



Wendy Pearlman.- *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 290p.

Wendy Pearlman's new book is one of the most important yet to emerge from the Syrian revolution and from the Arab revolutions as a whole. Following a model she first used to acquaint English-speaking readers with the voices of Palestinians during the Second Intifada, Pearlman has collected and translated statements by more than seventy Syrians from variety of backgrounds and parts of Syria. The interviews took place between 2012 and 2016, that is, beginning when the revolutionaries were still optimistic that they could overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad and ending in the more somber pessimistic period of a civil war in which Islamist groups and foreign Shi'i militias played dominant role. Most, although by no means all, of the interviewees are educated people. The interviews were conducted outside Syria, in Jordan, Turkey, the UAE, a number of European countries, and the United States. They are the voices of displaced Syrians, although not of those displaced inside Syria. The UNHCR estimates that more than five million Syrians are refugees in surrounding countries, close to one million have sought asylum in Europe, and more than six million are displaced within Syria. More than 400,000 have been killed. As the conflict continues, the numbers are bound to grow.

Pearlman divides her work into eight roughly chronological sections. She begins with the years of Assad rule that preceded the revolution before going on to describe the early demonstrations, spread of revolutionary activities, and government crackdown. This crackdown eventually brought about a militarization of the revolution, as many ordinary Syrian soldiers refused to fire on their fellow citizens and either deserted or defected to join the opposition, creating an armed rebellion. Subsequent passages deal with the civil war, the rise of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and the experience of flight

abroad in search of refuge from the violence. Finally, she includes a few reflections by refugees about their experience.

Although the passages are chosen and arranged by Pearlman, her aim is to give ordinary Syrians, none of them important political or military figures, an opportunity to speak to the Western public. It is also an opportunity for Westerners, whose views about the Arab revolutions and their aftermath have been shaped by the Western media, to encounter voices that they might otherwise never hear. Coming at a time when cynicism about the prospects for democracy in the Arab world has peaked, and when Western governments and populations increasingly turn their backs on refugees and turn away from open borders, these testimonies are especially poignant.

To her credit, Pearlman is careful to let the Syrians tell their own stories, with minimal intervention on her part. Through the deft arrangement of often conflicting narratives, she succeeds in conveying the dismal horror of living under a totalitarian regime. As her first interlocutor, a man named Fadi, says “A Syrian is a number. Dreaming is not allowed.” Other voices offer potted summaries of modern Syrian history that summarize such events at the failed insurrection at Hama in 1982 with a series of anecdotes. Although the professional historian may feel that this anecdotal approach slights important events, Pearlman is remarkably successful in conveying the importance of an event or an interpretation of Syrian society by selecting the right narrative. Those who want a more analytical approach can find it in recent works by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, Samer Abboud, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Nikolaos van Dam, and Charles Lister. For those who want to know how Syrians have experienced the Assad regime and how they were inspired to revolt against it, Pearlman has distilled many of the key ingredients in the words of the Syrians themselves.

A number of Syrian writers such as Samar Yazbek and Alia Malek have written memoirs of the revolution, as have several Western reporters who covered the war from within Syria. Yazbek’s works in particular open a window in the world of the Alawite minority to which Syria’s rulers belong. A critic of the regime who sympathizes with the early non-violent phase of the rebellion, Yazbek suffered threats and recriminations for her “betrayal” of her sect. Pearlman admits that her book does not have much to say about those who support the regime. Many wealthy Syrians who support the regime left the country to escape the violence and avoid having their sons drafted into the army and paramilitary forces. These voices are absent from Pearlman’s account, which focuses on the hopes that the opposition had for a new, more humane and democratic country. Perhaps the pro-regime Syrians abroad would not speak to her. This is unfortunate since the reader of Pearlman’s account will find it difficult to understand how anyone could support such

a cruel and repressive regime. In Yazbek’s account, we learn about the fear which pervades the Alawite community, fear of an Islamist opposition, but also fear of a regime that ruthlessly punishes dissent within its own ranks. Pearlman’s work does allow us to sense the fears of Syria’s Christian minorities, as well as the discrimination meted out against Syria’s Kurds. In one moving anecdote, a Christian opposition activist whose mother has been killed at a roadblock pleads successfully with her mostly Muslim colleagues to avoid chanting slogans when they appear at the church to attend the funeral so that she can allay the fears of the congregation. In one humorous story, a worshipper at a mosque is accidentally revealed to be a Christian who came hoping to join an anti-regime demonstration and decided to join in the Muslim prayers. Narratives like these emphasize the cross-sectarian and multi-ethnic character of the revolutionary opposition, but tell us little of why the dreams of national unity and political reform proved so elusive.

Hints emerge here and there. Abdel-Halim, a Free Syrian Army fighter from Homs, describes how money corrupted the opposition in Homs. The FSA became dependent on its control of rationing in the city and the ration system became a racket controlled by corrupt officers. Money flowed in from places like Turkey and Qatar, and the FSA commanders became entrepreneurs competing for foreign funds and weapon shipments. In the end, the city’s defenders were obliged to sue for peace and leave the city. Another FSA officer named Khalil, from Deir ez-Zor, describes how the better funded and armed Nusra fighters exploited any advance the FSA made against the regime. A number of anecdotes describe the rise of ISIS. Talia, a TV correspondent from Aleppo, describes the divided character of the city before the rebel-held portion fell in December 2016. In this case, the division was largely between urban Aleppans, most of whom supported the regime, and the inhabitants of neighboring villages, who supported the rebellion. Although it initially appeared that the rebels would succeed in taking the entire city, their position gradually weakened. Eventually, combination of factors such as the rise of ISIS, pro-regime intervention by Iran, Hizbullah, and Russia (among others), and Turkey’s shift away from supporting the FSA to fighting the Syrian branch of the Kurdish Workers’ Party resulted in the rebels being cut off and forced to accept their departure from the city.

Foreign involvement only increased with time. Although every major faction in the Syrian civil war received some sort of foreign support, it was the intervention by Iran, its Shi`i militia allies, and Russia that decided the course of the war and ended any hope for a new Syria free from the sectarian tyranny of the Assad regime. Intervention also took place on behalf of a host of rebel factions, and against ISIS. As a result, the agency of the Syrian people that Pearlman places at the center of her collective narrative has been suppressed.

Even the pro-regime Syrian forces have lost their central role to Iran officers, Hizbullah fighters, and Russian pilots. Syrians of all political persuasions have fled a conflict over their destiny over which they have lost control. Yet, there is still evidence that the hopes that inspired the revolution have not disappeared. Whenever the bombing of rebel-held zones pauses, people come out to demonstrate in much the same manner they have since the beginning of the revolution. An underground opposition has resisted ISIS rule in al-Raqqa since that group seized control of the city. There continue to be demonstrations against Nusra's violent puritanism in the province of Idlib. Even in pro-regime Latakia, there are occasional demonstrations against the excesses of the regime's militia allies and poor living conditions. The rebels may have lost the war, but it is not clear whether the regime is capable of winning it.

The last part of Pearlman's work tells the stories of Syrians fleeing their homes, probably never to return. In many cases, they seek a different kind of life for their children, one which they now believe cannot be realized in Syria. In many cases, exile has proved disillusioning as well. Syrians have long suffered from discrimination in Lebanon, and the influx of refugees from the war is potentially destabilizing. Naturally, it is the poor Syrians, forced to compete with poor Lebanese for jobs, who suffer the most. Abdel-Aziz, a teacher from rural Daraa describes their refuge in Jordan: "They found a place in the desert where not even a tree or an animal can live, and they put the Syrian people there." Europe beckons, but to get there one must put one's life in the hands of a smuggler. Nur, a beautician from Aleppo, regrets her decision to leave and bitterly observes, "There's no way back. It's as if we were walking on a rope that kept getting cut behind us as we move forward. Like in the cartoons, when the characters cross a bridge that crumbles beneath them as they run."

If there is no way back for the Syrian people, it is as yet unclear what way lies ahead. The regime that once governed the country with an iron grip has been reduced to a militia state dependent on foreign forces for its survival. Half the country's population is displaced, many outside the country and unlikely to return. Abu Ma'an, an activist from Daraa, concludes, "There is always a price for freedom. But not this much." The revolutionary generation in Syria, and in many parts of the Arab world, continues to pay a very high price for its failure to achieve its dreams. Yet, in reading the voices of ordinary Syrians who dared to dream of freedom, one cannot help but feel that it is they, not the nepotistic, totalitarian regimes, that represent the future of the Arab world. It is to Wendy Pearlman's credit that she has undertaken to make their dreams known to a wider audience. In this, she has succeeded admirably.

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