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Vicious Aid for Vicious Times

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“History’s unfinished business will recycle itself,” the exiled Iranian narrator of *Call Me Zebra* reminds herself and her readers.¹ Like the heritage of violence messing up our progressive visions of what the present should be, the current era’s viciousness keeps interfering with my research – my attempts to access the past in the form of old texts and far-flung archives. I want to hide in History, but history grips me. Not only is this era’s viciousness inescapable, ignoring it with whatever privilege I can muster is itself a form of violence.

I work on the cultural history of US–Southwest Asia relations. Focusing on Turkey and Iran, my research foregrounds clashing nationalisms as well as transnational flows. My studies depend heavily on Persian and Turkish texts, archives, and interviewees I can only access in Turkey or Iran. In the last few years, my access to these two countries (and beloved family and friends) has been repeatedly restricted by travel bans, visa disputes, and fears of war breaking out. While no one administration has ever held a monopoly over US imperialism, the types of war waged on the region seemed to multiply and overlap with the Trump administration, with economic warfare, trade wars, armed violence, structural violence, and cultural violence overlaying each other at a dizzying rate. Local authoritarianisms, too, intensified in this period, often justified as a response to imperialist meddling or as a well-warranted turn against the ravages of a neoliberal system constructed by and for “the West.” Moreover, the symbolic burden of being an immigrant from “the Middle East” has somehow increased since the immediate post-9/11 period. It feels like vicious times, indeed.

Despite specializing in the near-contemporary era, I am uncomfortable analyzing the present and suspicious of anyone who can comment comfortably on the play-by-play turns in international relations. It feels safer inside History emotionally, even though, intellectually, I know the real past is a bloody, unresolved mess, filled with just as much viciousness as the present. Even when revealing terrible facts and connecting them directly to present conflicts, our essays have a comforting inevitability and teleological determinism to them. We have a research question, which prompts

the methodology and justifies the sources consulted. The intervention (or the “hero narrative”) emerges inevitably from the literature review. With paragraphs signaled by topic sentences, the argument progresses smoothly and concludes with an intriguing “so-what.” The “so-what” is usually where I gesture towards the present and the future: “It is illuminating to revisit this history in the light of contemporary....” This formula comes easier to me than anything else in my life, once I have the materials and a plan. I wonder how many of us do this—ritually trace the complexity of the past in our writing to escape the four-dimensional burdens of our current existence?

But now, I am missing the materials and the plan. Covid-19 made me lose access to Turkey and Iran once again. I also lost a hard-to-get interview I had scheduled with Iran’s deposed empress Farah Pahlavi. She refuses to use Zoom, so I must wait and try again. I worry that I might have lost my chance forever. What is more: I am embarrassed by these concerns. They mark my own privilege at a time of rising Covid-19 deaths in the United States and across the world, compounded by the intersecting ravages of racism, imperialism, and capitalism.

Even for those of us with the immense privilege of passports and visas, crossing borders has become nearly impossible. Yet, a large part of the Covid-19 story has been about movement—not just the shockingly fast movement of the virus across human-made boundaries, but also the loudly publicized movement of aid, shipped across seas and oceans in now-empty passenger planes. One of my first conscious memories of international aid was in the aftermath of the devastating 1999 earthquakes in Turkey and Greece, which vastly tempered the toxic residue of bilateral relations for my generation.² Yet, the emotional aftereffects of the international aid discourse happening around Covid-19 feels nothing like those memories. Consider Trump gesturing grandly about extending humanitarian aid to Iran, even as the noose of US sanctions tightens, further afflicting the afflicted.³ Consider China, accused of passing off defective kits in the form of aid to Europe and launching a viral public relations video mocking the ineffectual US response to Covid-19.⁴ At the same time, both Turkey and Iran have entered the aid game, sending off supplies to other countries, including European countries and the United States, and broadly publicizing their aid efforts.⁵ These moves, in turn, have met with loud dismissal: the UK has scoffed that Turkish gowns did not meet safety requirements; Turkey itself reported that Iranian test kits did not arrive on time.⁶ Nor is the criticism limited to outsiders; critical voices from within each nation have pointed out the contradictions in flamboyantly sending off aid to other countries (many with higher GDPs and better healthcare systems) when health workers continue to report shortages internally.⁷ In international relations theory, using aid to curry political favor is subsumed under the umbrella of soft power. Yet what strikes me about these Covid-19 aid send-offs and the dismissive responses to them is not softness but harshness. “Hey you, the so-called West,” I hear, “you have fallen, your people are dying, we will send help!” The response is vicious, too. “No, your aid doesn’t work! You have not progressed enough, no matter what you think!” In an insightful

interview, Erdi Öztürk has noted how multiple Muslim-majority powers' heavily publicized aid efforts mark the continuation of an extended Islamic leadership struggle for the worldwide community of believers (the *ummah*).⁸ In response, I cannot help but think about the religious mandate that Muslims help the afflicted quietly and anonymously, without embarrassing the recipient.

This uncomfortably public chatter between states also reminds me of a famous letter Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent sent to Francis I of France in 1526, offering to help free him from imprisonment at the hands of the German Emperor. My grandfather on my mother's side had told me about this letter when I was just a child, reciting out loud the opening lines in which Sultan Suleiman introduces himself with a series of grand titles, which shine in stark contrast to his bare-bones description of Francis:

I, who am the sultan of sultans, the sovereign of sovereigns, the dispenser of crowns to the monarchs on the face of the earth, shadow of god on earth, the sultan and sovereign lord of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, of Rumelia and Anatolia, of Karamania and the land of Rum, of Zulkadria, Diyarbakir, of Kurdistan, of Azerbaijan, Persia, Damascus, Cairo, Aleppo, of the Mecca and Medina, of Jerusalem, of all Arabia, of the Yemen and many other lands, which my noble forefathers and my glorious ancestors—may God light up their tombs—conquered by the force of their arms and which my august majesty has made subject to my flaming sword and victorious blade, I, Sultan Süleyman Han, to thee, who art Francis, king of the land of France ...⁹

My grandfather might have intended this as a lesson on a once-glorious Turkish past and, by implication, a commentary on the unacceptable present state of affairs vis-à-vis Europe. The letter also stuck with me, because it taught me how backhanded offers to help could be and how connected they are to power games, minor and major, past and present.

With my own research travel stalled, I have been watching the gaudy aid send-offs and the clashing international responses with discomfort. Their unconcealed nastiness prompts new questions. I wonder, what do you call soft power moves that are anything but soft? How far back does vicious aid go and how has it changed?

I do not know if I can or will follow these thoughts—after all, another part of my current reality is being the mother of a toddler and a kindergartner at a time when childcare is canceled and extended family cannot come to help. Maybe whatever I work out will never take the comforting format of a peer-reviewed essay and maybe it should not. But this rush of intellectual curiosity is a feeling I associate with being alive. Either way, these snippets of new data and the questions they prompt appear to be the only vicious help I will be getting these days, if we don't count that smirking,

Trump-signed stimulus check. Even more than a well-written “so-what” at the end of an essay, they pull me into the present and gesture towards the future.

Notes

- ¹ Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi, *Call Me Zebra* (Boston: HMH Books, 2018), 16.
- ² Stephen Kinzer, “Earthquakes Help Warm Greek-Turkish Relations,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/13/world/earthquakes-help-warm-greek-turkish-relations.html>.
- ³ Spencer Ackerman, “Iran Has Gotten Nothing from U.S. ‘Humanitarian’ Channel,” *Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/iran-has-gotten-nothing-from-us-humanitarian-channel?ref=author>.
- ⁴ “Coronavirus: Countries Reject Chinese-made Equipment,” *BBC World*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52092395>.
- ⁵ Sasha Toperich, “Turkey Emerges as Key Player in Global COVID-19 Fight,” *The Hill*, April 14, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/492628-turkey-emerges-as-key-player-in-global-covid-19-fight>.
- ⁶ Talha Yavuz, “Turkey Denies Receiving Coronavirus Test Kits from Iran,” *Anadolu Agency*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/turkey-denies-receiving-coronavirus-test-kits-from-iran/1837407>.
- ⁷ “The Tired Eyes of Turkey’s Health Minister Koca,” *Duvar English*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/opinion/2020/06/10/the-tired-eyes-of-turkeys-health-minister-koca/>.
- ⁸ “Covid-19 and Turkey’s Soft Power Diplomacy,” interview with Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *Wikistrat*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.wikistrat.com/turkey-soft-power>.
- ⁹ Quoted in Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 115.