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*Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State* by Dawn Chatty, and: *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* by Michael Provence, and: *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* by Wendy Pearlman, and: *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities* by Robert G. Rabil (review)



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**DAWN CHATTY**, *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refugee State* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017). Pp. 288. \$27.95 hardcover, \$9.99 e-book. ISBN 9781849048767.

**MICHAEL PROVENCE**, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Pp. 316 pages. \$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper. ISBN 9781139049221.

**WENDY PEARLMAN**, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017). Pp. 352. \$16.99 paper, \$11.99 e-book. ISBN 9780062654618.

**ROBERT G. RABIL**, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016). Pp. 150. \$85.00 cloth, \$39.99 paper, \$35.00 e-book. ISBN 9781498535120.

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Over the last few years a steady stream of books has been published on Syria and Syrians. Some take a historical look back at the roots of the current crisis, while others focus on developments after 2011. Genres vary as much as the topics. There are novels, fictionalized biographies, and nonfiction accounts, with subjects ranging from ISIS to the regime, settings ranging from prisons to besieged areas, and accounts of escapes to neighboring countries and to Europe. Other books trace the trajectory of the destruction of cities. Previously published titles about the Ba'ath Party politics or the Assad regime have been recycled, reprinted with new forewords, or updated. There is something to interest every reader. The four books discussed below, all written by established academics deeply knowledgeable about the Middle East,

represent diverse sources and approaches, and complement each other in fruitful ways.

Wendy Pearlman's *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* is almost entirely based on the edited stories of eighty-seven Syrian refugees interviewed by the author between 2012 and 2016. These pseudonymous individuals – women and men of all ages – come from all walks of life and all parts of Syria, but they all oppose the regime: the voices of Assad supporters are not heard in this book. Nevertheless, this is a poignant – even heartbreaking – introduction for readers who have little or no prior knowledge of Syria, and who want to grasp the processes which made so many Syrians flee their homes and country.

Pearlman skilfully crafts her interlocutors' stories over eight chapters, beginning with the authoritarian rule of Hafez al-Assad, moving through the optimism of the so-called Damascus Spring that followed the take-over of al-Assad's son Bashar in 2000, and arriving all too soon at disappointment: a political climate turned icy. She continues through the euphoria, hopes, and fears of the revolution. The author next focuses on the period of intense organization by activists met with escalating retaliation from the regime. Then came the increasing militarization of the conflict, and the formation of armed groups, which split the opposition. But as one Syrian states in the book: "It took time and effort for people to become extremists" (166). The horrendous stories of living through the war in various parts of the country make up the next section, leading up to narratives of the flight to neighboring countries or beyond. The book ends with Pearlman's subjects reflecting on their personal pasts and futures, and the future of Syria.

Pearlman's curating of *We Crossed a Bridge* – midwifery really – is very effective in giving voice to people whose opinions, experiences, and dreams are seldom heard. It required twenty assistants to transcribe and translate open-ended interviews she collected over seven months, spanning four years, in eight different countries. The author manages to sort this data to create a sense of the unfolding of events in Syria. Although the stories are individual, the overall result is a collective narrative.

Robert G. Rabil's *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon* is very different. While Pearlman meandered from place to place in search of stories, Rabil is firmly planted in Lebanon as he examines the effects of the drawn-out Syrian crisis on hosts and refugees alike. Unlike Pearlman's evocative and easy-to-read volume, Rabil's case study is a

dry analysis of Lebanese refugee policies and international refugee management. Lebanon, as Rabil underlines, has more refugees per capita than any other nation in modern history. The numbers are staggering. With a population of around four million Lebanese and half-a-million Palestinians, the country now also hosts perhaps one-and-a-half million Syrians. Lebanon stands in stark contrast to even the most generous Western countries like Germany and Sweden, which have received more Syrian refugees than other wealthy Western countries.

The book is a welcome reminder to all from affluent countries who complain about mass immigration of refugees and vote for those promising to close national borders, build walls, or fund prison-like camps for immigrants and refugees.

Rabil's book follows the evolution of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon from April 2011 when the door to those fleeing Syria – except the Syrian Palestinians – was more or less open, until winter 2015, when the border closed. He discusses how the Lebanese, initially welcoming of Syrians in need of protection, became more and more critical, even hostile, as the crisis which became the war, dragged on. Both high numbers of Syrians and particularities of Lebanese politics played a role in this turn of events. An important part of the book scrutinizes the regional response to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Once it became clear that vast numbers of refugees were not going back to Syria in the foreseeable future, regional and international organizations began to put more long-term policies and programs into place. Rabil is not very optimistic that these will succeed, not least because of lack of funding.

Lebanon's experience with Palestinian camps set up in 1948 that became a permanent fixture on the political and geographical landscape contributed to the recent refusal to set up camps for Syrian refugees. As a result, Syrians are mobile within the country where they constitute a cheap labor force in competition with the Lebanese, creating a local backlash. Rabil fears that both Syrian and Palestinian refugees will increasingly pay a double price in Lebanon: displaced, they have nothing to return to, and they are blamed for the increasingly dire conditions in the country.

The relationship between Lebanon and Syria, and between Lebanese and Syrians, is long, intense, and complicated. It is rooted not only in networks based on a long history of economic and political exchange, but also formed through marriage and kinship, leading to

the mutual reinforcement of both personal and practical links. We often say that history is important to understand the region and its conflicts. But which or what kind of history do we mean? "History" is not just there to be unraveled: like Pearlman's "curating," it needs a skillful midwife to deliver a comprehensible account. Dawn Chatty's *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State* and Michael Provence's *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* are two recent contributions that clearly demonstrate how to unravel historical processes as a way to think about contemporary politics.

In a fascinating study, Provence centers specific individuals as Pearlman does. He documents the education and careers of about two dozen men who began their lives as Ottoman subjects and ended up as citizens of different Middle Eastern countries. The trajectories of these individual lives can be read as entry points into political upheavals that transformed millions of lives. Unlike *We Crossed a Bridge*, however, this is not an easy read, but demands prior knowledge of the history of the region.

*The Last Ottoman Generation* is not directly focused on what became Syria, or those who became its people. Instead the author demonstrates the complex developments which led to the formation of the different countries. In these lands, Syria and Syrians, in a myriad of ways, are linked to other countries and their citizens. The narrative starts in the 1830s with the Ottoman reforms and the modernization of the empire's military education and ends in 1939 on the eve of World War II. The temporal focus is from the last decade of the nineteenth century when most of the men at the center of this book were born, and onward, following their public lives and their political roles, first in the Ottoman Empire and later in the Mandates.

Provence demonstrates how elite civil and military educational institutions opened new opportunities for students from the Arab provinces, ultimately creating a group of cosmopolitan Ottoman subjects. He puts particular emphasis on the reform of military education and how an Ottoman ethos, and often lifelong friendships (and sometimes enmities) were fostered and forged in such institutions, influencing later political positions and public roles. Nationalist discourses in the Arab world claim there were "five hundred years of Turkish oppression," while concomitant discourse in Turkey accuses Arab provincials of disloyalty. Such discourses have also influenced research whereby abrupt historical breaks are emphasized. The new trend among serious historians is, however, to underline continuities of relations, attitudes, and loyalties. The last elite

Ottoman generation with roots in the Arab provinces, as exhibited by Provence, did not, in general, become anti-Ottoman. Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian nationalisms largely emerged as a reaction to European colonialism and the Mandates. The interwar period and history of the Mandate is well researched, but the author's revelation of the deceit, stupidity, and plain cruelty at the heart of the British and French colonial projects in the Middle East is an important contribution. Sham political institutions masked the recurring violence against the populations of the Mandates, and recourse to martial law was common. These are, as we know, legacies often revived in the postcolonial period.

The main protagonists in this book, Provence reminds us, were not democrats or liberal but authoritarian, shaped by their elite imperial education and later military and political experiences. Nevertheless, the imperial authoritarian ethos shaped a culture of hospitality and open borders, in contrast to the modern organization of migration, refugee policing, and closed border policing of people deemed undesirable and undeserving protection. This imperial hospitality and ability to absorb even large groups seeking refuge is the starting point in Chatty's *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refugee State*. The book is based on the author's long-term anthropological engagement in the region and with the people she writes about. She not only records the suffering of those uprooted or forcibly moved from one territory to another, but also reports on the reception of the host communities.

Chatty starts with how and why Circassians and other Caucasians settled in Greater Syria, and continues with case studies of Armenians and other Christians who sought protection in Mandate Syria from genocide at the hands of Kurdish and Turkish troops in the period around World War I. Another case study in the book focuses on the dramatic uprooting of Kurds from what had become Turkey and resettlement on the Syrian side of the border. The author also describes how Palestinians became the paradigmatic Middle Eastern refugees and analyzes how they have fared in Syria since 1948.

Moving to contemporary history, one chapter focuses on the Iraqis who have sought temporary or more permanent refuge in Syria. The enmity between the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Ba'ath Party – going back to the late 1960s – has opened for the exchange of political opponents between the two countries. The more-or-less constant state of war in Iraq since 1980 pushed many citizens into exile in neighboring countries. But it was not until after the Western invasion in 2003 that

Iraqis left in vast numbers, especially to Syria and Jordan. What is particularly interesting is that most Iraqis refused to be registered by the UN refugee agency UNHCR, and rejected placement in camps in favor of self-settlement. Chatty's book ends with a short chapter on the period when Syrians, after more than a century of accepting, and even welcoming, people from near and far as settlers or people in need of protection, have themselves become people in need of a refuge.

The conflict in and over Syria has led to a terrible humanitarian crisis affecting not only Syrians, but especially people in neighboring countries. It has also been the most mediatized conflict in modern times. The four books reviewed here demonstrate that different approaches, material, methodology, and writing styles are important to contextualize contemporary Syria. Together these books make up an important piece of a picture which is still being drawn. The four authors contribute different insights into Syria's formation and regional importance, and amplify the voices of people who came to settle in that country as well as original residents. Pearlman's book is emotional and evocative, while Rabil's prose is dry and illuminating of a particular case, highlighting the need to look at cooperative and conflictive links between guests—refugees—and host communities. Provence's detailed account allows us to understand the complex intersection of macro political processes with the lives and careers of individuals who helped shape the modern Middle East. Chatty, finally, follows people to places that lack modern international refugee conventions. Yet these cases make a reader reflect that countries in the affluent, liberal, and democratic part of the world, which have actually signed such conventions, do not provide refuge for people who need it.