

Review – Never-Ending War on Terror

Written by Mohammed A. Salih

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MOHAMMED A. SALIH, OCT 2 2022

Never-Ending War on Terror

By Alex Lubin

University of California Press, 2021

Alex Lubin's *Never-Ending War on Terror* (2021) offers a riveting and piercingly critical account of the conception, execution, and cultural promotion and reception of the United States' host of military and security measures following the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in New York City. Lubin, who is a professor of African American studies at Penn State University, presents his book as a "discussion of the War on Terror's cultural politics as well as its material history in order to reveal aspects of the war itself, but also to highlight those histories that are willfully forgotten in the process of projecting violence onto racial others" (p.20). To achieve this goal, the book focuses on a set of "keywords"—such as *homeland*, *privacy*, *security*, *torture*, and *drone*—that allows one to make sense of the linked political and cultural histories of the War on Terror. It is through these keywords, or master signifiers, that the War on Terror is discursively constructed, sold, and importantly challenged and resisted. Each of the four chapters of this succinct and accessible book dwells on one or two of these keywords that resonates across the political and cultural terrain of the War on Terror, acting "as something like a DNA strand, through which to understand the basic building blocks of the War on Terror" (p.22).

Chapter one focuses on the invocations of the notion of "homeland" after the 9/11 attacks and its role in reconstituting the American national/cultural imagination. Amidst the climate of intense mourning, loss, and melancholia that emerged, cultural artifacts, such as songs and TV shows memorialized the US homeland as possessing mythical qualities of being vulnerable and exceptionally righteous at once, and in need of protection and re-assertion through a range of interconnected measures that traversed US national territory and the global arena.

The second chapter investigates the increased securitization of the US homeland following the 9/11 attacks, including the invasion of privacy and the installment of an expanding surveillance regime that led to an unprecedented curbing of civil liberties unseen since the 1960s era of the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests. The legal conduit for such "dark side tactics", advanced in the name of national security, was primarily through the PATRIOT Act which allowed the executive branch to monitor the lives of Americans, particularly those of Muslim backgrounds (p.57).

Chapter three explores the issue of torture and violence in the course of executing the War on Terror. Torture tactics such as waterboarding were legalized through recourse to "lawfare", or the state's bending of laws to suit its interests by offering revisionist legal interpretations about "executive authority and the rightlessness of terrorists" (p.134). Ironically, the legalization of torture as "enhanced interrogation techniques", and the playing of rhetorical and legal gimmicks with Geneva Convention rules, occurred in an act of moral self-justification to signify that the US maintains its exceptionalism, and along with it its innocence, by refusing to do what would be against the law. Hence, torture had to be legalized.

The fourth chapter examines the Obama administration's continuation of Bush's extraordinary measures of violence by focusing on its use of drones. As the author asserts the drone is not just an advanced military tool for remote killing, but a technology that allows the US to establish an "imperial gaze through which to map, understand, and

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ultimately know the expanding battlefields of the war” (p.104). Lubin shows that despite Obama’s otherwise moralizing and self-righteous rhetoric by, for instance, insisting on closing down the Guantanamo Bay prison, “extrajudicial assassinations were the hallmark of the Obama administration’s liberalism and not a departure from it” (p.92).

In the book, Lubin draws attention to important linkages between culture, national identity, and imperial pursuits in the post-9/11 US. He demonstrates how the state harnessed the emergent mood of national mourning and melancholia—which drawing on Paul Gilroy and Amy Kaplan he calls “imperial melancholia” (pp.78-79 & 133)—to generate support for its militarist agenda, global-scale counterinsurgency efforts, and unprecedented domestic securitization. Stressing the strategic manipulation and weaponization of national mourning and melancholia, Lubin states: “The War on Terror must be understood through its nostalgia and melancholia, as much as it needs to be understood as a violent military project with no end in sight” (p.20).

The author demonstrates the palimpsestic nature of the US’s imperial impulses, machinations, and quests by shining light on the unsettlingly long history of the co-constitutive rhetorical and material practices put to work during the War on Terror. For instance, domestically, indigenous, black, and other racialized bodies have long been targets and sites of violent policing, torture, displacement, and at times massacres in the name of fighting terror and terrorism. Lubin’s candid account is meant to challenge assumptions of innocence about the history of US power and shatter the myths of essential exceptionalism prevalent in certain quarters of the American population and power circles. He establishes a link between the state’s extraterritorial militarism and transnational warfare with ambitions of global economic domination and spreading the US model of the neoliberal free market economy.

The book highlights the importance of culture as a means of furthering the reach of state power in the US and globally, and as a site of resisting such power. In the US, while songs such as “My Ruined City” and “Redemption Song” served as an expression of national grief, sense-making, and recovery from tragedy, TV shows such as Homeland worked to justify growing securitization measures at home and counterinsurgency campaigns abroad. On the other end of this deadly equation, South Asian artists launched an artistic project in Pakistan named #NotABugSplat—referring to the euphemism “bug splat”, the pixelated appearance of dead bodies as seen on the screens of drone operators in remote locations. The artists installed a giant image of an unnamed Pakistani girl in a field in the Khyber Phutoonkwa region of the country, as “compelling counter-visuals and counter-epistemes of the War on Terror” (Lubin, p.104). Such “insurgent aesthetics” were meant to arouse the conscience of US drone operators, challenge the imperial gaze, and showcase the humanity of those targeted by drones. Drone attacks have led to thousands of civilian casualties in various parts of Asia and Africa over the past couple of decades.

While Lubin masterfully synthesizes the various aspects of the War on Terror and their meaning, the bulk of what the book has to say has been covered in prior scholarship on the war. The book could have relatively broadened its empirical and analytical/theoretical purview to include the very transnational political discursive power of the phrase “War on Terror” after 9/11. While Lubin rightfully draws attention to the connections and linkages between US and Israeli security/military and culture industries in the context of the War on Terror, he could have strived to show how for example, the mere invocation of this magical phrase, i.e. “War on Terror”, is used to legitimate and justify wholesale violence by US allies and partners against entire communities. Beyond the better-known case of Israel and Palestine, Turkey stands out as an important and yet understudied case in this regard. The Turkish state has sought and received increased intelligence/military/diplomatic support from the US in its protracted war of choice against the Kurdish community within and without the country in the name of fighting terrorism. Such violence against the racialized Kurdish community and its political movement is primarily designed to maintain a colonial regime of domination that harnesses the discourse and purchase of the “war on terror” in Washington and the West to its advantage.

This 140-page book, published by the University of California Press in 2021, would be appealing to students and scholars interested in the intersection of culture, politics, and imperialism, American studies, terrorism/War on Terror, and US foreign policy in the Middle East.

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