

A FIRST YEAR AND COMMON READING RESOURCE GUIDE
TO

**EXIT
WEST** *A Novel*

BY

**MOHSIN
HAMID**

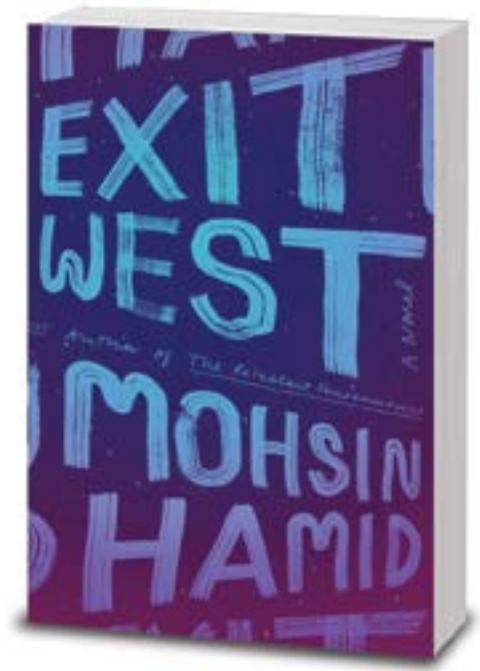


Penguin
Random House
ACADEMIC MARKETING

I. INTRODUCTION

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the reader is introduced to Nadia and Saeed, two young lovers who come together as the world around them falls apart. Amidst increasing violence and civil unrest, talk emerges of magical doors that offer Nadia, Saeed, and other refugees a way out and the opportunity to begin anew. In a sense, *Exit West* also offers readers their own magical doors, as the narrative transports them to spaces of contemplation and action. The book beckons readers to reflect on and positively impact the world beyond the text, a world currently brimming with an unprecedented number of refugees and other displaced individuals. In the context of this reality, *Exit West* serves as a timely, invaluable text, and this guide was written to assist students as they engage with it.

Through the questions, activities, and resources featured within, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *Exit West*, relevant personal experiences, and related topics. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, various classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First Year Experience (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.



II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. Why do you think Mohsin Hamid chose to not identify the city and country that Nadia and Saeed initially inhabit? What effect does this authorial decision have on the reader?
2. What role do faith and religion play in the book? How do Nadia, Saeed, and other characters differ in their approaches to faith and religion?
3. In what ways do Nadia and Saeed migrate in the context of their own relationship?
4. In what ways is Nadia and Saeed's relationship shaped by external circumstances? In general, how does their relationship change over time?
5. What forms of internal and external conflict do Nadia and Saeed experience?
6. How do mobile phones function as "portals" in the book? Consider your own mobile phone use. In what ways does it enable your own "migration"?
7. What emotional challenges do Nadia, Saeed, and other refugee characters face? What emotional challenges do refugees face in the world beyond the text? To what extent are these challenges tied to the experience of loss?
8. "We are all migrants through time" (p. 209). What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?
9. "They sat on their bed and watched the rain and talked as they often did about the end of the world, and Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them, and Nadia said once again that the natives were so frightened that they could do anything" (pp. 163-164). What do you think engenders the feelings of fear and anger displayed by the natives in *Exit West*? To move beyond the text, what engenders the fear and anger that some natives in the United States and other countries have recently displayed? How should these emotions, and the realities they produce, be addressed?
10. "...and so by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (p. 98). How do you interpret this passage?

11. "Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" (p. 72). What is your reaction to the fantastic use of doors as portals in the text? What equivalent mechanisms can you identify in our world?
12. In what ways does the book challenge and complicate the categories of "native" and "migrant"?
13. Would you describe the novel as optimistic, pessimistic, or some combination of both?
14. What do you think are some of the central themes of the text?
15. If you could ask Mohsin Hamid one question about *Exit West*, what would you ask and why?

III. VARIOUS CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following are short activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

1. STUDENT GENERATED QUESTIONS (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *Exit West* through this activity. QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships, and this activity works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. The types of questions include:

- Right there questions: answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text. (*How do Nadia and Saeed meet?*)
- Think and search questions: answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together. (*What are some of the high and low points of Nadia and Saeed's relationship?*)
- Author and you: answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence. (*How do you think the narrative would have changed if Saeed's mother had not been killed?*)
- On my own: answers connect personal experience with themes of the text. (*Have you ever had to leave your loved ones behind? If so, what was this experience like for you?*)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other's questions in writing
- Have students pose their questions during small group discussions
- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation ("Right there" questions do not work well for this)
- Have students answer each other's questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>)*

For more information on this strategy, consult this resource: <http://www.readingquest.org/strat/qar.html>

*All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.

2. COMPARE AND CONTRAST REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

After reading *Exit West*, have students access the two sources below. Each one details the experiences of a number of refugees.

- "Refuge," from *The Washington Post*: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/syrian-refugees/story/refuge/>
- Brandon Stanton's "Humans of New York: Refugee Stories": <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/tagged/refugee-stories>

To begin, have students browse both sources. Next, ask students to select one narrative to compare and contrast with a specific refugee experience detailed in *Exit West* (students could focus on the collective or individual experiences of Nadia and Saeed, or they could examine a secondary character).

To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of the refugee experience depicted in their chosen narrative; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of their selected character's experience. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole class conversation. Students could also further explore their noted similarities and differences through extended writing.

3. GALLERY WALK

"Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to re-create the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks" (p. 26).

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid provides a number of descriptive passages that create vivid images in the reader's mind. To accentuate this visual experience, have students analyze images related to the refugee experience through their participation in a gallery walk activity, described below.

A gallery walk requires students to move around the classroom while thoughtfully observing and analyzing visual content. To prepare for

this activity, select five–eight images that you believe will provoke students to reflect and think deeply. You can select these images from the following three websites:

- “Portraits of Syrian child refugees - in pictures”
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2016/mar/17/portraits-of-syrian-child-refugees-in-pictures>
- “Europe’s migration crisis in 25 photos”
<http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/03/world/gallery/europes-refugee-crisis/index.html>
- “These are the most powerful photographs of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015”
https://www.buzzfeed.com/lynzybilling/these-are-the-most-powerful-photographs-of-the-syrian-refugee?utm_term=.pgY2yD59Z#.cyoEkwaOB

After selecting the images, display each on its own designated laptop/tablet or print each out. Each image should be placed at a different location in the room, and desks should be arranged so that students can easily move around and quietly visit each image. Encourage students to spend sufficient time reflecting on each image, and as they do so, have them record responses to the following questions, per image:

- What would a good title for the image be? Why?
- What strikes you about the figure(s) (clothing, facial expression, etc.) or setting featured in the image?
- How does the image make you feel? Explain.
- In what ways can you connect the image to *Exit West*?

After students have circulated around the room, have them share their responses in small groups or during a whole class discussion.

4. PAIDEIA SEMINAR

A Paideia Seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and linking student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, and *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify main ideas from the text (What larger points does the book make about love and loss?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (How do Nadia and Saeed’s early experiences affect the trajectory of their relationship?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you learn from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another’s comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When

the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult <https://www.paideia.org/about-paideia/socratic-seminar/>.

5. VIRTUAL TOURS OF REFUGEE CAMPS

“They walked away from the beach club and in the lee of a hill they saw what looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colors and hues—many colors and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea...” (pp. 105-106).

This activity utilizes technology to provide students virtual access to two different refugee camps. To begin, ask students to take one or both of the virtual tours described below. As they begin their chosen tour(s), ask students to keep a “travel diary.” In this diary, students should record what strikes them (both intellectually and emotionally) during their tour, and they should also strive to make connections between the content of the tour and *Exit West* (particularly the camps described in the text). After all tours are completed, allow students to discuss their related thoughts, feelings, and questions, and ask them to specifically unpack the connections they made with the book. Invite students to share their travel diaries with each other if they are comfortable doing so.

- <http://zaatari360.martinedstrom.com>
This site provides students with a 360-degree view of Zaatari, a massive refugee camp in Jordan.
- <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/greece/>
This site provides students with virtual tours of five refugee camps located in Greece.

6. PORTRAITS OF REFUGEES AND THEIR SMARTPHONE PHOTOS

“In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be” (p. 39).

Photographer Alex John Beck traveled to refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon to take a series of portraits of Syrian refugees with their most treasured smartphone photos and the stories associated with them. Have your students navigate to http://alexjohnbeck.com/project/oxfam_syrianrefugees/ to browse Beck’s portrait series.

Give students time to browse the entire series, then have them select two–three portraits that particularly resonate with them. Next, ask them to respond to the following questions in a short written response:

1. Provide a brief description of the portraits you selected.
2. In what ways did these portraits resonate with you? Consider both aesthetic and emotional reactions.
3. How can you connect these portraits to *Exit West*? Identify relevant passages from the text.

Have students share and discuss their responses. To extend this activity, ask students to imagine that they have become refugees. In this context, what smartphone image would they cherish most? Give them an opportunity to present their images, and the stories behind them, in small groups or in front of the entire class.

7. "CLOUDS OVER SIDRA": A VIRTUAL REALITY FILM

"Clouds Over Sidra" is a virtual reality film that is narrated by Sidra, a 12-year-old girl in the Zaatari refugee camp. Virtual reality allows students to have an immersive, empathetic experience. Initiate this experience by directing students to <https://with.in/watch/clouds-over-sidra>.

As detailed at <https://with.in/how-to-watch-vr/>, students have several options for viewing the film in virtual reality. Students can use a VR headset, a cardboard VR viewer that uses a mobile phone, a mobile phone by itself, or a web player. Regardless of how students experience the film, ask them to address the following questions in writing or during class discussion after they view it:

1. What were two–three moments from the film that particularly impacted you?
2. Compare and contrast Sidra's experiences with those of Nadia, Saeed, and other characters in *Exit West*.
3. How did the virtual reality aspect of the film affect you? Do you feel it allowed you to empathize with the refugees featured in the film? Why? Why not?
4. In general, what do you believe viewers can learn from this film?

IV. RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper
 - Deliver a presentation
 - Create a website (<http://www.wix.com>, <http://www.weebly.com>, and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
1. Refugee crises are currently occurring in multiple countries across the globe. Select a country that is currently experiencing a refugee crisis and perform research while considering the following questions. What is the history of the crisis? What are its primary causes? Where are the refugees in your selected country fleeing to? What are the risks to those who remain behind? How should the crisis be addressed? You can use the following resource to help you identify a country you would like to focus on and initiate the research process: <https://www.rescue.org/where-we-work>.
 2. "He had not added that it was especially unsafe for a woman to be alone, but she knew both that he thought it and that it was true, even as she parried his suggestion...Nadia was herself coming to acknowledge that this was no longer a city where the risks facing a young woman living independently could be thought of as manageable..." (p. 74). What are these risks that Nadia, and other female characters in *Exit West*, face? Relatedly, perform research and explore the challenges facing women in countries ravaged by war, conflict, natural disasters, etc. What are the unique challenges that female refugees face? How should these challenges be addressed?
 3. "In contrast to Saeed, Nadia saw no need to limit her phone. It kept her company on long evenings, as it did countless young people in the city who were likewise stranded in their homes, and she rode it far out into the world on otherwise solitary, stationary nights" (p. 41). How do Nadia, Saeed, and other characters in *Exit West* utilize their phones? Perform research and explore how and why smartphones (and social media) are particularly important to refugees. In this context, what are the affordances and limitations of this technology?
 4. "The news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart" (p. 158). In what ways does this passage refer to the world we currently inhabit? Perform research and explore this question. Pay particular attention to current political and social developments in the United States. What factions have solidified as of late? What recent political, economic, and social developments have contributed to rising xenophobia, heightened nationalism, and increased calls to secure borders and restrict the movement of refugees? Who/what are significantly contributing to present forms of unity and disunity?
 5. Research yourself. Do you identify as a native, a migrant, neither, or both? In what ways has your identity been shaped by those who came before you? Even if you believe you are not a migrant yourself, in what ways is your existence informed by your ancestors? What cultural histories and norms inform who you are and who you seek to become? How do your social, cultural, and ethnic identities shape how you perceive others?
 6. Perform research and examine the Trump administration's travel ban. What is it? What countries does it affect? How are refugees specifically affected? What are the cultural attitudes and political and social developments that made this ban possible? What are the ethical and legal challenges to it? Based on your research findings, do you predict the travel ban will persist? Why? Why not?

V. SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. SUPPORT A CHARITY THAT AIDS REFUGEES

To initiate this activity, have students organize themselves into groups and invite them to select one of the charities described below (note that these are just suggestions; students can look online to locate others as well. If they do so, encourage students to vet charities through the use of <https://www.charitynavigator.org> and <http://www.guidestar.org>):

- The American Refugee Committee (<http://arcrelief.org>) works to support and provide opportunities to displaced people, refugees, and host communities.
- UNHCR's (The UN Refugee Agency) Nobody Left Outside campaign (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/nobody-left-outside.html>) works to shelter two million people who have been forced to leave their homes.
- The International Rescue Committee (<http://www.rescue.org>) works to assist families fleeing South Sudan, Myanmar, and other locations.
- DonorsChoose.org has established a page (<https://www.donorschoose.org/refugees?historical=true>) that lists projects that public school teachers have posted that will benefit refugee and immigrant students.
- The Karam Foundation has created a program (<https://www.karamfoundation.org/sponsor/>) that allows donors to sponsor Syrian refugee families.

After students select a charity, ask them to plan and implement several different fundraising activities to support it. To provide students with some fundraising ideas, refer them to the extensive list located here: <https://www.causevox.com/fundraising-ideas/>.

Whatever students choose to do, encourage them to promote their efforts through social media. After students conclude their fundraising efforts, have them debrief and reflect on what was successful and what could be improved.

2. JOIN THE "BOOKS NOT BOMBS" CAMPAIGN

While people of all ages have been affected by the extreme violence in Syria, young people have witnessed the destruction of schools, and by extension, the widespread loss of educational opportunities. In light of these circumstances, invite your students to take action by supporting Books Not Bombs, a student-led campaign that calls on universities in the United States to offer scholarships to Syrian students.

To begin, have students navigate to <http://www.books-not-bombs.com>. Here, they can browse a list of participating universities. If your university is listed, encourage students to join the existing campaign.

If your university is not listed, direct students to the bottom of the web page where they can contact Books Not Bombs and initiate a campaign at your school.

You may also wish to share the following resources with your students in order to provide additional information and inspire them to get involved:

- <https://tinyurl.com/y7wjm6kt>
This short video provides an overview of the mission of Books Not Bombs.
- <https://www.karamfoundation.org/karam-scholars>
This website describes the Karam Foundation's partnership with Books not Bombs and the resulting establishment of the Books Not Bombs Fellowship, a fund designed to help displaced students address gap expenses related to higher education.
- <http://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/tn-dpt-me-refugee-scholarships-20171129-story.html>
This editorial details the story of Iman Siddiqi, a student at UC Irvine who, with the support of Books Not Bombs, created the University of California's first student-funded scholarship program for asylum seekers and refugees.

3. VOLUNTEER WITH AN ORGANIZATION/ AGENCY THAT SUPPORTS REFUGEES

This activity invites students to connect with other individuals who care about the refugee crisis by asking them to volunteer with an organization or local agency dedicated to assisting the many refugees who currently need aid. To begin, have students complete the following online course on volunteering with refugees (this is a free, 2-hour course): <https://classroom.therefugeecenter.org/programs/volunteering-with-refugees>. Next, have students access one or more of the following resources to help them find a local organization or agency they would like to assist:

- <https://www.volunteermatch.org/>
- <https://therefugeecenter.org/in-your-city/>
- <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11THcAlc-J5HBmFNjEpbLsyP1zA8Vunuriz0yLnD-W2E/edit#gid=299847445> (this is a public spreadsheet that requires a free Google account to access)
- <https://www.rescue.org/volunteer>
- <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/state-programs-annual-overview>

Ask students to maintain a journal during their time volunteering so that they can share their experiences with classmates.

4. HOST A DINNER FOR REFUGEES

To combat the alienation and cultural disconnection that many refugees experience, invite your students to plan and host a dinner for refugees in your area. To begin, encourage students to access the two resources below:

- <https://www.changex.org/us/unitedinvitations/guide>
This website outlines the process of hosting a “Welcome Dinner” for new arrivals in your area. The five-step guide featured here outlines how hosts can register their event, connect with people in their area, send invitations, and initiate the dinner.
- <http://refugeeswelcometodinner.com>
This is the website for “Refugees Welcome,” a “dinner project where refugees and non-refugees break bread and break barriers. Anyone can host a dinner—organizations, businesses, individuals, groups of friends. All you need is an open heart and a big enough table.” Students can use this website to sign up to host a dinner, and they can also locate dinners that others are hosting.

Students can use either of these resources to get started, but regardless of which resource they use, encourage students to work collaboratively to plan their event. Additionally, students should carefully consider where they wish to host their dinner. Your school may provide space to host such an event, but the home of a professor, churches, and restaurants also offer potential locations for hosting the dinner; local businesses may also wish to host.

Lastly, encourage students to reach out to local refugee resettlement agencies (<http://www.wrapsnet.org> is a useful resource for this) to locate and invite refugees to the event.

5. BECOME AN EXPERT AND EDUCATOR

Have students select a topic related to *Exit West* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- The Trump administration’s travel ban
- Brexit and the European refugee crisis
- The mass movement of human beings throughout history
- The history of immigration in the United States
- The benefits of technological connectivity

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of *Exit West* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group’s topic?
2. What are controversial elements of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites them to debate the issue. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as <https://www.canva.com/> will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher to create documents.
- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through Prezi (<http://www.prezi.com>), Google Slides (<http://www.google.com/slides/about/>), or Microsoft Sway (<https://sway.com>).
- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and convey knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include <http://piktochart.com> and <http://easel.ly>.

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in dialogue.

6. HOST A REFUGEE

There are several initiatives that provide temporary housing for the many refugees who have been displaced from their homes. Invite your students to explore and support two such initiatives that are listed below.

- <https://www.airbnb.com/welcome/refugees>
Airbnb’s Open Homes platform allows people to open their homes and provide free, temporary housing for refugees and other displaced individuals. While your students are unlikely to be homeowners themselves, encourage them to explore this platform, introduce it to others, and lobby their professors, family members, neighbors, etc. to consider hosting refugees in their homes. Relatedly, students may also find it inspiring to access the following website that features profiles of refugees and their host families (students may also wish to share this resource with adults to help motivate/inspire them to become hosts): <http://www.unhcr.org/no-stranger-place>.
- <https://everycampusarefugee.net>
Started by Diya Abdo, an associate professor of English at Guilford College, Every Campus a Refugee is a program that calls on colleges and universities to host one refugee family and assist them in resettlement. Guilford College has hosted 32 refugees and assisted their resettlement in Greensboro, North Carolina. Encourage your students to visit the website above to learn more about the program and join the movement.

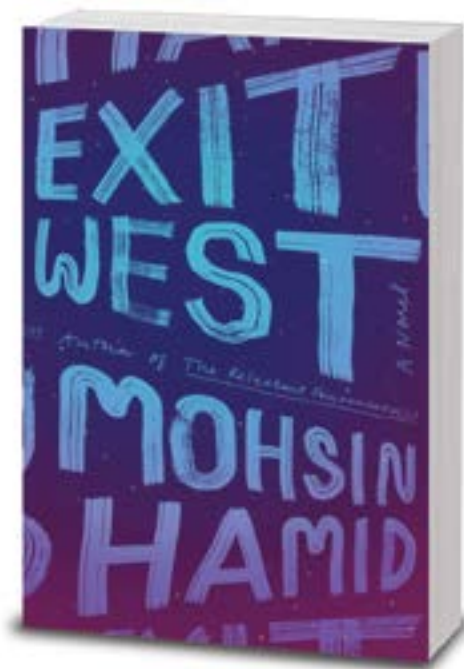
VI. OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following are useful resources for extending a study of *Exit West* and its related subjects:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2017/mar/21/being-a-radical-optimist-with-mohsin-hamid-books-podcast-exit-west>
A discussion with Mohsin Hamid on *The Guardian* Books podcast
- <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/08/519217991/from-refugees-to-politics-mohsin-hamid-writes-the-change-he-wants-to-see>
An interview with Mohsin Hamid on NPR's *Fresh Air*
- <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/06/518743041/mohsin-hamids-novel-exit-west-raises-immigration-issues>
A brief interview with Mohsin Hamid on NPR's *Morning Edition*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVM7xEMJPK>
Footage of Mohsin Hamid reading from and discussing *Exit West* at the Politics & Prose Bookstore, in Washington, D.C.
- <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/9/57d7d4478/mobile-connectivity-lifeline-refugees-report-finds.html>
Information on a recent study by UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) and Accenture regarding refugees and the importance of mobile phones and internet access
- <http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees/>
Information from the United Nations regarding refugees
- <https://www.hrw.org/topic/refugee-rights>
Information on Human Rights Watch's Refugee Rights Program
- <https://www.ted.com/topics/refugees>
A selection of TED Talks on the topic of refugees
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecavbpCuvkI&t=64s>
"The Displaced," a virtual reality film from *The New York Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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