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Towards an Anthropology of Defeat: Rethinking the Aftermath of the Syrian Revolution

Author

Charlotte Al-Khalili

Charlotte Al-Khalili is a LabEx HaStec post-doctoral fellow at the École pratique des hautes études (EPHE) and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). She is hosted at the CéSor and is a member of the Syrian Conflict, Displacement, Uncertainty research programme (SHAKK). She is the author of “Halaqas, Relational Subjects and Revolutionary Committees in Syria” (Focaal, 2021); “Rescaling Hospitality: Everyday Displacement at the Syrian-Turkish Border” (American Ethnologist, forthcoming in vol. 50, no. 4, 2022); and “Destiny in Time of Revolution: Urgent Actions and Imminent Endings” (Social Anthropology, forthcoming in 2022).

Abstract

How does one study a revolution and its defeat in the aftermath of large-scale political violence? What traces does a revolution, its repression and defeat leave on people’s bodies, self, social and gendered norms, as well as lifeworlds? Based on long-term ethnographic work with Syrian revolutionaries displaced to the city of Gaziantep, located in the Syrian-Turkish borderland, between 2013 and 2019, this article interrogates what an anthropology of a defeated revolution looks like. Drawing on the anthropology of trace and erasure in the context of mass political violence (Napolitano, 2009; Navaro, 2020; Trouillot, 1995; Scott, 2014), this article maps out the effects and consequences of the revolution, its repression and its defeat on the Syrian lifeworlds.
This article asks: How does the anthropologist study a defeated revolution, a revolution whose very existence is contested, a revolution that seems to have disappeared? In other words, how can anthropology study a defeated revolution, a revolution that has been erased? The Syrian context of revolution and war leads us along further lines of enquiry: What kind of tools does the anthropologist have to retrace unwitnessed events, the very occurrence of which is denied, and whose traces are being deleted? What remains of the 2011 revolution and its defeat, and where might it be located?

Such an ethnographic endeavour thus turns out to be an attempt at locating the silenced revolution’s traces in different domains and on various scales of Syrian lifeworlds—in other words, to draw a fragmented picture of the revolution’s afterlives through the (re)collection of linguistic, mnemonic, material and bodily marks. It does so through the ethnographic exploration of revolutionary Syrians’ stories of involvement in the 2011 revolution and through the recounting of the transformations of their lifeworlds in displacement. This article thus argues that an anthropology of the Syrian revolution and its defeat can only be fragmentary.

This approach presupposes a shift from the seen and the present to the unseen, the hidden, the absent, and therefore from an ocular-centrist epistemology to other modes of knowing, through an anthropology of the invisible, for instance (Bubandt et al., 2019; Mittermaier, 2019). Indeed, one has to start with what is missing, what is absent and what is unknown to make sense of the revolution’s defeat and its aftermaths. This simultaneously suggests the rethinking of anthropologists’ methodological tools of enquiry as well as anthropological concepts, and proposes to walk away from a Eurocentric ontology and epistemology inherited from the Enlightenment (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016; Trouillot, 1995).

By doing so, this article aims to locate the Syrian revolution, its repression and defeat in unexpected places: in scale (the intimate) and domains (religious and social) that sometimes seem apolitical, in the social fabric, in new marital alliances, in people’s bodies, in pictures of the deceased and in conceptions of the witnesses.

Résumé

« Vers une anthropologie de la défaite : repenser les suites de la révolution syrienne »

Comment étudier une révolution et sa défaite dans les violences politiques à grande échelle qui s’en sont suivies ? Quelles sont les traces d’une révolution, de sa répression et de sa défaite sur le corps, le soi, les normes sociales et de genre, ainsi que sur le monde et la vie des Syriens ? Fondé sur un travail ethnographique de longue haleine avec des révolutionnaires syriens déplacés dans la ville de Gaziantep, située dans la zone frontalière syro-turque entre 2013 et 2019, cet article interroge les différents aspects d’une anthropologie d’une révolution vaincue. S’appuyant sur l’anthropologie des traces et de l’effacement dans le contexte de violences politiques de masse (Napolitano, 2009 ; Navaro, 2020 ; Trouillot, 1995 ; Scott, 2014), il décrit les effets et les conséquences de la révolution, de sa répression et de sa défaite sur le monde et la vie des Syriens.
Ce texte pose les questions suivantes : comment l’anthropologue étudie-t-il une révolution vaincue, dont l’existence même est contestée, qui semble avoir disparu ? En d’autres termes, comment l’anthropologie peut-elle appréhender une révolution déchue, effacée ? Le contexte de la révolution et de la guerre en Syrie nous amène à explorer d’autres pistes de réflexion : de quels outils dispose l’anthropologue pour retracer des événements sans témoins, dont la réalité même est niée, et dont les traces sont supprimées ? Que reste-t-il de la révolution de 2011 et de sa défaite, et où pourrait-on le situer ?

Une telle entreprise ethnographique s’avère donc une tentative de relever les traces de la révolution réduite au silence dans différents domaines et à différentes échelles du monde et de la vie de mes interlocuteurs syriens. En d’autres termes, il s’agit d’en dessiner une image forcément parcellaire en recueillant des marques linguistiques, mnémoniques, matérielles et corporelles. C’est ce que fait cet article à travers l’exploration ethnographique des récits des Syriens qui se sont engagés dans la révolution de 2011 et en rendant compte des transformations de leur monde et de leur vie en déplacement. Il soutient ainsi qu’une anthropologie de la révolution syrienne et de sa défaite ne peut être que fragmentaire.

Cette approche présuppose un passage de ce qui est vu et présent à ce qui n’est pas vu, est caché, absent, et donc d’une épistémologie oculo-centriste à d’autres modes de connaissance, notamment la mise en œuvre d’une anthropologie de l’invisible (Bubandt et al., 2019 ; Mittermaier, 2019). En effet, il faut partir de ce qui manque, de ce qui est absent et de ce qui est inconnu pour donner un sens à la défaite de la révolution et à ses séquelles. Cela conduit simultanément à repenser les outils méthodologiques d’enquête des anthropologues ainsi que les concepts anthropologiques et à s’éloigner d’une ontologie et d’une épistémologie eurocentriques héritées des Lumières (Behrooz-Ghamari, 2016 ; Trouillot, 1995). Ce faisant, cet article propose de situer la révolution syrienne, sa répression et sa défaite dans des lieux inattendus : à une échelle (intime) et dans des domaines (religieux et social) qui semblent parfois apolitiques – dans le tissu social, les nouvelles alliances conjugales, dans le corps des gens, dans les images des défunts et les conceptions des témoins.

**Keywords:** anthropological theory, defeat, erasure, Syrian revolution, traces

**Mots-clés :** théorie anthropologique, défaite, effacement, révolution syrienne, traces

**Cite this item:**
An Impossible Revolution\(^1\)?

The shell came back. The shell that fell nine years ago, thousands of kilometres away, it suddenly came back. It had stayed inside his body for nearly a decade. Silently making its way from the central part of his abdomen where it had initially pierced his skin, it was now moving closer to his right hip bone. Yassin had carried it for nearly ten years without being aware of it, he had carried it for thousands of kilometres: from Aleppo to Gaziantep, Gaziantep to Istanbul, and later to Berlin. He had already been operated five times in order to take out the fragments of the shell that had savagely ripped his body apart. But this had not rid his body of this materialisation of the violent repression which unfolded on the non-violent Syrian revolutionary movement that began in 2011.

The shell had marked his body forever, leaving a large part of his belly burnt and scarred, a “map” as he liked to call it, his right hand had never fully recovered its mobility, and his forearm had been sewn back together using flesh from his belly and nerves from his lower left leg. The place of the protest in which he had participated was turned into a place of death when it was bombed by the regime’s airplanes.

This was in 2012, in a working-class district of Aleppo, which became a liberated area. The local families and youth, activists and university students, men and women, elders and children had come together to protest the regime that had ruled the country for over four decades, and the murder of hundreds of thousands during its oppressive and corrupt rule.

Young men and women were singing revolutionary songs and slogans and performing *dabkeh\(^2\)* holding banners and revolutionary flags when they were violently scattered by firing from airplanes. This killed many and left others severely injured. Yassin, a young man studying at Aleppo university at the time, was among the protestors and was rushed to a field hospital in the city’s liberated areas where he received his first round of treatment before being transferred in an ambulance smuggling Syrians seeking refuge across the Turkish border where he could be properly operated upon.

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\(^1\) I borrow this phrase from Syrian intellectual Yassin Al-Haj Saleh’s book, *The Impossible Revolution*, which provides a first-hand account of the “failing” of the Syrian revolutionary movement in its initial years.

\(^2\) A traditional Syrian dance in which dancers form a (half-)circle and hold one another’s shoulders.
This article is based on more than two years of fieldwork and long-term ethnographic engagement with Syrians displaced in the border city of Gaziantep, Turkey, between 2014 and 2019. Its main aim is to interrogate how revolution and its defeat can be ethnographically studied and anthropologically conceptualised. It thus reads my ethnographic material through two fields of literature: the anthropology of the invisible, absent and unknown (e.g. Bille et al., 2010; Bubandt et al., 2019; Mittermaier, 2019; Napolitano, 2015; Navaro, 2020) and non-Eurocentric approaches and epistemologies of revolutions (e.g. Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016; Trouillot, 1995; Scott, 2014).

My Syrian interlocutors and friends were composed of youth who had participated in the revolution and older housewives who could have been their mothers and were often displaced with younger children as their fathers, sons and brothers were either martyred, detained, en route to Europe or besieged in Syria. They were in great majority Sunni Arabs from mid-sized towns and urban peripheries that became revolutionary strongholds, some of which were besieged by the Assad regime. They belonged to the lower and lower-middle classes, with some youth being the first generation to reach university and many being informal/daily workers, taxi drivers, small shop owners or teachers. Most of the women were housewives and helped their husbands in the fields and in their shops.

My interlocutors self-defined as thuwar (revolutionaries), a term like thawra (revolution) from the root th-w-r (to rise up and rebel) initially used for the French revolution (Said, 1979, p. 314–15). The thuwar are those who participated in the revolution and shared a quite broad set of demands (freedom, justice and dignity) rather than referencing a circumscribed identity and a clear political programme. Those designated as thuwar were involved in a wide range of activities: cooking for protestors and rebels, preparing banners and slogans, collecting clothes and medicines for internally displaced people and the wounded, and supporting the revolution materially. The thuwar can thus be understood as taking an ethico-political position that encompasses a wide variety of people not traditionally seen as revolutionaries: people who stand on the margins of what is usually defined as revolutionary action such as women and housewives, yet who are at the heart of its transformations and without whom revolutions could not happen (see Winegar, 2012).

The Syrian revolution started in 2011, when protests erupted after children were arrested and tortured by security forces in the city of Deraa for having written on their school’s walls, “The people want the fall of the regime” and “It’s your turn next, doctor”, referring to Bashar Al-Assad and echoing Tunisian and Egyptian slogans. The protests were met with

3 Interestingly, this term was also used by the Assad regime to refer to its coming to power. Its use is thus sometimes also seen as a subversive move by the revolutionaries of 2011 (Aubin-Boltanski and Kallas, 2022).

4 These concepts have different meanings in secular and religious traditions (Al-Khalili, 2019).
disproportionate levels of violence as the regime deployed security forces and soldiers in Syrian cities, soon to be joined by snipers and tanks, locking down cities and districts that were rebelling and shelling them from the first months of the uprising. The protests quickly grew in size, reaching 400,000 protestors in Hama (July 2011), and shifting from peripheral to central cities. Eight thousand people were killed in the first year alone (Chatty, 2017).

The militarisation of the uprising marked a turn in July 2011 when the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created by regime army defectors joined by armed protestors. In April 2014, when the official death toll was released, over 300,000 people had been killed and, in 2016, 500,000 people were estimated to have died (Longuenesse and Ruiz de Elvira, 2016, p. 9). Moreover, the number of forcibly displaced Syrians exceeded 13 million (over half of its 2011 population) and tens of thousands have disappeared into the Assad regime’s jails (Amnesty International, 2017). In this article, I aim to locate the traces left by the defeat of the Syrian revolution on revolutionaries exiled in the Turkish borderland. I thus ask: How can one study a revolution and its defeat in the aftermath of large-scale political violence? Moreover, what traces does a revolution, its repression and defeat leave on people’s bodies, self, social and gendered norms, as well as lifeworlds?

Through wide media coverage and an increasing number of academic publications (e.g. Boëx and Pinto, 2018; Boissière, 2015; Burgat and Paoli, 2013; Hassabo and Rey, 2015; Munif, 2020; Pearlman, 2018) and artistic productions (e.g. Al-Dik, 2016; Al-Kateab, 2019; Farah, 2021; Sulaiman, 2018), the Syrian “conflict” has been quite visible among global audiences. However, on the one hand, there is a hypervisibility of certain forms of violence, usually highly orchestrated murders by jihadi groups, and on the other, an invisibilisation of the peaceful revolutionary movement and legacy. This is a paradox since the horror of the revolution’s repression is reported by millions of images and videos (Boëx and Devictor, 2021) of the destruction, the sieges, the victims of chemical weapons, and Syrians tortured and killed in Assad’s jails, but nevertheless seems to constitute “formulas of erasure” or “silence” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 95).

In what follows, I focus on the Syrian revolution’s defeat or failure (Al-Khalili, 2021b) and its resulting fall into history’s “dustbin”, and, on a local level, its tentative erasure by the Syrian regime. This process is not unmindful of the way in which the Assad regime dealt with the 1982 uprising and the Hama massacres. Moreover, I proffer the hypothesis that the forgetting of the uprising and revolution in Syria is also linked to a lack of ontological and epistemological tools, in anthropology and more broadly in Social Sciences, to properly name and grasp the Syrian revolution as it unfolded and in its tragic aftermath. Indeed, the concept of revolution is still very much marked by Enlightenment philosophy and Western historiography (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016; Trouillot, 1995), and anthropological methodology appears rather “ocular-centrist” (Bubandt et al., 2019) and intimately linked to an ideal of being there, witnessing events, seeing things, as the central methodological idiom of “participant-observation” reveals.
So, how does the anthropologist study a defeated revolution, a revolution whose very existence is contested, a revolution that seems to have disappeared? In other words, how can anthropology study a defeated revolution, a revolution that has been erased? The Syrian context of revolution and war leads us along further lines of enquiry: What kind of tools does the anthropologist have to retrace unwitnessed events, the very occurrence of which are denied, and whose traces are being deleted? What remains of the 2011 revolution and its defeat, and where might it be located? By attempting to answer these questions, I simultaneously interrogate what a revolution is and how to redefine it through its defeated aftermaths outside a Eurocentric ontology and Enlightenment inherited epistemology⁵.

**The Defeated Revolution: An Unthinkable and Disappearing Event**

In his brilliant study of the failed Granada revolution, David Scott (2014) shows how revolutions that did not succeed—that is, those that did not overthrow the existing political regime—end up in the dustbin of history, and when they do appear in history are named revolts, rebellions or insurgencies. Drawing on Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi’s work on the Iranian revolution (2016) and Trouillot’s work on the Haitian revolution (1995), I argue that the reason why the Syrian revolution is not remembered or acknowledged as a revolution by contemporary observers and analysts⁶ is not just because it failed to overthrow the Assad regime. Indeed, specialists of the Middle East were “ill-prepared” to grasp the Arab revolutions fully—in their full radicality (Mazeau, 2013, p. 2). In other words, most scholars were incapable of thinking of the “Arab Spring” outside of a Western framework of time: these revolutions were thus placed in a unique and universal time, one oriented towards progress and liberal democracy (Mazeau, 2013, p. 2). The Arab revolutions were defined in Koselleck’s terms as a radical rupture with the past and with old regimes (Mazeau, 2013, p. 3). They have often been analysed within a teleological frame—explained as phenomena enabling the Arab world to catch up with universal history (cf. Badiou, 2011).

Drawing on and broadening Ghamari-Tabrizi’s question, I ask: “Is it possible…to envision and desire futures uncharted by already existing schemata of historical change and patterns of social changes? Is it possible to think…outside the Enlightenment cognitive maps and principles?” (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016, p. 1).

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⁵ The idea of revolution itself played a central role in the genesis of Social Sciences (see Koselleck, 1985).

⁶ Indeed, the Syrian revolution is most often described in terms of ‘conflict’, ‘war’ or even ‘civil war’ (see Baczko et al., 2017; Burgat and Paoli, 2013).
Taking revolution as an ethnographic object—that is, examining it through Syrians’ lived experiences, narrations and understandings of the events—allows us to shed new light on its causes, developments and evolving definitions. This contributes to extending the concept of revolution, showing what a revolution can be when it is understood from the perspective of its actors. Indeed, heard through Syrian voices, or its mnemonic and linguistic traces, rather than a failed uprising, *al-thawra* (the revolution) appears as an ongoing process that inscribes itself in a national and regional history of uprisings, rebellions and revolts. It is presented as having deep roots in Syria’s past, creating a radical rupture in the Syrians’ present, and having long-lasting consequences in their lives. Moreover, *al-thawra* appears as a transformative entity that is itself subject to change: from a peaceful uprising to an armed rebellion against the regime’s and, later, the jihadists’ oppression (*zulm*), leading Syrian revolutionaries from hope to doubt and despair in their political project.

Placing the events within a wider historical frame, Yassar, a university student in Damascus whose paternal family was displaced from Palestine during the Nakba, and who had taken part in the Deraa uprising, told me his story of the revolution and said: “It will take a long time [to tell you my story]; it all started in 1948!” Yassar thus locates the Syrian uprising within a broader regional history, placing it in a continuity and as an heir of the Palestinian Nakba. Samer, who has belonged to the Darayya circle since the late 1980s, similarly placed the events within a longer temporality rather than seeing it as the result of a regional contagion or a fortuitous event. He said: “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” (Al-Khalili, 2021a, p. 62).

Yet, if many of my interlocutors defined their revolution by contrasting it with and in opposition to *intifada* (uprising), *sira* (conflict), *harb* (war) and *harb ahlieh* (civil war) (see Al-Khalili, 2021b), some were doubtful: “It is not a revolution, it’s a war…. They [the martyrs] all died for nothing”, a young man told me soon after he was released from jail and who said he was disenchanted by the arming of the movement. To him there was an inherent and intimate contradiction between a revolution that ought to be peaceful and armed rebellion. But others did not accept the distortion of their story: Leila, a school-teacher and a widow in her early thirties who took part in the revolution alongside her husband, said: “I want people to know our story, I want them to know that the warlike situation started with

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7 Interestingly, Nakba translates as catastrophe.

8 The Anas *halaqa* (Quranic studies circle) led by Abdelakram al-Saqqa, later known as the non-violent circle, became an important forum of political discussion and action before and during the revolution (Al-Khalili, 2021a).
a revolution. My husband didn’t die in a civil war; this is not a civil war. He died because we had a goal, we had demands. We wanted freedom, justice, you know these things!”

Ethnography of a Defeat: Tracing the Absent(s)

The main obstacle to making sense of the Syrian revolution, to acknowledge it as a revolution and to understand it in all its radicality, is therefore the fact that it was reduced to or recast by its analysts and observers within a predefined world of possibilities. Indeed, by naming the Arab revolutions the “Arab Spring”, the uprisings entered a conceptual and discursive universe with a written past and a known future direction, thus “closing the window of possibilities” (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016, p. 2; see also Trouillot, 1995).

However, an ethnographic approach to revolutionary events and processes shows how one can grasp their specificities—the ways in which they are rooted in local and regional histories, politico-religious ideologies, and how they are determined by genealogies, biographies and socio-economic situations. The aim of an anthropological approach to the defeated Syrian revolution is therefore to seize its singularity and analyse it outside of revolution’s Western historiography and history in order to escape teleological narratives.

So, what is a successful revolution and what is a failed or defeated one, and does this framework still make sense in the Syrian context? Moreover, do failed or defeated revolutions still have transformational power? If so, where are the transformations engendered by non-successful revolutions located? I have argued elsewhere (Al-Khalili, 2019) that a revolution defeated in the political domain can nonetheless produce ruptures and disruptions in the social realm, and at the micro (intimate) and macro (cosmological) levels. I thus suggest stepping away from the dichotomous definition of revolution as a successful or failed rupture, shifting the research focus to its marginal and often unexplored dimensions to grasp what a revolution is more fully. Rather than looking at the epicentre of revolutionary action—protests, occupations and political organisations—I propose to explore what is often seen as peripheral and apolitical: everyday life, kinship relations, religious imagination, and spatio-temporal practices (Al-Khalili, 2019).

I would like to reflect on this from a new angle: rather than an attempt to describe and understand life in the aftermaths of defeated political actions, I aim to show what an anthropology of defeat can be and how it can be done. Revolution was a subject of debate, doubt and (re)interpretation among my interlocutors throughout the time of my fieldwork in

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9 I do not mean to artificially and strictly divide the political and the social; rather, I’m following an emic conception of a shift from more visible political changes in state, regional and local structures of the public organisation of life to less visible changes in people’s everyday life and personal changes as well as unforeseen changes in the social fabric.
Gaziantep. It also determined marriages, living arrangements, and present and future life plans; it redrew kinship, gender and social norms, and inflected belief, piety and ritual practices. It impacted marriage ceremonies, Eid celebrations, departures to Europe, arrivals from Syria, liberation of detainees, coffee readings, women’s meetings, and protests. It was widely present visually in pictures of martyrs and protests and videos of sit-ins and attacks on liberated areas. The revolution also formed a soundscape as it was made audible during the weekly protests that filled Gaziantep’s squares with dabkeh in the colours of the flag.

For instance, new forms of alliances started to appear in the wake of the revolution: revolutionary marriages that could be defined as “politically-endogamous marriages” (Peteet, 1991, p. 181). Indeed, over the course of revolution and displacement, a shift came about from marriages based on kin and community ties to marriages based on political affiliations. For most of my Syrian interlocutors, pre-revolutionary forms of marriage were endogamous, which did not necessarily mean that they took place between father’s brother’s son (FBS) and father’s brother’s daughter (FBD) (Wilson, 2016, p. 150), nor within the extended kinship network (Joseph, 1999). They were, rather, alliances that were usually formed with close neighbours and known members of the same community (see Ghannam, 2002, p. 80; Joseph, 1999d; Kastrinou, 2016, p. 98). Yet most of my interlocutors refused these forms of endogamous marriages after the revolution. Alliances were redrawn on the basis of revolutionary affiliations, ethos and actions rather than endogamic logic.

Umm Yazan, a lower-middle-class housewife from Hama and a mother of five in her mid-fifties, had actively participated in the 2011 revolution, mainly delivering food and medicine to protesters and besieged revolutionaries, after having trained in her youth to fight in the 1982 uprising alongside the Muslim Brotherhood. She married off two of her daughters, Sara (at age 16) and Nour (at 17) before the revolution to men whom she and her husband had chosen. These two marriages followed an endogamic logic: the grooms’ families were neighbours and belonged to the familiarity of the beit’s surroundings. In addition to coming from known and respectable families, the men had homes, stable jobs, and were pious and moral citizens. Umm Yazan had two daughters who did not marry before the revolution, Maya (19) and Raya (23), in 2014. When I met Umm Yazan, Raya had married a man of her own choice a few months earlier, someone her mother did not even know or like10. When I asked about the striking difference between her daughters’ marriages before and after the revolution, Umm Yazan explained that she could trust Raya, who knew what she wanted, so she did not interfere with her life. She described Raya as a strong, smart, highly capable woman whom she admired for her involvement in the revolution. Yet there was more to it

10 This does not mean that resistance to marriage arrangements did not exist before the revolution (see Abu-Lughod, 1990; Chatty, 2017) or that marriage arrangements did not concern men too (see Borneman, 2007), but rather that it took on new meaning for my interlocutors.
than Raya’s character, since Maya also married according to the logic of political endogamy despite her mother observing that she was rather weak and noting her lack of participation in the revolution.

In what follows, I focus solely on Raya\(^\text{11}\). Raya met her husband, Omar, at a revolutionary meeting. They had been involved in the same underground network inside Syria without knowing it, then discovered it while chatting about their revolutionary involvement in Gaziantep. Several months after this first encounter, they decided to get engaged, and got married later the same year. Their marriage faced resistance from both families, which did not know each other or belong to the same city or social background. Whereas Raya’s family was socially and religiously conservative and lower middle class, Omar’s was rather liberal and upper class. Raya explained her parents’ opposition, saying, “It is harder to marry a man from Homs [for a woman coming from Hama] than a foreigner”. Umm Yazan was particularly dissatisfied with this marriage arrangement, but Raya went ahead with her decision.

The fact that Raya participated actively in the revolution and had lived on her own with her sister for a year made it difficult for her mother to assert her authority over her. Not only was she a respected revolutionary, she had also managed to find employment and accommodation, and had lived without male relatives in a foreign city, breaking numerous taboos and living an independent life (see Ghannam, 2002, p. 69); she was thus not ready to fall back under her parents’ authority. This was not an isolated case, as women, once involved in politics and public life, started to build new networks of sociality, meeting the men they married through their involvement in political life rather than through their families.

Through this example, one can grasp how revolution and its defeat marked Syrian everyday life, social and gendered norms and led to the recomposition of the social fabric in exile as well as the emergence of new gendered subjects. However, such ethnography has to be “displaced” since participant-observation of a revolution is particularly difficult to realise because of its uncertain and unpredictable nature. Revolutions are thus mainly studied after they have happened, and once they have been acknowledged as such—that is, once they have been successful in overthrowing the existing regime.

The methodological, theoretical and ethical challenges posed by the study of a series of events that are still unfolding and are not being defined clearly have been explored in early work on the Arab revolutions, particularly the Egyptian one (e.g. Abu-Lughod, Agrama, Ghannam \textit{et al.}, 2012). These research studies have led anthropologists to “rework the tools of their discipline” (Elyachar and Winegar, 2012) and to question the kind of theory that can

\(^{11}\) See more on Maya in Al-Khalili (2022).
emerge from the study of unfolding and shifting events whose outcome is inconclusive, asking whether these events should be called a revolution with a capital “R” or be labelled a revolt with a small “r” (Elyachar, 2012).

I would like to go further and show that there are epistemological obstacles to the proper study of a defeated revolution in exile, especially a revolution that has been silenced and appears to be non-existent. How does one study something that by definition withdraws from one’s gaze? This question is relevant for both a defeated revolution and the aftermath of mass political violence in displacement as it appears in my field site.

The key methodological tool in anthropology, participant-observation, resides in the primordiality of being in the field when things happen. One must be present to observe—in fact, anthropologists are trained to participate in and observe events. To quote Mittermaier at length:

“Accounts of the unseen (or the barely perceptible) pose a profound challenge to, and open up new possibilities for, doing ethnographic research, writing ethnography, and thinking anthropologically. Al-ghayb...reminds us that seeing does not always equal knowing, that ‘having been there and having observed it’ does not mean one understands what is really going on...” (2019, p. 19).

But this methodological positioning is actually underpinned by Western epistemology inherited from the Enlightenment epoch in which a “logic that links vision to knowledge has become naturalized and infused within everyday language” (Bubandt et al., 2019, p. 2). Anthropology’s ocular-centricity is a critical challenge to the study of revolution, and especially a defeated one, leading us to focus on revolution’s (im)material traces.

The Arabic and Islamic concept of al-ghayb—the hidden, the unseen, the invisible, but also the absent, and which encompasses both phenomena in the here and now and the thereafter, in other words historical and cosmological events—allows us to better grasp our research object. Indeed, seen through al-ghayb, studies of a defeated revolution’s aftermath thus bring together the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, and redefine these categories by questioning the relationship between invisibility and hypervisibility, which are theological concerns in Islam and political concerns about Islam (Bubandt et al., 2019, p. 6, emphasis added). Hence, to study the aftermats of political violence, one also has to examine the (im)material traces it has left behind.

**Traces of Absence, Absence of Traces**

In asking how to ethnographically study the absent and what has disappeared, I take my cue from Yael Navaro’s insightful review of the anthropology of the aftermath of mass violence (2020). I focus on the possibility of an anthropology of traces of the Syrian revolution’s aftermath because tracing is the “capacity for remembering and imagining after an event has ceased and turning the counter-position of apparently uneventful data...into meaningful
trace” (Lévi-Strauss, in Napolitano, 2015, p. 51), as well as the “connecting forms, the materiality of presence/absence to the margins of histories” (de Certeau, in Napolitano, 2015, p. 51). Traces thus allow the anthropologist to grasp the “work of absence and abjection at play within social formations” (Napolitano, 2015, p. 57).

Hence, I look at the material and immaterial traces of mass violence that belong to the intimate and public domains and inscribe themselves on individual and collective scales: linguistic and mnemonic traces such as narratives of the regime’s repression and stories of incarceration; and material traces left on individuals’ genealogies and on people’s bodies as described above.

Most of the families I worked with had been scattered and had lost family members, leaving many households with only women, shifting the traditionally patrilocal beit (house, home, lineage) into matrilocal ones. The traces I study are also constituted by private and public visual archives and autobiographical novels that aim to place one in the position of witness and as constituting proof of the Assad regime’s crimes as well as a positive archive of the non-violent Syrian uprising and its legacy inside and outside Syria.

These visual traces are martyrs’ pictures and belongings, videos of protests, of shelling, pictures of destruction and scarred and mutilated bodies. These images that are made (semi-)public through Facebook posts and WhatsApp profile pictures are perceived to have a memorial and legal function12. Umm Khaled created a montage of the pictures of her martyred son with his siblings, giving a larger space to the martyr. She explained that martyrs’ pictures have several functions including that of commemoration, but also of providing proof (tawsiq). Martyrs’ faces were particularly important as they were said to reflect a person’s feelings at death, and therefore whether he was a martyr or not. When I questioned Umm Khaled, who had recently changed her profile picture, she commented on the practice of taking pictures of martyrs and publishing them, explaining that it was a novel trend, although it had been technically possible earlier (see Allen, 2006; Buch, 2010; Khalili, 2007):

“It allows the families to show that their sons are really martyrs. It is a proof of their martyrdom and also of the crimes of the regime. It works as a testimony against the regime. It is like a proof (tawsiq) of Bashar’s crimes….everything has to be recorded. These pictures show that the martyrs are innocent people, not terrorists!”

Survivors of the revolution’s repression and martyrs of the revolution are in fact both witnesses of the revolution and traces of it that survived its defeat. They are shuhada (sing. shaheed), etymologically witnesses, of the revolution and its repression: they are witnesses in

12 German courts have put Syrian intelligence officers on trial and found them guilty of inflicting torture in Assad’s jails: see https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-security-germany-idINKBN2AO141.
the here-and-now or the thereafter. As Yassin’s body and Umm Khaled’s sons’ pictures illustrate, Syrian bodies are marked by the repression. They are traces of the revolution and its repression: the martyrs’ bodies are not washed to bear witness to their violent death in front of God on Judgement Day and the scars mark the Syrian bodies forever. Syrians have photographed and exhibited their wounded bodies to bear witness to the regime’s invisibilised crimes—first to raise awareness among the population, later in asylum claims or in trials of the regime’s representatives.

These scarred bodies are traces since they make “elsewhere(s) and other-times” resonate in the present (Napolitano, 2015, p. 57)—and they are witnesses or lived memories of defeated and invisibilised events for they embody the revolution’s repression. These wounded bodies become living archives of what is presented by the regime as a non-event—an event that cannot be recounted (Feldman, 1991). These traces are a condensation of stories and history into material bodies, as the shell’s fragment in Yassin’s body exemplifies. But these traces can also be the very absence of family members or people’s limbs. These absences turn into phantomatic presences as their absence is marked by constant pain.

This question of present/absent or the absents’ presence appears as a form of haunting or phantomatic presence. This haunting is quite different from that of the ghosts of the Vietnam war (Kwon, 2008) and resonates more with Kader Attia’s video work (2016) in which the absent(s) and present(s) are linked through phantom pain on an individual and collective scale. For Umm Ahmad, whose three sons were martyred and two disappeared, their absence was indexed and made present through artefacts—personal belongings—and through the narration of shared memories. Moreover, the disappeared sons’ absence restructured Umm Ahmad’s everyday life as she constantly thought and talked about their absence, which had become a haunting or phantomatic presence:

“When your son is martyred, you can find some peace because you know he is with God: he is in Paradise. But when your son is detained, you can’t be at peace. If you eat, you think: did he eat today? If you’re cold, you think: is he cold now? If you take a shower, you think: did he have a shower today? Each time you do something you think of him and wonder what is happening with him…”

In my ethnography, the invisible, the missing, the absent appeared not only as the unknown future and the destroyed past to which I have already alluded, but also as the invisible and the unknown in cosmological and historical terms. The question of time and the temporality of the defeat colluded with the question of the apocalypse and the end of the world. This is central to my exploration of the invisible and the unknown, and therefore the invisible is not only metaphysical or cosmological but also historical. To come back to the figure of the

13 It can also be called a non-event in Trouillot’s sense (1995) that the non-violent revolutionary moment has been widely invisibilised by the focus in global media and research publications on violent events.
witness, the *shaheed*, it is both a historical and cosmological figure in the Syrian context: it brings together historical and apocalyptic endings, utopian and prophetic temporalities. The aftermaths of the defeated revolution thus resonate with the afterlife and with the apocalyptic ending of the world.

I thus attempt not only to map the ways in which “the invisible can make history”, but also to retrace historical and cosmological events through the invisible. Hence, I contribute to showing “how attending to invisible actors can open up new ways for thinking about memory, history, and violence” (Mittermaier, 2019, p. 28), and also to demonstrating how history and violence appear through the absence-presence of disappeared actors and witnesses. This means asking how unknown and invisible revolutionary events, actions and actors can inflect and create an anthropology of defeat.

With the revolution’s defeat, historical and cosmological times seem to be colluding. This is very much visible in the figure of the *shaheed*—both the historical witness in front of other humans and the cosmological witness in front of God. In both cases, the *shaheed* needs to present proof of the crimes committed against them. In fact, both survivors and martyrs “carry history on themselves, since they are a physical embodiment, a historical relation carried on the self” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 149). The co-existence or co-absence of these two kinds of witnesses can be understood as a “heterotemporality” (Chakrabarty, in Mittermaier, 2012, p. 395). In the Syrian case, that means writing the history of the revolution bringing together cosmological—prewritten/predestined—history and secular history.

**Conclusion: Traces and Tracing of the Defeat**

On an early morning in August 2015, I received an enigmatic message informing me that Umm Yazan’s family, with whom I had become close friends, were leaving the next day for Izmir, in Turkey. When I arrived at their home, Umm Yazan’s daughters had already begun packing. I got busy helping Maya and Nour as their mother went out on an errand. As we made our way through the piles of clothes, suitcases and garbage bags full of shoes, Umm Yazan’s daughter, Raya, joined us. As Raya went through the piles to see if she had left anything behind when she got married, she suddenly caught sight of some black trousers.

“Do you remember those trousers?!” she exclaimed. “Those are the trousers I was wearing while I was in jail! Aren’t those the trousers you brought to me in jail with mom?” Raya asked Nour as she moved them to the pile of clothes she wanted to take with her.

When her mother came back, Raya ran to her bedroom to show her the ripped trousers. She wanted to be sure those were the ones her mother had brought to her in jail. Raya became very emotional as the piece of clothing awoke memories: of the beginning of the revolution, of detention, of a time when she still hoped the revolution would overthrow the regime. Just as Umm Yazan was turning her back on Syria and accepting the revolution’s defeat, when
they were trying to forget the past to start new lives elsewhere, the past was coming back to them through material memories and remnants.

In this article, I attempted to show how an anthropology of traces can help in building an anthropology of defeat and its afterlife: the ethnographic exploration of invisibilised or non-existent events. Drawing on Navaro’s work (2020), I proposed exploring what is no more but is still perceptible in the “interstices” of a presence/absence, in the shadows of revolutionary actions, in the aftermaths of mass political violence, in the silenced revolutionary movement’s intervals. Thus, I reflected on the impossibility as well as possibilities of writing about a defeated revolution, suggesting using a “negative methodology” to “trac(e) against the odds” (Navaro, 2020, p. 166). I suggested focusing on the revolution and repression’s traces, remainders, remnants, debris, ruins, fragments through private and online archives, through linguistic and mnemonic traces in life-stories and autobiographical novels, through bodily marks that bear witness to the extreme violence that unfolded on the revolutionaries.

Here, an anthropology of defeat is an anthropology of traces and a tracing of the absence, the unseen and the unknown. This allows us to fully grasp the temporality and materiality of a defeated revolution and its violent aftermaths. In the Syrian context, the Janus-like figure of the martyr/survivor constitutes the very possibility of an anthropology of the Syrian revolution’s defeat. Indeed, this figure articulates different temporalities, domains and scales: historical and divine times, here-and-now and Thereafter, human and divine justice, the intimate and the collective, stories and History.

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