

## Books

### When Ideologies Clashed, Bosnia Suffered

An American lawyer/ethnographer's groundbreaking book illuminates the universal features of jihadi movements while eliding their violence and fanaticism.

***The Universal Enemy. Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity***, by Darryl Li. Stanford University Press, 2020. 364 pages.

by Bojan Aleksov

This publishing debut of a conspicuously gifted and innovative anthropologist and lawyer dismantles the “terrorism experts” and “terrorism studies” that have taken hold in some academic environments, closely linked to media, governments, and security agencies. We are shown how they not only engage in wholesale falsifications and inventions but also offer little benefit on their own terms in preventing further terrorism or the fanaticism that leads to it, and instead contribute to polarization, lack of trust, and deepening of conflict between Islam and “the West.”

In Li's words, the book “explores the lives and times of men who came to Bosnia for jihad, those described as ‘transnational volunteers,’ ‘foreign fighters,’ and of course, ‘terrorists.’ ” Akin to Shmuel Eisenstadt, who saw the rise of Islamism as part of modernity even though it was modernity's nemesis, Li treats “foreign” jihadi fighters, regularly branded as terrorists, as legitimate actors in global politics with their universalist project only declared inimical by another set of universalists, be that the American global empire or international law.

### **Everyday Jihadism**

Questioning American hegemony (mediated by debt, military assistance, and development aid, and provided either directly or through multilateral institutions), Li not only argues that Guantanamo was not an aberration but an extension of American political/racial incarceration and domination over the Caribbean archipelago, but he maintains that the same process applied in Bosnia and elsewhere in the world. Unlike many a Bosnian expert, Li criticizes the Dayton agreement which ended the war in Bosnia, not for its inefficiency and the political paralysis of the country that it wrought, but by pointing out its important function in formalizing foreign control as exemplified in its role in the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT), declared by President George W. Bush in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. Whereas for years the United States and its allies were indecisive about the bickering nationalist parties and policies in Bosnia, Washington acted with unusual decisiveness about any foreign Muslim deemed suspicious. Similarly, as a practicing lawyer, Li is able to show

how procedural safeguards for incarceration or expulsion of foreign fighters were far weaker than those for accused war criminals as in the cases of Syrian jihadi Abu Hamza or Saudi national Ahmad Zuhair, abducted and later held without charge at Guantanamo, each of whom he assisted as either defense lawyer or *amicus curiae*.

While his legal experience and research enables him to discover, question, and oppose gross violations of human rights in the GWOT, proclaimed to strengthen Western hegemony with its universalist aspirations, Li finds that this is not the only questionable universalism. Thus, the book examines other universalist projects such as the socialist (Li's questionable attribute) Non-Aligned Movement and United Nations peacekeeping operations, focusing on some similar patterns of Muslim mobility and recruitment they employ and similar if not identical claims to legitimacy, including pan-Islamism, as in their display of Muslim solidarity, given that more than half the UN contingents deployed in Bosnia were from Muslim countries, all of which brought their own agendas to the conflict zone. Li's textual analysis and ethnographic research points out how division into "foreign" and "local" fighters makes little sense; instead, his "thick description" looks at more useful factors such as mobility and pre-existing family and social networks and backgrounds. At the same time, Li sheds light on other features of jihadism, such as the cultivation of virtues, creation of kinship bonds, and the founding of new communities, which remain in the shadow of jihadists' propensity for violence.

### **Context Matters**

Despite its many merits, the approach this book has taken runs into a number of problems. While aspirations to universalism might provide a useful interpretative framework, Li stops short of explaining universalism's priority over what he identifies as jihadism's other defining features: factionalism and fanaticism. Questioning assumptions and rules dictated by the Western-imposed universalism, Li legitimately confronts it with its competition on the ground, all the while circulating within the same Western mainstream interpretations of the Bosnian conflict and other events. Moreover, he does not subject jihadis to the same scrutiny applied to the West. Denouncing the demonization used by practitioners of "terrorism studies," Li treats the ideas and behaviors of contemporary jihad in equally problematic terms (or as Li insists, in the jihadis' terms). Embedding jihadis in everyday contexts renders useful, but also banal information. Too narrow a context or too loose an analogy (as with the Non-Aligned Movement) can confuse or trivialize rather than elucidate. Similarly, whereas Li should be commended for giving jihadis a voice – something that has been almost entirely missing in previous reporting and scholarship – one only wishes that he had raised more questions, expressed more doubt, criticism, or curiosity. Important issues of financing, logistics, and political, spousal and other connections are only hinted at.

The book discusses in detail conflicts related to religious belief and practice between jihadis and local Bosnian Muslims, but there is nothing on the perception and reaction to the actions of jihadis in Bosnia from other sides in the conflict. Trying to avoid a one-dimensional view, Li falls into another trap as he glosses over jihadis' crimes, the use of child soldiers, execution of prisoners, gendered rule, etc., at times simply rehashing jihadis' own hagiographies. Finally, field ethnography does not tell us much about the larger picture or even the significance of the Bosnian jihadis' part in the conflict. What was the percentage of

soldiers or Bosnians who were attracted to join them; how many Bosnian widows married them (the two ways Li identifies of their local diffusion)? How relevant were the jihadis in the conflict at all?

### **A Cloudy Picture of Bosnian Islam**

What is striking is how little this book has to do with Bosnia, even considering Li's insistence on not using the Bosnian conflict as a backdrop for his analysis of neo-colonialism and the ever more dominant politics of exceptionalism. For him Bosnia is a locus where multiple universalist projects intersect, mutually influencing each other along the way. But that is everywhere, not just in Bosnia. What's more, Li glaringly ignores the most obvious historical parallel to modern Bosnia's upheavals. In 1878, the Congress of Berlin awarded Bosnia to Austria-Hungary for occupation and colonization (interpretations differ). Many Bosnian natives resisted; others left en masse. Some were expelled. Several decades later, a couple of Bosnian high-school students who had been expelled from the country for their anti-Austrian views procured weapons in Serbia and returned to assassinate Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand, prompting Austria-Hungary to start the most terrifying war in the history of humanity. Li is not a historian and so can perhaps be excused for overlooking the events which made Sarajevo famous or notorious. As a human rights lawyer, however, he misses the parallels between the alleged terrorists of 1914 and those he defends. Austria-Hungary sent a German-speaking judge to Sarajevo; he condemned the native plotters to death, or to prison terms that became death sentences, in a trial conducted in the foreign, German, language. Li never wonders if his "universal enemy" is a new phenomenon, or what is new and specific in American imperialism and its attitude to Islam and jihadism, compared to the German imperialism that was used before against other religions or those without any religion like Franz Ferdinand's assassin Gavrilo Princip and his comrades.

While Li rightly rejects the conception of the Bosnian war as a rare outburst of barbaric nationalism and ancient hatred, as the global media would have it, readers of his book get only hints of Bosnia's complex history and the role Islam plays in it. Moreover, extracting the Bosnian war from the context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia obscures issues that are of direct relevance to Li's concerns, such as an acknowledged but not explored relationship between some Muslim activists who came to Yugoslavia as students during the heyday of the Non-Aligned Movement and Bosnia's Young Muslims, the most famous of whom, Alija Izetbegovic, became their leader and country's president. Or the process by which the Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak nation emerged or was birthed by the multi-ethnic Bosnian Communist leadership. Darryl Li's book provides argumentative criticism of American foreign policy, but for Islam in Bosnia one should turn to the recently published, brilliant monographs by [Xavier Bougarel](#), [Armina Omerika](#) and [Iva Lucic](#).

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