as from close historical connections and the current problem of the inflow of refugees from its immediate southern neighbor. Nonetheless, the fact that Arab countries see Sudan as more African than Arab appears to help explain the indifference both among official circles and in the media toward the events in Darfur, especially in comparison to other "more important" areas such as Iraq and Palestine.

Interestingly, recent events point to the possibility of a change in this pattern of response. Two years ago, Nabil Kassem of *al-Arabiya* television produced a documentary film on Darfur, *Jihad on Horseback*. He believed that the film's scenes of unspeakable brutality and untold suffering would shake Arab public opinion out of its indifference. "Arabs should be ashamed having one million Muslims begging for help. Shame", he declared. As it happened, the film was never broadcast on any of the main Arab TV channels. However, parts of it were made available on the Internet, resulting in lively discussion on various blogs and talkbacks. Moreover, since 2007, *al-Arabiya* and *al-Jazeera* are providing broader, more critical, and "on the ground" coverage of Darfur. Another source for critical discussion on Arab world attitudes towards the violence in Darfur are Arab activists in humanitarian and human rights organizations. Nadim Hasbani, the Arab Media Officer of the International Crisis Group, writing in *al-Hayat*, denounced "Arab governments [that] continue to support the perpetrator of massacres rather than the civilian victims". In addition, a coalition of Muslim organizations and human rights groups recently called for the Arab League to play a more active role in trying to solve the humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

Do these examples signify a real change in Arab world attitudes toward the crisis in Darfur? The answer is not unequivocal. On the one hand, there are growing signs of a developing public discourse denouncing Arab indifference and inaction concerning a contemporary genocide that is happening within the Muslim world. On the other hand, in analyzing the

declarations and deeds of the Arab League, it seems that real policy change is occurring very slowly, if at all. To be sure, the Arab League supports the deployment of the hybrid UN-AU force in Darfur (UNAMIS), and rejects accusations of negligence. On June 10, 2008, the Arab League's envoy to Sudan, Ambassador Salah Halima, told reporters that the League is doing its utmost to reach a political settlement of the crisis. Yet, most of its declarations continue to reflect the Sudanese government's position regarding the conflict (such as referring to the local Darfurian groups as "rebels"). Moreover, its budgetary and manpower contributions to the African and international forces in the region remain minimal. More than five years after the beginning of the conflict in Darfur, and notwithstanding its escalation to a full-scale genocide, it seems that the events there are still marginal to Arab concerns.

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