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Halaqas, relational subjects, and revolutionary committees in Syria

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Abstract: Through an ethnographic account of Syrian halaqas (Sunni religious circles) from the 1980s until the 2011 Syrian revolution, this article argues that halaqas have a revolutionary potential. The analysis demonstrates that Syrian religious circles are spaces of self-transformation that have heterotopic qualities. The Darayya halaqa studied here is a space where present and future are collapsed: a space in which future revolutionary selves and societies are already enacted. This temporal collapse is thus simultaneously a scalar one, for through the emergence of a relational or unbounded subject, a revolutionary project is being performed. This project is, moreover, without a preexisting program that its members seek to implement in a distant future; it is rather a revolutionary project that is perpetually in the making through discussions and actions happening within it.

Keywords: circle, halaqa, heterotopia, revolutionary subject, Syrian revolution

The Syrian revolution represents an extraordinary experience for hundreds of thousands of Syrians, as much a moral as a political trial, as much a renewal of the self as a social change. It is an insurrection against oneself and a revolution against what exists.
—Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, La Question syrienne, 2016 (my translation)

What makes a circle revolutionary? This article examines Syrian halaqas, a term that means “circle” in Arabic and originally describes the spatial configuration in which students and their teacher seat themselves for a Quranic lesson, often inside a mosque or religious study center. In contrast to classic revolutionary circles, a halaqa is not established with the aim of discussing politics or revolutionary ideas, but to learn about Islam and to shape pious and ethical selves. However, the transformation of the self is hardly an apolitical endeavor, and the halaqa not only describes the spatial configuration of meetings and specifies the format of a religious class, but is also a social shape that accounts for the relationship between its members and society at large.

This article mainly traces the evolution of the Anas halaqa—later known as the Darayya or nonviolent circle—from its formation to the establishment of the Darayya local council in the second year of the Syrian revolution (2012),


and contrasts this *halaqa* to two others that also gained a central role in the revolution. It asks: What turned a local religious circle into a laboratory of radical political thought and actions, and how did its members become a revolutionary vanguard? Moreover, how is the *halaqa* a heterotopic space where different temporalities are at play, and through which self and society are constantly transformed and politics reimagined and performed through dialogues? This article is based on ethnographic engagement with Syrian revolutionaries, local councils, and former political detainees in Gaziantep, Turkey between 2014 and 2019, conducted during doctoral and postdoctoral research. The discussion particularly draws on conversations with three circle members—Ahmad, Youssef, and Samer—who joined at the circle’s inception and were among its most active and dedicated members, despite ideological differences and divergent life paths. Some of these conversations happened online, as complementary fieldwork was canceled due to the ongoing pandemic. The article also benefited from continuous dialogue with my main interlocutors throughout the writing process, two of whom offered insightful feedback on earlier drafts.

Samer, Youssef, and Ahmad all lived in Darayya, an agricultural suburb of Damascus mainly composed of artisans and farmers, whose inhabitants started to become civil servants or to attend university in the 1970s, and many more by the 1990s. Most of local preacher Abdelakram Al-Saqqa’s students belonged to farmers’, artisans’, and civil servants’—mainly teachers’—families. Youssef, the son of an electrician, had left Syria in the late 2000s to study abroad, and continued to participate in the circle’s conversations online. Described as courageous and determined, he was the group’s informal leader, along with his friend and symbol of the nonviolent resistance Yahya Shurbaji.4 Ahmad, a rather reserved person, is the son of a schoolteacher. He survived the revolution, the four-year siege of Darayya, and forced displacement inside and outside Syria. He is one of the main engineers of the Darayya local council, alongside *halaqa* members Mohammad and Youssef. Samer, the son of an influential local family, was among the members of the circle jailed in the 2000s. He left to study abroad after his release, but continued to participate in online activities and returned to Syria when the revolution started.

Of the 30 male students who composed the first circle around Al-Saqqa in the late 1980s, a dozen members, then in their thirties, remained active when the revolution started in 2011; meanwhile, members of a second circle, then in their twenties—the circles were organized by age—became more active. Some members migrated to study or work in Europe and the Gulf, while others worked 12–14 hours a day or had families to support, so lacked time to meet with friends. Still others distanced themselves from the core group for security reasons, especially after 24 of them were arrested in 2003. The revolution’s repression also hit the circle hard: four members6 were killed in the regime’s jails and a dozen more were detained for several months to several years.

This article explores how a *halaqa* could become one of the most important political forums in Darayya before the Syrian revolution and lead to the organization of the most influential and effective local council of the revolution. What kind of revolutionary morphology emerges from such a circle? In other words, what kind of revolutionary subjects, actions, and temporality are created by and through the *halaqa*? Bringing together the nascent anthropology of revolution (Al-Khalili 2019; Cherstich et al. 2020; Mittermaier 2014) and the literature on self-formation and its relation to (revolutionary) politics and asceticism (Foucault 1997; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016; Holbraad 2014; Mahmood 2001), I argue that the *halaqa* is a social shape that carries revolutionary potential. Indeed, *halaqas* are dedicated to the transformation of the self, a political endeavor that is heterotopic, for it is performative of the future in the present. However, not all *halaqas* become revolutionary circles. Yet not unlike in other revolutionary projects, the transformation of society starts at the level of the self and
with the self, since the future is first embodied within the self of the circle’s participants, and in the relations and sociality created within that circle. In other words, a scaling-up from the intimate to the collective is operated within and by the circle itself. In fact, the *halaqa* can be understood as a heterotopia: it is a space where a utopic yet indeterminate future is already enacted (see Foucault 1986). Indeed, there is no clear plan about the future, but rather a series of principles from which a project will emerge along the way.

In tracing its history, this article shows (1) why the circle’s shape makes it a revolutionary (i.e., heterotopic) entity, and (2) how it expands and moves through a scaling-up from the self to the society, the individual to the collective, thus cultivating continuity rather than rupture between the intimate, the ethical, the religious, and the political. Moreover, it shows that the particularity of the *halaqa* as a revolutionary shape is its very indeterminacy: there is no predefined project or guiding ideology that leads toward the constitution of a predetermined future self and society. The shape of future selves and of society are both enacted in the present and created within and by the *halaqa*. Hence, revolutionary politics and selves can be described as a process that is both already happening and continuously being shaped in the present, rather than a distant and utopic future horizon.

**Circles and Islam**

*Halaqas* are traditionally places where subjects such as memorizing the Quran, jurisprudence, exegesis, and Islamic law are taught. Following the Prophet’s tradition, the teacher does not sit in the middle of the circle, but rather forms a part of it with his students. This physical positioning symbolizes the equality between the students themselves, and between the students and their teacher, although in practice most teachers do not leave much space for discussion and questions. The boys joined the religious institute headed by Al-Saqqa aged 9 to get a religious education, as it was the only authorized institute in Darayya. In the early years, they did not study directly with Al-Saqqa: “it was only when I was 14 that things became more organized and we were distributed by age and level to different *halaqas* and teachers. I joined Al-Saqqa’s one with the brighter and older students,” remembered Ahmad.

Al-Saqqa’s circle was untraditional and unorthodox in many ways. Al-Saqqa did not have a formal religious education, but studied in the Zayd Bin Thabet mosque that followed the dominant Sufi current in Syria (see Pierret 2013). Yet Al-Saqqa inscribed himself within the reformist and revivalist traditions, and understood Islam as inherently democratic and egalitarian. He followed the unorthodox and minoritarian thinkers Jawdat Sa’id and Malek Bennabi, who were criticized by the religious elite and the majority of the *ulama* for developing an Islamic humanism sometimes understood as a theology of liberation (see Pierret 2013; Séniguer 2014). These two thinkers heavily influenced the young circle members, although each developed a different degree of affinity with their work.

These “democratic principles” were applied within Al-Saqqa’s lessons: the Anas circle was a space where discussion was welcomed and even encouraged, and where “all had an equal voice,” remembered Youssef. Al-Saqqa ran his circle in a “democratic way,” Youssef continued, explaining how Al-Saqqa would only briefly speak at the beginning of each lesson before letting his students lead the session. He thus made a virtue of the circle’s shape, embracing its “egalitarian” and “democratic” potentials in the way he taught his students.

In its shape, the Anas *halaqa* sharply contrasted with surrounding circles, as well as with Sufi and Shi’i circles, which are marked by a strong concentric hierarchy among initiates, going from an outer (larger) to an inner (smaller) circle, with the master at the center. It also contrasted both with religious scholars’ public lessons (*dars*)—which can be attended by all, and where the speaker stands in front of rows of people in the manner of a preacher—and with
school lessons (muhadara), wherein students are not allowed to speak, physical punishments are in order, and pupils are taught in a strict hierarchical way not dissimilar to the military. This hierarchy reproduces the regime's organizational structure, wherein the military and the leader have the most authority.

Moreover, Al-Saqqa was particularly interested in discussing the Quran and hadiths, and in revisiting their meaning critically, as well as expanding his students' reading list to non-religious topics. “He asked us to critically question everything, even the hadiths. He asked us to take nothing for granted, even what he told us,” recalled Ahmad. He did not ask his students to memorize the surat, ayat, and hadiths, but rather to discuss them, and to see the contradictions between some hadiths and the Quran, and between different schools and interpretations. “I go with the truth wherever it goes,” was his golden rule. This meant that “one shouldn’t be fanatic about a school or a statement, and should be ready to abandon it if it proves to be untrue,” explained Samer. This was criticized by many outside the circle, who judged that its members were doing things according to themselves (‘ala kifon) rather than following the text, recalled Ahmad. However, in doing so, Al-Saqqa was inspired by religious thinkers such as Sa’id and Bennabi, who are prone to self-criticism and take a critical approach to religious exegesis.

For this reason, more than the content of his lessons, it was the way they were given that shaped Al-Saqqa’s students durably. Contrasting his circle with others, Samer said,

I remember that there was a tendency to teach us how to think. Sometimes it was boring: we didn’t feel that we were progressing especially when we compare with our friends in other mosques who were progressing more in the traditional learning: they were memorizing more.

Al-Saqqa would often give his students untraditional exercises: he asked them to reflect on the texts and to apply Quranic ethics in their everyday life, in the reformist fashion (cf. Mahmood 2001). Every week, one of the students chose a subject and wrote one page about it. Ahmad recalled,

He gave us writing and reading assignments starting with traditional things like patience, honesty, but over time we started to discuss what we called at the time “the Muslim’s role in society or the Muslim’s mission in life.”

Moreover, one of the central pillars of the circle was nonviolence (la ‘unef), which is developed in Sa’id’s theology of nonviolence, and from which he develops a heterodox understanding of jihad. It led the Anas circle to stand in sharp contrast to all other religious interpretations and caused them to often be understood by Islamists as secularists (‘almaniin). Moreover, they felt that the nonviolent atmosphere, methodology, and ideas developed within the circle contrasted sharply with the other spheres of their lives. “The idea of nonviolence was already a revolution in itself in our town,” said Samer, as he remembered how widespread was the “culture of violence.” “When you said something stupid you’d get slapped at home and at school!” he continued. “Violence was something normal and daily in our society,” he concluded.

In this first period, the halaqa’s primary goals were thus personal: to improve oneself, and to shape oneself to be a good Muslim. This was a pious attitude to enact and embody in their everyday lives: it was not only about religious duties such as praying or fasting, but encompassed their lives as an ethical posture, shaping relations with their family, friends, and community. “We felt we have to do what is right even if the majority of people are not doing it. In the early 90s we didn’t care about the government; we cared about saying the truth,” said Ahmad.

The circle was thus a space of self-transformation where ideas took shape through collective discussions, in which members invariably disagreed at first, as the main aim of the halaqa was to form (self-)critical ethical subjects. There
is, in fact, a long tradition of self-cultivation in Islam that is often associated with the dialogic structure of the circle itself. But the shaping of Islamic and ethical selves within the semi-private sphere of the *halaqas* is far from an apolitical project (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016; Mahmood 2001). Indeed, the correlate of the cultivation of pious selves is the transformation of social life, since it is not “a withdrawal from socio-political engagement in as much as the form of piety it seeks to realize entails the transformation of many aspects of social life” (Mahmood 2001: 829).

This was particularly vivid in the Anas circle, since its members understood the transformation of the self as continuous and coterminous with the transformation of the society and, later, of the political regime. They developed a theory of gradual change in which transformation spread from the self to bigger circles—family, friends and acquaintances, neighbors, and the local community. As Ahmad summarized, “we understood change to start at the basis, at the bottom: if you change yourself you can change your family, then your surroundings, and eventually things will change for the entire society.”

However, at the time they did not speak or think of regime change, although contrasting positions existed within the circles, with some members preferring to keep change at the individual level while others understood it in a more holistic way—the latter being more common. Yet the central idea remained that one should first experience these changes for oneself before advocating them. This was both an ethical and a political posture, since the youth knew their position would bother the security apparatus and they did not want to expose others to risks that they did not take for themselves.

“Changing oneself is changing the world”

“We change the regime by changing ourselves . . . But it is hard to change ourselves first,” said Youssef, before adding, “changing oneself is changing the world.” This is a sentence that later became widespread in the uprising, as Ahmad remembered. But he was not as enthusiastic about this phrasing of their motto, for he felt that it had the potential to be misunderstood as an easy task; that it could end up putting all the pressure on the individual as the sole factor of change. However, he highlighted that this formulation was not unique to their circle, underlining its roots in the Quranic tradition: “a lot of verses speak about individual responsibility, and in the afterlife you are judged according to your own actions,” he said. Indeed, one can find this imperative in an *aya* stating, “God doesn’t change people until people change themselves.” Moreover, the idea of a continuity between intimate, societal, and political changes came from Bennabi’s provocative and ambiguous claim that “Muslim societies were colonized because they were ‘colonizable’.”

The youths thus believed that change starts from within each and every person, and through changing oneself, one has the power to change an entire society and political system since, as they foregrounded in the reformist and humanist traditions, this is the believers’ responsibility. This idea was criticized by many outside the circle, for it seemed to neglect the existing world powers. The *shebab* (young men) defended their position by admitting the existence of these powers while also arguing that although they could not change the world order, they could change themselves and therefore be more prepared to gradually face them. They believed, maybe naively or idealistically, that “when people are aware of their rights and are prepared to defend them, nobody can oppress them . . . for us it was a motto, it meant that we have to be stronger, more prepared so no one can strip us of our rights and freedom,” said Ahmad. Here, the colonization did not refer to the historical colonization of their lands by foreign powers but to their “intellectual colonization” and “oppression” by the regime, Ahmad clarified. They thought that if Syrians better knew their rights, they could resist their oppressor. The controversial and problematic concept of “colonizability” was thus taken out of its historical context as
a metaphor for the need for an Islamic revival based on knowledge and education. Indeed, although members of the circle understood that they could not do anything about Iraq’s invasion by the US or the occupation of Palestine, Samer explained that they interpreted these events as “the consequences of their misinterpretation of Islam” that led to their “submission to oppressive government.”

The process of self-transformation at work within the circle, which resonates with the popular hadith “your governors will be as you are,” thus collapses the intimate and political scales, and is reminiscent of a process at the heart of many revolutionary projects. Indeed, revolutions appear as political projects that presuppose a radical transformation of politics, society, and subjects: “revolutions can be as much projects of radical personal transformation as they are projects of sociopolitical upheaval. One of the abiding characteristics of revolutions is that they connect those two scales” (Cherstich et al. 2020: 66). However, although a similar collapse of scales is at play in the Anas circle, the temporal and logical order of this collapse is different: the project of self-reform according to Islamic principles differs substantively from the model of creating new selves according to the template of a New Man based on a preexisting revolutionary ideology (see Cheng 2011; Cherstich et al. 2020; Kharkhordin 1999). In these revolutionary contexts, political changes precede personal ones: the New Man is created by the revolution and consolidated through education and other means, often after the revolution has already happened (see Cheng 2011).

The relation between individual and society is thus reversed, for the “New Man” is forged to serve the revolution post facto, whereas in the Syrian case he is the condition of revolution. For instance, whereas in the Russian context, “the variation of the ideas themselves . . . gives shape to the different patterns taken by the revolutionary groups” (Humphrey, this issue), in the Syrian one, the very structure and organization of the Anas circle gives birth to different ideas and practices. Indeed, the possibility for new selves to emerge within the halaqa is linked to the idea that common readings and discussion of ideas within a group of friends or a circle can “produce new language, topics, comparisons, metaphors, and ideas, ultimately leading to a profound change of discourse and consciousness” (Yurchak 2005: 3). The centrality of education resonates with other revolutionary projects, although educational projects have often been framed as secular within other revolutionary utopias. Indeed, here it is a religious project of self-cultivation that aims to change the society. As noted by Alexei Yurchak, Lenin used to say that “a person could not become truly liberated spontaneously; that person had to be educated and cultivated”. In the socialist society . . . the formation of the new person goes not spontaneously, but consciously, as a result of a purposeful educational work” (ibid.: 12).

In addition, the ways in which knowledge is formed through readings and discussion in the halaqa, and the fact that ideas are formed through these exchanges between circle members, shows that knowledge is produced through discourse and does not precede it. Here the subject does not appear as “a unified, bounded, sovereign individual who possesses a ‘unique self-constituted’ consciousness” (Mitchell 1990, in Yurchak 2005: 18). If discussions of texts bring about new ideas, these ideas simultaneously have an effect on the youths’ selves. The collective enunciation of these ideas “does” something: they not only describe the reality, they also have the power to perform change (ibid.: 19). The shebab shape their very selves as they enunciate these ideas within the circle: the ideas have a performative power. The ritualized ways to discuss in and within the circle thus amount to non-linguistic forms of ritualized practices that produce aspects of the youth’s subjectivity. For instance, the youths started to embody practices such as nonviolent communication: they are shaped by and through this practice that they reproduce in all parts of their life.

The description of self-cultivation within the halaqa thus complicates the understanding of revolutionary subjects, as it challenges the idea
of an autonomous self: it is through collective discussions that thoughts are collectively created and actions and behaviors enacted. This performative embodiment is imminently collective and relational. This relationality is inherent to the circle’s shape and the egalitarian relations enacted through it, as well as the constant practice of nonviolence and free debate within it. Revolutionary subjects here appear as unbounded: their self is, as suggested by Suad Joseph, “not a bounded unitary individual but rather a relational person ... with less than stable borders between self and other” (Buch 2010: 93). In other words, these unbounded subjects focus on individual changes that are dependent on a collective praxis and are formed through the relations inherent to the circle and their conception of the divine and the thereafter. These qualities are also central to their understanding of themselves as in continuity, in relation to the rest of the society. Moreover, they are not separated individuals acting on their own and for themselves, for they understand individual intimate changes as independent from collective sociopolitical ones.

Defining the subjects formed within the halaqa as unbounded and relational helps in making sense of the scaling between self and society that stands at the heart of their political project and their revolutionary politics. Moreover, this allows us to complicate the widely secular(-liberal) model of the revolutionary self (cf. Cherstich et al. 2020). In addition, it points to the heterotopic nature of the circle, since a societal project is already enacted at the scale of the self through embodied practices.

Inside and outside the circle

We started to feel the contradiction within ourselves: we were speaking about certain ideas but we did not have the courage to apply them. It was not only about courage, we were also not quite sure about the way to do it: we were digging rather than walking our way.

Two central ideas of the halaqa appear in Ahmad’s words: first, that the circle members increasingly felt that it was not enough to discuss among themselves, and that their discussions should lead to concrete actions on the ground. Second, that the members never had a clear objective to reach in a distant future.

This followed their idea of a gradual expansion of the circle, which Samer described as a task to “create a critical mass of people ready to pay the price to practice their rights, and aware and prepared for things to change.” Changing one person at a time inside the private sphere of the circle was also necessary in a country where the emergency law had, since 1963, forbidden gatherings of more than two people, which rendered the mosque, the Friday prayer, and halaqa some of the only places where people, mainly men, could gather. “We started to speak about corruption, our rights, political freedom with our students, our parents, our friends, and later our neighbors and the local community,” Ahmad recalled, showing how things expanded gradually by proximity with circle members. This was visible in the ways that the halaqa organized public activities.

During Ramadan 1999, they began to screen “educational” and “inspirational” movies such as Gandhi and Braveheart for their students, and movies on Islamic history for the public. They also organized a series of debates for the public: there were questions that people had to answer, arguing for their position. Ahmad explained that the most important thing was the persuasiveness of the argument itself, rather than its validity in the dominant Islamic tradition. They kept the most provocative question for the end: “Should someone pray during military service despite it being forbidden?” The security services heard about this and summoned the shebab to the waqf (ministry of religious affairs) directorate.

“We reached a point where we were in direct confrontation with the political authorities,” said Ahmad about their summoning. This moment was understood as the high point of a series of actions undertaken for years, and
was framed in terms of continuity rather than rupture: it was yet another test they had to go through in their fight for a more just society. The increase in public activities and actions was intimately linked to the fact that the youths had reached the understanding that to them, Islam was mainly about standing up to zuhlm (oppression/injustice).

Through their readings and practices, they developed the idea of exercising their “rights” and being righteous—they understood themselves as having rights and as being right (i.e., true and moral). These notions of “right” became central and pivotal in their discussions because they formed a bridge between the private (intimate) and the public (political) spheres, and established a continuity between an ethico-moral positioning and legal and political demands. This was strongly associated with the Quranic idea that one should go wherever the truth takes them.

This understanding of Islam holding the idea of social justice at its core developed particularly in relation to the often-alluded-to story of Moses and the pharaoh. Al-Saqqa’s students remembered discussing this often with Sa’id and in their readings of Shariati. They drew parallels between the Hebrews’ state of slavery under the pharaohs and their own servitude under the Assad regime. They took from this story that Islam is mainly about standing against injustice and for one’s personal, religious, and political rights.

Moreover, as they became more interested in theories and tactics of nonviolence, the youths read Gandhi and Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Ahmad recalled,

In one of Khan’s books his father advises him not to take part in the struggle against the British. Khan answered him, “would you tell me to stop praying?” His father said “of course not!” so he says, “this is as important for me as prayer is.” This was very inspiring for us. We would use it to explain why maintaining our sessions even if they were not authorized by the security services was as important as praying.

This comforted them in their opposition to their own fathers, who grew critical of their belonging to the halaqa, as it also challenged their own authority as heads of the family and elders of the community. This is also what led them to enjoy Shariati’s writings, which were a central source of inspiration for Ahmad in particular. He was especially inspired by a passage he recalled approximately:

He says something like “at the moment of truth it makes no difference if you are drinking wine or if you are praying in the mosque if you are not doing the right thing.” It means that in certain circumstances you have to stand up to injustice and to say or do what is right. If you don’t do that it makes no difference if you are drinking or praying. For us we felt that standing up for our right to peaceful gathering, and to think freely was as important as our obligation to pray.

The youths thus tried to find suitable examples and experiences in texts and testimonies of the thinkers and actors of nonviolent actions and civil disobedience that they could transpose to their own situation. This search was enhanced by their meetings with Sa’id and his explicitly political interpretation of Islam, crystallized in his ideas of “no to violence, no to secrecy, and no to political party.” Summarizing their understanding, Samer said,

In our understanding, to be a good Muslim and earn the hereafter, one has to abide by God’s rules. It is about being against injustices, going through tests . . . We started to understand that part of this test is to stand up to tell the truth even to unjust rulers.

These ideas led to a series of concrete actions that later informed their entire praxis. During their compulsory military service, some refused to obey the interdiction to pray, seeing praying both as a religious obligation and as an act of
defiance against the regime’s unjust laws; others refused to applaud the president’s name whenever it was pronounced, claiming he was a dictator who had killed thousands, and that they should only worship one God. This refusal was linked to the core principle that there is no God but God (la illala li allah), and that one should not worship any other God or Godlike authority.

These central convictions pushed the shebab to quickly meet after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000. They met without Al-Saqqa and decided to visit all of Darayya’s mosques and to plead with the sheikhs not to praise Assad and pronounce his name in the Friday sermon, thus explicitly going against the regime’s orders. “There is a verse in the Quran saying that mosques are for God, and that we shouldn’t praise anyone else in them. We used this verse to try to convince the sheikhs,” explained Samer. No one could argue against them on religious grounds; however, no imam, apart from Al-Saqqa, did what they asked. Al-Saqqa thus showed he was true to the principles he taught the youth. He was arrested and detained for two months for this. A few months later the circle and the center led by the shebab would be expelled from the mosque.

The circle and its members’ work continued outside the mosque. Yet outside the mosque, their work—even their meetings—became officially illegal and gained a clearer political dimension. “There is a very fine line between religion and politics. As soon as you bring things outside the mosque it becomes political. Inside the mosque things stay ‘religious,’” Youssef explained.

They started with small and seemingly uncontentious actions, trying to practice outside what they had learned inside the mosque. Their first action was a cleaning campaign, which was a symbolic statement and an action for which it was relatively easy to find volunteers in the community, and therefore an opportunity to discuss the importance of taking care of the commons among themselves. It was thus also a way to spark debate with passersby about the public good and Syrians’ rights. Ahmad explained:

If someone told us, “But it is dangerous; they will arrest you,” we would tell him, “Think about it! We are living in a country where even this very little thing is dangerous and could put you behind bars.” It was also a way to prove to ourselves that we were prepared to do something, and to draw others’ attention to the bad situation in our community.

The shebab felt that no one could tell them it was wrong to clean the town since the municipality was not doing it. Moreover, this action would serve as a clear statement to the authorities: they were able to organize themselves.

Their second campaign, about corruption, was more contentious: in 2003, they went around the city telling people that they should not give bribes—a widespread practice in Syria—arguing it was forbidden in Islam, and that if they wanted to live in a fairer society they should start individually to act more ethically. Until then, as Ahmad explained, they were trying to be “critical and creative from within the Islamic tradition.”

Indeed, this confrontation was perceived as an embodiment of their idea of Islam as a nonviolent fight against zuhlm, and was conceptualized as a divine test. The public activities had a two-fold aim: (1) to convince people to change their behaviors and that they needed to follow what is right, and to individually and daily reclaim their rights so they could live in a fair country; and (2) to “practice” confronting the security apparatus, “like going to the gym,” explained Ahmad. The notion of “practicing” that the youths began to develop during this period is inseparable from that of gradual confrontation and self-sacrifice. Each step of the way they grew more aware that what they were doing was actually challenging the security apparatus, and they slowly prepared themselves for a direct confrontation. Until that point, the confrontation was conceived of as being with the mukhabbarat (security apparatus) rather than the nizam (regime).

The youths started to organize protests without seeking authorization to practice civil dis-
obedience, and directly opposed the security apparatus. They organized a sit-in in downtown Damascus in 2000 and staged a demonstration in 2002 in solidarity with Palestine. The sit-in was a silent one so that it could not be hijacked by pro-Baath chants. The youths then used the second protest to spread their ideas: they had banners with Quranic verses calling on people to change themselves, sending the indirect but clear message that people deserved better living conditions, and that it was up to them to change these conditions by changing themselves. Moreover, in these years, the *shehab* started to become more aware of the surrounding political landscape. In 2000, the Damascus declaration was signed by hundreds of political opponents after Assad’s death, and political forums sprang up around the country. Some of the youths, among them Yahya, Samer, Youssef, and to a lesser extent Ahmad, started to visit some of these, and also went to public lectures by opposition figures. The confrontation became direct in 2001, when the youths were summoned by the security services on several occasions. They saw this confrontation as a way of conquering their fear: when they were asked to sign a deposition saying something along the lines of, “I hereby declare that I will never attend any unauthorized classes in a house or mosque, and I will notify the competent authority of any activity that might undermine the security of the state,” and so on, Ahmad remembered that he was alone and wrote things like, “I’m not doing anything wrong. We are acting within our basic rights, and the content of our lectures is all good; I wouldn’t do anything that would undermine the national security, etc.” He concluded, “So I was rejecting it but in a very soft way . . . But I was quite convinced that I would be sent to a solitary cell and stay there.” Instead, he was sent home 30 minutes later.

Through these actions outside the mosque, the *shehab’s* ethics of self-sacrifice was put into practice, and another dimension of their revolutionary self emerged. The idea of self-sacrifice had, however, developed since an early stage and was intrinsically linked to self-cultivation within the circle. Youssef recalled the following anecdote from the late 1990s:

> I was teaching 16-year-olds in a corner of the mosque, there was a 10-year-old child who kept moving and was annoying. I told him, “come sit with me.” He started listening to our discussion. It was about justice, oppression, freedom, dignity. After 15 minutes the boy told me, “why are you saying that, they will imprison you.”

The Anas circle members knew early on from the townspeople’s and relatives’ warnings that they would be perceived as a threat by the regime, although this was not similarly understood by all members. They were also well aware of what opposing the regime meant concretely since, despite being a taboo topic, the Hama massacre was still vivid in Syrians’ minds. There was, moreover, a deep continuity between the central idea of nonviolence and their readiness to sacrifice themselves, which was reflected in their reading of King, Mandela, and others: “even when the regime tries to stop you with violent means, you should not stop being nonviolent. You should be ready to sacrifice yourself,” explained Youssef. They had also seen their teacher being arrested and jailed for months for denouncing corruption in a Friday sermon. They thus accepted the possibility of being arrested, tortured, and even killed for what they were doing, and this even after the confrontation with the *mukhhabarat* became a reality. “In 2001, after we were summoned to the political security and it became clear that what we were doing was dangerous . . . we accepted the risk of going to prison to continue our meetings,” Ahmad once told me.

I argue that this readiness to sacrifice one’s present and one’s life became increasingly constitutive of the Anas circle members’ identity, and is constitutive of their revolutionary selves, as it is the direct corollary, in this revolutionary equation, of the new men they became. Indeed, the most encompassing definition of a revolutionary self is a willingness to sacrifice oneself...
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(see Holbraad 2014). In other words, the ontological premise of revolution is the sacrifice of the self and of one's present, accomplished through either death or radical transformation: by becoming a “New Man,” embodying the “revolutionary ethos,” and “enact(ing) the very revolutionary condition” (Yurchak 2005: 10). Becoming a new man or dying for the revolution are in fact two faces of the same reality, as Martin Holbraad observes in the context of the Cuban revolution (2014: 13).

This revolutionary self was, however, not yet perceived as such by the circle’s members, despite their knowing that they had entered dark waters. Moreover, they still felt that they had to work more on themselves—they had to better ready themselves, and as Ahmad often said, they had to “apply things to themselves first before asking others to do it”—before starting bigger fights with the security apparatus. They could thus be said to be “not quite revolutionary” in comparison to the Marxist revolutionaries described by Cooper and Humphrey (this issue), for despite a common willingness to sacrifice themselves, they did not have a preset utopic horizon with which they were trying to bring themselves and society in line. Their work on themselves was thus continuous, but without a clearly defined horizon or a predetermined goal: it is rather through the process of changing oneself that the utopic future takes shape in the present. Yet this shape is constantly in the making: the shebab often repeated that they only looked a step or two ahead, and otherwise kept their attention on the present.

“We couldn’t see ten or twenty steps ahead, maybe just two or three,” said Ahmad about the evolution of their project. This is why the circle as a shape of meeting and discussion was so fundamental to the evolution of the halaqa from a traditional religious one into a revolutionary one, as they believed that “things come through discussion.” This resonates with observations made in the literature on alter-globalization movements wherein the future is similarly indeterminate, and Stine Kroijer proposes the concept of “figuration of the future,” wherein the present and future function as a co-present in different (collective) bodies (2015: 135, see also Juris 2005; Maeckelbergh 2009). Indeed, my interlocutors understood their political praxis as realized in the notion of the circle as a heterotopic space, and through expressions like “digging their way,” “we had to climb the ladder one rung at a time,” and “we never saw a step or two ahead of us.” Here, the future is embodied but is still in the making, and therefore does not have a predetermined form. It might as well be understood as a heterotopic space to which slices of time (heterochronia) are attached, which allows a multiplicity of times to exist simultaneously.

I find that the Anas circle can be described in terms of heterotopia following Foucault’s definition: as “real places” that “are a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which all the other sites that can be found in a society, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986: 24). Indeed, for Foucault, heterotopias have a “role to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (ibid.: 27). The Anas circle is an enacted utopia because, as we have seen in my interlocutors’ words, it is a space where nonviolence, which is defining of all relations, is exercised. It is a space where rights and freedoms are respected; it is a democratic space where people can speak equally, without hierarchies.

This is, moreover, a space that functions like a laboratory of the future: it actualizes in the present what the future is supposed to look like. It is because of this heterotopic nature (which is simultaneously heterochronic) of the circle that its members only saw a step or two ahead. By virtue of being inside the circle, its members embrace the holistic demands of their revolutionary project: the circle has self-shaping effects that are tailored collectively by the students themselves as they discuss authors and plan actions. Moreover, there is a collapse of different times and spaces within the Anas circle: the future is precipitated in the present, and it is a place where future social relations and the halaqa’s political project are performed (see Kroijer
Halaqas, relational subjects, and revolutionary committees in Syria

The fact that most circle members do not have a clear idea of the future and rather focus on the present could be described, in Amira Mittermaier’s terms, as an “ethics of immediacy” (2014). Change is linked to a togetherness that happens within the circle. The modes of sociality and being in the world that developed in Tahrir and the khidma described by Mittermaier, and in the Anas circle, are similarly “radically oriented towards the present” (ibid.: 55). In other words, inside the halaqa the shebab “were getting a taste of the kind of society they were fighting for” (ibid.: 69). In the circle, my interlocutors were thus shaping the utopian future as they were shaping themselves. Transformations that first happened at the scale of the self, within the circle, also operated at other scales: the local community and the society as a whole.

With the American military intervention in Iraq starting in 2003, the Anas circle became known as the “nonviolent” circle, for they had started to advocate more clearly for nonviolence—one of their ideological pillars—which led to a different approach to jihad. This was lived as a test, for they were not always sure whether they could or should convince others not to go to fight in Iraq. Just after Bagdad fell, they organized a protest joined by two hundred people. Again, they saw this as a legitimate occasion to practice organizing protests and sharing their views on self-transformation, rights, and nonviolence. A few weeks later, 24 of the circle members were arrested by the security services; this was a harsh test of their willingness to sacrifice themselves.

Shrinking and dividing the circle

On 3 May 2003, the shebab and their teacher were summoned to the military intelligence branch in Damascus, marking the height of their confrontation with the mukkhabarat. Of the 24 initially arrested, 11 were transferred to the infamous Sednaya prison until April 2004, and four remained until definite release in November 2005. In the security branches and in prison, the halaqa tried to reconvene, but mainly to pray together and to take a few minutes to comment on a sura or aya.

The halaqa’s imprisonment marked a turning point in the circle’s history and goals: it strengthened the political objectives of some, mainly those jailed in Sednaya, and led to the exile and distancing of others who felt the pressure from the security apparatus was too strong. After their detention, the circle went through a dead period, only resuming meetings—albeit secretly—a year after all members were released. By then, the circle was reduced by half since some had fled the country, while others distanced themselves after marrying or starting demanding jobs, or otherwise refused to risk reimprisonment. In the sessions, the members did two things: read a sura or a page of the Quran and discuss it briefly, and speak about current affairs worldwide. Until the revolution, sessions mainly aimed to maintain a communications channel among the shebab—notwithstanding links through online platforms with members in exile—so that they could regain momentum.

Sednaya was, however, also lived as a period of “political education” and of expansion of the circle’s political connections. Reflecting back on this period, Ahmad said, “For me it was an opportunity to expand my vision . . . We had been locked up in a small space of discussion, and now we had to learn more and more.” This led to understanding their struggle as a direct confrontation with the regime (al nizam). They also started to meet with political figures encountered in jail, and with those who advocated for their release, joining them in different secret political meetings. In these meetings outside of the circle, as well as through their advocating for civil disobedience and nonviolence online, their influence became national and later led to the establishment of a national nonviolent movement close to the secular opposition.

During these years, many principles that later appeared as central to the revolution crystallized. Until Benali stepped down in Tunisia in late 2010, the circle was not publicly active; at this point, though, it became a major actor in the Syrian uprising.
Circles in revolution

When the uprising started in 2011 we started to organize the protests in Darayya. We were fortified by our experiences in 2000 and 2003. We knew better how to protect ourselves; we were used to working in secrecy.

These were Samer’s words. Moreover, within the circle, people knew, understood, and trusted one another, which facilitated underground work and helped them to easily assign roles among themselves according to their skills and personality. Circle members individually participated in the first protest organized in Syria, which took place in downtown Damascus in February 2011. The circle first found itself drawn in by the events: “We had the feeling that things had started to be beyond our discussions . . . we were having sessions discussing different ideas, and suddenly we found that things had already started,” recalled Ahmad. Yet most of them did not think much before they started to protest: “as in the 2000–2003 period, we were waiting for an opportunity to take part in public actions,” Ahmad continued.

The circle, with its past experience organizing protests, imposed itself as the main organizer of the revolution in Darayya. In the first months of the revolution the group organized protests and candlelight vigils, distributed leaflets, spray-painted on walls, and organized debates. During the uprising, the circle members’ main challenge was to keep the protests nonviolent, for they conceived of their actions as figuring the future: a violent uprising would thus bring a violent regime. This meant choosing the songs that would be sung at the protests, and forbidding certain slogans and curses that they found violent. During the protests they tried to spot and stop any chanting of violent slogans, and afterward they would have long meetings discussing “every word” said at the protest, explained Ahmad. Summarizing their role, he added, “Our circle was the mastermind but not the leader of the protests: during the protests you would not notice many of us.” This dynamic lasted until the end of April 2011, when three protesters were killed and many injured. Soon after, the security situation started to make it harder to organize meetings. Moreover, other people started to take a bigger role in the protests. “The circle started to play the role of coordinator rather than initiator,” Ahmad explained.

A few months after the revolution started, three circles became visible. Interestingly, they were also formed around halaqas in local mosques, but they adopted different methodologies and therefore developed different ideas and practices. However, the shape of the halaqa meant that these youths were used to meeting, discussing, and socializing together, and had similar religious and political orientations; it was therefore natural for them to work together. In a way, the halaqa appears as an “affinity group,” a “group of friends who remain connected for a long period of time, and are engaged in politics together and/or have a social life outside political action,” to borrow from Krøijer (2015: 11). They were thus not simply a group of friends (shalleh), youths from the same generation (shebab), or classmates (zumala) structured around specific spaces (schools or universities), activities (football, etc.), and personal affinities (friendship). There is thus something fundamental about the morphology of the halaqa that led to their importance in forming revolutionary selves, structures, and projects. Indeed, it presents Syrian revolutionaries “as the precipitation of relationships” rather than “human subjects [who] are actors who create relationships” (Strathern, in Mittermaier 2012: 251).

The circles later widened, embracing broader structures—coordination committees—that brought people from various paths together. However, the nonviolent circle was still identified as such, and continued to play a prominent role, positioning itself as a revolutionary vanguard throughout the revolution. Indeed, as well as influencing a nationwide nonviolent movement, in June 2011, the nonviolent circle members established a Local Coordination Committee (LCC) in Darayya in order to better
fight the regime at the local, regional, and national levels. The committee was part of a network of LCCs that had emerged in many parts of Syria. Within the LCC a management committee was elected following a structure similar to the one that the nonviolent circle had established inside the mosque. However, the five elected members were quickly detained, and elections had to be run frequently due to ever-increasing arrests. This led the LCC to operate underground, and many of its members left town and went into hiding. A competing committee was also created by the “jihadi” circle, named “Darayya Committee the people want the downfall of the regime,” which tried to gain traction by playing on secularist versus Islamist and nonviolent versus violent social divisions, but the nonviolent circle’s role remained prominent throughout the revolution. However, the nonviolent position of the Anas circle was increasingly criticized as nonviolent activists were killed and peaceful protests were attacked.

In order to make the revolutionaries stronger, Ahmad, one of the last circle members to survive in Darayya, worked to build a committee that would bring together representatives of the different groups of peaceful demonstrators and of the armed factions. By their opposition to the circles, the committees thus brought together people who did not specifically share a common past, did not have previous relations, and did not have identical political or religious views. They were also more diverse in terms of age and social background. The committee was composed of five people elected to coordinate actions between groups. Their work was mainly to keep armed activities under control and minimize their effects on civilians. This was the embryo of the local council that was created in October 2012 after the Great Massacre, during which the regime army killed seven hundred civilians in Darayya. If, in addition to the structure of the committee, many things made it different from the initial halaqa (e.g., the committee was not an affinity group sharing similar political and religious views and coming together around a teacher), it seems that the heterotopic nature of the circle still animated the committee: it embodied and enacted in the present the values and principles that the revolutionaries wished to see guiding the country’s leadership in the future, while leaving the shape of the future government open.

Moreover, the relation to time remained similar, as Ahmad described: “We didn’t have time to think about the future . . . we had to focus on the present.” He later added, “If we thought too much about the future we would have stopped because nothing was clear! . . . so most of us were focusing on the moment.” Ahmad portrayed the spirit of the period:

For a long time during the revolution we were very much immersed in the practice on the ground so that for some time the overall goal of the revolution wouldn’t be clear. . . . However, all our activities were directed towards a revolutionary change that we saw as inevitable [in 2012]. We knew things would not be the same anymore but we didn’t really conceive what kind of change it would be.

However, with the revolution turning into a war, Ahmad became increasingly isolated in his nonviolent position. Many circle members quit the council, as it had decided to cooperate with the local FSA (Free Syrian Army), while Ahmad thought it was better to stay within the council and use it as a tool to control the armed factions. Darayya local council became the only revolutionary council that managed to impose civilian control over the FSA, which made it a lasting symbol and example.

Conclusion: Halaqua, revolutionary heterotopia, and unbounded subjects

Through an ethnographic account of the functioning of the Darayya halaqa, this article argues that halaqas’ shape has a revolutionary potential, proposing a novel understanding of heterotopia in which the halaqa appears as a place where a
utopia is made to exist through performative discourses and practices. Subjects are formed through these discourses and practices as they utter them and bring their utopia—a counter-society based on nonviolence, democratic practices, self-critique, and justice—to life by embodying these values.

This article thus proposes a definition of revolutionary selves, circles, and projects that sharply contrasts with those in the literature with respect to the relation to time so central to revolutionary projects—the idea of sacrificing the present to abolish the past and march toward a better or utopic future. Indeed, the revolution is already happening in the present in a heterotopic space, and there is a collapse between present and future times at the scales of self and society, and in the intimate and public spheres.

The article simultaneously proposes to break away from the “Eurocentric (not to mention Pauline and thus emblematically Judeo-Christian) idea of the person” (Cherstich et al. 2020: 91) by showing how an unbounded subject emerges from the halaqa. Indeed, it shows, to paraphrase and transpose Mahmood (2001: 203), how a particular notion of human agency, self-formation, and cultivation in the literature on revolution—one that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power—is brought to bear on the study of revolutionary subjects in a tradition such as Islam. It argues that despite the important insights it has enabled, the model of the revolutionary subject based on an autonomous individual shaped by a secular tradition is called into question by the formation of revolutionary selves within the halaqa.

Revolutionary subjects appear as relational subjects that are cultivated and formed within the circle and by its shape in relation to one another and to the divine. Here, we see how revolutionary subjects and politics are formed through the embodiment of ritualized practices that are collective in nature. As such, the self is not autonomous, and is thought of in continuity with the wider society. This is why changing the self can be understood as changing the society, and why this specific program of self-cultivation has revolutionary potential.

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**Notes**

1. Local councils are revolutionary bodies that emerged after the regime’s withdrawal, as an effort to organize everyday life, deliver basic
needs, and organize civil resistance to the regime in Syria’s liberated areas. They were a product of the local coordination groups that had organized protests at the beginning of the revolution, and appeared independently and in varied forms throughout the liberated areas. Some are elected bodies, others the result of nomination.

2. In this article, what has been known as the Syrian conflict or civil war is referred to as the Syrian revolution, for the article adopts an emic perspective on these events and focuses specifically on the years 2011–2012 when the uprising started and the revolution was peaceful (see Al-Khalili 2019).

3. All names have been changed.

4. Yahya became a local and national symbol of nonviolent resistance to the regime during the revolution, along with Ghiath Matar. They were arrested in 2011, and Ghiath was killed under torture six days after their arrest, while Yahya was executed in January 2013.

5. Al-Saqqa was a fervent advocate of women’s education and also led female circles; however, this article solely focuses on its male counterpart for reasons of space, and therefore presents a male perspective on revolutionary politics and selves (on the constitution of female and male revolutionary selves, see Al-Khalili 2019; and more particularly on Syrian female revolutionaries, see Al-Khalili 2021).

6. Namely Mohammed Qaritm, Yahya Shurbaji, Nabil Shurbaji, and Mohammed Ali Khulani. Al-Saqqa is detained by the regime since July 2011 and is assumed to have been martyred.

7. For more on this concept, see Séniguer (2014).

8. This term was suggested by my colleague Narges Ansari (see also Ansari forthcoming).

9. The armed rebellion led by the Muslim Brotherhood was defeated by the Syrian regime in the Hama massacre in 1982.

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