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Alex de Waal's Shuttle Diplomacy

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Alex de Waal's Shuttle Diplomacy

Abstract

This month's discussion piece, "The Activist," is a critical look at one of the most renowned scholars of the turmoil in Sudan. Alex de Waal, a man with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the different factions, aspects, and issues surrounding the conflicts in Sudan, is profiled under a careful eye. De Waal, a competent critic—as McDonnell notes who "takes pride in his competence, and he does not hesitate to criticize activists he deems inexperienced"—has built a career on a meticulously researched understanding of the conflict. He honed that reputation through careful action, critical thinking, and a critical voice for actors who do not hold the same academic and experiential pedigree; namely, activists.

Keywords

Human rights, Sudan, Darfur

Alex de Waal's Shuttle Diplomacy

by Sarah Stanlick

This month's discussion piece, "The Activist," is a critical look at one of the most renowned scholars of the turmoil in Sudan. Alex de Waal, a man with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the different factions, aspects, and issues surrounding the conflicts in Sudan, is profiled under a careful eye. De Waal, a competent critic—as McDonnell notes who "takes pride in his competence, and he does not hesitate to criticize activists he deems inept"—has built a career on a meticulously researched understanding of the conflict. He honed that reputation through careful action, critical thinking, and a critical voice for actors who do not hold the same academic and experiential pedigree; namely, activists.

Despite his disdain for activist intervention in the region, de Waal may be the best person to carry out activist's biggest hope. In December 2007, the [Enough Project](#) (ENOUGH), an offshoot of the Center for American Progress, called for "[aggressive shuttle diplomacy](#)" to help bring about a transformation in Darfur. [Shuttle diplomacy](#), recommended in cases of extremely complex and seemingly intractable conflicts, allows for mediated communication in rapid-fire succession to bring about a solution and limit outside input from those who could set the process off course. ENOUGH's reasoning for this recommendation is that swift, controlled mediation would limit negative influence of regional actors, counter the unwillingness of rebel leaders to travel and meet official mediation teams, and address the fractured nature of the conflict.

As a member of the African Union's mediation team in 2005 and 2006, de Waal has the official capacity and the legitimacy to undertake this shuttle diplomacy tack that is advocated by the Enough Project. As evidenced by de Waal's work with Abdul Mohammed and his condemnation efforts against Bashir's indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC), de Waal is already working his brand of shuttle diplomacy. Rather than use his shuttling skills to undermine the ICC—a legitimate construct that is *indicting* Bashir, who will get a fair trial—de Waal could turn his attention to shuttling information between parties to resolve the conflict. Breaching the divide between academic analysis and conflict "street smarts," de Waal has the potential to usher peace into the region for the first time in decades.

The multiplicity of actors, logistical issues, historical grievances, and mistrust has festered in the stalemate to create an environment rife for misunderstanding and miscommunication. De Waal himself admits that the government in Khartoum is fractured, and it is apparent the power base is ill-defined in the region. The situation is broken, with unclear parties, unclear needs, and an unclear roadmap. However, if there is any singular person who can bridge the gap between the many factions, it would be de Waal. Leveraging connections which he has cultivated from his Ph.D. research days until now gives him ample resources and lines of communication that he could tap into. His vast wealth of cultural understanding, legitimacy, and credentials puts de Waal in a unique position to thrive in this position.

Furthermore, what de Waal can gain from his work in this capacity would be the ability to show his students that there is a nexus between passionate activism and pragmatism. De Waal's caution against hot-blooded activism is understandable. Action without understanding could prolong or worsen an already complex conflict. However, level-headed, logical approaches to activism

surrounding genocide should not be shunned completely. The danger in staunch anti-activism is the ability to inspire passivity in others, including his students. McDonnell notes that there has been many a frustrated student who has angrily asked the activist-wary professor, “What do you want us to do?!” Through his role as a shuttle diplomat, de Waal could concede that activists can be competent decision makers, and that their collaboration with academic heavyweights can yield great things.

Shuttle diplomacy is one approach that could be beneficial, and it is important to note that it is not a fail-safe strategy. Olusegun Obasanju’s recent [efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) yielded a tenuous ceasefire which was quickly violated, and Henry Kissinger’s work in the Middle East did not forge a lasting peace. But shuttle diplomacy could also yield peace—as is evidenced by George Mitchell’s work in Northern Ireland. While academics argue about credentials, labels, cultural competency, and remedies, people continue to die. The impetus is on those who know the region best to take steps to forge a peace that lasts long enough to make inroads for a more permanent solution.

With a new administration [swiftly being compiled](#), the hope for Sudan-watchers is that a massive policy shift will occur that will compel the United States to quick action. It remains to be seen, however, exactly what policies and plans will be put into place. In the interim, this remains a dire situation that commands immediate attention. The International Crisis Group [notes that the changes](#) to the conflict over the last year have been great, and not for the better. While shuttle diplomacy can yield results, the participants must be willing and the mediator must be both swift and careful—characteristics de Waal possesses and could leverage for positive action.

Sarah Stanlick is currently heading a health and human rights project working to alleviate health burdens on the underserved population of Lawrence, MA and as a teaching assistant at Harvard University. She formerly served as Research Associate to Samantha Power at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, and was also affiliated with the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at HKS. She graduated as a Trustee Scholar from Lafayette College and holds a Master's degree in Conflict and Coexistence from Brandeis University.