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Missing the Point

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Missing the Point

Abstract

“What would happen if we thought of Darfur as we do of Iraq, as a place with a history and politics—a messy politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency?” (§4). This is the most telling question posed by Professor Mahmood Mamdani in “The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency.” The implication is that the growing public demand for strong international action—military or otherwise—to halt the atrocities in Darfur is somehow unwarranted because people have failed to understand that the systematic crimes against humanity committed against civilians in Darfur (and indeed Iraq) are an inevitability of “the messy politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency.”

Keywords

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

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Missing the Point

by Colin Thomas-Jensen

“What would happen if we thought of Darfur as we do of Iraq, as a place with a history and politics—a messy politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency?” (§4).

This is the most telling question posed by Professor Mahmood Mamdani in “The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency.” The implication is that the growing public demand for strong international action—military or otherwise—to halt the atrocities in Darfur is somehow unwarranted because people have failed to understand that the systematic crimes against humanity committed against civilians in Darfur (and indeed Iraq) are an inevitability of “the messy politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency.”

It is a cynical and detached argument, built largely on frustration with U.S. policy in Iraq and Americans’ failure thus far to mobilize in large numbers against the Iraq war (though the Democratic victory in the 2006 must be viewed as a public rebuke of the Bush administration’s Iraq policy). Yet whatever we call the atrocities that the government of Sudan and its proxy militias have committed and continue to commit against civilians in Darfur—“genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” “crimes against humanity”—the crisis demands a measured and forceful response from the international community.

The commonly held view—and the one espoused by Mamdani—is that the government of Sudan armed and trained the *Janjaweed* to wage scorched earth counterinsurgency warfare against anti-government rebels in Darfur, by forcibly displacing civilians belonging to the same ethnic groups as the insurgents: ethnic cleansing as a tactic of war.

However, the history of the regime and the well-documented racist ideology of many senior Sudanese officials suggest that a more nuanced and sinister policy is unfolding. The counterinsurgency itself gave a group of Arab supremacists, both inside and outside the government of Sudan, the opportunity to fundamentally alter the demography of Darfur: war as an excuse for ethnic cleansing.

The debate over intent is at the core of Mamdani’s “politics of naming” and serves as a basis for his assertion that an “Iraq-style intervention” is both unwarranted and potentially catastrophic. But the appropriate policy response to mass atrocities must focus not on the intent behind the crimes being committed, but on how to most effectively protect civilians, promote peace, and punish perpetrators.

Moreover, in drawing comparison with Iraq, Mamdani ignores a fundamental difference between the logic behind an intervention there and one in Darfur. In Iraq, the intent of the U.S.-led intervention was regime change; the chaotic aftermath a byproduct of inept military planning and poor political analysis. In Darfur, the U.N. Security Council has approved the deployment of a peacekeeping force to protect civilians and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive ceasefire and peace agreement. The government of Sudan has refused deployment of the force. Non-consensual military intervention would be a last resort should the security situation

deteriorate and life saving humanitarian operations collapse. No one has credibly called for regime change in Khartoum.

The international community's acceptance of its collective role in halting and preventing mass atrocities against civilians is enshrined in the doctrine of "the responsibility to protect." At the U.N. World Summit in 2005, the world's heads of state and government agreed that "each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (§138). Further, world leaders agreed "to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner...should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (§139).

Regardless of the Sudanese government's intent in Darfur, the situation on the ground requires strong international action to protect civilians. State-sponsored violence has left at least 200,000 people dead and displaced some 2.5 million more. Centuries' old livelihood systems have collapsed, local administrative structures overturned, and valuable land and livestock redistributed as war booty. Atrocities have spread to neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic, spawning a regional crisis with even more devastating consequences for civilians.

There are many strong arguments for not intervening militarily in Darfur. "The politics of naming" is not one of them.

*Colin Thomas-Jensen is taking leave from his International Crisis Group work to serve as a Policy Adviser to [ENOUGH](#). Colin joined Crisis Group from the U.S Agency for International Development (USAID), where he was an information officer on the humanitarian response team for Darfur. Colin has an MA in African Studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), with a concentration in the history of Islam in Africa, African politics, and Islamic family law. He has recently published "[Blowing the Horn](#)" in the March/April 2007 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, an article co-authored by John Prendergast.*