The African continent serves as a living laboratory for exploring at least five types of guerrilla insurgencies: national liberation insurgencies directed against colonial empires and white minority regimes unwilling to cede power peacefully, such as the successful struggle of the African National Congress for black majority rule in South Africa; national reform insurgencies that seek the overthrow of incumbent regimes, as witnessed by the overthrow in 1997 of Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; regionally based reform insurgencies intent on achieving greater rights for their specific regions, inclusive of the Casamance guerrilla insurgency in southern Senegal; separatist insurgencies intent on achieving the secession and ultimate recognition of their territories as independent countries within the international system, as witnessed by Eritrea's independence in 1993 after nearly thirty years of guerrilla warfare; and warlord insurgencies that often lack a coherent vision of the future beyond the more immediate goal of overthrowing an existing regime, and are typically unable to reestablish centralized states after achieving victory, as demonstrated by the continued de facto division of Somalia into warlord-based fiefdoms more than ten years after the overthrow of the Somali regime of Mohamed Siad Barre.
The civil wars of the Sudan, the topic of Johnson’s timely and insightful book, have pitted authoritarian central governments of various ideological and religious stripes against a series of guerrilla insurgencies, the primary protagonists of which have alternated between desires for reform of the governing structures of the country as a whole to the right of self-determination and ultimate independence. Drawing on his experience as an historian and relief worker in the region, Johnson offers a masterful analysis of the various root causes of Sudan’s civil wars, thereby discounting those who offer up simplistic arguments based on the “clash of civilizations” (i.e., northern “Arabs” versus southern “Africans”) or the imposition of an artificial set of boundaries inherited from the colonial era. Among the various root causes explored in the book include patterns of governance that existed during the precolonial independence era; the introduction during the late nineteenth century and reemergence during the late twentieth century of a particular brand of militant Islam; the institutionalization of unequal patterns of socioeconomic development under colonial rule; the emergence of a narrow, elite-dominated nationalist movement and the failure of post-independence elites to achieve consensus concerning national unity, regional development, and power-sharing between the central and regional governments; severe economic crisis during the 1970s and the 1980s; the internationalization of conflict within the larger geopolitical setting of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union; and rising foreign interests in exploiting natural resources, most notably water and oil.

Those interested in how an understanding of the root causes of Sudan’s civil wars can be mustered to promote an enduring peace will nonetheless find themselves wanting in the final chapter, “Ideas of Peace & War in the Sudan” (pp. 167-80). Johnson
describes peacemaking efforts at the internal, regional, and international levels, but does not do so in a systematic fashion, nor in a way that systematically returns the reader to the various root causes of conflict set out in earlier chapters. It also unclear whether there exists a hierarchy of root causes (i.e., is one root cause more important than another), which in turn would suggest a potential pathway for resolving Sudan’s civil wars. These critiques are minor, however, in comparison to Johnson’s artful presentation of why Sudan finds itself in its current predicament, permitting others to take the analysis one step further in the search for a durable peace. The book also includes two highly useful appendices: a very insightful bibliographical essay (pp. 181-94) and a detailed chronology of events from 1972 to 2002 (pp. 195-221).

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