

We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled

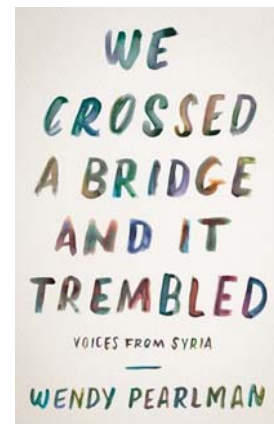
Custom House

By Wendy Pearlman
ISBN: 9780062654618

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the wave of demonstrations known as the Arab Spring, in 2011 hundreds of thousands of Syrians took to the streets demanding freedom, democracy and human rights. The government's ferocious response, and the refusal of the demonstrators to back down, sparked a brutal civil war that over the past five years has escalated into the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our times.

Yet despite all the reporting, the video, and the wrenching photography, the stories of ordinary Syrians remain unheard, while the stories told about them have been distorted by broad brush dread and political expediency. This fierce and poignant collection changes that. Based on interviews with hundreds of displaced Syrians conducted over four years across the Middle East and Europe, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* is a breathtaking mosaic of first-hand testimonials from the frontlines. Some of the testimonies are several pages long, eloquent narratives that could stand alone as short stories; others are only a few sentences, poetic and aphoristic. Together, they cohere into an unforgettable chronicle that is not only a testament to the power of storytelling but to the strength of those who face darkness with hope, courage, and moral conviction.



Questions for Discussion

1. What does Syria teach us about how authoritarian regimes endure and the conditions under which they are brought down?
2. One long-standing puzzle in the study of social movements is why people come to participate in high-risk dissent. What lessons does the Syrian experience offer for explaining that puzzle?
3. Many Syrians went out in demonstrations in early 2011, some of their most prominent chants were for “freedom” and “dignity.” What do those terms mean to Syrians? What do they mean to you? What basic elements must a political system have in order to offer and protect its citizens’ freedom and dignity?
4. Why did the Syrian uprising evolve into a protracted violent conflict? What explains the course of its particular development? Was this trajectory inevitable, or what different decisions might have changed the course of the conflict?

5. The Syrian conflict has forced individuals to face many difficult decisions and challenges. Try to imagine putting yourself in Syrians' shoes. What would you have done if you were in Syria? Would you have protested, supported the regime, or remained silent? Are there impetuses that would have driven you to become a rebel fighter? Under what conditions would you have stayed in your hometown or alternatively have fled as a refugee?
6. What lessons do the speakers in this book derive from their experiences, and from the Syrian conflict at large?
7. In the penultimate passage, Adam remarks that it is easy to have a moral code when you live in a stable country, and also easy to forget that bad acts were committed to have create that stable system. What does he mean by this? What are the implications of his ideas for you in your country?
8. What should Western countries' policies have been toward the Syrian conflict during the years since 2011? What should it be today?
9. Several million Syrians are refugees in the Middle East, where they have only temporary residence rights, typically work for low wages in the informal economy, often live in undignified housing, and hundreds of thousands of children are working to support their families rather than going to school. More than a million other Syrian refugees or asylum-seekers are in Europe or elsewhere, where they struggle to learn new languages, build new lives, and frequently cope with being separated from family members. What should the international community do in the face of this refugee crisis?
10. How can the personal testimonials of ordinary people help us learn about history and politics?
11. What is the meaning of the book's title, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*?
12. Based on what you have heard, what do you think was the role of religion in the Syrian conflict? What do you think was the role of sectarian differences? What do you think American coverage of Syria typically understands the role of religion or sectarianism to be? If there is a gap between Western perceptions and Syrians' accounts of their own experiences, what do you think accounts for that?