

# UNDERSTANDING SUDAN/DARFUR

## Study Guide

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### INTRODUCTION

Sudan and the region of Darfur have been in the news over the last few years for what is evidence of ethnic cleansing and genocide. A number of celebrities and humanitarian groups have called for action from the world leaders. One that has gained particular attention is George Clooney. This week we will look at Sudan and Darfur and explore what is behind the conflict and what is happening there. Again this is a place we read of in the news but have little understanding of the country, its history and the causes of the conflict. It is therefore good for us to learn more of what is happening.

### HISTORY OF SUDAN

The history of Sudan begins with the history of the Nile. The Nile is the longest river in the world. Forming in the mountains of East Africa, the Nile flows 4,160 miles mostly north until it reaches the Mediterranean Sea on the Egyptian coastline.

Early civilizations formed along the Nile, particularly the Egyptian Empire, closest to the Mediterranean. However, people also settled farther up the river (that’s usually south) in Nubia, what is now southern Egypt and northern Sudan. There were several groups of Nubians who lived from just north of Aswan, Egypt, to the region of el-Debba, southeast of Khartoum. The Nubian language was one of several spoken throughout the Nile Valley.

There is virtually no rainfall in Nubia. Thus fertile land is confined to the narrow strip alongside the Nile. Along the Blue Nile, one of the Nile’s two great tributaries, there is more rainfall, permitting more vegetation.

Ancient Nubia has no written account of life by its own people. The earliest accounts are by Arab and European contacts, mainly in the northern parts. Therefore any analysis of early culture and history relies heavily on archaeology.

The Nubians actually followed the Kushites (or Cushites), a people named in the Bible though they are sometimes referred to as Ethiopians. The Kushites lived in the Middle Nile from the ninth century BCE to the fourth century CE. For a time (approximately 750–661 BCE) they even ruled over Egypt. A related postpyramidal group may have continued farther south along the Nile until the sixth century.

After the birth of Christianity, many brought the faith into Africa, forming Christian communities up and down the Nile. The first Christian converts in Nubia appeared no later than the fourth century. Around 543, the emperor and empress of Constantinople sent separate missionaries to the northernmost Nubian kingdom. Yet, the later rise of Islam and Arab influence throughout North Africa in time cut off Nubian Christians from other Christian communities springing up in Europe. Eventually a Muslim came to the throne of Nubia’s northern kingdom. Without royal support, Christianity suffered.

Egypt expanded its authority over the remaining Nubian kingdoms in the 1820s. When Arabs arrived in Sudan, they did not expand their territory into the South. However, they did engage in raids in the South to obtain slaves. Muhammad Ahmed ibn Abdallah, an Arab calling himself the Mahdi, or “Appointed of God,” took control of Sudan in 1881. He pledged to end slavery, thus encouraging many southerners to join his revolution. Unfortunately slavery and forced conversions to Islam continued after he gained power. The Mahdi’s vision was to unite West and North Africa under Islamic rule, even though this was never attained.

The reign of the Mahdi and his successors lasted until 1898, when a British and Egyptian force retook control. Once the British arrived, they established a policy of separation. The 1921 Passport Ordinance Act controlled travel between the northern and southern regions. Northern Dinkas (an African ethnic group) were asked to relocate to the South.

Britain’s original plan was to add southern Sudan to a British East Africa. However, this did not happen before Sudan’s independence in the 1950s. It was Egypt that set up the separate government and constitution for Sudan in 1951. Southern Sudanese were excluded from participation in the new state government. Sudan formally became independent five years later.

Once independence was established, the new Sudanese government exercised its control over the South. Arabic was declared the official language for the entire nation, requiring all education and government business to be conducted in that language. Northern Muslim leaders and the business community also moved south to spread their influence. These new southern residents, having the benefit of better education during the colonial period, took over much of the leadership in southern business, education, law enforcement, government, and civil service.

Responding to the Arabizing forces, an armed resistance seeking southern secession began in 1955. Peace was not established until three years after Jaafar Muhammad Nimeiri, a military leader, took power in a 1969 revolution. This peace lasted for eleven years. It provided self-rule and religious freedom for the South. However, Nimeiri grew increasingly religious and eventually decided to impose *sharia*, or Islamic law, on the entire country.

Jok Madut Jok, a Sudanese historian who now lives in the United States, believes Nimeiri was working to undermine the peace agreement throughout his reign. Jok points to Nimeiri's redefining of regional boundaries and exploitation of southern oil as examples of his desire for a weak South.

In 1983 the peace agreement ended. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), formed at this time.

Nimeiri was overthrown in 1985 through a popular uprising. Jok, who is a professor of history at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, believes the SPLM's ideas for a new Sudan free from discrimination of any sort had caught on with the northern opposition.

The newly elected leader of Sudan was a grandson of the Mahdi. He saw the need to give some self-rule to the South. However others saw this as a threat. Only a few hours before a peace agreement was to go into effect in 1989, the military took control. General Omar al-Bashir quickly purged the army and educational institutions of any persons considered threats. He also closed down many churches.

At this time he created the Popular Defense Force (PDF). The PDF was outside of the military. It would use religious fervor to promote martyrdom in the fight with the South. In 1992 a jihad was declared on the South, and other rebellious non-Arab groups also joined.

## SUDAN TODAY

Peace talks between the North and South grew in 2002–2004. Leaders signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005 that provided southern autonomy for six years. After that, there should be a referendum on independence. As part of the peace, the SPLM joined as a minority partner in a national coalition government. The National Congress Party, which came to power in the 1989 military coup, is the majority party. Elections are planned for 2008–2009. While Islamic law is still the rule in the northern states, the peace agreement did establish some protections for non-Muslims in Khartoum.

Economically Sudan is growing. It achieved its first trade surplus in 1999 with the addition of crude oil to its exports; however, agriculture continues as its main economic sector. Agriculture supports 80 percent of the workforce and at least 35 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Sudan had more than 10 percent growth in GDP during 2006 and 2007. Nevertheless, public debt remains at 96.9 percent of GDP.

In addition to oil and petroleum products, chief exports include cotton, sesame, livestock, groundnuts (peanuts), and sugar. Sudan's main trading partners are Japan and China. In the South among the Dinka people, the four main economic sectors are cattle, agriculture, trading, and wild food such as fish, fruits, and nuts.

The North-South peace has helped to reduce human trafficking and abductions, but they still occur. A Ugandan rebel organization called the Lord's Resistance Army raids southern Sudan for children to support its fighting forces. It has set up camps in Sudan, just as the SPLA has had camps in Uganda.

Implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement is behind schedule. This is due, in part, to the more recent separate conflict in Darfur. Tensions along Sudan's North-South border continue, as armed groups have not moved out of certain regions as previously agreed. Reconstruction, while slow, is happening, but the SPLM suspended its participation in the national government, asking for more cooperation from the National Congress Party. The United States and other international bodies are calling for renewed efforts to implement the CPA and address other areas of conflict and disagreement.

In January 2008, northern Sudanese forces were to have withdrawn all personnel out of southern Sudan's oil producing region. This was the main sticking point that led to the October SPLM walkout. The oil fields are currently patrolled by a joint force. Even as this peace moves forward, another conflict in Sudan has broken out.

## THE DARFUR STORY

Before Sudan became an independent country in 1956, there were various regional powers. One of these regions that is now the Darfur Province was the state of Tunjur, between 1500 and 1650 CE, located in current Darfur and eastern Chad. It was mostly a pre-Islamic society. As it was collapsing, a dynasty led by an ethnic group named Fur was arising in the eastern part of the region. Thus began the Darfur Sultanate. Darfur means "land of the Fur."

Darfur was an Islamic state, at least to the extent that its rulers practiced Islam. Many subjects of the Darfur Sultanate still practiced their traditional religions. To the west was another Islamic state, Wadai. The two states often invaded each other from 1680 to 1750. During the nineteenth century, Darfur gained enough power to oversee Wadai until the Darfur Sultanate's collapse in 1874.

Darfur was a multiethnic state. Some ethnic groups were split among multiple states. One of the groups that resided within the bounds of the Darfur Sultanate was the Masalit, though there were also Masalit in the neighboring sultanate of Wadai (located in modern-day Chad). Some groups of Masalit were related to the Fur. In exchange for some security, trade, and political oversight, the Fur nobility would extract taxes from local villages.

For centuries the territory of Masalit was much more fertile than it is today. There were many streambeds lined with sycamore and acacia trees. The Masalit were mostly farmers, though wild game abounded. Nearly every person in a Masalit village kept a farm, including the trades people and religious leaders. Herds were overseen communally, with various families taking turns in their oversight. Nevertheless, raiding nearby communities for their herds was a traditional part of life and often viewed as a requirement before a young man could get married. Both men and women farmed, though they had separate crops. Men, women, and children also spun cotton for clothing. Other clothing was provided by animal hides.

Most trading was done between neighboring communities, though outsiders were occasionally permitted in the marketplace. The cattle raiding strained relationships with some nomadic herding groups in the area. While some slaves were bought from a related tribe to the south, they were usually not resold. By the 1980s this land had become very dry with few trees and no game.

When the state of Sudan was formed, like those in the South those in Darfur had little participation. Nevertheless, Darfur initially supported the government in its campaign against the South. However, since 1980 the issue has broadened. No longer was the conflict being viewed as primarily a North-versus-South campaign united around religion. Other non-Arabs noticed how the Arab-controlled government was not addressing their concerns. With the worsening droughts, Darfur called for more assistance, but the only solution ever offered was to kick some non-Arabs off their land.

In the early 1980s, clashes and disputes between groups in Darfur were addressed locally through negotiation. Usually they would end with some sort of compensation for the other's loss. However, in the mid-1980s, the government in Khartoum asserted control over the disputes and required all settlements to go through the bureaucracy. This enabled the government to promote its views of Arabization and hierarchy of peoples.

Being Arab in Sudan is more of a state of mind and a way of being. It is a different understanding than what would be viewed as Arab in Egypt. It can be complicated by the amount of racial mixing, including between Arabs and non-Arabs, particularly in regions like Darfur.

Although the people of Darfur are all Muslim, they are not all Arabized. That is, they have maintained their own cultural traditions and have not assimilated into the state's understanding of how an Arab should act and be. Sudanese historian Jok Madut Jok describes the racial tensions in Sudan as "not based on phenotypes alone." He continues, "They are also pegged to a host of practices such as religion, economic activities, material conditions, the naming of people and other cultural practices. The geographic distance between groups, the natural environment in which each group lives and their language are also considered part of the racial schema."

In this type of environment, Jok describes how people could move among African, black, and Arab labels. "This means that a non-Arab who wants to become one could racially 'pass' through expressed devotion to Islam." However discrimination still exists.

As one Darfuri put it, “They think they are better Muslims because their race brings them closer to the Prophet, and that blacks can never make good Muslims.”

The conflict in Darfur is one of Muslim versus Muslim, black versus Arab. It is a further extension of the Arabization tendencies of the Sudanese government. Those tendencies had already played out in the conflict with the South, where it was clearer that the southerners were not accepting the Arabization process.

## THE DARFUR PROBLEM

In Darfur, the Arab population moves about grazing cattle. Meanwhile the African population is settled as farmers. The grazing land is decreasing due to drought and desertification. This forces the Arab cattle herders to move into the farming land of the African population. The non-Arabs sought to keep the traditional land demarcation. Attacks escalated, and in 2002 a group of Arabs led what Jok calls a bloody massacre against settled African farmers. The non-Arabs then revolted against the Khartoum government, perceiving that it was behind the Arab attacks.

In 2004, when the world recognized the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, eyes turned to Darfur asking whether it was happening again.

The amount of government support for the Arab militias, or Janjaweed, is hard to ascertain. The government claims the conflict is a regional ethnic clash. However, others believe the government backs the Janjaweed and encourages the conflict as part of its Arabization of the country. The government says it supports only “selfdefence militias.”

Nevertheless, Jok and others suggest that the same tactics the government used in the South are being used in Darfur. These include air raids followed by ground attacks. Darfur refugees report the raping of women and pillaging of villages. They also say the Janjaweed patrol outside of refugee camps, raping and killing those who stray too far.

The question over whether this conflict is genocide is one full of many competing international political tensions. With lack of action to settle this question from the African Union, European Union, and the United Nations, the United States sent a team to investigate. This investigation resulted in an announcement by the U.S. State Department, then led by Colin Powell, that genocide was occurring in Darfur.

Relief groups also hesitate to use the word *genocide* in talking about the conflict in Darfur. Many of these groups, including those sponsored by Christian bodies, are careful about what they say, lest they be arrested or forced to leave the country. Those who avoid calling the conflict genocide believe it is more important for their relief efforts to address the humanitarian needs than to get involved in the politics of the region.

A U.N. investigation team, while stopping short of calling the conflict genocide, has identified war crimes. The Sudan government has announced that various persons will be put on trial, but these may be attempts to avoid having them tried at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

International criticism of government involvement in the conflict is not always helpful. Part of the problem that the Sudanese opposition sees with international criticism is the lack of action. “Because,” as one opposition leader put it, “any threatening remark they made against Khartoum was enough to guarantee the Islamists a lot of support from Iran and Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries.” It could also be used to raise up additional fighters from within the country.

## INTERNATIONAL RELIEF EFFORTS

By 2004, Darfur had become what the United Nations and others termed the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Now almost four million people have become reliant on aid. About 2.2 million of those were displaced from their homes, more than 200,000 of whom had fled to Chad.

In addition to the United Nations, various nongovernmental organizations are providing relief to refugees and displaced persons. Most U.S. denominations are coordinating their efforts through Church World Service, the relief arm of the U.S. National Council of Churches, which issued a \$13 million appeal for Darfur work on January 11, 2008. Church World Service is among sixty organizations joining together as part of Action by Churches Together and Caritas Internationalis Confederation. This joint response has been working in Darfur since 2004, particularly in the southern and western regions.

The coalition's goal is to develop Sudanese leadership to play a stronger role in managing the effort. Local partners include the Sudan Council of Churches, the Sudan Social Development Organization, and Sudan Aid (Caritas Sudan).

The main programmatic work of the coalition, in terms of people directly served, is in water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and emergency preparedness and response. Areas of concern include HIV/AIDS awareness in displaced communities, the role of women and gender issues, environmental concerns, and community empowerment.

Monitoring ground water is chief among the environmental concerns, and the coalition plans to train people to carry this out. The coalition will also be involved in planting trees around the camps, necessitated by heavy clearing for firewood.

UMCOR also has built sixty temporary classrooms and fixed up or constructed fifty-four permanent teaching spaces for primary students. Students have also been provided with notebooks, pens, and other school supplies.

UMCOR also provided teacher training. Presbyterians also support the efforts by Church World Service. In addition, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is working with the Resource Centre for Civil Leadership (RECONCILE) to help communities in South Sudan. Information on this response can be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/pda/reconcile.htm>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Again we see another country where people turn against people. Just like in Rwanda people who have lived together turn against each other for reasons we cannot understand. It seems that a corner has turned in the Darfur conflict and some inroads have been made to stopping the genocide. Sometimes it is hard to know the truth as information is difficult to obtain.

Even if the genocide has stopped there is still the ongoing problem of drought and the lack of food. Getting supplies and aid to the people who need it is extremely difficult as it has to go through corrupt government channels. Aid and help is still desperately needed.

We must keep the people of Darfur in our prayers and continue supporting the aid organizations that are working in the region.

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Read Matthew 2:13-23. In this passage we see Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing to Egypt to escape persecution and they remained there until there was a change in power. Is their experience the same as or different from those in Sudan who flee the conflicts. What impact does this have on the families?
- What do the terms; *Arab*, *African* and *genocide* mean to you?
- Consider the term WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) in relation to the areas around the world where we have seen genocide in recent years and in particular Darfur. If Jesus were alive today and living in our place what do you think his response would be? Is that what you should do?