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Karine V. Walther, *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821-1921*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 480 pp., \$39.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9781469625393.

American Islamophobia, past and present, deeply impacts the ways in which Americans think about the U.S.'s role in the Muslim world. In *Sacred Interests*, Karine V. Walther argues that "it would be a mistake to trace an unbroken trajectory from the nineteenth century to the post-Cold War period, and, more importantly to the post-9/11 era," as these attitudes "have been shaped by specific historical contingencies" (329). However, Walther is adamant that "it would be equally erroneous to discount the ways in which American discourses about Islam have persisted in the recent relations of the United States with the Muslim world, albeit in varied forms" (329). There is no escaping the past when considering current trends in American Islamophobia.

Walther examines the involvement of Americans in the Muslim world from 1821 to 1921 and how those experiences shaped American discourses about Islam. The earliest experiences in one part of the world, namely the Ottoman Empire, created "a knowledge base from which to draw understanding and shape policies in other Islamic societies" (5-6). This knowledge base was the production of both nonstate and state actors. The collaboration and interplay of nonstate with state actors distinguishes *Sacred Interests* from previous monographs that examine specific American groups or individuals in the Middle East.¹ It is Walther's treatment of American engagements not only in the Ottoman Empire but also in North Africa and the Philippines that sets her intervention apart from previous works that note some of the same disparaging prejudices against the Ottomans and Muslims more generally.²

Inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, she goes further than many of the works on "American Orientalism" by exploring the "impact of religious belief on the history of *American* foreign relations with the broader Islamic world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" through "the broader web of interactions *between* state and nonstate actors in Islamic lands" (24; italics original). Walther's conception of nonstate actors

¹ For example, the many books published on the topic of American missionaries in the Muslim world; most notably, Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008) and Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

² Some of the same historical events discussed by Walther in the Ottoman context are the bases of analysis in Justin McCarthy, *The Turk in America: The Creation of an Enduring Prejudice* (Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 2010).

(missionaries, religious organizations, journalists, academics, businessmen, clergymen, philanthropists, etc.) is quite broad, but it allows her to reveal the scope and magnitude of the shared values and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam across a wide range of the American public. When she uses the term “activist” in regards to nonstate actors it is not immediately clear if this is an accurate category as it is not apparent what exactly it meant to be an “activist” in the nineteenth century. Is it simply a philanthropist who uses his/her money towards political gains? At times, yes, but it is not always evident.

The book is divided into four parts, based on geographical and historical contexts, that weave a narrative beginning with the U.S. government’s official nonengagement in the Greek Revolution (1821) to its eventual involvement in World War I and the post-war peace treaty that led to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire into mandates (1921). Although most of the events occur in the Islamic world, Walther discloses from the outset that this book “remains an American story” (27), relying on the grand narratives of those of elite status in both nonstate and state positions within American society. *Sacred Interests* situates itself well within transnational and American studies, but also resonates with the fields of Middle East and Islamic studies. Walther convincingly exposes the interconnectedness of American domestic and foreign policies based on discourses of religion, race, and notions of civilization that created patronizing conceptions of Islam and Muslims that presumed American intervention was inevitable despite the official stance of neutrality.

In Part I, Walther explains how the Greek War of Independence was a catalyst for the Monroe Doctrine (1823) that limited U.S. intervention and involvement to the Western Hemisphere. Prior to President Monroe’s statement, the American *philhellenes* (admirers of ancient Greek culture) called for intervention in Greece based on notions of religious, racial, and civilizational connections between Americans and Greeks. It was believed that America was under divine obligation to help their “white” modern Christian brethren against “furious, bigoted, and persecuting enemies of Christianity” (39). Although the Monroe Doctrine was enacted, Walther argues, “it could not erase the civilizational and religious affiliations that united Americans with European Christendom in a larger global war against Islam” (53). This is most evident in the case of the Cretan revolution (1866-1869), which garnered the public support of political, religious and journalistic elites in America based on supposed historical and religious ties. Interestingly, the Ottoman ambassador to the United States noted the bias toward the Cretan revolutionaries, comparing it to U.S. intolerance and suppression of Mormons (62).

The second chapter in Part I deals with Bulgarian Independence (1876-1878), which took on some of the same religious, racial, and civilizational discourses. The central role played by American missionaries and the institution they founded, Robert College (present day Boğaziçi University), radically shaped Bulgaria’s future (77). It is one of the clearest examples of nonstate actors playing a decisive role in shaping American attitudes toward foreign affairs. It was this very institution that “revealed the close ties among American Protestant activists, philanthropists, and political, military, and diplomatic elites” (73). Thus, this chapter highlights how nonstate actors provided the “knowledge” for American state actors to participate in the Eastern Question that dominated Western European and Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean for decades, despite the limitations the Monroe Doctrine imposed. Newspaper articles from journalists and missionaries depicted massacres in purely religious terms in support of Christians, concealing the fact that Muslims and Jews were often equally devastated by Bulgarian and Ottoman forces (88). The notion that Muslim behavior was controlled by faith alone drove American policy going forward.

The geography and religious context shifts in Part II, as Walther narrates Jewish American activism on behalf of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire and Morocco from 1840 to 1906. The accusations of a blood libel in the Damascus Affair of 1840 provided the first instance of Jewish Americans maintaining that “the U.S. government had a duty to defend oppressed Jews *alongside* oppressed Christians against *Muslim* oppression,” despite the fact that French diplomats were responsible for the false claims (109, italics original). It was one of many events used by American Jews to place themselves closer on the religious, racial, and civilizational hierarchical spectrum that dominated white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant thinking. In the case of North Africa, American Christians’ perceptions of despotic, intolerant Muslims created from interactions in the Ottoman Empire were adopted by Jewish Americans who “assumed that all Islamic rulers were inherently uncivilized and intolerant toward Jews,” thus ignoring the historical and cultural peculiarities of Morocco and the ways in which Jews had been active participants in nearly every sector of society (113). Both the Spanish-Moroccan War (1859-1860) and the Safi Affair (1863) were instances in which Spanish misbehavior was ignored by the U.S. and Jewish Americans in favor of accusations of cruelty by Muslim rulers.

Part II’s second chapter deals more extensively with Morocco from 1878 to 1906. Here Walther reveals how the major U.S. state actors took advantage of Muslim-Jewish relations in Morocco by misrepresenting the treatment of Jews (127). Their intention was to gain standing in international relations as well as garner support in elections among a growing Jewish American population. One of the largest issues covered by Walther is the protégé system enacted in Morocco, similar to the one promoted by European powers with minorities of the Ottoman Empire. In this instance, American consul members used the system to exploit and financially benefit from Moroccan Jews. Even after the public scandal of American councilmen’s misdeeds, it was framed as a problem of “Islamic intolerance and Jewish oppression” (131). Jewish American nonstate actors called for U.S. alignment “with British and French efforts to reform Muslim societies” by equating “the treatment of Moroccan Jews to the Ottoman oppression of Armenians and Greek Christians” (147). Thus, Walther shows the depth to which American orientalist discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth century spread, which culminated in figures such as President Roosevelt touting Euro-American imperial expansion, and in one case supporting French colonial efforts in North Africa through the Algeciras Conference of 1906.

Few have seamlessly connected the discourses that originated in U.S. involvement in the Ottoman Empire with what would become the “Jewish Question” in North Africa. Too often these narratives are treated separately. Walther manages to brilliantly link the religious, racial, and civilizational discourses that pervaded American society in regards to the Ottoman Empire and its Christian minorities with Jewish American calls for intervention. Through a shared American orientalist discourse, Jewish American activists sought intervention on behalf of their coreligionists under Muslim rule, whether in the Ottoman Empire or in North Africa.

Such shared notions of universal Muslim behavior and attitude—no matter the historical, cultural, or geographic context—were utilized by U.S. officials in the Philippines as they sought to “control” their “Mohammedan wards,” the Moros. It is the U.S.’s “Moro Problem” that Walther presents in Part III, and it is her ability to weave the “knowledge” created by previous American engagements in Muslim lands that was later used to rule the Moro that is so fascinating. This is by far the most original aspect of Walther’s intervention. It is also an example of how specialists of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa often miss the interrelatedness, whether artificially constructed or not, and historical contingencies that

play out over vast locations. Walther proves how transnational networks of nonstate and state actors were employed for disseminating and reinforcing notions of religious, racial, and civilizational superiority to rule over the *other*.

In the first chapter of Part III, we observe the “ideological overlap” of official and nonstate actors as they transferred their experiences in other parts of the Islamic world for use with their Muslim wards in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Missionaries who served in the Ottoman Empire lent their “expertise” regarding Muslim behavior and Islamic beliefs. At the same time, Najeeb Saleeby, a Syrian born immigrant who attended an American missionary school, became “one of the top American experts working with the Moros in the colonial administration” (163). Similar to European colonialists, although attempting to distance themselves from such a legacy, the U.S. rhetoric highlighted “the alleged religious, racial, and political inequality of Filipinos in order to justify such claims to imperial benevolence” (159). Crucial to this dominance was the classification of a universally accepted conception of a “Mohammaden mind,” which required brutal and overwhelming force as a standard practice of control (167). In this instance, American officials called upon British colonial officials to learn how to deal with their Muslim wards, even if they believed themselves to be enacting a more benevolent rule based on the “exceptionalism” of America. The fruit of such study was the *Colonial Administration, 1800-1900*, a playbook of sorts that “bore testimony to a larger transnational and international framework of imperial understanding” (171). Another critical aspect of U.S. policy in the Philippines was separating and ruling Filipino Christians differently from the Moros based on religious, racial, and civilizational hierarchies that developed over the previous decades.

Walther’s second chapter on the Philippines continues the narrative of a Christian civilizational project alongside violent repression of rebellion that relied on consistent othering of the Moros. Governors and military leaders adopted their own form of despotism to rule in the Moro Province, believing this was how Muslims responded best. This led to violent and brutal crackdowns that were publicly rebuked by anti-imperialist politicians in the U.S. with little effect. Speaking of Moros as savages and linking them to the eradication of Native Americans, U.S. policymakers justified their actions. Until they could be convinced the “uncivilized” had been pacified, self-rule was impossible. Christianizing and civilizing was one tactic, so was the training of Filipino Christians in the same kind of hierarchical discourses previously mentioned. The net effect being that “Americans had succeeded in imbuing many Christian Filipinos with their own attitudes about Muslim inferiority, transforming them into imperial agents who would continue to treat Filipino Muslims as inferior long after Americans had left the Philippines” (237).

The fourth and final section of *Sacred Interests* examines the well-documented relationship of American state and nonstate actors with Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The first of the two chapters covers the so-called Hamidian massacres (1894-1896) and the eventual calls for American involvement and interventions from nonstate and state actors. The second chapter covers a vast array of topics: the Young Turks, WWI and US/Ottoman relations, Armenian massacres and American responses, the Paris Peace Conference and the Mandate System as it relates to Armenians, and the King-Crane Commission alongside Zionism. Again, Walther is not attempting to provide new interpretations of these events, nor will those familiar with late Ottoman and early twentieth century Middle East history find much of the storyline of American advocacy vis-à-vis Armenians and the aftermath of WWI particularly original. Numerous books and articles scrutinize, on a micro-level, the three categories of religion, race and civilization as driving forces for American interests in “protecting” Armenians. What *Sacred Interests* is able to do is situate these narratives within

the grand-narrative of American engagement in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Philippine contexts. They are separate histories, often with unrelated contingencies; however, the discourses through which Americans understood and interacted with these events shared common and reinforcing conceptions of the Islamic world.

Throughout *Sacred Interests*, several recurring American figures feature prominently in nearly every section. Josiah Strong, clergyman and eventual leader of the Social Gospel movement, looms large in Walther's narrative as a nonstate actor who promoted American imperial expansion through discourses of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant superiority. It is not discernable, at least not in the book, whether Strong's particular strand of Protestantism had any bearing on his attitudes towards the Islamic world and the role of the U.S. internationally. This might show the ubiquitous nature of such discourses across varying theological and denominational convictions, or perhaps further study could reveal that certain groups of American Protestants (particularly those among the elite: Unitarians, liberal Protestants such as Strong, Episcopalians, etc.) were more inclined to imperialist policies versus anti-imperialist ones. For example, how do African-American churches and Christians of the day respond to these notions of religion, race, and civilization vis-à-vis the Islamic world? Glimpses of their responses show up in the book, but one gets the impression that there is more to be uncovered. American Christian beliefs and practices, then and now, are far more diverse than this book would lead us to believe.

Theodore Roosevelt also appears regularly, whether in the case of Jews in North Africa, the Moros of the Philippines, or the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. Walther suggests of Roosevelt that he "was a man defined by the beliefs of his era" (320). There is certainly a thread of consistency in the beliefs and attitudes of Roosevelt weaved throughout the chapters. However, due to the fact that the chapters are not entirely in chronological order (they are in order in each themed section), one might miss the fact that when Roosevelt addressed the atrocities of the Hamidian massacres (1894-1896), it was from his position as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, whereas in previous chapters he spoke from the position of Vice President and President. This does not alter Roosevelt's prevailing convictions towards Islamic societies' inferiority, backwardness and need for intervention, but it does leave us with little historical context in regards to how and to what degree his words shaped broader American attitudes and policies.

In *Sacred Interests*, Walther fills gaps in our understanding of American orientalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and expands our conception of its popularity in domestic and foreign policies, even at a time of official U.S. noninvolvement in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. One of the most striking aspects of the book is the evidence of transference of "knowledge" about Islam and Muslims produced by American nonstate and state actors. How this knowledge was utilized over time and in various cultural and geographical contexts demonstrates the pervasiveness of orientalist discourse in America from 1821 to 1921. Readers will come away with a clear picture of how religious beliefs, in collaboration with notions of racial and civilizational superiority, informed the motivations and decisions of American foreign policy across Islamic lands prior to the Cold War. Thus, I concur with Walther's assertion that it advances "a deep and complex understanding of the ideological and religious foundations upon which many twentieth century American policies were built" (25). As such, scholars are now equipped with a fuller picture of America's relationship with the broader Islamic world.

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