# REVIEW ESSAY

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## THE SUDANS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

**Joseph O. Abulemoi.** ***The Fragility of Sudan: A Study of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.*** London: Janus, 2011. xxvi + 340 pp. Acknowledgments. Abstract. Maps. Bibliography. Apendixes. £16.95. Paper.

**J. Millar Burr and Robert O. Collins.** ***Sudan in Turmoil: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State***. Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2010. vxiii + 340 pp. Map. Abbreviations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $89.95. Cloth. $28.95. Paper.

**Elke Grawert, ed.** ***After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan.*** Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, N.Y.: James Currey, 2010. xvi + 293 pp. Tables. Figures. Maps. Editor's Preface. Notes on Contributors. Bibliography. Index. $70.00. Cloth.

**Randall Fegley.** ***Beyond Khartoum: A History of Subnational Government in Sudan***. Trenton, N.J., and Asmara: Red Sea Press, 2011. xix + 395 pp. Figures. Maps. Tables. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. $34.95. Paper.

**Abdullahi A. Gallab.** ***A Civil Society Deferred: The Tertiary Grip of Violence in the Sudan***. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2011. xxiii + 239 pp. Preface. Acknowledgments. Note on Transliteration. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $74.95. Cloth.

**Douglas H. Johnson.** ***The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Peace or Truce***. Revised edition. Oxford: James Currey, 2011. xx + 236 pp. List of Abbreviations. List of Maps. Preface. Bibliography. Index. Appendix. $29.95. Paper.

**John Ryle, Justin Willis, Suliman Baldo, and Jok Madut Jok, eds.** ***The Sudan Handbook***.Oxford: James Currey, 2011. xx + 220 pp. Maps. Figures. Tables. Notes on Contributors. Acknowledgments. Glossary. Chronology. Index. $34.95. Paper.

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Many recent books on Sudanese history and politics have fallen into two broad categories: analyses of the Sudan's problems (what may be called Failed State Studies), and more specifically, accounts of the civil war that ended in 2005 and led to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The seven books reviewed here (with one partial exception) fall into one or another of these categories or straddle them. As such they share attributes and defects, but in representing recent scholarship they are noteworthy too in pointing to a marked change in the focus of academic interest and in the approaches concomitantly eschewed and permitted by that change.

For various reasons (most worthy of attention themselves), a Golden Age in historical writing on the modern Sudan ended in the 1970s. Although much of lasting importance has appeared since then (and several historians have produced superb bodies of work), the ability of Sudanese and foreign scholars to conduct original research in Sudanese archives, and the scarcity of expert supervision of postgraduate study in the Sudan and elsewhere, have in part been responsible for this decline. Originality has suffered as well-worn themes have been repeatedly reworked, often badly (the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of 1896–98; the regime of Lord Cromer; colonial education policy; the Juba Conference; the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, etc.). Overall quality has been diminished by shoddy or inexpert supervision in European and American universities. For political, financial, and other reasons, good Sudanese historians and promising Sudanese students have abandoned the field. In general, the result has been the substitution of deadline-driven ephemera for studies of modern history, and the deracination of political or sociological studies from history.

It might be expected that the dearth of modern historical textbooks makes *The Sudan Handbook* a welcome addition to the literature. Proceeding from an annual Sudan Course held at the Senior Secondary School at Rumbek under the auspices of the Rift Valley Institute, the book is meant as "a critical guide to current knowledge." This, at least, it is not. Of as uneven quality as one would expect of a volume with four editors and a score of contributors, the book is a medley rather than a summary and critique. None of the chapters is original, although one (Wendy James's "Religious Practice and Belief"), is a real essay with a beginning and an end and is a gem of concision. Other chapters have errors of detail and interpretation (e.g., Justin Willis's "The Ambitions of the State") or are warmed-up leftovers of authors' work elsewhere (Peter Woodward's "Sudan's Fragile State"; Douglas Johnson's "Twentieth-Century Civil Wars"), poorly conceived (Daniel Large's "The International Presence in Sudan"), pro forma (Justin Willis, Omer Egemi, & Philip Winter's "Land and Water"; John Ryle's "People and Culture of Two Sudans"), or redundant (Edward Thomas's "The Past and Future of Peace"). Despite (or because of) four editors, there is a great deal of repetitive "historical background" from one chapter to the next. The maps are mostly poor. The glossary has some dicey definitions, especially of Arabic terms. An appendix, "Key Figures in Sudanese History, Culture and

Politics," is embarrassing: omissions are a risk inherent in any such Who's Who, but there is no obvious reason why some of the fifty-one personages made the cut: was each contributor asked to submit a few names? Yet who would devote seventeen lines to Bona Malwal (whose name does not even appear in the index), and none to Francis Deng? Rather than a successor to the magisterial handbooks of the colonial era which the editors eschew (9), *The Sudan Handbook* is more reminiscent, at a stretch, of J. A. de C. Hamilton's (ed.) *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Within* (London 1935).

At the other end of a spectrum, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* is a revised second—and, the author tells us, "final"—edition of a book first published in 2003. To that monument to industry (which is not about "root causes" but is a history of the wars), the author has supplied a new preface, final chapter, and updated "Chronology of Events." Johnson is the leading historian of (what since its independence is called) South Sudan, and the virtues of the original book remain: mastery of the English-language sources, factuality, authoritativeness, and meticulous attention to detail. For the nonexpert, however, the devil is in the details: almost every closely typed page is packed with proper names and acronyms, and the student or general reader is bound to get lost or to give up. For example:

> The NDA leadership accepted this initiative, and there were moves to incorporate it into the IGAD process, though it was in conflict with the DOP. The SPLA hovered between acceptance and rejection. In breaking with Garang and leaving the NDA late in 2000, Sadiq al-Mahdi cited the SPLA's final opposition to the ELI as clear evidence of the SPLA's lack of commitment to peace. (xiii)

The book suffers too (though general readers will hardly notice it) from Johnson's sly handling of contemporary political figures (and historians) he dislikes; obiter dicta find their way even into the lengthy chronology of events. Despite these objections, there is nothing to compare with *The Root Causes*, and it remains essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the civil wars.

From a forest of detail we pass out in a miasma of generalization. The intention of *After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan* is to deal with the Sudan since 2005, when that agreement ended the second civil war. The volume brings together papers presented at a conference at the Institute of World Economics and International Management of the University of Bremen in 2006 that were "updated in 2009" (viii). But the result is a rag-bag of old hat and sale-day fashion, much of which was of little value by the time the book was published. Thus Melha Rout Biel's "The Role of African and Arab Elites in Building a New Sudan" is now pointless (as well as error filled); the title of Yasir Awad Abdalla Eltahir's "Empowered Deliberative Democracy (EDD): A Start from the Bottom" provokes mirth, while what follows has become irrelevant. On the other hand, the two chapters

of a section titled "The CPA in Its Sub-regional Context" are of interest: Regassa Bayissa Sima on "Changes in Gambella, Ethiopia after the CPA" and Monika M. Sommer on Ethiopian federalism. Several of the chapters' bibliographies needed work. The index is useless. In reading predictions for a future that has already passed, one weeps for the future of traditional book publishing.

Similarly problematic is *Sudan in Turmoil.* Nothing on the cover or title page indicates that this is really a reissue of a book published in 2003 by Brill as *Revolutionary Sudan,* now in its "first American edition" with "a new Preface, and . . . newly written Chapter 13 and Afterword." One of the authors, R. O. Collins, died in 2008, and the preface makes no mention of corrections or revisions. The book continues to read like pure Collins in the last phase of his career. For example,

> The totalitarian character of the Sudanese Islamist theocratic state insisted that it be the only authority to rule the Sudan by a constitutional government based on the consent of the believers, the *umma,* and government by the divine law of the Shari'a. (xiv)

Some may discern a Muse in such stream-of-consciousness, but this reviewer would welcome a compromise between fruity and dry-as-dust: between, to be blunt, Collins and Johnson, Collins's longtime bugbear, when it comes to making Sudan's modern history both authoritative and accessible. Over the long term, perhaps the most interesting point in this second edition is the reference, in the "Preface to the American Edition" to the libel action against the same authors' *Alms for Jihad* and their publisher's "capitulation" (xvii).

Both Fegley's *Beyond Khartoum* and Abulemoi's *The Fragility of Sudan* are revised Ph.D. dissertations. Fegley's book has two parts, the first apparently to some extent his 1986 University of Reading thesis, which included a case study of the Sudan's Northern Region, and the second based on more recent research and including a case study of Kajo-Kaji County in Equatoria. The first part is largely dated; the second gives the impression of waning interest. Early sections suffer from a lack of mastery of the sources for the Mahdist and Anglo-Egyptian regimes' legacies to local and regional government. A remark in the preface (xvi), that "sources on Sudanese subnational government are few," raises fears. These are confirmed at once in chapter 1, "The Development of Local and Provincial Government in Sudan," which is based on published secondary works, including long-discredited British colonial-era war propaganda. The chapter shows no understanding of even the structure of the Anglo-Egyptian regime: errors are far too numerous to list, and taken together they betray the hand of an amateur. Even matters of important detail—local government ordinances, British policy initiatives—are misconstrued: for example, the "Milner Commission" (4–5), the "Powers of the [sic] Nomads' [sic] Sheikhs Ordinance," and "Powers

of the [sic] Sheikhs Ordinance" (5). That a student of local government could write that members of the Sudan Political Service in the northern provinces "tended to be Arabists from the Foreign Office" indicates a lack of even basic understanding of the subject at hand. Howlers abound: "The term *jellaba* is rooted in *jellabiya,* the robe-like garment typically worn by Sudanese Arab males" (p. 32 n.9); "The best works on the Condominium era " include "Hill, R. *Egypt in the Sudan*" (a book on another subject); and so on. And there is this: "The range of death tolls of Sudan's first period of civil war are the result of compiling the figures published in all other works on that era cited above" (p. 35 n.59).

The rest of the book is similarly cavalier, or worse, about sources. Many of those the author lists are dated, or only generally (or not at all) relevant to the subject, or are anyway cited irrelevantly. There are very few references to archival sources, and some of those few are incomplete. Tables are out of date. What we are left with are case studies from which, because of the time lag, lack of clarity, and unreliability of sources, comparisons, or general conclusions are hard to reach.

Abulemoi's book appears to be a verbatim reproduction of a 2008 London Metropolitan University thesis for a Ph.D. in public administration. The text ends at page 208; a long and error-filled bibliography, which includes also a list of mostly anonymous interviewees, is followed by appendixes of illegible maps and documents often published elsewhere (e.g., the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement; part of the 2005 CPA). There is no index. Again, because of the time lag between thesis submission and publication, *The Fragility of Sudan*'s exposition (in the present tense) offers predictions for a period that had ended before the book was published.

*A Civil Society Deferred* aims to be a study of the role of violence in the modern history of the Sudan, and deals mainly with the colonial period, though so diffusely that even that temporal focus is not always clear. Upon reading the first sentence of the book—"I know, of course, the Sudanese state" (ix)—the reviewer imagined a Sudanese dictator on his deathbed at Erkowit. The reverie instantly ends in an explosion of mumbo jumbo, name-dropping, and sociological jargon. We are told: "knowledge relates to the creation of the concept and the imagined reality of the imperial core state, or 'the "Center" as the heartland of social and religious models of organized cosmic space and social and ideological life, and as the focal point for communication with the sacred'" (xii). If a reader finds this sort of thing difficult to grasp, the author might suggest a reason: "the comprehensions of the meanings of the geographical distance ... were removed from the field of the discourse" (ix). Get it?

In only partial mitigation it can be said that an author is limited by his sources, in this case almost an undifferentiated slew of published works from Homer, Herodotus, and Diodorus to Tocqueville, Kipling, Du Bois, Sartre, Foucault, and Wallerstein, with generous uncritical dips into long-discarded Anglo-Egyptian propaganda and campaign histories (Churchill,

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Steevens, Wingate, Cromer). Heroes of the Condominium cannot be blamed, however, for others' misidentifying, misquoting, and mistitling of their works, or for their treating those flawed accounts as gospel. Copy-and-paste is also a problem, as when passages are repeated almost verbatim (e.g., 36ff and 84ff), but with differing errors. Although the author acknowledges archivists' help, no archival sources are actually mentioned or, apparently, used. The notes are replete with mistakes. It is not often that a bibliography provides comic relief from the main text of a book, and such oddities as "Dustin" Wai, "Roland" Wingate, and John "O'Voll" would be excused as typographical errors were it not for, for example, the revelation of King Edward VII as the author (posthumously, in 1914) of a biography of Kitchener. (Who knew?) Withal, Abdallahi Gallab has serious scholarly aspirations. What he did not have, and obviously needed, was direction in the sources, control of a propensity to digress, and, before publication, someone—anyone—to give his drafts a close and critical reading.

Of the authors whose books are under review, the veteran Johnson emerges the uncontestable champion. *The Root Causes* stands out because of his mastery of sources and expertise in synthesis, the absence of both of which in so many other recent works helps to explain the attraction of theoretical rabbit holes. As interesting and even provocative as some of today's flawed academic work may be, it gives little hope for a renaissance in historical and political writing on or from the two Sudans.

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