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## Appeasement Driven by Oil

### The Bush Administration and Darfur

By David Morse

The Bush administration is now in the habit of hurling the charge of "appeasement" at critics of its Iraq war. Anyone who has followed the President's stance toward Sudan closely will appreciate the deep irony.

President Bush has targeted "Islamofascists" across the globe as successors to the Nazis, while likening his own position to that of Roosevelt and Churchill in World War II. "We're in a war we didn't ask for," he recently declared, "but it's a war we must wage and a war we will win."

Never mind that the war he "didn't ask for" began with a preemptive shock-and-awe strike on Iraq, based on fabricated evidence, or that his administration has done more to fan the flames of Islamist extremism around the world than to contain it. Just focus on that charge of "appeasement." Only when we shift the spotlight from the President's critics to George Bush himself and his stance toward Sudan's troubled western province, Darfur, does the charge make any kind of sense.

### Identifying the Islamofascist Enemy

Let us speak plainly and in George W. Bush's own terms: Giving him the benefit of the doubt, let's assume that in his label of choice, "Islamofascist," his implied adjective is not *Islamic*, referring to the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, but *Islamist*, referring only to those fundamentalist Muslims who seek to impose their worldview on others.

Certainly, if any Islamist government deserves the epithet "fascist," it is the one established by the National Islamic Front (NIF), which seized control of Sudan in a military coup in 1989 and installed the country's current ruler, Lt. General Omar al-Bashir. The Front took over with a grandiose agenda that assumed the racial superiority of a northern Arab elite in a country that historically enslaved, and continues to enslave and marginalize, black Africans. Dominating the central government in the capital, Khartoum, the NIF Party sought to impose *sharia*, Muslim fundamentalist law, on all Sudan, including Christians and practitioners of indigenous African religions who lived in the South.

The Front's ambitions were too large even for a country of just under a million square miles, the largest in Africa. They extended to the rest of the continent and the Middle East as well. In the 1990s, Khartoum became an incubator for international terrorists, Osama bin Laden among them. Bashir viewed Sudan as the gateway for the Arabization and Islamification of all of Africa. His party's "totalitarian ideology," coupled with greed,

prompted Khartoum to grab oilfields newly discovered in South Sudan by the simple expedient of redrawing jurisdictional boundaries in the early 1980s to deny them to the South. This triggered a bitter civil war that lasted twenty-two years and claimed the lives of an estimated two million Sudanese civilians, mainly poor, black subsistence farmers in the South. Most died of starvation when food supplies were cut off. Now, for similar reasons, a reprise of that tragedy has been unfolding in Darfur, the poorest region of Sudan.

If Khartoum's racism was muddied by the religious dimension of the North-South civil war, it is starkly evident in Darfur, where Arab Muslims are killing black Muslims. For the past three years, Arab militias on horseback and camel-back, armed and supported by Khartoum, and accompanied by aerial bombardment by government planes, have attacked non-Arab farming villages in Darfur -- murdering and raping, poisoning wells, seizing cattle and household goods, burning houses and mosques, and driving survivors from their land in a scorched-earth campaign of ethnic cleansing. Now some 3.5 million displaced Darfuris, roughly half the population, are wholly dependent on outside food aid.

Meanwhile, the NIF-controlled government prevents the citizens of Khartoum from grasping the genocidal nature of the campaign in Darfur -- by censoring the Sudanese media, shutting down newspapers, torturing activists, and denying visas to foreign journalists.

Here, in short, is a totalitarian regime with significant parallels to Nazi Germany, even if hardly on the same economic or military scale. It is also a regime arguably more murderous than that of Saddam Hussein, with a more expansionist agenda; a rogue state that has sponsored terrorism in the past and threatens to launch a [jihad](#) if the UN intervenes in Darfur. Earlier this year, Osama bin Laden issued a world-wide call for terrorists to go to the aid of Khartoum. Sudan has bona fide -- not fabricated -- ties to al-Qaeda. Khartoum is, in other words, everything Mr. Bush could wish for in an "Islamofascist" enemy.

### **The Bush response to a real "Islamofascist" threat**

In September 2004, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell famously described what was happening in Darfur as "genocide," with the caveat that the U.S. would not intervene militarily because we had "no vital interests" in the region. For the past two years that *realpolitik* twist of logic has underpinned U.S. policy in Sudan. The claim of "no vital interests" seemed credible because of the sanctions imposed by President Bill Clinton in 1997, when he added Sudan to the State Department's list of states sponsoring terrorism. These sanctions, which are still in place, include heavy fines and jail sentences for U.S. citizens doing business with Sudan.

Powell's startling use of the word *genocide* suggested at the time a moral forthrightness lacking in his European counterparts, even while the "no vital interest" caveat assured Khartoum's leaders that we would not interfere. President Bush used the word in [an](#)

[address](#) before the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 2004, saying that "the world is witnessing terrible suffering and horrible crimes in the Darfur region of Sudan, crimes my government has concluded are genocide."

Strong pronouncements. In hindsight, however, these can be seen as a carefully scripted pre-election sop to conservative Christians who had long complained about Khartoum's attacks on Sudanese Christians in the south during the civil war.

After the 2004 elections, the administration fell silent on Darfur, even as the slaughter continued. In early March 2005, Khartoum stopped granting visas, effectively preventing foreigners from witnessing the ongoing carnage. Two top officials from the NGO Doctors without Borders were jailed for "treason" simply for delivering a report in the Netherlands on Khartoum's use of rape as a military weapon. President Bush kept silent.

Without leadership from the Oval Office, Congress spent most of 2005 dickered over the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act. In its [original version](#), the bipartisan bill had formidable teeth. It provided a broad new set of sanctions, in addition to the existing Clinton-era ones which had been limited to trade. The new sanctions would have put the U.S. government on record as seeking a UN resolution embargoing arms sales to Sudan, establishing a no-fly zone over Darfur, seeking unspecified measures affecting "the petroleum sector in Sudan," and guaranteeing humanitarian aid workers' access to those suffering in Darfur. Even more to the point, additional sanctions would target individuals in the Khartoum government who were responsible for the genocide, freezing their assets abroad and imposing travel restrictions on them -- exactly the sort of hamstringing that such men fear, especially if they are likely to be prosecuted by the [International Criminal Court](#).

Taken together, these powerful sanctions, if approved by Congress and then adopted by the UN Security Council might conceivably have stopped the genocide in its tracks. Whether it all could have gotten past the Security Council is questionable. Russia and China are selling weapons to Sudan; China, Britain, and France are heavily involved in exploiting its oil resources. Indeed, considering that U.S. firms were already prevented from trading with Sudan under the 1997 sanctions, such a resolution from the U.S. might have appeared self-serving.

But the relevant question is this: Did President Bush support the bill?

The answer is: Quite the opposite. Under pressure from the White House, virtually all the sanctions were seriously weakened or eliminated in Congressional committee. The reference to a possible embargo aimed at the petroleum sector was deleted. The provisions for targeting individuals were replaced by a single provision giving the President discretion to refer individual war criminals to the International Criminal Court, a highly unlikely prospect considering the administration's hostility to the ICC. In its final form, the bill was toothless. It offered modest funding -- guilt money -- to the under-funded African Union mission in Darfur, and little else.

The President, by failing to support a bill that would certainly have defined the nation's moral position, and might even have saved tens of thousands of lives, was choosing to appease, not confront the very "Islamofascists" against whom he rails in the abstract.

This was the same George W. Bush who, shortly after taking office, had scrawled the phrase "Not on my watch!" in the margin of a briefing paper that referred to former President Bill Clinton's inaction during the genocide in Rwanda. That phrase has been interpreted by [Samantha Power](#) and other writers as Bush's declaration that he would never countenance such a horror during *his* presidency. If so, then his retreat during the past two years is all the more pathetic. A different interpretation can, however, be offered for that scrawl. It can be seen as an expression of relief that Rwanda happened on somebody else's watch.

### **Oil Enters the Picture**

Exactly how much oil lay beneath the dusty red savannas of Darfur was unclear, at least to the outside world, back when the Bush administration took office. (If Khartoum had commissioned preliminary geologic surveys, it wasn't telling.) Darfur is three-quarters the size of Texas, and the violence there had left large swaths of the country inaccessible to geologists. By early 2005, however, the destruction of villages and the clearing of inhabitants from the land had opened the way for oil exploration.

Until April 2005, it was said that whatever oil deposits existed in Darfur were confined to its southeastern corner. However, new seismographic studies brought a surprise. On April 19, 2005, Mohamed Siddig, a spokesman for the Sudan Energy Ministry, announced that a new high-yield well had been drilled in North Darfur -- several hundred kilometers northwest of the existing fields. Seismographic studies indicated that a huge basin of oil, expected to yield up to 500,000 barrels of crude per day, lay in the area. This Darfur discovery effectively doubled Sudan's oil reserves.

Perhaps as astonishing as the oil discovery, reported in brief [by Reuters](#), was that it was not picked up by the world press. You are probably learning about the discovery for the first time here at Tomdispatch. Yet it may explain in part Mr. Bush's puzzling retreat on Darfur.

The Bush administration had already been developing a closer relationship with Khartoum, based (it was claimed) on the sharing of intelligence about potential operations in the President's Global War on Terror. The announcement of the new find in April 2005 seemed to accelerate these efforts, and may explain why, a month later, the Central Intelligence Agency sent a jet to Khartoum to ferry Sudan's chief of intelligence, Major General Salah Abdallah Gosh, to a clandestine meeting at C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

This provoked a political tempest when the [Los Angeles Times](#) revealed the meeting (as well as a split within the State Department between those who thought Gosh should be arrested as a war criminal and others who toed the administration line). Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice had the unenviable task of explaining that our government sought "closer ties" with a terrorist regime because of its cooperation in the "war on terrorism." Khartoum voiced hopes that U.S. sanctions would soon be lifted.

June 2005 saw oil companies from India, France, Malaysia, China, Great Britain, Japan, and Sweden flocking to sign contracts in Sudan, while U.S. companies were officially sidelined by the 1997 sanctions. The rush was occasioned partly by the new oil finds in Darfur, but also by a long-awaited North-South peace agreement, scheduled to be implemented in July, that ended the civil war.

As part of a power-sharing agreement, rebel leader John Garang was to be installed as vice president of Sudan, and oil revenues were to be divided between the government of Sudan in Khartoum and the now semi-autonomous government of South Sudan. Garang had already signed an oil deal with a new British oil company called White Nile, and had rescinded an earlier contract concluded by the government of Sudan and the French oil giant, Total. The French company had pulled out of South Sudan when fighting got fierce during the civil war. Shares of White Nile on the London stock exchange now shot up. Total threatened to sue.

### **"No Vital Interests"**

Although U.S. oil companies could not openly join the scramble for Sudan's oil, many were finding ways to circumvent the sanctions. One method was by minority ownership. For instance, Marathon Oil, based in Houston and a major contributor to the Bush re-election campaign, is a partner in the French company Total. Before John Garang thwarted such expectations by signing the White Nile contract, Marathon had resumed payments to the Khartoum government in the expectation that it would take part of Total's operations in the oilfields.

In addition, certain foreign companies -- including some that exist only on paper -- were probably serving as place-holders for large U.S. firms until the sanctions could be lifted. One such "foreign" company is registered in the Virgin Islands, uses a Swiss business address, and is owned by an American oil tycoon, Friedhelm Eronat, who has fronted for Exxon Mobil in the past. BBC 4 discovered Eronat was at the heart of a deal to get at Darfur's oil. Eronat avoided prison and a fine only by swapping his U.S. citizenship for British citizenship just before signing a lucrative contract with the government of Sudan for drilling rights to a huge tract that spreads west from South Sudan across the middle of Darfur. As a result of the new Darfur discoveries, that contract is now worth billions of dollars. The deal provoked outrage from human rights groups in Britain. U.S. media showed little curiosity.

"Eronat is not interested in Darfur or political issues," a former colleague told BBC. "He's interested in making money."

But was Eronat acting only on his own behalf or was he the middle-man for some third party?

Here's the rub. While various subterfuges can be employed to skirt U.S. sanctions, most involve fraud, bribery, or worse. Individuals like Eronat may thrive in this shadowy world, but oil giants like Exxon Mobil cannot afford to get too deeply into projects that are effectively "off the books." For this reason, the same industry that bankrolled Bush's presidential campaigns and crafted his petroleum-driven energy policy is undoubtedly now pressuring his administration to normalize relations with Sudan. And soon. As the global scramble for Africa's oil intensifies, the price exacted by wheeler-dealers like Eronat will only get higher.

In July, 2005, John Garang was inaugurated as Sudan's vice president before a huge crowd of cheering supporters. A new era had dawned. Three weeks later, he was killed in a helicopter crash. Riots broke out in Khartoum and in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The crash is still under investigation. Thus far, the peace has held in South Sudan, but barely. Oil remains at issue between north and south -- and Khartoum keeps its troops in the oilfields.

All this is to suggest that the stakes in Darfur are extremely high and that the claim the U.S. has no "vital interests" in Sudan is entirely bogus. Quite apart from oil, Sudan is a huge nation, and one of the poorest in Africa, with untapped mineral wealth that may include gold and uranium. It occupies a strategic geographic position, dominating the Horn of Africa and sharing borders with ten other countries. Its largest trading partner is now China.

Although activists and pundits continue to quote Colin Powell's "genocide" finding, the Bush administration has backed away from the word. When Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick visited Sudan last April, he back-pedaling furiously on Darfur: "It's been a terrible series of events," Zoellick said, "and as you know, there's a debate. The [UN] did a legal analysis of whether this was a genocide, and their conclusion was that it was *crimes against humanity*, as opposed to genocide."

This was not idle word-niggling on Zoellick's part. A finding of genocide would have required the UN to honor its 1948 convention against genocide. Zoellick's evasion seemed to signify a shift in Bush administration policy. Asked how many Darfuris had died, he suggested that the figure might be 60,000-160,000. The numbers estimated by responsible analysts range widely, to be sure, from 200,000 to 500,000. But it was as though someone had instructed Zoellick to cut the deaths by one-third. On the other hand, Bush himself used the word in [addressing the UN](#) last week. The administration may be seesawing.

### **Appeasement by Oil**

All that stands between U.S. oil companies and Sudan is the genocide in Darfur.

Why, then, does the White House not take bold steps to stop the slaughter -- for pragmatic reasons, if not moral ones? And why, last May, did the administration help

broker a treaty between the government of Sudan and the several rebel groups in Darfur that was clearly doomed to fail?

The answer to the second question is easier. The Darfur Peace Agreement was negotiated in great haste. The delegates from Khartoum threatened to pack their bags and leave the talks. Tensions flared between rebel factions. Egos and fears were involved, differences papered over, all in the haste to produce a document which only two of the four rebel groups signed. (In contrast, the comprehensive peace agreement that officially ended the North-South civil war required multiple sessions over a period of years.) All the Darfur Peace Agreement really offered was political cover to Khartoum and Washington, who could say they had tried.

Now for the deeper question: Why does President Bush not use his clout to seriously attempt to stop the slaughter?

The most sympathetic conjecture might be that the President is truly torn between his conservative Christian constituency, upset over the killings of Christians in South Sudan, and his oil constituency. In truth, George W. Bush may be paralyzed, as Bill Clinton seemed paralyzed by the genocide in Rwanda -- as indeed the world so often seems paralyzed, when confronted with the worst that human beings can do to each other.

Intervention may raise for Bush the specter of American failure -- the failed attempt at nation-building in Somalia by the Clinton administration, his own failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, even the failure implicit in attempting to impose military solutions on political problems.

But that seems unlikely. It is far more likely that George W. Bush does not recognize the moral imperative before him, that he and his top officials are thinking purely pragmatically. More cynically, the administration may imagine it easiest to go through the motions of concern without accompanying action -- so as to minimize the political costs and let Khartoum finish its work as quickly as possible.

Certainly "going through the motions" has characterized the Bush efforts. After months of pressure from activist groups, the president finally appointed a special envoy to Sudan, and earlier this month he formally requested the UN to send a robust peacekeeping force to Darfur with a mandate to protect civilians. Bush is finally on record as supporting a NATO-enforced no-fly zone. But these steps are a far cry from the sanctions urged more than a year ago in Congress. Still conspicuously missing are those that targeted individuals.

Finally, what is needed most, both within the UN and outside its structure, is exactly the kind of multifaceted, collegial diplomacy that this administration seems to understand least. Bush himself seems to understand only bullying and force -- or, in the case of Sudan, its flip-side, appeasement.

Appeasement driven by oil is surely as reprehensible as any. When confronted with reality, this President is clearly reluctant to confront the genuine "Islamо-terrorists" of his nightmares.

*David Morse's articles and essays have appeared in Dissent, Esquire, Friends Journal, The Nation, the New York Times Magazine, The Progressive Populist, and various on-line publications including Altnet, Counterpunch, Mother Jones, and Salon.*

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