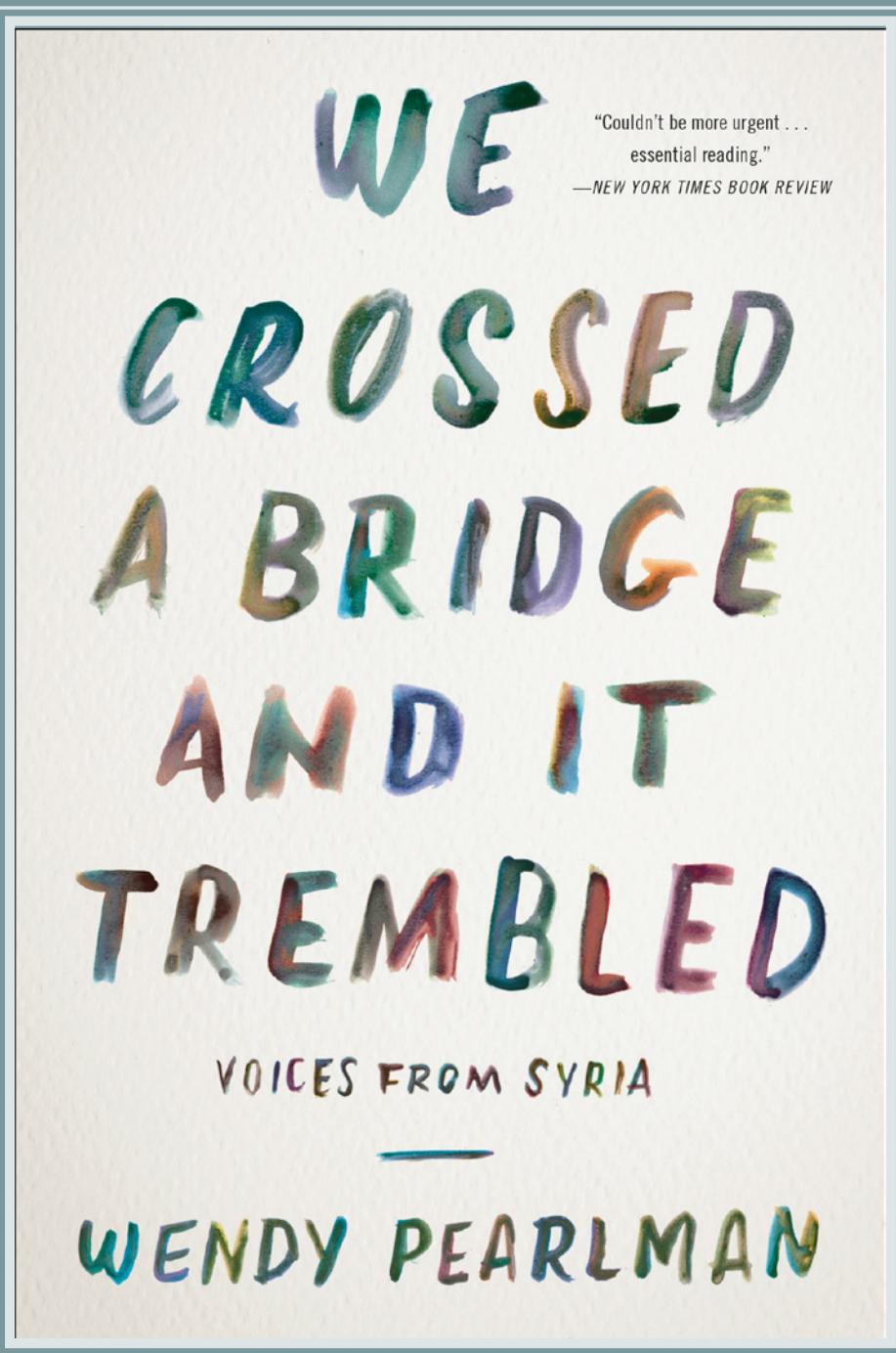

TEACHING GUIDE



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About the Book

We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria tells the story of the Syrian uprising, war, and refugee crisis through interviews that Wendy Pearlman conducted from 2012 through 2016 with more than 300 displaced Syrians across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

Following an introduction in which the author provides basic context, the book consists entirely of a curation of testimonies in Syrians' own words. Individual narratives of varying lengths are organized chronologically to reflect the key stages of the Syrian conflict, beginning with life under the authoritarian regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad and then moving to describe the launch of nonviolent protests as a part of the 2011 Arab Spring, the government's subsequent crackdown, the escalation and militarization of a fragmented rebellion, civilians' everyday experiences under conditions of war, and the forced migration of millions of refugees.

An accessible and deeply human entry point into one of worst humanitarian catastrophes of our times, the book both explains the Syrian conflict and conveys what it has been like for ordinary people to live it.

About the Author



Wendy Pearlman is the Martin and Patricia Koldyke Outstanding Teaching Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, where she specializes in the Middle East. She is the author of three books, *We Crossed A Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (Custom House 2017), *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada* (Nation Books, 2003), as well as dozens of essays, academic articles, or book chapters. Pearlman holds a BA from Brown University, an MA from Georgetown, and a PhD from Harvard. She speaks Arabic and has studied or conducted research in Spain, Germany, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

Discussion Questions

INTRODUCTION

1. To understand Syrian politics, it is helpful to distinguish between the concepts of state (the permanent institutions of a country in a recognized territory) and regime (the rules determining who controls state organizations and how they use them). What do you learn about the origins of Syria as a state and the Assad regime as a regime?
2. What does Syria have in common with other countries in the Middle East? How has the history of Syria been shaped by developments in the larger Arab world?

PART I: AUTHORITARIANISM

1. Iliyas says that Syria appeared stable, but that was not “real stability.” What does he mean by that? In what ways was Syria’s political status quo simultaneously both stable and unstable?
2. What function do the security apparatus—meaning the army and security forces, as well as their ability to punish citizens—play in upholding the Assad regime?
3. Many Syrians say that they were raised on the expression, “Don’t talk, the walls have ears.” What does that mean? What does it say about the relationship between state and society, relationships within society, and even individuals’ relationships to themselves?
4. How do Hadia, Sana, and Ayham describe their memories from school? What do their stories suggest about the regime’s approach to schools and the socialization of children?

PART II: HOPE DISAPPOINTED

1. Why are many Syrians hopeful when Bashar al-Assad assumes power in the year 2000? What are they hoping for and why are those hopes disappointed?
2. What economic changes occur under Bashar al-Assad’s presidency? How do these changes affect citizens?
3. What is government corruption? How does it impact ordinary people and their views of the government?
4. The book’s introduction and first two parts make reference to Syria’s diversity as a country in which the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim Arab and the remainder is comprised of different religious or ethnic minorities. What do you learn about how politics shaped relations among these diverse communities?

PART III: REVOLUTION

1. The “Arab Spring” became a popular name for the mass uprisings against authoritarian regimes that began in Tunisia in 2010 and then spread to Egypt and across the Middle East in 2011. What are the different ways that Syrians respond to these Arab Spring protests in other countries?
2. What obstacles do Syrians overcome to get demonstrations off the ground in their own country?
3. What drives people to participate in protest, despite significant risks?
4. How do speakers describe the personal experience of participating in protest? Why do they experience protest in these ways?
5. What brings the uprising in Syria to evolve from a few tentative demonstrations calling for reform into a nationwide revolt to overthrow the Assad regime?

PART IV: CRACKDOWN

1. President Assad made his first public address after twelve days of protest in which dozens of people were killed. What was the effect of this much-anticipated speech?
2. A long-standing puzzle in the study of social movements, in countries throughout history and across the globe, is how state repression affects protest. Regimes that crack down on protest movements usually believe that this will discourage or prevent subsequent protest. However, sometimes the opposite occurs, and government repression instead increases and intensifies citizens' protest. What do Syrians' stories suggest about why government repression might have the intended outcome or instead backfire?
3. Sects (subdivisions within any religious faith) are different from sectarianism (the ways in which those religious identities come to matter for politics, power, and social relations). What do the stories suggest about changing sectarianism in Syria after 2011?
4. What are prisons like in Syria? What role does imprisonment play in the Syrian conflict?

PART V: MILITARIZATION

1. Why do some members of the opposition take up weapons and fight the regime with military means?
2. What explains the rise of Islamist groups—movements calling for a greater role for Islam in government and public life—within the Syrian opposition?
3. What problems does the armed rebellion face and why?
4. In this section, speakers begin to talk about leaving Syria. What are some of the reasons that compel them to leave?
5. What lessons do you derive from Kinda's story about the Syrian brides?

PART VI: LIVING WAR

1. For civilians living through war, in what ways is war a kind of terror? In what ways do people become "normalized" to that terror?
2. How do citizens' experiences of war differ due to their socio-economic class, gender, or other factors?
3. What does Sham want the United States to do in response to the 2013 chemical weapons attack? Why?
4. What are speakers' views of ISIS?

PART VII: FLIGHT

1. Why do millions of Syrians flee as refugees? Why do many refugees in the countries on Syria's borders seek to migrate onward to Europe?
2. What hardships do refugees face?
3. Under what circumstances does becoming a refugee open up new opportunities?
4. What are similarities and differences in refugees' experiences, depending on the countries in which they settle?
5. What kinds of futures await refugee children?
6. Yasmine discusses the concept of "homeland." What does homeland mean to her? What does it seem to mean to other speakers?

PART VIII: REFLECTIONS

1. What range of emotions do speakers express as they make sense of events in Syria?
2. What lessons do speakers derive from the Syrian conflict?
3. How does the Syrian conflict transform individuals who live its unfolding?
4. 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 create that stable system. What does he mean by this? What are the implications of his ideas for countries such as the United States?

Writing Prompts

1. What does Syria teach us about how authoritarian regimes endure and the conditions under which they are brought down?
2. When many Syrians participated 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?
3. 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?
4. What should the United States' policy have been toward the Syrian conflict during the years since 2011? What should it be today?
5. 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?
6. How can the personal testimonials of ordinary people help us learn about history and politics?
7. The title of the book is both a literal excerpt from one of the testimonies and a metaphor. Write an essay interpreting the meaning of this title.

Additional Online Resources

- Syria Direct, <http://syriadirect.org/>
- News Deeply, "Syria," <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria>
- The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, <https://creativememory.org/>
- Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Syria Stories," <https://syriastories.net/>
- Qisetna "Talking Syria," <https://talkingsyria.com/>
- The Syrian Observer, <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Home>
- Carnegie Endowment Middle East Center, "Syria in Crisis," <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/>
- International Crisis Group, "Syria," <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria>
- The Atlantic Council, "Syria Source," <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource>
- Syria Sources in English, <https://syriasources.org/>

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