

Beja

Local conflict, marginalisation, and the threat to regional security

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Introduction

In a region that has become notorious for its level of armed conflict, Sudan stands out. Armed struggles in the south broke out months before the country was granted independence on 1 January 1956. In the 1960s these struggles developed into a full-fledged insurrection led by Anyanya that only ended in 1972. The conflict resumed in 1983 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which was established in the same year. The second civil war was formally brought to an end with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Nairobi on 9 January 2005, although the jury is still out as to whether peace will prove sustainable. In February 2003, even before the signing of the CPA, a long-simmering conflict in Darfur became a full-fledged civil war.

Nor has eastern Sudan been immune to conflict. Although 'marginalisation' has become a term synonymous with the position of the south within Sudan, the Beja National Congress (BNC) was in fact established in 1958 to fight politically against the peripheral position of this major eastern tribe within Sudan. In 1993 the BNC became a member of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a group of opposition parties based in Asmara committed to overthrowing the ruling National Islamic Front (NIF). After the NDA virtually collapsed in 2005, the BNC joined the Rashaida Free Lions to form the Eastern Front, thus shifting from an ethnic definition of the conflict to a regional one. On 14 October 2006 the Eastern Front and the Government of Sudan (GOS) signed the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement, thus formally bringing the conflict to an end.

While not on the scale of the conflicts in the south and west, the war in the east has nonetheless produced

tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and has led to the destruction of the economy and infrastructure in the Eritrean-Sudanese border area. But the tragedy of the east lies in its lack of development, poverty, and the loss of human potential. By these measurements this region may well be suffering the most in Sudan from marginalisation. Moreover, because of the strategic position of eastern Sudan, this conflict has long been at the centre of tensions between Sudan and Eritrea, and to a lesser extent Ethiopia, which borders the southern portion of the territory. Because Eritrea and Ethiopia have yet to resolve their outstanding border issues, relations between them remain tense and any developments in eastern Sudan are bound to have an impact on that conflict as well.

Instability in eastern Sudan mushroomed from an ethnic defined conflict to a regional war

With that in mind, this study will endeavour to place the conflict in eastern Sudan in a theoretical and national context, explain its critical regional dimensions, provide an overview of its causes, consider the principal actors, provide some background to the negotiations between the Eastern Front and the GOS, and end with a consideration of the peace agreement and some projections for the future.

This overview and analysis of the armed conflict in eastern Sudan is informed by a number of assumptions or observations:

- Local level armed conflicts in the Horn risk becoming inter-state conflicts because of the engagement of neighbouring non-governmental and governmental bodies.
- These neighbouring states, or the organisations they form, have often played a critical role in resolving these conflicts.
- Because of the dominant role of the states of the region in allocating resources in general conditions of scarcity, they become the focus of dissent.



- Many in the international community mistakenly view conflicts in the Horn solely in local terms and thus fail to appreciate that these problems are the result of dysfunctional states.

As a result, this analysis will give due attention to the link between the armed conflict in the east and the threat it poses to regional security, consider the role of Sudan's dysfunctional state in producing this conflict, and appreciate that only structural changes to the state are likely to produce sustainable peace internally or with the country's neighbours.

While referring to the limited relevant literature, this study is largely based on interviews with a range of people, mostly activists, which were carried out in a number of centres of eastern Sudan, including Port Sudan, Sinkat, Kassala, New Halfa, and Gedaref, and during a two-week visit to Asmara in September-October 2006.

Theoretical starting points

A long-noticed characteristic of conflicts in the Horn of Africa is what Cliffe (1999) calls the doctrine of 'mutual intervention', or the practice of governmental or other forces supporting opposition groups in neighbouring states. Indeed, most long-running violent conflicts in the Horn at some stage have involved neighbouring states supporting the dissidents. Thus the various opposition groups that fought the Ethiopian Derg in the 1970s and 1980s all received varying levels of support from countries in the region. And when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the Derg in 1991, it was not long before it too was confronted by insurgents, usually operating from the peripheries, and invariably receiving outside support. The southern and northern Sudanese armed groups, as well as those currently in Darfur, gained support from countries in the region. The opposition to Eritrea's regime currently receives assistance from neighbouring countries and in turn supports armed groups in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

Thus local level, or intra-state, conflicts always risk becoming inter-state conflicts. What Cliffe's proposition perhaps does not fully address is the extent to which local level conflicts become elements in regional struggles, and also the extent to which neighbouring states use these disputes to pursue broader political objectives. Indeed, there is a real danger that local level conflicts like in the strategically significant eastern Sudan risk being overtaken and for periods even ignored while the international community focuses on real or potential inter-state conflicts.

At the same time Cliffe and other analysts have noted an equally convincing history of neighbouring states or regional security organisations playing an important role in resolving these local level conflicts. The list is long, but among the most significant achievements was the critical role that Emperor Haile Selassie played in concluding the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement which ended Sudan's first civil war. Also noteworthy is the leading role that the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) assumed in formulating the CPA that ended Sudan's second north-south war. Although it is not clear whether the CPA will prove sustainable, that achievement generated widespread local and international support for regional-based organisations assuming leading roles in conflict prevention and resolution. And while it is not entirely clear why IGAD did not take up peacemaking efforts in Darfur, the parties to the conflict did accept the AU assuming that role, providing peacekeeping forces, and conducting peace negotiations in Abuja that led to the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in 2006. However, while IGAD and the AU can point

to these achievements, IGAD's role in the south was eclipsed in the final stages by the Western Troika of the US, Britain and Norway and IGAD was not able to provide peacekeepers, a role that was taken up by the UN. In the case of Darfur, the early engagement of the AU was eclipsed by US and Britain, and UN forces may eventually replace those of the AU.

Turning to the national level, it can be concluded that the political economy of eastern Sudan mirrors that of other areas in the Horn of Africa in terms of the poverty of its people, a fierce competition for resources in conditions

of scarcity, and the role of the state in controlling the allocation of such resources. This has produced the kind of conflict that is all too common in the Horn. As Markakis (1987) notes, 'Because it controls the production and distribution of material and social resources, the state has become the focus of conflict.' Access to state power is essential for the welfare of its subjects, but such access has never been equally available to all the people of the Horn, and to many it has never been available at all. Indeed, Khalid (2006) points out that Sudanese government policies are not based on 'mere economic rationale but are mainly engineered to weaken political opponents and enhance the NIF's economic and political power base'. Whether the problem is conceptualised as one of centre versus periphery exploitation, internal colonialism, or marginalisation, the poverty of the many and the enormous wealth of a few – who invariably are linked to the state – characterise most of the conflicts in the Horn.

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According to Markakis (1987), while ethnicity is frequently the starting point of revolts, it is a product of the domination of the states of the Horn by particular communities who use a specific state for their personal enrichment and that of their ethnic cohorts. The oppressed of the peripheries thus respond in kind. However, these conflicts can just as easily take other forms, for example being regionally based, as in the case of southern Sudan, or clan based, as in Somalia. Indeed, the marginalisation of the Beja under a Sudanese state controlled by governments led by riverine tribes produced an ethnically based armed struggle. But the Beja were not alone in the east in suffering at the hands of the state, and the conflict is increasingly assuming a regional form.

Despite these realities, international actors engaged in Sudan rarely rise above the local focus and question the role of state actors in producing conflict, or press for the country's democratic transformation. Avoiding the central position of the state, they are left with the daunting problem of resolving a seemingly endless number of conflicts in the outlying regions. Thus the international community first focused on the south and then moved on to Darfur and the east. Rarely was much consideration given to the central state, even when academic bodies produced an analysis which suggested that Sudan constituted the world's leading example of a 'failed state' (*Foreign Policy* 2006). The view here, however, is that the conflict in the east is not following some geographical pattern – south, west, and now east. These conflicts cannot be resolved by addressing only regional concerns – they necessitate fundamental change. Indeed, Alejandro Bendana, a critic of international peacebuilding efforts, has characterised them as 'top down, externally and supply-driven, elitist and interventionist' (Bendana). And that is an apt description of the Sudanese peace processes to date.

The context

Eastern Sudan and regional security

The borderlands of eastern Sudan and western Eritrea and northwestern Ethiopia represent a natural frontier. Physically they mark a transition between the mountains of Eritrea and Ethiopia and the deserts and plains of Sudan. Culturally and tribally they form a divide between the largely Christian highland Tigrigna-speakers of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia and a host of lowland Muslim tribes, of which the Beja is the largest. Economically the frontier divides the rain-fed and intensely farmed highlands and the lowlands where pastoralism and irrigated agriculture are practised.

Historically this area served as a western frontier for the Axumite civilisation and the eastern reach of Nubia and Sennar. With the encroachment of Western imperialism into the Horn, the British operating from Sudan and Egypt and the Italians operating from Eritrea drew the borders that have largely been maintained to the present day. However, these border areas have frequently not been under the effective control of the governments in Khartoum and Addis Ababa (and, since 1991, Asmara), and all these governments have strenuously pursued efforts at centralisation. This has formed part of the background to the present hostilities between Sudan and Eritrea, as well as between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Bordered exclusively with Ethiopia until Eritrean independence in 1993, and largely with Eritrea after this date, eastern Sudan has long assumed a key role in relations between these countries and has been a focal point of regional tensions. In 1961 the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began a revolt against the regime of Haile Selassie from bases in western Eritrea and eastern Sudan after the emperor overrode international agreements protecting Eritrea's autonomy. Although Sudanese governments gave only nominal assistance to the ELF, it gained widespread support among neighbouring tribes and other sympathisers. At about the same time, the southern rebels of Anyanya gained the support of Ethiopia in a tit-for-tat pattern that would bedevil relations between the two countries for the next three decades. Although exacerbating one another's conflicts, neither Addis Ababa nor Khartoum was the cause of these local conflicts. Haile Selassie's leading role in reaching the Addis Ababa Agreement which ended Sudan's first civil war made clear that problematic neighbours could nonetheless contribute to resolving local level disputes; indeed, they were almost certainly necessary to ending them.

In the event, the Addis Ababa Agreement broke down and war in the south resumed. Once again the GOS and elements in Sudan began supporting the ELF and later the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and a host of smaller armed groups. This in turn led the Derg – the successor to Haile Selassie's regime – to give enormous financial, logistical, and military support to the SPLM/A.

Although tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia remained high throughout the 1980s, they did not produce open war. However, the rise to power of the National Islamic Front (NIF) in 1989 brought a new element into the regional equation: Islamic fundamentalism and the efforts of the new government

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in Khartoum to export it to the neighbouring states. As Woodward (nd) notes: 'It was the first time that a radical Islamic group had taken power in the Arab World, and its agenda was international as much as it was domestic.'

Realising that reconciliation with the communist Derg was unlikely – in any case, the regime was on its last legs in the late 1980s – the NIF astutely cultivated relations with the EPLF and TPLF, the two liberation movements that would assume power in Asmara and Addis Ababa respectively. Against this background Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea all professed non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and this appeared to herald a new era of regional cooperation. Believing its own rhetoric, the incoming EPRDF ejected the SPLM/A from the latter's bases in western Ethiopia. A fledgling Eritrea concerned with establishing its credentials in the international arena was initially opposed to foreign adventures and worked to maintain good relations with all its neighbours. Indeed, both Ethiopia and Eritrea made major commitments to peacemaking in Sudan and Somalia.

Convinced that it could militarily defeat the SPLM/A, the NIF intensified the war and endeavoured to export political Islam, particularly to Eritrea and Ethiopia because of their large Muslim populations and their supposed vulnerability. The NIF also supported Eritrean Jihad from bases in eastern Sudan and facilitated 'Afghan' guerrillas entering the Sahel region of Eritrea in December 1993, an event that proved pivotal in the decline in relations between Sudan and Eritrea. The Popular Front for Development and Justice (or PFDJ, the successor to the EPLF) had its core among the highland Christians and was weaker in the Muslim-inhabited western lowlands that had served as the base of the ELF. This was the area from which the NIF's Eritrean Islamist allies chose to launch their campaign.

Preoccupied with domestic concerns, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea tried to convince the NIF to stop their campaign of subversion. But to no avail – in 1994 Asmara closed the Sudanese embassy and began hosting a wide range of Sudanese opposition groups operating under the umbrella of the NDA. Slower to act, the EPRDF was nonetheless outraged when in June 1995 Sudanese-assisted terrorists attempted to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the streets of Addis Ababa. While not completely breaking relations with Khartoum, Ethiopia began giving large-scale support to Sudanese opposition groups. In particular, the Ethiopians supported armed groups that operated along its eastern border so they could establish a cordon sanitaire. With much of the

borderlands of Eritrea and Sudan inhabited by Beja people, priority was given to supporting the Beja National Congress, which in the early 1990s was making the transition from being solely a political party to a guerrilla movement. While the BNC pursued an ethnic-based struggle, the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments also supported the Sudan Alliance Forces, which aspired to national status, but largely focused its efforts on eastern Sudan from bases in western Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian army captured the Menza area north of the Blue Nile River and turned it over to the SAF, but gave even more support to the SPLM/A to gain control of the area south of the river. Teaming up with Uganda, Eritrea and Ethiopia assisted the SPLM/A by moving their armies into Eritrea. Anxious to support these efforts and ensure the security of its regional allies, the US provided US\$20 million in military equipment to the 'frontline' states of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda. With their armies not only supporting the armed opposition, but directly engaged in the fighting, something close to a regional war took form that had the clear objective of overthrowing the NIF.

In a bid to export Islam, Khartoum brought the wrath of the 'frontline states' to itself

Before this goal could be realised, war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia on 6 May 1998 and support for Sudanese opposition groups was either ended or considerably reduced out of fears that an alliance between Khartoum and either Addis Ababa or Asmara would give the other undue military advantage. As relations between Addis Ababa and Khartoum steadily improved, the PFDJ resumed full-scale support of the Sudanese opposition. In particular it assisted the various components of the NDA, including the BNC, and while the NDA never posed a serious military challenge to Khartoum,

its wide support base posed a political threat to the regime. At the same time, even though its efforts at Islamist subversion in Eritrea and Ethiopia had clearly failed, the NIF continued to assist the Eritrean Jihad and a host of other groups which operated from bases of the Sudanese army in eastern Sudan. While Ethiopia and Sudan stopped supporting each other's dissidents, Eritrea and Sudan continued 'mutual interference', albeit at a more restrained level, while they ostensibly made efforts at reconciliation. As a result, relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa steadily improved, while those between Khartoum and Asmara remained tense.

Eritrea continued supporting the BNC and NDA as a means of countering Islamist-supported terrorism in western Eritrea, achieving comprehensive peace and reconciliation between the two countries, and ensuring that its allies would one day dominate the government in Khartoum. But the winds generally



blew in Khartoum's direction as the Umma Party deserted the NDA and signed the Djibouti Accord with the NCP. The Sudan Alliance Forces collapsed, and the BNC never had many military successes. Those it did have were largely due to the direct support of the Eritrean army and the SPLA. Moreover, the CPA effectively severed the relationship between the SPLM/A and the NDA, and the subsequent decision by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to negotiate a separate agreement further weakened the organisation.

The victory of Ethiopia over Eritrea in 1998-2000, and Ethiopia's subsequent refusal to leave some of the contested territories despite the ruling of the Ethiopia Eritrea Boundary Commission, again changed the configuration of support for dissidents in the region. As well as continuing to assist the armed struggle of Sudanese opposition movements, Eritrea began aiding a range of Ethiopian dissident groups operating from the Ethio-Eritrean border south to Gambella. In the typical tit-for-tat response, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Yemen – which was still smarting from its military defeat by the Eritreans, who briefly occupied its Red Sea Hanish Islands – created the Sanaa Pact. Officially this regional body was designed to address various security concerns and fight terrorism in the region, but its members could not hide the fact that in some ways it was a group established to confront Eritrea. These states thus provide cash as well as logistical and military assistance to a range of opposition armed and political groups, most of which operate from northern Ethiopia and eastern Sudan.

The signing of the CPA reduced the pressure on Khartoum for a genuine comprehensive peace agreement and divided the opposition. As a result, it was resented by Eritrea. The CPA led to the departure of the SPLM/A from Eritrea and the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU), both of which served to weaken the opposition, limit the prospects of achieving a genuine comprehensive peace agreement, and reduce Eritrea's influence. Probably most alarming for the Eritreans, the agreement can be considered a road map for the independence of southern Sudan. Without southerners in the national government, Islamic parties can be expected to dominate the political life of Sudan, and this could again threaten Eritrea's security.

However, the biggest threat to the security of Eritrea is posed by the Ethiopian army, which at the time of writing is still occupying parts of the country. President Isias Aferworki has taken numerous diplomatic and military actions to force the Ethiopians to leave, but they have all failed. War cannot be discounted and,

indeed, at various times during 2005 this seemed imminent.

A major obstacle to Eritrea launching a war against Ethiopia to regain the lost territories is the need to ensure that its western border with Sudan is secure. And that border can only be made secure by the imposition of a radically different government in Khartoum than at present (in the short term that appears unlikely), or reaching a peace agreement between the Eastern Front and the GOS that protects Eritrea's interests. This is at the centre of the following analysis.

While the conflict in eastern Sudan was exacerbated by bilateral tensions between Eritrea and Sudan, it was nonetheless rooted in genuine local grievances. As such, it can not be ended through any changes in bilateral relations unless they address the local causes of the conflict. Moreover, although Eritrea did not cause the conflict, it is clear that it has to play a role in ending it. That said, while Eritrea has supported the Eastern Front and other Sudanese opposition groups, its interests cannot be entirely altruistic, but ultimately must be based on its need for security in a nexus in which Sudan and Ethiopia are key players.

Eritrea needs a radically different government in Khartoum for its interests against Ethiopia

Eritrea does not appear to have any narrow interests in terms of acquiring land and it has shown a consistent commitment to assisting almost all elements of the Sudanese opposition, militarily and politically. This has included the movements of Darfur and it has given at least political sustenance to a wide range of groups in Sudan, ranging from the Sudan Communist Party at one extreme to the Popular National Congress (PNC) of Hassan Al-Turabi at the other. But having concluded that

the agreement between the NCP and SPLM/A did not significantly change the character of the government of Khartoum or improve its own security situation, Asmara faces a dilemma. Should it continue to support a comprehensive peace agreement in Sudan, or would its security concerns be best advanced by supporting an agreement in the east which gives its ally, the Eastern Front, a major role in the administration of the territory? Or is there a third option?

To sum up, the war in eastern Sudan fits the pattern of local conflict in the Horn assuming a threat to inter-state relations and security. It also suggests that states use support for neighbouring dissidents to pursue broader policy objectives. The NIF assisted Eritrea Jihad, both as a response to Eritrean support of the Eastern Front and other groups and as part of a broader campaign to export political Islam to neighbouring countries. The PFDJ, in turn, supported the Eastern Front as a counter to Islamist terrorism



emanating from Sudan because the BNC had genuine support from the Beja, and as part of broader efforts to reach a comprehensive peace agreement which, it was believed, would lead to the displacement of the NIF. In pursuit of these objectives the local conflict was all but ignored, sometimes for considerable periods of time. Inter-state conflict and the wars in southern Sudan and Darfur served to relegate the low-level insurgency in eastern Sudan to the back burner. But genuine grievances of the people of eastern Sudan sustained the struggle of the dissidents, and thus the conflict could not be completely ignored.

The nature of the Sudanese state

From its inception in the final days of the nineteenth century as an artificial creation of British colonialism, the Sudanese state has had a distinctly narrow base among a handful of Arabic-speaking riverine tribes. Sudan gained its independence in 1956 under the common pattern in Africa which involved a handover of power by the British to their accolades, in this case the Umma Party of the Mahdi family and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of the Mirghani family. As well as being political leaders, the heads of these families have been major religious figures: the Mahdis leading the Ansar sect and the Mirghanis leading the Khatimiya sect, which is the dominant group in eastern Sudan. These groups and others that would come to the surface favoured the interests of those from the riverine core, and that in turn fostered dissent in the peripheries.

Although the country has produced a wide variety of governments in its tumultuous five-decade-long history since independence, invariably they attempted to overcome their weakness by professing Arabism and Islam. Not surprisingly, the predominantly non-Arab and non-Islamic peoples of southern Sudan were the first to see through this façade and raise the banner of revolt. In the absence of strong political institutions, but having a robust martial character, southerners quickly moved from political dissent to armed struggle. The people of eastern and western Sudan were more integrated into the Sudanese state because they were Muslims. Some also believed that they were Arabs, or at least Afro-Arabs, although evidence of this is hard to come by. At any rate, this confusion as to their identity under a riverine-dominated central state, their greater willingness to use political means to attempt to advance their interests, and hence their greater involvement in the Sudanese state, were all responsible for their much later revolts.

The armed struggle of the southern Sudanese contributed to rising levels of political consciousness

of eastern and western Sudanese, although at the same time southerners stigmatised them as *jalaba*, a term synonymous with northern exploiters. SPLM/A leader Dr John Garang, however, understood that southern Sudanese were by no means the state's only victims. As a result, he raised the banner of the 'New Sudan', thus embracing all the marginalised, a group which constituted the large majority of the country. Indeed, the appeal of a New Sudan of justice and unity increasingly came to reflect the sentiments of many disaffected people in the north, including those in the east. That said, the New Sudan has been hard to realise, as made clear by the NDA, which in theory was the highest expression of this ideal, but in practice was an abject failure militarily and had only minor political successes. This is because the two traditional sectarian parties of the country have opposed the call for a social revolution that is the unstated implication of the New Sudan, and also on account of the confused identity of many in eastern and western Sudan.

The struggle for a New Sudan was undermined by the parochialism of southerners who could not embrace a broader identity, were frequently disparaging of Muslims and their culture, and tarnished as enemies all the people of northern Sudan, including those living in poverty every bit as great as their own. Despite the rhetoric of a New Sudan, southerners overwhelmingly favour independence, and this objective cannot be expected to gain support among the marginalised in the north. Also, there has always been a fear in some quarters that 'marginalised' was a code word for 'African' and that the struggle for a New Sudan constituted a racial war against the Arabs.

Garang's aspirations for a 'New Sudan' were hard to realise

In the event, the SPLM/A effectively disowned the New Sudan and signed the CPA, which is a narrow agreement between elements in the north and their counterparts in the south. A critique of the CPA cannot be carried out here, except that it involved ending any alliance of the marginalised, setting aside the attempt to overthrow the NCP and dispensing with any ideal of achieving a comprehensive and sustainable peace.

Thus, instead of achieving a countrywide alliance of organisations representing the marginalised people of Sudan that could seriously challenge the masters of the Sudanese state, separate insurrections have taken place in the south, in the border territories of Abyei, Nuba Mountains, and in South Blue Nile, Darfur, and eastern Sudan. The organisations leading the armed struggles in each of these areas have been offered separate peace processes by the NCP, all of which have produced formulas that define the



problem solely in regional terms and do not challenge the CPA. Moreover, these efforts involve various forms of regional autonomy that leave the state untouched. Significantly, the international community has supported all of these efforts.

Structural causes

When questioned as to the causes of their discontent, eastern Sudanese, in particular the Beja, invariably stress 'marginalisation', a term that is used in the south, Nuba Mountains, Abyei, South Blue Nile, Darfur, and increasingly among the Nubians in the north and those of western Kordofan. The term has explanatory value for all of these areas, but in the only systematic study of political representation on a regional basis, that of the Black Book – which was published underground in the late 1990s by Darfur Islamist followers of Hassan al-Turabi – the east stood out from the time of independence for its political and economic marginalisation. Employing extensive statistical analysis to examine a wide variety of social phenomena, the east was shown to have fewer ministers and leaders in the central government, fewer leaders in government and quasi-government corporations, fewer leaders in the military, in education, in health, and in most spheres, than other regions of the country. In addition, eastern Sudanese had among the lowest levels of education and access to health services in the country.

Although almost all the people of eastern Sudan are followers of Islam, it is of a highly local character and intimately interwoven with a host of tribal and other belief systems. The one significant exception to this is the Khatimiya sect of the Mirghani family, which embraces a large proportion of the people of the region, although even in this case the belief systems and practices are often quite eclectic. The DUP is not as such the party of the Khatimiya since it also contains others, but it is led by Osman al-Mirghani, who is also the leader of the sect. Loyalty to the Khatimiya has usually translated into loyalty to the DUP, but there is reason to believe that this link has weakened in recent years because of the failures of the coalition government of 1986/89 in which the DUP played a leading role, the attempts by the NCP to undermine the party, and the increasing role of the BNC.

Eastern Sudan is made up of three states: Red Sea, Kassala and Gedaref. Collectively they have a population of about 3 746 000, of which an estimated two million are Beja. Largely rural, the region has one major city, Port Sudan, and two medium-sized towns, Kassala and Gedaref, which respectively serve as state capitals. Reliable statistics are hard to come

by, but the Red Sea State has a population of about 800 000, almost all of them now living in Port Sudan, Kassala State has a population of about 1.5 million, and Gedaref has approximately 1.8 million people. The Beja population, however, runs in reverse to this pattern: thus Red Sea is overwhelmingly Beja, Kassala's population is about 6 per cent Beja, and that of Gedaref is about 20 per cent Beja. The level of destitution also follows this pattern with Red Sea suffering the most, followed by Kassala and Gedaref. According to one household survey, the per capita income in Red Sea State was US\$93 in 2004.

Rainfall is limited and highly variable throughout the region. From near complete desert conditions in the north and east of Red Sea State, rainfall increases to the south, where non-irrigated agriculture is practised. Biological productivity is low and vegetation is limited because of the predominance of saline rocky soils. As a result, there is virtually no agriculture in Red Sea State and food production is almost entirely based on raising animals. In the wake of the last major drought of 1984/85 there was a move to urban centres and pastoralists who had lost their land increasingly turned to producing charcoal to meet the rising demands of consumers in the towns. This, in turn, is causing deforestation.

The Beja inhabiting the arid pastoral regions of eastern Sudan are marginalised on all fronts

Although eastern Sudan is home to a polyglot of peoples – like the rest of the country – Beja pastoralists and agro-pastoralists inhabit most of the area. The Beja are a confederation of tribes united by a common language, TuBedawiye, a Cushitic idiom, and a common segmentary structure, where each lineage is linked to a common ownership and use of land. The Beja have retained a distinct culture and their own language despite having mixed for centuries with Arabs who migrated to their region. The three main groups making up the Beja are the Bishariyyin, the Amara, and the Hadendawa. There is considerable debate over whether the Beni Amer can also be considered Beja, since most of them speak Tigre, a Semitic language related to Tigrinya and Amharic, and have a different social structure based on a caste system.

A second pastoralist group, the Rashaida, are mostly found in the Kassala area, although their seasonal migration takes them north from Kassala to the Egyptian border. As well as the Rashaida, who migrated from the Gulf to eastern Sudan in the mid- to late nineteenth century, other pastoralists from West Africa and Darfur have moved to the east in recent years. In the wake of the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s the Nubians were forcibly transferred from their ancestral home in northern Sudan to New Halfa, west of Kassala. There is also the Shukrya, an Arab tribe



living in the Gedaref area, a considerable number of Massalit farmers, and other Darfurian tribes, most of whom are farm workers employed on the large commercial agricultural schemes in this area and New Halfa. People from the riverine area have long lived in eastern Sudan in small numbers, often holding positions in trade and government. Because of war in their areas, people from the Nuba Mountains and southern Sudan have moved to the east.

Many of these groups now complain of marginalisation, but because the Beja constitute about half of the population of the area, their concerns must assume central place. Their deep sense of grievance has numerous causes: first, the policies of successive governments that were designed to centralise the state; second, drought and desertification and the way governments used these crises to enhance their power at the expense of indigenous people; third, instability as a result of large numbers of refugees moving into the region escaping conflicts in Eritrea and Ethiopia; and finally, the disruptive effect produced by the growing numbers of IDPs in the area from the conflicts in southern Sudan, eastern Sudan and, to some extent, Darfur. Indeed, generalising the experience of the state in the Horn, Markakis (1987) concludes that the expansionist state encroached on pastoralist lands and brought different ethnic groups into contact – if not different religions, then different forms of Islam – and that this in turn ‘became rallying symbols for group mobilisation in times of conflict’.

Successive governments since Turkish times have used Beja land for the benefit of outsiders and at considerable cost to their agro-pastoralist economy. The development of large cotton plantations in the Gash and Tokar deltas and the import of Turkish farm labourers in the mid-nineteenth century precipitated a conflict between the Hadendawa, who grazed their cattle in this area, and the Turkish government. It also radicalised the tribe, and as a result they and their brilliant military leader, Osman Digna, sided with the Mahdi in his revolt against the Turks, and later against the British. During the course of that war the Khatimiya sect under Osman al-Mirghani, which had only recently entered the country, aligned with the British. As a result the in-coming victorious Anglo-Egyptian administration passed out land tracts in the Gash and Tokar deltas to its followers, thus further undermining the Hadendawa economy. Not easily cowed, the Hadendawa responded by launching a campaign of robbing those using the caravan route between Kassala and the Red Sea.

The British imposition of the Native Administration system in eastern Sudan also negatively affected

the population. The Native Administration model created for the Beja did not reflect existing indigenous leadership, but imposed artificial hierarchical units on to a flexible institutional setting. This had the effect of undermining traditional leadership and creating ruling elites which were not representative of the local population. In addition, the 1905 creation of Port Sudan was developed along strict ethnic and social lines which made clear the negative view the British had of the Beja.

The situation did not improve after independence. Successive Khartoum governments encouraged outsiders with capital to start mechanised agricultural schemes producing dura and cotton on land traditionally held by the Beja. This practice reached its height under the current government, which used privatisation schemes to reward its followers. Again this had the effect of transferring communal Beja land to non-indigenous commercial farmers and sharecroppers. Major tracts of land owned by DUP leader Osman al-Mirghani were seized in the Kassala area, while Osama bin Laden reputedly bought up two-thirds of Hadendawa territory in the Gash Delta. As elsewhere in the country, eastern Sudanese youth were coerced to join the Popular Defence Force (PDF, or *Defa Shabi*) to propagate the Islamist ideology of the NIF. Further upsetting local sensitivities, the NIF detained and tortured Islamic teachers who opposed government efforts to propagate political Islam in the traditional Koranic schools of Hameshkoreb.

Although drought and desertification leading to famine and displacement are not unknown in the history of the Beja, the drought of 1984/85 had an unprecedented impact. This can be explained in part by a simple lack of rainfall, but the displacement of 1,2 million people and the disruption of the economy to the degree that much of the region has still not been rehabilitated, suggest something more than just the impact of nature. Government policies referred to above and the impact of wars in Sudan and in neighbouring states had the effect of undermining the local economy and traditional coping mechanisms, thus magnifying the impact of the drought. Even today, Beja frequently attribute much of their destitution to the loss of cattle and capital during the famine of the 1980s.

Population displacements have been equally disruptive to the Beja economy. As compensation for the loss of land during the 1960s construction of the Aswan High Dam, Nubians were moved to New Halfa in eastern Sudan, thus reducing Beja pasture land and producing a community of discontented migrants. The Bisharien-Beja also suffered loss of land by the construction of

Eastern Sudan continues to be encroached by foreigners and increasingly feels exploited



the Aswan Dam. They were forced to move south and were not provided with any compensation.

Drought, government policies that undermined the traditional economy of the peasants and pastoralists, dislocation because of the war, and prevailing insecurity have all served to encourage people to move to the urban centres. But there are few jobs in the towns and day labour on the docks in Port Sudan has been steadily eroded because of mechanisation. Continuing a colonial arrangement, all stevedoring work is carried out by Beja. The Labourers' Union which represents these men reports that their numbers have declined by 60 per cent in recent years, to 2 245. This, in turn, has produced rising anger and political consciousness, as was made clear during the demonstrations by port workers in January 2005. Urbanisation in an environment in which there are declining job prospects is also producing a growing class of disaffected youth who could be ready recruits for the BNC or other groups advocating radical change.

The Beja's complaints about the denigration of their culture and native language are similar to those heard in the other peripheral parts of Sudan. Here, the same phenomenon is at work: efforts by those in the central state to use culture (that of the Arab riverine core), language (Arabic) and their version of Islam as a means of asserting their hegemony and implying that the cultures of those in the peripheries are inferior. The problem is considered particularly severe because there is a widespread view that the Beja population is decreasing and that the tribe may completely disappear within this century. Concerns about threats to the indigenous cultures are regularly heard in eastern Sudan. Beja in Port Sudan and Kassala say that they rarely watch Sudanese television because of its mono-cultural programming, but they regularly tune into Eritrean television where they can watch dancing and singing in their native tongue. They also note approvingly that the Eritrean government is giving the Beja language a written form and teaching it in schools, while the Sudanese government is making no comparable efforts.

The grievances of the Rashaida, the other major component of the Eastern Front, are of a different order, since many of its members are wealthy by Sudanese standards. Although they suffer from underdevelopment and a lack of government services, in similar fashion to the Beja, their devotion to pastoralism and trade means that historically they have not given much attention to education, and with ample capital many of them can purchase health care. The Rashaida have also pressed for their own nazir, and in 1994 the NIF granted a nazirate without land, although

this immediately raised objections from the Beja. The sense of grievance of the Rashaida also derives from their lack of integration into Sudanese society, in part because of their late arrival in Sudan from the Arabian Gulf, self-imposed seclusion, including the refusal to permit their women to marry outside the tribe, envy and resentment of their wealth by others in Sudan, their devotion to smuggling and black market activities, which brings them into conflict with governments in Khartoum, and a reduction in available pasture land. Rashaida complain about their lack of acceptance in Sudan, but their sending of military forces to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1991 and participation in the First Gulf War on the side of Kuwait suggest that their Arab-Gulf identity conflicts with a broader Sudanese identity. It also served to increase tensions with the NIF government, which supported Iraq in that conflict. In addition, Rashaida claim that other Sudanese resents their fair skin colour, while their critics respond by saying they are arrogant. Their Saudi origins became a problem because of the poor relations between the NIF and Riyadh.

The Beja fear extinction while the Rashaida have failed to be integrated as Sudanese due to their Saudi origins

The immediate cause of the Rashaida's conflict with the NCP derives from the government's confiscation of some four hundred vehicles that were given to the community by Kuwait for their participation in the First Gulf War. The Rashaida view the confiscation as theft, while the government justifies it as necessary to regulate trade and maintain vigilance given rising tensions with Eritrea in an environment in which Rashaida traders regularly and unofficially were crossing the border. Combined with other grievances this pushed Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, a wealthy merchant, influential chief and former DUP MP, to begin mobilising the Rashaida (who live

on both sides of the border), and in 1999 the Rashaida Free Lions were established with considerable support from the Eritrean government. Although the tribe is small in numbers, their knowledge of the border mountain tracks and expertise in shooting made them valued partners in the war against Khartoum.

Both the Beja and the Rashaida have suffered the social, economic, and political consequences of the various conflicts that have beset eastern Sudan. Since the outbreak of the Eritrean war of independence in 1961, refugees have moved to the area and usually received assistance from their extended families. This support reduced the prospects of mass starvation, but also brought destabilisation and more mouths to feed. The war intensified in the 1970s with the collapse of the Haile Selassie regime and the rise of the Derg, and as a result Tigrayans and Amharas began crossing the border and taking up residence in UNHCR camps. By the late 1980s the region was hosting well over a



million refugees. With the defeat of the Derg in 1991, conditions along the border began to stabilise, but the incoming Eritrean EPLF government of Isias Aferworki was slow to welcome back the refugees into a country that could not feed the existing population. Some refugees returned without government support, but it was not until the late 1990s that an agreement was reached between Sudan, Eritrea, and the UNHCR that appeared to herald the return of the remaining refugees. That had no sooner started when the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out, thus ending the return of the refugees and initially encouraging many more thousands to cross the border into Sudan. Some of these refugees have now returned to Eritrea and many more have gone back to Ethiopia, but food shortages in both countries mean that many are reluctant to leave Sudan. Competing with a local poverty struck population for resources has in turn led to environmental degradation and fierce economic competition for scarce goods.

Nor has the east escaped the effect of population movements within Sudan. Falata from West Africa who migrated to Darfur and then drifted east, ostensibly en route to Mecca, have moved into various parts of the southern reaches of eastern Sudan. Not only do they compete for limited resources, but tensions developed because the NCP made alliances with the Falata in the war against local insurgents. Displacement in the south has brought many to the urban centres of Kassala and Port Sudan and to work on the agricultural projects of Tokar, Gash, and Gedaref. With the outbreak of armed struggle in eastern Sudan refugees have fled to Eritrea and the displaced have left areas along the Sudanese-Eritrean border, in particular the area around Hamishkoreb, for IDP camps. While some of these people probably have a higher standard of living than before their displacement, their lives, traditions, and economy have been disrupted and some have died or been maimed (mostly as a result of mines) because of the conflict.

Lastly, the Eastern Front and others in the region complain that the NCP is selling them short in border disputes with Egypt and Ethiopia. To the north there is a long-standing dispute in the Beja-inhabited area of Halib on the Red Sea which interferes with the local camel markets and makes travel across the border difficult. When relations between Sudan and Egypt deteriorated in the mid to late 1990s, Cairo occupied the area and little has been done since to resolve the issue. In the Galabat area east of Gedaref there is another border dispute over possession of valuable agricultural land that dates from at least the 1960s. Again in the mid-1990s, when relations between

Khartoum and Addis Ababa were rock bottom in the wake of the Sudanese supported attempted assassination of Mubarak in Addis Ababa, serious fighting broke out between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces, but with reconciliation the two countries agreed to establish a joint border commission to resolve present or potential problems. However, local Sudanese farmers contend that the commission is stacked against their interests because the government is more anxious to retain the goodwill of Ethiopia than aggressively defend the interests of its nationals.

The main actors

As noted, southerners launched an armed revolt even before independence, but the Beja were not far behind in forming the Beja National Congress in 1958 in Port Sudan. Like the rebellious southerners, and in language similar to that which would be raised in Darfur, the BNC complained about the lack of development and social welfare schemes and the threat posed to their culture, and in response called for economic development and federalism. In addition, the BNC explicitly challenged the leadership of the Khatimiya and the DUP, because these groups had dominated eastern Sudan since independence and thus had to bear considerable responsibility for the plight of the people.

The BNC
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party discipline
and a narrow
social base

But General Ibrahim Abboud overthrew the democratic regime that permitted the formation of the BNC on 17 November 1958. As a result the fledgling organisation was forcibly disbanded until the popular uprising of October 1964. In spite of the resistance of the DUP, the BNC was able to reorganise with the return of democracy and its supporters gained nine seats in the parliamentary elections of 1965. The BNC opposed the Nimeiri dictatorship and went to Libya for military training and participated in the failed coup attempt against the regime in 1976. As a counterweight to the emerging BNC and to the continuing strength of Mirghani's DUP in eastern Sudan, Nimeiri began promoting Sheikh Ali Bitai as a local potentate in his home area of Hamishkoreb. In the 1986 election the BNC captured only one seat, after which it rapidly declined. The reasons for the weakness of the BNC are its narrow social base, lack of strong leadership and party discipline, the power of local level sheikhs over which the BNC exerts little authority, and the continuing weight of the Mirghani family in the region. After the coup of 1989 all opposition parties were subject to political repression.

From its inception the BNC leadership had close ties with their ethnic cohorts in Eritrea, and these ties developed during that country's long struggle for



independence. In particular, many among the current leaders of the Congress originally came from Tokar on the Eritrean border where they developed close links with the EPLF during its revolutionary struggle. Thus Abdulla Kuna, current General Secretary, is from the town and established firm ties with Isias Aferworki. Abdulla Musa, Salah Babakwin, and Sheikh Omar are also from this area. These links helped win them favour with the EPLF after it took power.

With the closure of the door to political change after the rise of the NIF, the BNC and many other parties responded by launching an armed struggle. In 1989 the NDA was established in Asmara. It represented a broad grouping of northern opposition groups, including the BNC which joined in 1993. Later the SPLM/A also joined, in the first instance because of its commitment to the New Sudan, but more significantly because Garang wanted to divide the northern forces and open up a front in the north that would threaten the government and compel it to shift forces away from the south. In that sense the strategy was successful, even if the NDA never posed a serious threat to the regime. Beginning in the mid-1990s, fighting began between the Sudanese army and the NDA, including the BNC, and it was concentrated along the Sudanese-Eritrean border. Efforts were largely directed against military targets, creating insecurity along the Khartoum-Port Sudan highway, and attacking the oil pipeline. Mines were laid along the border and this seriously interfered with traditional pastoral migration routes (Reports of Civilian Protection Monitoring Team). Fighting also spread to Tokar and Kassala provinces, where BNC and NDA forces took control of the area between the border and Tokar and for a brief time in 1997 held the town.

Although Osman al-Mirghani was elected chairman of the NDA, the real power in the organisation was always with the SPLM/A which assumed responsibility for the conduct of military operations and provided the lion's share of the soldiers. Beja areas adjacent to the border were captured with the direct involvement of the Eritrean army, significant SPLM/A forces, and smaller numbers from the BNC to give these military incursions legitimacy. Twice NDA forces (again with considerable Eritrean support and led by the SPLM/A) captured Hamishkoreb. After losing it the first time, the NDA forces went on to launch a surprise attack on Kassala, which it held for 24 hours before being forced to retreat across the Eritrean border. This gave the NDA an enormous propaganda victory, exposed the military weakness of the regime in the east, and forced the government to move significant forces into the area. But Mirghani was personally embarrassed when it was later revealed that he knew nothing of

the planned attack and his followers in Kassala were angered that their community had been dragged into the war.

As noted above, the security nexus in the Horn dramatically changed with the start of the Ethio-Eritrean War. In particular, the NDA saw to its consternation its two greatest supporters – Eritrea and Ethiopia – endeavour to gain the support or at least the neutrality in the contest of the GOS. In that environment a number of leaders of the NDA sent out peace feelers to the government and in the case of the BNC some defected. The Ethio-Eritrean War marked the end of the optimistic phase of the NDA, and with Ethiopia reconciling with Sudan it also signified the start of a period in which the NDA, and in particular the BNC, were left with only one foreign ally – Eritrea.

In recent years the eastern Sudan insurgency has been largely reduced to a low-level campaign through the use of mines, the occasional BNC robbing of vehicles on the Kassala-Port Sudan road, and some highly publicised NDA attacks on the oil pipeline, although these efforts did little to disrupt the flow of oil. BNC and Free Lions leaders stress that eastern Sudan is strategically significant because it is through their land that Khartoum is connected by road and rail to the Red Sea. The oil pipeline also passes through the area, there is a significant gold mine, and Sudan's only ports are in this region. However, the strategic significance of the area has to some extent worked against the Eastern Front, because the GOS has sent large forces into the area.

Although the region has witnessed limited fighting in recent years, there has always been the danger of things slipping out of control. That appeared to be the case when dock workers and other unarmed civilians in Port Sudan went out on a peaceful procession on 26 January 2005 and requested that the Red Sea State Deputy Governor respond to their demands. These demands included, first, that the manager of the port be replaced because he was held to discriminate against Beja; second, that the Beja Congress be recognised as the legal representative of the people; third, that the heads of the political, economic, and security divisions of the local government be placed under the control of Beja; fourth, that development of the region be made a priority; and lastly, that the Beja Congress from the three states of the east be represented on the GOS's Constitutional Commission. Within two days a special security force was brought in from Khartoum and a killing spree began that ended a day later after an estimated twenty-two civilians were killed and scores more wounded. The killings took place in the Sheba Drar area of Port

The opposition, NDA, SPLM/A and BNC all weakened by Ethio-Eritrean war, leaving them with Eritrea as the only foreign ally



Sudan, which is almost completely inhabited by Beja, although ironically one person from the Nuba Mountains and another from Kordofan were also killed, apparently because they were wearing the *sedari*, a vest that is traditionally worn by the Beja. A government commission of inquiry that included members of the security services was organised and eventually made recommendations regarding compensation, but the report was never published and a number of the victims' families claim that their rights were denied and refused to accept any reparations, or *diya*, blood money.

The tragedy graphically expressed the rising frustrations and anger at the abysmal conditions in eastern Sudan and the lack of attention given to the region. By using outside security forces it was clear that the NCP could not rely on the local agencies. In addition, the ruling party conveyed the message that it would not contenance any civil disobedience. The event elicited much attention from the international community, which feared another Darfur-like conflagration. That has not happened, probably because of the weakness of the BNC, the desire of Eritrea not to intensify the military conflict, and the fact that while objective conditions of exploitation were similar to those in Darfur and the south, the subjective political conditions were not.

But on 10 January 2006 – the date by which the CPA stipulated that SPLA forces were required to move from their bases in eastern Sudan and return to southern Sudan – the GOS-backed militia of Suleiman Ali Bitai launched an attack on Hamishkoreb. Swift diplomacy ensured that the problem did not escalate, but the coming of the militia sent the powerful message that the SPLA had to abide by the CPA and that the GOS or its proxies were prepared to use force to take control of the town and adjacent territories. In the event after many delays the SPLA did leave Hamishkoreb and the town and area was promptly occupied by the SAF, thus leaving the Eastern Front with only a small amount of territory in the Telkuk area near Kassala.

In an effort to keep up the momentum after the Port Sudan strike an alliance was announced in Asmara in February 2005 between the BNC and the Free Lions, which henceforth was called the Eastern Front. On the surface this is a curious arrangement, since the Beja are among the most destitute people in the Horn of Africa and many of the Rashaida are wealthy. And while the various components of the Beja are known to have lived in what is now eastern Sudan and parts of Egypt since the days of the pharaohs, when they were involved in constructing pyramids, the Rashaida

only began entering Sudan in the 1840s. Because of this difference in origins, the Beja are usually considered to be African (although this is not without controversy, as some claim Arab origins), while the Rashaida have clear Arab antecedents.

This alliance is also a product of the tensions within the NDA. As noted above, the relationship between the Beja Congress and the DUP and its leader, Osman al-Mirghani, has long been strained, to the point that the two leaderships are in a virtual state of political war as both claim and compete for the support of the Beja civil population. In addition, the DUP has long been under the influence of the Egyptian government, which favoured the return of the DUP to Khartoum. This set the two organisations on a course of conflict. Hence the Egyptian security services hosted periodic negotiations between the NDA and the GOS in Cairo for most of 2004. Contending that the interests of the east were not given due consideration, the Beja Congress and Free Lions left the negotiations in Cairo in December 2004. In fact, the NDA came close to breaking up during its last leadership meeting in

Asmara in February 2005, and probably would have but for the intervention of the Eritreans. However, in late 2005 the DUP, the Sudan Communist Party, and a handful of tiny components of the NDA joined the opposition ranks of the National Assembly, effectively signing the death knoll of the organisation.

Twenty two
civilians were
killed in a bid
by Khartoum to
crush disobedience
but the BNC
struggled on

The Beja Congress, the Free Lions, and the Darfur-based Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) constitute the rump NDA. Despite its almost complete irrelevance, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) under Dr Khalil Ibrahim was until recently still anxious to join the NDA, presumably

because it would give the organisation greater national legitimacy. In July 2004 the JEM signed a political and military cooperation agreement with the Free Lions, and in an attempt to become a national organisation it recruited in the east and began carrying out joint military operations with the Eastern Front. Many Eastern Front leaders are concerned about the suspected links between the JEM and the Popular National Congress of Hassan al-Turabi, but have softened their views in the face of the JEM's increasing presence in the east, as well as its ability to garner publicity and its access to financial resources. It would appear that Khalil has calculated that his forces can achieve greater impact from their involvement in the east, where they are effectively big fish in a small pond, than in Darfur, where they are small fry in a large pond. It remains to be seen how this involvement of the JEM will figure in the future dispensation of the east, because the BNC favours a peace agreement that gives central



place to local autonomy, while the JEM is using its participation in the eastern conflict to pursue a broader strategy to overthrow the NCP. Also not clear is the position of the Eritrean government, which permits the JEM to have an office in Asmara and carry out military operations from Eritrean territory. That said, Eastern Front internal leader Dr Amna Drar said that in the event of a peace agreement in eastern Sudan, the JEM would be informed that military actions in the territory would not be accepted and that the Darfurians would accept this.

The Port Sudan demonstration brought considerable attention to the Eastern Front and raised expectations that the Beja would significantly advance their political and military struggle. The BNC did manage to organise a national conference in its liberated territories, but the newly elected leadership amounted to a shifting of chairs among the existing leadership, except that Musa Mohamed Ahmed, who had been a simple soldier ten years ago, rose to become head of the BNC. Meanwhile, Abdulla Kuna, a teacher, was made responsible for political affairs, which has led to speculation that he holds most of the power. Dr Amna Dirar, a professor at Ahfad University in Omdurman, was elected vice-chairman and leader of the internal wing, and is one of the few members of the Beni Amar in the BNC.

There is also a growing recognition of the need to mobilise the non-Beja and non-Rashaida communities, a concern particularly great in the Gedaref area, where the Beja constitute a minority. There were fears that if the Eastern Front did not mobilise these people, the government would – to the disadvantage of the Front. Despite this, the large majority of eastern Sudanese outside the Beja are awaiting a decisive indication of where the political winds are blowing.

The BNC leadership has at best a subtle approach to armed struggle, or at worst a confused one. They take pride in the longevity of the party and their commitment to political struggle and engagement in the great battles for Sudanese democracy, like the October Revolution of 1964, which led to the overthrow of the Abboud dictatorship, and the overthrow of the Nimeiri regime in 1985. But long participation in Sudanese political life has meant that it has been less easy for Beja to break from beliefs in Arab superiority and acceptance of the riverine dominance of the country. As a result of such attitudes and engagement in political processes, the BNC army has not been very effective, its leadership has been weak, and despite the well-documented rising anger of Beja youth, many joined the rebel army, but almost as quickly left it.

Lack of focus, leadership and organisation

Because of its weakness as a party and the strength of the Beja's traditional leadership, the BNC has repeatedly made alliances with sheikhs and religious leaders that make any programme of transformation difficult. In this light, Suleiman Ali Bitai is of particular interest because his family provides the traditional authority in Hamishkoreb and among other Beja in a swath running south along the Eritrean border from the town to Kassala. Suleiman was a senior member of the Beja Congress, but he returned to Sudan and was followed by his close colleague, Sheikh Omar, who was the head of the Beja Congress at the time. The two of them conducted 'negotiations' with the government in 2003 on behalf of the Beja and signed an agreement, which has been ignored. One of Suleiman's brothers remained in Asmara in the Beja Congress, while Omar returned to Eritrea and is living in a house supplied by the party in Hamishkoreb. In 2005 Suleiman formed a government-supported Beja militia which he claims has 700 members, but his opponents say that the numbers are inflated for the benefit of the government which provides him an allowance for each member. Sayid Tirik, a Hedendawa nazir, has also organised a GOS-affiliated militia, or Popular Defence Force (PDF), based in Tiney. It is not known whether this is a genuine fighting force that could threaten the Eastern Front or simply a vehicle by which the NCP can purchase loyalty. It appears that other militias led by traditional leaders with government support have been formed.

Strong traditional leadership among the Beja has formed government-supported militia, posing considerable threat to the BNC

The Beja Congress justifies its previous alliances with Suleiman, and currently with Omar, by contending that they and other religious leaders exert considerable

influence over the poor and ignorant Beja and that it would not be wise to challenge their authority. However, the dependence of the Beja Congress on the support of traditional leaders is reflected in their inability to enact any serious social reforms in its liberated areas. Secular education is limited and although the BNC leadership speak of their concern with woman's emancipation, the reality is that there is little education outside the control of the sheikhs and women are isolated and kept in a state of ignorance that is among the worst in Sudan.

The Beja are also divided internally, with the status of the Beni Amar sometimes held to be part of the tribe and at other times viewed as a separate tribe. Some among the Beni Amar have close links with the NCP security services, which further complicates matters. Good relations with the government may at least in part explain their relative affluence and the fact that, unlike the rest of the Beja, their population



is not reckoned to be declining. Living on both sides of the border, but with the majority of its members in Eritrea, the Beni Amar also figures prominently in the Eritrean Islamic Jihad group, which is supported by the NCP. While previously the Eritrean Jihad had their own offices and vehicles and moved about publicly, in 2005 they largely disappeared from view. It is believed that their public presence was proving to be an embarrassment for the NCP and as a result they were formally absorbed into the army, but they still have an independent existence. For some time there have been reports that the Sudanese Armed Forces have been arresting young Eritreans who have escaped their homeland to avoid lengthy periods of conscription and forcing them to take military training with these opposition groups. Informants report that these activities have gained momentum in recent months, apparently to strengthen their position and that of the GOS in negotiations. Another group, the Islamic Liberation Party, operates out of the three state capitals of eastern Sudan, but is not believed to actually be engaged in armed struggle against the Eritrean regime. There are also a number of Islamic NGOs in the region that might be linked to terrorism in Eritrea.

As Beja consciousness rises, it is producing growing tensions with the many people which have moved to the area, even those whose families have lived in eastern Sudan for more than a century. Despite the recent alliance between the Beja Congress and the Free Lions, their relationship is not without problems, since the Rashaida are largely living on land that the Beja claim historical rights to. On the humanitarian side, the BNC's weakness is demonstrated by its dependence on the Christian fundamentalist Samaritan's Purse as the only source of food relief for Beja in the liberated territories, particularly Hamishkoreb, which is a chronically food-deficit area. People from this area frequently trek to Kassala through mine fields and various military forces to acquire food. This situation has deteriorated with the expulsion of USAID (the principal donor for Samaritan's Purse) from Eritrea in early 2006. As noted above, the Eastern Front has not proved to be an effective military force and although the Port Sudan riots served to stimulate young Beja men to cross the border to Eritrea and join the Front, most would appear to have left after a short time.

Despite its manifold weaknesses, the Beja Congress has achieved a measure of success in uniting its disparate peoples, giving them an awareness of their collective identity and popularising the notion of marginalisation. This is no mean achievement, given that it was accomplished among a predominantly local people who are among the poorest and most

uneducated in Sudan, and that this politicisation was pursued under the dictatorial regime of the NCP. The evidence of this achievement can easily be found in any Beja-inhabited area, but it is evidenced in particular by the fact that in recent years there have been far less tribal clashes than in the 1980s, according to a Kassala-based medical doctor who has been treating the victims for years. The negative side is expressed by the growing resentment among the Beja of non-indigenous inhabitants of the region, with the possible exception of their Rashaida partners in struggle. It remains to be seen whether present efforts to transform a struggle that had its origins in ethnic resentment can advance – as the leaders of the Eastern Front desire – to a struggle based on a region-wide identity in the post-peace agreement period. Much as the Beja Congress leadership is to be credited with developing political consciousness – it has clearly reduced intra-communal disputes and violence – the challenge continues because the NCP and its security services continue to foster divisions, having honed their skills in the south and Darfur. Their main focus has been on developing militias

and Popular Defence Force groups, but the security forces also practise disinformation, encourage defections from rebel ranks, establish parallel organisations under their control (such as the Beja Congress for Reform and Development), foster tribal antagonism, particularly between the Beni Amar and the Beja, and inject Islamist ideologies into the political equation.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the BNC is its weak organisation, a leadership not organically linked to its armed forces, the absence of clearly articulated political objectives and ideology, and its dependence on Eritrea.

Its organisation is diffuse, decentralised, and prone to factions, and it is sometimes difficult to clearly demarcate the lines between the Beja Congress, DUP, and NCP. People often shift between the three parties and even when in a specific party, are likely to have family members in another organisation. The Khatimiya sect often links people across party lines, as do tribes, divisions within tribes, and traditional leaders. Moreover, lines between political and religious authority are invariably unclear, and in the case of Mirghani, who is both a religious and political leader, efforts are made to keep things murky.

Revolutionary parties often suffer tensions because of divisions between their political and military leaderships, but in the case of the BNC the divisions are even greater, since it also has had to contend with a division between its external and internal wings. The inability to convince the large number of disaffected Beja youth to join the rebel army, or

Despite many weaknesses and numerous setbacks BNC has achieved remarkable success in uniting its disparate people



keep them in it, suggests a major weakness of the military leadership. Interviewees in eastern Sudan said this was due to the BNC leadership not providing the army with sufficient inspiration, because it rarely joined them in the field. Less often mentioned is the lack of a coherent ideology. Many divergent views are held, ranging from communist to Islamist, and this leads to division, problems in articulating clear bargaining positions, and failure to agree on desired social changes. In November a major rift broke out in the Eastern Front when Dr Amna Dirar, head of the internal wing, was accused of making common cause with Rashaida leader Mabrouk Salim to displace the leadership of Musa Mohamed. Dr Amna was further accused of misappropriating party funds. Behind these allegations – at this point that is all they are – appear to be tensions between the Beni Amar and the Beja and the demands of the Beni Amar and the Rashaida Free Lions for land.

While the Beja Congress does have a functioning, if sometimes lethargic, leadership, the Free Lions is largely a one-man political party led by Mabrouk Salim, who holds the position of Secretary-General of the Eastern Front and maintains power through the support provided by the Eritreans, his considerable personal wealth, and his influence as veteran politician and tribal leader. While his forces are limited in number, they are highly respected for their mountaineering and shooting skills and their ability to freely cross the Eritrean-Sudanese border. But there is little that motivates them ideologically, and while Mabrouk claims he cannot be bought off by the NCP because of his wealth, it is widely assumed that wealth and prestige are indeed the currency that may bring him back to Khartoum. Apart from deeply felt concerns over the confiscation of their vehicles by the government, Rashaida typically voice the same grievances as the Beja, namely marginalisation, underdevelopment in their areas, the negative effects of mechanised farming, etc. But while there is a reasonable degree of unity across the Beja community in support of their struggle and demands, followers of the Free Lions are drawn disproportionately from the youth, and many tribal leaders and elders do not see the need for an armed struggle.

Negotiations and the way forward

At various times it was proposed that the UN lead the negotiations in the east, but both Khartoum and Asmara were opposed to this. Given the poor relations between Washington and Asmara, the Americans could not assume the role. The British favoured a small British NGO, Concordis International, leading

the process, but it lacked experience. From the beginning the Eastern Front pressed to have the peace negotiations take place in Asmara under the auspices of the Eritrean government, but initially this was opposed by Khartoum. However, the GOS eventually relented and full-fledged peace negotiations began in August 2006.

GOS acceptance was almost certainly based on the view that the Eastern Front was largely under Eritrean control and that no agreement could be reached that did not involve at least a thaw in the tense relations between Khartoum and Asmara. The NCP probably also anticipated that a successful outcome to negotiations in the east would serve to reduce some of the international pressure over its handling of the Darfur crisis. Against that background the NCP encouraged its SPLM/A partner in the GNU to use its good offices to ease tensions with Eritrea. As a result, First Vice President Salva Kiir, Foreign Minister Lam Akol, and SPLM parliamentary leader Yasir Arman visited Asmara in the weeks prior to the commencement of the negotiations, while leading Eritrean officials, notably Presidential Advisor Yemane Gebre-ab and Abdella Jabir, Head of Organisational Affairs, went to Khartoum where the outlines of a reconciliation between the two countries and a peace agreement with the Eastern Front were probably agreed upon.

GOS agreed to peace negotiations in Asmara to thaw tensions with Eritrea and deflect international pressure from the Darfur crisis

It is remarkable that Eritrea had the capacity to keep out the US and its allies when IGAD (in the course of the Naivasha peace process) and the AU (during the Abuja peace process) lost control to the international heavyweights. With few friends and bad relations with the US, EC, UN, AU, and most of its neighbours, Eritrea had little

to lose by marginalising these powerful bodies and much prestige to gain with a positive outcome to the peace process. Its interests in leading the negotiations included security because the conflict was taking place on its border. Resolution of the conflict was held to be a stepping stone to assuming a leading role in the Darfur peace process, and since a peace process had to be held, better that the Eritreans and not any other group lead them.

Unlike the negotiations preceding the signing of the CPA and DPA, which involved large numbers of participants and observers, the Asmara negotiations have been distinctly low key and no one, apart from members of the official Eastern Front and GOS bargaining teams and the Eritrean mediators, were permitted to participate. Compared to Naivasha and Abuja, the negotiations have gone exceptionally smoothly and quickly. This is almost certainly because, first, although the Eastern Front and the



Eritreans were opposed to the CPA they understood that there was no escaping its stipulations; second, with the loss of its NDA and SPLM/A allies and its less than impressive military accomplishments the Eastern Front had largely run out of options; and third, in the wake of the peace processes in the south and west, the east was next in line.

The negotiations began with a statement of principles in which the parties agreed to declare eastern Sudan a marginalised territory. The Eastern Front tried to use this acknowledgement to pursue various bargaining objectives. SPLM participation in the negotiations might have been held as a positive development for the Eastern Front given their previous close relations in the NDA, but even before the commencement of the talks Front leaders downplayed SPLM involvement and held that their former ally would not operate outside the constraints of the GNU and would endeavour, like the NCP, to keep the negotiations within the terms of the CPA. Indeed, that has proved to be the case. Eastern Front leaders did not want to press the SPLM and cause embarrassment, because in the rapidly changing political climate of Sudan the SPLM could again become a close ally.

The critical security arrangements component of the agreement involves the Eastern Front holding one-third of the national army positions in eastern Sudan. This has been set at 5 300 soldiers, although some of these soldiers may wish to retire or go into paramilitary services such as the police, prison, and wildlife forces. This provision will be maintained until the elections that are anticipated to take place in two years' time. It was further agreed that Eastern Front soldiers could not be moved from the region for an additional three years. There will be no outside military observers because – it is argued – they are not needed. Indeed, unlike the situation in southern Sudan and Darfur, where the international peacekeepers have had at best mixed results, it is anticipated that the Eritreans will have the capacity to closely monitor developments even without a standing army in Sudanese territory. The smaller size of the region and the largely desert conditions will also make cheating on the security provisions of the agreement more difficult.

Negatively, the Eastern Front will not be permitted to maintain an independent military force to ensure compliance with the agreement, as the SPLM/A was able to negotiate. According to one Western diplomat, the Eritreans overruled the desire of the Eastern Front for international military observers, but Front officials maintain that there is no need for such observers. This provision will no doubt please the GOS because of

their opposition to UN forces in Darfur. The GOS was less happy that they did not obtain any promises from Eritrea to stop assisting the Darfur-armed opposition, while under the security arrangements the other armed groups operating in the east (notably Eritrean groups supported by the government and GOS-aligned militias) will have to be disbanded within three months of the signing of the agreement.

A High Joint Military Commission will be established to oversee the implementation of the security arrangements. It will include three representatives from the SAF and the Eastern Front and a chairman appointed by the Eritrean government, thus giving the latter the key vote. Although not officially spelled out in the peace agreement, the Eritreans will effectively serve as the guarantors of implementation in a similar fashion to the US, Britain, and Norway with respect to the CPA. Because of their greater knowledge of conditions on the ground, their capacity to operate in the east, and the lower level of intensity of the conflict, the Eritreans should be able to exert more control than their Western counterparts, who are the guarantors of the CPA.

The CPA is signed but Eastern Sudan continues to be marginalised politically, with few concessions made by GoS

The power-sharing agreement that was reached includes the granting of deputy governorships to Kassala and Gedaref states and a ministerial position in Red Sea State, one commissioner in each of the three eastern states, and sixty members in regional and local councils. The Eastern Front will gain ten representative positions in the assemblies of the three states of the east. This leaves the Front in a weaker position than the SPLM/A in Nuba Mountains and South Blue Nile. Indeed, the Eastern Front will hold ten seats in assemblies of fifty, with other opposition parties holding a

further fifteen. Holding the governorships, the NCP will have bare majorities in the three states, but to date the opposition parties have shown little sign of the kind of unity that would genuinely threaten the ruling party. Moreover, in each of the three eastern states the security services will be under the NCP. The NCP has also won the argument against recognising an eastern region which has long been a prominent demand of the Eastern Front. Instead, a commission will be formed for all of northern Sudan to assess whether the country should be divided on the basis of regions (as the Darfurian armed opposition groups have demanded as well) or maintain the present state-based system. The granting of the lion's share of power in the centre to the NCP and SPLM (52 per cent and 28 per cent respectively) severely constrains the bargaining power of other groups. Indeed, the Eastern Front has only been given one cabinet position (which was not specified at the time this is being written), an advisor to the president, an assistant to the president,



and eight seats in the federal assembly. This does not change the existing distribution.

The Eastern Front attempted to negotiate cultural provisions under the power-sharing protocol, because this is an area of great concern to the indigenous inhabitants of the region. However, recognising cultures other than the dominant riverine culture and languages other than Arabic, and acknowledging other approaches to Islam than those favoured by the NCP, pose a challenge to the ideology of the ruling party and as a result was fiercely opposed. A major focus of the power-sharing protocol would appear to be that the Eastern Front will be able to appoint a considerable number of its followers to various positions in the governments of the eastern states. Also attractive, and presumably also a major source of patronage, the GOS agreed to establish a special US\$600-million development fund that will focus on raising the low standards of education, health care, and water supply. However, the NCP Finance Minister in Khartoum will lead the commission overseeing the management of these funds and the national government will appoint the majority of its members.

Not surprisingly, there is little enthusiasm in the Eastern Front camp for the agreement; the prevailing sentiments are of resignation, a view that there is no alternative course of action, and that the desperately poor population of the east is in urgent need of the relief that peace would bring. While the prospects of money and positions were leading to a fight for spoils among some Eastern Front leaders even before the peace agreement was signed, more thoughtful members are concerned that they will achieve far less than their supporters expect in negotiations and that this will lead to disillusionment. They also know that their organisation has been penetrated by the NCP intelligence services, which will continue to have a ready source of cash to buy Eastern Front officials after the signing of the peace agreement. This will further demoralise members. Indeed, while some international supporters of breaking up the peace processes by regions argue that the regime is further weakened with each agreement, a senior Eastern Front leader acknowledged that, 'By making this agreement [with the NCP] we will probably extend the life of the government by a few years'. Eastern Front Chairman Musa Mohamed Ahmed takes a more nuanced position, arguing that while it advances the interest of the NCP by ending the conflict, the Eastern Front will work with its traditional allies and others to undermine the power of the ruling party.

Unlike the American and British formulators of the CPA, who could not foresee the implications of the

agreement for other areas of the country – indeed, their agreement threw up barriers to achieving peace elsewhere in Sudan – the eastern agreement has improved the security position of Eritrea and its leaders appear to think that the achievement of a peace agreement in the east will provide the momentum for a renewed peace process in Darfur that they hope to lead. That Eritrea, a destitute country of less than four million people, could lead one peace process and have expectations to take on the Darfur disaster after the AU, UN, the Nigerians, Americans, British, and others have dismally failed speaks both to the planning of the Eritreans and the political and intellectual failings of the others. Unlike the others, Eritrea has long been deeply enmeshed in Sudan. The PFDJ-NCP struggle began in the early 1990s when Khartoum supported Islamist attacks on Eritrea. Asmara responded by launching its own attacks and assisting the NDA and the SPLM/A. The CPA took the SPLM/A out of the struggle, but Asmara went on to support the Darfur-armed groups and to press for a broad-based opposition political alliance that stretched from Turabi Islamists to the Sudan Communist Party.

Consistent support for the Eastern Front on its own borders made Eritrea an indispensable partner in the Eastern Sudan peace process. In the wake of the DPA, which sent one group of rebels into the government, but left most of them embittered, Eritrea is there to offer support and a political and military vision of the way forward: military unity in the form of the National Redemption Front (NRF) and political unity in the form of an alliance that could challenge the NCP in national elections.

While GOS Presidential Advisor Ghazi Salahdien insisted that Eritrea would not lead the Darfur peace process, many observers think it may well accept Eritrean mediation because of Asmara's influence over the Darfur rebels (although not on the scale of its influence over the Eastern Front) and because Eritrea shares the views of the GOS in limiting the involvement of the UN and the US and its allies. The Eastern Front leadership will give strong support to the desire of Eritrea to lead the Darfur negotiations. In addition, Chairman Musa told GOS Presidential Advisor Ismael Mustapha that he would be prepared to use his good offices to bring about peace in Darfur. Interviews with leaders of the JEM and some of the components of the SLM echo this support.

The weakness of the military and political strategy in confronting Khartoum, as the Eritreans acknowledge, is the lack of leadership in the opposition camp. The SPLM/A is the natural leader of any opposition alliance, but it has not given up on the CPA and its supporters are largely motivated by the objective of independence

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and not the vision of a united New Sudan, even if that vision was largely popularised by its former leader, Dr John Garang. Indeed, Eritrea supported the SPLM/A for years and with the signing of the CPA it was left high and dry. An SPLA brigadier who had spent years in Eritrea argued that the outcome will be the same after the signing of a peace agreement in the east. In fact, the Eastern Front is likely to be so dependent upon Eritrea that is not likely.

The Eritreans were able to play the leading role in the eastern Sudan peace process because they had considerable influence over the Eastern Front, had a good knowledge of conditions in eastern Sudan because the area lies adjacent to their border, and there were few competing stakeholders. The situation with respect to Darfur is very different. Eritrea does not exert the same influence over the disparate armed Darfurian groups, its understanding of the area is not as developed as in the east, there are many stakeholders, the scale of the conflict is of a vastly different order, and peacekeepers will have to assume a major role. While all the Darfurian armed groups welcome Eritrea playing the leading role in their peace process, at least one leader of a major faction argued that the Eritrean government does not appreciate the relative significance of the different armed groups or the importance of the varied international interests in the conflict.

Despite Eritrea's significant engagement in Sudan and its growing involvement in Somalia, its major foreign policy interest is Ethiopia and its regional activism is part of a broader objective of ending the country's encirclement by Ethiopia, Yemen, and Sudan and building alliances with groups on Ethiopia's borders. With a thawing in relations between Sudan and Eritrea and the fact that Asmara and Khartoum support the Somali Council of Islamic Courts in Mogadishu in opposition to the Ethiopian and Yemeni-supported Transitional Government, the Sanaa Pact has been seriously undermined and Eritrea no longer appears encircled. Whether this will bring Ethiopia around to accepting the Ethio-Eritrean Border Commission ruling and withdraw from the disputed territory is doubtful, but with the security architecture in the Horn rapidly changing, it is increasingly difficult to anticipate all the implications.

Conclusion

The low-level insurgency in eastern Sudan is the product of a predatory state that has generated similar conflicts throughout the country since independence. Governments in Khartoum have struggled to exert their dominance over peripheral areas in the east –

and in other areas – so as to exploit their human and material resources. Conflict thus emerged between those who controlled the central state and those who became its subjects through incorporation. This process was encouraged by the objective of all governments in Sudan and in Africa to achieve state centralisation. While in some parts of Africa more benign forms of government have developed, in the Horn authoritarian and military governments have been the norm. The NIF/NCP government fits this pattern and thus it pursued policies of centralisation as a means of enhancing its own power in an otherwise weak state. This deepened patterns of uneven development and disparities between regions and this in turn heightened ethnic and regional consciousness and resentment. The seeds for the insurgency of eastern Sudan were planted.

These same governments, and none more than that of the NCP, have also pursued civilisational projects in which local cultures and religious practices were denigrated and efforts made to bring them into line with those favoured by the country's riverine ruling groups. As has been the pattern in marginalised areas across Sudan, and indeed across the Horn, resistance to state centralisation and attempts at cultural hegemony first took political forms, and when they proved unsuccessful in confronting authoritarian governments, people resorted to armed struggle. Where the people involved inhabited borderlands they turned to their ethnic cohorts in the neighbouring country for support. This usually led at some stage to neighbouring governments becoming involved in the dispute, thus giving a local level dispute a regional security dimension. And such has been the case in eastern Sudan.

However, unlike the experience in Eritrea and Ethiopia where the EPLF and TPLF were able to ensure their independence, groups conducting insurgencies in Sudan have been weak and typically fell under the influence of foreign powers. Thus the Derg largely dominated the SPLM/A during the first eight years of its existence. After that its leader, Dr John Garang, endeavoured to win the favour of the US, and hence bring the movement's political position in line with the interests of the Americans. While the picture is less clear in Darfur, the rebels are to some degree beholden on the Chadian government of Idris Deby, to the US, and of late increasingly to Eritrea.

The Eastern Front is clearly the weakest of all the major rebel groups in Sudan and hence the most susceptible to outside influence/ Indeed, after developing relations with a host of countries and

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political organisations in the region during its early years the Beja National Congress increasingly put all its eggs in the NDA basket. When that organisation effectively collapsed, it found itself largely beholden to the Eritrean government, which had long been the principal backer of both the NDA and the BNC. As a result, the eastern Sudan conflict has often been overtaken by the regional conflict between Eritrea, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and it has reached a stage where it is almost inconceivable that the local conflict could be resolved without a resolution of the regional conflict. The Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement of October 2006 thus harbours changes to the security nexus of the region and has the potential of either heightening tense relations between the three countries or reducing them. However, given the critical strategic position of eastern Sudan in the region and in Sudan, and the failure of any of the peace processes in the country to bring about genuine structural change in the Sudanese state, it would be naive to expect that any negotiations will ensure long-term peace and tranquility.

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About this paper

This paper seeks to explain the origin and causes of the conflict in eastern Sudan, its regional dimensions, considers the principal actors, provides some background to the negotiations between the Eastern Front and the GOS, and ends with a consideration of the peace agreement and some projections for the future.

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