

Noref Policy Brief

Egypt and the Darfur conflict

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Executive Summary

The conflict in Sudan's western province of Darfur has revived even as the peace talks in Qatar between Sudan's government and the rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) seem to have collapsed. Egypt has hitherto refrained from involvement in negotiations to end the conflict, a strategy that has contributed to further diminishing Cairo's already weakened status as a major player in regional politics and diplomacy.

Now, however, several developments present Egypt with an opportunity to assume a more active mediating role. Among these is a direct invitation to Egypt from the JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim. Egypt's position is complicated by its need to balance its relations with Sudan and those of other Sudanese political actors, and inhibited by narrow security calculations – chief among which is ensuring a stable government in Khartoum.

But Egypt still has the political stature and regional influence to impel the parties to the conflict to negotiate in earnest. Such an effort would carry risks for Cairo, not least the possibility of damaging its relationship with both Khartoum and the rebel groups. However, a more active contribution to peace diplomacy over Darfur would restore Egypt's position as a regional heavyweight and could help resolve one of the most intractable disputes of the past decade.

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Why should Egypt be involved in Darfur?

The civil war in Sudan's western province of Darfur has developed into a self-perpetuating humanitarian catastrophe in which hundreds of thousands have died of war-related causes and more than a million have fled from their homes. The prevailing analysis of the conflict tends to focus on the themes of competition over resources or the Khartoum government's use of local militias. By contrast, the regional dimensions of the civil war in Darfur are often ignored or downplayed.

This lacuna needs to be addressed, since Darfur – which borders Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic – is strategically situated, and in recent history the area has been an important factor in regional conflict dynamics. Any solution to the conflict is dependent on the actions and policies of regional actors. Egypt's position as a major regional power that neighbours Sudan suggests that it has interests at stake in such conflict dynamics, and may be expected to play a role in resolving the Darfur crisis.

So far, it is three other regional states – Chad, Qatar and (to some extent) Libya – that have involved themselves in processes aimed at bringing the conflict to an end. Chadian pressure on the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Darfur's leading rebel group, and Qatari facilitation of negotiations between the Khartoum government and JEM, led to the signing of a framework agreement between the two parties in Doha on 23 February 2010. The agreement was met by optimism bordering on euphoria, with Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir stating that this was the beginning of the end of the war in Darfur.

A deteriorating situation

However, as both JEM and Khartoum seemed unwilling to build on the Qatari deal and finalise a comprehensive peace agreement, optimism soon gave way to apprehension. Following al-Bashir's disputed victory in Sudan's election on 11 April 2010, the

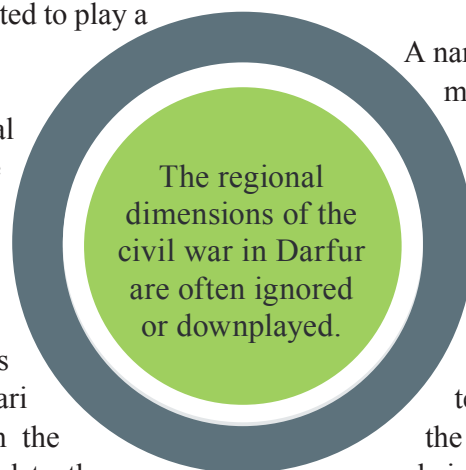
government's willingness to compromise with JEM appears to be further reduced. Meanwhile, clashes between different rebel groups and government forces in Darfur have continued. By mid-June, the talks in Doha seemed to be indefinitely suspended and violence in Darfur has reached its highest level since the introduction of the hybrid African Union/United Nations peacekeeping force (UNAMID) in 2008.

In the face of the current breakdown in the Doha process, is Egypt able and willing to play a role in resolving the crisis? Historically, Egypt regards Sudan as its own backyard and is in general highly critical of other countries' engagement in Darfur. Egypt has not been an active political player in the Darfur conflict. Yet Egypt, which has been a diplomatic heavyweight in the region, was for a time in the 1970s and 1980s strategically involved in the Darfur situation, as well as having close ties with the United States government.

A narrow view of Egypt's security interests might suggest that Egypt should not be concerned with peace processes in Darfur; but in a holistic and long-term perspective, Egypt has much to gain from taking a more active role. This would, for example, increase Egypt's international standing and assist in stemming destabilising tendencies that go beyond the borders of the Darfur region. For Egypt to undertake such involvement, however, will require the mobilisation of considerable political, diplomatic and financial resources.

Cautious Egyptian engagement

The Egyptian government's own assessment of its contribution in Darfur is clear. The state information service says that Cairo has played "a pivotal role in [the] Darfur crisis; it is crystallized in the attempt of Egypt to solve the crisis peacefully and settle the



differences between the parties in conflict so as to stop bloodshed and prevent the foreign interference in the Sudanese affairs, thus, maintaining the unity of Sudan.”¹

Egypt’s most significant contributions have been humanitarian aid and peacekeeping soldiers to the UNAMID force. The costs have included the killing of two of its peacekeeping officers in early May 2010. Yet these contributions notwithstanding, it would be an exaggeration to say that Egypt has tried to “solve” the conflict. Egyptian and other observers have noted – sometimes with exasperation – that Egypt has largely been absent from the political and diplomatic scene. To the extent that it has made itself heard, it is by clearly indicating its unhappiness with the current Qatari diplomatic initiative.

In mid-May, however, Egypt suddenly stepped up its involvement by hosting JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim, who turned to Cairo in dissatisfaction with the way the Doha talks were going.² Ibrahim claims that the Qatari mediators favour the Khartoum side, and he seeks to involve different actors. But aside from receiving Ibrahim, Cairo has so far been cautious, and it remains to be seen whether or not the Egyptian regime will follow up on the initiative. A complex mix of internal and external pressures influencing Egyptian foreign policy makes it difficult to gauge Cairo’s room for manoeuvre when it comes to getting the Darfur peace talks back on track.

Do ordinary Egyptians care about Darfur?

President Hosni Mubarak and his advisors are not restrained by any domestic pressure when shaping and implementing Egypt’s policy on the Darfur conflict; they are free to pursue whatever they define

as Egypt’s best interest in this issue. Where Egyptian public opinion may influence President Mubarak’s foreign policy in the case of the hugely unpopular policy of normalisation with Israel, no such pressures seem to exist in the case of Darfur. The few advocacy organisations that do exist, such as the Arab Coalition for Darfur, have no impact in the public sphere.

The Darfur issue does not have the symbolic value that in Egypt often accrues to conflicts where Muslims are victimised (such as the Bosnian war of 1992-95, when Egypt’s media and student activists raised popular awareness about the massacres and other hardships endured by Bosnian Muslims). The very fact that almost all of the parties in the Darfur conflicts are Muslims accounts for this: for when both victims *and* perpetrators are Muslims, it is difficult to frame the conflict in terms of religious solidarity (the anti-Muslim west vs the Muslim east). In consequence, the war represents an embarrassing reality that is better left ignored in Egyptian public life.

The International Criminal Court’s application to open a war crimes case against Omar al-Bashir in July 2008, followed by its arrest warrant in March 2009, has made Darfur more of a concern in the Egyptian public space. But Egyptian diplomats tend to dismiss the conflict as involving “tribal” problems, and claim that reports of mass rapes are exaggerated,³ while the ICC indictment of Sudan’s president is widely portrayed in Egypt as an attack by the west on the Arab world as a whole.⁴



Since all parties in the Darfur conflicts are Muslims, the war is largely ignored in Egypt.

1 Egypt state information service, “Egypt and Darfur”, http://www.sis.gov.eg/en/LastPage.aspx?Category_ID=76, accessed 24 June 2010.

2 Gina Walim, “Bashir’s adviser travels to Cairo to solve the conflict with Egypt over the leader of Darfur rebels, al-Yawm al-Sabi, 2010, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=226769&SecID=65&IssueID=0>, accessed 24 June 2010.

3 Interviews with Egyptian foreign ministry official, Cairo, 6 May 2009.

4 Jacob Høigilt, “Darfur and Arab public opinion: strategies for engagement”, Noref - Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre, 2009, <http://www.peacebuilding.no/eng/Publications/Noref-Reports2/Noref-Report-14-Darfur-and-Arab-Public-Opinion>, accessed 24 June 2010.

Is Darfur a threat to Egypt's security?

Egypt's reluctance to take a more active position in relation to Darfur contrasts with its security involvement in earlier decades. This was during the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, when Muammar Gaddafi's Libya sought to increase its regional influence by weakening the then Sudanese president, Ja'far al-Numayri, and Chad's Hissène Habré. Libya succeeded in ousting Habré from power, and Gaddafi also put severe pressure on Sudan by entering into alliance with Ethiopia and South Yemen.⁵ Egypt, already loath to see a radical and unpredictable Arab leader rising to prominence in its backyard, viewed Libya's policies as a danger. In consequence, it chose along with Sudan to actively assist Habré, whose forces were mobilised in Darfur before they marched on the Chadian capital N'Djamena.

Two decades on, the peak of the Darfur conflict in 2003-05 did not present Egypt with any grave security threats, and there is probably little concern in Cairo that events in Darfur will in the foreseeable future influence Egypt's security. Egypt's relations with Libya have improved, and those with Sudan are cordial if cautious. Chad's president, Idriss Déby, has also made efforts to mend fences with his former adversaries in Khartoum, resulting in a fragile ceasefire and contributing to the process that led to the framework agreement between Sudan and JEM.⁶ The impact on Sudan-Chad relations of the fresh outbreak of hostilities between JEM and Sudanese government forces in May remains to be seen.

Regional security and domestic challenges

JEM represents disgruntled groups in one periphery trying to make their voices heard in Khartoum, but it also has a national agenda. JEM's roots lie in the Islamist student movement connected with the

Islamist leader Hasan al-Turabi. Since 2000 al-Turabi has been in opposition to the Omar al-Bashir regime, and he is (assumedly) in communication with the JEM leadership.

The elections of April 2010 confirm that the old-established opposition parties in Sudan (the Umma party and the Democratic Unionist Party) have been all but decimated. The stage is set for a new political structure in which regional parties like JEM and the northern wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) may emerge as two distinct challengers to the current regime. From this perspective JEM's aims can be seen as national rather than regional; and in the long run, it (or possibly a later manifestation representing similar social sentiments) can become a political force to be reckoned with. These developments should concern Cairo; and if Egypt wishes to influence Sudan's political future, it seems essential to engage with political forces based outside Khartoum (and in JEM's case, in Darfur).

Sudan is approaching a decisive crossroads in its history, with the people of the south preparing to cast their vote in a referendum (scheduled for 2011) on whether they want to secede from the north. The process may be used to trigger political instability not only in Southern Sudan, but also in, for the time being, relatively stable northern peripheries. The outcome of escalating conflict could be instability on a scale that threatens the very existence of Sudan as a state formation. This would most probably impinge on Egypt's national interest, not least with regard to border security. Hence, sustainable peace in Darfur should be a high priority in the context of a broader, long-term Egyptian security strategy.

5 Peter Woodward, *Sudan, 1898-1989: the unstable state*, Boulder – L. Rienner Publishers, London – L. Crook Academic Pub, 1990, p 170.

6 Gamal Nkrumah, "Bitter foes find common ground", *al-Ahram Weekly*, February 2010, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/985/re2.htm>, accessed 24 June 2010.

Darfur in Egypt's regional relations

Following a rocky period in the 1990s, Egypt-Sudan relations are now cordial though with concerns on either side: Khartoum remains wary of its more powerful neighbour, and Egypt is uncomfortable with the Islamist foundation of the National Congress Party (NCP) which dominates the Sudanese regime. For its part Cairo's stance, in the absence of a viable alternative to the regime, is one of pragmatic cooperation. Both governments maintain a relatively high threshold for initiating actions or presenting statements that will upset the other. An indication of this willingness to accommodate each other's interest came in April 2010, when Khartoum's complaint about an international conference relating to Darfur to be held in Egypt led Egyptian security services abruptly to cancel the event.⁷

In light of this situation, the current developments in the Darfur conflict represent a conundrum for the architects of Egyptian foreign policy. On the one hand, they are presented with an opportunity to assert Egypt's regional dominance by accepting JEM's invitation to Egypt to join the negotiations with Khartoum as a mediator. On the other hand, the Sudanese regime has expressed in clear terms its dissatisfaction with Egypt's willingness to host JEM's leader Khalil Ibrahim. Egypt's acceptance of JEM's offer means that it would not be regarded as a neutral mediator, and by seizing this opportunity the Egyptian government might put its relationship with Khartoum at risk.

Meanwhile, Egypt-Qatar relations have been less than friendly since Qatar's hosting of the JEM-Khartoum talks became known. Egyptian officials were reportedly furious that the tiny Gulf state would dare to intervene

in what Egypt perceives as its own sphere of influence.⁸ Egyptian diplomats readily express their disdain for the Qatari diplomatic initiative, dismissing the Qataris as foreign policy amateurs with a lot of money to spend.⁹

Egypt's waning political influence

The apparent collapse of the Doha talks and JEM's turn to Egypt puts Egyptian foreign-policy makers in a contradictory situation. The situation is an opportunity to score points in the competition for regional diplomatic prestige, even more tempting since

Egypt is widely perceived among Sudanese observers to have lost political clout. At the same time, Egypt's further involvement in the Doha peace process – for which (notwithstanding the result) Qatar has been complimented by all parties, not least the regional actors such as the African Union and the UN¹⁰ – could end up being disadvantageous to Cairo. The conundrum probably explains why Egyptian officials have been reticent on the issue.



Any involvement by Egypt in diplomacy over Darfur needs to take other considerations into account. Khartoum would not be content to see Egypt as a mediator, and few Sudanese believe that the Egyptian regime includes the wellbeing of the Sudanese in its equation. Moreover, the different Darfur rebel groups have to date distrusted Egypt. This suggests that JEM's overtures to Cairo might be only a tactical measure; some observers even speculate that Egypt's hosting of Khalil Ibrahim is designed to signal to Sudan's ruling National Congress Party that Cairo is dissatisfied with the NCP's handling of the progress in implementing Sudan's north-south comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) of 2005.

⁷ Email communication with international NGO official, 4 May 2010.

⁸ Julie Flint, *Rhetoric and reality: the failure to resolve the Darfur conflict*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2010, http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/portal/spotlight/sudan/Sudan_pdf/SWP-19-The-Failure-to-Resolve-the%20Darfur-Conflict.pdf, accessed 24 June 2010.

⁹ Interview with Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, 10 March 2010.

¹⁰ Email communication with international NGO observer in Doha, 5 May 2010; interview with Darfuri NGO activist, Omdurman, 15 May 2010.

Whatever motives Egypt might have for receiving the JEM leader in Cairo, the fact remains that Egypt's role in the Doha process has not been helpful. Major stakeholders share this opinion, not least those speaking on behalf of civilians in Darfur, who consider the Doha process the only viable path towards a solution.

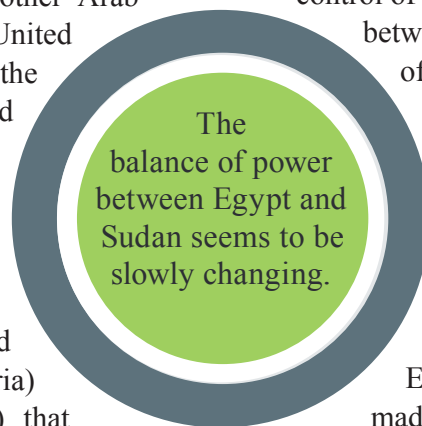
Can Egypt contribute to peace in Darfur?

Its foreign policy skirmish with Qatar is symptomatic of Egypt's reduced significance in the region. Previously, Egypt has been regarded as a major player whose leadership is a channel for other Arab countries (including Sudan) to the United States and Europe. The signing of the Camp David agreement in 1978 and the close relationship between the US and Egypt that resulted from it has been particularly important. Egypt, together with Saudi Arabia and Jordan, formed a potent pro-western bloc in Arab politics. This block represented a counterbalance to regimes (Iran, Syria) and movements (Hizbullah, Hamas) that oppose US and European policies.

In recent years, however, the influence of these forces and movements – and their challenge to Egypt's position – has increased across the region. Together with other pro-American states such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Egypt faces a situation where it no longer necessarily sets the regional agenda, and where its position as a gatekeeper to global powers is less important. Egypt's failure to engage fully in Sudan's peace processes is one indication of its reduced significance. Indeed, observers point out that in the multilateral game leading to the CPA in 2005 and the (flawed) Darfur peace agreement in Abuja in 2006, Egypt was consistently left behind by events and rendered largely irrelevant.

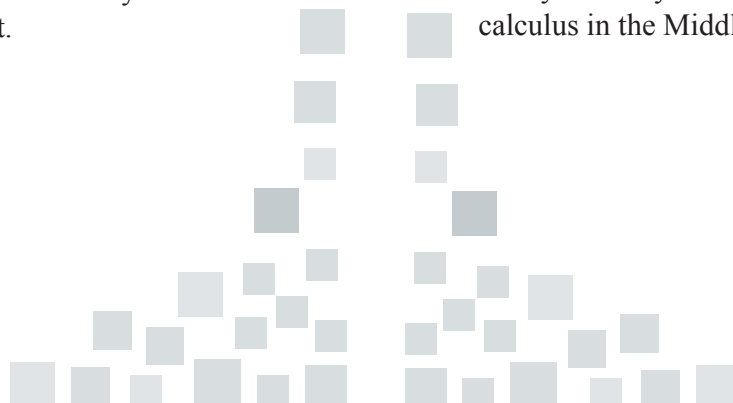
The implication is that for Egypt to retain its stature as the diplomatic powerhouse of the Arab world, it needs to assume an active role in stabilising the region. Where Sudan is concerned, Egypt's political-military power and connections still give it the ability to pressure both the NCP regime and the rebel groups to accept compromises. The balance of power between Egypt and Sudan seems to be slowly changing, and it is unlikely that Khartoum will welcome Cairo taking a more active role in the Darfur peace talks.

Egypt needs Sudan badly as an ally in the struggle over control of the Nile waters. It also walks a tightrope between befriending the prospective leaders of a future independent Southern Sudan, and staying close enough to the regime in Khartoum to ensure that it does not become radicalised. These issues weaken Egypt's position vis-à-vis Khartoum and restrict its freedom to intervene in Sudanese affairs. Now, Khalil Ibrahim's invitation to the Egyptians to join the peace process has made it harder for Cairo to remain passive and so please everyone. Herein lies Cairo's current dilemma.



Solutions to Egypt's Darfur dilemma

With the Doha peace talks in disarray, much depends on the role of Sudan's neighbours. Egypt has not been involved to the extent expected of an assumedly strong regional state; but if it does take an active and constructive role in the Darfur conflict, this may help the country regain its diplomatic influence after a period when Egypt has been marginalised in the discussions surrounding Sudan's future. This issue is in turn closely connected to Egypt's struggle to remain a key country in the international relations calculus in the Middle East.

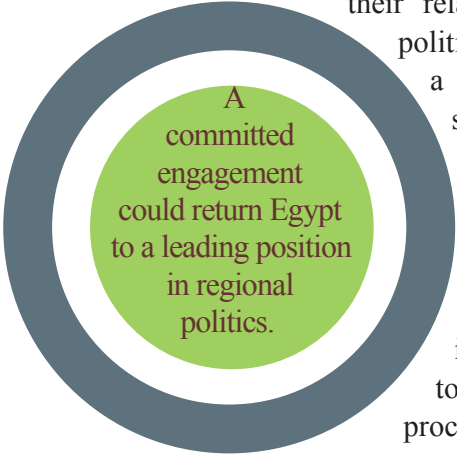


Egypt faces no immediate threat to its security from continued civil war in Darfur, and there is no domestic pressure for Egyptian policymakers to engage in Darfur. In fact, an engagement may create problems in

their relations with Sudanese political actors. The result is a situation where Egypt seeks goodwill among several political forces in a Sudan that faces an uncertain future.

The JEM leader's invitation to Egypt to join the Doha peace process may be a tactic to put pressure on the Khartoum

regime, but it does offer Egypt an opportunity to make a positive contribution to resolving the Darfur conflict. Much will depend on how Egypt chooses to respond. Egypt might score a short-term foreign policy point by trying to sideline Qatar and seize the initiative in the peace process, but this approach would likely prove damaging to the process. Instead, what is needed is Egyptian cooperation and participation in the current multilateral peace effort, which enjoys the support of key players such as the African Union and the United Nations. Egypt could well pay a temporary political cost in terms of a strained relationship with the Khartoum regime, JEM, or both; however, a committed engagement could return Egypt to a leading position in regional politics.



A committed engagement could return Egypt to a leading position in regional politics.

Further reading

1. M.W. Daly, *Darfur's sorrow: A history of destruction and genocide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007
2. Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A new history of a long war*, London, Zed Books, 2008
3. Publication series on democracy, *Sudan – No Easy Ways Ahead*, Berlin, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2010, http://www.boell.org/downloads/HBF_Vol_18_Sudan-NoEasy-WaysAhead%281%29.pdf, accessed 24 June 2010
4. Making sense of Sudan, Social Science Research Council blog, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/sudan/>, accessed 24 June 2010