

Interview – Alex de Waal

Written by E-International Relations

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Alex de Waal is executive director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. He has worked on the Horn of Africa, and on famine, conflict, and related issues since the 1980s as a researcher and practitioner. He served as a senior advisor to the African Union on Sudan and South Sudan. He was listed among *Foreign Policy's* 100 most influential international intellectuals in 2008 and *Atlantic's* 29 'brave thinkers' in 2009. He is the recipient of the Huxley Award of the Royal Anthropological Institute for 2024. De Waal's recent books include *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power* (Polity 2015); *Mass Starvation: The history and future of famine* (Polity 2018), *New Pandemics, Old Politics: 200 years of the war on disease and its alternatives* (Polity 2021), and (with Willow Berridge, Justin Lynch and Raga Makawi), *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy: The promise and betrayal of a people's revolution* (Hurst 2022).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I work mostly in two fields — the study of famines and the politics of the Horn of Africa. Today, they converge in a deeply worrying way. The study of mass starvation, long dormant in the academy, is stirring again for the unfortunate reason that famines are making a comeback. The sharp end of acute food crises is the use of hunger as a weapon of war. And famine is itself a 'polycrisis' — it's more than an aggregate of malnutrition and child mortality, it is a profound and traumatic societal transformation.

The epicentre of famine-related polycrisis is the Horn of Africa. The entire region is currently facing state failure and armed conflict — including transnational conflicts waged by proxy — alongside collapse of food and livelihood systems. Reasons include the layers of unresolved political conflicts, precarious livelihoods, and the way in which the 'Red Sea Arena' has become a theatre for regional and global political-economic power contestation.

Today, many research questions that preoccupied scholars and students of both food security and northeast Africa over the last twenty years are looking either less relevant, or need to be reframed. For example, debates over international intervention and the use of force to protect civilians in humanitarian emergencies, over state-building, and combating violent extremism, are being superseded by interest in starvation crimes, the ethnography of political elites, and the ways in which global power contests are shifting the burden of hardship to vulnerable communities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

One of the things that *hasn't* changed is my enduring scepticism and critique of the value systems of the most powerful states — particularly the US and UK — as they protect their interests and project their power. I quit Human Rights Watch in opposition to the US 'Operation Restore Hope' in Somalia in 1992, asking, are the US Marine Corps the stormtroopers of philanthropic imperialism or the vanguard of a (progressive) humanitarian international? (Mostly the former, I thought.)

But my early-career critiques of humanitarianism underestimated the capability of liberal emergency relief systems to professionalize and save lives and livelihoods at scale, and the readiness of individual humanitarians to reflect on their political-ethical predicament. International relief assistance contributed to astonishing successes in reducing the

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incidence and lethality of famine worldwide from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s. Comparable observations hold for the international human rights movement, including, among other things, the International Criminal Court, which I believed overreached under its first prosecutor. At the millennium, many vocal proponents of humanitarian action and human rights were undoubtedly dazzled by the promises of liberal utopia and tended to forget that these agendas were also rooted in the struggles of colonized people for emancipation from the Euro-American imperium. The liberal interventionism of that era was hubristic. Both its champions and its critics (including myself) often succumbed to telling simplified morality tales. Looking back, it's clear that the humanitarians kept at least one foot on solid normative ground.

Israel's war of annihilation in Gaza is our moral litmus test. The metrics, practices and norms of humanitarian and human rights have all proven their value. I have written that it is the most intense episode of mass starvation since World War Two, in the exact sense of the most rapid reduction of a specific population from a condition in which acute malnutrition is statistically insignificant, to one in which food emergency indicators match or exceed those seen in famines in Somalia and South Sudan at their respective nadirs, through the efficient application of technologies of deprivation. This analysis has not been challenged.

There's a missing layer of analysis here — something I sensed in my doctoral research on famine in Darfur in the 1980s, but failed to build upon. Famine is far more than an aggregate of individual hunger and increased child mortality, it's a crisis of societal trauma. That much-abused word 'crisis' is appropriate here, as it's also an episode that compels critical reflection upon the fundamentals of society as those fundamentals are coercively reconstructed under the pressure of society's failure to reproduce itself. Famine was correctly understood by the people who experienced it as a threat to — and a loss of — a *way of life*. Thus, the famine of 1984-85 that I studied contributed to the social conflicts that led to the rise of the infamous Janjaweed militia, responsible for pillage, massacre and forced displacement in 2003-05. Another twenty years on, that conflict in turn led to political economic transformation in Darfur that is now being consolidated. The targets of the Janjaweed-led, state-orchestrated mass violence are now an assetless precarious underclass. In terms of demographic geography, Darfur went through accelerated distress urbanization. Those who reaped the benefits of the conflict — the merchant-officer cartels forged during the Janjaweed campaigns — consolidated their position. The Rapid Support Forces under General Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, known as 'Hemedti', are the heirs of the Janjaweed, a transnational commercial-military venture that looked as though they were bigger than the Sudanese state, and indeed made their bid to own that state. The hostile takeover didn't succeed but they appear set to dominate Darfur. The roles of starvation as a political method, and of famine as societal trauma, are an under-recognized element in this story — not only in Sudan but in other countries too, from Afghanistan to Yemen, Congo to Syria to Venezuela.

Today's civil war in Sudan is commonly portrayed as a senseless power struggle between two warlords. Obviously, it's not just that. Explain how you understand it at the intersection of political economy and international relations.

Sudan's war is the outcome of layers of political-economic history, each with its unresolved tensions, sparked into mass violence by the contingencies of individual ambition and miscalculation. It is also the product of longstanding international forces, reconfigured by the current global geopolitical landscape.

Internally, Sudan's modern history has been one of rapacious exploitation of the land and labour of the peripheries by a dominant commercial-military class, that ruled the provinces by dint of outsourcing its repression to local proxies. That's overlaid with a complicated social hierarchy related to kinship, skin colour and membership of sectarian groups. This was most pronounced in southern Sudan, and the outcome was that the southerners voted for secession as soon as they had the chance in 2011. For the rulers in Khartoum, the loss of the south was not just a political humiliation but an economic disaster too — they lost their oil revenues. The financial squeeze left them unable to manage diverse political challenges across northern Sudan. The ad hoc response was to empower the Janjaweed, reconstituted as the RSF, as a regime protection force, rewarded by commercial concessions to control artisanal gold mines and rent out its troops as mercenaries in Yemen. That didn't solve the economic problem — and the economic crisis duly contributed to a popular uprising and the fall of the government — while it fueled the rise of a new rival power capable of challenging the military-commercial establishment in Khartoum. During Sudan's interlude

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of a civilian-led government ostensibly seeking a democratic transition, the power struggle between the rival commercial-military blocs — the Sudan Armed Forces and the RSF — intensified. A showdown was inevitable.

The international dimension to Sudan's permanent emergency is no less significant. The country was forged as a hybrid imperial venture involving Egypt and an array of European and Middle Eastern mercenaries and fortune-seekers, entangled with Britain's geo-strategic drive to control the Nile Valley. The British Empire had its own 'belt and road', the maritime passage connecting London to India through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, and Egypt was the buckle on the imperial belt. Egypt lives on the Nile, and so Sudan became important. The combination of geo-strategic location and the enticements of windfall profits from exploiting Sudan's land and labour turned the country into a ruthless capitalist frontier. We see that today. The 2019 civic revolution was hostage to the cynical transactional politics of the middle powers of the Red Sea Arena — Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The Trump Administration belatedly agreed to lift economic sanctions when Sudan joined the Abraham Accords, recognizing Israel; it has since been an arena in which the rivalries among those Middle Eastern powers back their own proxies. Regional power competition also targets the neighbouring countries too, and so it's unlikely that there can be peace in Sudan until there's either a new regional order across the Red Sea Arena — there are ambitious visions but none that can be realized soon — or, a more realistic possibility, a pact to insulate Sudan from the devastating impact of their rivalries. Behind the regional conflicts are global contests — the Red Sea is the buckle on China's belt and the location of its first naval base in what it calls the 'far seas', the Russians and Iranians are actively seeking military bases on the Red Sea's shores, and it is Israel's back door, as Yemen's Ansarallah, known as the Houthis, have forcibly reminded us. The 2024 BRICS expansion brought in five new members, all of them Red Sea Arena middle powers (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), all seeking freedom of maneuver in a multi-polar world, and leveraging their strategic location accordingly. The UAE has stolen a march on the others in seeking to control gold and land in Sudan and its neighbours.

You've proposed a complete demilitarisation of the Red Sea. What is the role of alternative trade and shipping routes such as the newly-proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in enhancing the viability of such a proposal?

Transport infrastructure — sea lanes, railway corridors, oil and gas pipelines, and container ports — are critical in today's geostrategic contests, alongside access to critical resources. Unlike 19th century imperialism and the Cold War rivalry, in a world of weaponized interdependence, physical control of territory is less important than setting the rules and having the financial clout of real estate and commodity encumbrance. So I don't expect to see one Europe-Asia transport corridor 'owned' by China and another 'owned' by the US and its allies. Illustrative of this is the fact that the IMEC route terminates at Piraeus in Greece — a port majority owned by the Chinese conglomerate COSCO — and that the UAE is pivotal to both the IMEC and a member of BRICS-Plus. That said, the IMEC plans, and the extraordinary Israeli vision for rebuilding Gaza as a Dubai-style entrepôt integrated into that infrastructure, point to the ascendancy of what Keller Easterling calls 'extrastatecraft.' In the context of Israel's violent domination of the Palestinians and the regional arms race across the Red Sea Arena, we see a new configuration of infrastructure, finance, and actual and potential war at the crossroads of global trade. Those pushing for militarized domination of this space should at least be challenged by bold ideas on the other side, such as demilitarizing it.

Twenty years ago, the war and atrocities in Darfur were the focus of an international movement demanding action. Darfur is facing something similar today. Why the inaction?

The 'Save Darfur' movement of twenty years ago was astonishing and surprising — no-one who worked on Sudan expected that American college students and celebrities would turn out *en masse* to campaign for the US and UN to send troops to a faraway region and for the International Criminal Court to indict a sitting president for genocide. Today the humanitarian disaster and mass atrocities in Sudan, including acts that are indisputably genocidal, pass with scarcely any international outcry and certainly no campus protests.

The immediate reasons are surely the wars and atrocities in Ukraine and Gaza along with the culture wars and the shadow of climate emergency. Then, George Clooney spoke to mass rallies demanding that President Omar al-Bashir go to the ICC to stand trial for genocide. Today, Amal Clooney is advising the ICC Prosecutor who wants

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Benjamin Netanyahu arrested for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Bigger issues of global strategy and the standing of an international order based on universal rights, applied impartially to all, have eclipsed issues such as Darfur, whose significance was chiefly marking out moral territory. Twenty years ago was the zenith of American optimism: the question was not whether the US could shape the world, but how it should do so in those places yet to fall under liberal dominion. Save Darfur rallies demanded Bush and Obama adjust policy to align with their rhetoric; officials inside the White House and protesters outside the railings agreed on who was the enemy, just not on how far to go in bending them to American will. Today's campus protests against America's support for Israel's atrocious war represent a profound rupture between truths deemed to be self-evident and US power.

I think the connections between Darfur's current atrocities and famine, and the catastrophic starvation crimes in Gaza, and the globally contending war economies centered on the Russian war in Ukraine and the Red Sea Arena, will become evident. But I don't yet see a compelling narrative that links these issues that can capture the popular imagination.

You've focussed a lot, recently, on traumatic decarbonisation and how it is more likely to impact African nations than any others. What are the politico-economic implications of the process, and are there alternatives?

'Traumatic decarbonization' is the unplanned loss of oil and gas revenues to fragile fossil-fuel producing countries, which means that a central pillar of their economies and their political systems crumbles. We have seen in countries such as Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan and Venezuela, how the squeeze on the financial nutrient supply to the body politic can contribute to various pathologies — a rush towards new sources of rent (e.g. gold, much of it illicitly traded), resort to violence and even greater licensing of corruption in intra-elite politics, repression of popular protest, and desperate efforts to lobby to slow down the global carbon transition. The oil price rebound of the last two years has given fragile fossil fuel producers a temporary reprieve, but there's little sign that either they, or international policymakers, are paying attention to this problem. We need urgently for political scientists, IR scholars and energy policy strategists to break out of their disciplinary silos and talk to one another.

One dimension to the power struggles across the Red Sea Arena is the strategic decarbonization of the Gulf kingdoms. States such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are looking to diversify their economies and leverage the combination of enormous sovereign wealth and geo-strategic location, ahead of their loss of carbon rents and the shift from the petrodollar to new currency systems. Which brings us back to their interest in the gold mines of Sudan and the Sahel, land banking in East Africa and being traffic cop and tollmaster at the world's crossroads.

For four decades, you've worked on improving conditions in conflict-prone areas of Africa from both a humanitarian and diplomatic standpoint. While a mix of such approaches is no doubt needed to have meaningful change, what are some of the more effective avenues for effecting this change in the region?

I first went to Sudan as a graduate student in 1984 because the University of Khartoum was the number one centre of intellectual excellence for humanitarian research (at that time there was no 'humanitarian studies' as such, but rather refugee studies and associated applied disciplines). Within a year those university lecturers were part of a civic uprising that promised a democratic future for Sudan — like its predecessor in 1964 and its successor in 2019, the revolution unravelled, but it nonetheless was a notable demonstration of the power of brave ideas, bravely articulated. A few years later, Ethiopian political economists — among them some of the leaders of the new government — set about charting a distinctive course for reconstructing their country. We saw something similar with the rebirth of the African Union at the turn of the Millennium.

The key, in my view, is defining the problem and setting the agenda. When a country's thinkers and leaders are able to do this, then there's a chance. Part of the failure of the 'Save Darfur' moment was that it distracted those efforts, offering the illusion of salvation from abroad. Central to the approach taken by the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur in 2009 was asking the people of Darfur to define the problem for themselves, and core to the strategy of its successor African Union High-Level Implementation Panel was creating the space for the Sudanese and South

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Sudanese to pursue this. The exercise in defining the problem was successful, the effort to find solutions accordingly was much less so. The failure was partly a failure of leadership in Sudan and South Sudan, and partly an unforgiving international context. Those are the key lessons that I would like to emphasize. Today's internal and external disarray over Sudan begins with the absence of any agreed definition of the problem.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

It's a fascinating moment to be a scholar of IR! It's common to call today's world 'multipolar.' It's also epistemically multipolar: people see the world differently depending on where they stand. Many concepts that Anglophones take for granted don't translate easily; and those inside the citadels of western power and learning evidently don't share the frameworks of those camping on the lawns. Studying international relations requires the sensibility of the anthropologist.