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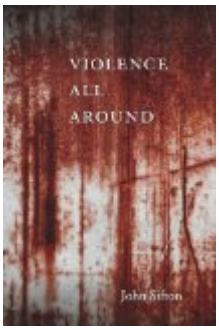
John Sifton. *Violence All Around.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. xii + 323 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05769-2.



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Published on H-Diplo (January, 2016)

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Violence All Around is an enjoyable and engagingly written work, focusing mainly on the Middle Eastern conflicts since 2001. Whether by virtue of the author's legal background or by simple coincidence, the text maintains a tight and matter-of-fact quality that keeps it easy to digest. However as an in depth scholarly study of violence and conflict, *Violence All Around* falls well short of the most forgiving expectations. Though the work contains some philosophical engagement, much of this comes in the form of brief and cursory treatments of disparate ideas, quotes, and anecdotes from historical figures—additions that do little more than elucidate the author's specific personal musings. The book's historical component functions in much the same way, with its accounts of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan providing a distant color and insight to events, but is far from complete or well rounded. Any stringent dissection of its philosophical content (or as one blurb suggests, its exploration of the "human condition") would be quite sparse and scathing. There is very little of value, certainly no new insights and practically no critical engagement with any sort of scholarly work.

However, that is not to say that the book has nothing to offer the more theoretically minded reader. John Sifton's account as a "boots on the ground" representative of law and reason in an unreasonable world gives us the opportunity to compare our expectations as spectators with that of the referee. Drawing on both personal experience and his wider knowledge, the author is able to provide points of interests and direction to otherwise loaded debates. As an example, while speaking of what could conceivably be done in the face of systematic ethnic violence, Sifton points out that the notion of education as a tool against ethnic and ideological hatred is fundamentally flawed to those who spend their lives cataloguing and investigating such abuses. Using the civil rights leaders of Myanmar as an example, the author challenges the idea that perpetrators of ideological or ethnic violence simply lack empathy, and that in fact such a view disregards their motives—their empathy for the plight of

their own group and interests. In Sifton's view, the perpetrators of such abuses must be acting out of empathy for their own group's interests, as "How else can the seemingly considerate rights activists in Burma speak of Muslim Rohingya minorities as 'foreigners' who should be put in internment camps?" (p. 69).

It is insights like this that push their way through and provide the reader with value. Between the autobiographical recollections of his fieldwork in war zones, changing his suit on the morning of 9/11 to keep it clean, and the aesthetic qualities of Reinhold Niebuhr's study, ***Violence All Around*** contains vital insights into the life of a human rights field-worker. In an arena where it suits many to simply say that one "makes a difference," Sifton gives readers the opportunity to see what that difference may be and what form it would take. Crucial to this picture is the fact that Sifton speaks not only of his time spent "in the field" but also of attending conferences, of preparing reports for disinterested governments, and of liaising with journalists and bureaucrats. Far from being a whistlestop tour of his Middle East experience, ***Violence All Around*** gives a brief but important view of how such work intersects with Western political, social, and academic life.

Beyond simply demonstrating the day-to-day reality of such work, Sifton's account also highlights the limitations of legal recourse against states. Whether committed by the Central Intelligence Agency, US military, Taliban, or Egyptian government or its provisional replacement, Sifton details the various abuses and the various ways they could be construed as illegal—as well as the multitude of ways such judgments could be nullified, avoided, or ignored. The last chapter of the book attempts to transcend the apparent hopelessness of such inevitabilities through its treatment of the power of people to effect change upon the stage of violence, giving an account of the Arab Spring and the removal of Hosni Mubarak.

Despite the effort, however, Sifton settles on a rather pessimistic tone. After all the research, advocacy, and effort put in by non-governmental organizations and their agents, even with the support of the common people of the local and global communities, in Sifton's view, the champions of human rights can only name and shame. At the last, Sifton confronts us with the world as he sees it, as theater, played out by states wielding humanity's all-pervasive will to violence. Whether a pacifist relying on the violent intent of the community for which they advocate or a soldier relying on their government's right to power, the riveting theatrics of conflict can easily be assayed and catalogued but seldom controlled. In Sifton's view, we are left with very little sense that we can prevent or truncate abuses, and are certainly not left with any plan or goal on how any sort of prevention may be initiated. If perpetrated by a non-state actor, there is little hope for education; if such abuses are performed by a government there is no recourse but a sort of patient despair. Though further insight into how such issues may be overcome would make the work truly commendable, the lucid and engaging account contained in ***Violence All Around*** is most certainly one worthy of consideration by policymakers and the academics who advise them.

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Citation: James Mortensen. Review of Sifton, John. *Violence All Around.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

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