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May Roundtable: Introduction

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May Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency" by Mahmood Mamdani. London Review of Books. March 8, 2007.

Keywords

Iraq, Darfur, United States, Genocide, United States foreign policy

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[“The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency” by Mahmood Mamdani. London Review of Books. March 8, 2007.](#)

An Annotation:

For this month’s focal article, Professor Mahmood Mamdani draws a controversial comparison between two of the world’s most recent international crises: the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq and the ongoing state-sponsored “genocide” in Darfur. Mamdani argues that a centrally important dispute simmers among the smoldering car wreckage of Baghdad and the razed villages of Western Sudan: how the international community categorizes a conflict dictates what action is taken and there is great power lurking behind this process of labeling. By conflating Iraq and Darfur, Mamdani makes a boldly critical claim about moral responsibility, the viability of international human rights norms, and the dramatic results of action and inaction.

“Morally, there is no doubt about the horrific nature of the violence against civilians in Darfur. The ambiguity lies in the politics of violence....”

How we refer to particular types of violence matters. “Genocide” is a term the international community developed to describe Nazi atrocities, which were indistinguishable from evil incarnate; there is no room to judge the use of the term “genocide” when referring to Hitler’s “final solution.” However, we have run into considerable disagreement when attempting to reapply this category to subsequent tragedies. Because of the unambiguous nature of Allied intervention in World War II, the use of the term genocide compartmentalizes the story by placing it in the context of a just, successful and morally uncomplicated history. Is Darfur a similar situation? Does calling the conflict a “genocide” make it simpler to deal with or does it oversimplify the issue to the extent that it obscures important complexities?

“How could it be that many of those calling for an end to the American and British intervention in Iraq are demanding an intervention in Darfur?”

Mamdani suggests that the circumstances in Iraq and Darfur are similar enough to warrant comparison and is suspicious of those who argue that a military response in Darfur is necessary, while in Iraq it has become an unmitigated disaster. His claim is that the [Save Darfur Coalition](#) mistakenly glosses over the facts on-the-ground, ignores atrocities perpetrated by rebel groups and advocates a policy that could be equally dangerous—on par with that in Iraq. Does Mamdani over-generalize the campaign for action in Darfur? Are there other interventionist alternatives that do not rely on arms, such as diplomacy, targeted sanctions, political isolation and financial divestment? Are there lessons the human rights community can learn from Iraq and apply to Darfur in constructing a course of action?

“This voyeuristic approach accompanies a moralistic discourse whose effect is both to obscure the politics of the violence and position the reader as a virtuous, not just a concerned observer.”

While critical self-reflection is necessary in all cases, especially when dealing with situations where massive numbers of innocent lives are at risk, is Mamdani’s argument persuasive or has

he gone too far? There is an empirical case to be made that the conflicts in Iraq and Darfur are comparable, as is forcefully proven in the article. However, in the name of bringing politics back in, has Mamdani produced an analysis that further complicates the issue by ignoring particular historical, cultural and factual distinctions? Is it productive to judge conflicts based on raw numbers and non-specific categories? Or does it make more sense to look at each conflict separately in the context of their respective relationship to global powers (e.g., the U.S. or China), each nation's role in the "war on terror," or the natural resources each possesses? To be sure, at stake here is a highly practical issue: the names we use carry great weight, are tremendous sources of power, and morally and politically commit us to action.

~ *The Editors*