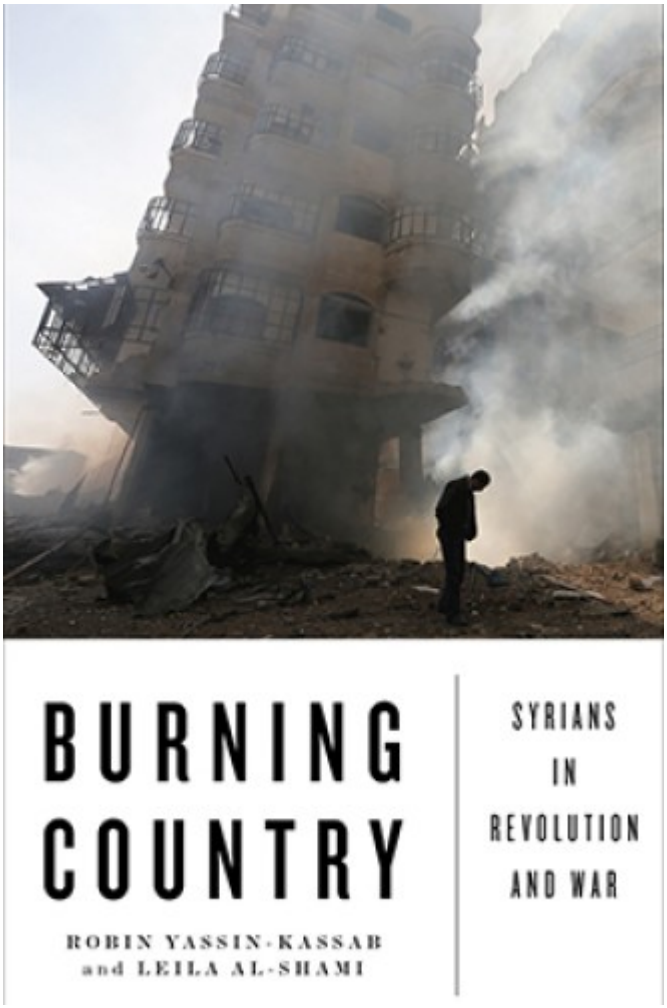
Witnesses to war

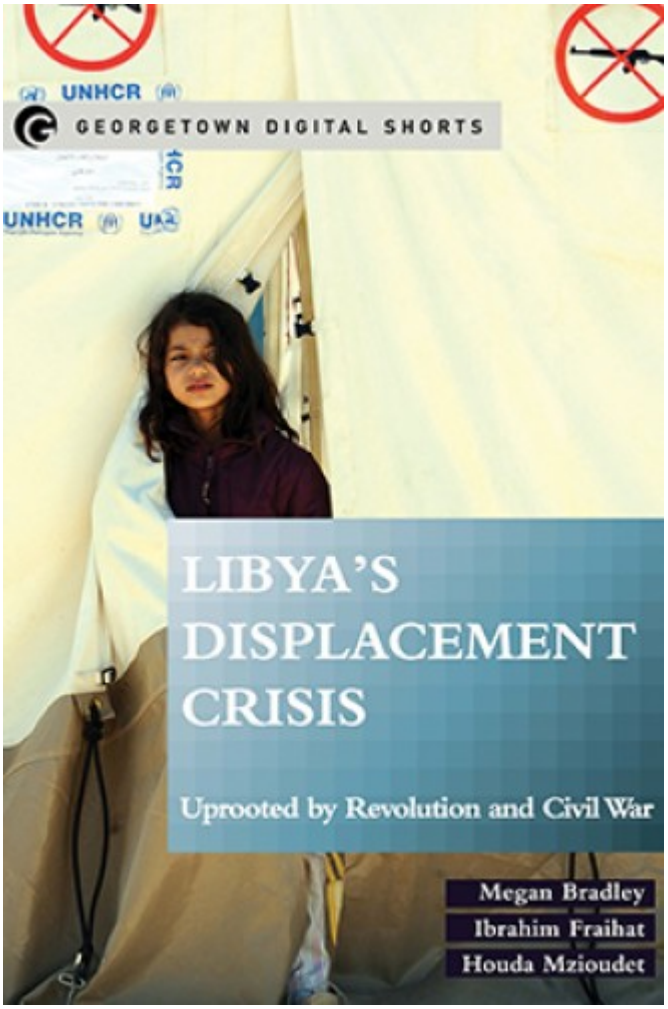
by Carolyn Stauffer in the December 7, 2016 issue

In Review



Burning Country

by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami
Pluto Press



Libya’s Displacement Crisis

by Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, & Houda Mzioudet
Georgetown University Press

Traces of Survival

edited by Tamara Chalabi & Philippe Van Cauteren
Mercatorfonds

"Fire is catching. And if we burn, then you burn with us.” Katniss Everdeen brandishes this impassioned and defiant threat in the 2014 film *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay–Part 1*. Revolutions exact costs from all parties involved. The fire of war consumes winners and losers alike; this is the price invariably extracted by systems of violence.

An inordinate proportion of the costs are borne by the less powerful parties within a conflict. This silent majority, people on the street, bear the brunt of war and its aftermath. These three books illuminate the lives of everyday folks who are traumatized or displaced by violence and war. They reveal the lives behind the statistics.

“When revolution blows the lid off, all kinds of steam rush out.” With this admonition, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami in *Burning Country* draw us into the throes of the more than decadelong civil war in Syria. This war has left over a million people dead or wounded, four out of five Syrians living in poverty, over half of all children not attending school, and more than half of the country’s hospitals no longer functioning. The broad-scale collapse of Syrian infrastructure, the decimation of political economy, and the erasure of civil society have rendered Syria and its citizenry fractured beyond recognition. In this context, “radicalization is better named traumatization.”

Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami trace the rise of Bashar al-Assad’s “vampire state” with its slow and incisive strangulation of its inhabitants. An orgy of Assadist-fueled sectarian violence has included overt and covert warfare as well as genocidal massacres of thousands using Sarin gas and other chemical warfare attacks. While state-manipulated regional militias and sectarian violence run rampant, external interference by Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, and the United States (not to mention Hezbollah, al-Nusra, and ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) exacerbates nationalist, revolutionary, and jihadist fires.

Having lived through three wars in the Middle East, I appreciate the nuance and complexity of identity politics represented in this book. I also respect the authors’ criticism of postcolonial excesses that entrench capitalist elites, militarized states, and co-opted ideologies. But the book’s vilification of Assad’s regime is too limited. Like Katniss’s nemesis, the Syrian state is cast as a monolithic structure. Seeing a regime through this lens is rarely advantageous to postconflict reconstruction. In juxtaposition with this starkness, the authors prioritize the nuancing of religious expressions. They boldly state: “Islamism can be liberation theology, bourgeois democracy, dictatorship, or apocalyptic nihilism.” This nuancing is critically important in countering the Western propensity toward a monolithic Islamophobia.

The book concludes with hopeful vignettes from Syrians who have sacrificially chosen to lead a change movement. The authors’ passion for the courage and language of everyday people emboldens their narrative of Syria’s “Arab Spring.” One Syrian survivor explains:

> The revolution . . . was about normal people who stopped what they were doing, to stand up for what they believed in.

The same words might have been spoken by Katniss, or recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

Revolution is not just about debt or emancipation; it's also about being indentured to a cause and inextricably tied to its aftermath. This reality is apparent in *Libya's Displacement Crisis*, Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, and Houda Mzioudet's stellar analysis of Libya's war. This short commentary on an uprooted population reveals the precarious security of displaced people amidst a cacophony of competing visions for post-Qaddafi Libya.

While a post-Qaddafi world might seem like a desired future for some, these authors point to displaced persons as the temporary (if not permanent) losers of this transition. The collapse of public order and the rise of private militias following the nine-month revolution in 2011 resulted in the flight of over 1.3 million Libyans.

Citing land restitution as one of the many issues overlooked in the nation's transitional justice process, the authors note that the threat of potential prosecution has forced many previously Qaddafi-aligned citizens into asylum in neighboring states. This protracted diaspora of a critically important middle class has created an echelon of displaced persons who live in the shadow of extradition and seek "invisibility within neighboring countries."

These previously Qaddafi-aligned exiles face not only dispossession, but also the assumption of guilt by association. The question of collective guilt (and the role of "extrajudicial justice" writ large) is one of the most useful issues raised by this text. Also significant are the authors' astute observations regarding the need for more durable "reintegration" solutions.

Traces of Survival poignantly captures a richly textured kaleidoscope of drawings rendered by residents of a refugee camp in Iraq. It interprets the barrage of atrocities committed in Mosul prior to the ISIS takeover in June 2014. It's a coffee-table book—not because it is nonscholarly, but because it artistically captures a nostalgic sense of what life could have been like for a generation of Iraqis (more than 2 million) had they not precipitously become nomads. Chosen by Ai Weiwei, a Chinese social reformist and artist, the drawings give voice to the dissonance of dissidents. Their jarring pathos is a reminiscence of security shattered, the memory of an innocence no longer held.

In the caption beneath one drawing, a refugee artist provides this inscription: “apart from the kindness of Christ, we have nothing left.” Another indicts with this refrain: “We asked you for help and you did not come to our aid. We were your guests and you expelled us.” Such voices, alongside the images, embody truth telling and testify to resilience against all odds.

These books resoundingly call for critical solidarity. They all critique the West’s intervention tendencies, whether of the political left or right. “The common thread between neoconservatism and [progressivism] . . . is an abiding refusal to work with the people on the ground directly concerned by the outcome,” write the authors of *Burning Country*. They call us to a third approach—one that is more congruent with a God who became incarnate. These books break the barrier of distance and challenge us to do the same.