Darfur: General Background and Further Details
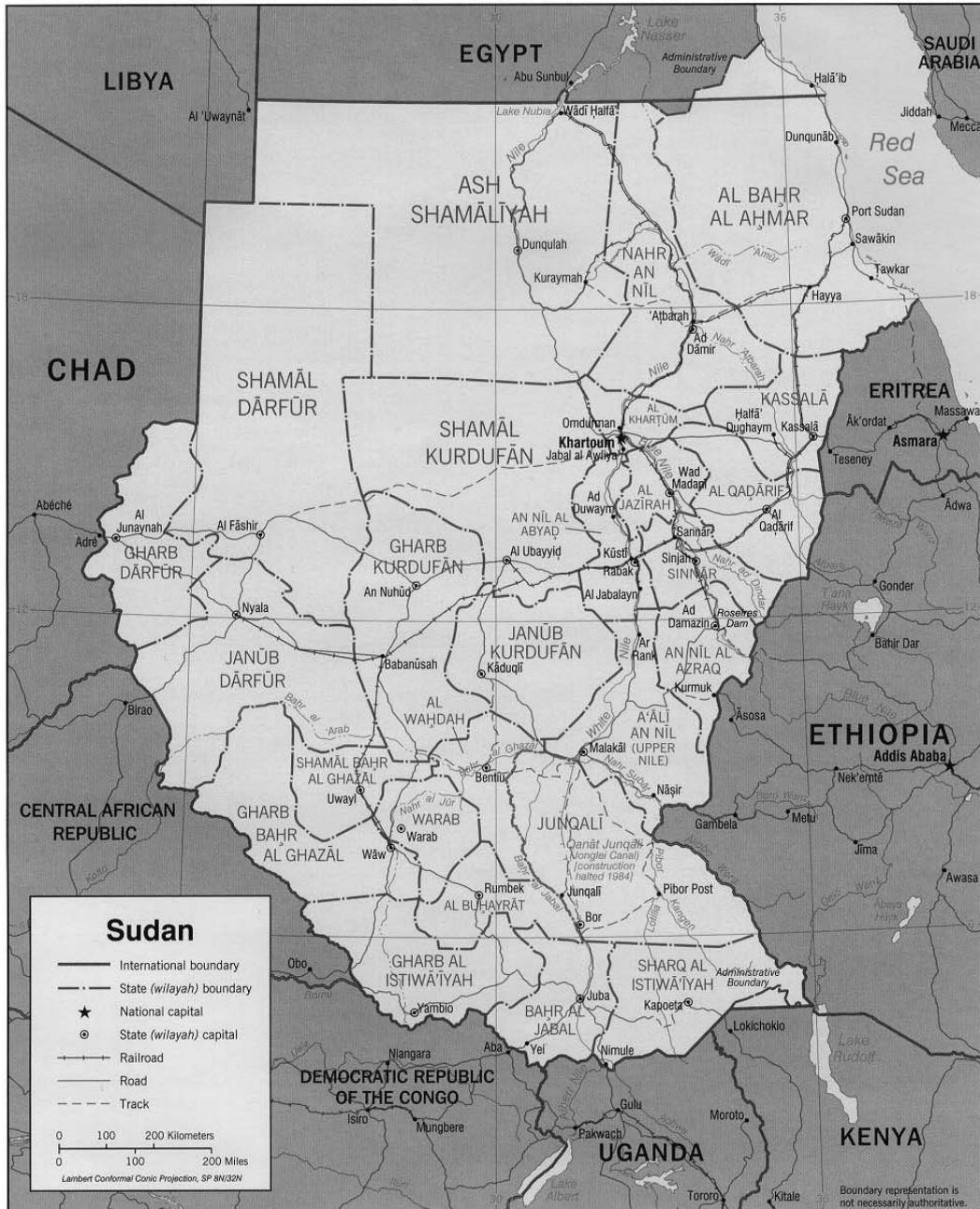
I.   Brief Historical Background

Darfur literally means "home" (*dar*) of the Fur people (*dar Fur*), in Arabic, but historically has been inhabited by the Masalit and Zaghawa communities also. Darfur society was organized by a set of laws, rules and traditions that evolved since the 16th Century and constituted a social system that regulated movement of individuals and groups, their respective settlement within the region and their interaction with other ethnic groups.

The independent Sultanate of Darfur was incorporated into Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1917, but maintained its multiethnic character. In addition to the traditional cattle and camel herders and settled farmers in the area, Darfur is also host to a significant urban population of traders, government officials and other professionals. Arab and arabized inhabitants have increased over time, comprising over 50% of the population.

Interethnic struggles are endemic to the region. Historically, armed raids on rich agricultural lands and skirmishes with rival groups formed part of the historical way of life for the nomadic herders. Such struggles formed part of a survival strategy in response to natural calamities and poverty, but also enabled nomads to maintain their social integrity in the face of threats from other groups. The pattern of conflict gradually escalated from low-intensity, small-scale outbreaks from the 1950s through the 1970s, to high-intensity, persistent and large-scale battles in the mid-1980s. The earlier conflicts were predominantly clashes between nomadic groups over access to pasture and water, or theft of animals.

> **Political Context**
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> Military regimes favoring Islamic-oriented governments have dominated national politics since independence from the UK in 1956. Sudan has been embroiled in a civil war for all but 10 years of this period (1972-82). The wars are rooted in northern economic, political, and social domination of non-Muslim, non-Arab southern Sudanese. Since 1983, the war and war- and famine-related effects have led to more than 2 million deaths and over 4 million people displaced. The ruling regime is a mixture of military elite and an Islamist party that came to power in a 1989 coup. Some northern opposition parties have made common cause with the southern rebels and entered the war as a part of an antigovernment alliance. Peace talks gained momentum in 2002-03 with the signing of several accords, including a cease-fire agreement.

Since the mid-1980s there has been a more systematic drive by the nomads to occupy land in the central Jebel Marra massif, on the scale of a civil war, with entire villages wiped out and thousands of lives lost on both sides. While drought-stricken livestock herders attempt to survive by encroaching on the fertile central zone, the Fur have

fought back to retain what they consider to be their land. The attempts of successive governments to achieve control have been alternately ineffectual and heavy handed.

Regional resentment of Khartoum was not limited to the southern reaches of the country, where the ethnic and religious composition of the population contrasted with the Muslim Arabs dominating the central government. Regionalism and suspicion of Khartoum has been manifest to varying degrees in other areas of Sudan. Although the ethnically diverse people of Darfur were predominantly Muslim, more than 40 percent generally felt more affinity with related groups in neighboring Chad than with Khartoum, particularly in response to Sudan's arabization process, which became official policy in 1958 when General Abboud seized power and established military rule from Khartoum.[1] The Sudanese government also revoked the indigenous social system of laws and traditions was laws in 1972, replacing it with a centrally imposed administrative system (*al-Hum al-Sha`bi al-Mahali*, or Popular Local Authority), which undermined the role of local chiefs (mayors).

Since 1985 the central government in Khartoum through the Ministry of Defence has armed Arab ethnic groups in Darfur and Kordofan

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