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Martyrdom and Destiny in Time of Revolution

Urgent Actions and Imminent Endings in Syria

Abstract: Through the ethnographic exploration of the Syrian uprising, this article shows how revolutionary actions and times are shaped by competing ideas of martyrdom. Aiming at tracing Syrian revolutionary engagement through the fragments left by martyrs and witnesses; this article argues that the urge to act *now* during the 2011 revolution was linked to the imminence of personal and collective endings. Through revolutionary actions, Syrian revolutionaries seemed to actualise in the present their desired destiny, often understood as martyrdom among my interlocutors. Destiny thus appears not so much as a cosmological but as a moral frame of revolutionary actions, as well as an *ex post facto* theory of the revolution's defeat and the course of history.

Keywords: destiny, martyrdom, political action, Syrian revolution, temporality

These were years when revolutionary futures
were not merely possible but *imminent*;
not only imminent, but *possible*.
(Scott 2014: 4; emphasis in original)

'Martyred, martyred, also martyred, martyred . . .', Abu Zein slowly enumerated as the pictures of those he had been fighting alongside, in a Free Syrian Army battalion in Ghouta, scrolled by on his laptop's screen. He had escaped his besieged town, heavily injured, a few months before this discussion took place on his mother's balcony in Gaziantep on a Ramadan night in 2015. Abu Zein was still planning to go back to Syria to fight the Assad regime once he recovered from his injury. He later began showing me footage he took himself. One clip was from a protest in 2012. The protesters were singing together '*Jana jana jana jana ya watana*' (paradise, paradise, paradise, paradise you are our homeland), a song that became an anthem of the revolution after after Abdel Basset Sarout – a former football player and soon revolutionary icon – interpreted it in Homs's central square.

These lyrics – referring to dying a martyr and so entering paradise, reflecting an Islamic script – were often sung by my interlocutors in commemorations of the revolution, in the weekly protests in Gaziantep's main square or more mundanely in everyday celebrations and reminiscing about the revolution's first years.



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This article draws on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork (2014–2017) with Syrian revolutionary families and youths in Gaziantep, Turkey. My interlocutors belonged to the lower-middle and working classes, and were from mid-sized towns that often became revolutionary bastions. They called themselves *thuwar* (revolutionaries) for they participated in various ways in the 2011 uprising: some from the private spheres of their homes, others joining protests and taking up weapons against the regime. A majority of my interlocutors described themselves as pious (*multazem*), and were often labelled *islamiin* (Islamic) or *akhuan* (Muslim brothers) by fellow Syrians. Others referred to themselves, in opposition to the former, as *almaniin* (secular). However, these (self)-definitions were very dynamic: constantly evolving, moving and often overlapping.¹ Most of the families I lived among were female-headed and marked by the absence/presence of men. This text mainly echoes *islamiin* mothers' and wives' stories² of their sons' and husbands' actions and deaths during the revolution's early years (2011–2013), and their reflections on the revolution's course after it was deemed defeated (2015–2017), although it contrasts them to *almaniin* experiences and understandings of the revolution.

Reading through the anthropological and historical literature on revolution, one is struck by the omnipresence of the term 'martyr' to describe the dead revolutionaries in a wide range of settings (e.g. Alexievich 2003; Holbraad 2014; Khalili 2007; Wahnich 2003). Sophie Wahnich (2003) shows how the notion of 'sacred' was central for French revolutionaries, especially during the period of the Terror (in 1793), when many citizens joined the fight to save the Constitution and were ready to sacrifice themselves for the revolution. Those who died fighting for this 'sacred' cause were referred to as the 'martyrs of Prairial' by the Montagnards (2003: 90, my translation).

Locating the question of martyrdom within the literature on (self-)sacrifice and revolution, one can argue with Michael Lambek that 'sacrifice . . . takes place in the interest of some later good' (2014: 433) – here one could say a greater or higher cause. Furthermore, taking as my starting point the idea that self-sacrifice can be described as the ontology of revolution (Holbraad 2014), I analyse *shaheed* (martyr) as both a political and religious term that stands against a number of practices in Syria. Dwelling on the polysemic character and the indexical nature of '*shaheed*', this article shows the ambivalences and ambiguities inherent to its understanding by my interlocutors and within the Syrian context.³

Indeed, despite certain differences, *shuhada* (the plural of *shaheed*) are linked to an idea of futurity that is similar for both secular and Islamic revolutionaries, albeit framed within a historico-secular or cosmologico-religious spatio-temporality and this forming a 'temporal multiplicity' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017). Similarities ran deeper than linguistic occurrences, for burial practices, rituals and relations to time were also shaped by the idiom of martyrdom.⁴ Dying a martyr is a good death: it is dying for a just and higher cause. Whether these

are understood in secular, religious or both terms, they are not necessarily in contradiction.

Shaheed is thus both a common term and one heavily charged in the Syrian context, for it touches on existential questions and relates to Islamic texts and ritual practices. In addition, for the *islamiin* it is intimately linked to the Islamic concept of predestination (*qada wa qadar*), whereas, for most of my interlocutors – including *‘almaniin* – the time of one’s death was prewritten before one’s birth.

This article explores the ways in which martyrdom and destiny – locally referred to as *qadar* or *maktub* (written) – orients revolutionary actions, explains the tragic endings of the Syrian revolution, and alters experiences and understandings of time. It is hence both an ‘ex post facto’ explanation (Gaibazzi 2015) and a horizon of action for most of my interlocutors. Hence, how do Syrian Sunni understandings of martyrdom and destiny radically reconfigure revolutionary temporality and political action: how is the urgency to act oriented towards imminent individual and collective endings? This question is inherent to the project of ethnographically tracing the Syrian revolution. Moreover, it helps us reflect on the wider purchase of revolutionary temporalities, which are religiously inflected and continue to be so after the urgency to act has moved elsewhere.

Ethnographic Traces of the Syrian Revolution in Exile

‘al jana rayhin shuhada bi-l malayin (the martyrs will enter paradise in their millions), protesters often shouted and wrote on banners. The martyr’s iconography and language were omnipresent in the Syrian revolution: not only does this figure appear in many songs, it is also very present in slogans. Visually the high probability and sometimes willingness to sacrifice oneself for the revolution – and its equivalent, dying a martyr – was alluded to by protesters wearing white funerary cloths. Moreover, martyrs’ funerals were often the places to stage revolutionary protests. Yassar, a man in his mid-twenties who self-identified as *‘almani*, remembered the funerals of the first protesters killed in Deraa: ‘The crowd was bigger at the funerals than at the protests themselves! . . . Actually, the funerals became new sites of protests’.

This article aims to give an ethnographic account of the Syrian revolution and its repression through the unseen (predestination), the absent (martyrs) and their effects on Syrians’ revolutionary action and temporality. This is only possible by mobilising the narrative, mnemonic and visual traces of the dead revolutionaries. Bringing these traces into my ethnographic description of the Syrian revolution is a way to challenge the possibility of accounting for the unseen and the erased in anthropology.

In this sense, the focus on Syrian martyrs and understandings of destiny among secular and Islamic revolutionaries can be perceived as an exercise in

anthropological tracing of the invisible (the dead) and the invisibilised (the defeated) in the aftermaths of mass political violence as the revolution's ends and endings remain unclear (see Al-Khalili 2022; Haugbolle and Bandak 2017; Mittermaier 2019; Napolitano 2015; Navaro 2020; Trouillot 1995). It can thus be described as an ethnographic endeavour to read the Syrian revolution 'through the lens of *al-ghayb*, the unknown and invisible' (Mittermaier 2019: 18). As such, the narratives, dreams and visions of martyrs' relatives have to be understood as narrative and mnemonic traces of the first days of the revolution. They, the survivors, are the only way left to give a voice to those who fell in the revolution's violent repression.

Two figures of witnesses emerge through such tracing: the martyr (*shaheed*, etymologically 'the witness'), a dead witness who testifies of his violent death in front of God on Judgement Day, and the survivor, the living witness who can testify in front of a human court.⁵ Two temporalities and registers are signalled by this figure: a cosmological and historical time, and a divine and human regime of justice. This presents a different temporality and history – a non-linear and non-secular one – that could be thought of in terms of a heterotemporality or heterohistory (Chakrabarty 2000). In other words, taking revolution beyond the Enlightenment frame (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016) and grasping it through an Islamic temporality – one marked by the Afterlife and Judgement Day – and the Sunni concept of predestination, broadly understood as life being predetermined – or as death being already written – opens up to a redefinition of revolutionary action and temporality.

Revolution as Anticipation of Predetermined Futures

'The question, as for all Syrians, was how were we going to start the revolution?' said Zakaria, a university student from *rif dimasqh* (the Damascus suburbs), who took part in the peaceful protests at the beginning of the uprising before joining the armed rebellion. As we sat in his mother's apartment in early 2014, he explained, reminiscing about the early days of the revolution:

We gave ourselves a deadline: if the revolution survived in Egypt, we could do the same. When the revolution was over in Egypt, the atmosphere was ready in Syria. One of my friends thought of immolating himself to start the revolution . . .⁶

In early 2011, the urgency to act was linked to the feeling that some momentum had been gained with the 'success' of the Egyptian uprising. For many of my interlocutors and their relatives, the revolution manifested itself through an urge to act to cause the regime to fall. Moreover, this urgency was rendered through the oft-repeated expression that participating in the revolution was 'a once-in-a-lifetime chance'. My interlocutors recalled the ineluctable call to be *there* in the streets: to act *now* for the revolution to quickly succeed. Revolution thus

appeared as a future horizon that had to be ‘precipitated’ in the present through collective action (Elliot 2016).

I feared for my children, and hoped that we [the revolutionaries] would succeed. I just wanted the regime to step down and hold new elections. I wanted the *fasad* [corruption] to end; I wanted us to have laws. I wanted people to live in *karama* [dignity]! . . . Before the revolution, you were always scared for your future and your children’s future . . .

Umm Khaled – a housewife in her early fifties, whose husband and youngest son were martyred in 2012 – said this as she remembered her early hopes. We sat on the floor of her living room as she handed me a cup of mate. Time of revolution was marked by an intense feeling of hope and a continual attempt to draw the revolutionary future into the present. Hence, the temporality of the Syrian revolution seems quite dissimilar to that of crisis (cf. Bryant 2016), for the future was experienced as imminent and, in Umm Khaled’s words, the revolution opened towards hopeful futures.

Through the actions reported by my interlocutors, it seems that revolution was characterised by anticipation: a feeling that through revolutionary action, Syrians could materialise the revolutionary future in the present. This translated as an urge to act and a feeling of an imminent future. Anticipation thus seemed to become a mode of personal and collective action. Yet, how did Syrians attempt to actualise a fixed and unknown (i.e. prewritten) future through revolutionary actions?

Anticipated Self-Sacrifice and Revolutionary Action

My sons were saying that either they would live in dignity in their country or they’d rather die!

Umm Ahmad, a pious working-class woman in her mid-forties, told me this during a conversation in 2015 in the precarious apartment where she lived with her daughter, her remaining son and his family. She was the mother of three martyred and two forcibly disappeared sons.

Echoing the slogan ‘dignity or death’, Umm Ahmad’s sons’ words show that in revolution everything is at stake (see Cherstich et al 2020).⁷ The urgency to act *now* appeared, for most of my interlocutors, as the actualisation of a better future, and most often meant the imminence of (self-)sacrifice. Revolution was indeed a time marked by intense asceticism. Umm Khaled laughingly remembered how her husband had refused to speak about which dishes to serve, got upset when she laughed with friends on the phone and pushed her away when she came close to him in bed. ‘He would tell me, “How can you think of eating while there is a revolution going on?” or “How can you laugh when we have so many martyrs?”’, she recalled.

If revolutionaries are those willing to die for a better future and a greater cause, what does it mean in the case of most of my interlocutors – whether *islamiin* or *almaniin* – for whom dying in the revolution is understood as martyrdom that is a glorified (in a divine and/or historical sense) and prewritten death? Martyrdom appears here as closely linked to predestination, for destiny can be defined as the most widespread explanation for the (unexpected) outcomes of actions (see Schielke 2015).⁸

Here, martyrdom does not so much appear as ‘the revolution’s irresistible force’ or as a ‘key symbol for mobilizing affect and action’ (Armbrust 2019: 77, 79), but as a future horizon that could be actualised through action. It is therefore not similar to the understanding of the Iranian revolution as a ‘(re)enactment of Shi’a martyrdom’ that makes Iranian revolutionaries’ preparedness to die an ‘act of religious devotion’, and that is oriented towards the establishment of an Islamic Republic aiming to ‘go back’ to the time of the Prophet (Cherstich et al 2020: 72). Martyrdom – as a prewritten death – is an unknown(able) and uncertain future horizon that orients Syrian time and action: it pushes the *thuwar* to act to precipitate their desired future in the present.

Since the start of the violent repression of the protests in 2011, Syrians inhabited a spacetime where death lurked everywhere. In this context, how could they be assured that the urgency to meet their destiny would not alter it by changing one’s time of death? A central element in actualising one’s destined death was to not cross the fine line between suicide and martyrdom (see Pandolfo 2007; see also Willerslev 2009). But what is the difference between a dangerous situation – in which, if it were so ordained, one would die at the appointed hour without modifying destiny – and a suicidal situation, in which death was inevitable, thereby interfering with destiny?

The day that my youngest son was martyred, a lot of young men were injured, but he was the only *shaheed*. In Islam we believe in destiny (*qada wa qadar*): before someone is born, everything is written.

Umm Ahmad reminisced in these terms about her youngest son’s martyrdom at an early protest in Aleppo. Here, one can see how he did not put himself in excessive danger – he was one among thousands of protesters during a period when the protests were not highly lethal yet. His death, especially the fact that he was the only martyr, was proof to his mother that he was destined to die in that moment. As we sat drinking coffee, Umm Ahmad contrasted this situation with one wherein danger was inescapable. While staying put with her family under intense shelling was not destiny-altering, given its indiscriminate nature, they fled their home when a checkpoint was built in front of their house and a warrant issued against her husband. Staying in their home would have then been suicidal, for he would not have been able to escape arrest and would likely have been killed.

The debate over destiny and the possibility of changing it is important in order to understand some of my interlocutors’ and/or their relatives’ prepara-

tion to become martyrs, as it implied sacrificing oneself without killing oneself. The most widespread understanding of martyrdom among my interlocutors was indeed linked to the knowledge that one should not put oneself in situations where death is ineluctable, as this would alter one's destiny (i.e. time of death).

In addition, martyrdom had a double dimension for the *islamiin*: it was the local idiom of revolutionary self-sacrifice and was also the best possible death. As Umm Ahmad said in one of our conversations that inevitably came back to her sons, 'martyrs never die'. Paraphrasing the *ayat al shuhada* (the verse of the martyrs), she said, 'Those who are killed in the cause of God, do not call them dead. They are alive though you cannot perceive that life'. Martyrdom was thus perceived as the best way to die – a death that is sometimes seen as better than life itself – and an honour for the martyr's family, a sentiment rendered by the sentence, *Allah ikramna* (God honoured us). But ambivalent feelings persisted as Umm Ahmad's words about her son's death show:⁹

When your son is martyred, you can find some peace because you know he is with God in Paradise. It's true that there is sadness inside of you too but there is also happiness because when one is *shaheed* you don't consider that you have lost someone.

The belief that martyrdom is the best death, and a death better than life itself also seemed to be manifested in revolutionaries' reported longing for martyrdom.

When Salah was martyred five months after his brother, Ahmad was very affected. He had thought that it was his turn to be martyred. He didn't think it would happen to his brother first. [. . .] My sons were not scared of being arrested or martyred. They told me, 'We know this is the road ahead'.

Remembering Ahmad's feelings at the time of Salah's martyrdom, Umm Ahmad told me that he was crying. On another occasion, as I was having tea at Umm Khaled's, she remembered how her late husband, returning home after joining the armed rebellion, lamented that he was not yet a *shaheed* as he listed his companions martyred that day.

In time of revolution, destiny thus appears as imminent in the present: as orienting the present, by acting in the present to actualise the future, despite this future being unknown (cf. Bryant and Knight 2019: 160). Revolutionary action becomes the anticipation of individual destinies, and the urgency to act is an urge not to miss one's destiny. In revolution, time is oriented by an urgency to act, which simultaneously appears as the imminence of death. One is urged to actualise one's desired destiny through revolutionary actions – be it martyrdom or surviving the revolution.

Believing that one is destined for martyrdom can lead those who seek it to follow a specific course of action: being in the front row of the protest, protecting other protestors against the regime's thugs and soldiers, and later arming themselves to defend their neighbourhoods and joining the rebellion. But others did

all they could to survive the revolution, despite accepting the risk of dying in it (see below).

Revolution and the Imminence of Death: Performing the Martyr's Destiny

Ahmad used to tell me, 'Mother don't be scared! Don't be scared because no one dies before his day has come. And one's death will come anywhere one is.' And he was right! Death comes when it has to and that's all.

Umm Ahmad told me this as we sat on the floor with her daughter and daughter-in-law around the only *subya* (coal-burning hearth) of the house. She later recalled how Ahmad had also said, 'He who is destined to die will die even if he is inside his house', thus reflecting the idea that death is predestined and happens at the hour fixed by God before birth, which was the most widespread understanding of destiny among my interlocutors (see Schielke 2015). One could assume that this led to a fatalistic understanding of destiny and potentially to reckless actions, given that it could be understood as meaning that one will die at a fixed time and place regardless of what one does. However, another reading is possible here.

Understanding destiny as fixing one's death hour did not translate into fatalism and inaction, nor did it justify putting oneself in dangerous situations. Despite death and the martyr's status being predetermined, future martyrs prepared themselves to meet their destiny, acting-like-martyrs to actualise what was prewritten. Seen through their relatives' memories, martyrs seem to be those ready to sacrifice themselves¹⁰ for the revolution and a better future while hoping to meet the best death possible. This was also the case for Abu Zein, whose words open this article. Umm Zein, his wife, recalled one of their conversations, during which she begged him to stop fighting and to leave for Turkey.

'I am fighting and I will die a martyr', he said. 'But if you are martyred what will happen to me and the children?', I asked. And he kept saying, 'God will not forget you.' He wanted to go to Paradise, that's all! And he is right.

One cannot choose to be a *shaheed*, but one should act as a martyr in order to become one. Acting like a martyr or working towards martyrdom is understood as actualising destiny rather than creating it; this is described as an active process, since destiny guides humans' actions in an uncertain world while leaving its outcomes unpredictable. A similar tension between a life predestined by a divine power and the necessity to work to meet what has been prewritten has been described in the literature. Destiny is thus an interaction between human and divine wills, between human action and divine determinism, rather than an elimination of human agency (Elliot 2016; Gaibazzi 2015; Schielke 2015). Predestination, despite coming from elsewhere, needs human action and self-cultivation to be actualised: the two must come together. This was particularly prominent, for

most of my interlocutors understood their time of death as having been written before their birth.

Self-cultivation to become a *shaheed* expresses itself through a readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice. It leads people to prepare themselves to die for a just political and/or religious cause despite God's plan being unknowable, according to the religious understanding; in its historical understanding, free action leads to tragic consequences (Scott 2014). The circumstances of one's death are thus central to one's being a martyr, though they are not enough to guarantee it. Some of my friends who were involved in the revolution believed they were not destined to be martyrs and therefore did not act-as-martyrs. They followed different courses of action: they did not take up weapons themselves, focusing instead on civil society and relief work after the revolution became armed. Yassar, whom I introduced above, laughingly said, 'we knew we were not good enough to be martyrs!', meaning that they were not 'pious enough'.

However, they used the term '*shaheed*' to designate their friends and comrades who had fallen in the revolution. More tellingly, they buried them the ways Sunni martyrs are – not cleaning them or changing their clothes. In this sense, Sunni understandings and uses of martyrdom and destiny in the Syrian revolution are not unlike the role of Shi'ism in the Iranian revolution that Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi observes across political and sectarian lines since it 'afforded a political milieu to spread and perpetuate a movement that massive numbers of peoples could identify with in historically complex, politically ambiguous, and, to a large extent, inexplicable ways' (2016: 19).

Sunni Islam appeared broadly as a 'religious mode of the revolutionary expression' (2016: 60). Here, Islam can be conceived as 'a religion that has given people inexhaustible resources for resisting the power of the state Religious rituals and Islamic symbolic language were constitutive, and not incidental, features of the revolutionary movement' (2016: 66, 78). The aim of this article is therefore, not to reify Syrian revolutionaries or orientalise them by pointing out differences along religious lines. On the contrary, it is to show how specific modes of revolutionary action, subjectivity and temporality emerge through a number of Islamic concepts of destiny and martyrdom, despite their different meanings among my interlocutors along the '*almaniin/islamiin* divide and beyond. In the Syrian context, martyrdom depends on one's revolutionary actions as well as one's character, ethics and (pious) actions in life. Martyrdom thus becomes a shared moral frame of political action, and destiny appears as a temporal frame of revolutionary consequences.

Martyrdom: A Shared Moral Frame of Political Action

Umm Khaled claimed that it was not enough to fight (peacefully or not) against the regime to become a martyr. She remembered one specific man who had

poor morals and died while fighting. To her, this man could not be a *shaheed*, as joining the revolution did not absolve him of his previous sins. She actually suspected that he had joined the rebels for the wrong reasons: ‘probably to die as a *shaheed* and try to compensate for his sinful life’. Being a martyr was not only linked to one’s actions but also to one’s morals. My interlocutors often repeated that the martyrs were the best among them: ‘We’ve lost the best of the *shebab*’, I often heard, explaining that the martyrs were pious, educated, moral men. Umm Ahmad recalled her bright and pious son:

Ahmad used to study history. He knew a lot. He spoke ancient languages [. . .] Before he was martyred he had an operation. I went to visit him in the hospital and he asked me to help him pray. I told him, ‘There is no need, God allows the sick not to pray’. He told me, ‘No I’m fine, just help me pray.’

This also influenced ‘*almaniin* when they were inside Syria. They would modify their behaviours as they prepared for the possibility of dying.

Amal, a woman in her thirties from *dimashq*, who defined herself as a secular revolutionary, once told me:

You have to imagine that when one is *juwwa* (inside (Syria)) one thinks one can die anytime. You are ready to die anytime and for that reason you cannot do things that would make you unready to die. Watching something impure is a problem in such case. Because if you are killed suddenly just after, you wouldn’t have time to purify yourself.

She then added, ‘There is only God and yourself *juwwa* . . . nothing else! Death is much closer when you are *juwwa*.’ This idea that God (and death) is closer inside Syria was expressed in a conversation we had with her husband as we were discussing what movie to watch. This led them to discuss the kind of movies they used to see *juwwa*: movies containing nothing *haram*,¹¹ because they had to be ready and prepare themselves to die anytime and they did not want to be impure when they met death.

Martyrdom and Destiny: Unknowability and Premonition

Acting towards becoming a *shaheed* can seem paradoxical, since martyrdom is something that must be self-cultivated but cannot be self-actualised. As Umm Khaled reminded me, ‘ultimately it is up to God; we cannot say whether one is a *shaheed*’. Indeed, a person’s preparedness and actions can never lead to certain outcomes when dealing with divine power. One never knows whether one’s actions will lead to martyrdom since it remains a divine decree fixed before one’s birth. This resonates with Mittermaier’s (2012a) work on dream-visions among a Cairen Sufi circle. She argues that divine dreams do not happen without any action on the part of the dreamer. Even though the dreamer does not produce the dream, she should nonetheless prepare herself to receive it.

Martyrdom thus remained a deeply ambiguous and uncertain matter. For my interlocutors, the uncertainty surrounding martyrdom was tied to religious debates and political orientations. Attempts to estimate whether someone is a *shaheed* – like efforts to determine what actions will be regarded as good deeds and facilitate entry into Paradise – could never be definitive. Indeed, one never knows whether one's calculations are correct, and whether their divine fate is the one they had aimed for through human action. Having good morals, fighting for justice and exhibiting the bodily signs of martyrdom are not enough to be certain of whether someone is a martyr, since no one knows how God will calculate on Judgement Day (*yawm al hisab*, literally 'day of calculation'). My interlocutors' urge to act was thus oriented towards an unknown and unknowable horizon.

Dream-visions and pictures of martyrs could, however, appear as 'proof' of martyrdom. Premonitory dreams and signs were recounted by mothers and widows of martyrs. These were said to come from God and, as such, comprised the most certain proof of a loved one's martyrdom, despite being an intimate experience that could not be shared.

I saw my husband: he was travelling and dressed in a wedding suit.¹² I asked him, 'Why are you travelling? Where are you travelling?' I saw from the dream that he was going to travel and leave me. He would go somewhere and I wouldn't be with him. I had this dream a month before he was martyred. I also dreamed that there was a martyr in front of our door. People were carrying a martyr back to our place, and when I saw him I was very sad and I got scared. In the dream I told my husband, 'Open the door and see who it is.' When he opened the door I saw that the martyr was there in front of it. I cried a lot. The *shaheed* in this dream was my son.

Umm Khaled remembered these two dreams with emotion as she was narrating the days preceding her son's and husband's martyrdom and the events that led up to it.¹³ Commenting on her dreams, she said that she knew it was not a 'normal' dream. 'A voice came; I don't know what the voice was. It said, "Don't worry you're not going to die. You're not going to die before you are eighty."' Umm Khaled later expanded about this voice: it came from elsewhere, she said, without specifying whose it was, as she did not know that herself. What was clear, however, was that the voice sent a divine message.

Widows and mothers of martyrs often remembered dreams they had just before their husbands and sons died, and dreams that were considered signs sent by God to announce a martyrdom. Although all other signs carry some ambivalence, as no one can be sure of God's plan, this one was widely understood as a divine message.

Divine signs could also present as premonitory feelings. Leila, a young widow who referred to herself as *'almaniah*, told me extensively about her martyred husband. She did not dream of his being martyred, but she had strong premonitory feelings that she interpreted as signs of his martyrdom. She recounted being with

her husband at a protest in a liberated area when he was killed. He had promised her that this would be the last time they would participate in a protest – ‘And it really was’, she added, offering this as one of the reasons why she still believed in God, especially after this episode in which she felt ‘life had turned on her’. She also remembered that, at the time of her husband’s death, she had a strong feeling that one of them would die during the revolution, and she felt that ‘it would probably be him’. Moreover, the couple had been about to leave the country and only needed to obtain an authorisation for them to exit Syria. She received it the day after his death. This was another sign of a god-like power in the world but she did not know if this was a sign from the God about whom she had been taught. Leila saw this as a sign that God did not want him to leave Syria and that his destiny had been to die in the protest.

Martyrdom: A Theory of Revolutionary Action?

Everything that is happening in Syria was written by God! You could ask where the good is in what’s happening in Syria now. For a long time, there have been millions of reasons for the revolution to happen. Why did it happen now? This was written! Everything is written. The people who are going to Europe, the ones who die at sea, everything!

Sara, Umm Ahmad’s daughter – who usually remained silent during my visits – intervened above, as the conversation turned to understanding the revolution as a foreordained event. This is an example of the thinking on key questions on freedom, agency and history, not as abstract entities but as lived figures in times of political turmoil.

The question of the extension of destiny from the individual to collective, and the intimate to historical scales was a point of debate for many of my more pious interlocutors, as it came to notions of freedom, agency and history. They asked whether they entered freely into the revolution or if it was predetermined. They raised questions about the revolution itself: was it an act of human or divine will, was the revolution prewritten, the same as one’s life? Furthermore, how could one make sense of the revolution’s failure as part of a divine plan? These questions deepen the understanding of the links between human agency and freedom, divine predestination, and the consequences of political actions and events. In addition, they suggest that, at a collective scale, the urgency to act was tied to the imminence of the end of historical and cosmological times. During this conversation, I asked how human freedom should be positioned in relation to predestination. Umm Ahmad answered, rhetorically asking: ‘if humans made no choices and decisions, why would there be the need for a final judgement?’ ‘The only reason for Judgement Day is that, although destiny is prewritten, people still choose between good and evil actions along the path designed by God’, Sara suggested, reflecting the Ashari school’s understanding of destiny.

Sara further explained the relation between divine destiny and human agency through a metaphor:

There is choice because you don't know that this will happen so you still choose. It's like a film. You are a spectator and God is the one who wrote it. You have the choice to watch it or stop watching it.

Rather than providing them with a fixed route or a fatalistic approach to life, destiny helped my interlocutors make sense of their actions in an uncertain world. Destiny appeared as a way to understand what it means for humans to act; as a moral category that directs how one acts or a moral orientation of time (see Schielke 2015: 220–223). This is what led my interlocutors to get involved with and pursue their involvement in the revolution: in order to meet their destiny, they had to fight against oppression within the frame drawn by their aspired-for destiny. They thus had the choice to protest or stay home, to be involved in peaceful or armed actions, etc. Participating in the revolution was therefore a matter of free will.

However, going back to Sara's first words, it appears that destiny can be understood as a theory of revolutionary actions as well as a theory of revolutionary events. But how are collective and political tragic defeats to be explained in light of predestination? If one follows Sara's description of continuity between the individual and collective scales when it comes to destiny, it seems that, as with Mittermaier's Sufi interlocutors 'even a hypervisible, activist-driven event such as the uprising is enfolded in al-ghayb as God moved the people . . . the uprising was driven by a divine force; history is only seemingly made by humans' (2019: 19). In what follows, I expand on Samuli's definition of destiny as a theory of action (a theory of the unintended consequences of people's actions in a world that people do not control) – which I argue is a theory of revolutionary action in the Syrian context – on a different scale: that of politico-historical events.

Destiny: A Theory of Revolutionary Time?

For a majority of my interlocutors, the fact that dead revolutionaries were martyrs was proof that the revolution was a just struggle. Commenting on the widespread practice of publishing martyrs' pictures that exhibited signs of martyrdom – signs that showed that the martyr was 'still alive' and was at peace with his death at the moment of seeing the angel of death (*malak al mut*), such as a smile and bright skin tone – Umm Khaled said,

This allows the families to show that their sons are really martyrs. It is proof (*taw-siq*) of their martyrdom and also of the crimes of the regime.

In a context where martyrdom remained highly ambiguous and ambivalent, and in which all sides of the Syrian conflict claimed their dead were martyrs, such proof was thus central to claims that they were fighting on the right side. How-

ever, despite understanding the revolution as a just cause, from 2015 onwards my interlocutors increasingly started to doubt the revolution would succeed. ‘Everybody is against us! No one wants the revolution to succeed. I hope my son and husband didn’t die in vain’, Umm Khaled told me, echoing the oft-repeated sentence by the martyrs’ relatives who hoped that their sacrifice would eventually lead to the revolution’s success. ‘Let his death not be for nothing!’

Yet, if the martyrs seemed to indicate the righteousness of their cause, how could my interlocutors understand that this just revolution was not succeeding? The revolution’s violent repression, its setback and its final defeat were actually broadly understood by my interlocutors as a divine test, in the same way as the martyrdom of loved ones and other hardships were, at an individual scale. Rather than weakening faith, this unexpected outcome of their political struggle had the effect of deepening and strengthening the faith of martyrs’ widows and mothers. Hence, if men cultivated heroism and martyrdom, women had to cultivate resilience and patience (see Al-Khalili 2019; Peteet 1994).

My second visit to the field in the summer of 2014 coincided with the Israeli attack on Gaza, when some of my interlocutors were saying that this could, and for some must, be a sign of end times. They understood the concurrence of the Gaza and Syrian wars as the fulfilment of a Hadith announcing that in the end times there would be a war in the Levant between Muslims and Jews, and later all nations against Muslims.¹⁴

Commenting on the links between the end of time, predestination and the Syrian revolution, Umm Ahmad said:

In one of the Hadiths it is written that there will be a war in Palestine at the end of times. It is also mentioned that there will be a war in Ghouta during the same period.

These kinds of comments were mainly spread among *islamiin* but also found echoes among *almaniin*, and resonate with the understanding of destiny as a theory of action and its consequences. Indeed, destiny is a reminder that after one has done one’s share, the outcomes of those actions are no longer in one’s own hands and must simply be accepted (Gaibazzi 2015; Schielke 2015). My ethnography shows that this principle is particularly acute in the case of revolutionary action, for the imminence of positive or negative endings renders action urgent and intimately linked to human freedom (Scott 2014).

Thus far I have argued that martyrdom and destiny can be understood as a theory of individual and collective political actions and their tragic outcomes. Moreover, destiny, as a theory of action, is closely tied to interrogations of the consequences of political actions, since for most of my interlocutors there was a tendency to understand the revolution’s defeat and revolutionaries’ deaths as predestined.

In fact, looking at revolution through predestination, understanding revolution as being oriented towards predetermined futures leads to a reimagining

of revolution from the perspective of the end. Moreover, the idea that the future and destiny always remain unreached horizons, and that the future is always different than expected, is even more salient in the case of revolution, for political actions are prone to failure (Scott 2014). This simultaneously invites us to rethink what urgency and imminence mean in a context where they are oriented towards a predestined future.

My interlocutors' understanding of the temporality of political action through predetermined futures and endings echoes David Scott's study of the failed Grenada revolution, about which he points out how its tragic endings have had major consequences on time and temporality: 'They have provoked . . . an accentuated experience of temporality, of time as *conspicuous*, as "out of joint"' (2014: 2; emphasis in original). The experience and meaning of 'modern historical time' is thus challenged: whereas it used to be 'organised around a notion of discrete but continuous, modular change, in particular, modular change as linear, diachronologically stretched-out *succession* of cumulative instants' – a change that is moreover an 'improvement' – in the wake of a catastrophic present, one feels 'an uncanny sense of divergence between the *experience of time* and the *expectations of history*' (2014: 5, 7; emphases in original).

Something similar happened with the Syrian revolution's defeat: the experience of time is mediated by Islamic cosmology: historical time is understood as prewritten, the revolution's defeat is perceived as predetermined and as a sign of Judgement Day. However, the main difference is that by casting revolution within a cosmological time, its defeat is not necessarily seen as tragic, nor are the deaths of revolutionaries. Although I have shown that Syrians' feelings towards revolution's and revolutionaries' endings are ambivalent, they were broadly understood, among my interlocutors, as part of a divine plan that will eventually be revealed on Judgement Day. The future seems to disappear for my interlocutors as it is replaced by destiny: the urgency to act *now* is an urge to meet destiny. Revolutionary time and action are oriented towards personal and collective destinies that appear as individual and cosmological endings.

Reorienting Revolutionary Action and Temporality through Martyrdom and Destiny

Reflecting on the numerous martyrs and the revolution's defeat, Umm Khaled said, 'There is nothing else but to say "*ya rab*" [oh Lord], God is one. We need patience, patience.' This reflects two temporalities of destiny: it was an urge to act *now* in the revolution's first years, and it became a tool to reflect on revolutionary actions and events after the revolution's defeat. Moreover, although there is no agreement among my interlocutors over the extent of predestination at the individual and collective scales, there was a common understanding that when things are unintelligible to human minds, there is always a divine plan. 'You may

not understand today or tomorrow but eventually God will reveal why you went through everything you did', as a friend worded it in a Facebook post at the time of violent attacks on her town. While my interlocutors did not concur and sometimes did not know which parts of individual and collective paths were predestined, there was a consensus that there must be a reason behind the unexpected outcomes of individual and collective actions, and behind the unexpected course of history and the unfolding of revolutionary events. Most believed that God was actually testing them through these sacrifices and defeats, and that they should place and renew their faith in God. Only God knew what was happening, but there was meaning in all of this that would eventually be discovered.

* * *

From these ethnographic traces emerge the sense that times of revolution are deeply marked by an urgency to act and an imminence of endings. This was expressed as an urgency to meet individual and collective destinies. My interlocutors took action in the present to meet their individual destiny – often anticipated as martyrdom – and their collective destiny, perceived as the fall of the Assad regime. By trying to actualise these destinies they aimed to realise the future in the present, making the future no longer a distant but an imminent horizon. Moreover, revolution was oriented towards desired but unknown and predetermined futures.

Ideas and practices central to revolutionary process are thus reconfigured in light of Islamic predestination and martyrdom: revolutionary actions are urgent in a context where collective and individual endings are imminent. Indeed, revolutionary actions appear as an anticipation of destiny; revolutionary actors hope to actualise a predetermined future in the revolutionary present and to meet desired endings. Furthermore, destiny becomes as a moral frame to revolutionary actions and a theory to understand *ex post facto* the unexpected consequences of collective and personal actions and events. Ultimately, the linear chronology of History is replaced by a cosmological non-linear time in which revolution's tragic is understood in light of Judgement Day and God's unknown calculation.

In tracing the Syrian revolution ethnographically, I aimed to 'not reify' *al-ghayb* and let it 'inflect' my writing and theorising, thus taking my cue from Mittermaier (2019: 28). It led me to attempt to account for mass political violence and its history beyond the framework and language imposed by the Enlightenment frame and leave space in stories of the Syrian uprising and revolution for the invisible and the absent (whether it be God, predestination, martyrs or dream-visions). This, in other terms, allows different temporal frames to coexist forming a 'temporal multiplicity' in which different H/history and times replace one another and change over time and according to my interlocutors (see Ssorin-Chaikov 2017).

A decade has passed since the beginning of the revolution, a period during which the ends and endings of this process have been evolving as the defeat and legacies of the revolution are still being discussed (Al-Khalili 2021). In the last

decade, revolutionary action's tempos and temporalities have varied greatly. Moreover, new intimate and collective archives of the *thawra* will continue to emerge, leading to novel research horizons.

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Notes

1. Most of my interlocutors started using these terms to define themselves in contrast to Jabet al-Nosra in 2012. Whether they initially supported or opposed it, many *islamiin* stopped supporting al-Nosra as soon as they understood its political aims. Indeed, despite defining themselves as *islamiin* in opposition to the '*almaniin*', most of my interlocutors would be defined as seculars in English for they similarly asked for a secular state. *Islamiin* in the Syrian context rather signifies one's social and religious conservatism when used by '*almaniin*', and is used self-referentially to differentiate oneself from the '*almaniin*' that were often caricatured as atheists. These categories were thus very dynamic. Moreover, in some contexts, it was also a strategic move to define oneself in these terms in order to gain support from a foreign government agency or local NGO.

2. This status is not contingent – widows and mothers are witnesses and survivors of this often-gendered violence (Ghannam 2014; Jean-Klein 2000). See also Peteet (1994); Khalili (2007) on the central place and role of women, particularly mothers and widows of martyrs in the Palestinian context.
3. The term *shaheed* can be described as indexical for all parts in the Syrian revolution and later conflicts claim their own martyrs (see Al-Khalili 2019: 220).
4. This has been similarly studied in the Palestinian and Iranian contexts (e.g. Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016; Khalili 2007; Peteet 1994), in which revolutionaries come from diverse political and religious paths; the figure of the *shaheed* is central to political actions in the context of mass violence.
5. This has been the case in trials against Syrian officials condemned for crimes against humanity in Germany.
6. The case of self-immolation poses actually the question of the fine line between suicide and martyrdom (see below).
7. This could be argued in other contexts of political oppression (see Ajari 2019).
8. This does not mean, however, that other frames of understanding did not exist (on conspiracy theories to understand the revolution's failure, cf. Proudfoot 2016).
9. See also Khalili (2007) on mothers' ambivalent feelings towards their sons' martyrdom.
10. In the Syrian context there appears to be no room for the notion of the 'unintentional martyr' (Khalili 2007).
11. *Haram* means forbidden and in an Islamic context refers to what is forbidden to believers. The consumption of alcohol or pork are thus *haram* to Muslims. In this specific context it meant any movie with scenes including naked people or sexual content.
12. The martyr as a groom and martyr's funeral as a wedding are a common trope in the region (see Khalili 2007).
13. See also Ghannam (2014: 11) on Anas' feeling of his own death coming.
14. See Mittermaier (2012b) on religious interpretations of historical events.

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Martyre et destin en temps de révolution : actions urgentes et fins imminentes en Syrie

À travers l'exploration ethnographique du soulèvement syrien, cet article montre comment la révolution est façonnée et subsumée dans un discours islamique du destin. Qu'advient-il du sens de la temporalité et de l'action révolutionnaires dans un contexte où le temps est pré-déterminé et les actions orientées vers un futur inconnu mais pré-écrit ? Cet article soutient que l'urgence d'agir maintenant pendant la révolution de 2011 était liée à l'imminence de fins personnelles et collectives. Par le biais d'actions révolutionnaires, les révolutionnaires syriens ont tenté d'actualiser dans le présent leur destin souhaité, souvent projeté comme un martyr. De plus, la révolution était orientée vers la fin du régime syrien, à l'échelle historique, et vers le Jugement dernier, à l'échelle cosmologique. À travers la révolution syrienne, le destin apparaît donc comme un cadre moral des actions révolutionnaires, ainsi qu'une théorie ex post facto de la défaite de la révolution et du cours de l'histoire.

Mots clés: action politique, destin, martyr, révolution syrienne, temporalité