The Chad-Darfur Conflict System:
Causes, History, Dynamics, Movements, and Personalities

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On February 2, 2008, for the second time in as many years, the city of N'Djamena lay under siege. With arms and intelligence supplied by the government of Sudan, a loose collection of rebels descended on the Chadian capital with the explicit goal, in the words of one rebel commander, to "remove the tyrant Idriss Déby,"[1] Chad's president for the last 17 years. But armed itself – and directly assisted – by French military forces, the Chadian army pushed the rebels out after two days of fighting, most of whom retreated to their bases over the Chad-Sudan border in Darfur, readying, in theory, for a next move that has yet to materialize. It was, according to the French academic Gérard Prunier, "yet another case of a frustrated group of disgruntled African politicians throwing child soldiers at a sordid ethnic dictatorship they were hoping to overthrow in order to replace it with their own."[2]

Yet the conflict in Chad, given its international and regional contexts, can be seen as much more: A desperate attempt by a fledgling Islamist regime in Khartoum to reign-in a periphery that is increasingly challenging it's own stability at home; a one-time occupier in Tripoli seeking to play dealmaker within the greater Sahel region; and a frustrated colonial power in Paris propping up the status quo, because the alternative – a potential failed state with Khartoum as kingmaker – would in all likelihood be far worse. For the purposes or our analysis, though, it makes most sense to view the Chadian conflict from an internal lens first, and introduce its international and regional dynamics later. Unlike is often portrayed in popular media, the current instability in Chad is not a mere spillover from Darfur: rather, it's roots lie in the evolution of the ethnically fragmented Chadian state which, in 48 years of independence, has seen neither sustained peace nor reconciliation.

The Chadian Context

Comprised of a mountainous, desert north and east, an arid Sahelian central plain, and fertile lowlands in the extreme southwest, the modern-day state of Chad is home to a predominantly rural population of 10.8 million, divided more or less evenly between an "Arabised" Muslim north and an "African" Christian and Animist south. Today home to more than 200 distinct ethnic groups and sub-groups, pre-colonial Chad was organized around various regional kingdoms and chiefdoms when, in 1910, it was subsumed into a colonial entity known as *Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF)*, along with the present-day sates of Gabon, Congo (Brazzaville), and the Central African Republic. Sparsely populated and neglected by Paris, according to Prunier, the AEF was little more than a "poor relative of France's colonial empire,"[3] a result, perhaps, of imperial overstretch, which brought *l'hexagone* little gain – yet in the case of Chad, in particular, a host of problems it would continue deal with for decades after granting independence.

As one might imagine, given Chad's marked religious and ethnic factionalization, power transition at independence was no easy matter: François Tombalbaye, a southern Christian who assumed the presidency at the end of French rule in 1960, was in power just three years before his banning of political parties triggered violent opposition in the Muslim north. By 1966, this had evolved in to a full-fledged civil war, which, with various twists and turns, some argue, is still being fought today. With France supporting the Tombalbaye government, and Libya backing the Chadian National Liberation Front rebels, fighting raged throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s before a coalition government was created in 1979, with a northern Muslim, Goukouni Oueddei, as president. Two years later, when Oueddei ordered the Libyan troops propping him up to depart from N'Djamena, his government fell victim to a French-backed coup from within, led by his own Minister of Defense, Hissein Habre. Habre's ascension quickly brought Libyan troops back into the picture, as Muammar Gaddafi began to fund new rebel movements in the north, and even proclaimed the unity of Libya and Chad – his army occupying parts of northern Chad until it finally left the contested Aouzou strip, adjacent to the current Libyan border, in 1994, when the International Court of Justice granted Chad sovereignty over the territory.

Yet Habre's government, like Oueddei's, would ultimately fall from within, as simmering internal ethnic rivalries, and a loss of faith in Habre by Paris, paved the way

for the rise of Habre's defense minister, Idriss Déby. In an odd foreshadowing of future events, Déby used Darfur as a base in 1990 to mount a series of attacks on N'Djamena, supported by three important – and unlikely – bedfellows: Sudan, Libya, and France. By February of 1991, Déby was Chad's new president.

An eastern Muslim belonging to the minority Zaghawa tribe, Déby, from the outset, faced the same basic problem that had plagued Chadian leaders before him: How to maintain his grip on power with just a small following of loyalists, in the face of continuous, dynamic, violent opposition. The answer – no anomaly in the world of African politics – has been a potent mix of bribery, electoral fraud, foreign pandering and dissident repression. To establish, for the western world, a veneer of democracy, Déby legalized political parties in 1992, and then went on to win "democratic" elections in 1996, 2001, and 2006, all of which, nonetheless, have been "farcical," according to the International Crisis Group.[4] Through 17 years of coup attempts and rebellions, Déby, according to the ICG, has responded "with extreme violence or by expelling dissident elements to Sudan or the Central African Republic," while keeping his hold on power through "intrigue, intimidation, and cash."[5] According to the Africa Scholar Alex De Waal, Déby "relies heavily on a very narrow circle of close kinsmen and on using state finance as his personal property, distributing largess in return for loyalty."[6] Meanwhile, the citizens of Chad have been left to suffer. Though Chad, today, boasts a GDP-per capita of $1,400 – not bad by sub-Saharan African standards – it ranks dead last in the most recent UN Human Poverty Index,[7] and has no electricity, nor system of public education, outside of the capital.

Adding to the complexity of the situation – and drastically raising the stakes of the game that is Chadian politics – is oil, which has flowed from fields in the southwestern corner of the country since a pipeline was completed in 2003 through Cameroon to the Atlantic Ocean and shipping lanes to international markets. First discovered in the 1970s, reserves of Chadian oil, at a proven 1.5 billion barrels, are the fifth largest of any African country, more than twice the size of neighboring Sudan's. In 2000, seeking to avoid the "resource curse" that typically afflicts developing nations, the World Bank provided the Chadian government with a $93 million dollar conditional loan to assist in the building of its portion of the 670-mile pipeline – negotiated as part of a

production sharing agreement with an international oil consortium led by Exxon-Mobil. To secure the loan, Déby's government pledged it would allot 80% of its oil revenue to development activities – such as education, literacy programs, and healthcare – yet when oil began flowing at the 2003 price of roughly $30 per barrel, leaving Déby with less revenue than expected, he soon reneged, causing the World Bank to suspend all loans to the country. Though the deal was eventually re-worked to mandate 70% of revenues to development, the message of Déby's stubbornness was clear: Chadian oil was Idriss Déby's personal property: or the property of anyone that dared unseat him.

Such players, of course, are not hard to come by these days, with as many as 12 different rebel groups, unified only in their opposition to Déby, now seeking the presidential palace as their own. It's important to note, says Prunier, that these rebels are far from one collective entity. Each group, he writes, possess "such varying levels of military competence (the vast majority being young rural boys whose only skill is being able to roughly use an AK-47), that it would be quite wrong to see them as some sort of coherent 'army.'"[8] The largest, the *Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Dévelopment* (UFDD), has been around since Déby took power, and is composed primarily of Gorane – a tribe of Arabised African nomads hailing from the northern region of Tibesti – many of them former allies of the Gorane president Habre. Second in stature, there is the *Rallye des Forces pour le Changement* (RFC), a Zagawa movement led by Déby's twin nephews, Tom and Timan Erdimi. Finally, among groups large enough to merit mention, there is the *Frount Uni pour le Changement* (FUC), a militant wing of the Tama ethnic group, and the splinter movement *UFDD-Fondementale*.

Enter Sudan

The evolution of these rebels into what some might consider proxy armies of Sudan can be directly linked to a political calculation made by Idriss Déby during the early stages of Sudan's Darfur conflict. Though Déby and Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir had long held cordial relations (according to De Waal, Khartoum supported Déby's coup in 1990 under an agreement that each government would deny support to each others' rebels),[9] the outbreak of fighting in Darfur, precipitated by offensives of the largely Zagawa Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Army

(SLA), caused unrest within the Déby camp. Though initially disassociating himself with these groups, and even mediating the first ceasefires of the Darfur conflict, Déby was eventually compelled, through threats from within his own inner-circle, to lend the rebels support in defiance of his prior agreements with Khartoum. By 2005, the JEM and SLA were operating freely from within the largely porous Chadian border, recruiting from among 200,000 Darfuri refugees in Chadian camps, and using Chad as a base to launch attacks against the janjaweed militias sent by Khartoum to do its "dirty work" in Darfur. With Déby now a threat to its periphery, Bashir responded by supporting his enemies' enemies, arming the UFDD, the RFC, and other Chadian rebels, who, by April of 2006, in a foreshadowing of the events February 2008, made their first unsuccessful run on the Chadian capital.

Sudan's support of Chad's rebels, it should be noted, is not merely a simple tit-for tat, but a manifestation of Khartoum's age-old strategy of controlling its periphery, which can be said to include both present-day Darfur and Chad. As De Waal explains, this borderland strategy dates back to the Turko-Egyptian rulers of Sudan in the 19th century, who established influence over their peripheral, or "military" provinces by buying off local leaders of the hinterlands – and treating borders not as lines, but as territories that extended indefinitely to the east, south, and west, until military resistance was too strong or the price of buying influence too high.[10] It is within this framework that one can better understand recent Sudanese policy in Darfur: by manipulating cultural and ethnic divisions, Khartoum has managed to get Darfur's Arabs (whom they despise as second-class "black" Arabs), to act as their local operatives, violently suppressing the "African" Darfuri rebel movements. And across the border in Chad, over which Sudan covets renewed influence, rebel leaders like the Erdimis have become the Bashir regime's newest clients.

This is not to say, however, that this strategy is a primarily offensive one. As former US Envoy to Sudan Andrew Natsios notes in a recent *Foreign Affairs* piece,[11] in the last three years, Sudan's ruling National Congress Party has routinely been defeated in battle by Darfur rebels, has seen tens of thousands of its own soldiers refuse to fight and defect, and is increasingly weary of the growing political and military strength of the Southern Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) – against which if fought a long and

bloody civil war and just recently battled over the oil-strategic town of Abyei – ahead of a planned referendum for southern independence in 2011. On top of this is a growing fear of western encroachment, not just in Darfur, where a UN peacekeeping mission has begun deployment, but in Chad and Chad's neighbor to the south Central African Republic. February's attack on N'Djamena, in fact, was prompted by the planned deployment in Chad and CAR of 3,700 EUFOR (and predominantly French) Peacekeeping Forces, considered to be the "vanguard of an invasion" by Sudan, according to Natsios.[12] Though it was equipped with a UN-Sanctioned peacekeeping mandate, most in the region viewed the mission – which began deployment in February after the Chadian rebels were repelled – as nothing short of military protection for Déby. Already a western pariah due to what some have termed the ongoing "genocide" in Darfur, the last thing Khartoum wants are western forces propping up a hostile neighbor while simultaneously "keeping peace" within its borders.

This, then, brings us to the role of international actors in the Chadian crisis, the most important of which, given general non-engagement in the matter by the US, is the continually looming colonial power, France. The French Republic, which maintains a permanent presence of more than 1,000 troops within Chad, in addition to the 2,100 "peacekeepers" it has supplied to the EUFOR mission, is by all accounts vital to Déby's grip on power. A departure of the Paris lifeline would likely mean the fall of Déby within days, if not hours – either by Chad's Sudanese-backed rebels or by Sudan, itself. As General Abdel-Rahim Mohamed Hussein, the Sudanese Minister of Defense, announced on the 6th of February, "We have the capacity to destroy N'Djamena with air strikes, but we won't do it, because this would lead to a war with France."[13]

Libya's influence, as well, should not be discounted: Muammar Gaddafi has long had his hands in Chadian affairs, and though he has lately feigned the role of peacemaker, brokering a fragile (and almost farcical) "peace agreement," between Déby and Bashir in October, 2007, he, too, according to De Waal, continues to provide military assistance to Chad in the belief that a post-Déby, pro-Sudan Chad would weaken Tripoli's regional position.[14] Gaddafi, despite his warming to the west in recent years, has also opposed UN and EU missions in both Darfur and Chad, ordering his own troops to secure the Chad/Sudan border in defiance.

Conclusions: The Road Ahead

The Chadian problem – or *le cancer tchadien*, as the French political journal Jeune Afrique recently called it – is undoubtedly one of distinctly Chadian origin, yet one now inescapably intertwined with the crisis in Darfur. Were Chadian events in a vacuum, one might argue, the various rebel groups in Chad might well be deserving of western support. Idriss Déby, after all, is nothing short of a tyrant, a statement underscored by the arrests of a handful of political opponents in the wake of the February rebel attack on the capital, even though none had links to any of the rebel movements. According to ENOUGH, a project funded by the International Crisis Group and the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity, Chad's government is "among the world's most venal and its citizens are among the world's most destitute and disenfranchised."[15] Timan Erdimi, Déby's nephew and rebel leader, would surely agree. "We are not instruments of Sudan," he said in a recent New York Times interview. "We have no interest in harming a single Darfur refugee, or getting involved in the problems of Darfur. We are only interested in changing the political system in our country."[16]

There may very well be some truth to this argument, yet at the same time, were the rebels to succeed in removing Déby, it seems hard to imagine a Chadian government not marching to the tune of Sudan. What began as an internal Chadian conflict, writes Prunier, has evolved into a "desperate gamble by a revolutionary Islamist regime gone commercially and ideologically bankrupt to try to regain control of a revolting periphery that was coming to pose and increasingly dangerous challenge to its rule."[17] It's no question, then, that a post-Déby Chad would have Khartoum as its kingmaker, but just how this would happen remains unclear. While De Waal argues there exists a legitimate Civilian alternative to Déby – those opponent's he's been carting off to prison, or perhaps worse, since February – it seems hard to imagine a stable civilian regime that might rule with a softer hand – and still manage to fend off both Khartoum and the rebels. Yet any of the rebel groups, once in power, would find it next-to-impossible to establish a political consensus. As Erdimi admits, speaking of the recent failed run on the capital, the various rebel groups, including his own RFC, retreated in part because they "couldn't

agree on a political plan for the country."[18] Thus, experts fear, a power vacuum created by the fall of Déby, could plunge the country quickly into warlord rule or even a situation of state collapse. This could have repercussions throughout the region, including the Central African Republic, whose president François Bozizé was effectively installed by Déby in a 2003 coup and could be vulnerable himself were Déby to fall.

Yet, for, now, while Déby may be hanging by the skin of his teeth, he's still hanging, thanks directly to Paris and its allies in the west, who have tended to overlook Déby's repression as part of what Prunier terms "some kind of a pseudo-humanitarian face-saving dispensation;"[19] i.e., the much graver humanitarian crisis perpetuated by Déby's enemies just over the Sudanese border. As bad as things are in present-day Chad, a post-Déby Chad, the west seems to have concluded, would be even worse. Thus for the time being, Déby stays, while his opponents, armed by Khartoum, hang out on the Chad/Darfur border and wait for their next opportunity to make a run on the presidential palace.

Notes

1. Polgreen, Lydia. *Darfur crisis draws Chad and Sudan toward deeper conflict*. The International Herald Tribune. 13 April, 2008.
2. Prunier, Gérard. *Chad: Between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war*. Open Democracy. 19 February, 2008.
3. Prunier, Gérard. *Chad, the CAR and Darfur: dynamics of conflict*. Open Democracy. 17 April, 2007.
4. *Chad: Back towards War?* The International Crisis Group. 1 June 2006.
5. ibid
6. De Waal, Alex. *Making Sense of Chad*. Pambazuka News. 5 February, 2008.
7. Chad: United Nations' Human Development Reports. Available at http://hdrstats.undp.org
8. Prunier. *Chad: Between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war*.
9. De Waal
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11. Natsios, Andrew. *Beyond Darfur: Sudan's Slide Toward Civil War*. Foreign Affairs. May/June 2008.
12. ibid
13. Prunier. *Chad: Between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war*.
14. De Waal, Alex. *Chad Rebellion Could 'Set Darfur Aflame.'* The Council on Foreign Relations. 5 February, 2008.
15. Thomas-Jensen, Colin. *Is Anyone Serious About Ending the Political Crisis in Chad?* Enough. February, 2008.
16. Polgreen
17. Prunier. *Chad: Between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war*.
18. ibid
19. Prunier. *Chad: Between Sudan's blitzkrieg and Darfur's war*.