

# Survivors and Saviors: Darfur, Politics, and the “War on Terror”

## Book Review

By [Christopher Banks](#)

Global Research, June 09, 2009  
[pslweb.org](http://pslweb.org) 9 June 2009

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

### ‘Save Darfur’ campaign is a war mobilization

*“Survivors and Saviors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror”* is the latest book by researcher and author Professor Mahmood Mamdani, who teaches at Columbia University in New York City. The book is the result of lengthy research, conversations and meetings carried out since 2003—the year that the armed insurgency in Darfur began raging full-force—with many protagonists, including traditional leaders, political parties and representatives of internally displaced persons from different camps, among others.



*March 2009 protest in DC to stop attacks on Sudan*

Reportage of the violence in Darfur by the U.S. corporate media has stripped away its historical and political context. Knowledge and information have been substituted with a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign led by celebrities of showbiz and sports, feeding misinformation to a mostly student base. Mamdani’s historical work restores much-needed context—an urgent task as the United States continues its threats against Sudan.

Framing the conflict: drought and the land question

The author writes:

“Contemporary Sudan is Africa’s largest country, with a land area roughly the size of Western Europe.” “Darfur, the westernmost province of Sudan, is roughly the size of France.” (pp. 8-9)

“If the Nile is the lifeblood of Central Sudan, the heart of Darfur is the striking and verdant Jebel Marra mountain range ... splitting the province on roughly a north-south line into almost equal halves.” (p. 9)

“The province of Darfur is made up of three geographic zones, ranging from the tropical green of the Jebel Marra to the arid desert in the far north.” (p. 10)  
“Corresponding to this natural habitat—highlands, savanna, and the Sahel—are distinctive ways of life. Rain-watered hand-hoe agriculture is practiced in the central highlands; cattle nomadism prevails in the southern savanna and camel nomadism in the northern and northeastern parts of the province.” (p. 11)

“In the 1960s, when the Sahelian drought hit the region and the desert began to move southward, a full one hundred kilometers in four decades, many of the

inhabitants of the Sahel—nomads and settled peoples—began to move, some south, others east, all in the direction of the Jebel Marra, ... the one certain source of sustenance in an increasingly arid land. Just as the drought knew no borders, those affected by it also shed their sense of borders, whether between countries or between tribal homelands, as they groped for ways to survive.” (p. 9)

“The unprecedented deterioration of environmental conditions in the northern part of Darfur led to a massive movement of population groups and livestock into the farming belt of South Darfur.” (p. 236)

As the ecological crisis unfolded, it pitted “tribes looking for land (a homeland) against those with land.” (p. 16)

“For all populations, nomadic and sedentary, the effect of the ecological crisis filtered through the land and governance system created during the colonial period.” (p. 237)

British colonialism: turning back the clock on Sudanese nationalism

The Sultanate of Dar Fur, which existed before the province of Darfur, was created in 1650 and remained an independent power until it was colonized toward the end of the 19th century.

Mamdani’s research affirms that the Sultanate of Dar Fur constructed a centralized state. It worked hard to create a kind of detribalization by recruiting a state elite drawn from different ethnic groups, and breaking with the notion of land as tribal property, replacing it with a new property system, granting land to state officials, nobles and other followers.

In 1885, the Mahdiyya movement, led by Muhammad Ahmad but known to history as the al-Mahdi, completed a countrywide anti-colonial uprising against the British and Turco-Egyptian forces. The Mahdiyya continued the centralizing political plan of the past few centuries, uniting the lands of the east and west for the first time in the history of Sudan.

The Mahdiyya were defeated by a British counter-revolution in 1898. Fear of a nationalist rebellion meant that the core of British administrative policy was to reverse the political and trans-ethnic developments embodied by the revolutionary Mahdist state—in other words, *retribalization* of Sudanese society and land ownership.

The British wanted to reorganize the colonized population around narrower identities. Crucially, they decided that “Negroid” and “Arab” were two different “races,” the former considered indigenous (native) and the latter foreign (settler). The assumption was that “Arab tribes of Sudan originate from Arab settlers who came from the Middle East, when in fact the Arabs of Sudan are as native to Sudan as most of its inhabitants.” (p. 71)

Mamdani’s research documents how “British colonial law then defined the right to access land and the right to participate in local governance as the preserve of those who belonged to the ‘native’ tribes. The result was a system that discriminated between native and ‘nonnative’ tribes. ... Members of a tribe said to have immigrated into the area were

considered settlers and were disenfranchised.” (p. 167) This form of British “indirect rule” turned what had been very fluid ethnic identities based on culture and language (and even occupation) into frozen political identities used as a basis to favor one group of the colonized over another.

The colonial system divided Darfuri society into two groups: tribes with homelands and tribes without. As drought and desertification devastated entire groups, leading to a massive southward migration of both Arabs and non-Arabs, the situation turned into a powder keg revolving around the single issue of land.

As the conflict unfolded, it tended to pit northern nomadic tribes against southern sedentary tribes, the former usually—but not exclusively—being “Arab,” and the later “non-Arab.” In addition, conflict emerged between cattle nomads of the south, of whom the larger tribes tended to have homelands (for historical reasons) but not the smaller ones, both sides being “Arab.”

The war that broke out in 1987-1989 began as an internal affair between neighbors. By its latest phase in 2003 and 2004, the war had taken on national proportions with several rebel insurgencies and a government-led counterinsurgency.

There is a widespread assumption that the government counterinsurgency represents all of Darfur’s Arabs against a rebellion of non-Arab groups. In reality, some Darfuri Arabs abstained from the conflict altogether, others signed political accords with rebel movements, and still others formed their own rebel groups against the government, such as the Popular Forces Army, which draws its support from the militias of three of Darfur’s largest Arab tribes. The important point is that the anatomy of the rebel and counterinsurgent movements in Sudan cannot be understood using the “logic” of race, but only through an analysis of groups’ relationship to land as the means of production.

Save Darfur: building support for an imperialist agenda

The idea of “Arabs” trying to eliminate “Africans” is false. As Mamdani points out in his careful and correct analysis of this organization, “the critical work of establishing in the public mind that the violence in Darfur is indeed racial has been the mission of the Save Darfur Coalition.” (p. 59)

The Save Darfur Coalition’s demonization of Arab people and the government of Sudan fits in seamlessly with the “War on Terror.” In the words of the author, it has packaged Darfur as “a world populated by villains and victims ... where atrocities mount geometrically, the perpetrators are so evil and the victims so helpless that the only possibility of relief is a rescue mission from the outside, preferably in the form of a military intervention.” (p. 67)

Of course, the Save Darfur forces utter not a single word on the terror and suffering that imperialist war forces upon people. With its contempt for historical and contemporary facts, and its arrogant calls for Western military intervention, Save Darfur has become the twin of the demonization campaign that preceded the occupation of Iraq.

Mamdani exposes in detail how groups acting to “defend U.S. national interests” in Africa (!) employ accusations founded on distortions to promote yet another military intervention in an oil-rich country.

The Save Darfur movement proclaims that the number of “excess deaths” in Darfur from 2003 to 2004 exceeds 400,000. This figure comes from a study financed by the U.S. Department of State after President Bush had already declared the violence in Darfur genocide.

The report, published in April 2005, provided the basis for most international reporting on Sudan in the West. The U.S. Department of State later compiled a different estimate for “internal policy makers,” reducing the estimate of excess deaths to between 63,000 and 146,000. In 2006, the U.S. Government Accountability Office audited the high-end findings of the State Department-financed study, citing major problems in “design, sampling, and data collection.”

In contrast, the GAO declared the highest confidence in the study by the Belgium-based Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters. CRED estimated there were 131,000 “excess deaths” between September 2003 and June 2005. The Save Darfur Coalition ads suggest that all deaths occurred on one side of the conflict, but the numbers actually reflect combined mortality figures from all sides.

Furthermore, the CRED estimated that even during the worst period of violence, nearly 70 percent of Darfur’s excess deaths were due not to violence, but rather to disease and malnutrition. A study conducted by the World Health Organization in August 2004 found that “the main cause of death reported during the survey was diarrhea.” The main recommendation of the study was to provide greater access to clean water and latrines.

Lack of modern infrastructure (such as sanitation) and drought, both of which preceded the violence by decades, are fundamental causes of high mortality in Darfur, yet the movement under the Save Darfur umbrella has consistently called for economic sanctions against Sudan, which would only further deprive people of the essentials to support human life. Twelve years of economic sanctions against Iraq killed more than 500,000 children under five years of age, and at least as many adults. Economic sanctions are not humanitarian intervention; they are a weapon of mass destruction.

#### Mortality drops, hysteria rises

As the rhetoric of the Save Darfur movement in the United States escalated, the level of mortality in Darfur declined. Mamdani writes: “All agree that by 2005 there was a dramatic drop in the mortality rates in Darfur.” (p. 32) United Nations field reports from 2005-2006 “regarded the mortality rate as having dipped so low in 2005 that the figures no longer justified considering the situation in Darfur an emergency....” (p. 33)

Today, mortality averages less than 135 per month, levels that are better than they were before the war. Yet, international media and the Save Darfur campaign do not acknowledge this development, and cries for a Western military intervention continue to grow louder.

Save Darfur is a large-scale publicity campaign to build support for an imperialist intervention in Africa’s largest, and one of its most resource-rich countries. In the words of Mamdani, it is not a “peace” movement—it is a “war mobilization.”

Mamdani warns: “For Africa, a lot is at stake in Darfur. Foremost are two objectives, starting with the *unity* of Africa: The Save Darfur lobby in the United States has turned the tragedy

of the people of Darfur into a knife with which to slice Africa by demonizing one group of Africans, African Arabs. ... At stake is also the *independence* of Africa. ... In its present form, the [Save Darfur mobilization's] call for justice is really a slogan that masks a big power agenda to recolonize Africa."

Professor Mamdani's book is a damning condemnation of the Save Darfur campaign and its political agenda. True peace is only possible if the self-determination of the Sudanese people is respected. Part of recognizing the centrality of a people's well-being is defending their right to political independence.

Hands off Sudan!

The original source of this article is [pslweb.org](http://pslweb.org)  
Copyright © [Christopher Banks](http://Christopher Banks), [pslweb.org](http://pslweb.org), 2009

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Christopher Banks](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)  
[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)