

Taylor K. Caleb, book review, Navid Kermani's *State of Emergency*. *AmeriQuests* 14.2 (2018)

Navid Kermani. *State of Emergency: Travels in a Troubled World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018. Translation of: *Ausnahmezustand: Reisen in eine beunruhigte Welt*. 299 pp. Hardcover: \$69.95. ISBN 978-1-5095-1470-0

*State of Emergency: Travels in a Troubled World* collects Navid Kermani's travelogues from the period between 2005 and 2014. Previously published in German news magazines and newspapers, the pieces featured in this book detail Kermani's journeys across Egypt and India, reaching across the Middle East to Syria, Iran and beyond, and finally returning full circle to the coasts of Europe, on the island of Lampedusa. Weaving together the threads of individuals with vastly dissimilar views, Kermani has written a gripping and sensitive book that relays the untold stories of those in the crisis belt of refugee flight. Kermani sheds critical light onto the harsh and harrowing core of refugees' day-to-day lives, relying on his unique understanding of the refugees' narrative, gained through years of viewing the world from the perspective of an Orientalist living in a German society. He illuminates the resilience of individuals, and the value of their personal hopes and aspirations in war-torn countries, where uniformity is demanded. He details the struggles of these people in their rawest forms, while stressing the apathy of outsiders and the insistent need to address the human suffering. He invites readers to share a glimpse of the truths that will not be otherwise reported.

Of special note is the poetic language that Kermani uses to convey these overarching concepts. Through his eyes, the reader experiences a picture that once seen cannot be forgotten. In Tehran, for example, he recounts his eyewitness account, captured in the midst of the 2009 Iranian Presidential election protests:

'We have to hide! . . . If the militia find us, they'll set the shop on fire.' But the volunteer militia don't get as far as the shop. Many of the demonstrators have turned around and are throwing stones at them . . . Stones fly from other directions as well; not two yards from us, two older, clean-shaven gentlemen join the fight; across the road, women . . . Through the bars we see the militiamen debating among themselves; we see their leader shouting, when suddenly the demonstrators call out 'God is greater!' and storm forward. The cheers that break out as the volunteer militia run away don't last five minutes: an anti-riot squad is already approaching, the *zede shuresh* . . . [W]e hear gunshots, screams, sirens. Another five minutes later, as if at the push of a button, there is silence . . . [W]e step out onto a deserted battlefield: billows of smoke, the ground strewn with stones and shards of automobile glass, fires here and there . . . The smell of tear gas hangs in the air. It is Saturday, 20 June 2009. What looks like war was a silent protest march when I arrived in Tehran three days ago. (166–67).

This brief glimpse is an example of the lucid prose that Kermani employs in order to transport the reader away from his own realm, and plant him in a reality that few of us can even attempt to understand. The astounding nature of these stories reminds readers that it is indeed a nonfiction work. This is a compelling testament to Kermani's writing style, as the picturesque nature of his words is realized even upon translation of *State of Emergency* from German to English.

As we advance through the chapters, which seem dissimilar at the outset, three key themes emerge as the backbone of each story: the disastrous abuses of individuals in these societies—particularly of those whose views are not tolerated; the pressing need to relay the truest form of each story for the world to hear; and the unforgiving indifference of outside nations. These notions propel Kermani's stories and highlight a commonality between each varying piece.

Kermani's environment and surrounding culture shift dramatically as he travels over the years across different countries, but the reported conditions remain largely the same. Communities of mostly uneducated people are starving and without funds. Moreover, individuals live surrounded by war, death, rapes, and tortures on an unconceivable scale, and there are very few positive signs of growth and transformation; indeed, when Kermani visits Afghanistan five years after his first visit, it becomes apparent that any guarantees of change were not followed through (see for example pp. 99–160). Kermani notes the largely unaffected difficulties in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2011, despite promises from other nations to aid in improving the Afghan quality of life (pp. 99–160).

Each person and community that Kermani interacts with seems to have a similar tale of tragedy. One group of people lives with only three to four hours of electricity per day, while another group spends their days sitting in the desert heat, swaying with exhaustion, following the shade of their tents as the sun moves across the sky. One Afghan gentleman told Kermani that he earned only three thousand afghanis in one month, equivalent at the time to roughly seventy U.S. dollars. Some days, the man said, he has so little funds that he could not give anything to begging children. 'No, not a dog's life: we live much worse than dogs. Dogs at least are not ashamed,' he reports. The man then pointed to Kermani's notebook: 'I'll write you twelve of your books full: that's how great our grief is' (161). Such unfortunate misery is not limited to one group of people. Every classification which is in any way deviant from what is commanded is under constant threat.

Deeply engrained in the chapters of *State of Emergency* is the undeniable need to tell the sufferers' true stories. Kermani writes of corrupt governments that attempt to silence individuals and suppress them into obedience. Iranian soldiers selected for their government's army need only be qualified by their "size and stupidity," so that they don't feel so inclined as to think for themselves at all. The government of Iran, desperately attempting to keep its violence, torture, and killings out of international reports, slowed Internet speeds to a crawl, shut down the mobile phone network entirely, and blocked journalists from obtaining visas.

Because the government is pretending to ignore the resistance and is abstaining from further spectacular abuses . . . yet at the same time is prohibiting all reporting under threat of imprisonment, the protests are slipping downward in the international news. The information blockade is working: not only are the daily silent marches too indistinguishable in the poor-quality images taken with mobile phones, but the pictures get out too late and too sparsely to make the evening news. (p. 172).

Iran's pulling of the plug on globalization kept outsider statements to a minimum; its citizens were seemingly unreachable, and they called out for help to a nonexistent audience.

Kermani details the physical conditions that may leave communities largely isolated. The rugged land of the Middle East is practically inaccessible for residents themselves, not to mention for journalists and foreign visitors. Even if the terrain were not at issue, however, it is unclear that those paths would be taken at all. Traveling far away from one's home may be too dangerous to consider, and these conditions can make international reporting exceedingly challenging, if not impossible.

Kermani's advocates for nations and individuals alike to open their eyes and their hearts to these people. In Palestine, in April 2005, Kermani shames the Israeli government for its treatment of Palestinians. In propelling its idea of "building a Greater Israel," the government pushed for a massive wall to annex Palestinians entirely. Israel, believed by many to be a liberal-minded, civilized, humanitarian democracy, treated Palestinians as if they were no longer human beings.

I could give dozens of examples each day of Palestinians being humiliated, violated in their dignity, treated like criminals, locked in cages, herded past the muzzles of loaded assault rifles. These are everyday experiences in the lives of practically all Palestinians. Whenever they want to go from A to B, they have to walk past a loaded assault rifle aimed at them. At the checkpoint to enter Gaza, which is as monstrous as the German–German border crossings used to be, except that the Palestinians do not sit in cars but are sent through the chutes at a run like pigs, an Israeli soldier asked what business I had there. Was I a veterinarian? (p. 270).

In another disturbing account, Kermani shares his September, 2008 experience in Lampedusa, an Italian island between Sicily and Northern Africa that has been the site of many refugee processing for asylum cases. Refugees typically arrived there half-dead, dying of thirst or exhaustion, traumatized, burned, starving, and broken. For every three refugees that did make it to Lampedusa alive, one was said to have drowned on the way. Kermani writes of his excitement seeing refugees make it through their tragedies and treacherous journeys to finally arrive at a safe place. The Lampedusa camp, however, illuminated itself as more of a prison than a paradise:

Concrete slabs between rows of shipping containers stacked two storeys [sic] high, each so full with six bunk beds there is barely room to stand; the men's section crowded everywhere, in fact, although there have been storms at sea for days and all the bunks aren't even occupied. The whole camp, officially for seven hundred refugees, is less than sixty metres wide, less than two hundred metres long, I estimate; the population density is higher than in any Japanese high-rise. Every square metre manifests the authorities' efforts to walk the fine line between potential accusations of treating the refugees inhumanely or of spoiling them. Rough-hewn strips of foam rubbed that look like building insulation serve as mattresses; the sheets are paper; all the dishes are disposable plastic. In the men's section a silent throng stands in front of the gate, yet no one is able to explain to me what the men are waiting for. All of them are silent, in fact: the boredom is palpable, as are the inevitable tensions among the refugees. (p. 288).

This "help" provided by Lampedusa had been regarded as an utter imposition by its citizens. The people of Lampedusa, the previous mayor tells Kermani, wanted to help the refugees, but the residents didn't want to be the ones to bear that burden. Indeed, the residents remained blissfully ignorant about the plight of these refugees, and in many cases acted as though they were invisible. Refugees were whisked away immediately upon arrival to a refugee camp that could not be located on a map, and hidden far behind a hill away from the town. Reminding the residents of the refugees' misery every day, the mayor tells Kermani, would depress the residents and ruin the island's image as a tourist attraction.

Kermani's bottom line is that someone—or, better still, everyone—needs to face the refugee crisis head-on, and make a difference in the quality of our fellow humans' lives. These instances of failures by other nations and individuals is an unfortunate and problematic reality still existing today. Countries who use their platforms to voice concern for refugees may still fail to provide adequate remedies. Indeed, the Lampedusa mindset is all too common. Many nations and individuals alike recognize the misfortune out in the world but do nothing to address human abuses, often brushing it off until a more convenient time or a more appropriate location is apparent. The geographic and chronological span of Kermani's stories highlight the fact that the

vast human sufferings are immeasurable and persistent; such misfortune will not disappear without generations of fierce commitment.

Given Kermani's intimate knowledge of the history, geography, and culture of the Middle East and its surrounding areas, the reader is fortunate enough to receive an expert's narrative. While one can surely appreciate Kermani's ability to narrate such thorough accounts, and preserve them in their original forms, an introductory chapter to the book explaining the overarching takeaways may have served useful here. If Kermani's intended audience here is fellow scholars, this may not be an issue at all; however, as these pieces were previously published in German newspapers and magazines, the audience is likely laypeople, or alternatively, individuals who have an interest in foreign affairs. Such an introductory chapter would likely broaden the book's scope of audience to a younger generation. This could have profound impacts, as the future of the refugee crisis will necessarily fall on the future generations' shoulders. Facilitating connections between different types of people, coupled with the furthering of conversation regarding the moves necessary to address the refugee crisis, may propel Kermani's overall purpose of *State of Emergency*.

From the perspective of an individual who is not well-rehearsed in issues of this crisis belt, it may not be apparent through the first several chapters of the book how each one comes together. Particularly for readers unfamiliar with the regions or grief-stricken circumstances citizens are coping with, it may be difficult to grasp the essence and magnitude of a specific story. Indeed, for many pieces, it is necessary to widen one's lens and comprehend the political or religious undertones in order to fully fathom the conflicts at issue. For example, in an opening section in Palestine, April 2005, Kermani writes of Palestinians' anger following the breakdown of peace negotiations three years prior. He goes on to briefly mention the attacks by radicals and the restrictions of the Israeli army. While these are certainly significant points, the reader may feel that not enough light was shed on the history of the area to wholly appreciate the desperation of Palestinians during this time. Unfamiliar readers, rightfully enthralled by Kermani's book, may read on in anticipation of the next story without a clear understanding of Palestine's history.

Additionally, *State of Emergency* is now somewhat dated, with the most recent account being in 2014. However, many of the struggles written about continue to burden refugees. Power-hungry extremists remain in control of individual beliefs, gripping accounts are transformed into misleading or forgotten information, refugees continue to flee corrupted nations in hopes of a better future, and western civilizations still remain blind to others' hardships and dismiss their concerns. These unthinkable truths must be spread, as swift action needs to be taken in order to prevent the worsening of these injustices. Kermani shares but one small piece of a much larger problem perplexing the entire human civilization today. Western societies must familiarize themselves with these issues, recognize their impact on real individuals, and provide refugees with a deserving life filled with safety and acceptance. For as long as books like Kermani's *State of Emergency: Travels in a Troubled World* are circulated, the dreams and aspirations of refugees may live on. "I can't change anything,' I admit, 'I can only help make sure you are not forgotten.' After me will come someone else to remember . . . and another and another, hopefully, and someday something will surely change." (p. 53).