

Reports

PUBLICATIONS

Melissa Fleming, *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea: The Journey of Doaa Al Zamel* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017), 288 pp.

A Hope More Powerful than the Sea by Melissa Fleming recounts the courageous and often jaw-dropping journey of Doaa Al Zamel's flight from persecution in war-torn Syria to resettlement in Sweden. In harrowing detail, the story brings to life the plight of refugees forced from their homeland and into the uncertainty and violence that constitute the liminal space of stateless communities, and the resiliency required for their survival.

The book begins in the comfort of six-year-old Doaa's home in Dara'a near the Jordanian border. From playing with her cousins in the courtyard to observing aunts chide her mother for bearing only daughters, it is a childhood punctuated by the joys and squabbles of extended family life. By 2011, the familiar rhythms of Doaa's days attending school and gossiping with friends on the rooftop are ruptured when tanks, helicopters and soldiers descend on the city. The Arab Spring had arrived in Syria; however, initial hopes for regime change and progressive reform are crushed by President Bashar al-Assad's oppressive and indiscriminate response to opposition, which includes abduction, torture and rape.

Having lost his livelihood and desperate to protect his family, Doaa's father makes the anguished decision to flee their homeland, a decision she likens to 'taking my soul away' (81). The family arrives in Egypt only to encounter more persecution as a tide of anti-refugee sentiment sweeps the country. Under constant threat of violence, Doaa, now 19 and engaged to Bassem, makes the gut-wrenching decision to accompany her fiancé on the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean in search of a better life in Sweden. The young couple endures detention centres and the cruelty of merciless smugglers before their dilapidated trawler capsizes. All but a handful of the 500 refugees crammed onboard are swallowed by the sea, including approximately 100 children and Doaa's beloved Bassem. Doaa manages to cling to her own life and that of two small children for an interminable four days before being rescued by a passing



commercial vessel. After 16 months in Greece, she is eventually reunited with her parents and siblings in Sweden.

A Hope More Powerful than the Sea reveals the tensions inherent in refugee life, including living with the ordinary and the surreal (one moment you are dreaming of attending university, the next dodging bullets while attempting to buy bread) and the juxtaposition between malevolence and kindness: Doaa's ship submerged after being rammed by another vessel, whose crew was yelling to send 'these filthy dogs to the bottom of the sea' (193). Days later, she is rescued by a merchant crew who refused to give up their search at their own personal cost. The dominant tension – and wherefrom the book derived its title – is between despair and hope: not only does Doaa survive insurmountable odds at sea, she does so despite a lifelong fear of water. The book ends with Doaa, who is traumatised but alive, returning to the sea and wading out into the water and thinking 'I am not afraid of you anymore' (251). It is these types of heroics in the midst of unimaginable suffering that draw the reader in and have him or her rooting for Doaa at every ill-fated turn, as local, national and global forces inscribe but never completely circumscribe her life: she continues to struggle for a better one.

Fast-paced and accessibly written, the book holds appeal for any audience (popular, professional or academic) interested in the production and plight of disenfranchised populations in general and Middle Eastern studies and refugee studies in particular. The book would also be an effective teaching tool, especially at the college level, for courses on refugees and asylum, gender, humanitarian crises and area studies, with supplementation as needed. *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea* is a well-researched work of non-fiction, but a decidedly biographical one, with the broader context of regional politics and international response addressed in less depth. From an anthropological perspective, the book would be an excellent vehicle for analysing structural violence, the phenomenology or lived experience of suffering, and the manner in which violence becomes gendered, especially during times of war.

There is little not to like about this book, save for the narration of Doaa's interior life and the seamlessness of the account. While 70 hours of interviews were conducted with Doaa and her family, imputing the inner monologue of her past would be difficult under any circumstances, let alone with the ruptures and lapses that typify narratives of trauma. Fleming addresses this dilemma in the conclusion, stating that Zahra, the documentary filmmaker who interviewed Doaa, 'ensured that the transcripts were complete and coherent . . . that any lapses in memory were resolved' (270). The manner of resolution is unclear.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2019 an estimated 79.5 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced from their homes: 26 million as refugees, 40 per cent of whom were children. In addition to national borders and international bureaucracies, they now have to navigate yet another set of boundaries and limbo created by COVID-19. The incomprehensibility of pain is difficult to

articulate for both those who suffer and those entrusted with their stories. Whatever editing decisions Fleming made in order to weave Doaa's story into a coherent narrative were likely related to a larger purpose. Fleming, chief spokesperson for UNHCR, writes that she is 'always on the lookout for distinctive accounts of survival and resilience that illustrate refugees' predicaments while also building bridges of empathy to the public' (263).

It is an agenda of compassion and awareness that also reflects Doaa's, who, in the book's penultimate section ('A Note from Doaa'), states:

I have shared my suffering with you. It is only a small glimpse of the hardship and pain that refugees around the world endure. I represent just one voice among the millions who risk their lives every day in order to live a life of dignity . . . We are not terrorists. We are human beings just like you. We have hearts that feel, yearn, love, and hurt. (261)

Later she adds: 'I am grateful to all of those who refuse to remain indifferent' (262). *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea* demands readers do just that.

Kathleen M. Gallagher, St Mary's University, San Antonio, TX

Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), xviii + 239 pp.

Omar Dewachi's *Ungovernable Life* is a must-read for all students of the Middle East and North Africa. It is one of the few contemporary books on modern Iraq that exhibits a combination of intimate first-hand experience of the country, deep familiarity with Arabic language sources – from historical narratives to social scientific texts to diaries – and theoretical incisiveness. An Iraqi medical doctor who left Iraq in 1998, as the country's infrastructure and economy, formerly the envy of the Global South, crumbled under the cruel US sanctions regime, Dewachi worked at the American University of Beirut's medical centre for a time and trained in socio-cultural anthropology in the United States. Dewachi has produced a moving, clearly written and refreshingly jargon-free critical and ethnographic history of modern Iraq written through the lens of its healthcare system.

Of the various motivations for writing this book, Dewachi mentions in particular the 'obliteration of the history' of Iraq by 'ill-informed explanatory models of religion, sectarianism, and authoritarianism', which became prominent during and after the American invasion and occupation of 2003 (xiii). These models have generated claims about Iraq being 'ungovernable', although narratives of ungovernability go back to the time of the British First World War intervention and the early mandatory period. What conceptual and political work do such claims do? As Dewachi shows, through such claims speakers attribute developments in Iraqi state-making to endogenous factors, obscuring imperialism's role in the making and unmaking of modern Iraq.

Particularly distorting have been discourses that reduce post-1979 Iraq to the Ba'ath Party's apparatuses of political repression and control. What Dewachi's study shows is both how reductive these discourses are and how much they leave out, in particular how 'medical discourses and practices have been central to the country's architectures of governance' (11).

It is not only imperialist and overtly ethnocentric narratives on Iraq that are at issue, however. In his discursive critique, Dewachi alerts the reader to the importance of remaining grounded in the concreteness of the place and time that is the subject of ethnographic writing. Along with anti-imperialist critique, Dewachi's text and his research method also, implicitly, regard with scepticism dematerialised accounts of Iraq which focus on Western representations, fantasy or 'imagination'. Discourses of ungovernability, or by contrast, Iraq as a 'model' mandate, are rather products of imperialist and post-independence states' administrative and developmental projects. In this, *Ungovernable Life* is a salutary corrective to the tendency amongst Anglophone social scientists and historians to centre their analysis on Western representations of non-Western societies.

The latter point is related to Dewachi's theoretical interventions, of which two are important. First, he shows how biopolitical frameworks shifted between the period of the First World War and the early mandatory period to the later mandatory period and on into the late 1950s. In this period, British medical experts and imperial administrators began imaginatively remapping Iraq away from the 'tropics' towards a cultural-geographic space not dissimilar to parts of Europe. Thus, Iraq came no longer to be seen as a pestilential absolute 'other' to British 'civilisation' but more as a potentially modern and developed state, albeit ('naturally') under the guiding hand of the British. In the process, British administrators positioned, and exhorted, the emerging Iraqi medical professional stratum to fashion a new generation of doctors embodying the values both of *hakim* (ruler, more colloquially, leader and administrator) and *hakeem* (doctor). The role of the medical doctor was now both: to administer public health and to guide the Iraqi state's developmental trajectory – in short, to be a lynchpin of Iraqi modernity. All of this was conditioned by the fact that, aside from a series of brutal military invasions between 1914 and 1920, the British generally desired not to have too heavy a hand in the mandate. The financial crisis resulting from the war, and Britain's vast crumbling planetary empire, prevented such a posture. To attend to the specificities of the British role in Iraq, it is therefore crucial to jettison *a priori* notions of what the logic of imperialism is in the Global South and instead study the concreteness of imperialism: how it is instantiated in different parts of the Global South at different points in history.

The second intervention emerges from Dewachi's deep engagement with what might be called anthropology's immanent critique of the state and of development pioneered by scholars such as Anna Tsing, James Scott, Tania Murray Li and James Ferguson. *Ungovernable Life* poses the question of whether Iraq's contemporary travails are not a result of the self-defeating logic

of top-down schemes of state-led development, binary categorisations of state, economy, and society, and similar logics to which anthropology has turned its critical gaze since the mid-1990s. This critique is particularly apt when applied to the state's engineering of wetlands and canals under the revolutionary government of Abdul Kareem Qasim (1958–1963). The results of this process were an increase in waterborne diseases, soil salination, uncultivable agricultural land and an exacerbation of urban–rural inequality (105–107). However, the same logic of state developmentalism, especially after the nationalisation of the oil industry in the early 1970s, was a key to the story of how Iraq expanded its health infrastructure, popularised medical education, expanded and improved access to healthcare in rural areas and for children – even and, paradoxically, especially during the Iran–Iraq War – and developed its health research and education sector (129–131). Later of course, Iraq became a country whose infrastructures were devastated by deliberate acts of invasion and war by the United States and its junior partner, the United Kingdom.

By the time Dewachi left Iraq in 1998, the country could no longer provide basic healthcare to its citizens and was witnessing a reversal in its history: instead of attracting foreigners to its medical schools and hospitals, it saw its citizens forced to seek medical care in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon (3; 171–175). In a moving concluding chapter, set during 2015, Dewachi – by then a professor of medical anthropology at the American University of Beirut – describes the charnel house of the university's cancer ward. The ward serves a disproportionate number of Iraqis, who come to Beirut seeking medical care unavailable at home. The United States has since the early 1990s used Iraq as a laboratory, systematically dismantling its state sector and subjecting its population to chemical warfare at a breathtaking scale (this is discussed in Dewachi's important article, 'The Toxicity of Everyday Survival in Iraq,' published in 2013 by *Jadaliyya*). Iraqis, according to a Lebanese doctor interviewed by Dewachi, are 'tough cases.' Many are young victims of 'very advanced and aggressive types of cancer' not typically seen in patients their age. Multidrug-resistant bacteria (MDR or 'superbugs' resistant to antibiotics) are also typical of Iraqi patients. Space does not permit a sufficient discussion of the impact on the reader of this final chapter, which I can only describe as one of the most devastating pieces of writing to emerge from the field of cultural anthropology in recent memory.

Adding to the injuries of invasion the insult of 'ungovernability' was deployed anew to describe Iraq's supposed endogenous socio-political pathologies. How this happened is a story more of old-fashioned imperialism and the brute force of racial capitalism than it is of the immanent logic of state development, though of course the two are not necessarily separable. Although Dewachi is not as explicit on the theory of the latter, his empirical material is a damning indictment of US and British imperialism in Iraq, past and present.

FILMS

Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghani, *Sonita* (Zurich: Xenix Film, 2015), 90 min.

Sonita, by Iranian film-maker and first-time feature film-maker Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghani is an action-packed documentary about an Afghan refugee girl in pursuit of her dreams of becoming a famous rapper. The audience is dropped into Sonita's life at the Tehran NGO for displaced youth where she is employed as a cleaner. At recess in the concrete yard, Sonita stands on a set of stairs that she has turned into her stage, rapping about the injustice of Afghan girls forced into child marriage. Her peers cheer from the yard below, their arms pumping, their headscarves falling as they jump to the quick beat: 'Son-i-ta! So-ni-ta! So-ni-ta!' In this opening montage, one refugee girl is quite literally staged above the rest, invited by the film director to perform the role of her life.

The plot is structured around directorial interventions laden with social, political and filmic references. Sonita's mother in Afghanistan plans for Sonita's marriage, an arrangement that would fetch a dowry of 9,000 US dollars, the exact amount needed for the marriage between Sonita's older brother and his betrothed. As Sonita's mother is increasingly present in the plot line, Ghaemmaghani's role in front of the camera expands. In one scene, the director enters the frame and turns to ask her camera operator: 'How could I stand by while Sonita is denied education?' and 'How could I allow Sonita to be married off at her age?' When Sonita briefly goes missing, Ghaemmaghani voices her distress: 'If we don't find her, this will be the end of the movie. That would be horrible'. Brokering a deal with Sonita's mother, Ghaemmaghani pays 2,000 dollars to gain an additional six months' time before her wedding. The film evolves into docu-thriller pulled around Ghaemmaghani's plot for 'saving' Sonita – or saving her own film? The boundaries between Sonita the girl's deliverance and *Sonita* the film's success are collapsed, as girl and director become co-conspirators charting a path in the fraught space between documentary fact and fiction. The film production team works with Sonita to craft a music video, 'Bride for Sale', which they enter into a European music contest where she wins best rapper. Her music video goes viral with over a million views, and Ghaemmaghani helps Sonita apply to an American arts high school, and without informing Sonita's family the two abscond to Afghanistan to obtain her passport. To the sound of great auditorium applause, Sonita is delivered to Wasatch Academy, a private boarding school in rural Utah, where the school principal introduces Sonita to her predominately White classmates in a language she does not yet know.

After her travel to and enrolment in this American high school, Sonita buries her face in a couch pillow as Ghaemmaghani initiates the call to Sonita's mother in Afghanistan. Across the crackling connection, her mother screams in anguish before hanging up the phone. In the final scene, Sonita

rap's 'Bride for Sale' in a small, packed performance venue, where for the first time her hair is unveiled. These closing scenes suggest that while Sonita has lost her family ties, she has realised her dream of going to America and becoming a rapper. Sonita's Afghan culture is represented as backwards and her conservative working-class family as repressive. By contrast, the path forged by Ghaemmaghani's interventions represent Western liberal feminist ideologies of individualism, women's education and non-Islamic clothing, to which Sonita has been delivered.

Ghaemmaghani received her BA in film-making and her MA in animation from Tehran University. Her film-making practice extends from a rich tradition of self-reflexive film-making in Iranian experimental documentary cinema. Post-revolutionary Iranian directors working with amateur youth and child actors from poor, working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds accentuated power differentials amongst characters and between film subject and director, including Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Salam Cinema* (1995), Abbas Kiarostami's *Homework* (1989) and Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1995), to name a few. While these filmic experiments cross numerous ethical boundaries that would give pause to today's festival jurors, their works are canonised in the world of independent cinema for posing thought-provoking, uncomfortable questions about the power relationships embedded in film-making as a practice.

Departing from her predecessors' tendencies towards open-ended provocations about power, Ghaemmaghani deliberately harnesses the power of film in the age of viral YouTube videos. She expands her mobility as an Iranian woman film director through the deliverance of her charge, the Afghan refugee girl film subject. And yet the ethics of this intervention are displaced in the film. Moments of reflexivity about Ghaemmaghani's rescue of Sonita are brief and buried by their Westward momentum. Meanwhile, deeper forms of imperialist structural violence remain peripheral in this plot, including the history of Western intervention targeting oil extractions, the protracted American military occupation of Afghanistan, and the US-imposed economic sanctions on Iran. All of these factors drive the displacement of people from their ancestral lands in Afghanistan while also contributing to poverty of Afghan migrants in Iran. As a result of US military and economic interventions, many Afghan families are left with no choice other than to send their children to Iran to find work and to arrange child marriages at younger ages due to poverty. And yet in the film, the promise of, superiority and desirability of American education are not questioned.

Taking the Grand Jury Award at Sundance in 2016 and the Audience Award at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, this film's allure lies within its omissions. Through an Orientalist lens, Sonita is exceptionalised as separate from her 'repressive' Afghan community and thus worthy of saving. This narrow, predominately interpersonal lens for power between director and film subject enables international audiences to look past Western culpability

in the economic and social conditions at the root of Sonita's familial and communal hardships.

Sonita is exemplary of a broader shift in the documentary film industry towards single-storyline, character-driven films in which brown youth from the Global South are invited to perform their own vulnerability and express their dreams on the camera. Tropes of the 'deserving migrant', the 'desperate migrant' and the 'exceptional migrant', to name a few, come at the expense of fuller stories about the humanity of people moving through the wake of North American and European histories of colonial and imperial violence. *Sonita* is a valuable teaching tool for upper-division undergraduate- and graduate-level courses on visual anthropology, the politics of representation, the anthropology of migration, and the Middle East. Critically teaching *Sonita* can support students in how to better see tropes about refugees, to better understand Western saviourism and ultimately to make their own valuable interventions down the line as anthropologists, activists, educators or NGO workers.

Natalie Nesvaderani, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Ron Bourke, *Terror and Hope: The Science of Resilience* (Portland: Collective Eye Films, 2019), 36 min.

The documentary *Terror and Hope: The Science of Resilience* was filmed by award-winning film-maker, Ron Bourke, and won a Best Documentary Award at the 2020 Sci-On Film Festival and the Jury Award for Best Short Documentary at the Raw Science Film Festival. Bourke's goal was to show to a general audience how science works on behalf of refugees in humanitarian settings. He showcased ground-breaking research that bridged academic and humanitarian sectors, featuring the voices of scientists, humanitarian staff and Syrian refugee families who had been displaced to Jordan.

The scientists were invited by Mercy Corps, an international humanitarian organisation, to measure the effectiveness of *Nubader*, a psychosocial and behavioural intervention, in Jordan. The programme seeks to alleviate profound stress and build resilience amongst youth affected by the Syrian War. The study was led by Professor Catherine Panter-Brick from Yale University in collaboration with Professor Rana Dajani in Jordan and funded by Elrha, a global charity that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation.

Their randomised control trial, begun in 2015, sought to answer the question: does the programme work to demonstrably alleviate stress and improve mental health? To answer the question, the research team developed a culturally relevant tool to better measure individual, family and societal dimensions of resilience. After the trial ended, the team continued to meet young people and their families to relay the findings of the study. In 2019, a second project was launched, which was guided by an important question raised by

the research team in conversation with refugee families: can severe violence experienced during pregnancy be transmitted as trauma across generations?

The documentary explains the impact of trauma and toxic stress on refugee health, as well as some of the innovative solutions being developed to undertake community-based research and interventions in contexts of forced migration. Conducting rigorous scientific research under humanitarian conditions is not easy. However, the need for scientific research is very important to ensure that humanitarian programmes are impactful and to find ways to improve them. The film's emphasis on the collection of research data and field-work demonstrates how difficult this process can be. The film is good at showing the psychological burden of asking difficult questions related to trauma on both the Syrian study participants and the Syrian/Jordanian research team. We can see the emotion in the faces of those interviewed.

Families of study participants were asked for permission to be filmed. Many participants were scared for their safety or for the safety of loved ones who were in Syria, some of whom were in Syrian prisons. Some families did not trust a foreign film-maker's intentions in creating the film. This is understandable, given that many of the crises in the region were made worse because of foreign intervention. Our presence – as researchers of Syrian heritage living in Jordan and known to local communities through our foundation, Taghyeer – was key to explaining the process and building trust. Those who chose to participate in the documentary wanted to share their experiences so that the world could hear directly from them instead indirectly through the voice of a journalist.

Since we wanted to work with families as participating partners in the research, we asked them to co-design some aspects of the programme evaluation, inviting them to answer questions of their own. As a research team, we were inspired and humbled by the resilience and courage of Syrian refugee families. Teenagers, in particular, taught us how to go beyond the mindset of victims and the importance of having hope and aspirations for the future. This is an important take-home message for the general audience of the film and for people who work in the humanitarian sector. Rather than perpetuating the refugee-as-victim mindset, we emphasise that refugee families can develop their own solutions – they know the problems they face, they have agency and they can work to build a better life for themselves.

There are many films on the history of conflict in Syria and the Middle East at large; therefore the film-maker made a deliberate decision to simplify the political history of the crisis, in order to focus on the science and its potential to help people who are displaced by violence. This is the first film to focus on the current refugee crisis through the lens of science. However, to be fair to the Syrian people, the film could have explained more clearly that the dictatorship was mainly responsible for the injustice and atrocities happening on the ground.

While the documentary inspires us to work towards a better future, and establishes that addressing trauma and toxic stress is crucial, we also see the

need to discuss how government policies must be altered to create open and humane policies for refugees and immigrants. This documentary showcases how scientists work with humanitarians to improve programmes that help reduce stress and build resilience. It shows the complexity of studying trauma and resilience. Most importantly, the film shows how local and international scientists can work together not only to do better science, but to ensure that research participants are part of the process, respecting their dignity. The film is unique in its portrayal of science in humanitarian contexts. Furthermore, it illustrates the importance of science and international collaboration in solving today's most significant humanitarian challenges.

*Rana Dajani, Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan,
and University of Richmond, VA*

*Dima Hamadmad and Ghufraan Abudayyeh,
Taghyeer Organisation, Amman, Jordan*