

# The One City-State

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Cryonic07. Southern Sudan - 1800. July 14, 2011. Wikimedia Commons.

## Introduction

Africa is known for being a continent fraught with wars. The modern history of Sudan lives up to this stereotype. Sudan is a nation located in northeast Africa. Once the largest country in Africa bordered by nine other countries, it has historically connected Africa with the Mediterranean. For many decades, Sudan has been engaged in an armed conflict between the central government in Khartoum and the Southern military known as the Sudan People's

Liberation Army. For decades, ordinary life has been disrupted by a series of guerilla warfare fought in the bush and villages in the Southern part of Sudan. Over two million people have died, and four million South Sudanese have been displaced as a result of these civil wars.[1]The First Sudanese Civil War broke out in 1955 and ended in 1972. There was a period of relative peace before the civil war broke out again in 1983 and lasted until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed in 2005. The CPA paved the way for the creation of the world's youngest nation: The Republic of South Sudan. In this paper, I critically examine the scholarship on Sudan's civil wars in hopes of developing a richer understanding of why issues of mistrust, class, and nationalism are factors that contributed to the ongoing civil wars in Sudan.

Many historians and scholars have investigated the constant conflicts and violence in Sudan. The four most essential scholars are Stephanie Beswick (*Sudan's Blood Memory: The Legacy of War, Ethnicity, and Slavery in Early South Sudan*), Amir Idris (*Identity, citizenship, and violence in two Sudans*), Elena Vezzadini ("Nationalism by Telegrams: Political Writings and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Sudan, 1920–1924"), and Richard Cockett (*Sudan: Darfur and the failure of an African State*). First, I investigate Beswick's claim that mistrust was a force leading up to the civil war due to the history of slavery in Sudan. I also examine Idris' view that colonial Britain elevated the Northern Sudanese into a position of power, which created a Northern elite class over Southern Sudanese and ultimately led to civil war. Cockett continues this frame of thinking as he argues that the civil war emerged from the Northern elite's unwillingness to include Southerners into their group of power and privilege. Finally, we will investigate Elena Vezzadini's claim that nationalism and religion played prominent roles in the civil war. She argues that one group saw themselves as Arab and Muslim while the other groups saw themselves as Africans. This diversity was not embraced fear that national unity required cultural oneness.

## Mistrust

Mistrust is an integral factor that contributed to the civil war in Sudan. For centuries, there had been a mutual mistrust between Northern Sudanese and Southern Sudanese. Beswick tells us about the history of before British colonialism—a time when Northern invaders enslaved black Southerners. One of the largest group of peoples native to Southern Sudan is the Dinka, who shares a rich oral history describing violent scimmages with Northern peoples. Historical records from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Arab kingdoms support Dinka accounts of Northerners migrating into their territories and kidnapping their

people to use them as slaves. Beswick says, “Early evidence of contempt and negative Muslim attitudes towards non-Islamic peoples of the Southern and central Gezira is illuminated by the fourteenth-century geographer, Abi Talib as-Sufi Ad-Dimishqi,” who describes the Southern region of Sudan as, “a land inhabited by a race of Sudan who go naked like the Zanj and who are like animals because of their stupidity; they profess no religion.”[2] This source shows clear evidence that Arabs in the North and Africans in the South had contact with each other for centuries, but these interactions were not peaceful. Instead, a long history of violence between these two groups instilled a level of mutual mistrust that would prove uneasy to remedy.

From the African perspective, Southern Sudanese people believed the whole land of Sudan belonged to the black people, even though they had been pushed South for centuries due to violent conflicts with Northern Arabs. Speaking of the area as the land of their forefathers, Dinka elders explained that “their early forefathers left central Sudan many centuries ago because of military stress, slave raids, and droughts.”[3] This is especially significant because Sudan’s central government is located in its capital city, Khartoum, which is in central Sudan.

Invasion and slave-raiding pushed black Southerners out of the land that would become the city of power. It also forced the many diverse African peoples of Sudan into a smaller space where they would fight for limited resources. From the modern perspective, this scenario can be viewed as a domino effect. Beswick explains: “with the fall of the kingdom of Alwa (Dinka and other native groups under Alwa at the time) in the thirteenth century and the beginning of the great Dinka migration South, many clans arrived at the junction of the Sobat and Nile Rivers and displaced and warred with, and absorbed, a new people.”[4] This stress of foreign intruders and slave raiding “continued intermittently for centuries... As the Dinka were the most prized of slaves during the Egyptian colonial era.”[5] While slave-raiding ended with the arrival of British colonialization, the memory of such would live on through oral history. Oral history is alive and well for the peoples of Southern Sudan, and accounts of violence and slavery undoubtedly contributed to a culture of viewing their neighbors to the North with hostility.

## Class

Colonial and post-colonial factors also led to the trenchant nature of civil war in Sudan. Idris points to how the colonial government left a clear road for a small group of Northern Sudanese to form an elite class with complete hold over government power. When the colonial government of Britain and Egypt

occupied Sudan in 1899, they established their authority in the North and deliberately excluded the South from education and economic development. Idris says: “People of Northern Sudan have been seen as ‘oriental’ while people of Southern Sudan have been presented as ‘people without history.’”[6]Idris stresses this depiction of the native peoples according to western racial perceptions: “In fact, the colonial state accepted the racist ideology of the 19th century, that the South was inferior to the North and Arabs and Muslims were civilized, while Africans and non-Muslims were not.”[7]Thissupports the notion that the colonial administration favored the North over the South.

Two major religious sects – the Khatmiyya and the Ansar – were the first Northern Sudanese settlers who established the central government of Sudan before the British colonial occupation in 1899. These groups allied with the British and were given a choice to rule Sudan either by indirect rule they could divide the country and rule it accordingly. Sayyid Ali Al-Mirghani was the leader of the Khatmiyya religious sect, and Al-Rahman Al-Mahdi was the leader of the Ansar sect. Both leaders eventually created separate political parties: the Umma and the Democratic Union Party (DUP). Historian Richard Cockett writes:

*Indeed, for all their superficial differences, Sudan’s leaders were (and remain) products of the same political class and were often educated at the same schools; they even married into each other’s families. It is little wonder that the southern Sudanese, the perennial victims of Khartoum’s politicians, scarcely bothered to distinguish between them.[8]*

These two parties represented Islamic ideologies and, though they were charged to serve the interests of all Sudanese people under imperial rule, they were run by a small group of elites. The elite wanted to make sure that Sudan’s experience under Turkish invasion and Ottoman rule from 1821-1885 would not be repeated. Instead, the elite class derived power from the indirect rule and wanted the country to be ruled by Islamic law. Black southerners were considered infidels because they had religious beliefs distinct from Islam, so for that, they were kept out of positions of power with the intent to convert them in time to come. Speaking to this latter point, Sadiq al-Mahdi (Prime Minister of Sudan from 1966-1967 and 1986-1989) said: “Islam has a holy mission in Africa, and Southern Sudan is the beginning of that mission.”[9]

The colonial administration governed the North and the South differently until the year before Sudan gained its independence. Then, the colonial government decided that Sudan would be ruled one country and the political

parties in the North or the elite class would have full power. “The call for the unification between the North and South occurred in the midst of heightening anti-colonial nationalism, particularly in the North, and the drive for independence led by the northern Sudanese political elite.”[10]The colonial power and the Northern elite agreed that the Southerners were backward and unfit to govern themselves, so they were not included in the negotiations for Sudan’s independence from colonial rule. After the people in the South discovered that the administration changed from British hands to the Northerners, the Southerners thought that it was best to leave intact the policies that had already been agreed upon regarding the separation of North and South. The people in the South believed they would figure a way to govern their affairs after the departure of the colonial power. They did not think their fate would be left in the hands of a group who had enslaved them in the past. Ultimately, however, instead of allowing the people of the South to govern themselves, the British handed the South to the North to be governed as one nation under leadership in Khartoum. Idris quotes Pete Kok, a Southern Sudanese resident: “To most Southern Sudanese and indeed to some British colonial officials, the most untenable part of the British legacy was the handing over of the state to the northern Sudanese nationalist, without any safeguards of the south and other marginalized regions in the African belt.”[11]

The end of Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule in Sudan, leading up to the country’s independence, marked the beginning of civil unrest in Sudan. As the colonial administration was getting ready to abandon Sudan, the Northern Sudanese were left in positions of power over the whole country. The entire southern Sudanese region quickly came under the Anyanya army control, backed by his political party of South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM). The Southerners fought for more representation in the newly unified government with North Sudan, but they were skeptical because they were never included in any of the negotiations. Cockett relays Idris’ frame of thought, viewing the emerging unrest in Sudan as an expression of an elite group wanting to maintain its elite status, and not opening itself to other communities.

## Nationalism

The war took on a different meaning over time. At first, the war was about territory. Southerners wanted the land that was theirs, and Northerners wanted the region in the South due to its plentiful resources. Over time, the war was framed as a battle between Northern Muslim believers and Southern non-believers. The civil wars in Sudan were not fundamentally religious wars;

instead, religion was used to fuel ideas about nationalism. Nationalism can be defined as “an ideology that prioritizes the needs of the nation, making all other concerns – social justice, universal religious teachings, partisan politics, personal ambitions – subordinate to the national interest.”[12]Nationalists used differences in religion to alienate the non-Muslim, animist South population. Vezzadini explains: “The nationalist narrative of the 1930’s had created for itself a genealogy that stretches far into the Islamic Arab past.”[13]In the case of Sudan, though, nationalism evolved. The Sudanese government was heavily influenced by Islamic religious leaders and elite ideologies foreign to the people in the South as well as the west, such as Darfur and Nubia. The people in the North thought it would be in the nation’s interest to be united under both a common language and religion. Idris quotes a South Sudanese soldier: “Our problem with the North began earlier-when northern nationalists considered Sudan an Arab-Islamic state during their struggle against the British. They [northern nationalists] did not consider the presence of other religions, cultures, and groups.”[14]

The people in the South have always been very diverse linguistically and religiously. They were not consulted or allowed to be involved in the creation of Sudan after the end of colonial rule. The ideologies of the religious nationalists in the North after WWI played a significant role in the escalations of war in Sudan. While the arrival of the colonial government led to the creation of a central government administered in Khartoum (then the capital of Sudan), the Anti-Colonial Resistance in Sudan from 1920–1924 led to the creation of political parties such as the National Umma Party(established in 1945) and the Democratic Unionist Party (formed in 1952). There were also political parties in the South such as the Southern Front (SF) and the Sudan African National Union (SANU). The Southern political parties argued to be included in the decisions made in Khartoum. However, the colonial government’s exclusion of the Southern Sudanese parties before Sudan’s independence led to increasing dissatisfaction, exclusion, and, ultimately, civil war.

The Northerners were fighting for the ideals of a nationalist movement that promoted Arabization and Islamization. Vezzadini argues that the evolution of Islamic religion in the North was a natural occurrence. Therefore, the uprising of this political group during the colonial era was to protect the rights of people more than the religious aspects of their struggles. She states: “Northern Sudan, since the middle ages, had been transforming Islamic cultural region. Southern Sudan had remained isolated from this unifying factor.”[15]Vezzadini viewed this shift as an evolution of societies in Sudan that is quite normal in every society. Such a shift naturally led to a political

movement in the North to push out the British in the 1950's and call for the unity of Sudan. British oppression and intrusion into Sudanese ways were the significant grievances shared by many colonized peoples. Vezzadini said, "Because British colonization was a rule of oppression, the Sudanese had the moral obligation to fight it." [16] However, the unity government did not include the people in the South who felt that the North wanted to force Arab and Islamic ideals upon the diverse societies of South Sudan.

## Conclusion

There is no simple explanation for why the civil wars in Sudan occurred and why peace has been so short-lived in this region. Beswick, Idris, Cockett, and Vezzadini all agreed that factors such as mistrust, class, and nationalism have contributed to Sudan's civil wars. These three issues must each be carefully examined and adequately resolved the wars to end, once and for all. The people of Sudan have endured decades of civil war due to issues that were never addressed before independence from Britain in 1956. Now, newly-independent South Sudan has been embroiled in its civil war since December 2013. It is clear that this is due, at least in part, to mistrust, class, and nationalism that remain unresolved in the hearts and minds of Southern Sudanese. Scholars, politicians, and laypeople must have a clearer understanding of what caused the ongoing conflicts when Sudan was created because the deep-seated culture of mistrust continues to tear the nation apart, with Southerners fighting fellow Southerners with unimaginable brutality.

## Endnotes

[1] U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *USCR Country Report Sudan: Statistics on refugees and other uprooted people, June 2001*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/uscr-country-report-sudan-statistics-refugees-and-other-uprooted>.

[2] Stephanie Beswick, *Sudan's Blood Memory: The Legacy of War, Ethnicity, and Slavery in South Sudan* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 30.

[3] Beswick, *Sudan's Blood Memory*, 29.

[4] Beswick, 201.

[5] Beswick, 201.

[6]Amir Idris, *Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Two Sudans* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 27.

[7]Idris, *Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Two Sudans*, 53.

[8]Richard Cockett, *Sudan: Darfur and the Failure of an African State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 57.

[9]Idris, *Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Two Sudans*, 79.

[10]Idris, 63.

[11]Idris, 79.

[12]“Nationalism,” *Encyclopedia of Modern Europe: Europe 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire*, August 14, 2018, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/nationalism-2>

[13]”Nationalism,” 62.

[14]Idris, 63.

[15]Elena Vezzadini, “Nationalism by Telegrams: Political Writings and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Sudan, 1920-1924,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013).

[16]Vezzadini, “Nationalism by Telegrams,” 50.

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