

Isa Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us about the World*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 312 pp. ISBN: 9780520296145 (Softcover)

This is a compelling analysis of a tragic but unfolding story. It is a deeply humane, passionate, conviction-led, historically rich analysis. It is rigorously researched, detailed, complex. It collapses so many “divides” in scholarly considerations of “weak” states and polities on the so-called periphery versus so-called core states. It gives agency to the peoples and groups of what are often seen to be marginal states and societies, rarely discussed in relation to world politics or global political development. It explores how central the peripheral is to the strategies of the metropolitan core states or, as Blumi terms it, Western empire. It is an analysis that pulls no punches but excoriates and connects the scholarly, intellectual, and political knowledge-makers to the structural and military violence of the empire and its Middle Eastern allies that have seen Yemen as an economic and strategic prize. It is a work of the heart and head, painful for the author to write and the reader to read. But as war, disease, and disaster ravage Yemen, and unyielding popular resistance to outside forces continues, the book is a must-read for anyone claiming to know and understand the world we live in today, regardless of their field of scholarly research. One can only empathize with an author (and his subject) who begins with a frank confession that he has only been able to complete the study based on his “spiritual radar” and prevalent “sense of guilt” that he “cannot do more” to help the people of Yemen. This is no ivory-tower scholar.

In another recent scholarly work of scholarly distinction, Paul Chamberlin presents the global arc of bloodletting during the Cold War, from China in the late 1930s, through East and Southeast Asia, and into the Middle East. The sheer levels of largely Western imperial violence starkly laid out in *The Cold War's Killing Fields* (2018) – the bloodbaths in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, among others – should lay to rest any remaining notions about the “Long Peace” since 1945, the fruits of the liberal international order. Blumi’s book complements Chamberlin’s analysis by locating Yemen in regional and global networks of trade, scholarship, art, literature, and philosophy, showing that little-known, if not forgotten, and “backward” Yemen has played an out-sized role in the making of some of the key contours of the modern world.

Blumi’s argument is that Yemen is both agent and victim of modernization, globalization, and neoliberalism, not to mention unbridled military aggression by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and their Anglo-American suppliers and sponsors. Their purpose and goal is, primarily through market and military forces, to drag Yemen into the twenty-first century of “freedom,” postmodernity, and openness. That is, to transform Yemen into another cog in

capitalist, global, financial and military-strategic systems. Yemen is only legible if it services the needs of regional and global powers. Yemen does not make sense unless it is integrated.

Given the marginal coverage in the mainstream media of the war in Yemen, Blumi's references to war crimes, the use of incendiary, cluster, and phosphorous bombs in civilian areas, the use of mass starvation as a strategic weapon, outright massacres, and the concomitant cholera outbreaks, are absolutely warranted. This is happening now, despite the additional deadly impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

But before military violence was unleashed on Yemen, "Yemen" had to be framed and understood. Its moving political forces, it is claimed, are allied to and answerable to Iranian Shias, and therefore a danger to peace and order in the region. Blumi argues that this is a self-serving framing under cover of which a coalition in Yemen that represents 80 percent of the population is being bombed into submission. That popular and broad-based Yemeni coalition promised to halt the corruptions of the pro-Saudi and pro-Western interim Hadi regime, including its illegal plans to sell Yemen's publicly-owned assets to the highest foreign bidder. This is the significant and durable coalition that is resisting foreign aggression in Yemen today.

According to Blumi, Yemen is not engaged in an internally driven civil war, as most global media suggest, but a war conducted by external actors who want a neoliberal future for Yemen, and which the majority of Yemenis are resisting. There are indeed foreign forces at work in Yemen, Blumi concedes, but it is the West and its allies who are the principal problem, not Iran. And therein lies the problem – and the solution. Ignorant Yemenis must be saved from themselves and Iran. What Henry Kissinger said about Chilean people's "irresponsibility" in democratically electing a socialist president in the 1970s, and his assertion that the "issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves," applies to Yemen today. Backward people just don't know what's best for them.

Yet, there is some hope because of instabilities within the Western camp: not only has Qatar moved away from its Gulf allies, but the UAE and Saudis are also competing among themselves for ascendancy in Yemen (not to mention across the region, including Libya). And more recently, there is growing pressure in the US Congress against supplying weapons that perpetuate the conflict and humanitarian disaster.

While market and military means are essential to the imperial project for Yemen, Blumi also places responsibility on the shoulders of intellectuals and scholars who develop ways of thinking to justify the forcible "modernization" and "development" of Yemen. This is of course a relatively well trodden

path – knowledge in the service of power. The late Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, noted long ago that what there is of an American empire, should one even exist, was made largely through intellectual and cultural penetration rather than territorial acquisition. America is famously viewed as based on an “idea” or ideal – an intellectual-political project. And it has built a global imperium based on an idea – its own modernity, superiority, and mission to spread its idea to the world. And it has mobilized impressive resources – especially the social sciences of economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology – to that end. Elite knowledge networks expanded the empire of knowledge to the world, creating circuits of knowledge, education, and training to promote a universally applicable theory of scientific modernization. But it is not knowledge alone but knowledge embedded in networks of institutions: elite universities, think tanks, and international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, the UN, and other development agencies, with deep roots within postcolonial states’ elites. As Blumi argues, there are “deeply imbedded Yemenis in the inner circles of empire,” noting the “central role of local intermediaries” and enablers. Such is the weaponization of the “The Imperialist Projectile of Development,” in Blumi’s terms.

But those local Yemeni enablers embedded in empires of knowledge were aided and abetted by revolutionary regional powers, especially Nasserite Egypt. With the loss of almost 200,000 lives in the 1960s, however, Yemen’s resistance to modernizing ideas and technologies was broken at the hands of Egypt. It furthered the process toward attempts at transforming and remaking Yemenis into modern consumers “drinking a bottle of Pepsi, chewing gum, and listening to rock and roll” (13).

Most interestingly, Blumi also considers Yemen central to the transformations wrought within Islam that shifted its meanings away from “radical, progressive, and perhaps even Islamic anti-imperialism,” towards an “Islam against Muslims” or takfiri politics (21). It was on the front line in Yemen that an imperial front reworked and remade Islam into “an essentialist, ahistorical Islam synonymous with Wahhabism” that opposed the left and social progress (see ch. 5 in particular). And closely allied to turning all that youthful revolutionary energy in on itself, in addition to the entire infrastructure of theocratic knowledge funded by Saudi Arabia and its allies, was an emerging “political economy of war” that required mercenaries and jihadists from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan to Syria to Yemen itself. Yemeni resistance to modernization and globalism thus, unwittingly and with lethal consequences, helped shape the contours of global jihad.

In Blumi’s telling, the story of Yemen and of South Arabia more generally is central to the world. It is the front line of a battle of local forces dedicated to

fierce independence against a universalizing capitalist globalization. This is a major claim to make but an important one. Readers will have their own views on this but, after reading this impressive work of impassioned historical scholarship, I find the case compelling.

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