THE LIVING DEAD

Revolutionary Subjectivity and Syrian Rebel-Workers in Beirut

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PhD Thesis

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DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/Ph.D. degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the emergence, materializations, and transformations of revolutionary subjectivity amongst male Syrian migrant workers in Beirut. It documents how these processes surfaced within, and impacted on, their daily life. On the basis of over twenty-four months of participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and oral history collection, it identifies some of the key mechanisms through which the uprising was experienced and lived out at a distance.

For an extended period, Lebanon has maintained a significant population of Syrian migrant workers. Many arrived in Beirut before the first rumblings of the uprising, but when it broke, some temporarily returned to Syria hoping to participate via peaceful protest or, later, armed resistance. Yet many also found space in Beirut, through new communication technology and face-to-face interaction, to take part in the uprising. The often neglected perspective of Syria’s labouring diaspora is critical because, for these ‘rebel-workers,’ the same socio-economic pressures that structured their initial decisions to migrate from the countryside to sell labour power in the city resembles what many have identified as the material foundations for the uprising itself.

The study begins with an outline of Syria’s history and its political economy to reveal how the Ba’athist state once achieved a degree of legitimacy amongst impoverished and rural workers. Legitimacy was won with thanks to a system that prevented absolute poverty and rising inequality. When this system collapsed, a major support base for the state fell away. From this foundation, the remaining chapters describe how the journey to ‘rebel’ became variously represented, reinforced and re-made. To reveal how uprisings are experienced at a distance, and how rebel identities form in conditions of displacement, these subjective processes are described in chapters that evaluate, in turn, the nature of populist political language; the role of electronically circulated art objects; the emergence of martyrdom commemoration practices across new media networks; the challenges to maintaining patriarchal gender identity in exile and finally the proliferation of conspiratorial discourse.

I conclude that the Syrian uprising was fundamentally populist in nature and thus powerfully explosive, but external structures ultimately determined its transformation into a simultaneously civil and proxy war. While this transformation was at first ‘resisted,’ these revolutionary subjectivities ultimately appeared as if they were beginning to fold into, and reflect, the degradation of the uprising itself.
For The Martyrs of Syria

and

My Mum, Dad, and Granda
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- **How are Rebel-Martyrs Made?**
- **The First British Brother**
- **Conclusion**

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# Chapter Six

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- **Conclusion**

# Conclusions

*It’s Your Turn Doctor*

# References
A NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

TRANSLITERATION
Arabic words are transliterated according to the system developed by the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. Included are special characters, diacritic sounds and long vowels. Where contextually appropriate some transliterations have been adapted to reflect the original dialect and others written in line with the pronunciation of Modern Standard Arabic. Arabic transliterations are not italicised and when a term is first introduced a translation is provided within square brackets.

PROPER NOUNS
Arabic names of places, towns, and people are transliterated according to the above system unless an alternative transcription is dominant in English. For example, Abdullah and not 'Abdu ’llah; Deraa not Dar’a; Shia not Shi’a.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In March 2016 a UN-brokered ceasefire came into effect in Syria, the country witnessed one of its calmest days since the popular uprising degraded into a civil and proxy war. In a number of rebel held areas protestors returned to demonstrate in the streets. The conflict has seen over 250,000 people killed and 4.2 million displaced, but members of the crowds were reported to be even holding up the sign, “The people want the downfall of the regime”. The bravery of the Syrian people in the face of danger and uncertainty is truly astounding. This thesis would not have have been possible if it were not for a wonderful group of displaced rebels in Beirut who were so willing to share their aspirations, thoughts and daily lives with me. But with an uncertain future still ahead, their names must nonetheless remain hidden behind pseudonyms.

My principal supervisor, Professor Martha Mundy, has taught me since I was an undergraduate at the LSE. As a reader, she has challenged my ideas and helped shape my work in uncountable ways. I thank my secondary supervisor, Dr. Mathijs Pelkmans for his patience and for providing such thoughtful commentary on draft chapters.

In 2010 I was still planning on fieldwork in Damascus and not in Beirut. For this reason, I can not overstate my gratitude to the people who made my introduction to Lebanon so enjoyable. I was collected from the airport by Gustavo Barbosa, and I was his guest for several weeks as I found my feet. While studying Arabic my fellow classmate, Miriam Stock provided invaluable conversations that helped me begin to reformulate my research. Without Mohammad Hosso I would have likely not felt myself at home in Beirut, and my research would have taken even longer to begin. I am thankful also for the support offered by the American University of Beirut.

I wrote this text between Beirut and London, elements have been informed by my conversations in both cities. In Beirut, I must thank, in no particular order: Olivia Alabaster, Nader Atassi, Jonathan Dagher, Rita Yara, Pete Targe, Sophie Rimington-Pounder, Hamed Sinno, Tory Brykalski, Safa Hamza, Michael Jerab, Ali Kadri, Daniel Neep, Ryan John Stultz, Alaa Minawi, Philip Issa and Alison Meuse. A special mention must go to Mahdi Zaidan for his willingness to read numerous drafts and for his wonderfully thoughtful comments. In London I must thank, again in no particular order: Emily Fu, Henry Lodge, Ashok Kumar, Danny McNally, Peter Adams, Charlotte Gerada, Olivia Herbert, Duncan Crystal, Daniel Oldfield, Meadhbh McIvor, Fuad Musallem, Agustin Diz, Andrea Enrico Pia, Natalia Buitron, Susannah Crockford, Katherine Fletcher, Julia Huang, Mark Stanford, Christopher Martin and Fernande Pool. Finally, I thank all staff and colleagues at the LSE.
## A TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS

**2011: Civil Uprising, Repression, and Violence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th March</td>
<td>Syrian authorities arrest fifteen school children in Deraa, Southern Syria, for writing revolutionary slogans on their schoolyard walls. They are alleged to have been tortured in detention leading to an uproar and series of demonstrations in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th March</td>
<td>Named the “day of rage” by activists, protests are staged in Damascus and Aleppo that call for reforms, civil liberties and freedom for political prisoners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th March</td>
<td>Security forces are alleged to have opened fire on protests in Deraa, killing 4 in what is known to have been the first deaths of the uprising. Protests and crackdowns continue to spread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>State security storm an occupation in Homs that was attempting to mimic Cairo’s Tahrir Square.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>The Syrian Army is by this point deployed in Deraa, Homs, Banyas and the Damascus suburbs. The European Union begins an arms embargo, asset freeze and travel ban on senior officials. Reports suggest Iran is providing assistance and equipment to help suppress the civil unrest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>The violence reached new levels, this was signalled by events unfolding in the town of Jisr al-Shughur. The regime claimed 120 were killed by an armed gang, and activists suggested they were killed for deserting the army and joining protestors. Shortly afterwards the uprising claims to have liberated Jisr al-Shughur, but elite government troops retake it within days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Military defectors announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army [FSA].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>President Barack Obama calls for Assad to resign and orders the Syrian regime’s assets frozen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>The US and the European Union ban Syrian oil imports. The Turkish government cuts contact with Syrian authorities. Fighting between the Syrian military and defecting troops escalates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Violence continues, the Arab League peace plan fails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Damascus now agrees to allow Arab League monitors into the country to observe compliance with a new agreement, however, one day before they are due to arrive in Syria the government is alleged to have fired on an anti-government demonstration in Hama. 200 are reported massacred in Idlib by security forces. At the end of the first year, the UN claims 5,000 have died.</td>
</tr>
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**2012: Civil War**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Jabhat al-Nusra’s is formed and this marks al-Qaeda’s official entrance into the Syria conflict. The group proves itself fighting against the regime and alliances are made with more ‘moderate groups.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>One year since the start of the uprising; Syrian troops push into Homs. Kofi Annan’s non-binding peace plan is endorsed but failures and the violence continues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>100 killed in the Houla massacre; a later UN report lays the blame on Assad-aligned gangs, the so-called Shabiha. Parliamentary elections are held but boycotted by the opposition; most seats go to Assad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Fighting spreads toward Aleppo, Syria’s second city, and commercial capital. Rebels gradually take control over half of the city, and this battle continues at the time of writing. The Red Cross decla the situation a Civil War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Kofi Annan quits as the UN-Arab League’s envoy. Obama declares for the first time that his ‘red line’ on the Syria crisis would be the use of chemical weapons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>The US officially agree to supply rebel forces with a total of $45 million non-lethal aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>The Syria National Council (SNC) is created with the idea of gathering together the many opposition factions. However, from its very beginning, there are signs of infighting and on-the-ground many feel the SNC is disconnected from reality.</td>
</tr>
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**2013: Refugee Crisis and Chemical Weapons**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Israel is alleged to have carried out an attack on a convoy of ‘advanced anti-aircraft weapons’ bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>A number of reports emerge that suggest foreign aid is finding its way into weapons supplies; rebels make gains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Three years since the uprising; officially UN-registered refugees hit 1 million.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Foreign Jihadi organisations grow in number; in Iraq, a man called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announces that Jabhat al-Nusra is an extension of his group, ‘The Islamic State of Iraq.’ The leader of Nusra, Abu Mohammad al-Joulani suggests otherwise. Meanwhile in Lebanon,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, admits for the first time publically that his group is engaged in Syria.

July: A UN report is released suggesting the total number of dead has reached 100,000

August: 21st of August: the regime is accused of committing a chemical weapons attack in the Ghouta, a rebel-controlled area near Damascus. Numbers put the dead at 1,400. The regime denies the assault, with others suggesting it was a rebel ‘false-flag’ operation engineered to provoke US intervention. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom puts military intervention to parliament but is outvoted.

September: Islamic factions within the SNC split and form the ‘Islamic Front’ whose official aim is now a future state subject to Islamic law.

October: In response to US pressure, a deal is struck with the Syrian government which agrees to destroy their chemical weapon production equipment. Meanwhile, increasing violence witnesses the total number of refugees hit two million.

November: A major suicide attack on the Iranian embassy in Beirut kills 21, Jabhat al-Nusra remains the likely suspects

**2014: Islamic State and Counterrevolution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Leaked images suggest regime prisoners are being killed on an ‘industrial scale.’ Geneva peace talks begin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>The second round of talks brings no results, and the then Join Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi resigns. Barrel bomb attacks are reported to have increased, but the regime denies it is using such tactics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>The Syrian army, backed by Hezbollah, takes back Yabroud from the rebels. Yabroud was the last city held by rebels on the border with Lebanon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Under ceasefire arrangements, the government resumes control of Homs. Rebels are given 48 hours to leave the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>In government-held areas general elections are carried out, more than one candidate is permitted, but the international community and rebels refuse to cooperate, they declare the elections a sham. Islamic State [IS] is now a self-declared caliphate, with Baghdadi the head. IS controls territory from Aleppo to Iraq.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>IS takes control of the al-Omar oil field, the largest in Syria, after a fight between IS and Nusra. Staffan de Mistura is named the new UN envoy to Syria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Islamic State publishes a video showing the beheading of the American journalist James Foley, the first amongst a group of five Western hostages to be executed by the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>In response to hostage executions, the US carries out its first airstrike against IS. IS begins its offensive against the Kurdish town of Kobani, located on the border with Turkey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Lebanon now closes its borders to Syrians fleeing the conflict; its population of refugees hits one million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>76,000 are reported by the UN to have been killed in 2014, making it the single most deadly year. Lebanon introduces a new sponsorship system for Syrian workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**2015: Interventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>New reports suggest Syrian rebel groups, trained and armed by the CIA, will soon have their funds and weapon supplies cut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>IS is pushed back in both Iraq and Syria. Jaish al-Fatah, backed by Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, takes control of Idlib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Palmyra is taken by IS and many world heritage monuments are destroyed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Russia begins its intervention in Syria, the Kremlin claims it is targeting only the IS group but the opposition respond that all rebels are targeted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Over 40 killed in a double suicide attack in a South Beirut marketplace, IS claims responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>After IS claims responsibility for Paris Bataclan attacks, both the UK and France join the US and Russia in their bombing campaigns over Syria.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**2016: Ceasefire and Pushback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>The United States and Russia attempt to broker a ceasefire between the government and opposition forces, Islamic State is excluded from the agreement. This follows a government push to re-take Aleppo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>The Syrian Army, with Russian air support, takes Palmyra back from IS. Later that same month the Russian orchestra plays a triumphal concert amongst the ruins.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SYRIA CONFLICT MAP

[AT TIME OF WRITING]

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in the Time of Revolution

“I’m thinking about divorcing my wife,” said Abdullah between gulps of Turkish beer, “are you shocked, Philip? I thought you’d have no idea … but what can I do? She wants me to leave for Germany [on an ‘illegal’ boat] but I want to stay here — next to Syria. I love Syria. All I want is to return to my village someday. But Dala says she wants to live in the city … she doesn’t care about [tribal] tradition … you know, I loved the revolution but she’s not interested. When my friends come over she gets annoyed, especially if we eat on the floor … she throws down forks at guests saying, ‘don’t eat with your hands because … tatāwwarna hala’ [we got developed now].

It was December 2015 when the newly wed Abdullah decided to pass by my apartment in Beirut for a drink. Abdullah is a 26-year-old Syrian construction worker from rural eastern Syria and a former student of social science at the Lebanese University.¹ I met him in the summer of 2012, by which point he had already participated both directly and indirectly in a civil uprising that had been taking hold in Syria since March 2011.² Soon, Abdullah agreed to become my research assistant and as such he acted as my gatekeeper into the everyday lives of Syrian workers, rebels, and refugees in Beirut.

My assistant was one of three brothers and two sisters. He stands at about 5ft 11in wearing hair styled tightly into the sides, blending into his carefully groomed ‘designer stubble.’ He sports relaxed athletic gear, hooded jackets, jogging bottoms, and the like. Despite the sporty look, Abdullah’s weight fluctuated endlessly; it was the source of much anxiety, and the size of his posterior was often the butt of other men’s jokes.

Abdullah, like many of the men described throughout this thesis, ‘loved the revolution.’ However, his revolution had also long since transformed into a vicious civil conflict and proxy war. Moreover, at the time of writing, victory appeared a long way off. With the regime looking set to remain, Abdullah’s life was suspended between destruction across the border and an ever-worsening ‘refugee crisis.’ Indeed, hundreds and thousands of men like him have come to board ‘illegal’ and dangerous boats destined for Europe.

In popular press narratives, the civil uprising phase of the Syrian war was a further iteration in a wider revolt known as the ‘The Arab Spring.’ This story began with the self-immolation of a Tunisian Street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi (see Kraidy 2016: 23 – 52). Bouazizi’s drastic protest — on the 17th of December 2010 — came in response to the
confiscation of his goods by a local police officer. Mass demonstrations followed with popular mobilisation spreading soon to Egypt. Syria followed in Egypt’s wake. In fact, on the 28th of January 2011, echoing events in Tunisia, a man called Hassan Ali Akleh set himself ablaze in the North-Eastern Syrian town of Hasakeh (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016: 35). But Akleh’s act went unremarked (ibid). Instead, the rupturing event of the Syrian uprising has been typically framed as the arrest and torture of fifteen schoolboys in Deraa (ibid: 38). The Syrian authorities accused the boys of writing Arab Spring slogans on their school yard’s walls (ibid). The regime responded to ensuing protests with live ammunition and ever more repressive violence. In 2012 many rebel militias had appeared and by 2013 a proxy war raged across Syria. Iranian and later Russian-backed forces sided with the regime, and Gulf-sponsored extremists pledged allegiance to various Islamist outfits. However, those who fled the war zone found little security. Refugees living in neighbouring countries became subject to many laws and edicts that limited free movement, gainful employment and a dignified existence.

It is with an eye to these severe levels of loss and devastation that Dala’s insistence that Abdullah travel to Germany and begin a new life must first be read. Instead of precariousness, Dala imagines stability, instead of poverty she sees prosperity and in place of car bombs, peace.

**REBEL-WORKERS**

For the most part, this study steps back from the current moment of refugee crisis to reveal instead the conditions through which the men like Abdullah first left Syria, travelled to Beirut, but nonetheless carved out means of participating in what they called ‘the revolution.’ All the men featured here can be considered ‘part-time revolutionaries’, and so to signal the hybridization of migrant work and revolutionary labour I have called them ‘rebel-workers.’

Rebel-workers took whatever opportunities presented themselves to return home and to participate directly in the Syrian uprising, in terms of both ‘peaceful protest’ as well as ‘armed resistance.’ Given that the majority had also arrived in Beirut prior to the first rumblings of the uprising, they can be conceived of as a kind of a ‘rebel diaspora.’ All then, to varying degrees, threw their solidarity and support to opposition forces.

The contemporary usage of the term, ‘diaspora’ has been subject to various disciplinary emphasis and investment, its meaning often stretched in too many directions at once. In general, the term is understood to refer in this text to the shifting sociocultural relations that form between a particular group and its homeland, as well as the distinctive
INTRODUCTION

characteristics of that group’s social structure within its host nation (e.g. Athur 2010; Banerjee 2012; Cohen 1997; Vora 2013; Zabel 2006). Broadly, a diaspora has been defined in relation to the degree of its dispersal, the duration of its settlements, its institutions, and the kinds of emotional sentiment the group forms toward homeland. In this thesis, however, I follow Rogers Brubaker (2005) practice orientation toward diaspora studies. Brubaker cautions against deploying the term ‘diaspora’ to signify an already bounded group and argues that we must de-substantialise the term and draw attention to the practices and processes through which the struggle to bind is actually played out. This processual orientation toward the diaspora is particularly compelling given the study’s backdrop of an uprising turned civil war.

Indeed, scholars have, prior to the 2011 uprising, suggested that Syrian labourers in Lebanon constituted not a diaspora, but a temporary worker population (Chalcraft 2009). My use of the term diaspora is, therefore, deliberate. I return to discuss this in detail below, but for now my point is that a once temporary pattern of labour migration is in a state of flux and is moving toward (increasing) permanence. Settlement looks likely given that socio-cultural life rituals are carried out now Lebanon, and different sets of attachments and longing are forming toward Syria. These desires to return rotate between longing for direct engagement in what was sometimes understood as an empowering political upheaval and armed struggle, or, by contradistinction a return to some pre-war stage, a relative idyle of secularism, tight communities and peaceful coexistence. Much of this text can be read as evidencing the various mechanisms through which attachments to a contentious political cause back home intersected with an emerging sense of bounded community abroad.

Even if they were often disconnected physically from initial frontline protest mobilisation, men like Abdullah seemingly underwent a process of revolutionary transformation. It is with a desire to understand how this happened, and how it was lived out, that this thesis moves between the broader socio-economic foundations of the uprising to everyday encounters through which a journey to ‘rebel’ became variously represented, reinforced and (re)made. Attention is narrowed to the emergence, representation, and degradation of what I call throughout ‘revolutionary subjectivity.’

In the most general sense, ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ is a concept that refers to the point at which any individual begins to think of herself as part of a broader collective force that is by a common goal which, if it is achieved, is thought to bring about a radical transformation in any particular socio-political order. For rebel-workers the goal was overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad.
These rather subjective processes are clarified through their more physical materialisations in chapters that evaluate, in turn, the falling away of the Ba’th party’s popular legitimacy; the nature of alternative populist political language; the role of electronically circulated art objects; the emergence of martyrdom commemoration practices; the challenges to maintaining patriarchal identity and structure in exile, and finally the proliferation of conspiratorial discourse. Taken together, chapters aim to reveal how support for the uprising first came into being or was articulated, how it was then mediated and ‘acted out’ in moments of storytelling, conversations, art objects and martyrdom commemorative practices as well as elsewhere in everyday life. Finally, how it was that a commitment to the uprising hit certain limitations, was degraded, and ultimately contained.

While these men were ‘rebels,’ they were also ‘workers’, specifically migrant workers and as such took a whole variety of jobs. Within Abdullah’s network of friends and kin were construction workers, shop assistants, odd jobs men, removal workers, roadway signage installers, and painters. But from the very fact of their migrant labour came further and more macro-level hybridizations of rebel and worker identities: the socio-economic pressure that had informed these men’s decisions to migrate from the countryside in order to sell labour power in the city resembled what many have now suggested were the material foundations for the uprising itself (e.g. Hinnbusch 2012; Matar 2012; Azmeh 2014).

The remainder of this introduction sketches further how these two aspects of identity, ‘worker’ and ‘rebel’ have collapsed together in contemporary Lebanon. I describe this collapse through key moments in Abdullah’s life between 2011 and 2016. In-so-doing, I introduce the fieldwork context, as well as the ways in which revolutionary subjectivity emerged. It was through such an emergence that the final threads of the Syrian regime legitimacy snapped for significant sections of the population. In dropping in and out of the major life events and rituals for Abdullah — such as his marriage ceremony and expulsion from university — I point toward other important analytic questions at the centre of this work. After this sketch, the theoretical and ethnographic themes of this thesis are drawn out further before I describe the general chapter structure.

REVOLUTION FROM A DISTANCE

It was March 2011 when Abdullah first learned of anti-regime mobilisation occurring back home in Syria. In an instant, he became transfixed with Facebook, his apartment’s satellite television and, a little while later, WhatsApp messenger.
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A few months passed and the intensity of street organization mounted, violence increased, and Abdullah made the decision that, during a break from university, he would take the arduous 30-hour bus journey back home to his village in Deir Ezzor.9

In Lebanon, Abdullah developed his commitment to the uprising from a distance because, evidently, he lacked an opportunity to participate directly in street organization. In many stories of the uprising, individuals point to their first experiences of participation and mobilization as generative of a rebirth, making for tight bonds of ‘togetherness’ and ‘collectivism’ in opposition to the regime (e.g. Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami 2016: 57 – 77). However, Abdullah’s political consciousness and the emergence of his revolutionary subjectivity preceded any participation in front-line activity. Intrigued by this, I asked Abdullah and other men how it was they came to be so political. Inevitably, I was pointed toward new communication technology. Without exception, every rebel-worker I knew owned some manner of Internet-enabled smartphone. Moreover, it was through this technology that art objects, local news stories, photographs, and videos shot on mobile cameras rapidly circulated. These items appeared valued in so far as they offered the men a ‘less mediated’ form of coverage from across borders. Powerful connections of solidarity formed between initial local organizers and men separated by geographic distance. A digital community was enacted upon, and made visible and activist practices extended into online worlds.10

Indeed, in what Abdullah reflected upon as days of peaceful protest and youth organization, he became something of an activist. However, when he would reminisce to me about those times, things did not always sound quite as ‘peaceful’ as he otherwise insisted. One of his favourite stories begins with him lounging around with mates in the Lebanese University’s cafeteria. They were noisily discussing events taking place in Deraa. Abdullah had already attended a few rapidly planned meetings on campus and was engaged in never-ending political discussions with fellow Syrians.

“Some of us were saying it will not be longer than three months and Bashar will fall […] ok, some thought longer — but we all were convinced he was going,” he said, when reflecting back on that time. In memories of 2011 it was typically understood that the coverage of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia was what fuelled a sense of excitement: could Syria be the next state to drive out its dictatorship?

Against this, Abdullah explained to me the emotional drive he felt to go back home or risk missing out on a transformative moment of Syrian history. Just as he was debating the necessity to go back and support the revolution, another group of whom he presumed were
Harakat Amal-supporting students appeared to overhear their discussion. They shouted back a chain of insults: “It was like Syria,” he said.\textsuperscript{12}

What he means by ‘like Syria’ is that, even at a distance in Beirut, the relationship of Lebanese political forces was such that the antagonisms flaring in his homeland could appear reproduced on the grounds of a foreign university campus.\textsuperscript{13} Before these mounting confrontations, he had even been trying to organize an ‘opposition solidarity march’ through Dahieh.\textsuperscript{14} However, after the cafétaria fight, his plan was soon abandoned.

Moments like this raised a set of initial questions that this thesis sets out to answer. To what extent did the ‘digital revolution’ here have other dangerous ‘real world’ components? What led to certain forms of digital media circulating, and others not? Moreover, what are the actual social processes behind this media’s capacity to offer a seemingly ‘unmediated’ view of the uprising?\textsuperscript{15}

**EXAMS AND THE FUTURE**

Abdullah never graduated from college: the university expelled him.

In the winter of 2014, my friend approached what would have been his penultimate round of examinations but he decided against sitting the tests. Instead, he paid one of his peers to take the exams. Upon entering the hall, ID checks took place — the plot was revealed. It was, in hindsight, not the greatest of ideas, as his friend only bore a passing resemblance. Abdullah was dismissed from the university, his two and a half years of study amounted now to nothing. This was a real blow. Abdullah was the most intellectually gifted amongst his immediate kin. He scored the highest in his school exams back in Syria and it was with these results in hand that he had decided to travel, in 2010, to Lebanon. He enrolled in the Social Sciences faculty at the Lebanese University.

His decision to travel abroad for work and study was made possible through his family’s long-standing connection to seasonal work in Beirut. In fact, his elder brother Firas had already been working in construction in Beirut for some years, and their father had found employment in Lebanon intermittently during the late ‘80s and ‘90s. The advantage for poorer students studying in Beirut is that if they could secure cheap accommodation and a job they also might well begin to accumulate some cash for a future back in Syria.

Abdullah lived with Firas when he first arrived. At that time — while already having learned from his brother that conditions were not great — he nonetheless crossed into Lebanon with a vision of future of prosperity and a life of luxury. He told me how he saw only fast cars and plush apartments ahead. Unsurprisingly, Abdullah’s first night living on a
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construction site was a somewhat unpleasant memory. But regardless of his first impressions, Abdullah did not want to disappoint his brother, who had even managed to wrangle him some work. He tried his best to work as a labourer, but he could not hack it; after two weeks he quit. “I hadn’t gotten used to that type of work then,” he later admitted. Abdullah was fortunate, he struck it lucky, quickly finding further employment working odd jobs in a sports nutrition supply shop in a central commercial district of Beirut: Hamra. When we first met in 2012, he was still working there, and meanwhile renting a spot in an apartment close to the shop and my own accommodation.

With regard to his eventual expulsion from the university, my friend was keen to stress that his punishment was draconian, especially considering that he was well known to the faculty as a hard-working, promising student. His grades stood significantly above the class average. When his fate was revealed, Abdullah found that he could not curry any favour amongst friendlier academic staff. In his later telling of the situation, he said he felt it all came down to the simple fact that 'sectarian politics’ had long infiltrated the Lebanese University.’ This was in view of the apparent the domination of Ḥarakat Amal around campus. Abdullah argues he was himself a ‘known troublemaker,’ especially in relation to his vocal support of the Syrian opposition.

Abdullah’s decision to cheat emerges within a chain of identifiable and intensifying socio-economic pressures. His mother and sisters had become internally displaced in Syria, his elder brother with them. Firas was then stuck back home in Syria. He had been fighting with a Free Syrian Army [FSA] unit in Deir Ezzor city, having returned to Syria in 2013. When Firas learned their father had died in mid-2014 from a heart attack, he returned to his mother’s side. He has not (yet) returned to combat. He became internally displaced with the rest of the family when Islamic State crossed the border in the summer of 2014. Their village is one of a string of small agricultural settlements that run down the Euphrates towards the Iraqi border. It did not take Islamic State long to subjugate an initial tribal uprising against their conquest (Ghassan 2014).

The family’s farmland previously grew wheat but now lies fallow. As a consequence, Abdullah’s $200 per month remittances have shifted from ‘assistance’ to ‘life-line.’ He cobbled this money together by seemingly working every hour of the day. However, as a consequence of all this, he began missing classes, delaying on assignments and finding himself unable to study for incoming examinations. Such was his preoccupation with the impossibility of studying and working that Abdullah wrote one of his research assignments on fellow rural-urban migrant worker students. All were united by the fact that they had once
imagined they could combine an income and savings with a degree in Beirut. Most now faced an impossible task of precariously balancing these twin desires thanks to an increasingly war-torn Syria with attendant ‘hyperinflation’ (O’Brian 2013).

However, Abdullah had already invested much time in his degree and with the little promises it held for a better future, as well as the weight of his mother’s pride, he had to find a solution. That solution was cheating. The agency Abdullah might once have enjoyed, in building a future through his education while providing for his family through remittances appeared now to be increasingly limited.

It was around a year later, after Abdullah’s expulsion from the university, and on a rainy December evening in 2015 when my friend sat across from me in my apartment drinking Turkish beer. Despite the inclement weather, he could not resist the opportunity to sneak out of his home. He appeared to find some relief in explaining the complications newly married life was throwing up. These complications ranged from ever-present financial difficulties, his sense of total precariousness and rural-urban cultural differences, to his wife’s apathy toward the revolution versus his determination to keep the uprising alive.

I’d attended Abdullah’s autumn wedding some months earlier. Weddings are elsewhere a central and important ethnographic fixture, but when I began fieldwork in April 2012, there was little expectation I would have the opportunity to partake in one unless I were to travel somehow to Syria. At that time, movement across the border from Lebanon to Syria remained a relatively straightforward and open affair. Indeed, the workers I first made acquaintance with, before I had met Abdullah, were still making regular trips back home, with some returning to join the protests, and others later to fight. Many also returned to wed.

When I first ‘entered the field’ I came to spend countless evenings hanging out with guys who live and work on construction sites dotted across central Beirut, these were evenings accompanied with tales of love, future brides, and marriages.16 With the uprising not yet significantly militarized, these migrant workers often still saw themselves as desirable, for they were making wages that — while poverty-inducing in Lebanon — were still comparatively high for Syria. True, it was not comparable to their parent’s generation, and the on-site average of $450 per month might not sound like much, but it goes further across the border in Syria, especially if you manage to avoid rent by securing accommodation within a construction project. Moreover, these hard-won savings were still at this point hoped to materialize one day into future wedding ceremonies, dowries, businesses or family homes.

One of the men I met on a construction site, Mohammed, was a student in Damascus University’s journalism department. Mohammed had intended to work in Lebanon only for
the summer. Through his cousin on the site, he had managed to secure accommodation on a central Beirut site while working the counter at a nearby pastry shop. Mohammed is from an impoverished rural Idlibi background; his father is an out-of-work alcoholic, and his brothers are too young to work. He estimates he is making double what he would earn in Damascus for the same job.

Against the mounting conflict Mohammed too — as with all the workers, refugees, and rebels I know — witnessed his planned future become fiction. He never returned to university. Instead after eventually leaving for his village, he ended up fleeing with his family to Turkey. Presently his education is on hold; he works now at a clothes shop in an urban centre, not far from the border. Another of Mohammad’s cousins, Bilal, a one-time roadside banana seller, also returned to Idlib in 2013, but he took a different path. In fact, Bilal remains in Idlib today, having completed military service he wanted to put his skills to use in the uprising. First, he joined an FSA brigade, then Jabhat al-Nusra, before, in 2015, abandoning the direct fighting altogether. Today Bilal searches the wreckage of aerially bombarded buildings for bodies and survivors alongside the White Helmets.

By contrast, men like Abdullah, who did not make an earlier return, now remain somewhat stuck in Lebanon, their entire lives uprooted to Beirut. The expected duration of residence moves from total uncertainty to an increasing likelihood of, and even necessity for, permanent settlement. So how exactly did Beirut, once a place of temporary and seasonal employment, become now a place for social reproduction? In other words, how is it that I came to attend the wedding of my research assistant?

A NEW TRADITION

Abdullah’s new wife, Dala, is from Idlib in Northern Syria. Dala is from a family of moderately wealthy shopkeepers, whereas my research assistant is from the more impoverished rural province of Deir Ezzor, in eastern Syria, just short of the Iraq border. Dala, who’s 23, is somewhat short, she tends to wear a modern-style coloured hijab matched with bright tops. She is evidently intelligent and performing well at university; of late she has seemingly become an expert on the web of decrees, laws and regulations governing those who attempt to gain illegal entrance to Europe. “Why does David Cameron say he’ll only take 20,000 urgent case refugees?” she asked me at dinner one mid-November evening in 2015, “what exactly is an urgent case? All of Syria is an urgent case.”

Abdullah’s family’s background is tribal and agricultural; Dala’s background is urban and trade-orientated. Despite these evident differences in class and region, they had fallen for
one another at university and, after a few months of courtship, announced their engagement. At that time Abdullah acknowledged his betrothal would likely have proved impossible were it not for the upheaval generated by the Syrian uprising, for in the present state of war, displacement and economic degeneration, marriage costs are significantly lower with parental control over partner choices seemingly weaker (see also The Syrian Observer 2014). There was nevertheless a round of initial protestations from Dala’s father, but, eventually, he consented to the marriage, given that Abdullah was, at that time, a student in university and had, through construction work, a source of income.

Where the young couple’s home regions of Idlib and Deir Ezzor share similarities is the fact they’re both no longer controlled by the Syrian regime, but by Islamist militias. During the conflict, Idlib has exchanged hands many times and, as of March 2015, it was successfully recaptured during an operation named, ‘Taḥrīr Idlib’ [Liberate Idlib]. This operation was launched by a coalition of Islamic resistance organizations known as, ‘Jaish al-Fatah’ [the army of conquest]. Jaish al-Fatah’s constituent outfits included the al-Qaida-aligned, ‘Jabhat al-Nusra’ playing the most prominent role (Homsi 2015). Abdullah’s village fell in June 2014 from relative isolation, to become territory now part of the ‘Islamic State.’

His tribe — the Sheitaat — rose up against the occupation, but in so doing lost, in Abdullah’s estimates, 1,500 young men (Ghassan 2014).

These occupations go someway to explaining why the wedding was not carried out in Syria. However, travel to these regions remains, in fact, still technically possible, with at least one regular bus departing from central Beirut and ending its journey in the de facto capital of the Islamic State, Raqqa (Issa 2015). Even if the young couple were from a more tightly controlled regime area, their wedding still would likely have been carried out in exile. This is because — in addition to the physical violence of war — a further and interrelated formation of bureaucratic structural violence through the labour sponsorship system now acts to delimit movement across the Lebanese-Syrian border. I return to these limitations below, the point being that with warfare accelerating in Syria and the day-to-day violence of state institutions determining the flow of things, Abdullah finally decided that his wedding would have to take place in Beirut.

We’d discussed the celebration and where to hold it many times. My friend changed his mind a lot. At first, he thought a small party at home would do, with only his closest friends invited, for these were, of course, frugal times. But as more individuals expressed a desire to attend, Abdullah felt compelled to switch gear and hold a larger affair. “There’s a
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war though,” I said on the phone after he made the decision, “and most of your guests are going to be refugees and workers like you. Surely they’d understand.”

“My friends are not the problem,” he answered back, “I need to show Dala’s family that I’m not poor — that I’m a good man.”

So, finally, he settled on an adequate but rather stripped down event space near Cola — a busy transport intersection to the south of Beirut. The space, on a veranda above an arghila café, did nonetheless provide ample space for dancing and socializing.

Abdullah’s former housemates, Haytham, Adnan, and Mahmoud greeted me at the door. The three are cousins from a village not far from Abdullah’s. Shadi was also there, a friend made by Abdullah and Haytham at University, and from a larger city near the Iraqi border.

Haytham is tall, slim, and handsome with dark eyes, set against well-shaped cheek bones. He studied with Abdullah at the Lebanese University, and the two remained friends for a prolonged period. However, at the time of writing, they are no longer on speaking terms. Despite for a time both working on the same large construction project, they now awkwardly avoid eye contact when passing. The cause of this fallout is money; shortly before the wedding, Abdullah insists he loaned Haytham $100; Haytham insists otherwise. “Huwa maslahji” [he’s a self-interested person] Abdullah told me.

“Huwa kazzāb” [He’s a liar] responded Haytham when I asked him about the fight.

Haytham was once in a different economic position to the men with whom he shared an apartment in Sabra, a Palestinian camp in South Beirut. For a time, he received, rather than sent, remittances, his studies were partially paid for thanks to his father’s work in Amman. His rent in Sabra, in a two-room apartment shared with five workers, came in at just over $50 per month. With food costs kept low and minimal expenditure on luxuries, he was able to survive without much work. He’d still occasionally take employment opportunities when they presented themselves, often through his kin and friendship network. As he began nearing the end of his degree, however, his father lost his job, and he had to take up more work in construction. Having now finished his degree, he is still working there today, faced with the seeming impossibility of finding employment relevant to his qualifications.

Another resident of the apartment, Adnan, installs motorway signage. He is shorter than the other men, sports ‘designer stubble’ and reflective aviator sunglasses. Adnan is the apartment’s resident joker, a favourite of his is to shout, “Take your hand off my dick!” whenever the flat plunged into total darkness during frequent power cuts.
Mahmoud works with his uncle, Khaled, installing Gypsum board in luxury apartment construction projects. He is the jokingly self-acknowledged, “housewife” in charge of cooking and cleaning. He is an amazing chef, reproducing for the men their favourites from village cuisine with massive amounts of rice, chicken and stuffed vegetables. Everything is consumed sitting on the floor in a circle, with hands reaching into a central plate and water passed around the group from the same jug. Despite differences in age and status, there is no discernable division at the dinner table according to rank. That is aside from children who needed constantly reminding of the manners appropriate for collective eating, such as not grabbing at the food until everyone sits. These children appeared because as the uprising degenerated further into war, they had been brought by men and women to the relative safety of Beirut. Whenever we were done eating, Shadi was always spared the duty of washing dishes, for that was already his job at a Lebanese upmarket restaurant. Instead, his main duty was to assist Mahmoud and me in cooking.

After exchanging greetings with the four men, I moved upstairs to join the wedding party. Immediately I noticed that the bride’s side of the room was more heavily attended, this was likely down to the fact that nearly all of Dala’s family, aside from one uncle, had long since transported their lives and assets to Beirut. Sitting on the groom’s side, the majority of Abdullah’s guests were young university students and Syrian migrant workers. I recognized some faces from the football teams with whom we had done battle against during our regular Sunday evening matches.

The institution of what Abdullah insisted was a welcome ‘new tradition’ amongst young displaced worker-refugees in Beirut defrayed the cost of this well-attended celebration. Collectively, his closest kin and friends pooled together money to assist in the $700 venue hire, DJ, and refreshment costs. This pooling is done, of course, with the expectation that the gift will be returned when it is another’s turn to wed.

“Back in Syria,” Abdullah told me, some days after his own ceremony, “weddings might cost $5,000 just for the celebration, ceremony, and the dowry.” He stressed that some men were even prepared to drop an additional $1,000 on the engagement party alone. By contrast, Abdullah’s engagement party was a small gathering of friends in his shared apartment; he provided only soft drinks and cigarettes. He told me that the dowry by Dala’s parents totalled just $600. Abdullah confirmed, “people can’t ask for more” and, in a story that’s reportedly become common throughout Syria he said, “where would we get that money from these days?” (e.g. The Syrian Observer 2015).
It is not so much the wedding itself that is the source of Abdullah’s current predicament, but more a whole host of obligations and limitations that have mounted as the Syrian revolution, in which he once participated, has transitioned from its uprising phase into the current bloody stalemate.

After the marriage, Abdullah moved out of his former home in Sabra with the aim of establishing a place for himself and Dala. The couple found a two-bedroom apartment on the edge of Bourj el-Barajneh, the Palestinian refugee camp. Due to its affordability, this camp, as with Sabra and Shatila, has become popular with Syrian worker-refugees. The newly-weds’ rent totals $300 per month. The apartment — while conveniently located at a walking distance to some Dala’s kin — came unfurnished and unequipped. Abdullah took out an in-shop loan from a nearby store; his debt was set at $1,500 to outfit the new home. However, on top of these expenditures come the regular internet and mobile phone bills, electricity generator fees and the need to maintain $200 per month remittances for his family in Syria.

At the time of writing my friend is moving in and out of stable employment, but on average he brings home between $400–450 per month. Dala is working part time, and generating around $350 per month. However, a broken phone, a sudden demand for increased remittances to Syria, or the loss of a job all risk pushing the couple into a state of precariousness with little options open aside from turning toward Dala’s kin connections.

A few months after the wedding, in early November 2015, we all went for dinner with the young couple at a restaurant along Beirut’s coast. We all ordered chicken fajitas, a dish seemingly always popular with Syrian workers. Before our food arrived, we were smoking, drinking Pepsi and discussing what’s next for the young couple. “Any good news on a job?” I asked Abdullah, who proceeded to explain that he had been working the previous few days as a removal man, work secured by a friend from back home.

“You see,” interjected Dala, “Lebanon can’t give him a future, just work, no future, low wages, high costs.”

“Well, what should he do, take a boat?” I asked, somewhat mockingly.

“Yes,” she replied, seriously. “My cousins made it to Germany. I want him to go; there’s nothing here for Abdullah.”

“But it is illegal, so many people have died crossing,” I said, trying to discourage her.

“That doesn’t bother me, so many have died in Syria too,” Abdullah then added, “there’s lots of pressure. What can I do? Stay here for nothing, go to the village and maybe someone will kill me, or get on a boat and maybe drown?”
I was wrong to assume it was the risk to his life that was now the sole factor blocking my friend from relenting to his wife’s pressure. This was not it. Instead, what pressed on his mind most was the thought of finally reaching Europe without a passport, and being detained. Not knowing if he would be able to return to Syria, Abdullah did not want to disconnect from his friends who might remain in Beirut and thus further divorced from his imagined future back home in Deir Ezzor.

“But there’s no future here!” insisted Dala, a second time.

“What hope does he have in Europe?” I replied, “so many people are being held in camps, they can’t get past the Hungarian border. What’s going to happen to him then?”

At that moment we all looked up at the flat screen television hanging in the corner of the restaurant. Scenes were showing bloodied people running away from smoking buildings. A twin bomb blast had seconds before hit a populated market area in Bourj al-Barajneh.

Forty-three people were killed and over 200 wounded (Buchanan 2015). The bombs were just two streets down from the couple’s apartment; we were planning on travelling there together after dinner. The location of the explosion was close to Dala’s family’s homes; the couple often shops at the targeted market. Nobody connected to my friends was harmed. ISIS later claimed the attack. As we immediately began checking our mobile phones for further news, Dala’s insistence on her husband leaving Lebanon seemed now less rash than it did just moments earlier.

REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECTIVITY
Men like Abdullah suddenly found themselves part and parcel of a collective alternative political force, with bonds of solidarity that stretched out across Syria and beyond. These bonds were made visible, as aforementioned, through online social media and satellite television feeds. His story above and those below reveal the overwhelming sense of sheer excitement as to what could be. It is in these moments of excitement, collectivism, and effervescence that the barrier of fear between the people and the regime appeared to drop. The barrier of fear aside, what fell away too was many once taken-for-granted social boundaries between confessional groupings, genders, generations and tribes (cf. Haian 2014). In short, as revolutionary subjectivity emerged, various other socio-cultural boundaries were felt to have lessoned.

Revolutionary subjectivity refers here to the point at which the individual in society begins to conceptualize herself as part of a broader social force, a force intent on radically reorganizing the distribution of political and economic power in any given society. However,
the emergence, materialization and degradation of this subjectivity is not some wholly political process, and the shape, texture, and depth of broader socio-cultural impacts that follow from radical transformations cannot be grasped in isolation from everyday life.

In orthodox Marxist theory, however, revolutionary subjectivity emerges at the point at which a class transitions from acting as a class-in-itself — who share a common relationship with the means of production — to acting as a class-for-itself. When a class-for-itself politically mobilizes, it becomes, for the first time, an agent and not merely a subject of history. For Marx (1990; 2008) a transformation in the mode of production results from a dialectical interplay between the objective and subjective conditions in any given society. It is this interplay that produces ‘class consciousness.’ In this sense, arguments purporting to identify the ‘root causes of the Syrian uprising’ would do well to follow the roots themselves, that is, to begin in the earth, at the base point of socio-economic reproduction and, in so doing, reveal how certain emerging antagonisms were endured, negotiated, or eventually resisted. Seen against the physical and structural violence described throughout this thesis, the Syrian uprising and the broader politico-economic structures that lay the foundations for that uprising function like over-determining frames through which men like Abdullah came to navigate their lives. Many of Abdullah’s small everyday decisions, including his decision where to marry, or potentially to divorce, necessarily materialized against impersonal historical formations. In accounting for the journey to revolutionary commitment, this thesis stresses the need to take the emotional dimensions of the individual’s revolutionary experience seriously.

In this experience, the prominent role afforded to new technology in accelerating the collapse of the Syrian regime’s legitimacy must be balanced further against the fact there is something ‘offline’ about his transition from worker to rebel. Abdullah is just one individual from a small farming village, similar to the thousands of other farming villages across Syria. It is precisely people like Abdullah who found themselves at the bottom rung of a process that looks very much like ‘accumulation by dispossession.’

‘Accumulation by dispossession’ is a concept popularized by the geographer David Harvey (2004). Harvey -- building on Marx’s notion of ‘primitive accumulation’ -- set out to identify how the neoliberal policy core, represented by financialization, privatization, the ending of re-distributive measures, and the manipulation of crises, has resulted not in mutual prosperity but an ever increasing flow of power and wealth to an ever narrowing section of elites. These measures are at the heart of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF’s) ‘structural adjustment’ conditions that must be met in return for a loan. Syria, however, unlike
the more officially Western-orientated Arab states, has not been subjected ‘directly’ to these pressures; however, the IMF’s spectral presence and influence can still be located in the economic ministries with regards to their financial policies carried out since the mid-2000s (Matar 2012a).

These economic policies stand as a key foundation that intersects with all the various demographic, environmental and political triggers for the most recent round of Arab uprisings (Johnstone and Mazo 2011; Campante and Chor 2012; Kuhn 2012; Diwan 2013; Moore 2013; Joffé 2011; Ansani and Daniele 2012 cited in Azmeh 2014). Regardless of the considerable academic scholarship now devoted to deepening our understanding of these various catalysts, many mainstream media, and popular analysis remains fixated on the role of ‘sectarianism’ in and of itself as generative or restrictive of political transformations in South West Asia and North Africa [herein: SWANA]. This essentialist narrative has stultified much work on the Levant (Chit 2011). However, in the Syrian case, some scholars have instead described the multiple interweaving factors influencing the outbreak of this particular uprising (de Châtel 2014; Haddad 2012; Gleick 2014; Goulden 2011; de Elvira and Zintl 2014 cited in Azmeh 2014).

The political historian of Syria, Raymond Hinnebusch, for example, has focused on what he calls ‘authoritarian upgrading.’ ‘Upgrading’ here refers to the process by which the regime, through a combination of internal and external pressures, was forced to liberalize its economy and integrate itself into the world market. Throughout this integration, the regime maintained an anti-imperialist posturing, keeping in place the repressive state apparatus (Hinnebusch 2012). As outlined further in the chapters that follow, it is evident that rural Syria was particularly hard hit. What these reforms ended up doing was devastating social reproduction for rural Syrian citizens. Economic neglect and de-development turned out to be politically suicidal given that Syria’s rural hinterlands and their agricultural towns and cities constitute the historical base of the Ba’th party’s core (Batatu 2002; Francis 2011; Matar 2012b; Kila 2013; Hinnebusch 2001, 2012, 2015; Perthes 1995; 2003). 

21 It is not by coincidence that the Syria countryside formed the area in which anti-regime protests first flared, and where at a later stage jihadi organizations could secure a ready recruiting pool of young volunteers composed of poor, out-of-work men. Places like Deraa in Syria’s fertile Hauran, for example, had previously benefited greatly from state assistance in agriculture, price-capping, and investment in irrigation systems, but in recent years the fallâhîn [land workers] found life increasingly difficult (Hamade 2015).
Between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of the Syrian population directly employed in agriculture declined from more than 33 per cent to 10 per cent; yet before the uprising an estimated 46 per cent of Syrians lived in rural areas, indicating a high degree of rural unemployment and underemployment (MEICA 2013). This shock could, for some years, be warded off through the long-standing links between migration and remittance flows that many villages have maintained through work in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf. However, from the 1990s onwards, these flows began to transform, no longer a source of ‘cash injection,’ migration to urban centers became increasingly economically essential (Azmeh 2014).

These objective economic conditions are revealed in a context that gave rise, in part, to the pressures Abdullah faced in selling his labour for survival wages. These poverty was manifest in his family’s inability to rely on their land and his father’s vegetable shop back home. Together this meant that his migration, his brothers, and the migration of many described below, were part and parcel of a general trend of urbanization. The Syrian countryside was thus increasingly stripped of its capacity to provide for the reproduction of human life. The fact that the fallāḥīn, as well as rural-urban workers, were often the first to rebel against these processes of dispossession should come, consequently, as little surprise (cf. Scott 1977).

Accurately accounting for the diversity of causal factors in the emergence of the Syrian uprising is, as often the case in ongoing moments of historical upheaval, rather difficult. What this thesis attempts to do instead is to connect lives lived within an increasingly precarious socio-economic context, and to identify what mechanisms emerged to challenge this situation and thereby facilitate the uprising. My argument is that by revealing the ‘emergence, representation and degradation’ of revolutionary subjectivity it is possible to pair the objective and subjective conditions of the uprising, the objective conditions being those factors outlined above that pushed many of the men I know into labour migration to Lebanon in the first place. The subjective conditions are the political aspirations that emerged in relation to the hope and attempted to overturn these objective conditions.

However, these hopeful beginnings have, at the time of writing, become re-configured as the backdrop to the uprising’s failure and faltering. It is these falterings — the violent suppression, the articulation of imperialist politics via proxies — that have transformed the Syrian crisis into the worst humanitarian disaster since WWII. Against this, any future Syria is likely to emerge out of the war with an economy worse than sub-Saharan Africa. The obstacles to liberation have returned with a vengeance. In fact, this thesis concludes by asking to what extent the barrier of fear appears to have returned. Perhaps it is not really ‘a barrier’
after all but ‘a lockable door’? Albeit a door that once sprung open, but a door which now, through an alignment of broader geopolitical interests, seems once again to be slamming shut.

In the absence of any serious alternative organizational and ideological force outside of the Islamism-liberalism nexus, the initial moments of populist antagonism, and any hint at alternative socio-economic structures which these could have engendered were always already ripe for subversion.

FROM CONSENT TO COERCION

Before the intensification of the Syrian civil war, there existed a clear pattern of migration and return. Men undertook largely seasonal work and extended labour. There was little sign of permanent settlement and few signs of second-generation Syrian workers making good in Lebanon. This pattern is specifically the phenomenon that the political sociologist, John Chalcraft, in his book *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (2009) sets out to explain. His argument, drawing heavily on Gramsci, revolves around ‘hegemonic incorporation.’ This arrangement sees Syrian workers embedded “[…] within objectifying structures of accumulation by combinations of coercion and consent, repression, and choice” (ibid: 3). The pattern of migration and return is not entirely determined by structural factors, notably the economic decline in rural areas, nor by the sheer agency of the migrant, who seeks fortunes abroad, but by multiple forms of agency and control. For Chalcraft, the subjectivity of the migrant is not wholly determined by structure, but those structures are still reinforced through everyday decisions. The following chapters document how this convincing and nuanced interpretation has, nonetheless, seemingly started to collapse before the uprising and fully expired in its wake.

Critically, on December 31st, 2014, the General Security Directorate of Lebanon issued a decree — amended January 13th, 2015 — stipulating that the entrance and residency of Syrians in Lebanon now fall under the discretion of both the Directorate and the Ministry of Social Affairs (Shoufi 2015). This decree effectively nullified the longstanding free movement agreement that had existed between Beirut and Damascus. According to section 7 of the decision, Syrian nationals will only be permitted entrance into Lebanon if their purpose is, ‘travel, business visit, shopping, owner of real estate or tenant in Lebanon, study, transit, medical treatment or a visa application at a foreign embassy’ (ibid). Workers must obtain a permit from their employer as well as a letter of sponsorship from a Lebanese citizen. Employers must also pay a fee for every Syrian they hire. In sum, this marks the first time the kafala system has been extended to Syrian workers in Lebanon (cf. Harbi 2014).
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A real world warning regarding the Byzantine levels of bureaucracy that this new decree requires came when, just after the law was passed, Khaled, a 40-year-old Gypsum board specialist from one of Abdullah’s neighbouring villages, was denied re-entry upon his return from Syria. Khaled, whose story is detailed further in the following chapter, had hoped to re-start his family’s farm; he was fed up with working in Beirut and wanted to return to his family, regardless of the difficulties that might entail. However, upon finding it was near impossible to make this desire a reality, he was compelled to return, only to discover on the border a newly required vast array of paperwork, passports, and letters needed to secure re-entry. In total, it took two months before he was back in Beirut.

The Lebanese government’s claim that these laws are designed to ‘protect Lebanese jobs’ should be dismissed. As a point of fact, when arrangements were first announced, they were almost immediately opposed by Lebanon’s major contracting and construction companies. Their main objection was how these laws risk interrupting their ready supply of cheap Syrian labour. This labour was cheap because it was foreign — aside from Palestinians, manual labour has been largely Syrian. These were thus not ‘Lebanese jobs’ but jobs for Syrians in Lebanon (cf. Shoufi 2015, Chalcraft 2009). Syrians can more readily accept a poverty wage of $20 per day given that, as aforementioned, social reproduction was once mostly carried across the border where per-capita GNP was one-third that of Lebanon (World Bank 2015). Moreover, in Syria, subsidies kept control over food prices, and medical care and education were state funded.

The Lebanese Contractors Syndicate of Public Work and Building estimated that, in 2014, 350,000 Syrians workers were distributed amongst 3,400 companies (ibid). The value of the represented companies is over $10 billion. According to the head of the syndicate, the cost of sponsoring a Syrian worker is around $2,000 annually, whereas he estimates the average wage for a labourer is $20 a day and $30 a day for a foreperson (ibid). However, the International Labour Organization estimates the situation is even worse, with the average Syrian wage in Lebanon coming in at $287 per month for men, which is 40 percent less than the already largely notional national minimum wage of $448 per month (ILO 2014). The Lebanese minister of labour recognized that these protestations were really about multi-million dollar businesses objecting to spending what amounted to only a small degree of their profit on legalizing the status of their employees. The main benefactor of the flow of workers into Lebanon remains, then, a small cluster of the elites.

Instead of ‘protecting jobs,’ the real effect of the kafala system is more accurately framed, perhaps, as monitoring and controlling the Syrian population and decreasing the
likelihood of permanent settlement (Shoufi 2015; ILO 2013; Gardner 2014). This fact was close to being explicitly acknowledged when the Lebanese Minister for Social Affairs, Rachid Derbas, who, in response to the British Embassy’s call that the labour laws be relaxed, replied: “… Lebanon is not a warehouse for people.” However, then, in the same interview, Derbas went on to repeat the line that, “changing the law is not possible, and it may not even be appropriate considering the high rate of Lebanese unemployment” (Derbas quoted in Issa 2016). Given that companies appear unwilling to sign the ‘pledge of responsibility’ and to prepare permits for their staff, the result of the kafala system has been to transform the status of sections of the Syrian population in Lebanon into illegal workers (Shoufi 2015).

At the time of the law’s implementation, the warehousing company employing Abdullah refused to sponsor its workers. He was, nonetheless, lucky. He explained his plight to his Lebanese neighbour, and she agreed to sign the pledge of responsibility for him, but at a cost of $200. This additional expense came on top of the $200 processing fee. Rather than preventing Syrians from taking jobs from Lebanese workers, it appears the law is currently functioning to enable additional value grabs from the employee’s pocket. Many of the Syrian labourers I know, especially those who live in areas popular with workers, now report the proliferation of private offices offering to carry out labour sponsorship for Syrians but at the seemingly exorbitant fee of $600 (plus $200 processing). The costs of residence for an individual could potentially reach a minimum of $1,200. Whatever element of consent remained within this arrangement has long eroded, and it has eroded to the point that one of the few spaces left for choice might easily appear an illegal and dangerous boat to Europe. At Abdullah’s work, he told me, “boats are all the guys talk about these days.” So how exactly can Abdullah and Dala return home to Syria if their homes are now destroyed, and economic life has been disintegrated? However, how can they remain in Lebanon if their wages are barely enough to survive?24

**ACTIVISM, REFLEXIVITY, AND ETHICS**

Abdullah, as with all the men described here, would rarely talk about himself as a ‘political activist’ [nāšīṭ siyāsī]. My labelling and theorising of his, and others, dispositions and practices — as activists, rebels and workers — is fundamentally an interpretative act. And as with any application of analytic or everyday categories, the meaning one reads into these labels and their cognates should not be assumed fixed or self-evident. The connotations of the term ‘activist’ or ‘rebel’ are not immutably set in time or place. These words are, in reality, implicated in a whole manner of historically emergent structures. ‘Political activist’ for
example as the growth and transformations of the ‘public sphere’ with the concomitant rise of ‘civil society’ and then the late 60s ‘New Left.’ Nonetheless, interpretative clarity and critical reflection arguably helps avoid any uncritical adoption of these otherwise western-centric analytic categories. Moreover, the degree to which western-centric ideas _themselves_ are adopted by inhabitants in the Arab World is far more complicated, overlapping and nuanced than some binary choice of embracing/rejecting (e.g. Kraidy 2008). And also within western contexts, analytic meanings are negotiated within fluid (not static) conversations taking place in academia, the media, and grassroots political organisations themselves (Maxey 1999: 200).

But to now put my cards on the table: I also consider myself to be part of these conversations. As an anthropologist, I have, for example, debated with peers on issues ranging from secular political mobilisation in Lebanon, to the performative use of law courts by Christian legal activists (Musallam forthcoming; Melvor 2016). Moreover, as an activist in London, I have blocked roads, occupied university buildings, and disrupted public lectures given by fascists and war criminals. For at least a decade, I have spent my free time engaged in deliberations over a range of tactical and ideological matters. Without doubt, these attachments to academia and activism are foundational in producing how I came to interpret the social phenomena described in this text. But my analytic predilections are not just the outcome of dispassionate armchair theorising and western intellectual baggage, but are, as I will suggest here, equally knitted throughout more intimate moments in my own life history.

In 2007, I was awarded a place to study Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and with that I left my family home in North East England’s County Durham. The North East is, due to industrial decline under Margaret Thatcher's premiership, the country's most impoverished province. It is not surprising that the level of socio-economic disparity I encountered in the capital was, initially, rather overwhelming. I felt, in my first few months, quite out of place in this supposedly elite university.

During ‘Fresher’s Week’ I recall a moment in the undergraduate bar when I overheard two students relishing an instance of mutual status recognition. In sharp Queen’s English one voice said to the other, “Oh! You're one of _us_”. With my then rather thick Geordie accent and state-school background I knew it unlikely I would ever be _one of them_. But I soon overcame these sentiments of displacement and found a footing and belonging amongst London's activist groups. I made meaningful friendships with those committed, in talk and action, to resisting the webs of exclusion, institutionalised inequality and intersecting networks of privilege that had, in many ways, fuelled that first sense of unease I felt at the Queen's English undergraduates. Eventually, I was exposed to Palestinian solidarity campaigns and
with that developed a more internationalist orientation — my activist horizons expanded well beyond the United Kingdom.

My commitment to political anthropology is equally entangled throughout these personal experiences of class and distinction. At 18, social science provided me with a range of theories that helped make sense of the world. Terms like ‘cultural capital,’ and 'structural violence' slipped into my everyday vocabulary. One of the first monographs I was assigned to read — Paul Willis's seminal *Learning to Labour* (1977) — spoke in a revelatory manner about my educational experiences at comprehensive school.

The readiness I have to recognise in others a similar activist impulse is accordingly implicated in a personal history of education and class struggle. The anthropologist is never just a neutral recording machine. And, as stated above, one response to this is to be as clear as possible with regards to our analytic terminology. So, in this instance, I have come to deploy the word ‘activist’ — in everyday and academic conversations alike — to mean anyone who knowingly acts to challenge oppression, or to overturn the exclusionary patterns that can be found at all social levels (i.e. from personal interactions to governmental policies). 'Knowingly acts' is key, for if ‘activism’ is extended to any act that has an impact on the (re)production of social organisation, then every single human interaction could be classified as such (Maxey 1999: 201).

Despite what I hope is an embracing and broad definition, there are still some important questions outstanding with regards to certain normative values, in other words: how far do those who label something as ‘activist’ do so because they actually agree with the goals of the act or organisation?

If one were to adopt the Syrian government’s perspective, for example, then my labelling of these men as activists would be not well received; the preferred term instead being terrorist, saboteur, or foreign mercenaries.

Academic discourse has more readily dislodged and unpacked many of the normative values caught up in processes of categorisation. In this sense, cultural relativism is one of the anthropology's most well-established positions, and known contributions. But, from an activist perspective, a pure cultural relativism risks destabilising the day-to-day reality of struggle. When scholars debate, for instance, the western-centric origins of sexuality and gender categories, they stake only their egos across the seminar table. By contrast, Lebanese LGBT activists have *actual lives* on the line than when they attempt to garner Western government attention and NGO funding. And these financial flows are necessary if activists are to secure the socio-legal recognition of transwomen refugees or the normalisation of gay
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rights, and thereby protect individuals from arrest, torture and self-harm (Rae 2016. And for a flavour of the political implications of these relativist positions see Massad 2008, or Puar 2007). By contradistinction, I was once able to reach broad agreement on a Beirut conference panel that Islamic State must also be considered an ‘activist organisation’ (if not activist state). On a scholarly level — however much we might disagree with it — Islamic State’s grassroots supporters act in a way that knowingly aims to change the world. The digger driver who knocked down the border between Iraq and Syria would probably confirm as much. But it remains hard to imagine that such a consensus could be as smoothly reached amongst Lebanese anti-sectarian civil society campaigners, for whom moral values, emotional sentiments, and activist practices all overlap (Musallam forthcoming).

I nevertheless reached some additional conclusions as to why worker-rebels often disavowed the activist label. As stated, many of these men occasionally joined protests back home, some fought with the opposition, and others kept busy within digital rebel communities enacted on WhatsApp and Facebook. Of course, and as should be expected, their willingness to identify with the various aspects and organisations of the uprising waxed and waned in-line with its failures to deliver; initial glimmers of hope were sometimes dimmed by the dark reality of war. But, even in those initial moments of the civil uprising, the men rebuffed the activist label, and they did so in a comparative sense: other people were *doing activism*. Worker-rebels would typically draw my attention to their circumstances (i.e. increasingly difficulty crossing the border, or the risk of being drafted for military service if they return) and material factors (i.e. increased demand for remittances). These facts limited what they would describe as real revolutionary action.

Informants' assertions must, however, be squared against one of the fundamental methodological contributions of ethnography. Ethnography means spending years getting to know people, taking part in their lives, hanging out, and attending life stage rituals. With increasing restrictions on funding and university regulations, such long-term fieldwork is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. However, thanks to a full ESRC scholarship, this project was able to turn against the tide. I was awarded the time and resources needed to develop strong friendship relationships with the men who feature here. I will return below to the issue of closeness and companionship. As we all know from the friends with whom we spend the most time, what they say they do, and what they do, are often rather different. Ethnography means embracing and understanding this contradiction, and my research participants were no exception. Abdullah could tell me one minute he is, “not that political” and, the very same day, send me a vicious cartoon take-down of Bashar al-Assad. For this
reason, and from an interpretative point of view, their (albeit occasional) actions could fit my understandings of what activism means.

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One of anthropology's original goals is, then, to offer an explanation as to why there often appears a disjuncture between human thought and action. Yet, in this instance, how can I be sure that there even was a disjunction? Have I not created this disjunction by imposing a western-centric ideas of activism, politics and struggle?

With this question in mind, there are some more fundamental methodological and theoretical motivations that informed the above diversion into my background. These details are not a self-indulgent sideline, but a necessary contextual clarification given my intimate day-to-day involvement in rebel-worker lives. As a character, I am present throughout the text, and it is, therefore, imperative I first introduced something of myself. Now I turn to address the overlapping issues that fall between research ethics and ethnographic self-reflection in some highly politicised situations.

To begin, my commitment to ethical research practice has meant taking some necessary practical measures while conducting this project. Syrian rebel-workers live in an uncertain environment; I outlined this above in my description of Abdullah’s declining social, legal and economic status. Moreover, the men faced the very real possibility of physical violence. Lebanese citizens have carried out a number of reprisal attacks against labourers at intermittent moments of general political instability. Moreover, many of the men here endured suspicious questioning and harassment by local political party militia, internal state security, and border guards. In response to this challenging context, I first insisted that informants could withdraw from the project at any time. If they said anything ‘off the record’, then I have obeyed that wish. Second, for most of the time, my movement in the field, and the places I conducted interviews and focus groups were ‘informant-led.’ However, I could not offer total control to participants. These men had — as is the central point of this thesis — undergone a remarkable political transformation and with such change came seemingly rather masculine performances of bravado and bravery. For instance, when a series of car bombs hit Lebanon in 2013, security increased in many of the districts that my informants inhabited. Media and political discourse described these attacks as ‘Syrian spillover,’ and thus the refugee and migrant worker populations found themselves under increased scrutiny. During these particular moments, I decided it best to avoid increasing, through my presence, any
attention the men might generate from the local forces that controlled their neighbourhood. Moreover, this was always in spite of the revel-workers insisting otherwise. So, instead, I shifted the research location to the more politically neutral spaces of Hamra and the Corniche. There was an added value to this move in the sense that lingering concerns about walls with ears were alleviated; talk became a little freer.

That same bravado also threatened to impact my ethical writing practices. When I asked informants what names they would prefer to be known by all initially spurned the very idea of pseudonyms. They described them as 'fake names,' and suggest it was like hiding and even evidence of cowardice. Nonetheless, I reached the decision that it was probably best to ignore their wishes. Thus, I have changed all names and places of origin. Moreover, I made an additional step and disguised all key identifying details within ethnographic case studies and did so in such a way that hopefully maintains the essence of the narrative but prevents any identification.

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Practical research ethics are one thing, but in the development of Social Anthropology scholars have taken ethical considerations even further and driven them into the discipline's primary goal of 'understanding and representing cultures and societies.' The result of such intense self-reflection was a moment in the development of the discipline known now as, 'the reflexive turn,' or, more drastically, 'the crisis of representation'.

The reflexive turn produced a range of sophisticated arguments that are nonetheless broadly unified by the broad assertion that anthropologists inevitably enter into the field carrying conceptual baggage, unspoken analytic assumptions, models, methods and socio-cultural preconceptions, and collectively this weighs down on all informant-researcher interactions.

The impact of this auto-anthropology is to be found in a now rather formulaic but nonetheless necessary run of responses located, usually, within a monograph’s introductory chapters. First, the author acknowledges that a neutral empirical account of human reality is impossible and that the writer's analytic mind is always already conditioned by epistemological-political forces (Whitaker 2010: 596). Given this, the writer should, at a minimum, further acknowledge whatever personal investments they may have on the subject. For myself, this meant pointing out, as above, my personal and political life as an activist, and how this life drew me toward the struggle of opposition-aligned Syrian workers, and further, perhaps led me to read into their actions a particular activist impulse.
Second, the anthropologist acknowledges that the discipline was established during a period of Western colonialism and that therefore any desire we may have to ‘understand human diversity’ is not as innocent as it might sound. This demands we exercise constant vigilance toward the unspoken conceptual assumption that often have rather dubious histories (ibid; Salmond 1995; McGrane 1989; Ingold 1994). A re-reading of anthropology’s past, and how current research practices are implicated in this history, has advanced an even more radically reflexive turn within the discipline. Post-colonial writers accuse anthropologists of producing invented exotica, positioning the concept of culture in such a way that it represents a form of textual colonialism. The author distances herself socially, ontologically, and morally from 'other people in the world' and thus erases the political webs of colonial exploitation, imperialism and dispossession that led to the fieldworker-informant interaction in the first place (Fabian 1983; Ardener 1985). These positions were much inspired by Edward Said's ground-breaking Orientalism (1978) and thus this critical disciplinary self-reflection even led to the assertion that ethnography does not examine other societies but creates them (Abu-Lughod 1991).

These matters reached a peak in the mid-1980s through a moment widely referred to as the 'The Writing Culture Debate.' This debate was generated off the back of two significant publications. First, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography and Cultural Critique (Marcus and Clifford 1986) and second, Anthropology as Culture Critique: An Experimental Moment in Human Sciences (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Together these texts reiterated that any attempt to describe a universal 'human nature' or 'cultural essence' was an unsavoury western-centric invention. Moreover, all writing is rhetoric and claims anthropologists make to 'speak about' those who they research often tell us more about the nature of professional academic writing and the textual nods and winks that help constitute truth claims. Finally, in-line with post-modernism, any hint of a grand narrative of progress needs be radically re-examined, and not assumed as given.

It seems, then, that field encounter has produced a catch-22 situation for anthropologists: without coeval conversations we might not have so expressively learned the discipline's prejudices and the Writing Culture debate would not have happened. But because of deep running epistemological cultural baggage, we cannot truly know the real nature of our encounters and the meaning of our conversations (Rapport 2014: 100). But, to strike a slightly more moderate tone: what often appears rather downplayed in these more extreme examples of self-reflexive ethnography is the possibility that the anthropologist might actually learn something in the field. Indeed, could one not argue that it is precisely because
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of these intimate contacts with flesh and blood humans that, within the academy, anthropologists have been highly receptive to critical self-reflection, anti-imperialist thought and post-structural analysis?

Far from abandoning anthropology altogether, a critical yet not paralysing reading of the discipline's history is possible. In British Social Anthropology, a collection edited by Talal Assad — *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) — generated a significant early moment of self-reflection that culminated in work by scholars that moved to blur the hitherto rigid distinction that existed between ‘objective monograph’ and ‘field memoir’ (Whitaker 2010; Rabinow 1977; Dwyer 1982; Crapanzano 2013). The author became present in the text. With clarity, these scholars acknowledged the degree to which racial, national, political or professional status impacts on the researcher's day-to-day life of gathering and interpreting data. The often awkward moments, false starts, and misunderstandings of the field encounter were now part of the academic text itself. And it is this approach that I have followed in writing this monograph. Indeed, participant-observation means, for me at least, the act of becoming a friend to research informants. This is, as all humans know, not some wholly streamlined process. Of course, there are moments of failure, miscommunication and simply just not getting along with someone. I fell out with people, made alliances, and also broke them. But I do not shy away from referring to a number of the men in this text as friends. I think that one would have to be a rather strange aloof figure to maintain a lab-like relationships after years of day-to-day contact. Yet, no friendship is without its frustrations. I am also cognizant of the men’s flaws and my own, and how, for example, their desires and values emerged within a chain of mostly unchallenged patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions (taken up more directly in chapter five).

To now conclude with one final reflection: this project has led me to realise that perhaps, in the last instance, I am more of an activist than auto-anthropologist. I worry that wholly abandoning the possibility for generalisation and comparison will tilt scholars (back) toward a radical cultural relativism, with all the argumentative circularity as well as dangerous political implications such a move can imply. Most significant is that radical relativism destabilizes the very foundation on which activist attitudes and practices build. Radical de-construction and cultural relativism might make for interesting conversations in the university common room, but these debates matter little to those fighting for the basic rights of dignity, equality and justice. In other words, to return to the aforementioned example of Lebanese LGBT activists: a culturally specific closet is still a closet.
THE FIELD

I began the pre-fieldwork ‘Masters of Research’ (MRes) component of this PhD at the London School of Economics in early September 2010. At that time, my plan was to conduct a ‘mobile ethnography’ with a group of men who were planning on absconding from compulsory military service in Syria. The idea was to trace their lives from Damascus and beyond. But then — four months into the programme — the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions ignited. Two months after that, the first protests were taking place on the streets of Damascus and Deraa. It seemed that as I was writing my proposal it was gradually transforming into a work of fiction. It was with some hope of rescuing, at minimum, the principal theoretical themes that I travelled to Beirut in mid-September the following year.

First, I began nine months of intensive spoken Arabic training. Throughout this period the situation in Syria was worsening. It soon became impossible for British passport-holders to acquire a Syrian research permits and remain long-term across the border legally. In July 2011, the FSA was founded. Composed of military defectors, it eventually came to enjoy financial backing from a variety of Western-aligned states (see Landis 2011; Deyoung and Sly 2012; Shipman 2012). With this, the stage was set for the further transformation of the Syrian uprising into a simultaneously civil and proxy war.

Five months into my Arabic programme, I decided to begin searching for an alternative project. Many of the young men who worked ‘low-skilled jobs’ in Beirut were avoiding military service, especially given that now service could entail being drafted in to fight against one’s friends and family. At first I naively emailed several building firms in Beirut, explaining my project and inquiring if they’d be interested in letting an ethnographer work on their construction sites. Unsurprisingly, I received no replies.

Given the severe limitations of my initial project and the reality of the uprising taking place across the border, I decided to switch the overall focus of this research project to revolutionary transformation. The necessity of making this switch came to me when, during the initial months of wandering around, Beirut I chanced upon the aforementioned construction site inhabited by Bilal and Mohammed. Without official permission, I initially went to construction sites under cover of darkness when most of the contractors and bosses had gone home, and the few workers who lived on site remained.

Before I’d completed my language training, a student from the Lebanese American University agreed to assist me with translation when I got stuck. To both of us, the depth of Bilal and Mohammed’s political transformation was evident from the moment we first set foot on the site. In these first ten months of fieldwork I made regular evening visits to this
construction site until, eventually, it was temporarily shut down and the workers were moved to a project outside of the city. A security guard was installed and when I tried to go back he angrily told me that the bosses knew some guy was visiting at night and I was banned.

It wasn’t long before I received word that both Mohammed and Bilal had returned to Syria. Thankfully, before they left Mohammed had introduced me to another of his friends from Damascus University. He too had planned only to work in Beirut for the summer. Before he also eventually returned to Syria, this friend, in turn, introduced me to another guy who happened to come from the village next to his: Abdullah.

It turned out that Abdullah and I were neighbours, both living in Hamra. Although his dialect was closer to Iraqi than the spoken Arabic I’d been studying in Beirut, he’d been in the city long enough to make the switch to Lebanese. Between my Arabic and his intermediate English, we were able to proceed with the research. With the permission of the men I would use an iPad to record particularly interesting discussions. While the use of a recording device might be thought to trigger alarm bells concerning secret police and sensitive information, it was in fact largely welcomed and often the guys would grab at it when making their most important points. This data was not kept permanently on the iPad given a risk it might be accessed without permission. I assured participants I would do my utmost to keep these recordings protected.

When Abdullah was not at work, we would spend his free time together. A project that began with an initial ‘fixed’ ethnographic site transformed into the mobile site of his network. With that, I came to participate in football matches; long walks along the seafront; afternoons spent smoking arghila in popular cafés; cooking dinners together; drawn out political discussions; shopping trips to the market and a whole host of other situations. In total, I conducted 24 months of participant-observation in my first initial fieldwork stint. After a time back in London, March 2014-2015, I returned to Lebanon and took a visiting research position at the American University of Beirut. During this period, I wrote up the Ph.D. while continuing to meet with my rebel-worker network from March 2015 – 2016. (The timeline highlights the overlaps between the fieldwork and major events in Lebanon and Syria).

In addition to participant-observation, I carried out structured and semi-structured interviews with the men inside Abdullah’s extended network. These interviews contained questions about life and work in Lebanon and Syria, the agricultural economy and memories of the uprising.

To a significant degree, the chapters that follow are built around recurrent discussions I held with a small group of rebel-workers over a three-year period. To make sense of these
conversations, with their recurrent patterns and notable features, I draw on a range of anthropological and sociological theories. Through ethnography and theory, I reveal the connections that exist between the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity and broader economic, cultural, political, and social structures that framed these men’s lives. It was thanks to these structures that rebel-workers were destined to experience an uprising at the margins, from a distance, occasionally directly participating, but for the most part removed. By spending time simply ‘hanging out’ with these men, firm trust and friendships were established, and rich qualitative data followed.

I carried out repeat conversations and interviews as we witnessed the situation in Syria transform into a civil and proxy war. But — as is often the case for anthropologist — this intensive qualitative focus meant forgoing the ‘representativeness’ afforded by quantitative data. Given limitations of time and resources, as well as the subject matter at hand, questionnaire work would have unlikely captured the contradictions, depths, and textures of revolutionary transformation. Regardless, to reach some general sense of the situation, I still carried out some limited population surveys and household income questionnaires. It turned out, however, that these surveys were more useful in creating for the men a proper initial impression of ‘a researcher,’ with clipboard and pen, than in the actual data they generated. Moreover, as the crisis mounted, a draft of well-equipped NGOs and international organizations began conducting more statistically valid surveys into agricultural collapse, average wages, housing conditions and the like (e.g. ILO 2014).

This thesis is, in the end, mostly about men in Lebanon talking about Syria. True, my data was collected in Beirut; practically what this meant was tracing a network through the city rather than remaining stationary in any one locale. However, this is less an ethnography of Syrian labour in Beirut and more an ethnography of the views, experiences, and lives of men who, for various reasons, found themselves observing and participating in the Syrian uprising at a distance. Given this, when I use secondary data and historical reconstruction this is to allow for elaboration on political conversation, thereby framing these conversations within the broader collapse of whatever populist legitimacy the Syrian regime might have once enjoyed. Perhaps, then, the real field site is the men’s political theories, their opinions concerning unfolding events, and means of knowing and not knowing from the margins.

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When some the ideas and the research questions outlined were being developed, I was still regularly visiting Bilal and Mohammed at their central Beirut construction site. I recall a
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moment when the three of us were drinking sweet black tea, and the boys were evidently exhausted from a hard day's work. The television was tuned into the news displaying scenes from the uprising.

During a lull in the conversation, I began explaining some of the ideas I had had about revolution, distance, and migration. I told them what I wanted to describe was how it felt to be experiencing the uprising from Lebanon and though to still occasionally make returns home and discover things were different, but to still feel suddenly empowered.

“So, what do you think I should call such a thesis?” I asked.

“The Living Dead,” replied Bilal.

THE LIVING DEAD

Bilal's suggestion that this thesis takes the title, ‘The Living Dead' was likely informed by the hours he had spent watching Hollywood cinema. His interest in the genre was not surprising given that, since 2011, the entertainment industry has produced a wide array of zombie films (i.e. World War Z) as well as television shows (i.e. The Walking Dead). In fact, many images that have since emerged from war-torn Syria would not have looked out of place in a dystopian movie.

In line with this, what exactly does Bilal’s self-identification with ‘the zombie’ say about Syrian rebel-worker life at a time of far-reaching political transformation? Alternatively, what might it say about the nature of the Syrian or Arab uprisings more generally?

To begin, the zombie is a creature both ‘here and not here’, whatever manner of life or ‘agency’ it possesses is directed solely toward sustenance through the consumption of human flesh (McIntosh 2008). When isolated, the zombie threat is limited, but a horde can eviscerate humanity. It is little wonder that film scholars have read swarms of the living dead as a Hollywood cypher for the lumpenproletariat, i.e. the disorganised working class, or even as a comment on the internal threat of populist political uprising (Boluk 2013). The symbolic framing of the zombie plague as a ‘populist movement' was taken a step further in 2011. This year witnessed both the ‘Occupy movement' and the beginnings of the Arab uprisings. In the United Kingdom, protesters reclaimed the zombie, dressing as the living dead they held aloft placards that announced, "We have come to eat the Conservative party", and likewise in New York City, activists stumbled through the city costumed as undead city workers (Schneider 2011).

It is noteworthy that in academic and media discourse, the Arab uprisings were regularly described in terms that highlighted their viral quality as they spread rapidly across
SWANA. This outbreak followed the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, who, like the patient zero in zombie sagas, is conceptualised as the uprisings' initial ‘point of origin' (e.g. Clemons 2011). The apparent connections between these movements were also brought out by organisers, some of whom rebranded Paternoster Square, the site for occupying London, as Tahrir Square, the site of the Egyptian uprising (Huffington Post 2011). In short, the wave of global and leaderless populist political unrest, and the acceleration in zombie media is, perhaps, no pure coincidence.

The structure of this thesis responds to Bilal's idea of the ‘living dead' in so far each as each part -- composed of two chapters -- is built around a particular stage within a narrative arch familiar to fans of undead fiction.

Part I, ‘Awakenings', sets the scene before, and immediately after, the uprising’s initial phases (2011 – 2012). Chapter one thus steps back from the unrest to inspect the level of socio-economic stability that preceded it. Was there — as with clichéd zombie cinema — a moment of calm before the storm?

To answer this, an introductory historical chapter looks at the extent to which rural and working class Syrians ever were folded into the regime's project. When and how successfully did the Ba'th party harness the state as a redistributive/repressive apparatus? Did this produce genuine support, and thereby see off any previous possibilities for popular insurrection?

This historical analysis nonetheless begins with an ethnographic moment in which Mohammed and Bilal exchanged a moment of humorous cynicism regarding the official slogans of Ba'ath Party ideology: "waḥda, ḥurrīya, isḥtirākīyya" [Unity, Freedom, Socialism]. Analysis moves between ethnography and history to reveal the base on which their sarcasm stands. But was the Syrian state ever really able to win the support of men like Mohammed and Bilal? And would these goals have always generated cynicism?

I argue that while the ideological mechanisms of the state, its personality cult, and the like, might not have universally convinced, the state's redistributive mechanism did once facilitate some support, for some time, amongst Syria's rural and working populations. Perhaps Bilal's cynicism was not directed at the slogans themselves but rather at the idea the regime could make these goals a material reality in the present?

The living dead finds its antithesis in the vampire (Dendle 2000: 10). Victims of the living dead turn rapidly into members of the Horde — zombies are a contagion. The vampire, by contrast, is selective, traditionally living disconnected from humanity and often in luxury. Dracula, a European aristocrat, was discerning in whom he wished to transform; humans were, for the most part, merely his prey. This model of the vampire stands for the wealthy and
powerful, ‘the blood sucking elite.’ In point of fact, when not being insulted as a donkey, Bashar al-Assad was himself regularly represented by opposition-aligned individuals as a vampire [see: fig 2.7]. To be described as a vampire is to be portrayed as evil but not ‘all powerful,’ the vampire's chief weakness being a simple wooden stake, an item used by peasants to build fences (Graeber 2015a: 47). By contrast, Zombie cinema often starts shortly after the apocalypse, the zombie threat cannot be stopped, only contained or ‘vaccinated against’. The undead horde appears infinitely stronger than the loner vampire. In this sense, the second part of the first section, chapter two, is about ‘outbreak.’

Chapter two describes key informants’ memories during the early stages of the Syrian uprising. Building on models of hegemony, populism and revolutionary subjectivity developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; 1990; 2005a; 2005b), I interpret these narratives as ‘awakenings.’ Awakenings point toward a general intensification of a ‘discursive frontier’ in Syrian society between two socially recognised camps: ‘al-sha’b wa al-nizām’ [the people and the regime]. This process of ‘bifurcation and consolidation’ was repeated not just during the Syrian uprising, but was, arguably, a feature of all recent Arab uprisings and beyond. Chapter two thus moves from an origin story to the ‘event’. In the horror movie cliché, this is the initial ‘undead outbreak' with all the panic, excitement, and terror that implies. But the central question here is how far can the awakening of ‘revolutionary subjectivities' be read alongside the demands and grievances individuals increasingly directed toward an unresponsive state?

For the political philosopher, Ernesto Laclau (2005), the principal means by which the state can contain, or ‘vaccinate itself against,’ radical populist outbreaks is by responding differentially to citizen demands. But when the state fails to respond adequately, demands can easily ‘knot together' into an antagonistic populist political discourse. Rebel-workers would explain to me, for example, how ‘the state of emergency' was cancelled, but then only replaced with equivalent ‘laws to fight terrorism.’ Other popular demands included the call for the ‘cancellation or reform of military service,’ the ‘end of corruption;' ‘greater democracy, freedom and justice;' ‘the creation of employment opportunities for university graduates,’ and ‘the ceasing of authoritarian terror practices within the security service.' Few of these demands were new; rather, what appeared new was the equiva lisation of chains of demands through the arrival of empty-signifiers like, ‘freedom,' ‘democracy' and ‘human rights'. As the populist political movement expanded and later unravelled, rebel-workers found themselves separated from the very thing that makes ‘the living dead' overwhelming: the horde.
The horde of zombies is a force to be reckoned with. But there is also in many local belief systems a figure that one could call a, ‘controlled zombie.’ Anthropologists have rarely highlighted this zombie's power but instead drawn attention to its power but weakness and exploitability. For example, in post-Apartheid South Africa, the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2003) have drawn connections between reports of zombie phenomena in an impoverished black community and the rolling out of neoliberal economic policy. Neoliberalism cheapened migrant labour, eroded traditional manufacturing and led to sudden explosions of wealth via financial speculation. Here actual zombies were reported to be working in the middle of the night, and thereby they acted as the real generators of the elite's new found fortunes. The Comaroffs posit that this condition is allegorical to the status of migrant workers. Zombies were silenced, tongues removed and were unable to articulate their oppression. Zombies, like migrants, are forced to accept the lowest regarded forms of labour in an economy driven increasingly by capital and the service sector.

Reading ‘the living dead’ as a comment on ‘the foreign’ has precedents in the sociological analysis of zombie cinema (Paffenroff 2011). In this frame, Bilal's identification with the living dead is also telling. As the crisis in Syria worsened, the political border between Syria and Lebanon has become less negotiable and so too have the socio-economic conditions that determined the necessity of remittance flow for those back home. However, as we shall see, this does not mean that the men were only disempowered, or felt unable to participate whatsoever in the political transformations occurring at home. Indeed, as we shall see in coming chapters, rebel-workers were not ‘silenced’ like the zombies discussed by the Comaroffs (2002). Rather, what Bilal’s metaphor seemed to capture was the complexity of experiencing a revolution at the margins, in a country, historically and linguistically tied to his native Syria and only hours away by car. In such a context he could feel ‘alive’ with the populist revolutionary subjectivity that had spread across SWANA but nonetheless limited by his location in Lebanon, meaning Bilal remained disconnected from the front, and constrained by other pressing cultural, economic and political factors.

The next section, Part II, assess the various avenues through which a political ‘awakening' was experienced and maintained at a distance, in other words, how exactly did the ‘the living dead' phenomena spread?

Chapter three shows the importance of smartphones for generating and constituting rebel identities, even at a distance. The key question here is how do processes of the ‘populist outbreak’ relate to the art objects Syrian rebel-workers shared across smartphone networks?

In a rebel-diaspora, communities formed through online digital networks seemed to
facilitate participation, from a distance, in events as they unfolded in Syria. At stake was not simply 'representation' of the uprisings, but a mediated participation and virtual involvement. But what exactly are the social mechanisms that enabled these images to articulate political consciousness, constitute oppositional identity, and encourage protest?

In one sense, smartphone technology has, indeed, accelerated a moment of space-time compression. Images, videos, news reports circulated more rapidly than ever, helping individuals mobilize, constitute identities, and build a sense of community. This technology has also accelerated and facilitated access to contentious political objects. However, is the facilitation of access enough to overcome other urban/rural and socio-economic divisions? Moreover, are these digital spaces isolated from real world visitors? If mobile phones gained much unwanted attention, does this then necessarily mean that they are doing some serious political work?

Chapter four brings an even more literal understanding of ‘living death’ by turning to the varied formations of martyrdom commemoration undertaken by worker-rebels in Beirut. How far did these practices constitute a primary techniques through which a revolutionary diaspora was able to participate in contentious politics at home and abroad?

I give close attention to the images, videos and narratives these men discussed, created and shared to reveal how speech acts and art objects fixed fluid memories, tales of struggle and acts of resistance. These materials and practices of commemoration are not isolated from previously described political and economic shifts; namely, the ‘falling away’ of Ba’th party legitimacy and the reactionary mobilisation of the state’s repressive apparatus. It is in the context of an emerging ‘revolutionary cause' that I ask, to what extent do contemporary Syrian rebel-worker commemoration practices point toward a recognition of ‘martyrdom' that generates ideas of both intentional heroism and transformative suffering?

The final part — chapters five and six — examines the ‘containment of the living dead', the outbreak's limitations, and its apparent incapacity to overturn other forms of social organisation and oppressive formations. To demonstrate these limitations, chapter five moves from the revolution to everyday life to identity and document how Syrian rebel-workers consume and talk about themselves in relation to seemingly contradictory attitudes and patterns of behaviour in the city. I suggest that these beliefs and patterns are embedded within a patriarchal consumerism that remained largely unchallenged. Thus, this chapter asks, primarily, what has the collapse of Syria meant for men and their sense of masculinity?

Beirut was once imagined as only a temporary home, but rebel-workers increasingly have to confront the possibility they would be resident for an unknown duration. How are
these uncertainties navigated? Do the consumption desires these young men direct toward certain objects exist at a distance from their other political desires? Weaving analysis through my informants' performances of masculinity, I ask what role these objects were playing in processes of self-construction and other recognition.

Chapter six moves to the emergence of alternative political narratives — what might be labelled ‘conspiracy theories.’ These theories contain ideas that appeared limiting in comparison to the universalism of political ideals expressed in chapter two. I question here how exactly conspiracy worked to maintain the previously discussed split between ‘the people and the regime' and at what cost it did do so. In identifying these alternative narratives, the final chapter documents divisions and linkages between ‘micro and macro conspiracy.’ The former is composed of little theories about secret collusion for material interests, whereas the latter endeavours to find large patterns between these smaller plots and to identify some common unifying factor of plotter identity. How far is it the case that a move between these two levels of analysis represents an ideological step toward (mis)recognition? In other words, do arguments about an all-powerful Alawi-Shia conspiracy not risk reproducing sectarian logics that obscure other, more pressing realities?

This thesis concludes by asking what exactly the Syrian uprising can teach us about the cyclical nature of revolution? I point to the fact that the process of emergence, materialisation, and degradation of revolutionary subjectivity may well have accompanied the opening and closing of the barrier of fear, but no future Syrian state looks set to reverse the damaging neo-liberal socio-economic trends of the past twenty years. In ‘zombie apocalypse' cinema, much of the drama that follows concerns ‘survival' and ‘rebuilding' after the collapse of civilisation. What, then, is to be re-built in Syria? Will there be a resurrection from living death?

1 The Lebanese University is the country’s only public university. Syrians who enroll pay significantly lower fees than at the American University of Beirut (AUB) or the Lebanese American University of Beirut (LAU). At the faculty of Social Science, the enrollment fee is $700. While education would be cheaper still in the state-funded Damascus University, even before the uprising, men made the decision to study in Lebanon instead. This was because they saw a chance for 1) a better education and 2) the possibility of working alongside their study and generating savings that could then be re-invested in housing, marriages, business and the like back in Syria.

2 The words used to describe events in Syria require careful elaboration. This elaboration develops throughout the text, but for now let me note that terms like, ‘revolution,’ ‘uprising,’ ‘civil war,’ and ‘proxy war’ all contain partisan webs of association dividing those who align themselves with the regime or with the opposition.
Analytically, I follow Thomassen’s (2012) definition of political revolution as that which not only involves the overthrow of the regime but entails a popular movement of mass participation. Without mass participation, a drastic political changes is less a revolution and more a coup d’etat. On an analytic level, given the high degree of splintering witnessed within the Syrian opposition, it seems accurate to refer to the first stages, from 2011-2012 as an ‘uprising’ before then transitioning into a simultaneously civil and proxy war. Civil because the conflict— despite the high presence of foreign forces — involved Syrians fighting Syrians but proxy given that this fighting is now sustained by a high degree of imperialist and geopolitical interests.

Ethnographically the men in this thesis — who were are all aligned with the opposition — understood the protests, armed uprising and (elements) of the war to be still part of a broader revolutionary process. The term they used was always thawra [revolution] and never intifada [uprising]. With the growth of internal opposition fighting, the entrance of the Islamic State and the complete degradation of social and economic life the term, ḥarb ahliya [civil war] increased slightly in usage but it was still not dominant in comparison to thawra.

For clarity’s sake, when writing in a more analytic frame, I use the words ‘uprising’, ‘civil war’ and ‘proxy war’ but when discussing the actions and ideas of informants I will their term: ‘revolution’.

4 The initial importance of Deraa is detailed further in chapter four

5 As a concept ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ is closely related to the Marxist notion of ‘class consciousness’, but differs in the sense that it describes more general revolutionary dispositions rather than merely ‘class awareness’, and acting in a ‘class interests’. Moreover, otherwise materially opposed groupings might share in these similar revolutionary dispositions (i.e. ‘solidarity’) therefore ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ can spread through the traditional proletariat but can also be found amongst the fallāhin [land workers], rural-urban migrants, students and intellectuals. Partially the aim of this thesis in its entirety is to foster a better understanding of these processes, so an initial theoretical definition might well have been resisted, nonetheless further discussion can be found on p. 25.

8 WhatsApp messenger became increasingly popular in Lebanon only after the more widespread take-up of the 3G network in 2012. The cost of sending an SMS and calling is prohibitively expensive. With WhatsApp one can send unlimited messaging and recorded audio clips provided one has a mobile device with either 1) wifi or 2) mobile internet.

9 The full story of his initial participation in the uprising is elaborated later chapter two.

10 A more substantive discussion of activist, media and community is to be found in chapter three (p. 127)
March 14th is a coalition of parties composed mostly of the Sunni supported ‘tayyār al-mustaqbal’ as well as the Maronite Christian, al-quwwāt al-lubnāniyya’ and ‘al-Katā‘ib al-lubnāniyya.’ They organized demonstrations against the Syrian regime, are pro-Syrian and are accused by their opponents of being proxies funded by Saudi Arabia and guided by the United States.

March 14th is a political party typically explained to me by rebel-workers as being popular amongst Lebanon’s Shia community as well as a party known for its support of the Syrian regime (see Norton 1987).

The political division in Lebanese politics has been divided between, “March 14th” and “March 8th” since 2005. Their dates refer to when parties within the alliances called for mass demonstrations in downtown Beirut in reaction to the assassination of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri. March 8th called for a demonstration in support of the Syrian regime, thanking the regime for its participation in ending the civil war and supporting resistance movements to the Israeli occupation. The most significant membership has come from Maronite Christian-supported al-Tayyār al-Watani al-Hurr (Free Patriotic Movement) as well as Shia-supported Hezbollah and Harakat Amal. March 8th is therefore largely pro-Syrian regime. March 8th are accused by their opponents of being proxies of the Iranian and Syrian regimes.

The southern suburbs of Beirut and an area physically controlled by and understood to support Amal, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. This area also has a large stock of affordable housing and is therefore popular amongst Beirut’s worker population, especially in the areas in, and directly surrounding the Palestinian camps.

These questions are central to chapters three and four.

This initial field site is described in chapter one and two, and more generally later in this introductions section on ‘The Field’ (p.38).

On the 23rd of January 2012 Nuṣrah declared its formation with a video posted online. The group claimed responsibility for many of the suicide bombing operations during the early phases of the uprising as well as a number of strategic guerrilla attacks. Western governments including the United States and the United Kingdom have blacklisted Nuṣrah as a terrorist organization due to its links with al-Qā idah. In areas under that fell under its control, such as districts in Aleppo, it seized bakeries and controls the distribution of food. It has also seen the implementation Shari’a courts. During the uprising’s opening stages the Free Syrian Army lost a good number of recruits to Nuṣrah due to its reputation as a highly disciplined, well financed and powerful fighting force (Casey-Maslen 2013)

The White Helmets are a non-combat neutral organization funded by donations. They’re predominant in rebel held areas where their role is search and rescue, pulling survivors from bombed buildings and applying immediate medical aid.

These questions are central to chapter four.
INTRODUCTION

20 The organization was formally known as ‘ISIS,’ ‘The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’, or — ad-Dawla al-'Islāmiyyah fi Iraq wa ash-sham. This old name remains the source of the organizations acronym in Arabic – ‘Da'ish’ which continues to find in popular usage, though mostly amongst those who object to its existence. Indeed, Islamic State discourage its usage, and have reportedly carried out corporal punishment against those found uttering it. Nonetheless, it is the term the individuals discussed in this thesis use, and it will be deployed interchangeably with ‘Islamic State’, which also is often used clipped in the Arabic to ‘Dawla’ [State]

21 The falling away of this delicate alliance between Syria’s rural and urban centers is the subject of chapter one and two.

22 The term fallāhīn [singular: fāllah] is often directly translated to the English, ‘peasant’. This is, however, not quite accurate given that a ‘peasant’ generally implies that the worker does not own the land. In the Middle East, by contrast, sometimes the term is used for landless land workers but it can also be applied to those who simultaneously own and work the land. For this reason, the more generic term ‘land worker’ is perhaps a more appropriate translation (Abufarha 2009: 29).

23 Having said that, Syria might, in fact, not hold on to this title for long if Saudi Arabia and their coalition partners are allowed to continue bombing the already devastatingly impoverished Yemen with impunity (Mundy 2015; Khoudous 2015).

24 These questions of changing socio-economic structures are the focus of chapters one and two.

25 These first encounters are detailed further in the chapter one.

26 A history and ethnography of Syrian Labour has been explicitly analysed and covered at length by John Chalcraft in his aforementioned book Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon (2009). Given my own limitations of access to these men's workplaces as well as the fact most of my time with research participants was taken up with discussion of the Syrian uprising, focus naturally fell less on Lebanon and more on revolution in Syria-from Lebanon.

27 Bilal — along with Mohammed — would also occasionally visit a nearby internet café, to play sometimes a modified version of the computer game, ‘Counter-Strike,’ wherein an elite squat team battles not the standard version’s ‘terrorists,’ but instead hordes of the living dead.

28 While not featuring zombies, the bombed out cities in the second instalment of the dystopian trilogy, ‘The Hunger Games’ have been noted widely for their quite blatant associations with the Syrian conflict (e.g. Blodgett 2013).

29 This metaphorical representation of the Syrian opposition as ‘zombies' took a startling literal turn in May 2013 when social and mainstream media circulated a video that appeared to show a Syrian rebel commander eating the heart and liver of a fallen regime fighter (Abdelaziz 2013).

30 The symbolic work that zombie cinema has performed is not static. Beyond a more or less direct allegory to the ‘class struggle', scholars have also suggested it can stand as a commentary on racism, consumerism and the feminist struggle (e.g. Boluk 2013).

31 Before April 2011, the ‘Emergency Law' had been in place for 48 years and extended the authority of the state into all aspects of citizens lives; it gave the security forces a free pass to arrest citizens without charge (Alvarez-Ossorio 2012)
PART I

AWAKENING
CHAPTER ONE

Unity, Liberty, and Socialism

[The capitalist mode of production] has proved to be the most destructive among all the modes of production that have existed so far in human evolution. Continuing through the plunder, uprooting, enslavement and outright murder of peoples perpetrated at an unprecedented scale across the globe, right at its ‘rosy dawn’, capitalist transformation of the production process with the whole globe as its theatre, has, above all, meant the martyrdom of the producers; and the technology and the combination of the social process of production developed by it has meant the simultaneous exhaustion of the twin sources from which springs all wealth: the earth and the labourer.

Paresh Chattopadhyay (2002: 1841)

INTRODUCTION

In the corner of Mohammed and Bilal’s breezefield shack, a salvaged television began to splutter, “clashes broke out today in the Damascus countryside” [Indal’at ishtibākāt fī rīfī dimashq al-yawm].

The youths — both at the time 20 years old — are cousins and school friends from the countryside of a small town, just outside of Idlib in North Eastern Syria. Mohammed is the taller of the two, painfully skinny with a big nose and dark eyes; his hair is short with small black curls. Bilal is short but more handsome; his features are balanced and his hair always neatly styled. Bilal’s demeanour is that of a troublemaker, whereas Mohammed has a quieter more scholarly disposition.

The news broadcast continued, it announced the latest round of skirmishes to break in the summer of 2012; images of clashes beamed in and detailed information followed concerning the various militia organisations involved. Momentarily the boys both glanced over at the screen, but then their eyes fell back down to our game of poker. Bilal, seemingly more engrossed in his hand, began musing aloud on the role Jabhat al-Nusra were playing during this early stage of the Syrian uprising.

I had met Mohammed and Bilal a few months earlier. In my first months of fieldwork, I took to wandering Beirut, familiarising myself with the city’s streets, trying my best to locate an adequate site around which I could embed myself further into a network of opposition-aligned Syrian workers and rebels.
On one such excursion, it was edging toward 6 pm as I made my way home. I took a slightly different route and noticed two young men lounging on a shabby leather couch placed at the entrance of an early stage construction site. Their seat gazed out across one of Beirut’s few public gardens. It was a good spot. Mohammed had his legs propped up on a broken swivel chair, and Bilal was sitting upright, smoking and drinking black tea. Sensing the opportunity to carry out another of my ‘basic population surveys,’ I walked over and introduced myself, asking permission to subject them to a few questions about Syrian migrant workers in West Beirut. They said yes and we began a rather stunted back-and-forth with my asking, “what’s your income?”; “how much do you send back?” “are your siblings here too?” and the like.

“Fa, shu?” [So, what?] interrupted a now bored looking Mohammed, “aren’t you going to ask for my opinion on the revolution?”

I laughed and explained my concerns over raising suspicions.

“Oh, fine, but these questions are dull!” he replied.

I tried to insist they were rather important but by this time Bilal had already jumped up and was gesturing for us to go inside while he refilled the teapot.

From the roadside entrance, Mohammed and Bilal’s home is obscured from view: it is hidden off behind large construction machinery, mounds of scaffolding, rusting iron rods and heaps of excavated earth. To reach their building, the boys first cross a wooden beam bridging a deep foundation trench. It wobbles with each step. Bilal enjoyed teasing me and, because of this, he’d occasionally sprint across full pelt, throwing in the odd jumps just to turn my stomach. Once at the other side and still breathing the shack moves into view. On its roof sits a grey tank resting on sheeted tin and stilts, making cold water available for the improvised outdoor shower. From this ‘bathroom’ comes a persistent drip, the shower is just a repurposed hose with water slowly dropping onto exposed orange earth. It leaves behind a brightly coloured muddy residue. Dirt was everywhere.

The building stands close to the edge of a foundation trench crisscrossed by concrete shafts. The site’s outer perimeter is separated out from the street by a chain of 10ft-high wooden barriers. Street side, these walls are dashed with computer-rendered graphics depicting a future promise of elegant living. Advertisements of this ilk are typical across Beirut’s luxury apartment construction projects: they depict imagined family scenes populated by grinning children and attractive young parents (see also, Sawalha 2010; Krijnen & Fawaz 2010). They inform the viewer a ‘modern lifestyle’ is here for grabs. The passer-by’s eye might be drawn to the architect’s floor plans, replete with maid rooms and master bedrooms
set against bullet-pointed lists of features such as, a ‘resident’s gym,’ ‘private electricity generator’ and cavernous ‘underground parking’ — the imaginary families often white and the information all in English.

The site is located in a district of Beirut that stands as a support base for Amal and to a lesser degree Hezbollah, parties that win favour amongst Shia Muslims on a sectarian basis (Kingston 2013; Norton 1987). As members of the March 8th movement, these parties have backed the Syrian regime against the uprising. The district’s affiliation is made materially manifest via party flags fluttering atop lampposts, or banners swaying between balconies, and even on the occasional martyrdom commemoration poster. As the uprising militarised, these posters surfaced with increasing frequency, appearing overnight plastered to buildings to memorialise the deaths of Syrian generals, political leaders and eventually Lebanese militia fighters from regime-aligned forces. It came as no surprise when Mohammed and Bilal reported feeling that they were surrounded by potential political foes, “people who hate us,” as they’d often put it. Nevertheless, when I’d ask if they had contemplated moving, they always responded that they have in fact learned to cope, because, whatever else, living on the building site means escaping the otherwise substantial costs incurred through renting private accommodation. These were the facts — they had to be dealt with.

Avoiding private accommodation meant that wages stretched a little further with remittances and savings increased. Bilal made around $400 per month as a labourer on-site. This was an improvement on his previous job, selling bananas on the roadside near Sabra.

“Maybe you just were not good at selling fruit,” I joked with him one evening.

“Well, listen, one day a man came up and asked me how much for a banana, so I told him 250 lira … but then he said not those bananas, I want to buy your banana.”

“And were you ready to sell it?” I joked.

“No, of course not. But let me to tell you, I’d have made more than I do in two weeks if I’d said yes! … Anyway, we are from Idlib; everyone knows we like to fuck!”

Mohammed, a student at Damascus University’s journalism department, brought in around the same wages as his cousin — he was working behind the counter in a local pastry shop. As a non-labourer, he had established an arrangement with the site’s foreperson, via his cousin, and each month handed him $50 from his pay in exchange for an extra bed and turning a blind eye. This represented a substantial saving on rent costs, especially in such a central Beirut location — the pastry shop was less than a minute’s walk from the site.
Mohammed initially planned only to be in Beirut for the summer but as ever more intensifying clashes broke out and, as the news headline above made clear, skirmishes were edging closer to the capital; his plans began to fall apart.

However, Bilal had imagined he was in it for the long haul. Revenue from his family’s olive grove had, for several years, failed to provide an adequate standard of living: “It wasn’t sufficient,” he said. His brother was now looking to join the fight in Syria. “There was no other solution,” he told me, “I had to leave and work here. I want to fight, but my brother is more experienced … he did military service … he’s more knowledgeable in these things.”

For both, wages regularly arrived with ‘complications,’ gaps widened between payments and ‘miscalculations’ which occurred regarding labour hours. In the evening Mohammed often stormed back to the site announcing he was “done.” His boss constantly talked down to him: there was no respect, he claimed. The boss had even occasionally gloated to him about regime victories in the suppression of the uprising. Mohammed increasingly associated this with the fact his boss is Shia, and therefore it is ‘shey ṯābī’i’ [a natural thing] that he would support the regime, “all Shia in Lebanon like the regime … they are the same, both killing us in Syria.”

Mohammed would endlessly fight with this ‘ahbal’ [moron] over his wages and the exact amount of hours he had, in fact, worked, versus what was recorded. Without any form of collective representation, and certainly with no union or embassy willing to take action, Syrian migrant workers have no collective bargaining power deployable in any fight against further exploitation, the betterment of their condition, or just to be paid a ‘decent’ wage. As more refugees moved across the border into Lebanon, with many searching for work, any individual protestations would meet with responses like, “go! There are a hundred like you,” “you’re not special” and “I can easily put someone in your place.”

These stories, and the sense of disempowerment they engender were expressed quite clearly when one day Mohammed insisted I visit him at work during scheduled hours, and we chat openly across the countertop. Mohammed is a cunning guy, quick and smart. Hopefully, he reasoned, this little play would signal to the boss that he knows “wealthy foreigners,” that perhaps he is “important” and has “wasta,” that is, ‘social clout through connections’ (c.f Cunningham 1993; Ramady 2015). His boss might then think twice before causing Mohammed any further problems. I responded that it seemed to me a pretty bad idea, more likely to raise additional suspicions than his wage. After much deliberation, Mohammed let me off the hook.
Despite the obvious inconvenience of living on a construction site, Bilal took pride in the home he had constructed for the two of them. I recall him directing my gaze toward shelving he’d erected from discarded wood; the hooks and nails on which pots and pans hang; his salvaged electric fan; the nooks and crannies between breeze blocks used to stash cigarettes and the odd secret bottles of whisky and, the pièce de résistance, a battered old analogue TV. They then managed to hook it up to a satellite, and it was ready to go. Mohammed had happened upon the set discarded next to some rubbish bins. At a guess, it was probably chucked out because of the damaged colour filter that seemed to confer an alien green tinge across the Al-Arabiya news presenter. The internal speakers were in a worse condition still, base notes intermittently and incomprehensively fizzling into nothing. Despite its unhealthy state, the boys managed to hook the TV to a satellite and now, electricity supply permitting, it was constantly turned on, broadcasting in often-live images of the increasingly violent suppression of the uprising.

Let me return now to that summer evening of poker and politics. Throughout the night, Bilal would pipe up to provide me and Mohammed with his intermittent analysis around the scenes appearing in Al-Arabiya’s reports. He also, somewhat annoyingly, seemed to win every hand. Thinking back now as to why, it was likely because his occasional speeches did not require our full attention. The opinions we heard formed along well-worn lines having crystallised over preceding months. Indeed, I’d noticed that Bilal had become a big fan of Jabhat al-Nusra, he wanted to make clear his view that their role in the revolution ought to be enlarged. Nusra, he stressed, is evidently the only group powerful enough to realise victory for the Syrian people.

However, his line of reasoning rarely deviated into any serious discussion of Jabhat al-Nusra’s particular relationship with Salafist Islam, which has been given such attention elsewhere (e.g Comerford 2015; Sherlock 2012). The only mention of this factor would come with the occasional assertion that, “they’re good Muslims” or “religion gives strength.” In Bilal’s framework, one might say Nusra’s piety was understood as important only in so far as it informed their fighting and revolutionary skill, their prowess with advanced weaponry or their heroic deeds. It was during these commentaries on heroism that I first heard the story of Bilal’s elder brother, Khalil. Bilal had recently received word the police had arrested Khalil, dragged him from their family home in the middle of the night, summarily beating and torturing him over several days. Bilal projects himself and his brother as just a ‘normal guys’; true, they’d had gone to the occasional protest when things first kicked off. However, this was just because their friends invited them and, “they wanted to have fun.” That this ‘fun’ had
resulted in his brother’s arrest and torture evidence that ‘al-nizām waḥṣī’ [the regime is monstrous]. Tha’r [revenge] he, reasoned, could be best meted out by Nusra.

For his part Mohammed disagrees; instead, he limits his support to smaller organisations, specifically his town’s LCC [Local Coordination Committee]. He’d heard Bilal’s opinions many times before yet still he somehow summoned the energy to shoot back the occasional incredulous look. A grin grew over Bilal’s face, having apparently achieved the rise he so desired, he retorted, “But look, man, I’ve told you before, Jabhat al-Nusra are just the best fighters; when they cry Allāhu Akbar [God is great] they strike fear into regime dogs.”

“Dude!” [ya zalāmi!], interjected Mohammed, “I don’t care if they’re good fighters … they’re breaking the unity of the people the unity of the people [waḥda a-ash’b]”

“Unity” [Waḥda?!] replied an increasingly irritated Bilal who then gestured to our surroundings and added, “My darling: Unity, Liberty, Socialism!” [Ya habibi, Wiḥda, Ḫurrīya, Ishtirākīya]

Bilal’s tone was deeply sarcastic; his recitation of this Ba’th party motto almost camp. His utterance defused the mounting tension. We all giggled. Moreover, when the laughter faded, I was still left wondering, *why exactly was this funny?* Was it just his out-of-character camp tone? Moreover, are these goals themselves being cynically dismissed, or rather, is it the capacity for the Ba’th state to achieve them which is now coming under fire?

What this chapter sets out to analyse is how this one tiny moment of laughter stands on a long unfurling series of historical transitions.

**CYNICISM AND IDEOLOGY**

If ‘political ideology’ is taken to mean the particular arrangement of normative discourses, goals, myths and symbols that concern how society’s political and economic systems *ought* to operate, then the job of party mottos, anthems and the like is to condense these arrangements into a set of catchy, memorable and fundamentally limited sets of words (Carlisle 2005: 689-670).

In Ba’thist Syria those words were “wiḥda, Ḫurrīya, ishtirākīyya.” Bilal’s interjection made apparent the contradiction between the guys’ contemporary circumstances, and the normative ideals expressed through Ba’th ideology. Neither Bilal nor Mohammed went so far as to convey an all-encompassing cynicism toward political projects of socio-economic transformation writ large. They certainly diverge around whom they invest their faith — Nusra, the LCCs or the FSA. However, theirs is not a stance of postmodern incredulity toward
meta-narratives (i.e. Lyotard 1984; Lyman 2001). Instead, what incredulity my informants expressed was limited to the skill of the ‘narrative former;’ that is, The Ba’th state. It never appeared to me that the idea of ‘unity of the Syrian people’ was being laughed at, nor even socialism, and not freedom. What they were seemingly laughing at was the proposal Bashar al-Assad’s government could have any real intention of materially realising these otherwise desirable objectives. An alternative struggle or organisation is thus supported.

From this observation, the following chapters move to consider what tactics can be deployed by a ‘revolutionary worker diaspora’ to participate in social movements that deploy contentious forms of politics from a distance, while also avoiding the practical dangers of being up close. However, more broadly, my argument is that where once there was some occasional degree of stability patterning the socio-economic lives of Syrian rural-worker migrants in Lebanon, instead there is now only precariousness and uncertainty. A relative period of stability has now ‘fallen away’ and in its place is a broad transformation of labour migration from a temporary means of making money to a means of sheer basic subsistence; from something understood as more-or-less ‘free choice’ to something ‘compelled by circumstances’ and, at the time of writing, simply a means of survival (Chalcraft 2009: 20-24). Indeed, the militarisation of the uprising has further eroded whatever stability the Syrian nation-state once exhibited by transforming its territories into the highly fractured regional battleground we witness today. Corresponding to this development, neighbouring countries have taken a mass influx of refugees. Moreover, this is especially the case for Lebanon, whose more or less open border has been crossed by over one million desperate individuals, and with this influx, degrees of hostility from the Lebanese host community have also increased (UNHCR 2016). Predictably, such a situation has opened space for employers to suppress Syrian labourers’ wages. Against all this there has been a series of ‘ruptures’ that have acted to catalyse the situation and engulf my informants’ lives (Rancière 2009). The goal of this chapter is to first nuance the idea of ‘rupture’ by revealing what came before, and how then the contemporary civil war in Syria might be better understood as a ‘speed-up’ in a more general ‘untangling’ of Syria’s socio-political fabric. This unravelling is shown to have begun before March 2011.

This opening chapter turns to Syrian contemporary history to trace how unity, liberty, and socialism became the principle ideological goals of the Ba’th party and reveals how these goals shifted in meaning and importance. Indeed, to give an accurate account of how particular structures patterning the choices and desires open to men like Mohammed and Bilal has ‘fallen away,’ we must first examine how far the Syrian state has ever actually been able
to fold such men into their project. Is the disjuncture between Ba’th ideology and lived reality a historical constant? Would Bilal’s sarcastic remark have always been a possibility?

Our laughter might not have surprised Lisa Wedeen, a political scientist, and Syria specialist. Wedeen described ostensibly similar phenomena in her book *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999). She documents the private jokes and public parodies targeting the ‘personality cult’ that enveloped Hafiz al-Assad, and argues that this mockery evidence a prevalent ‘public cynicism.’ Syrians, she suggests, didn’t take the exaggerated claims of the Assad cult seriously. Rather, the cult acted more like a disciplinary mechanism for enforcing the ‘correct guidelines’ of behaviour and speech across varying scenarios and spaces. The result is that citizens only ever came to behave as if they revered the leader.

Crucially, this does not mean the cult lacked power, for “even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*” (Zizek 1992: 155 cited in Wedeen 1999: 155). In fact, she reasons, if citizens feel compelled to act out of obedience, then this is more politically valuable than internal compliance (ibid).\(^{38}\) Wedeen’s reasoning seems sound in relation to the obviously absurd claims that Assad is the “country’s premier pharmacist” who “knows all things about all issues” (*ibid*: 1) but without an account of political economy, historical transformations or a wider articulation of Syrian voices outside of the bourgeois intelligentsia, her argument for public compliance and mass cynicism cannot be generalized to the regime and its ideology in totality. Especially considering that — and leaving aside the problematic (and deliberate) downplaying of the state’s repressive apparatus — Wedeen also makes some slippages between specific critiques of the ‘Assad personality cult’ to a more general critique of ‘the state.’ For instance, she presents the reader with a comedy script ostensibly attacking the state’s policy and assumed failure to subsidise sugar and fuel (1999: 106). For Wedeen, this is designed to draw attention to the fact the state “cannot celebrate its economic policy” presumably because her bourgeois and elite informants think it is bad economic policy to subsidise basic commodities (ibid). And true, it certainly is bad policy if you are a sugar merchant. However, one of the first things Mohammed ever told me about his family’s economic circumstances was that they could “barely afford a sack of sugar these days.” It was not only Mohammed who’d pick out this specific commodity as now unaffordable. Rather, these assertions were common amongst all the men I got to know. Perhaps the reason why it is the price of sugar, of all other possible commodity prices, that garnered most attention is due to the role sugar plays in the drinking of tea, an essential component of sociality in Syria. To make sugar unaffordable is to make unaffordable fundamental acts of hospitality, acts that are central to one’s general sense of social identity.
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For Syria’s rural poor, the subsidisation of sugar was not a laughing matter. True, if the state is understood as an institution variously concerned with ‘doling out material and symbolic privilege,’ that is, a mechanism for the transference of wealth, then the manner in which this distribution is conceptualised might be related back to the personality cult — the kindness of the leader, and so on — but distribution is ‘real.’ In distribution there are winners and there are losers. Wedeen concludes by acknowledging that certain ‘material interests’ play a part in securing compliance, yet we do not know whose interests are at stake, or if the regime was ever able to provide for them (ibid: 156). In a related manner, Hans Steinmuller (2014), an anthropologist of China, warns us against the totalising tendencies of ‘cynicism’ when it is deployed as a sociological concept. He maintains that it often problematically suggests an ‘either-or’ logic in which two sides of the coin, ‘cynic’ and ‘believer’ always opposed to each other. With this in mind, and in the interest of recovering historical variations in complicated textures of belief and doubt, I argue ‘unity,’ ‘liberty’ and ‘socialism’ represent foundational pillars upon which the Ba’th state did, in fact, generate some degree of legitimacy amongst some sectors of its population. I trace here how two understandings of ‘unity’ have intersected with one another throughout Syrian contemporary history.

The independent Syrian state that emerged from World War II has been marked by political instability flowing from its foundation under the French mandate and made worse by regional antagonisms and war thanks to the Zionist project in Palestine and later the invasion of Syria’s Golan province. Against these facts, it is little wonder ‘unity’ has appeared a central ideological tenant for many of the leaders who’ve taken Damascus. For some, ‘unity’ has signalled an investment in ‘Greater Syria’ or broader expressions of ‘pan-Arabisms’ and ‘pan-Islamisms’ and, for others, ‘unity’ has meant attachments toward the existing Syrian state with the aim of ‘unifying’ the population within its borders and thus against sectarian manipulations, tribal cleavages or class antagonism (Podeh 1999; Hinnebusch 2004; Van Dam 2011)

At the level of state, Hafiz al-Assad’s 1970 Corrective Movement sealed the victory of a specifically Syrian nationalism (Hinnebusch 2004: 64 – 83). His victory was predicated on the strengthening of the remaining two ideological pillars of Ba'athism: liberty and socialism. ‘Liberty,’ as we shall see, was initially more tightly bound to anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and anti-traditionalism; by contradistinction, economic liberalisation [ifitaḥ iqtiṣādi], minimal state, political pluralism and free enterprise were not, at first, necessarily included in the ‘liberty’ of the Ba’th slogan [hurriya]. Rather, ‘liberty’ meant resistance to external domination by colonial powers, either in neighbouring states, notably the Zionist occupation,
the re-occupation of Iraq, or Western client monarchies in the Gulf; or it meant ‘liberation’ from chains of dependency and economic bondage between the lower orders and the ruling class (Salem 1994: 67-68). Military defeats, in 1948 and 1967, suffered at the hands of Zionist forces, have acted to strengthen the call for national consolidation (ibid). Consolidation itself was first achieved through the Leninist model of a single vanguard party reshaping Syria’s socio-economic fabric from above (Hinnebusch 2001). ‘Liberty’ was always already tightly bound up with ‘socialism’ rather than ‘political liberalism’ or ‘constitutional democracy.’ These more bourgeois ‘liberal freedoms’ and ‘civil rights’ meant very little when workers and the fallāḥīn were deeply restrained by networks of servitude to traditionalism and feudalism (see Aflaq 1958: 26, 95).

Moving towards the present, it appears the capacity of the state to win legitimacy amongst its peasant/worker core has been progressively weakened due to the erosion of populist measures of incorporation. This erosion can be traced to the intensified economic liberalisation agenda of the 1990s onwards; this agenda generated more disunity and detachment thanks to equitable policy measures being replaced by market controls (see: Hinnebusch 2012; Matar 2013). These processes are to be placed in the broader context of a military defeat to Israel and Western imperialism. Indeed, as the economist Ali Kadri has argued, the Arab world’s ruling class, from the 1990s onwards, underwent a total transformation, turning once more back to a fully fledged comprador class as — in adjusting to the terms of defeat — there were few options open with the combined weight of de-industrialisation and loss of state sovereignty (Kadri 2014). 39

The liberalisation agenda of Bashar al-Assad’s Syria did not demand the liberalisation of the repressive state apparatus; rather, this apparatus was ‘upgraded’ and ultimately ended up safeguarding processes linked to accumulation by dispossession, generating, in turn, a narrowing set of sectarian and increasingly kin elites (Hinnebusch 2012). 40 For this reason, should we date the popular uprising to the March 15th 2011, then the ‘unity’ of Ba’thist Syria was already straining under the weight of an economic liberalisation agenda. This agenda witnessed the general abandonment of many redistributive measures, price controls, import restrictions and state-led programs for capital accumulation (Matar 2013). However, this scenario can not itself be analytically isolated from broader historical processes which, in this context, means various manifestations of imperialist aggression. These structures and processes are further mixed up with the persistent threat of war producing a normalised state of crisis. In short, Syria was a fertile space for economic imperialism and crisis manipulation. 41
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On the ground, the reforms Bashar al-Assad introduced shortly after assuming power in the early 2000s — including investment-promoting decrees, the privatisation of state farms, the creation of a private banking system, the liberalisation of capital and trade accounts, the reduction in custom duties and the dismantling of state-led investment — produced little pro-poor developments and instead accelerated a growing gap between wages and prices (ibid). These are policies which lay groundwork for the uprising. ‘Liberalisation measures’ further entrenched pauperization through mass internal and external migration from the countryside to the burgeoning shantytowns on the belts of urban centres (Kilah 2013 Ismail 2013).

To return to Bilal: if it appears that certain pro-poor anti-imperialist victories were secured during the early stages of the Ba’th revolution then his cynicism must also be read in light of these historical material factors. Here then enters a sense of nostalgia for the relatively stable existence described by elder generations. His sarcasm should be set against this fact, that a once more equitable way of life has been eroded by parasitic practices of the state elite. The drive to ‘market competition’ has seemingly resulted in a class of ‘corrupt crony capitalists’ — popularly signified by the president’s maternal cousin, Rami ‘Mr 5%’ Makhlof (Wedeen 2013). These cronies were permitted to siphon up vast sums of rent through the breaking up of public assets; a breaking up that typically demands and drives the disempowering and dispossessing of the multitude, the hollowing out of labour unions and the breaking down of welfare safety nets (Harling 2012).42

SYKES-PICOT IS OVER

We have now trespassed the borders that were drawn by the malicious hands in lands of Islam in order to limit our movements and confine us inside them. And we are working, Allah permitting, to eliminate them [borders]. And this blessed advance will not stop until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2014)

The Arabs form one nation. This nation has the natural right to live in a single state. [As such,] the Arab fatherland constitutes an indivisible political and economic unit. No Arab can live apart from the others.

The First Clause of the Ba’th Party Constitution (1947)
“Philip,” said Abdullah, his voice lagging over the terrible Skype connection, “I knew you’d be calling me about that speech.” In late July 2014, a man wearing a matching black turban and robe ascended the steps of a pulpit. The location: the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, Iraq and the man: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ‘Islamic State.’ Baghdadi had selected this time and place to make his first public appearance as Caliph; his sermon addressed not only the congregation gathered but also, more importantly, the world. This event — swiftly uploaded to YouTube and watched by millions — contained his declaration of leadership over all Muslims, “obey me” he commanded, “as far as I obey God.”

Baghdadi struck humble notes with pious tones, “I was placed as your caretaker, and I am not better than you,” he said and “if you find me to be right, then help me, and if you find me to be wrong, then advise me and make me right.”

There was, however, no equivocation when it came to the smashing of national borders with its future attendant unification of the Muslim world to be achieved first by the ‘destruction’ of the ‘Sykes-Picot agreement.’ This was a “blessed advance” in overcoming a century-old conspiratorial colonial project. With this victory acknowledged, Baghdadi moved to admonish true believers to join his new Islamic State emerging between Iraq and Syria, “if you knew about the reward and dignity in this world and the hereafter through jihad, then none of you would delay [joining us],” he stressed.

In the weeks preceding Baghdadi’s sermon, others clips went ‘viral’ amongst my informants. In these less high-profile videos, a militia fighter belonging to Da’ish looks directly down the lens and proclaims sentiments like, “we do not believe in Sykes-Picot.” Then — as if to evidence the assertion — other clips reveal a bulldozer flattening a man-made sand berm. Cut to another scene and short work has been made of this barrier once running between Nineveh in Iraq and al-Hassaka in Syria. The border has been opened. A fresh corridor carved between the sand. Da’ish militia looks on from both sides and triumphantly declare that, finally, one no longer needs a visa or even a passport to move freely within the land of Islam. In a similar video released by Vice News, passing drivers begin to vox pop their thanks to the Islamic State for finally bringing about long-sought unification (Vice News 2013).

The world first learned about these dramatic events when Da’ish’s online publicity arm began to circulate the hashtag “#SykesPicotOver” on Twitter. Moreover, it was not long before academics and commentators jumped at the opportunity to contradict these bold claims. Many questioned the historical validity of tracing the origin point of the Levant’s borders to that 1916 agreement between British politician, Sir Mark Sykes and the French
diplomat, Francois Georges-Picot. Scholars highlighted the Ottoman antecedents, preceding regionalisms, or that Sykes-Picot was never fully implemented in the first place and that the entire case has been overstated (see generally Barr 2011 as well as Visser 2014; Gordon 2014). In explaining developments, ‘on the ground,’ such literal validity is an almost insignificant sideshow. These historical debates hardly concern Baghdadi, or Da’ish militia, or even, as we shall see, Abdullah, my aforementioned research assistant. Rather, on the social level, all that’s important is that these borders have been conceptualised (or even imagined) as resulting from European colonial manipulations, as the materialisation of divide and rule politics and thus as synthetic foreign impositions that bear a weight of historical responsibility for the oppression, injustice and weaknesses experienced by those who fall within their demarcations. Given this understanding, dismantling these borders ought to confer a significant degree of legitimacy upon those who wish to right the wrongs of history. So what about Abdullah?

Abdullah’s ancestral village lies just a few kilometres from an Iraqi-Syrian crossing. Aside from this physical proximity I was witness to the evident ‘cultural proximity’ held between some areas of the Iraqi population and eastern Arab Syrians. When Abdullah, myself and friends would take long walks along Beirut’s waterfront, occasionally we’d overhear men speaking in Iraqi Arabic — a dialect closer to Abdullah’s own than that spoken in Damascus. Such encounters prompted introductions and inquiries into the men’s health, their situations back home and the like. At first, I found approaching strangers in such a way odd but Abdullah would ignore my discomfort, insisting “they’re our brothers” and “we must wish them well.” Given this, as Skype began to connect, I anticipated he would have mixed feelings about the collapse of the border.

“Well, ok then,” I said, beginning a topic Abdullah had already second guessed, “it looks like Da’ish have started breaking the border — are you happy about that?”

“What do you think Philip?” he replied. “You heard all those stories about men in the village working as smugglers ... that we use Iraqi phone networks and that we speak Arabic more like Iraqis. Essentially, I’m happy there’s no border. But, at the same time, I hate Da’ish — like everyone. We don’t want a border, but we don’t want Da’ish. What can we do? ... they don’t care about the good of the people. In reality ... they are the same as the regime.”

This might sound like a ‘pragmatic’ and not just a pan-Arab sentiment but, as later chapters document, the two intermingle and often form underlying ‘moral foundations’ from which Syrian migrant rebel-workers build judgements regarding the behaviour of their Lebanese hosts.
“Of course, they [The Lebanese] think they’re different,” Abdullah once reflected, “Because they think they’re not Arabs” but “frankly, there is no real difference; they create the differences.”

Attitudes like this do indeed then reveal a remaining “[…] deep-seated irredentist protest at the mutilation of Bilad ash-sham and the fragmentation of the Arab world under imperialism” (Hinnebusch 2004: 152) and this dispute, with its imagined resolution in ‘unity,’ has represented an effective and central ideological building block in the region’s conservative, Ba’thist, pan-Arab, pan-Islamic and Nasserist movements.

UNITY

One of the principle logos of the Ba’th Party is a map of the Arab world rendered in green, with the Ba’th party flag planted into the heart of Syria (Wieland 2006: 81). For Michel Aflaq, one of the principle founders of Ba’thism, the existence of an Arab nation is taken for granted; “[…] Arab nationalism for us Ba’athists is a self-evident reality not in need of special investigation or affirmation” (Aflaq 1959: 102 cited in Salam 1994: 62). Aflaq’s romantic nationalist vision stressed the need for a wide-ranging cultural, political and socio-economic renaissance — ‘b’ath’ itself meaning ‘awakening.’ If Arabs remain in a state of slumber, then the region will continue to ‘decline.’ An alternative future is rendered possible only through pan-Arab unification; if bound together, these states can finally overcome “feudalism, sectarianism, regionalism, intellectual reactionism” as “one nation, bearing an eternal message” (ibid). These rather lofty ideals have also been contextualised within the class formations of post-Ottoman Syria (Batatu 1999: 134). The predominant family occupation amongst the Ba’th party’s founders was wholesale grain trading [bāwaykiyya] (ibid). The merchant classes were often tightly integrated into the Ottoman Empire. By 1917 when trading was broken up by new nations with economically damaging imposition of customs duties it appeared that, for “[…] no other element of the population was pan-Arabism a more natural horizon” (ibid).

While pan-Arabism may have appeared then a ‘natural’ horizon to the party, it faced the pressing task of how to broaden its appeal. The answer came in the form of vanguard intellectualism (Hinnebusch 2004: 47). Clearly influenced by the nascent Marxist-Leninist movements, Aflaq advocated ‘one party rule,’ he was tasked with forging ‘New Arabs’ who will become empowered enough to cast off the material and intellectual shackles imposed by the old feudal and colonial elite. At a stretch, in his quest for renewal, Aflaq, though a Christian, shared certain overlapping sentiments with Baghdadi. Namely, that glory can be
located in the past and, in particular, with the birth of Islam in the 7th century. This moment, with the cultural, political, scientific and socio-economic advances it wrought, represents an enormous contribution by Arab civilization to the world. However, where Da’ish promotes the radical Islamic jurisprudence of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) as a means of recovering ‘lost greatness,’ Aflaq desired specifically new glories realised through a commitment to ‘Arab socialism’ and ‘liberty’ and not the strict application of interpretations of dogmatic 12th century Islamism.

The party split into regional branches bound together under Damascus’s leadership. It was, in principle, secular, yet acknowledged a unique debt to Islam while simultaneously welcoming of all religions (Hinnebusch 2004: 29). This new formulation of Arab nationalism combined socialism with populist hostility toward feudalism and the established notables who had come to dominate post-Ottoman Syria. In sum, Aflaq managed to combine Arab nationalism with a revolutionary progressive politics and this, in turn, both reflected and recreated the mounting class conflicts and antagonisms rife in the post-colonial Levant. Economically, what he aimed to develop was a ‘third way’ between communism and capitalism, allowing small-scale private enterprise and private property as well instituting broader acts of land redistribution and industrial nationalisation. His aim was to develop an identity that bridged the class conflict and sectarian animosity which risked continued manipulation from internal and external actors (Aflaq 1959; Torrey 1969:446–54; Abu Jaber 1966:97–138; Jabbur 1987:336–38 cited in Hinnebusch 2004: 29).

Aside from this orthodox Ba’thist position, there have been many alternative and competing conceptualisations of ‘unity’ prevalent throughout contemporary Syrian history. Mohammed already pointed us in that direction with his suggestion that Jabhat al-Nusra were breaking the unity of the people — his reference point here being not so much the breaking of national borders but rather ‘socio-cultural unification of Syrian people’ — and actually he meant here just ‘opposition people’ — within an already existing nation state. As a point of fact, one of the central contentions that have emerged between Nusra and Da’ish is precisely the degree to which they recognise the validity of Sykes-Picot, the latter tending to accuse the former of tacitly granting the legitimacy of existing borders (Jemmo 2013). These two positions — between building a broader Arab revolution versus solidifying Syrian unity within the post-independence state — overlap a series of disputes, though more often secular and socialist in nature, that have constituted and defined rival political programmes across Syrian contemporary history.
UNITY, LIBERTY AND SOCIALISM

Crucially, the central place ‘unity’ has taken within diverse ideological manifestations cannot be analytically separated from Syria’s history of colonial subordination and resistance. The same goes for neo-imperialist interventions in the present. Syria’s modern political history can even be retold through these conceptual swings and the variable degrees of legitimacy that competing ideas of ‘unity’ have been able to evince.

The Syrian state which emerged from World War I and the defeated Ottoman Empire was to re-establish a historical Greater Syria (Bilad al-sham) within a wider federation of Arab states (Hinnebusch 2004: 18-19). Between 1914 and 1918 Arab nationalism emerged as the region’s most dominant ideology (ibid). These initial formulations of Arab nationalism can be followed back to the widely despised direct Ottoman rule over Syria during World War I.“ The ‘Arab Revolt’ eventually ended this rule. The rebellion, which was encouraged by the British, and carried out by Sharif Hussein of Mecca and members of the burgeoning Arab nationalist movement, fed further into the final carving of the Ottoman Empire by the European powers (Salem 1994: 38-39). At this point, a drive toward an expanded ‘Arab state’ appeared desirable to the revolt’s leaders. By 1919, much of the Syrian ruling classes had thrown their weight behind ‘Arab nationalism’ (Tauber 1995; Zeine 1960; Gelvan 1998 cited in Hinnebusch 2004: 18). True, there was still resentment amongst the upper echelons of Syrian society, who apparently recoiled at the thought of being ruled by ‘less cultured’ Hijazi Hashemites and Iraqis (Hinnebusch 2004: 18). Nonetheless, when a leading member of the 1918 government, Yasin al-Hashimi, was arrested for his militant Arabism, counter protests erupted (ibid). The basis for sentiments of common identity switched between a linguistic Arabism to a Syrian national identity, whose content was Arab-Islamic (Tauber 1995; Zeine 1960; Salem 1994). For the Arab ruling class, this made eventual British betrayal and support for a French mandate over Syria and Lebanon all the harder to accept. Promises made to the Arabs were revoked under the Sykes-Picot agreement, and Bilad al-sham was divided between the French and the British, with the former acquiring its mandate over Syria and Lebanon (Barr 2012; Khoury 1987). The French divided this region into six states: the states of Damascus and Aleppo; the Alawi state and the Druze state; the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta and finally Grand Liban. The mandate was so unpopular that it could only be realised through the defeat of the first pan-Arab army at Maysalun and mass repression of several revolutionary nationalist uprisings in the early 1920s (Provence 2005). It took three years (1920-23) to quell the population finally given that all sects and regions seemingly revolted against the division. Hourani speculated that:
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Had [Greater Syria] become independent as an individual whole, Arab national identity might have been focused on that particular entity and a certain balance between Arab and Syrian feeling achieved, as in Egypt or Iraq. The division into smaller states [...] left national feeling with no existing state to focus upon and turned it outwards (Hourani 1970: 317 cited in Salem 1994: 39).

These early articulations of Arab nationalism were not yet tied-up with more radical ideologies and instead were connected to more conservative-reactionary articulations of, ‘pride in the Arab nation’, etc. Ultimately what these nationalisms continued to embody were the interests of urban notables, merchants, and landowners in response to the foreign power manipulation (Amin 1978; Salem 1994: 41). And it was not until the 1963 Ba‘th coup that Arab nationalism would finally become interwoven with an egalitarian socialist ideology.

Sovereign independence was reached in April 1946, led by nationalist leaders’ ability to exploit the imperial rivalries between the French and the British.

With the invasion of France by Nazi Germany in 1940, sections of Syria fell under the control of the Vichy government. While nominal independence had already been granted in 1936; the French maintained their rights to hold their armed forces within Syrian territory as well as two military airports. One could speculate that general demobilization was possible given antipathy amongst the French population towards its mandate over Syria in comparison to Algeria, where the settler-colonial and capital investments were significantly higher. Nonetheless, with the 1941 Paris Protocols, the Germans were granted access to these facilities, and the British, fearing an invasion of Egypt, compromised the mandate with their own intervention. This act awarded Syrian nationalists yet more space to fight, eventually, for their full independence.

The final impetus came in the aftermath of World War II, and the concomitant rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers supportive of ‘official’ independence amongst nations formally dominated by European imperialism (Hinnebusch 2004: 22-23). The French, in one last-ditch attempt, repeated in 1945 a tactic they had deployed first in 1923: Damascus was bombarded from the air. The British responded to this provocation with an ultimatum, and the French answered with the total evacuation of Syria (Mardam Bey 1994; Khoury 1987; Hinnebusch 2004: 23).

The constitutions adopted at that time declared Syria a parliamentary democracy, but de facto power still remained in the hands of the ruling class composed of landlords, merchants, and urban notables. These figures smoothly transitioned into newly opened parliamentary offices. They inherited a truncated Syrian state splintered with internal division
and sub-state loyalties. Given this, some within the political class argued ‘national consolidation’ ought to be the principle policy direction (Van Dusen 1972: 123-136). But the elites with their vast estates had enduring ties to a dependent fallāḥīn and were, therefore, more than capable of securing votes with little transformation in the socio-political structure. “Parties were mere parliamentary blocs of landlords, tribal chiefs or shaykhs, and their clients, without ideology or organisation, secure in their local power bases, the traditional politicians had no incentive to draw masses into participation or seek their active support” (Hinnebusch 2004: 23).

The state appeared fragile, and here another shift occurred from the pan-Arab direction of post-Ottoman Syria, toward internal-unification in a geographically bounded Syria. The socio-economic policy remained laissez-faire — the state was mostly concerned with securing property rights and encouraging business, and seemingly disinterested in the health conditions that witnessed, for example, 40 percent of children dying before the age of five (Batatu 1999: 239).

In spite of this, an area of significant government spending opened up in education. Progressive-nationalists made the case that education is a principal means for fostering affective loyalties toward the Syrian state. Sati al-Husri, a Syrian educationalist, kept influence over these reforms, “assure me of unity of education” he said, “and I will guarantee all other aspects of unity” (Salem 1994: 51). While gradually expanding out from the ruling class to the developing intelligentsia and bourgeois, Husri’s nationalism remained largely limited to the professional sectors. Husri didn’t lay down a blue-print for the forms of political or military organisation, nor did he specify even more generally what ‘unity’ might eventually look like, his was an emotional romantic vision that hoped only one day to have been the basis for a future nationalist struggle (ibid).

Those in a traditional elite position who imagined education a means of unifying the population behind the post-colonial truncated Syrian state were disappointed; in many ways, the opposite effect was produced. Increasing education yielded not a faithful bourgeois-subject, but constituted a radical section of the population who eventually would turn against the state elite and look again toward pan-Arabism within ascendant Nasserist and Ba’thist currents.

There is an important distinction to be made between Syria’s old bourgeois and a ‘new bourgeois.’ The former was closer to the landed aristocracy, typically drawn from notable urban families and therefore many of their economic interests as families overlapped. The bourgeois branch of the Syrian landlords emerged in the 1950s following the introduction of
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mechanised farming and pump irrigation. And together these technologies turned Syria into an agro-exporting state (Hinnebusch 2004: 24-25). Mounting indigenous surplus capital was reinvested in light industry, and agro-processing and industrial output grew yearly by 12 percent in the 1950s — thus a bourgeois wing of the agrarian-commercial sector began to invest in industrialisation (Keilany 1973; Hansen 1972: 344 cited in Hinnebusch 2004: 25). This class moved out of their old houses in the traditional quarters, bought cars and lived lifestyles that replicated those of European elites.

The ‘new bourgeois grew, by contrast, through a dependent relationship with an expanding state. This expansion was driven by the need to respond to increasingly popular demands for a health and education system with a growing bureaucracy and burgeoning military. This new bourgeois displayed a ‘modernising orientation’ and identified more with professions and nation than sect, city or tribe (Khoury 1984: 526-527). Critically, large sections of this new class also came up from the fallāḥīn and in seeking a means to escape limited opportunities they pursued education and state sector salaried jobs, thus a partly urbanised rural intelligentsia was beginning to form (ibid; Van Dusen 1972, 1975).

It was this area that began to move into a position of power in the wake of the Palestinian Nakba and the catastrophic losses incurred during the first Arab-Zionist war (see Pappe 2006 122-135; Van Dusen 1975: 129; al-Jundi 1969: 44–51). These military losses acted to de-legitimise the landowning ruling class in the eyes of the emergent new bourgeois/state-dependent class with their ties to the army and the state (Hinnebusch 2003: 25; Salem 1994: 41). This phenomenon wasn’t limited to Syria — across the region waves of old elites were swept out of office and replaced by the likes of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Free Officers in Egypt (1952) and Abd al-Karim Bilal in Iraq (1958) (Hinnebusch 2004: 25). Other old governments fell in Libya, Sudan and Yemen. Syria witnessed its own series of coups within the military that culminated in the overthrowing of the then President Quwwatli and, eventually, a military dictatorship led by ‘Abid al-Shishakli was established that lasted from 1951 to 1954 (ibid).

This is a critical time for Syrian history and its struggle with decolonisation. At this point, the military enters as the strongest counterforce to traditional elites. This is thanks to institutional transformation achieved through the infiltration of its ranks by radical political parties with ‘modern ideologies.’45 Their particular ideological directions — as communists, socialists, and secular-nationalists — were fragmented but they were united in key sentiments, all sticking to anti-imperialism, anti-landlordism and exhibiting scant loyalty to Sykes-Picot’s Syria. ‘Liberating Palestine’ at this point became a central objective within these ascendant
ideologies. Syria was destined to become the ‘defender of the Palestinians.’ Critically, socio-economic reform was framed as a necessity if Syria was to play an anti-colonial role (Van Dusen 1975: 124). Thus the first military dictatorship initially prompted state centralisation, basic welfare provision and Arabisation. National unity was prioritised, meaning the suppression of separatist movements amongst the Alawi and Druze. Yet, once at the helm, Shishakli moved to bar other radical parties, worked largely in the interest of the industrial bourgeoisie and dropped land reform from the agenda. Losing support of the younger radicals, Shishakli was himself overthrown in 1954 through a Ba’th-inspired coup (Hinnebusch 2004: 28). Here begins another series of rapid coups and counter-coups (1955-58) until, eventually, Syria’s first socialist and nationalist government swept to power.46

Popular opinion was reflected in the pan-Arab nationalism that led to the declaration of ‘political unification between Syria and Egypt’ in 1958 (Podeh 1999). Following popular sentiment, this United Arab Republic (UAR) pushed a socialist agenda that was brought about through nationalisation of major Syrian businesses (ibid). While redistributive measures began to answer popular socio-economic grievances, the alliance developed political weaknesses at the top. The UAR displayed no Syrian political class with a direct stake in its survival — aside from those Nasser had co-opted into sinecures in Cairo (ibid). There was nonetheless support from the masses toward the union and great admiration for Nasser (ibid). And against this enthusiasm, the Ba’th party saw an opportunity to begin realising Arab unification — its still principal mission.

The Ba’th initially desired a federal arrangement, and when the actuality of total unification hit home, they found themselves, along with all other Syrian political parties, officially dissolved. By this time the party lost control of the social base, who’d become so enraptured by Nasserism that one individual is reported to have said, “We followed the masses. The crowds were drunk … anyone at that hour who dared oppose unity — the people would tear their heads off” (Hinnebusch 2004: 42).

Pan-Arab unity, at this point, enjoyed seemingly greater legitimacy amongst the population than did the idea of a more limited Syrian state. It was the state, then, that appears the object of cynicism, and hope was instead placed in unification as an answer, in and of itself, to the question of how to ‘renew and modernise’ the Arab nation.

The UAR was short-lived. Cairo removed progressive Syrian generals, giving a handful of conservative officers an opportunity to retake Damascus. With their victory the union was terminated (see Abu Jaber 1966: 33-56; al-Jundi 1969: 71-86; Hinnebusch 2004: 43). In the final two years before the Ba’th party took full control, this conservative set of
military officers aligned themselves once again with the old elite and attempted to reverse engineer the socio-political developments of the previous decade. They unleashed a process of denationalisation and returned land which had been seized from rural landlords. In spite of mass resentment, it took two years for another coup to be organised. Delays were due to a fragmented opposition broke down by official dissolution and attendant disenchantment during the United Arab Republic. The Ba’th party was splintered into several groups divided by what they felt the next step ought to be. In Damascus, students and supporters gathered around Aflaq, the party’s founder who was still able to command some authority. Yet there was no clear position on what to do next regarding the unification with Egypt: was there to be a renegotiation or a total abandonment of the project?

Outside of the capital, another group was rising. They were made up of a rural intelligentsia more attuned to the party’s growing fallāḥ base (Batatu 1999: 133-144). For these ‘regionalists’ reunion would not be sought. Instead, they looked to further the socialist program: socialism and state building could be achieved in ‘one nation’ and thus ‘internal unity’ was stressed over and above broader Arab unification. Soon a number of secret military committees, clandestinely established during the United Arab Republic, sprang from the shadows. They wanted to overthrow the old party cadre; they maintained the highest sympathy amongst the party’s rural and working class base. It was this group that would sweep to power in place of the old guard. Together with sympathetic Nasserite officers, and a ‘neutral’ commander in the Golan, Colonel Ziyad al-Hariri, the military committee finally overthrew the much-despised separatist regime in March 1963 and brought the Ba’th party and its ideology into power (ibid).

In the wake of a military coup and fused together by, at most, a mutual opposition to the separatist regime, ‘unity’ was once more redefined. In spite of a keenness amongst Nasserite military officers toward reunification, their Ba’th counterparts were prepared to support a federal arrangement at best. Aflaq favoured this arrangement, mixed with moderate socialism and the ‘preservation of basic liberties’ (Torrey 1969). However, the party’s younger radicals won the day and, at “the definitive Sixth Nation Congress [they] succeeded in fusing Marxism-Leninism to Arab nationalism in a new radicalised version of Ba’th doctrine” (Hinnebusch 2004: 49).

This new doctrine gave ‘socialism in one country’ priority over a pan-Arab union; there was to be no federation with Egypt, and instead, modernisation and development projects inside Syria would move the state into a position where it might more successfully challenge Israel on behalf of the Palestinians, thereby counterbalancing the power of pro-
Western monarchies. Socialism was intimately entangled with the goal of ‘unity’; practically, this amounted to a pact between the urban working class, rural fallāḥīn, bourgeois intellectuals and military officers. In short:

[…] a “socialist revolution” would be carried out. The new credo held that the bourgeoisie was bankrupt, and capitalism in developing countries was inevitably a foreign dependent comprador enterprise. Under socialism, the heights of the economy — banks, large and medium industry, utilities and foreign trade — would be nationalised and private enterprise replaced with state planning and public investment as the motor of development (Hinnebusch 2004: 49).

For the ancestors of my informants in Beirut, this meant land reform, the establishment of state farms and cooperatives — all intended to break the control of merchants and moneylenders (ibid). Class dependencies and rural connections that previously held sway over the course of events were broken, workers and fallāḥīn were folded into the state-building project (ibid: 50; Batatu 1999). This victory of radicals over moderates marked the end of the ideological primacy placed on expansionist pan-Arabism, and the strengthening of an accord between the new middle class and previously disenfranchised workers, fallāḥīn and sectarian minorities. On the level of ideology, ‘unity’ was now discursively blurred into the goals of ‘liberty and socialism’ meaning here firstly, the liberation of Syria’s lower classes from economic bondage to the old ruling class; secondly, Syrian liberation from economic colonialism in the guise of European dependent capitalism and finally geo-strategic liberation from the ever-present threat posed by the Zionist project next door.

LIBERTY AND SOCIALISM
To understand why radical notions of socialist Arab nationalism were initially popular amongst an emerging new state-dependent bourgeoisie, one might adopt an explanation grounded in the historical formation of this class itself and its economic conditions (Salem 1994: 77-78, Batatu 1999: 133-144). I have described how the traditional ruling elite’s liberal-nationalist ideology was systematically discredited through a series of military defeats and internal coups. Paul Salem, a political scientist, and specialist on ideology in the Arab world, goes further, proposing four advantages Ba’thist ideas held in the struggle between this rising state-dependent class of professionals, versus their opponents drawn from the landed aristocracy and urban merchants:
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(1) Pan-Arabism was conveniently antithetical to the regionalism of the upper classes; (2) Socialism was antithetical to the upper class’s laissez-faire liberalism; (3) Chauvinism was antithetical to the upper class’s Europhilism (4) Marxism-Leninism could provide justification for the revolutionary overthrow of the upper class whose members, it could now be proclaimed, were “exploiters of the masses” and “agents of imperialism”. From this perspective, revolutionary Arab nationalism was the means by which a rising middle class facilitated its move into a position of dominance (Salem 1994: 2).

He further proposes that “the revolution of radical Arab nationalism was a revolt against the old generation and its political traditions as much as it was a positive vision of new options” (ibid).

Such an analysis is clearly necessary, yet it risks obscuring how the Ba’th party, at least in its earlier manifestations did reconfigure the fortunes and opportunities of Syria’s urban and rural poor and did respond in various ways to chains of popular socio-economic grievances. Moreover, the addition of what could be read as cynical quotation marks enveloping “exploiters of the masses” and “agents of imperialism” is perhaps trying to hint that such accusations were without foundation, when in fact, they were more than justified should one take even a swift glance over the poverty and land-ownership indicators for post-WWII Syria.

In 1960, 132 infants (under one year of age) died for every 1,000; by 1991 this was reduced to 37; in 1991 crude deaths per 1,000 reached 6 whereas in the 1960s it was 18. This ought also to be compared with the fact the US rate was higher and had fallen to 9 in 1991 (Batatu 1999: 38-71). True then, the state-dependent classes required the support of the rural and urban working class to break the power of Syria’s aristocrats; yet, in so doing, a pact between the middle and lower orders was established, and those freshly folded into the project may well have experienced a ‘positive vision of new options.’ It is indeed this pact, and these choices, that have now, as we shall see, ‘fallen away.’

‘Syrian unity’ acquired, then, a tighter focus on ‘liberty’ and ‘socialism’ before the pact began to unravel thanks to an move toward unleashing certain ‘market freedoms.’ The rise of these latter ‘freedoms’ actually represent the terms of defeat endured across the Arab world since the collapse of socialism more generally, and the loss of sovereignty through further imperialist military defeats more specifically (see Kadri 2015). Thus, and especially in the years preceding the Arab Spring, Syrian state policy that once aimed to ‘free’ the worker and fallāḥ from economic bondage instead reattached the shackles. To what extent did these policies, then, impact the lives of the Syrian men I met in Beirut?
FROM PEASENT TO WORKER

In 2014 Abdullah moved into a two-room apartment in south Beirut with his school friends, Adnan, Haytham, and Mahmoud. An uncle of all three, Khalid, was a regular at dinner. At 48 he is the most senior member of the household, and one of the oldest men within my network of informants. Khalid had a number of time, been responsible for securing work for his kin and extended network. He worked as a foreman for a company specialising in Gypsum board; his wage was the largest in the apartment, averaging, overtime dependent, at around $600-650 per month — the others making $400-450. Back home in Syria the remittances his family received have, as with nearly every migrant worker I know, transitioned from supplementary to vital. His wife and three daughters live in a property adjacent to their 100 dunams of farmland; he has two sons, one works outside of Beirut on a construction project, and the other was intermittently fighting in Syria with an FSA-aligned brigade. Their land is given over largely to cash crops, yielding cereals and cotton with a small portion sometimes used to cultivate fruits and vegetables.

Khalid was widely acknowledged by the boys to be an experienced farmer; he was proud of this, often stressing his overwhelming desire to return to the land, “I’m not a young guy,” he once reflected, “it’s better for me to be with my family now, to farm and make a living that way.”

These desires were eventually transferred into action and, in mid-2014, Khalid returned home. The younger men I knew couldn’t relate to this decision; it seemed economically impractical, and “very stupid,” to go back to Syria now, especially to farm given that even the most basic agricultural supplies were either prohibitively expensive or simply not available. As (bad) luck would have it, this all played out just a few months prior to the Islamic State crossing the Iraqi-Syrian border and seizing the surrounding territory, further eroding security.

Khalid had no choice but to return to Beirut after just a few months. According to his cousin he was depressed at the thought but has no option; Lebanon is where he happens to have the labour and kin connections required to secure a job, and he doesn’t want to risk travelling to the unknown. Aside from these economic ties, Khalid had little positive to say about Beirut and, on one occasion, after a particularly long dialogue about the lack of ethics exhibited by typical Lebanese citizens, I asked him, “so there’s nothing you like?” to which he replied, “ok, I liked it when I first came and was making excellent money, I worked up in the mountains, with a nice view and clean air; there was nothing sweeter.”
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On another occasion I was joking around preparing food in the kitchen with the younger guys when I heard him shout, “Philip, come quick, look at this!” and, abandoning my pile of courgettes, I found my attention was directed toward the television.

The television was playing long shots of the Deir Ezzor countryside set to oud compositions. Khalid knew I wanted someday to travel to Deir Ezzor to, ‘complete my picture’ of their lives, so he’d taken it upon himself to teach me, as best he could, from a distance. These scenes provided an opportunity to share with me his personal history and his memories of the land. He told me stories of swimming in the Euphrates, cooking chicken over a fire with friends, playing football in the open air and shooting rifles at passing birds or fixed cans. It was during moments like this that I learned how his family was one of the benefactors of the land reforms described above; formerly landless farm labourers, his kin’s fortunes looked up when they were awarded redistributed farmland in the 1970s; at this point they had “a foundation” and could secure, in Khalid’s words, “all the essentials of life.”

“If this was the case,” I ask, “why did you come to Beirut in the first place?”

Khalid first arrived in the late 1990s, working initially as a painter and decorator; at that time he was engaged to his future wife and decided it best to work for a temporary amount of time abroad to earn extra money as a cushion for his impending life as a married man.

“And how was farming then? Were profits still sufficient,” I asked.

“Sufficient yes,” Khalid answered, “they were a [means] for the continuation of life.”

For Khalid, his initially temporary migration wasn’t compelled by deteriorating economic conditions; rather, he saw before him an attractive means of accumulating extra savings that could then be productively set to work in farm improvements, house construction and the like. If ‘liberty’ meant ‘freedom from economic bondage’ then socialist measures made some strides that reached out even into the 1990s; migration for Khalid was experienced not as an ‘obligation’ but an ‘opportunity.’ For men of his socio-economic standing there was a certain sort of ‘freedom’ or ‘agency’ that was effectively brought into being through overarching structural dynamics. Subsidies on agricultural inputs and guaranteed pricing on crop yields kept the rural population protected from potentially damaging competition in an open market (Azmeh 2014).

I was not surprised that when I asked Khalid to reflect on how he thought of ‘the state’ back then he admits to having “few problems”; in fact, he didn’t think of the government much at all, it didn’t impede his life trajectory, “frankly,” he continues “I didn’t even think of it as a dictatorship as I do now. It just seemed normal; it was all right.”
On other occasions, Khalid would agree with group discussions concerning the more general sense that eastern Syria has been historically neglected, that roads were left broken or water supplies dirt -- but these complaints did not amount to a total rejection of the state’s legitimacy. Presumably, should I have met Khalid in the 1990s, he’d likely not have expressed the same texture of sarcasm that Bilal did when he mockingly recited the Ba’th party slogan. How might this transition have occurred?

**FROM STATE SOCIALISM TO MARKET LIBERALISM**

Ali Kadri poses a related question in his book *Arab Development Denied*, writing, “How is it [that Arab] societies come to emit a ruling class whose commitment to its international counterparts is more solid than its commitment to its own working class at home?” (2014: 4).

His answer is that, in addition to all the global forces of financialization, the military defeats by Israel and the United States have been critical. These defeats correspond to a general retreat of international socialist ideology (Kardi Forthcoming). In this process, the Arab ruling class have become a full comprador class through its adjustment to terms of surrender. Arab states’ sovereignty has been stripped and their economies de-industrialized (ibid). Neoliberalism, for Kadri, acts in reality as a framework for ‘tribute to empire.’ Indeed, if the state was composed of a cohesive social entity that reflected the needs and desires of working populations, then no such state would ever tolerate the imposed surplus drain except if “in a condition of surrender” (ibid).

How then did some of these processes play out in Syria? And how was the pact of the ‘60s and ‘70s between workers, fallāḥīn and party bureaucrats increasingly eroded?

The Ba’th coup on March 8th 1963 brought deep changes in Syria’s social fabric, and these changes represent the most radical transformation the nation had witnessed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. As outlined, two blocks had dominated the Syrian political scene during 1942-63: urban notables and rural landlords. Liberal and conservative political parties represented by their respective leaders came to monopolise the most senior positions of power. The working class, the fallāḥin and a ‘new bourgeoisie’ were underrepresented in state institutions and faced political and socioeconomic discrimination (Van Dam 1996: 82, 85). Sami al-Jundi, who was appointed minister of information at the time of the Ba’th coup, described the change in the urban scene as follows:

From the time the [Ba’th party] appeared on the stage, caravans of villagers started to leave the villages of the plains and mountains for Damascus. And while the alarming *gaf* started to predominate in the streets, coffee
houses and the waiting rooms of the ministries, dismissals became a duty so that [those who had newly come] could be appointed (Cited in Van Dam 1996: 76).

The ‘alarming qaf’ is the Arabic letter typically replaced by a glottal stop in Damascene (and Beiruti) Arabic but prominent in rural dialects. For eastern Syrians like Abdullah and Khalid, this letter is pronounced as gah sound; whereas, it traditionally remains in its classical form amongst rural religious minorities such as the Druze and Alawis. Al-Jundi’s alarm at the qaf evocatively expresses that, indeed, a social revolution, or at least ‘ruralisation of the centre,’ was unfolding. What followed can even be “[…] considered as a kind of national liberation” (Van Dam 1996: 77).

The prior political struggle in Syria was characterised by inter-elite comprador conflicts amongst a mostly Sunni aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The leaders of this new revolution found themselves isolated from urban-dominated political spheres and their most strategic option available was to win over instead the neglected rural and working class constituents, to break their ties of dependency, and to fold them into the radical project by enacting egalitarian redistributive measures (Kerr 1971: 1-95; Devlin 1976: 231-253; al-Jundi 1969: 120-139 cited in Hinnebusch 2004: 49).

A new more radical thrust was given to the “socialist transformation.” In the rural areas the attitude of the authorities changed regarding landlords as a respected power to treating them as a class to be broken […] the new peasant union identified and secured the dismissal of leftovers from the old regime in the Ministry of Agrarian reform who had given advance notice of expropriation to landlords, enabling the latter to dispose of excess land. The new agrarian relations law, now for the first time enforced, increased the share going to peasants in sharecropping contracts and strengthened their security of tenure. (Hinnebusch 2004: 53).

Through these and other such measures, a once more rigid class structure appeared to lesson and newly mobile individuals, like Khalid’s father, were liberated from their ties of dependency to rural landlords. Support flowed upward into the Ba’th project. Between 1964 and 1977 the number of primary school students and teachers doubled, thereby raising the school age population in education from 58 per cent to 85 per cent (ibid). The number of rural citizens holding a primary school certification also doubled from less than 10 percent of the total in the 1960s to 20.3 per cent in 1970 (ibid: 55). Although these reforms may well have first materialised as a tactical alliance, they were more than mere discourse. The haute-bourgeoisie did decline, and opportunities did arise even for landless fallāḥin. Landlessness dropped from 20.5 percent of the population to 8.9 percent by the 1970s (ibid: 57). Popular
legitimacy for Ba’th rule increased as socialism provided answers to material disadvantages, furnished new liberties and unified the lower orders through the provision of welfare, jobs, and subsidies. As Kadri notes, “despite the immediate post-independence aggression of imperialism against leading Arab countries, state-led development with regulated markets, capital and trade accounts, had demonstrated a better welfare and developmental model than the neoliberal one” (2014: 4).

This radical program slowed in 1967 with the onset of the June War. The Ba’th, having remained steadfast in their support for the Palestinian fidā’īyīn, continued to provide arms and training for operations against Zionist forces, thereby also buttressing the party’s legitimacy with regards to ‘resistance’ and ‘liberation’ from imperialist forces. In the build-up to war, Israel constructed an aquifer that would have syphoned off much of Syria’s water supply; Syria responded by diverting the water flow, and a mini-series of skirmishes broke out in April 1967. Israel launched a full-scale military onslaught in June (Pappe 2003: 184-186). In a “classic example of Blitzkrieg,” Israel exploited the tactic of surprise and deployed its superior Western arms over USSR-backed Arab states (ibid: 186). The Zionist army, as the instrument of an expansionary settler movement, seized not just the Golan but also the Sinai Peninsula. The regime in Damascus performed terribly, popular support flagged thanks to this further weakening of security and sovereignty. The radicals wished to continue the socio-economic revolution and to further aid supplies to Palestinian guerrilla fighters, but the then defence minister, General Hafiz al-Assad, called for the suspension of the revolution with the aim of essential national unity and the recovery of lost territory (Hinnebusch 2004: 58-60).

‘Black September’ brought these opposing party forces into direct conflict; the radicals gave military support to the Palestinian fighters who were under assault by King Hussein of Jordan. Assad, deterred by threats from the United States and Israel, could not commit air power in support of Syrian tanks, and Jordan consequently routed them. The radical wing moved to dispose of Assad, who answered back with his own successful military coup, the so-called, ‘Corrective Movement’ (Seale 1990: 154-161; Hinnebusch 2004: 54; Kjetil 2011: 193).

At the 1971 11th National Congress, the now president Assad reformulated the goal of the Ba’th revolution stating that “the advancement [to] which all resources and manpower [would be] mobilised [was to be] the liberation of occupied territories” while insisting there was to be no change in the regime’s nationalist and socialist line. There was here a shift of emphasis, with the liberation of lost territory taking precedence over the liberation of Syrian workers and the fallāḥīn (Hinnebusch 2004: 65-66).
Redistributive measures were not entirely abandoned; Assad was a pragmatist ready to make the necessary overtures to the Arab monarchies and the USSR from whom he acquired massive sums of financial aid and cheap arms, respectively. Aid, investment, and oil supplies become “Syria’s lifeblood” (Haddad 2009: 37). Assad began cautiously to invite further capital by liberalising certain elements of the economy, attracting domestic, expatriate and Arab investment (Hinnebusch 2004: 89). These gains enabled the regime to continue developing its politically essential public sector, while maintaining its populist legitimacy by cutting prices on basic commodities by a further 15 percent. Other gestures of support to the bourgeoisie included purging the much-despised security services and removing some restrictions on travel, trade and the private sector (Seale 1990: 71).

Assad achieved some success in modernising Syria’s agriculture and industrial sectors. His principle legacy in this regard was the completion of the Tabqa dam in 1974; this project increased irrigation provision while generating electricity that further facilitated techno-industrial expansion in Syria. As a result, the lot of the fallāḥ and workers continued to improve through greater welfare services, better hospitals and better education (Reich 1990: 56). Yet ideological and rhetorical stress fell increasingly on the need for liberation from external foreign threats, but this itself is a reaction based on the security concerns that did, in many ways, require that the military was reinforced and rebuilt given tangible threats against national sovereignty.

The regime went to war several times, with Israel in 1973, from ‘76-82 on its own turf with militant Islamists, and from ‘76 onwards with various forces in Lebanon. On the whole, this has meant that the barrel of the gun has increasingly dictated economic policy (Kadri 2014). However, under liberalisation the sectors of the population who normally lose out — workers, public sector employees, and the fallāḥ — had already been incorporated into a regime coalition, whereas the usual benefactors of liberalization, the bourgeoisie, had been largely displaced from political office. Any liberalisation had to be checked against the instability of such a state, thanks to both internal class conflict and external military vulnerabilities. From the 1990s onwards much of the development programme was handed over to international firms and private businesses and thereby further fused linkages between public and private capital. The need for regime stability further promoted patrimonisation of the state centre. Requiring leaders he could rely on, Assad turned to available kin and tribal loyalties in place of ideology; in so doing his actions further enhanced and strengthened the sectarian links now deployed to safeguard his rule. Thus, from the once impoverished fallāḥ, Alawi barons now emerged around Assad, they were transformed into a privileged elite with
client links stretching back to their rural communities. ‘Controlled liberalization’ meant practically that special privileges in the private sector were handed out only to those Assad could trust through proven loyalty or whose loyalty could be purchased (Haddad 2009: 39).

The resentment of being ‘left out’ heightened a Sunni sense of identity and the need to ‘defend privilege’ enhanced the Alawis’ position (Hinnebusch 2004: 70). Critically we see that sectarianism is not some ‘pre-modern force’ existing outside of history and therefore capable of ‘explaining’ political developments in SWANA; rather, sectarianism is imbricated in the formation of capitalist development itself, as well as the responses to the normalised crisis of sovereignty in the region (Chit 2014). The picture is more complicated than ‘Alawi rule’; an Alawī military core was tied to a broader social base via bureaucratic and party institutions that cut through sectarian and urban-rural cleavages (Batatu 1981). Even after the slowing of the early revolutionary project, the regime’s constituency was still a sizeable population (Hinnebusch 2012: 97).

The 1973 October War with Israel further enhanced legitimacy, yet total victory was impossible given the technological superiority of Israeli weapons, owing in large part to deep ties with the United States. With the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood gained a foothold in the cities to the north of Damascus and an urban rebellion commenced. This unrest results from another perpetual and manipulatable threat to regime stability in the guise of a Sunni merchant/clerical link. Thus, as ‘unity through socialism’ eroded thanks to external military threats which were financially draining, Islamism, often encouraged through Gulf money, was set free to fill welfare gaps left in the state’s shadow.

Islamism appeared to have had the capacity to articulate growing Sunni grievances regarding the domination of the political and military scene by men of rural Alawī fallāḥīn extraction. The regime brutally suppressed the uprising, an act only possible given the loyalty of the army to Damascus and the Ba’th party core. To prevent a reoccurrence, the state’s intelligence agencies mushroomed in number, and so too did praetorian guard units. To keep these units in check, the regime turned a blind eye to evidently corrupt practices, allowing for self-enrichment to breed a parasitic class who further drained the public sector and obstructed private industry renewal. Eventually:

The economic vulnerabilities of the system were exposed by the economic slump of the late 1980s. The crisis was met by an austerity policy that starved the public sector, froze social benefits and slashed the earning power of the state employed middle class; by the 1990s, government spending had dropped from half to a quarter of GNP (Hinnebusch 2012: 97).
Amongst the regime’s leaders, a consensus in the 1990s begun to emerge that the only answer to economic vulnerabilities was to try and restart private investment as an engine for growth. This consensus was enforced through the fall of Syria’s essential Soviet patron and the beginning of the peace process with Israel; aid flows thus declined. The Ba’th’s nationalist agenda had little option but turning inward for investment in place of aid. Syria still had some solid capital flows thanks to its own modest oil reserves, but it was predicted that these would run dry after the turn of the century. Under the watch of the United States, the regime explored the possibility of peace with Israel in a way that might prove satisfactory to both Syrian nationalists and to foreign capital that might be tempted back into investment (ibid; Haddad 1990; Hinnebusch 1995; Perthes 1997).

In sum, under Hafiz al-Assad, the regime remained somewhat resistant to total economic liberalisation and tried to balance the interests of its old popular constituencies with the interests of a newly emerging bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, under Hafiz al-Assad the foundations were laid for future reforms. Liberalisation was rooted in an economic crisis caused by a state whose autonomy was secured through redistributive and nationalist policies. These policies diverted resources into consumption and while patrimonial strategies subverted public sector accumulation. This strategy was itself informed by the erosion of sovereignty due to the drastic military imbalance between Syria and Israel and the need to attract oil money in the form of capital and aid, requiring a détente with neighbouring Western-backed monarchies and expatriate capitalists, who, in turn, demanded a liberalizing of the economy. Thus the regime was forced to tolerate reconstruction of the capitalist class as the main engine of accumulation.

This process of liberalisation has intensified into something combining neoliberalism, and even tighter family nepotism under Bashar al-Assad and his chief technocrat, Abdullah Dardari (Haddad 2005). Soon after assuming power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad introduced wide-ranging economic reforms that lay an irreversible foundation for a market-driven economic order. “[Bashar al-Assad] enacted an investment-promoting decree; privatized state farms; introduced a private banking system; liberalized capital and trade accounts; heavily reduced customs duties; and promoted private sector-led investment at the expense of state-led investment” (Matar 2012). This resulted in:

Investment rates [increasing] from 17 percent of GDP in 2000 to 23 percent in 2007. While state-led investment decreased following the liberalization measures, private investment increased and was concentrated in short-term
or single-deal attempts in the trade, finance, real estate, and service sectors. Billions of dollars of Arab investment, especially from the Gulf, poured into Syria and were directed into real estate. This led to a boom in land prices, especially in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo. Syria’s share of intraregional Arab investment registered 9.9 per cent in 2007 as total investment reached $787 million, 6.5 times higher than its 2002 level. As such, the Syrian economy appeared to be on the upswing. Yet, investment in the real economy or the productive sectors of the economy retreated. The share of agricultural investment out of total investment fell from 16 percent in 2000 to 9 percent in 2007. Moreover, investment in industry dwindled, causing the once exporting local industrialists to switch to importing or trading (Matar 2012: 2).

This ‘economic growth’ did not generate further employment. Instead it contributed to a widening of the gap between the wealthy and poor, with funds siphoned away from the party’s base. Assad anticipated resistance in the early 2000s, expressed though his decision to cut off fallāḥīn and worker unions’ funding in an attempt to minimise popular avenues for the expression of hostility (Hinnebusch 2012: 99). Yet the sheer weight of 250,000 young Syrians entering the labour market per year, thanks to a significant demographic boom in the 1990s, were unable to secure native employment. This fact could not fail but generate resentment. Official figures suggest an 8.1 percent unemployment rate, yet Syrian economists in 2009 were estimating the rate as closer to 24.4 per cent. Others have put unemployment figures at 30 percent just prior to the uprising (Matar 2013; Kilah 2013: 127). Rising unemployment rates and job insecurity can be linked in part to the long-term contraction of the traditional manufacturing sector given that, since the 1970s, the economy had largely relied on geopolitical and oil rents rather than productive and employment-generating investment. The Syrian manufacturing sector was particularly hard hit by the decision by the regime to remove restrictions on Turkish and Chinese imports in 2007 (Azmeh 2014). Despite assertions that this would stimulate the economy and increase investment, poverty and inequality also accelerated despite some overserved growth in national income (ibid) Seven million people were living below the poverty line, the poverty rate as a whole was 34.3 percent in 2010. In rural areas, it hovered at around 62 percent (ibid).

Between 2007-2010 the Syrian countryside suffered a severe drought at a time when subsidies were being withdrawn across the agricultural sector’s inputs, with a matched decline in prices and neglect of agro-planning and cooperatives (Hinnebusch 2012: 102). At this time too, shanty towns around urban centres were bloating with rural workers as well as Iraqi refugees. In the city, the influx of Gulf capital and the removal of rent controls meant that urban housing costs accelerated beyond the wallet of the middle and lower classes (Goulden 2011: 187-202). Economic liberalization was removing even the prior limits on corruption
and thus the regime “jettisoned its former popular constituency” hoping the gap would be picked up by the charities and religious institutions (Hinnebusch 2012: 102).

Even by the IMF’s own standards, many of these reforms ought to have been the last items tackled given that alternative social support mechanisms were absent; there were no measures in place that would have softened the impact of rising prices (e.g. Heller and Keller 2002). Consider that, in Syria, the price attached to a basket of eggs, which represents the principal protein source for many rural children, has risen since the 1990s threefold, while the egg merchant’s profits rose at a corresponding rate (Kadri 2011). For the merchant class, this amounted to a gift from the state (ibid). Whereas prior to the reforms, prices and profits were capped by the state, the post-reform situation freed prices and profits. Before free markets can replace state planning, there need to be markets in the first place, i.e. a series of legal, political and institutional reforms are first required to set the competitive stage. The Syrian state instead allowed the merchant class to jack up previously controlled prices without competition, thus devastating large portions of the population (ibid).

CONCLUSION
The central hotspots in the Syrian uprising have been predominantly rural (e.g. Deraa, Deir Ezzor, Idlib) or in cities with strong connections to their outlying countryside (e.g. Aleppo, Homs, Hama). However, drawing a direct line of causality between the shifts described in Syria’s political economy above and the protest movement risks missing a diverse array of internal and external factors that also played a significant role in bringing people to the street.

Ba’th rule was largely based on a fundamental socio-economic compromise between the regime and its subjects, one-party rule was tolerated, even as a single family increasingly dominated that rule, because a social and economic system remained in place that functioned to prevent absolute poverty and rampant inequality. In addition, there was the very real cost of confronting the regime. This cost had been made clear in February 1982 when Hafiz al-Assad levelled Hama in response to the Islamist uprising. The chapters that follow explore the various socio-cultural mechanisms that meant that, in the end, the fear of such costs collapsed and the so-called ‘barrier of fear’ fell.

From the mid-1990s, and more rapidly in the 2000s, the regime dismantled an economic system that functioned around the tripartite goals of ‘unity, liberty and socialism.’ This state-led system allowed a small space for private-sector growth that benefited from protectionism and control over the market. For the men who feature in this thesis, this provided subsidies on food, energy and agricultural inputs as well as free education and a
health service. Employment opportunities were generated through public and state-owned companies that were capable of absorbing some of the labour force. To maintain unity, the state turned a blind eye to tax avoidance and implemented a weak taxation system at best (Azmeh 2014). This substantial state infrastructure was upheld through the sale of oil in the 1980s and ‘90s.

With the rise of Bashar, it was clear that the system risked collapse: oil stock declined and profits tailed off, “Syria increasingly resembled an oil-exporting political and economic system but without oil” (ibid: 20). While markets were further liberalised, the regime did not seek to change the state’s limited role in relation to profit-seeking activities by implementing, for example, a progressive and enforced taxation system. This system would have at least softened the impact of the reforms on Syria’s rural communities by redistributing newly emergent wealth concentrations. Instead, the regime presided over a process that witnessed the emergence of a crony capitalist economy by unifying the military-business links.

The cost of economic reform was paid for by Syria’s poor, ending the pact of unity, liberty, and socialism. The subsidy system was stripped with employment in the public sector no longer guaranteed and there were even attempts to limit and financialise the education and health system (ibid). There seemed to be no forward planning or even basic research into the ground conditions. Why otherwise would any economic department advocate the reduction of agricultural input support, and removal of guaranteed pricing, right in the middle of the severe drought of 2008 onwards? What resulted was a complete socio-economic collapse in certain areas (de Châtel 2014).

The removal of trade protection had severe impacts. The small manufacturing economy faced major shocks; producers of electronics, textiles, food products and furniture found they could not compete with the cheap imports flowing in from Turkey and China (Azmeh 2014: 21). These manufacturing sectors were key in absorbing some of the rural workforces. Located primarily on the outskirts of Damascus and Aleppo, they drew their employees from the rural hinterland.

On top of this, an often-overlooked contributing factor in explaining the strains faced by the Syrian economy from the mid-1990s onwards is, indeed, the population boom. Much academic literature on Syria refers to the social policies of Hafiz al-Assad having handed over matters of ‘society and culture’ to religion in a pact with the Islamist opposition (on Islam and the regime see: Khatib 2011; Pierret 2013). One gets the impression that under the rubric of ‘society and culture’ fall women, and such issues as birth control, sex education and
the possibility for more anti-natalist family-planning policies that, had they have been implemented, might have reduced the surging unemployment figures.

Given all of the above, I would argue that when Bilal, in a mocking tone, replied to his cousin’s provocation with the slogan of the Ba’th party, he was not, in fact, mocking the goals themselves. Instead, it is perhaps more accurate to understand his humour as directed toward the idea the Ba’th party has any role or desire in realising them. Popular antagonisms toward the regime’s reality as a body working increasingly in the favour of a narrow state elite were elsewhere expressed through the protest movement directly. In Deraa, for example, demonstrations were called for outside of Syriatel, a company in which Bashar al-Assad’s cousin maintained a significant stake.

Amongst the Syrian rebel-workers I know, there is no cynical postmodern disavowal of all political projects of transformation writ large. In fact, what they spent most of their time actually debating and talking about were projects of revolutionary transformation. Rather, they reject the current government presenting itself as the engine for transformations. And as with anywhere in the world, the principal interest of Syria’s rural and working population has been its security and the betterment of its conditions.

These interests were increasingly central to the Syrian state during the period when the Ba’th party shifted its ideological emphasis away from ‘pan-Arab unity’ as a goal in and of itself, to a more limited nationalism with a population to be ‘unified’ — meaning limiting other potential sectarian, regional or class cleavages — through socialist economic measures. These measures were to contribute to the final Ba’thist goal of ‘liberty,’ the liberty of Aflaq’s ‘New Arab,’ empowered in her freedom from the domination of colonialism, traditionalism and feudalism. These measures did indeed alleviate deprivation, poverty, illiteracy and premature morbidity that had prevailed after independence.

In the context of imperialist assaults; the fall of oil revenues and the retreat of socialist powers, pro-poor policies and welfare programmes have also retreated. This retreat occurred in the region with the world’s highest frequency of international wars, acting to institutionalise crisis further and normalise militarisation. With a deep imbalance of forces, industrial capital has disengaged from Syria, leaving only the predominance of the merchant mode of accumulation; the ruling class no longer reproduced itself on the national level but instead, especially under Bashar al-Assad, grabbed and divested assets, shrunk welfare provisions, dolarised the economy, and shifted assets abroad. This is a process of (re)embourgeoisement and is the economic foundation of the Syrian uprising.
Social movement’ refers here to the process whereby an assembly of actors articulate shared interests and antagonisms while proposing solutions to their mutually identified problems. These movements typically have a singularly identified opponent (there ‘the regime’ but elsewhere ‘the government’), they are structured through informal networks rather than political parties, and their mechanisms are geared toward propagating and maintaining collective identities (see Porta and Diani 2006).

Social movements may engage in formal political processes but they might also deploy, ‘contentious politics’ which here, following Tarrow (2013: 7) refers to:

[...] episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when: (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants or objects of claims.

Contentious politics, in this sense, includes social movements, but it also includes less sustained forms of contention—like riots and strike waves—and more extensive ones—like civil wars, revolutions, and episodes of democratization—and it intersects with routine political processes—like elections and interest group politics.

The degree to which this Zizek quote is applicable in Syria is debatable given that he is here specifically talking about Western Europe and North America, where the texture of ideology and the nature of the state’s repressive apparatus is distinct to Syria. More instructive might be a comparison with Alexei Yurchak’s work (2013) where he suggests that actually a lack of internal compliance did, in fact, weaken Soviet communism. This appears the case in Syria too given that a lack this internal compliance did eventually culminate in resistance. The emergence of resistant subjectivities is discussed more concretely in the following chapter.

Ali Kadri (2014) argues that the Arab bourgeoisie were actually quite at ease with the defeat, because the defeat removed the populist state regulation of the sixties and seventies that inhibited their growth.

David Harvey calls this ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (eg. 2003 162-169) and through this term he identifies four neoliberal practices of privatisation, financialisation, management and manipulation of crisis and state redistribution. The result of these processes is that the Arab world has entered into a process of accumulation by dispossession and, hence de-development. De-development does not then signify comparative underdevelopment, but captures the actual process of eroding and deconstructing developing world(s) and stripping from the people their right to own and control their resources for their own benefit. It does remain possible to observe narrow strips of accumulation by commodity realisation and peaceful market expansion in the Arab world (economic growth), the preponderance of violently imposed social dislocation, rents structured around oil, and commercial, as opposed to industrial, activity unequivocally indicate that accumulation by extra-economic means (dispossession) holds primacy over the course of events (Kadri 2010).

By normalised crisis I mean also the banality of the word itself when deployed to describe events in South West Asia and North Africa. As Ali Kadri has also noted (2011):

There is a euro-centric tone to the word crisis in an underdeveloped region that has had the highest rates of conflicts globally. In the totality of existence, which is called underdevelopment, where wars and displacement rage in countries like Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Palestine, and where after some three decades of high positive growth rates nearly a third of Egyptian children suffer from malnutrition, the word crisis has little or no meaning for it is an everyday occurrence. This is rather reminiscent of Chekhov’s words: ‘even an imbecile can cope with a crisis. It’s the everyday life that exhausts us.’

If ‘corruption’ and ‘cronyism’ is defined as the misallocation of public goods for private use then it seems an essential part of every capitalist economic system; thus these terms ever refer only to emic conceptions of ‘good allocation’ and ‘bad allocation’. Thus my concern is limited to where informants would identify ‘wasta’ (nepotism) and ‘fasād’ (corruption).

Abdullah mentioned smuggling to me to suggest the fluid movement of people and goods across the border in spite of what is assumed to be a politically artificial border. This focus was not surprising given that his family do not directly profit from the smuggling trade; he probably images costs would be reduced on black market goods if smugglers are removed. The degree to which smugglers are happy about the collapse of the border is, however, another question entirely.
That is not to suggest even direct Ottoman rule was not without its supporters. See Hasan Kayali for detail on the varying degrees of support and dissension to be found at that time (1997: 196-200).

Post-Ottoman Syria lacked a military tradition within its upper classes. Thus this institution was always already susceptible to the formation of counter-elites and given this absence the French built the army up from the lower classes and minority sects.

Perlmutter (1969) argues that, at that time, it’s not that these military coups were less representative of public opinion than elections but that, given the opening up of military academies with their provision of scholarships for fallâh and working class youths, the armed forces were often more directly reflective of popular opinion than the elite-dominated parliament.
CHAPTER TWO
The People Demand

As for the larger Arab context, those who call what has unfolded in the last year in the Arab World as an Arab ‘awakening’ are not only ignorant of the history of the last century, but also deploy Orientalist arguments in their depiction of Arabs as a quiescent people who put up with dictatorship for decades and are finally waking up from their torpor.

Joseph Massad (2011)

The beginning of the revolution is a subject of mystery; its causes are not really understood. We knew the regime; we knew the secret police, and we knew their power. You wouldn’t simply gamble with your life or the lives of the people. We have been very patient, for four decades we were willing to get lower and lower, and then suddenly we woke up from sleep and decided to fly […] we rose into freedom.

Shadi

INTRODUCTION

The pairing of Shadi and Joseph Massad’s remarks may appear troubling. Massad — a scholar whose work critically engages with colonialism, neo-imperialism, and Zionism — is alarmed by Western media’s propensity to narrate the SWANA uprisings as spontaneous instances of ‘political agency’ emerging from decades of ‘passive submission.’ Whereas Shadi — a 22-year-old dish washer in an upmarket Lebanese restaurant — was reminiscing to me about the early stages of Syria’s uprising. Massad worries about ostensibly politically motivated ahistorical reductions of the Arab uprisings to ‘democratic springs’ that have finally succeeded in overthrowing or at least challenging the Arab world’s autocrats (e.g. Lynch 2011). On first reading, it could appear Shadi was forming a similar account — with parallel (auto)orientalising overtones.

Building on the models of hegemony, populism and revolutionary subjectivity as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; 1990; 1996; 2005) in this chapter I want to argue that ‘awakening narratives’ like Shadi’s might point toward something else; namely, the intensification of a ‘discursive frontier’ working to divide Syrian society into two ‘socially recognised’ camps: ‘al-sh’ab wa al-nizām’ [the people and the regime]. It is this process of ‘bifurcation and consolidation’ that undercuts many of the ‘waking up’ narratives documented below. Indeed, this metaphorical turn of phrase represents a narrative flourish
capturing how Shadi and others, following the 2011 uprisings, and with thanks to a particularly unified/unifying struggle, began to feel themselves as members of ‘a people,’ or ‘the people,’ constituted, defined and mutually recognised through their opposition to ‘the regime.’ In this analytic framework, Shadi’s statement need not necessarily point toward an insidious web of neo-imperialist machinations nor to (auto)orientalising renderings of prior ‘passivity,’ but instead it may simply highlight some of the socio-political practices through which ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ and ‘taṣāḥum’ [solidarity] was formed, constituted and socially recognised.

In the chapters that follow, these initial ruptures and their attendant emotions of excitement, hope, and joy are set against the reality of a prolonged civil war. At this point, however, my aim is limited to an *emic* account of ‘revolutionary narratives.’ From these narratives, I look toward moments through which ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ is first constituted. The chapters that follow build on this analysis to reveal the mechanisms through which these subjectivities come to be maintained, represented or transformed in reaction to rebel-worker displacement in Lebanon, as well as the complicated splintering witnessed since the uprising transitioned into a civil and proxy war. So, if — as the philosopher Jacques Rancière has suggested — “politics comes about solely through interruption,” (2004: 21) what could this mean for the Syrian revolution, where initial moments of disruption — and the surge in revolutionary thought and action — have now systematised and stagnated into a bloody stalemate?

In answering such questions with a chapter on revolutionary hope, I’m laying the groundwork here for later chapters that document how individuals committed to the revolution came to deal with the seemingly unfathomable levels of loss generated by the Syrian civil war.

The preceding chapter identified some of the historical links between Ba’thist state’s authoritarian apparatus, its populist discourse, its growth, and its retreat in applying redistributive measures and how these actions were historically tied together with the regime’s drive to mobilise, unite and control the masses. It concluded that in the initial moments of the Syrian uprisings these arrangements, which were already for some time weakened, began to collapse entirely. The Syrian government has — through both its recent socio-economic policy direction and its capacity and willingness to forcefully respond to the protest movement — seemingly lost control over sections of its popular base. Shadi experienced this loss of control in the opening quotation. He said to me, “we knew the secret police; we knew their power;” — that is, the state’s authoritarian practices — but then
“suddenly we woke up from sleep.” Popular awakening narratives like this appear to work as metaphorical utterances that simultaneously express and constitute the process of ‘becoming a rebel’ and ‘identifying with the opposition’ in a manner socially recognisable to others. But what sort of antagonisms lay behind this moment of awakening?

DEMANDS

Revolutionary demands amongst rebel-workers were numerous, typically they would include, ‘an increase (or a return to) state assistance in agricultural production’; ‘an end to ‘economic corruption’; ‘replacing dictatorship with democracy’; ‘freedom of opinion and expression’; ‘the creation of employment opportunities for university graduates’; to ‘the ceasing of authoritarian terror practices within the security service.’ Most of these demands were not necessarily new. Rather what was new was the equivalent of chains of demands; that is their ‘knotting together’ across vast sectors of the Syrian population. What this meant was that the demand for ‘end/reform to military service’ could become discursively equivalent, and linked, with other unmet/emerging demands. From this, it can be argued that revolutionary subjectivity emerged when a series of demands individuals directed at the state were either refused or responded to only via transparent propaganda. For instance, many rebel-workers would point toward the fact the ‘state of emergency’ was cancelled but then simply replaced with equivalent ‘laws to fight terrorism.’

The popular representation of these various ‘equivalent chains of (unmet)demands’ leads, eventually, to certain demands functioning as signifiers that can ‘represent the chain as totality’ (Laclau 2005: 39). The further these webs of equivalences extend, the weaker the direct-particularistic connection must become if unique demands are to capture the multiplicity of socioeconomic grievances symbolically. The ‘vagueness’ of words like ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ can be read therefore as “a condition of their political efficacy” (ibid 40). Laclau classifies these words as ‘empty-signifiers’. Empty-signifiers lack a ‘defined content’ in the same way that words like ‘apple’ do.

Laclau (2005) concludes that these words are really ‘empty’ and can, therefore, be ‘filled with meaning,’ and in so doing bring chains of equivalences to a point of collective articulation by ‘the people.’ So it is that the ‘the people’ now ‘awake’ come to ‘demand freedom’ from ‘the regime.’ In this process ‘demand’ has shifted into its second English meaning — a ‘fighting demand’— and with this change the revolutionary impulse can be identified.
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‘Demands,’ if they are responded to ‘differentially’ tend not to question structural political arrangements. It is generally accepted by a state’s population that they lack the power to decide what’s to be done — the government decides and citizens petition. In this sense, the development of the welfare state across Europe represents one avenue through which the state differentially answers citizen grievances. If some particular community is struck by unemployment thanks to the closure of a major firm or company, then their aggregate demand for unemployment support might be responded to differentially through access to jobseeker’s allowance, re-training programmes, and the like. Rancière (2009) has defined this state-society relationship as the ‘order of the Police,’ whereas Laclau (2005) called it ‘administrative rule.’ Both scholars are united in the assumption that such a ‘relationship’ is not ‘politics’ — at least in any meaningful sense. For both theorists real ‘politics’ only begins at a point of ‘rupture,’ or ‘interruption,’ that comes first when citizens demand for more radical inclusion. An example:

My research assistant Abdullah and his school friend Haytham told me about a time that they assisted, around 2008, in establishing an evening child/adult literacy class. At the time both were living at home in eastern Syria; they were young and nearing the end of high school. Both report being full of enthusiasm about beginning such an exciting charitable endeavour. With the assistance of their local mosque, the boys began teaching an Arabic class. Both insist that while the curriculum certainly had ‘Islamic components,’ it was not fundamentalist, or, as they saw it, challenging to the regime. Somehow, nonetheless, the authorities got wind of this programme, and the boys were informed it was to be shut down. Back in 2014, this story was recounted to me in the midst of a conversation concerning the general situation back in their village following its occupation by Islamic State. Reflecting on the programme, Haytham stressed that it was teaching ‘true Islam’; I asked what he meant by that, and he referred then to general moral principles such as ‘tolerance’ and ‘justice.’ I pushed him further as to where the funding came from — “not from the Gulf,” he stressed.

“Really?” I said.

He admitted he wasn’t sure and thought perhaps it was from wealthy charitable locals. Regardless of the source, the point is that they imagined themselves as working toward ending the ‘ignorance’ in their province and that this is universally ‘a good thing.’ In fact, had they been permitted to continue the endeavour, Abdullah reasoned, the initiative might have somehow prevented his more misguided peers from having since signed up to fight alongside Islamic State.

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Stories similar to this were often recounted when I’d probe the guys for a few examples as to how exactly they conceptualised the regime and its authority prior to the uprising. What I wanted to find out was the degree to which these men envisioned the state as an enabler or a block to realising their aspirations. When I asked why they’d not gotten angry and objected to the closure of the programme, both stressed, ‘we were not really awake’ at that time and ‘what could we have done?’

It seems that in the wake of the rupturing impact of the uprising ‘re-telling and re-thinking’ of past events entails establishing different meanings. What once was considered ‘par for the course’ appears now lifted up into a broader chain of instances that highlight injustice. For example — and in reflection of Bilal’s sarcasm toward Ba’th slogans in the preceding chapter — younger rebel-workers would often recount to me stories around the curricula in school and their ideological components as being “biased,” and, “all lies.” Others might narrow in on the strict authority found in school which was, to quote a 32-year-old steel worker, basically “pharaonic.” Military service too, especially for those who’d completed it, would be flagged as a particularly exploitative experience. Finally, general economic and infrastructural grievances, often meaning the bad quality of roads or dirty water, as well as rising prices of basic goods, would be picked out as examples of deliberate deprivation caused by the regime.

Yet, prior to 2011, these grievances were endured. Many were not dealt with differentially by the state. There was not yet ‘a movement’ and consequently ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ was absent: “We were not revolutionaries then,” as Haytham put it.

This acceptance of ‘the way things are’ seems to point toward the fact that authoritarian state-society relations have a somewhat different texture to those in democratic welfare states. There was not then even an expectation that a petition could be mounted for re-instituting the programme. Authoritarianism, and its capacity to produce acquiescence to state power was viewed typically as “ādī wa shey ṭabī’ī” [normal and a natural thing]. An understanding of this compliance and its demise is much of what’s being signified when rebel-workers like Shadi deployed metaphors of ‘sleeping’ and ‘waking.’

This compliance was ruptured in the early phases of the Syrian uprising. The people of Deraa and its countryside went out into the streets and demanded that the state return children apprehended for writing Egyptian revolutionary slogans on their school walls. This demand was refused, more protests followed, and eventually, the tortured body of a child from a nearby village, Hamza al-Khatib, was returned to his parents. Hamza al-Khatib — who is discussed further in chapter four — became something of an empty-signifier [fig 1.0 vividly
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illustrates this. His body, and the plight of the people of Deraa became “signifiers of the popular camp in a new dichotomic discourse” (Laclau 2005: 39). Their struggle stood discursively for the suppression of all ‘the people’ by the regime. 53

Shadi, for instance, when I requested his reading of this moment in the uprising’s history said, “Hamza could easily have been my brother.” Similar sentiments have been expressed around Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and Khalid Said in Egypt (Beaumont 2011; Khamis and Vaughn 2012: 145-163). In short, these young men, with their particular difficulties and their ultimate fates, became universal stories concerned with broader citizen struggles right across SWANA.54

Yet the Syrian uprisings endured beyond these particular instances that initially focused predominantly on grievances concerning abuses by the state security services. It wasn’t long before additional demands for reform were collectively articulated in the street, and as these demands went unanswered, a correspondingly ‘vaguer set of objectives’ were raised. In the act of ‘the people’ demanding justice, they soon became defined by their lack of, and therefore also their demanding and desiring of, karāma [dignity], dīmuqrāṭiyya [democracy] tahrīr [liberation], ḫuqūq [rights] and so on. This essential link between ‘demands’ which are expressed through a (re)formed populist identity of ‘the people,’ is why Shadi, in the same breath, sees himself “waking up” and “rising into freedom” [ḥurriya].55 It is also why Haytham can say, “we were not revolutionaries then.” It was constantly stressed that, in the last instance, a desire “to be free” was what really pushed al-shāb [the people] into the streets. With this understanding, one might actually make the claim that ‘politics’ — that is, ‘politics as rupture’ — did, at least from the perspective of Shadi’s generation began on March 15th, 2011.

Yet for Joseph Massad (2011) this vocabulary, as it spreads out across column inches and television reports, is not ‘empty,’ but carries a distinct historical and ideological significance. He tells us that the use of ‘spring’ in the ‘Arab Spring’ is engineered to remind us of the Prague Spring — an event now (deliberately) framed as a popular demand for liberalism, freedom and democracy when, in actuality, outcomes were enforced through a top-down coup which crushed worker’s interests and, in the year 2011, these words are read as evidence for a neo-imperialist strategy aimed at directly shaping the uprising’s goals. 56 This plan plays out through the elite media’s intense focus on a narrow clique of “professional, managerial and upper middle classes,” who support ‘neoliberal economics’; this combines with the wilful neglect of the multitudes, that is the fallāḥīn, the unemployed or the working
class whose demonstrations, strikes, and marches often carry distinct anti-liberalisation demands (Massad 2011; 2012).

So, back to the fundamental question: have the factors identified in the preceding chapter, which structurally informed patterns of migration and protest alike — namely chronic unemployment, the destruction of agriculture price controls, declining wages and antagonisms toward ‘corruption’ in the regime — found, even for workers, their imagined solution in bourgeois capitalist democracy?

My answer is the rather obvious point that reality and terminology are often mutually constitutive. Thus, uprisings are not simply mechanically shaped by terminology, rather, underlying socio-economic and political grievances can also shape terminology. Syrian fallâhîn and workers were not, in their use of ‘democratic spring’ vocabulary, advocating anything like free trade, privatisation, minimal government, or deregulation. In Judith Butler’s (2009) sense such a neoliberal notions of freedom did not even ‘enter the frame.’ Rather, words like ‘freedom,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘dignity’ appeared to be so void of ‘particularistic content’ that they could be uttered by an opposition-aligned Western-educated liberal activist in a chic Damascus café, and by Shadi from his sink in Beirut, with both still considering themselves as part of a unified ‘people’ fighting the ‘regime’ regardless of their highly distinct circumstances.

The remainder of this chapter returns first to Shadi and from his grievances with the Syrian regime then describes Laclau’s theory of populism further before advocating the need for ethnographic contingency. This contingency is necessary as it allows one to ask not merely what empty signifiers are doing on a discursive level, but not why this signifier and not others. To strengthen this context, two additional ethnographic cases will be analysed: First, Jamal, a Hamawi from a trade-orientated family and then his friend, Abdullah, my principal research assistant who, as we’ve already seen, has a fallâh background and is from the Deir Ezzor countryside. While both occupy the lower rungs of the Syrian socio-economic ladder they have distinct demands that I argue are unified through the populist political terminology they deploy.

**SHADI**

Shadi is originally from a rural village on the banks of the Euphrates, close to the Syrian-Iraqi border town of Abu Kamal. At the time of writing, this border has collapsed. As with his friends Abdullah and Haytham, Shadi’s home has now been incorporated into the Islamic
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State. Shadi is about 5ft 9in with dark hair neatly combed and waxed back. He often sports tight jeans and pointed shoes or white trainers and dark coloured shirts.

In a familiar story, Shadi planned only a temporary migration to Lebanon perhaps, he thought, to eventually gather cash for reinvestment back home. Yet as the uprising transformed into revolutionary civil war, Shadi found that, with each passing month, his remittances grew more vital. What little strength the rural economy exhibited faded into memory: “al-zirā’a kanat bitkaff [agriculture was sufficient] we once could live on it, if we had to,” he told me.

Migration was largely considered supplementary. On occasion Shadi’s family were even able to deploy accumulated funds to hire relatively impoverished locals to work their land, this move further enabled his father to generate even more income as a taxi driver in Kuwait. Yet, beginning in 2006, Shadi, though still young, can recall belts tightening. His family’s cotton crops were generating less revenue. Then, to top it off, his father contracted back problems that inhibited his ability to drive for long hours.

In the first instance, Shadi’s decision to migrate can be set against his story of declining family welfare and limited alternative employment opportunities. Critically, he now sees these socio-economic conditions as having informed his sympathies toward the emerging opposition movements and culminated in his desire to join initial protests as they rolled out across rural Deir Ezzor. Despite an initial sense of hope that these demonstrations might provide an answer to hardship, he decided in the summer of 2011 that he would travel to join his cousin for work in Beirut and perhaps even enrol in university.

Shadi told me that once he made the decision, it was done — he is that kind of guy. However, at the time, he’d still express a sense of sadness that he had left the movement. This sadness was offset, at the time, by the fact he was looking forward to his life in Lebanon. Describing himself as “open-minded,” Shadi wanted nothing more than to escape the village’s conservatism. Just like his eventual university friend Abdullah, he’d developed a wild imagination of bountiful pleasures and rich prospects in Beirut. And, more poetically, he also spoke about his excitement in “seeing mountains and the sea instead of the flat desert.”

Roughly one year later, Shadi was watching a Syrian workers football league from the sidelines of Beirut’s Palestinian camp, Sabra [Fig 1.2]. The game, held every Sunday, takes place in a rusty ramshackle AstroTurf cage overlooked by Mahmoud and Haytham’s flat in Sabra. By this point, I’d been moved to the sidelines; it had become abundantly clear ‘alinglizi’ [the Englishman] was not the secret weapon on the pitch that my friends had been hoping for. Assigned the less physically demanding role of “looking after the mobile phones,”
I decided instead to slip off and buy an espresso and a pack of cigarettes. The vendor, a local Lebanese man, regularly subjected me to his suspicious gaze. But this time, he’d decided just to proceed with direct questioning: “Who do you know here?”

“Allah,” I replied.

All of a sudden Shadi, who’d been standing close by cut in and said, “He’s our friend, it’s not a problem.” He swiftly ushered me away. Now at a distance, Shadi continued, “That guy is with ḥarakeh,” and “don’t talk to him too much, he might report you, he probably just thinks you’re a spy.”

Still a little nervous despite Shadi’s understatement I thanked him.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We know how to stop trouble with these guys.”

While I’d seen Shadi around we had never really talked much, so I took the opportunity to introduce myself officially. Shadi was not dressed to play football, and as I noted this to him, he said he was more of a spectator than a player.

“Me too,” I said with relief.

Shadi spoke with a mixture of Beiruti and Damascene Arabic. Like most people he had encountered in Lebanon, he assumed (rightly) that I would have difficulty understanding his native eastern Syrian dialect but he could make these linguistic adjustments comfortably. This skill not only eased the job of an anthropologist but, as we shall see in the later chapters, has more practical uses regarding the avoidance of abuse and interrogation in a wide range of situations.

Shadi had come to adopt the Lebanese tendency of dropping certain English expressions into the conversation, replacing, for example, “mi’a bil mi’a,” with “one hundred per cent.” Even so, his political vocabulary remained distinctly Arabic. And it is his vocabulary that returns me to the main question: Shadi constantly talked of ‘democracy, freedom and liberation’ and so on. Given this, it might be tempting to argue a small clique of Western-orientatated liberal elites have entirely succeeded in setting the terms of the debate and that therefore the popular revolution never really was, and Shadi is just another CIA patsy co-opted and ticked into a struggle which, in reality, never articulated his interests. Yet patsy or not, Shadi was politicised. And I liked him almost immediately. From our brief introductory pleasantries, he delved directly into an expansive monologue on what “freedom meant for Syrians.” I learned that he generally classifies himself as a supporter of the FSA, but that he’d “only participated peacefully,” in one or two demonstrations, as well as via ‘the media’ [al-i’lām] by which he meant Facebook and WhatsApp groups. These groups and mobile phones will take centre stage in the next chapter; for now, what Shadi proposed to me on our first
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meeting was that ‘freedom’ is impossible when one has a government actively denying citizens karāma [dignity].

“So what do you mean by dignity?” I retorted, “and how does the government take it from you?”

“Dignity is close to freedom,” he explained, “it means a government assists its people so they can do what they want with their life,” and they should “not let people go hungry; [they should] provide jobs … all these young men I know, back home, have nothing. No opportunities … or if they do work, it’s usually in low paid jobs. We should also not be punished for having an opinion on this.”

Shadi then gestured to the ragged football pitch and pointed to the pristine and evidently more expensive one next door: “this is the discrimination government should prevent — we have no dignity here, we play next to the Lebanese on their expensive pitch: we play in trash.”

Continuing with this theme, Shadi said “have you seen the mountain of trash near Sayda? [fig 1.2],” “yes”, I replied. “And what’s your opinion?,” Shadi asked. “Don’t you laugh? The Lebanese are arrogant [shā‘īfīn ḥālun], they say this is an advanced country, and then you go south, and there’s a mountain of trash next to the sea — it is a symbol of all the corruption and all that’s wrong with this government: how can they call this freedom if there is no dignity?”

“Well, ok, I get your point,” I said, “but what about Syria?”

“Oh, it’s just as bad, maybe worse: not only does the government not care about its citizen’s dignity, but it always tries to take [strip] it from us.”

Shadi went on to expound how institutions, like military service, strip “the people’s dignity” forcing them to act like slaves for corrupt officers.

“This is not a democracy. We can’t say no; we can’t protest conditions.”

Democracy in this instance means something direct, not just exercising a vote in a parliamentary election, it means the ability to influence decisions; to have a series of demands answered; to control one’s own destiny and certainly not to be subjected to arbitrary exercises of power. Democracy, freedom, and dignity all appear interrelated.

The critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss has also stressed this, writing that: “[…] in a post-colonial context, dignity matters. Better put, dignity is freedom in a different sense, as liberation from Western hegemony […] if the adoption of Western-defined freedom brings with it submission to Western power, the purported goal is undermined by the self-alienating means” (2003: 46). So perhaps Shadi’s political imagination is achieving a similar resistance
through the tight yet at the same time vague connections drawn out between ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘dignity.’

In broader discussions, the cancellation or radical reform of military service represented a central and seemingly distinct contention. Shadi doubted whether genuine reform was possible but was not entirely against the idea of a future service that actually ‘works for the people.’ However, as military service stands, it exists only for ‘the regime’ and therefore to exploit everyone else.

Military service was also a personal matter: he did not serve in the military nor does he want to. Part of his motivation for signing up to university in Lebanon, despite not considering himself a scholar, was that it smoothes the way to reaching a (temporary) exemption from military service. University graduates are also permitted to serve shorter terms. His unrealised ‘demand’ for reforming the service was an as yet unmentioned factor which also structured his decision to migrate to Lebanon. The weight of military service that hung above his head and compelled him to leave his home was also connected to his idea of freedom deprivation and by extension his own lack of dignity. Here, in one of our interviews, he was very clear he has no intention of signing up:

They say to us come: serve your country! But the average citizen doesn't have anything, I mean, for real? I have to go and “serve my country” and they're not going to give me anything? The state must recognise that it, in fact, serves the people: we don't serve it. In this respect, it could do anything, even if it’s basic, just to help the conscript or his family. But more than this, they enlist us on the basis of a lies: liberating the Golan Heights and Palestine. Let us say we are emotional people, we don't like anyone to laugh at us, but unfortunately the regime is laughing at us. They are exploiting the people's kindness, but now we are awake, we see the oppression; they have taken [stripped] our dignity. They are cheap, they exploit the idea of liberating Palestine, but we don't liberate anything. We are not even liberated; we are not free. And anyway, it’s not like we actually could liberate Palestine: it’s all lies.

**POPULIST REASON**

If our analysis of sentiments like the above were to commence by setting down, as narrowly as possible, how Syrian rebel-workers define and specifically comprehend some of the most debated concepts in political philosophy, I think we would soon run into difficulty. Self-descriptions of revolutionary commitments were usually rather vague, often imprecise and typically multifaceted. Shadi, for example, revealed above how his ‘freedom’ is swamped with meanings. One could argue he is variously implying both positive and negative liberty mingled with Aristotelian notions of self-worth and human flourishing through active participation in the polis (cf. Berlin 1969). But he was also clearly expressing a levelling
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instinct toward concentrations of wealth and power. In other words, one might even claim Shadi’s ‘freedom’ was not all too distant from ‘equality’ (see also Laclau 2005: 76; Rudé 1964: 224-5).

In place of a taxonomic approach, I maintain that such evident polysemy is best understood if we assess the Syrian uprising, in its early phases, as a kind of leaderless populist struggle (see also Wieland 2012; Kila 2013). Elsewhere, populism, as a political formation, has been both analysed and politically denigrate for its apparent ‘imprecision’ and used of ‘rhetorically moving empty words’ assumed to ‘sway the masses’ (see: Canovan 1981; MacRae 1969). Populist politics, in this framework, contrasts with developed ‘politics’ due to its ‘ideological emptiness’; ‘anti-intellectualism’ and ‘transient surges of narrow self-interested struggle.’ Yet maintaining such a simplistic distinctions won’t get us analytically very far. Opposing ‘politics proper’ to ‘populism’ is a dead end — this move implies widening the definition of ‘populism’ to the point any distinction is lost, or it appears more concerned with ideologically dismissing mass movements rather than understanding their internal dynamics.

Laclau recognised these weaknesses and sought to provide an alternative conceptual framework. And my contention is that his framework can be quite easily adapted by anthropologists to further our understanding of popular struggle in ethnographic contexts. Laclau’s notes, for example, that “relative ideological simplicity and emptiness [of populism] are seen in most cases as the prelude to an elitist dismissal,” and he suggests instead that populism, “should be approached in terms of what those processes of simplification and emptying are attempting to perform — that is to say, the social rationality they express” (2005: 73). Thus he asks, “is not the ‘vagueness’ of populist discourse the consequence of social reality itself being, in some situations, vague and undetermined?” and therefore populism might be “a performative act endowed with rationality of its own — that is to say, in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to a constructing of relevant political meanings” (ibid: 17-18).

What his emphasis on performance means is that populism should be considered by form rather than content. The Syrian uprising can be framed as populist but not defined as such; “political practices do not express the nature of social agents but, instead constitute the latter” (Laclau 2005: 33 [my emphasis]). Thus, if populism has a distinctiveness then it lies a capacity already touched upon. Namely, populism works by ‘gathering together’ common grievances towards a political power or source of authority. This gathering appeared in Syrian rebel-worker political narratives when they juxtaposed themselves as ‘al-sha’b’ [The People]
who are locked into an enduring struggle with ‘al-nizām’ [The Regime]. This particular term, ‘the regime,’ is really here just a context specific instance of what Laclau classifies as ‘the institutionalised other’, meaning any given regimented bureaucratic centre of political power (2005:117).

The act of grouping together ‘the people’ must match often quite diverse interests with the revolutionary need for unification. Laclau maintains that such consolidation can be achieved through the centrality awarded to particular ‘series of demands’ that, within certain contexts, are capable of standing for the people’s typically heterogeneous grievances. These chains of demands are often themselves unified through the arrival of a particular ‘empty signifier,’ which might be a concept, such as ‘freedom,’ that lacks a direct specificity. And it is from this analytic perspective that ‘vagueness’ appears essential if singular concepts or demands are going to stand for more diverse arrays of grievances. However, mass movements through time have also often made use of quite particular demands in a similar way to more abstract demands like ‘freedom’. Often, in populist movements the unifying can thus appear to be a particular demand that — for contextually specific reasons — can be drained of its direct particularism (though not entirely). ‘Freeing the children of Deraa’ is a solid Syrian example, here the plight of the town’s schoolchildren could stand for the plight of all citizens in their struggle against repressive state violence. Laclau himself points to 1917, and how antagonisms within Russian society came to be unified by Lenin around the slogan, ‘Bread, peace and land.’ These three demands were evidently not the “conceptual denominator of all Russian social demands” — rather, through a process of over-determination, grievances which “had nothing to do with those three demands nevertheless expressed themselves through them” (Laclau 2005: 98).

‘Bread’ was also demanded in 2011 through the slogan: ‘al-khubz wa al-ḥurrīya’ [bread and freedom]. This call proliferated during the uprisings across SWANA (Cavatorta 2012; Dayoub 2012; Lynch 2011). In fact, in Arabic ‘khubz’ [bread] holds similar metaphorical associations as it does in English — meaning ‘sustenance’ in general. Therefore, expressed ‘through bread’ one finds conceptual notions of social justice vis-à-vis increasing poverty and inequality. But these slogans can’t directly stand for all the heterogeneous demands behind the Arab uprisings. Revolutionary language is not a transparent medium but is necessarily vague because the forces mass uprisings unify are themselves often unclear (Laclau 2005: 98). And so, despite all many wrangling with informants — “what society would you prefer to live in, one with liberty or one with equality?” — they would simply refuse to see the contradiction, for ‘the people’ bread means freedom and freedom means
bread. Perhaps circularity like this is also an essential component of revolutionary political language?

If yes, then assumptions that populism results from some marginal or primitive political logic are best avoided (ibid: 99). There’s always a performative aspect to language and language that is especially performative, like rhetoric, is not merely ‘vacant and moving’ but also potent and constitutive. Yet the Syrian uprising is still somewhat distinct in so far as it lacked a clear singular leader. Previous mass movements that took hold in the region were led by the likes of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and Ibrahim al-Hamdi in Yemen. However, during the Syrian uprising this absence was more than made up for by the rapid circulation of discourse — digitally or otherwise — amongst citizens themselves, and it was this circulation that, as we shall see, managed to constitute ‘the people.’ ‘The people’ stood for all of society and their aim was soon the total overthrow of what they understood to be an exploitative and parasitic class of rulers.

Chapter one described the historical processes through which a core section of the Syrian population became increasingly alienated from the regime’s project. These processes go some way in explaining why very rarely would opposition-committed individuals I met refer to the conflict as ḥarb ahlīya [civil war] — at least without certain clarifications. In these early moments, they were ‘the civil,’ that is: the whole and the regime and its supporters were rendered external aliens.

In sum, empty-signifiers work as ‘binding concepts’ stitching together a unified political movement: multiplicities of Syrians with varied socio-economic statuses were transformed into ‘al-ša’b’ who first called for a series of reforms [al-ša’b’ yurīd islāḥ al-nizām] which, when unmet, then called for the total downfall of the regime: [al-ša’b yurīd isqāṭ al-nizām]. Laclau provides an abstracted model of this process that appears to speak directly to SWANA:

Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shanty towns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise, and the group of people affected by them requests some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a demand which initially is perhaps only a request. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands — problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them in a differential way (each in isolation from the others), and an equivalent relation is established between them. The result could easily be, if it is not circumvented by external factors, a widening chasm separating the institutional system from the people (Laclau 2005: 73).
Isn’t this precisely what Shadi is achieving when he first told me, ‘wa‘îna min al nawm’ [we woke up from sleep]? The verb in Arabic, “wa‘îna” is derived from the root ‘wa‘ā’ which carries the more literal meaning of ‘to gain consciousness.’ He is thus designating a prior ‘non-political’ stage of unthinking and unconscious, a state of acceptance regarding socio-economic conditions (nawm), to which a new moment of critique and possibility were opening (w‘îna). Shadi is also bifurcating time, and such a move reveals, if nothing else, his own recognition of new attitudes, a new temporality and a new state of being (Rancière 2012; Badiou 2007).

Shadi was making a performative gesture that is qualitatively dissimilar to the Western media’s use of similar expressions, for it is not intended to be a ‘historically accurate expression’ of Syrian political passivity. Rather, the real root of Shadi’s awakening might be better located in the verbal suffix, na, that is, the first-person, plural personal pronoun: we. It is this ‘we’ that then goes on to complain that military service exploits the idea of ‘liberating Palestine’ when he says “we are not even liberated; we are not free.”

This is expressive and constitutive of the emerging and widening chasm between whatever hold the regime once had over the ‘the masses’ (cf. Wedeen 1999). It is also the heart of the ‘simplification’ which critics of populism oppose; yet such a simplification also appears as the necessary content for all political-ideological projects worth the name — only in a world where politics has been replaced entirely with an administration dealing with particularised differences would this tendency eliminated (Laclau 2007: 74).

March 2011, at least for my research participants, was indeed a rupture in the socio-political order. Consider how Shadi’s “we” and his use of “al-sha‘b” are linked. Political activity and contestation prior to 2011 were marked by specific demands, but these demands did not link to other demands across Syria, or even in the region more generally. It is this ‘process of linking unmet demands,’ the establishment of solidarity across ‘equivalential chains’ that finally determines the emergence of the ‘the people’ as a political force (ibid: 77). For this reason, the awakening of ‘the people’ cannot be isolated from unmet demands for greater socio-economic justice. Rather than suggesting the wholesale adoption of Western media conceptualisation of the revolutionary process, perhaps it is better to begin by framing Shadi’s narratives and the narratives of others, as performing political work in a populist movement. Concordantly, instead of trying to define what Syrian rebel-workers mean specifically by words like ‘freedom,’ it is more fruitful to reveal instead, and ethnographically embed, the specific series of ‘demands’ being tied together by these terms. ‘Freedom’ is a
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‘lacking of fullness’ which calls for a solution to a host of grievances, the things Shadi attributes to his non-freedom, from ‘cancelling/reforming military service,’ through reforming the oppressive state apparatus to reducing inequalities within Syrian and/or SWANA societies more generally.

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Shadi’s demands have some contextual/historical significances that must also be accounted for. While we may have an idea about what these empty-signifiers are ‘doing’ we don’t know why this signifier? Why these demands and not others? Such historical contingencies play a major role yet they remain absent in Lacau’s more abstract philosophical model.

To begin, ‘populism,’ as a political practice, is nothing new to Syrian contemporary history (e.g., Hinnebusch 2002: 1-16). We have seen how in the early days the Syrian Ba’th party set its sights on the ‘establishment’ of traditional elites and landholders — i.e. the imperial comprador class — while endeavouring to group together the masses through the promulgation of egalitarian discourses and policies. In so doing, Syrian popular authoritarianism incorporated professionals, military officers, marginalised religious minorities and a significant proportion of the fallâhîn (ibid: 3). Also central to these early successes was the transformation of the ‘Syrian Armed Forces’ into an institutional foundation block for the state. From the period of French mandate onwards, Syrian military leadership had increasingly taken on a sectarian dimension. This was in part determined by a state-level fragmentation thanks to imperialist divide-and-rule policies. Sectarian manipulations have historically been manifested through the colonial powers deploying patronage networks and, in this case, favouring Alawi men in the French mandate’s military academies. In the wake of the Ba’th coup of 1963 followed by the corrective movement in 1970, loyal Alawi men came to fill key officer positions, and it is these men who were really set to become the state’s main power brokers (ibid: 5).

What the above means is those grievances expressed toward ‘military service’ are informed by the fact that many rebel-workers, especially those from rural single-sect regions, claim to have had their first direct experiences of — or even first “learned about” — ‘sectarianism’ [tā’ifîya] only when they left home to serve under an Alawi-dominated officer core. One evening, in May 2013, around the time Hassan Nasrallah officially announced the participation of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict, I was travelling back to Hamra with Mahmoud, a Gypsum board installer from Deir Ezzor, and close friend of Abdullah. Mahmoud is short, overweight, and wears a buzz cut. His temperament was such that he
always seemed annoyed about something or other; yet when he laughs, it comes out as an infectious cackle. He often seemed to ease people into a false sense of security before striking with an angry tirade.

Our taxi driver that evening was apparently in a rather jubilant mood, sipping intermittently from his can of caffeine/vodka mix. Five minutes into the journey he decided to provoke Mahmoud upon learning he was Syrian. He made multiple references to news of what, in the driver’s view, was ‘Hezbollah’s bravery’ in joining the fight against terrorists. Mahmoud succeeded in remaining calm for about one minute — he is a hot head. It was immensely difficult to follow the ensuing rapid exchange of insults, “Hezbollah, you moron,” shouted Mahmoud, “are the real terrorists.” He then grabbed his mobile phone and pushed it directly under the driver’s nose. “Watch this video,” he demanded. The video claimed to document Hezbollah forces shooting unarmed and bound Syrian prisoners. The driver seemed drunk and, wishing to avoid an escalation or car crash; I demanded that he stop and let us out.

“So,” I said, now walking along the motorway and hoping to break the tension, “Did you first experience this sort of political sectarianism in Lebanon?”

In my mind were the persistently repeated refrains heard from Syrians that, “back home, I never even knew the religion of my neighbours!”

“It’s true I’d never experienced sectarianism in my village … of course, we have tribal problems … but it wasn’t Lebanon that first taught me about sectarianism — it was when I served in the army,” Mahmoud responded. “Once, early on, when I wanted to pray, an Alawi officer told me, ‘you have no God now except Bashar.’” “But worse than this,” he continued “I later had to work on this officer’s new house; we were installing a large steel security door for his compound when the hinges broke, and it dropped on two guys, killing them.”

Stories like this have an enduring resonance for those who also carried out military service, and also for those like Shadi, who wish to avoid it. It is this resonance that informs why the specific demand for the cancellation or reform of service could discursively stand for other perceived contradictions and injustices ascribed to the Syrian state, i.e. grievances about networks of corruption, authoritarian practices, arbitrary exercises of power, incongruities between official anti-imperialist discourses versus ‘reality,’ as well as all those humiliating day-to-day interactions with agents of the state. Moreover, it is these grievances about service that explain why it came to be articulated into the broader revolutionary demands for ‘dignity’ and ‘freedom,’ why it “denies dignity” as Shadi put it.

Laclau postulates that ‘freedom’ only makes sense because there are no human situations in which freedom actually exists. Here, writing on ‘justice’ he makes the point that:
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A discussion of whether a just society will be brought about by a fascist or by a socialist order does not proceed as a logical deduction starting from a concept of ‘justice’ accepted by the two sides, but through a radical investment whose discursive steps are not logico-conceptual connections but attributive-performative ones (2007: 97).

It follows that Mahmoud and Shadi are ‘attributing’ to military service the responsibility for denying them freedom and dignity. If nothing else, this process of further attribution evidences how far the populist political logic of the regime has ‘disarticulated,’ or ‘fallen away,’ from its authoritarian structure. Lisa Weeden’s (1998) argument was that the Syrian regime only ever generates a politics of “as if,” meaning that citizens understood how they were to act as if in reverence for the leader. The regime produced guidelines for acceptable behaviour but could never develop unquestioning belief; mass rallies, images, recitations of ideology did operate at some public disciplinary level but, in private, people remained sceptical. This as if fell away in March 2011 and the declining need to ‘publicly act out’ one’s obedience to the regime is what ‘waking up’ and the ‘dropping of the barrier of fear’ actually means. It is the experience of doing ‘attributive-performative politics’ in public and semi-public spaces for the first time that explains why the years preceding 2011 were often described by my research participants as ‘non-politics’: ma kan fi wa’ai siyasi [there was no political consciousness]. On an analytic level, are these new dispositions toward the past as ‘not serious,’ ‘non-political’ and even ‘ahistoric’ not, in fact, a central process within the recognition of revolutionary breaks? And therefore the essence of what ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ actually is?

If yes, then ‘waking up’ refers to new understandings of possibilities and resistance, a recognition of rupture in temporality that corresponds to the emergence of ‘the people’ endowed with radical subjectivity. Individuals call for the people’s freedom, democracy, and dignity and attribute the absence of these to the state’s unwillingness (or incapacity) to deal with their demands.

There isn’t actually anything that novel about such an argument; it can, for instance, be found in the work of Hannah Arendt, specifically On Revolution which builds from similar assertions and proposes that: “the modern concept of revolution [is] inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story is never known or told before, is about to unfold” (2006:18).
Yet, the reality is that now, in the Syrian context, these ‘new stories unfolding’ are increasingly frustrated. The following chapters will develop this point, but for now, we need only note that — in 2016 — the main geopolitical choices on the table for Syria are typically presented as either Bashar al-Assad, or the victory of a counter-revolutionary forces. Military service aside, the key is that no mainstream actor has been prepared to forward alternatives that would actually address the web of concerns. Neither the opposition nor the regime appears likely to institute pro-poor policies which would necessarily put an end to the elite’s short-term rent-seeking behaviour and at minimum prevent the burden of economic adjustments from being borne by the poor. For to do so would be to halt the over-determining force of (economic) imperialism(s).

These forces and the processes they engender are set to continue unobstructed, facilitatied as they are by Syria’s structural location in the capitalist world economy and legitimised through the historical reverberations of colonialism and the ongoing articulation of imperialism via occupied Palestine, US client states, and Western bombs. Yet Shadi also recognised the discursive manipulation of anti-imperialism, versus the actuality of politico-economic imperialism. One evening in early 2013 Shadi told me, “They say we’re the al-ḥuṣn al-akhīr [the last defence] against Israel, against ‘terror,’ against the US, but we all know this isn’t true. They’re really just against us, the people.”

But Shadi appeared to me to be only ever critical of the regime’s self-presentation as ‘The last line of defence in the Middle East,’ — he was not attacking the fortifications themselves, but rather how these defences have more readily been deployed to terrorise Arab populations instead of the Zionist occupation. In all the interviews and informal conversations, I conducted, very rarely would an individual propose the complete abandonment of military service. Rather, the concern was to reform service so that its various injustices might be removed.

In later chapters, we shall return to these issues in documenting how such political subjectivities, established through the uprisings, are further contingently transferable to the alternative conditions of disempowerment, labour exploitation and racism which a rebel-worker diaspora encounters in Lebanon. For now, two further case studies, from two different corners of Syria.

JAMAL

“Bṭa’rif rḥat al-dam? [Do you know the smell of blood?], asked Jamal.

“What do you mean?” I replied.
“I know the smell,” Jamal continued. “I can’t forget it — the regime taught me this scent.”

I was introduced to Jamal, the youngest of four sons, during the summer of 2012. Jamal once worked as a car mechanic in a small village on the edge of Hama. Portly in appearance, his temperament is excitable, he talks quickly and with dramatic prose. His fast speech is laced with quick wit, and his moods can shift from joviality to a fiery-eyed seriousness. Everyone listens when Jamal talks. Abdullah and Haytham — who at that time were distracted, giggling to each other over a WhatsApp exchange with a Lebanese girl — quickly hushed up. We were sitting at one of our favourite cheap cafés on Beirut’s Corniche, sharing an arghila and watching the waves crash against the city’s main geographic feature, Pigeons’ Rock. It was almost year to that day since the siege of Hama, a year since Jamal saw his friend fall to the floor, hit by a sniper’s bullet, his head nearly separated cleanly from his body. Jamal tells me how blood spat out from the wound, hitting his own face and sticking to the inside of his nostrils.

In describing the point at which live ammunition was turned on the crowds, Jamal was adamantly that he was perfectly aware of these potential dangers; his friend knew them too. They’d heard about what had happened in Deraa. He told me that, in his village, the shops had even been shut for several days in an expression of ‘solidarity.’ So, the night before the protest, they made the decision that they’d join the demonstrators occupying central Hama and would do so “for freedom, for Syria,” and “for the people.” What can be learned from this tragic day?

Jamal’s general life circumstances further contextualise the specificity of the antagonisms that were mounting and not responded to. A series of declining economic circumstances stirred Jamal to protest in the street, and when the street didn’t provide answers, he relocated to Lebanon in the hope of securing work. This move once represented something of a ‘safety valve’ for those in Jamal’s socio-economic class. But today migration is seen as essential rather than supplementary and this itself can be read as an indicator of the people’s lack of freedom. Labour migration to Lebanon is, therefore, an ‘external factor’ that facilitated a differential response to specific socio-economic demands. But with the de-development and anti-poor outcomes of Bashar’s liberalising agenda, migration has now transformed what was once understood to be a ‘furṣa’ [opportunity] into ‘shay ḏarūrī’ [something necessary].

The event Jamal is describing has become known as the siege of Hama (July 3rd – August 4th 2011). It was one of the first in a chain of crackdowns carried out by Syrian
government forces during the initial stages of anti-government protests. At least 216 individuals were killed (Al-Jazeera 2011; Bakri 2011). Hama has a big history of violence (Dumper 2007). In recent memory remains the 1982 military onslaught ordered by Hafiz al-Assad against a Muslim Brotherhood uprising that is estimated to have seen 10,000 – 40,000 killed (Fisk 2012). Once again, in 2011, it looked like the city was set to become an opposition centre as protests initially spread across Hama’s countryside, eventually culminating in an occupation of the central Al-Asi square.

It was during the opposition’s occupation of Al-Asi that a protest singer known as Ibrahim Qashoush developed his reputation. Qashoush sung in the ‘arada style, the audience participates by repeating melodic lines or by answering questions posed by the singer (Wieland 2012: 25). Qashoush shouted refrains like: ‘ḥurūfiya ṣarat ḥadd al-bab’ [freedom is at the door] or the Syrian people won’t be humiliated to which the audience reply, ‘yalla! irḥal ya Bashar’ [Come on! Get out Bashar!] (for the YouTube video see: Freedomforeveryone2012).

Jamal spoke with pride to have been one of the few early participants in these revolutionary performances; he claims he couldn’t quite believe the openness of the criticism. Never before had Jamal heard someone so blatantly and so publicly cross ‘the red line.’ Such direct attacks on the president were unknown. In these moments, Wedeen’s as if was demolished. When he talked of Qashoush, the sense of hope Jamal felt articulated through his performances was palpable.

These moments did not last. Members of the opposition later discovered Qashoush’s body floating in the Orontes river — his entire throat has been cut out. Jamal can recall the burning rage he felt when Qashoush’s body was discovered; it was as if they all suffered the same fate: “We were all one,” he said. Amongst his friends, they agreed not to allow such acts to scare them. Instead, he stated that they’d “raise their voices even louder.”

Qashoush’s fate reveals how certain words can unify a movement while simultaneously shaking the governing class. The regime, or perhaps really those who saw themselves as acting on its behalf, recognised this too. Their reaction to this threat was to remove Qashoush’s throat. It might seem obvious now that such an act could only inflame the situation. However, whoever carried out the murder did so, ostensibly, with the direct intention that Qashoush’s body be found: his body was a sign. For his murderer perhaps a warning but for Jamal and his mates, it was yet another materialisation of all the brutality they had come to oppose.
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With the masses ‘speaking up’ though Qashoush, such an act stands as an attempt to symbolically (and very literally) ‘silence’ them. In reality, given the context of the uprisings and the attendant re-organisation of signs, Qashoush’s fate led to the emergence of yet another highly personalised martyr. It is in this sense that Jamal noted that he “spoke for us” and “when they killed him they thought they’d kill all the people … but we will not be killed; we will fight [fig 1.4].”

Reflecting further on the violence he witnessed in Al-Asi square Jamal said, “people say the Syrian regime created security … before the uprising … but you know the truth? They never created the security; the Syrian people did. Look, when we decided we’d had enough, that security went away so easily … didn’t it?” So, when Qashoush sang ‘the Syrian people won’t be humiliated’ what then did these words signify for a member of his audience like Jamal? What, exactly, had he “had enough” of?

Something of an answer to this may be found in the circumstances that seemingly structured Jamal’s decisions to join the occupation in central Hama’s Al-Asi square and also his decision to migrate in search of work in Lebanon. Ultimately, both failed to provide answers; the action of protesting and the action of migrating both were different responses to deteriorating material conditions.

When Jamal first went down to the occupation he imagined the regime would soon topple, “at most,” he speculated, “after three months of protests,” then, “things would get better.” Yet, throughout the uprising, Bashar al-Assad responded to growing turmoil with a series of speeches on March 30th, April 16th and June 20th, 2011, all of which tried, but failed, to stem the growing movement (Al-Bab 2011). But the political stalemate and the increase in violent confrontations meant that soon Jamal, with a weight of familial responsibilities, began to look away from the uprising and toward the Lebanese border. He halted his revolutionary career in the early months of 2012 thanks to the deteriorating security situation. With this deterioration, he could envision only worsening economic conditions. Perhaps, he reasoned at the time, he ought to search for (temporary) work in Lebanon and thereby to provide his family with a financial safety net, should the situation worsen further. Moreover, many of the other young men Jamal knew had begun to reach similar conclusions; he had heard that the labour market in Lebanon was saturated and thought it would only get worse. “I felt pressure, of course,” he told me, “but not from my family, from the circumstances, from myself.”

Hoping to beat what he imagined would be an impending flow of refugees and workers, in February 2012, Jamal took the bus to Beirut. On arrival, he bunked with an old school friend in an already overcrowded apartment located in the Armenian quarter of the city, Bourj
Hammoud. From there he’d set about his search for employment, first in Hamra and then spreading out across the city.

Finding work for new arrivals is urgent. Men who fail to secure soon steady jobs risk running out of options. They often find themselves with few choices other than waiting below the city’s highways, searching for passing vans that might offer a day’s worth of construction labour. Wages are low and conditions rough. Many of the popular cautionary tales concerning this work run like this: before climbing on board a potential employer proposes a day’s wage. This wage is often a comparatively handsome amount, $30 or more, which, as they pull further away from the initial gathering spot, begins to decrease in-line with an array of excuses. Already too late in the day for alternatives, temporary workers must put up and shut up. Jamal desperately wished to avoid these precarious situations, though he also knew it was a risk when he first moved to Lebanon. Finding total job security across the border is by no means a sure thing. But Jamal stressed to me that he didn’t come to Beirut “just to live.” The implication is that he was “only living” back home. Syria couldn’t provide Jamal with the opportunities he desired to generate the savings he needed that might one day be transformed into a house, or business.

“We had no dignity,” Jamal told me, “It’s like this: if I want to marry, build a house, run my own garage, I obviously need money. But I can’t possibly save enough money for these things in Syria. So I’m forced to leave — the decision wasn’t in my hands.” Hammering the point home, Jamal grabbed my list of interview questions and scribbled out one of the questions: “When did you decide to move to Beirut?” because he, argued, for most Syrians it doesn’t feel like a “free choice.” Rather, he said, it is “something necessary,” and if they say insist they made a choice then they’re “confused or stupid […] nobody wants to abandon their country […] Syria left us!”

Jamal claimed never to have really anticipated moving to Beirut and that there was no pressure from his parents to do so. He stressed, “I’d rather work in Syria to the point that I’d accept a wage much lower than what I’m currently paid just to be in an atmosphere I like, to be surrounded by my family; I feel relaxed/content. But I must work here now; my family needs this money … I’m not even saving anything. They didn’t force me to come, but the conditions, they put pressure on me.”

Even in these earlier days of the uprising, before civil war had fully set in, the Lebanese labour market was becoming an increasingly testing place for Syrian migrants. At first, Jamal experienced difficulty finding a job: “There were either no vacancies, or they told me they don’t want Syrians,” he said. But nonetheless, his luck changed on the 10th day.
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While wandering the city he chanced upon a health and nutrition store and Abdullah, my soon to be research assistant, was at that point manning the till. The shop’s delivery boy had returned to Syria for an unspecified period of time, and they were searching for a replacement. Jamal took the job, and soon he and Abdullah were effortlessly hitting it off given that both maintained strong commitments to the anti-regime movements and had experienced dramatic violence during the first protests of 2011. By the time the delivery boy returned, Jamal had found alternative work fixing car window shields, a job which was, he said, pointing at his belly, “more appropriate than a health shop.” Nonetheless, Abdullah and Jamal remained friends, spending weekends visiting one another or spending a few liras at the Sunday market.

Jamal’s story fits a pattern but is also somewhat usual. In the previous chapters, we saw how workers occasionally deploy their extended family network to secure labour in Beirut, established either through brothers, or even by earlier generations. Jamal’s eldest brother has been working odd jobs in Qatar since 2009, travelling initially to avoid military conscription; he has remained there ever since. His father, by contrast, had worked for some years as a taxi driver in Lebanon.

Jamal identified himself, along with his brother, as the family’s breadwinner but adds that that this doesn’t mean he is saving money for investment, “not even for marriage”; instead this money is going toward household expenditures. Jamal makes $450 per month; $200-250 of this is now sent back home to his family, which is then put towards subsistence expenses. What remains of his salary goes first to rent: $50 (Jamal now lives in a two-room flat just outside of Hamra with eight residents) and the final balance on food, clothes, and transport.

It is true that Jamal’s situation has been made worse by the continuing destruction of the Syrian economy through the civil war, but like others, he also located his family’s difficulties as having begun before 2011. The preceding generation, his father, for example, was able to use the money he made labouring in foreign lands to advance the family’s lot. “Who’s to blame for this?” I asked.

“It maybe started under Hafiz,” he replied, “but it became harder after Bashar: if a family in my village didn’t have at least one son working abroad, in the Gulf or here, they had nothing: zero.”

Jamal hoped his elder brother’s efforts in Qatar would be enough, but, as things turned from bad to worse in Syria, he knew they wouldn’t be.

In this sense, “dignity” and “freedom” for Jamal, as for Shadi, corresponds to a ‘lack of control’ he experiences regarding his potential future; ‘freedom’ connects to a wish to

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instead to be endowed with the capacity to fulfil certain socio-cultural ‘life stages.’ This freedom does not mean the removal of the state. “Freedom,” opined Jamal, “is not arriving at a stop sign and running through the red light; it means everyone waiting till it goes green.”

“What about in Lebanon where they never wait?” I asked.

“That’s right, the Lebanese never wait,” he replied. “They think this means they’re free: it’s not freedom, it’s chaos.”

To have arrived at a point where Syria can’t provide for its families unless they have sons labouring abroad clearly indicates that those economic transformations identified in the previous chapter have resulted not in growth but in de-development outcomes. These outcomes resulted from the Regime’s liberalization agenda that combined with drought and population growth to mean Syria’s rural, semi-rural and rural-to-urban populations have born the brunt of the economic decline.

So, when Jamal suggests he lacks ‘dignity’ and that he identifies with Qashoush’s lyrics he is not talking only about humiliating ‘face-to-face’ interactions with the bureaucratic-pressive state apparatus. The term here unifies the obstructions he faces in fulfilling certain designated life stages: to marry, raise children and provide for his family. The series of liberalizing reforms introduced by Bashar al-Assad laid the foundations, not for ‘freedom’ but ‘chaos’ and ‘uncertainty.’ Moreover, labouring in Lebanon once provided something of an answer to a series of socio-economic demands that could be dealt with without these demands moving into a point of collective articulation but now what was once a ‘release valve’ only provides a basic drip of subsistence. In sum: not much bread and no real freedom.

ABDULLAH

“When I returned to the village last month I didn’t want to come back to Lebanon; I wanted to stay with the Syrian people and protest the regime. But there was a risk that my parents, especially my mother, would force me [to return] or that I’d become known in the protest movement … and I would then need to run away from the secret police. Let’s say, I knew how to avoid the secret police … but avoiding my mother … that was impossible!”

It was a slow Saturday afternoon in spring 2012; Abdullah sent me a WhatsApp message asking if I’d like to meet him and Jamal near the health shop — the bosses had gone, and they’d be shutting up shortly. Back in Abdullah’s apartment sits an old television set bracketed to the wall, usually playing what’s thought to be the “least biased” Lebanese television station, LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation). Whenever a news item turned
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to Syria, Abdullah would begin a lecture even if nobody was particularly interested. Jamal and I quickly grew bored of his same lines running on repeat, with Abdulllah usually complaining about “objective facts” being ignored, about the pervasiveness of “big lies” even by this supposedly “unbiased television station.” For our sanity, I’d occasionally try to steer the conversation back to Abdullah’s own personal memories of the uprisings.

Abdullah, like Shadi, is from an agricultural family in eastern Syria, his village is about 400km from Jamal’s. Jamal’s family did not own land and were more orientated towards trade and small-scale manufacturing, with mechanics and stonemasons predominating. Abdullah, by contrast, classifies himself as a fallāh despite having won a place at the Lebanese University to study social sciences.

Abdullah’s parents have grander ambitions for their son. His mother, he says, became exceedingly angry with him when she learned he was planning to join the protestors and his father said he simply couldn’t support this. Abdullah puts this down to the fact the older generation can “remember the massacre of Hama.”

Abdullah’s mother, at the time when he returned during Ramadan in 2013, went so far as to bury the family’s AK-47. She suspected, correctly, that he was planning on sneaking off in the middle of the night to join comrades in ongoing skirmishes with the regime. Abdullah’s family is divided between those engaged in revolutionary labour and migrant labour. But, and as outlined in the introduction, Abdullah had achieved the highest level of education, and his parents had rejected his even thinking about joining the armed opposition.

Abdullah’s specific grievances with the regime differed from Shadi’s and as yet both still marked 2011 as a radical break in prior passivity, both desired ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity’ and both talked about these goals in terms of “the people” and “the regime.” So, what differed and what remained the same?

In Abdullah’s story, three particular sets of grievances with the Syrian state were articulated into the broader revolutionary struggle: firstly, the demand that students be assisted in their studies; secondly, that political sectarianism is brought to a close, and finally that appropriate employment opportunities be created for students who succeed in obtaining degrees. These demands intersect and their continued frustration informs their equivilization with other demands, such as those expressed by the likes of Jamal and Shadi.

When the uprisings first broke out across SWANA, Abdullah was studying at the Lebanese University in Beirut. “Back then, we were all really just concerned with our studies,” he told me. “We were watching the revolutions in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya and, honestly, I think we were a little scared of them breaking out in Syria. In fact, most of us
agreed it was unlikely, I mean come on, the regime was so powerful! But then it did and, speaking frankly, we were shocked. Of course, we’d heard a word or two about guys in Damascus being arrested, but that was a small protest, and they covered it up well.”

Abdullah claims that these early protests first caused division in the university, “There began to be problems in the university between Lebanese and Syrian students; this was already a big problem at LU, it was a problem before the revolution, and it only got worse afterwards; we protested at the university but even with the events going on in Syria I would not say that this was, at that time, only connected to the revolution; it was also about student rights…”

Abdullah continued, “There was a pro-regime demonstration against the revolution, actually, in Dahieh; I went to see what it was all about. I heard people, not Syrians but, naturally, Lebanese Shia, shouting ‘God, Syria and Bashar: only!’ — I said not a word that would support Bashar. But with me were a few other Syrian lads who were whispering about the need for reform and change, but nobody said anything about the downfall of the regime.”

I pointed out to Abdullah that in such a hostile environment I’m not really surprised nobody dared say anything about the downfall of the regime.

“You think I was scared, Philip!” he replied, and in response to my slight teasing he then repeated a story I’d heard many times before. The long drawn out story concerns the time my friend shouted “You’re all dogs!” at a group of young Assad sympathisers who hung out on his street in Chiah.

Chiah is an area of Beirut largely thought to be populated by Hezbollah and Amal supporters who are imagined as regime sympathisers. As an inexpensive place to live it has also become popular with Syrian workers. After this incident, Abdullah was chased out of Chiah, and this is how he came to live in a semi-squat off Hamra’s main street. Rather than acknowledging his provocations as the root cause for this series of events, he instead deployed the story as a morality tale concerning the negative impact political sectarianism has on ‘young people in Lebanon’ and how his freedom, as a Syrian man, is impinged upon.

“So these protests you went to in Lebanon, they were about ‘student rights’? What are these rights,” I asked, trying to get back on topic.

“Well the university is basically controlled by Amal [a Shia political party], and we have to do as we’re told […] I mean, never offer a different opinion, especially in political classes. And worse still, there’s just so much corruption. If I want to do well in an exam, I just need to pay someone, and they’ll help me. You know, I heard a friend of mine paid once, and
they didn’t even give him the right answers. It’s a mafia. This is what student rights means: fairness, no corruption, no sectarianism,” he said.

When I asked Abdullah what the solution to this problem is, how these rights can be achieved, he responded by stressing to me that the Syrian state ideally should be placing pressure on the Lebanese government to reform their national university, to protect the rights of their students studying in Beirut. Nonetheless, he has little faith in reform now; “There’s only one solution: The regime must fall.”

“So what about back home?” I asked.

“Well, sometime after that I remember receiving news from the village. Look, Philip; my village is a tribal village, and we’re very tribal but not sectarian. I thought [tribalism] would prevent us from protesting but when I called my friend, and he told me, ‘yesterday we made a demonstration in the village,’ but the security services came and beat everyone up. Everyone in my village knows everyone, who is the son of whom and who is from which house and so on … we think they must have received word about the protest through someone within the village; we call these people ‘umāla [agents] and they write down the names of everyone who was at the protest and then, maybe the next day, there is a knock and the door and the regime takes you away.”

Abdullah now sees little distinction between the behaviour of the ‘umāla in his village and the problems he faces as a student in Lebanon.

“It’s all the same,” he says, “The regime doesn’t want to hear us complain about our student rights and doesn’t want to answer our rights as Syrians in Deir Ezzor.” Abdullah would often get depressed when I’d ask him about his plans when he finished his degree, bemoaning the lack of opportunities for ‘appropriate employment,’ which was seen as an impossibility in both Lebanon and Syria given that he lacks wasta. Aside from this, though, there were lots of basic problems never answered.

“You know Bashar has only once been to Deir Ezzor!?” he said, “he must have at least seen the conditions of our roads … they’re so bad … or the pollution in the river. I swear it’s terrible. But, of course, he did nothing.”

This is what a lack of dignity means for Abdullah — and again it appears to be actually related to unfulfilled material demands that ‘roads are improved,’ or ‘water pollution dealt with.’ Remembering Bashar’s visit, he even admitted that he was “so excited” though now adding “of course I was just ignorant; now I’d throw garbage at him.”

Returning to his memories of the early stages in the Syrian revolution, Abdullah maintains that he initially didn’t feel any strong pressure to go back to Syria, to join his
friends in the protest movement. “We thought it wouldn’t last longer than a month, but then Bashar made a speech [the speech announcing the end of the emergency laws] and we were expecting him to take the revolution seriously, but he didn’t. He just spoke of conspiracies and then, after that, people wanted to protest more; I did too, so I went home that summer and joined in.”

Abdullah seemed to have a genuine expectation that the regime would simply respond to protestors’ demands and thus has even bought into Assad’s own argument of Syrian exceptionalism vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings. It was the ignoring of what he understood to be legitimate demands that really seemed to anger Abdullah, he felt the people were not being “taken seriously” and this connected back to his notion that the regime is responsible for this lack of dignity. Indeed, “the people will not be humiliated” was increasingly chanted in these initial protest stages.

When he returned, his friends had familiarised themselves with the perils of protesting so close to home, they changed strategy and began travelling to neighbouring villages where they could remain more anonymous. In doing so, Abdullah notes a secondary ‘positive result’ of the uprising was that, at this point, the tribal identities that held sway over this region in Syria began to weaken.

“I saw some graffiti once, it said: ‘no to sectarianism, no to tribalism; the people are united against the regime,’ he told me. More than this, marriage patterns, he claimed, were somewhat liberated from tribal patterns in these early moments.

“If you wanted to marry a girl from a different tribe it was always a problem,” he said, “there would, of course, be the big dowry and the parents would have difficulty accepting you as a suitable match; after the protest movement started people changed their views. I know someone who even married without a dowry.”

Thus the identity of ‘the people’ even seemed capable of uniting or ‘gathering together,’ mutually antagonistic tribes in a collective confrontation with ‘the regime.’

Yet this process is not entirely smooth; while celebrating the decline in tribalism in one context, if Abdullah happened to see regime interference in this arena, rather than revolutionary developments, he quickly bemoaned “cultural loss.” During a conversation about pre-2011 confrontations between state security and tribal leaders, Abdullah complained to me that, “The regime would never let us carry out our traditions!”

“What traditions were these?” I asked, expecting, as anthropologists tend to, that Abdullah was going to tell me something about initiation rites or the like. “Well, a man from
another tribe once came to my village and shot and killed someone from the Sheitaat [Abdullah’s tribe].”

“On that’s terrible — do you know why?” I asked.

“That doesn't matter Philip!” he said. “What’s important is that normally we’d go to that other village and kill one of their members — that would be the end of the matter. Or perhaps the sheikhs would resolve the problem peacefully. Instead, the security forces came into the village and said we were forbidden from carrying out our tradition. At night two of my friends found members of the security in the street and beat them up. After that, things just got worse, and the security force called for reinforcements. They began searching all our houses for weapons … I swear they confiscated so many! They even took my father’s rifle … these things are expensive, you know.”

Aside from this memory from Abdullah’s childhood, his first experience of state violence was when he attended a football match between a local Deir Ezzor team and regime-aligned Tishreen from Latakia in June, 2011. He didn’t travel up to the city that day expecting violence, but during the match the referee declared a goal when, according to Abdullah, there was definitely not a goal and “when the match ended the spectators descended down to the pitch and we just started smashing up the football stadium and shouting ‘God, freedom and Syria: only.’”

Abdullah explains this violence as a response to what he sees as the sectarianism of the regime penetrating even the national football league, which he thinks ought to be entirely neutral.

“This doesn’t happen in democracies does it?” asked Abdullah, “like in Britain, your football league isn’t sectarian.”

Clearly, Abdullah was not too familiar with Scotland’s Catholic and Protestant Celtic/Rangers football clubs. But the point is that these particular moments have behind them enough unfulfilled demands, enough ‘lack,’ that when the spectators smashed up the stadium and demanded freedom, it clearly wasn’t just about this particular referee’s biased decision but actually a host of heterogeneous individual experiences and frustrations which were all now coming to the surface. The referee stood in as a symbol for a regime that had itself been shown the red card.

**CONCLUSION**

Abdullah’s tales of revolutionary transformation did not end with this football match. There was even a subsequent game held a few weeks later that saw, yet again, a pro-regime team
wins a victory over locals. Abdullah recalls feeling exceptionally enraged and then moving with the crowd into the city, where he gathered with other men and attempted to smash up a statue of Hafiz al-Assad riding a horse. “We did it,” he said, “it was great, and there was no security stopping us … but suddenly the police appeared. I ran away but still took a truncheon to the arm.”

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This chapter opened by juxtaposing Joseph Massad’s critique of Western liberal media’s narratives of the Arab Spring with Shadi’s memories of how he felt during the early stages of the Syrian revolution. Massad was opposing the tendency toward ahistorical reduction of the uprisings to “awakenings” which he assumes amounts to an endorsement of liberal democratic capitalism as well as an ignorance of the forms of political contestation that have existed in SWANA since the end of empire.

Against this interpretation, one of the central themes of this thesis is that, on the level of populist revolutionary subjectivities, a certain degree of ahistoricism actually appears critical to the individual understanding and interpretation of revolutionary moments. The Syrian rebel-workers I came to know, by virtue of being caught up directly and indirectly within a political rupture, tended to look back on the time before 2011 and see before them a radical break with the past. Abdullah would later tell me about how silly he now feels about being an excited child hearing that Bashar al-Assad was finally going to visit eastern Syria; Shadi ‘woke up’ to the regime’s manipulations of anti-imperialist rhetoric and, Jamal found great power in the ‘arada singer’s lyrics and the echoing out of sharp public critiques of the president for the first time.

Given this understanding, the metaphors and vocabularies analysed above ought to appear now less troubling. I have argued that terminology does not, at least in any simple, direct sense, act to define political movements. Rather, political movements mutual define and constitute terminology. This is because 1) in the early stages, the Syrian uprising exhibited populist sentiments and practices; 2) this populism was reappropriating an already existing ‘popular base’ and ‘discourse’ from the regime’s authoritarian structure; 3) this dislodging led to the strengthening of a frontier between the ‘the people’ and ‘the regime’; 4) this frontier emerged in relation to the equivilisation of demands; 5) these demands are collectively articulated though empty-signifiers which are necessarily vague, or indeed, ‘empty,’ so that they come to stand symbolically for other heterogeneous demands which individuals direct at the regime, and to which the regime could not provide answers. True, some of the words may
have gained their prominence thanks to their centrality within Western mainstream media, but others have a longer trajectory within Ba’th party ideology. While the tempo with which these words circulate might be influenced by the aforementioned factors, it is hard to say for certain the degree to which their meaning has been fixed.

Words like ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity’ appear here to find their meaning relationally, their deployment being more attributive-performative than logico-deductive. This is where Shadi, Jamal, and Abdullah are unified, they all articulated grievances against the regime which that they attribute as the main block preventing ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity.’ Behind these empty-signifiers lies a chain of antagonisms; like the compulsion to work low-paid jobs in Syria, a lack of employment opportunities, the domination of corruption, the increasing webs of sectarianism that dictate even football. Thus, “at [populism’s] root is the experience of lack, a gap which has emerged in the harmonious constitution of the social. There is a fullness of the community that is missing” (Laclau 2005: 85 [my emphasis]). The hope of returning to a fullness of the community, with the current lack satisfied and a gap in the harmonious constitution of the community bridged, is what, in reality, lay behind those words: the people want to overthrow the regime [‘al-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ al-niṣām’].

47 An edited version of this chapter and the previous chapter is to be published (Proudfoot, forthcoming 2016)

48 The geography of the Syrian uprising can nonetheless not be explained through socio-economic conditions alone; poverty did not mechanistically produce anti-regime positions thanks complicated intersecting factors of tribal, sectarian and regional affiliations as well as the deep embedding of the Syrian Arab Army within certain communities (cf. Anderson 2014).

49 Here used in the traditional Saussarian sense; signifier meaning the ‘word’, the ‘sound-image’ whereas ‘signifier’ is the mental concept these ‘sound-images’ create; it’s not the ‘thing’ in the world, but the ‘referent’ created in the brain, particular to the individual, should I say, for example, “apple”. (Saussure 2011; Laclau 1996)

50 Empty signifiers are words that lack a specific ‘signified’, or it at least they have a lack of comparative specificity (established though custom). Elsewhere they’ve been called, ‘floating signifiers’. (Laclau 2005 69-70 Mehlman 1972).

51 ‘Ontic Content’ is understood in this thesis to mean, for example, if I write the word ‘apple’ (the signifier), I can presume we’re roughly thinking about the same thing, and that the reader has in her head an image of that green or red fruit (the signified). However, if I wrote, instead, the word ‘freedom’, the signified seems to have a different quality and I’m less able to assume the image(s) in my head is/are the same as the reader.

52 One should be cautious about taking Laclau too literally. Doubtless some of these words have a ‘residue of meaning’. But the purpose of this chapter is to show how these residues become overrun by alternative contexts. This is what enables these words to articulate an antagonistic relationship between the people and the regime. Given that the language of struggle, imperialism, and socialism has been monopolised by the regime itself and systematically discredited by its neoliberal and political policies since the 1990s, the residue of ‘freedom,’ and ‘democracy’ is also less problematic (see also: Kalb 2005; Ost 2005).
Dead bodies and martyrs have a specificity as particularly potent symbols and is this specificity that is taken up in chapter four.

It ought to be noted that it is not quite universally the case that new citizen martyrs became the definitive icons of choice during the most recent rounds of Arab uprisings. In often overlooked Yemen, during the anti-government protests of 2011, the martyrdom figure of choice was, in fact, the assassinated Nasserite-leaning president, Ibrahim Al-Hamdi. In one of the posters of Al-Hamdi held in the demonstration, the Arabic text translates as, “we are not from your generation … but we love you!” (Al-Kamali 2011).

Al-Hamdi was murdered in 1977 along with his brother by forces aligned to Ali Saleh who were suspected of acting with Saudi Arabian backing. In addition, two French call girls were killed and their bodies added to the scene, presumably the hope was discouraging any further investigation (ibid).

In terms of linguistic relatedness, the Arabic term for ‘freedom’: [ḥurā] and ‘liberation’ [ṭahrīr] are not connected to the words used to describe economic liberalization [iftīḥā al-īqtīsād] which is closer to ‘economic opening’] however ḥurā shares the same root with the adjective used in ‘free market’ [souq al-ḥor].

In-addition to the ‘Prague Spring’ one might consider too the so-called rabiʿ Dimashq [‘Damascus Spring’] of the early 2000s. This was a time in which the regime seemingly opened up to allow for ‘cultural and intellectual forums’ [muntadāyāt], held in private homes and spread by word of mouth. Through these a number of prominent activists formulated critique and calls for democratisation. But the spring was short lived and eventually culminated in the arrest of a number of high profile individuals such as Riad al-Sayf, accused of "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means" and "inciting racial and sectarian strife"(Human Rights Watch 2007; Taylor 2007; Wieland 2012).

This is a point about ‘political investment in a cause’; it is not about ‘post civil-war amnesia’, as has been noted in the case of Lebanon, where the war was euphemistically referred to only as ‘al-ḥdāth’ [the events] (see: Haugbolle 2005; Barak 2007).

Matar (2016) has however noted that some of the old regime policies of subsidization returned in areas still under its control, but this is to be understood more as a response to the conditions of war rather than a renewed intellectual commitment to re-distributive measures.
PART II

CONTAGION
CHAPTER THREE
Art, Uprising, and Smartphones

Visual art had expressed a culture of dissent in the years leading up to 2011, often indirectly, by way of allegory, but with the uprising of that year dissident graffiti spelled out explicit messages of rebellion across the walls of Middle Eastern cities. The crowds that assembled to reclaim public space became performers of unstoppable power, symbolically as well as materially. It was in this context that street art amplified that power, asserting the defiance and the pride of citizens who had come to reclaim what was rightfully theirs.

Charles Tripp (2013:2)

INTRODUCTION

“This violence is terrible,” I said, looking at the television.

“Of course, it’s terrible,” Mohammed said, “but come on — are you with the opposition or the regime? inta bt’arf al-haqq ‘ala min!? [you know whose fault it is!?].

Mohammed — the journalism student from Damascus University and pastry shop assistant encountered in chapter one — took a strong dislike to any attempt I would make at carving out a ‘neutral’ position on the uprising. His cousin, Bilal, would likewise not stand for any equivocation. This was made apparent to me one summer evening in 2012. We were sitting around, relaxing, and half-watching the battered old television. The guys had set it up outside, facing the salvaged beaten brown leather couch. A small plastic corner table was overflowing with tea and snacks thanks to Mohammed, who often took unsellable misshapen sweets from the shop to share out of an evening. That night, the set was beaming recorded footage from Homs, the central Syrian city that was the backdrop to prolonged bloody clashes between security forces and protestors.

“I don’t know enough … you’ve got to tell me about the situation,” I replied to Mohammed’s initial question.

The suggestion of ignorance visibly dismayed my friend: “Why do you need to know more, have you not seen the protests?”

“No,” I said, “You know I live in Beirut. I’ve not returned to Syria since 2010.”

Mohammed looked confused, he jumped up and sprinted across the precarious wooden beam traversing the foundation trench — he ushered me to follow. Once inside the familiar shack, he grabbed his Samsung mini, a phone that was then retailing in Beirut at under $100. It was cheaper still if you traded in for a second-hand model. Mohammad’s mobile was positioned upright; it seemed to take pride of place in the room. It was charging in
an improvised ‘dock’ that he had constructed using brick and breezeblock, around which he had threaded the cable.

He drew the passcode across the screen and immediately began opening media files. We both lit cigarettes, sat on the edge of the bed, and started staring at the phone’s miniature screen. On its crackling internal speaker, the sounds of popular protest songs, ‘radical dabke,’ played out. Accompanying the songs were creatively and imaginatively edited videos showcasing his friends dancing and protesting in the streets, holding aloft signs and pictures declaring the village’s opposition to the Syrian regime.

Mohammed show me photographs of slaughtered protestors, tortured bodies, and artistic renderings of opposition flags adorned in tears of blood and martyrdom imagery. I noticed that even the most macabre of images from his collection were decorated with revolutionary slogans, such as the then famous “Allāh, hurrīya, Sūriyā wa bas” [Only God, freedom and Syria]. Or contextually-appropriate verse from the Qur’an, such as lines said in the face of tragedy, “innāna li-llāhi wa innāna ʾIlāy-hi rājīʿūn” [We belong to Allah and to Him shall we return]. It was in that moment I realized he had not literally seen these protests; rather what he meant was that he had viewed them as images, video files and art objects on his phone. And these data rarely remain locked away in private folders but began lives of their own once uploaded to online profiles or shared on digital walls across a diversity of social networks. When I became more aware of these circulations, I asked Mohammed why he was frequently changing his own profile picture, and why he thought what one chooses to display is important. “When I meet a new guy,” he said, “the first thing I do is look at their WhatsApp profile image and then I check what’s written on their status … from this you can get a sense of their political positions; I mean, if they’re with the regime or against it. Then I know where the boundaries are.”

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This chapter describes and theorises a number of factors concerned with the well-documented surge in artistic creativity that accompanied the recent round of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements in SWANA (e.g., Halasa 2014; Lindsey 2012; Nour 2013; Tripp 2013). Specifically, what follows examines the opposition-aligned images and videos that men like Mohammed often invited me to view on their smartphone screens. What kind of social effects did Mohammed generate when he selected and shared media objects over digital networks? Why would opposition-aligned Syrian migrant workers devote such a considerable
amount of their thought and time to downloading and uploading these objects onto their Facebook walls or WhatsApp profile pictures?

The word ‘media’ refer typically to human artefacts, technologies and practices that mediate our interaction between the world and other humans (McLuhan 2001). The expression “new media” and/or “new communication technology” is intended to signal the specific impacts of global computer networking which is said to have produced dual or multi-directional communication (Logan 2010: 4). It is this interactivity that marks “new media” as distinct from what inventions that were once “new,” such as televisions but, with the passage of time, eventually became “old” (ibid). For those concerned with the study of social movements, the rolling out of such many-to-many horizontal communication platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) has impacted activist practices in a number of ways.

First however, by way of introduction, it is important to acknowledge that Mohammed, and men like him, rarely self-acknowledged as activists. Indeed, when I would ask if they considered themselves activists nearly all men would reply no, and point out to me the simple facts of distance and circumstance that meant they were not? part of action on the ground . But we have seen above how, even remotely, these men underwent something of a revolutionary transformation. In the previous chapter their transformation was evident in populist political narratives spun around grievance toward the regime. Empty-signifiers, like ‘bread,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘dignity,’ unified a diversity of grievances, and the collective vocalization of these signifiers solidified forms of hostile state/society antagonism, and thus awakened ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the regime.’ Part II (chapters three and four) builds on these observations to reveal how pro-opposition media objects and martyrdom commemoration images, shared across new media networks, contributed toward, made socially-recognisable, and constituted worker-rebel commitments to both the people and their revolution.

Since 2010, considerable research on social movements, new media, and artistic production in the Arab World has focused on the objects and practices of urban bourgeois and self-described activists and artists (e.g. Mason 2013; Demerdash 2012; Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016). My suggestion here is that by paying closer attention to the digital spaces and communities generated through smartphones and inhabited by rebel-workers it is possible to move this analysis further into the lives of the Arab World’s most impoverished communities. Indeed, the apparent gulf between those who have access to the internet, and those who do not, appeared bridged (at least in this particular ethnographic context). My informants had all crossed the so-called digital divide. Without exception, every man who features here
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possessed an internet enabled smartphone. This was enabled thanks to certain infrastructural facts: Mohammed’s Samsung, was an entry-level but brand new smartphone and it cost as little as $100. This apparent value was strengthened further by the comparative cheapness of WhatsApp messaging (limited only by data subscription or wireless, but nonetheless requiring a smartphone) versus SMS (constrained by a high cost per message). Nevertheless, an equality of access does not necessarily translate into homogenised chain of values, conversations or digital practices that cross or blur other pertinent divisions informed by rural/urban distinctions, class relations, or political commitments.62

Amongst the media objects that Mohammed shared were creatively edited videos of street protests, pictures and graphics that expressed support for opposition forces, and many other iconoclastic creations that targeted regime propaganda. These objects were united in so far as all stood as artistic expressions of political dissent. Was this dissent new?

Charles Tripp stressed, in the quotation that opened this chapter, that 2011 was in-fact not ‘year zero’ for artistic manifestations of political resistance in SWANA. Instead the 2011 – 2016 period can be said to have witnessed a transition from more indirect and subtle critique, to outright rebellion. Doubtless, this point has a high degree of etic validity; however, one ought not lose sight of the fact that apparently ‘everyday modes of resistance’ are rarely considered politically significant by those apparently doing the resisting. As we have seen in chapter two, ‘everyday resistance’ would most likely fall under worker-rebel categories of sleep and passivity.

Asef Bayat (2013) developed a nuanced reading on the politics of the day-to-day, arguing that the Arab World’s poor have long carried out diverse and indirect forms of political action which involved subtle tactics of survival that ‘encroached on the state,’ as well as challenged western-centric ideals of liberal modernity prevalent amongst the state elite. This ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ is manifest, for example, in the act of wiring power to slum housing by tapping street lights, or sharing of hacked satellite television connections across multiple homes. More structurally, encroachments on the state are visible in the sheer flow of poor rural Syrians into informal slum housing on the edge of urban centres; these shelters intrude on any urban plans toward clean managed spaces and the requirement of permits, and distinct lines of state-controlled space. Eventually, or so the theory goes, the state is worn down into some formula of recognition. However, while these forms of power negotiations are indeed central to ‘making-do,’ these practices typically also dismissed as constituting stagnation, as ‘not really political,’ at least in comparison to more explosive moments of rupture and rebellion.
Mohammed’s village excelled at rebellion (see Saleh 2013; Vignal 2012). He told me often how his home garnered considerable fame in the initial months of the uprising, this fame stemmed from the fearless creativity that his friends displayed at demonstrations. These were political happenings that wove noisy protest with street theatre, celebration, and dancing. Mohammed, who was first living in Damascus and then in Beirut, longed to join, but circumstances stood in the way. In Lebanon, his monthly pay cheque was essential for any hope he held to return to university back in Syria. So, with direct participation removed from the equation, a second-hand smartphone had seemingly enabled him to partake digitally in the battle against the symbolic domination of the regime (cf. Wedeen 1999, Thomassen 2010). In short, new technologies of media and communication enabled not only the rapid circulation of images, but also constituted space for transnational activism and community-building. This allowed those with otherwise limited opportunities to participate in modes of political action understood as fuelling and reflecting a radical break with past (in)action.

Within these emerging transnational activist communities, it appeared that, in grasping control away from the regime’s spheres of symbolic domination, a particular aesthetic of critique, subversion and resistance emerged. Images I observed rebel-workers display as their WhatsApp profile pictures, download from Facebook Local Coordination Committee groups, exchange in group chats, or transfer across Bluetooth, materialised, spread and expressed the revolutionary awakenings.

A holistic theorisation of Mohammed’s media practices ought, therefore, to combine an appreciation of both the particular role protest media played in worker-rebel lives, as well as an understanding of which new technologies of media and communication themselves impacted on, or informed, these roles. Indeed, the actual practice of sharing and displaying of images can be said to have contributed toward a shared (revolutionary) imagination.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Scholars writing in the domains of media and communication studies and social movement theory have endeavoured recently to bring their perspectives a little closer together (e.g. Cammaerts & Mattoni 2013; Hill and Hughes 1998; Meikle 2002; Kahn and Kellner 2004;). Researchers point out that in moments of uprising and revolution, media practices and communication strategies represent an important but hitherto under-theorised dynamic (Cammaerts 2007: 2). In the wake of the 2011 Arab uprising, this dynamic moved into the open. A vast array of regional specialists and mainstream journalists asserted that it was the likes of blogs, smartphones, web 2.0 platforms, and digital networks that had played a — or
even the — pivotal role in facilitating this world-changing series of events (e.g. Eltantawy 2011; Howard 2011; Huang 2011; Kraidy 2016).

In SWANA, mobile technology was celebrated for its alleged capacity to capture and spread striking images, circulate contentious ideas, solidify disparate individuals into unified wholes and organise rapid-response protest gatherings on the streets of the Arab capitals (e.g. Khatib 2013; Khondker 2011; Lotan 2011; Hudson 2014; Kraidy 2016). The journalist Paul Mason (2013) went so far as to argue that new technologies of media and communications were the essential binding ingredient for unifying more diverse social-political developments, from massive youth unemployment to the internet’s ‘meme culture.’ For Mason, the world was witnessing the emergence of a ‘networked individual’ who can now stand up to and overturn traditional hierarchies of power with images and ideas rapidly jumping between online and offline worlds:

“The revolts […] are the result of a technological revolution driven by the deployment of digital communication at work, in social life, and now in the forms of protest. It is not necessary to be a techno-determinist to see this […] The new technology underpins our ability to be at the same time more individualistic and more collective; it shapes our consciousness and magnifies the crucial driver of all revolutions — the perceived difference between what could be and what is” (ibid: 85).

The researcher Lina Khatib (2013) — while by no means a techno-determinist — noted the particular importance of mobile image capturing devices and physical occupations of space:

[…] during the Arab Spring the media was not just mediators in social and political interactions; the media were the individuals. Each person on the street in Tahrir Square or Deraa was an image creator and “broadcaster” of political messages. This broadcasting of messages, whether verbal or visual or both, did occur often using third-party communication tools like the internet or mobile phones or the carrying of placards, but it also happened through performance by the body, through visible presence, through being in a space. (2013: 6).

Charles Tripp (2013: 308) suggested that the mass broadcasting of images and information is not, in and of itself, enough to ‘change the balance of power.’ Rather, the broadcasting of images shaped an environment through which (new) attitudes to power were formed that enabled citizens to resist official version of events by now, “looking power sideways.” Protests dislodged in the process the certainties that had allowed “those who rule to get away with it for so long.” Demerdash (2012: 3) adds another level of analytic concern, she points out how other global networks of power, in the guise of an ‘art market,’ have latched onto
and commoditised transgressive, ‘resistant’ elements, revealing a “dissonance between local and global reception and consumption.”

For the most part, researchers have struck a cautionary note with regards to any blunt digital evangelism — i.e., the claim that social media and new technology was the most important factor for ushering in the Arab uprising. These arguments risk obscuring a diversity of other factors that slotted together and informed how these particular moments of activism and mobilisation played out (see, for example, Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami (2015: 55 – 77) and Brownlee (2015) on the many aspects of grassroots Syrian activist work). But it would be equally wrong-footed to dismiss new communication technology out of hand, especially given its pivotal role in amplifying access to radical politics, and producing digital rebel communities who would have otherwise remained divided by political borders and geographic distance (See, for example, Kraidy (2016) for an account of the creative insurgency made possible through digital culture). Below adds nuance this picture by suggesting why an increased possibility of action might nonetheless still fail to collapse other penitent socio-economic divisions. Moreover, widened access is never insulated fully from real world dangers: electronic galleries easily drew unwelcome real world visitors. Rebel-workers told me how checkpoint militia, employers, and other third parties routinely searched their mobile phones. However, the very fact inspections occur shows that certain media — from both the perspective of Syrian rebel-workers and their would-be interrogators — must have at least been doing political work of some magnitude. And even in the face of danger, such was the amount of time informants devoted to this technology, in creating, selecting, discussing and sharing digital media, that whenever I sought to shift attention away from the ever-present screen, the men would respond with a sharp retort that used a newly coined Arabic verb: ‘bas laḥţeh ‘m itwatsapp’ [Just a second, I’m WhatsApping].

For Syrian rebel-workers there were many context specific dangers in Lebanon, a nation deeply interlinked with the social, political and economic realities of neighbouring Syria (Hirst 2010; Traboulsi 2007). With a complex history and polemical present, there was no unified position on the Syrian uprising in Beirut. Instead, in the street, party logos, martyrdom posters and declarations of loyalty jostle for attention from one party-occupied corner to the next. So — with walls already painted, and formal galleries the preserve of an urban bourgeoisie — workers, refugees and a diaspora of revolutionaries have found in smartphone technology a device that facilitates their participation in the fight against the symbolic domination of the Syrian regime, as well as a means to inspect how far others are committed to this battle: new technology and social media both constituted a new field of
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action, generated a digital community, enabled the circumvention of mainstream and state media, and made possible rapid, cost-effective and efficient mobilisation. But a digital battlefield still does not translate into a high-tech solution to analogue dangers.

Considered as a whole, there are two interconnected observations made in the digital activism and new media literature that are relevant for the task at hand. First, scholars have highlighted how social media and new communication technology represents a set of potentially politically disruptive tools when placed in the hands of activists. In this sense, researchers have identified the various techniques through which individuals and groups integrate digital practices into more long-standing offline protest repertoires. As noted above, the integration of new communication technology is said to have increased the rapidity of mobilisation, the cost-effectiveness of information transfer, and the reach of actions carried out in the street. These reflections were also all borne out in my encounter with Mohammed and his mobile phone. Through his Samsung Mini, he extended the life of previous protests from mere events. These happenings had taken place without his direct physical presence, but in sharing the video recordings amongst acquaintances and friends he could, at the very least, assist in spread some awareness around his comrades' actions. Therefore, as an enabler of action, media and communication technology has opened a space for those at distance to participate in process of de-legitimising the Syrian regime, thereby combatting the party’s projection of “images of power and the powerful into everyday life” (Tripp 2013: 3).

It is noteworthy that most of Mohammed’s digital collection was concerned with the reclamation of actual and symbolic space from regime domination. This matter can be understood as contributing toward communication technology’s beguiling allure. But on a different level, when Mohammed also told me why he himself imagines the circulation and display of media to be important he was pointing toward how the display of this media allowed him to make certain assumptions — or more accurately ‘abductions’— from other people’s WhatsApp profile pictures (Gell: 1998: 14 – 16). Put more flippantly, “if one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” then rebel-workers held a combined aesthetic and technological means of rapidly identifying, or ‘mediating between,’ comrades and enemies. These media objects were being read and used as identifiers in moments of political uncertainty, thereby enabling mutual recognition, a sense of community and encouraging solidarity amongst a diaspora in Lebanon (Brinkerhoff 2009; Alonso 2010 & Oiarzabal 2010). Thus, Mohammed was also able to convey to me, a British anthropologist sitting on his bed in Beirut, exactly where his support fell. He also thereby expressed a part of his (emergent) rebel identity.
Finally, Mohammed’s access to new communication technology meant he could, as did many others, more easily circumvent traditional media gatekeepers. It is fair to say that large news organisations would have been unlikely to send a camera operator to cover a small-scale protest event in a Northern Syrian village. However, in this particular context, perhaps what’s more pressing for Mohammed is that he could ‘get out the truth of the opposition’ despite what was understood to be high degrees of regime censorship and ideological distortion. Finally, social movement actors are often engaged in the (re)working of technology and digital platforms, demonstrating their capacity for user agency in so far as these platforms were never directly intended to organise, for example, the toppling of Arab dictatorships but nonetheless were appropriated precisely for this task. This observation is nuanced by the fact that as rapidly as political activists modify and transform tools, government agencies find new avenues for intelligence gathering and tracking. However, as we shall see below, the Syrian regime and Lebanese militia are for more likely to demand access to mobile phones directly from detainees, rather than invest in high-tech hacking systems.

A second observation relevant when considering Syrian worker-rebel media and communication practice is that social media and web 2.0 are not never only tools but have themselves also constituted new spheres of engagement. These were spheres that my participants also attempted to occupy, intervene in and change. One example here were the campaigns and criticism levelled at Facebook for seemingly introducing the ‘marked as safe function’ in Paris a day after a massive double car bomb ripped through Beirut (Heine 2015). This feature allows Facebook users in the vicinity of a natural disaster or terrorist attack to instantly notify other users that they are safe. This missing feature fuelled a general sense of discontent that Facebook has an inherent western bias. This was also bias begin addressed in the #AleppoIsBurning campaign that rolled out across Facebook and Twitter in the summer of 2016, with many also demanding a marked as safe function in Syria.

For many months the northern city of Aleppo has endured heavy a bombardment from the Russian and Syrian Regimes’ warplanes and helicopters. Activists, who were fed up with what they felt was a lack of attention paid to Syrian government crimes, asked Facebook users to turn their profile pictures into a simple red square (O’Toole 2016). Within my network of worker-rebels, the majority of those with Facebook profiles joined the campaign. In these particular moments, they can be said to have occupied a digital space that they also felt increasingly neglected to cover regime-orchestrated atrocities.
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Both of these observations are interconnected, in so far as worker-rebels valued, for example, the capacity of media to raise awareness, and were able to assist in collective actions aimed at circumventing traditional gatekeepers in drawing world attention to Aleppo’s suffering. With protests in the street unlikely, the men were, therefore, able to partake in a virtual protest that had ‘real world’ aims. The widespread and dismissive label for online activism, ‘slacktivism,’ assumes participants in online campaigns are lazy and that these campaigns are ‘just for show’ rather than serious political action and transformation. However, such a dismissal misses a great deal. It misses the everyday time constraints and structural limitations that inform the appeal of online outlets for political activism. Moreover, given the expanding importance of digital networks to many people’s lives, these are also often rather effective means of catching the world’s attention. Consider the rapidly circulated image of Alan Kurdi; the Kurdish toddler who drowned crossing the Mediterranean in September 2015. Again, his image was widely shared across Facebook, in photo and cartoon form; the men within my participant network shared it too. Kurdi’s image moved from Facebook to newsprint and politicians desks. Often this moment has been claimed as pivotal in generating at least some degree of change in public perception of the refugee crisis, as well as creating actual transformations in state asylum policies (Dauvergne 2016).

In sum, the role of media and communications in social movements in the Arab spring and beyond has been often both overplayed and dismissed (Brownlee 2015: 41 – 89). In searching for a path between a dismissal and evangelism, a close ethnographically informed theorisation can help to account for who is actually using, producing and circulating media objects and how they are doing-so. We ought to be sceptical regarding any all too neat an analytic distinction between offline/online worlds. Indeed, when I questioned worker-rebels about their online practices, the men would stop short of suggesting an occupation of Facebook was somehow a goal or achievement in and of itself.66 Instead, what they typically stressed were very material goals, such as increasing asylum numbers, ending the siege of (rebel-held) Aleppo or, as this chapter will concentrate on, overthrowing the regime.

THE KISS

On a rainy evening in the winter of 2012, I was sitting with Haytham and Mahmoud on Abdullah’s balcony in central Beirut. Nobody was talking, all eyes were, as usual, transfixed on mobile phones. Feeling a little fed up, I tried to garner a little attention and held my own device aloft.
“Hey, guys, look, what do you guys think of this?” I said, showing each in-turn an image that was repeatedly shared over my Facebook timeline.

“Beautiful — the artist who made that is talented … he’s good” said Abdullah, “but is it about the revolution? I don’t feel anything. What’s the point?”

On my screen was a photoshopped image of Klimt’s The Kiss [fig 2.0] by the Syrian Tammam Azzam. The image is composed of a bombed out exterior building, over which was Azzam had digitally (and realistically) superimposed Klimt’s masterpiece; this bestowed an illusion of graffiti. Throughout social networks, a host of activists and the general public in Syria, Lebanon, and beyond united in praise for the work. Yet, at the same time, it remained practically unknown to my informants, and these were men who seemingly spent most of their non-working hours glued to smartphones. Moreover, their lives might easily have been led within those bombed-out apartments. But all murmured in agreement with Abdullah. Haytham even expressed confusion as to the political intentions behind the image asking me, “is the artist with the opposition or the regime?”

In the end, this work was not once sent to me by an informant, nor set as their profile picture, despite such common practices toward other art objects. Azzam’s work seemed, in short, to lack resonance. Was resonance missing because the artwork itself missed the distinct political goals, shared revolutionary subjectivities and political identities otherwise prevalent amongst men?

Without this identification, how could such an object really play a part in constituting a community of activists? It thus appeared that this otherwise highly popular image was not really doing much ‘revolutionary work.’ From the perspective of rebel-workers, might it then be more accurate to frame art as revolutionary only in so far as it was produced within and reflected upon revolutionary conditions?

In addition to Azzam, other establishment artists’ work failed to play a significant role in the lives of rebel-workers, and these were men who saw themselves as making the revolution. To be clear: by ‘establishment art’ what I mean are art objects produced by individuals socially recognised as artists, either through training, profession or notoriety — art that is knowingly made, ‘as art.’ (e.g. Dermadash 2012; Halasu 2014; Nour 2013; Tripp 2013). In fact, Azzam’s work is merely one example and widely known manifestation of a style dominant amongst artistic reactions to the uprising. This is a style transfixed by the depiction of gruesome brutality [e.g. fig 2.8 and 2.9]. The artists’ gaze lingers over scenes of destroyed buildings, mutilated bodies and murdered children (for highly illustrative examples see Halasa 2014: 10 – 16; 36 – 43; 235 - 237). This turn in SWANA contemporary art is
neither new, nor is it unexpected, given that the region has experienced the world’s highest frequency of international war (See Khalili (2007) for a related discussion on the turn to victimhood exhibits concerning Palestine). This art form is often categorised as political due to its representational quality; it is assumed to ‘compel us to revolt by showing us revolting things’ (ibid; Rancière 2010: 135). We shall see that, by contrast, images that rebel-workers preferred to circulate were more directly connected to the political struggle itself. More than a representation of suffering, they also ruptured meaning, regime legitimacy and fuelled the generation of new subjectivities t opposed to those in power.

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The circulation of opposition art, rebel music and videos of protests can be said to have generated a sense of community amongst opposition-aligned Syrian labourers in Beirut. And this community was not concerned wholly with issues of self-expression but — especially in the earlier years of the Syrian uprising — it also contributed toward the chipping away of the regime’s symbols of power. Thus, even those at a distance might consider themselves as having helped weaken the so-called barrier of fear. In short, these communities were not merely consuming representations of the struggle: they were also taking part.

Nonetheless, identifying ‘accurate representations’ of protest events and symbolism were still important. Again, my opening exchange with Mohammed pointed toward the fact smartphone owners acted as digital curators, ‘rebel Charles Saatchis’ who selected particularly appealing objects of political transformation, and display their own affiliations through a host of digital artefacts. However, unlike, ‘Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East’ (Saatchi Gallery 2009) 70 Rebel-workers’ media stocks rarely featured items by self-recognised artists. The products of professional artists nonetheless garnered significant scholarly attention during the recent round of Arab uprisings (e.g. Demerdash 2012; Shilton 2013; Tripp 2013). But as stated above, this attention risks distracting from the plethora of digital objects, which might not typically be considered art, that nonetheless widely consumed, displayed and exchanged by the likes of workers, refugees, and rebels; that is, men who had much at stake in the uprising.

Consider again Azzam’s re-working of Klimt’s The Kiss [fig 2.0]. This went viral on the internet, but remained entirely unheard of by rebel-workers. This was peculiar given that the online networks through which Azzam’s work circulated were often the same that rebel-workers themselves subscribed to. To understand why this is the case I suggest we look at the forms of social relations that appear within the vicinity of objects that “mediate social
relations” (Gell 1998: 7) and how these relations can encourage the “mobilization of ordinary people” (Thomassen 2011: 680). In other words, smartphone technology appears to have driven a compression of the vicinity required to view the art objects around which individuals mobilise, as well as also facilitating access to these objects.

If stored images were readily demanded by interrogators, it is pertinent we grasp the social mechanisms generating such a high degree of both danger and popularity. In suggesting an answer, what remains of this chapter combines: (1) an understanding of the agency-mediating capacity of art objects, as developed anthropologist as Alfred Gell (1998); (2) Jacque Rancière’s work on the interdependent relationship between politics and aesthetics, and (3) a more explicit focus on smartphone technology and revolutionary subjectivities (e.g., 2013). This combination is able to recognise the importance of image generators and technology, while also accounting for the agency of the audience in selecting, interpreting or critiquing particular objects. Moreover, studying the agentive quality of images reveals one significant reason why media circulations often failed to cross other important divisions. It suggests images did different things, and mediated different discourses, to difference audiences, all watching and interacting with the Syrian uprising. Thus, the ‘levelling potential’ of communication technology has, in this sense, ostensibly been overstated. In examining the images shared that rebel-workers shared, we find that these images often achieved a degree of political/revolutionary resonance that other artistic regimes of practice miss.

**ART, AGENCY, AND REVOLUTION**

The philosopher Jacques Rancière (2005; 2013; 2015) grappled with the question of what constitutes meaningful political action? And what constitutes meaningful political art?

His answers are instructive when applied to the context of the Syrian uprising due to his explicit focus on moments of rupture within a socio-political order, and what he sees as an intersectional relationship between political power, struggle, and aesthetics. In his *Ten Theses On Politics* (2010: 27 - 45) Rancière makes the claim that meaningful political action is an action that brings about moments of disruption in the normalisation of what can be seen, done and said. Non-disruptive ‘political action’ means engaging with the status quo and therefore remains within the ‘order of the police’:

The police say that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming
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this space of ‘moving-along’ into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein (Rancière 2010: 37).

Actions are political, therefore, in so far as they disrupt the actual arrangements of power — if one obeys the police officer or not — but, more critically, these actions also upset the ideological foundation of that order — the obviousness or naturalness of the police officer’s power. For Rancière, only at this particular point of interruption does politics really begin; it starts with the ‘rupturing of the sensible.’

Mohammed’s collection of assembled photo slideshows, set to revolutionary music and depicting his kin and friends protesting, vividly captured the challenges that his village was making toward the regime. These were media objects that showcased citizens appearing in spaces previously highly controlled through a combined aesthetics and physical means of domination (Wedeen 1999; Panter 2011). Even Mohammed’s most gruesome videos of tortured bodies and bloodied corpses did not just suspend the viewer’s gaze over the scene; rather, these spectacles were always narrated into a broader story of revolutionary struggle, either by the cameraman, or another person in the camera shot. The end result was that images circulated by rebel-workers challenged both the regime’s symbolic domination as well as the naturalisation of its authority. For this reason, media objects distributed by rebel-workers could be argued as representative of what Rancière (2015) has elsewhere called, ‘dissensus.’ Dissensus signifies a mode of political or artistic action through which hierarchical arrangements of power face disruption from groups that suddenly and radically assume a status of equality formerly was denied. In the preceding chapter, rebel-workers appeared to recognise such moments. Their expressions of metaphorical ‘awakenings,’ so critiqued by academics and journalists elsewhere, were a case in point. Abdullah, for example, “could not believe it” when a biased call from a football referee transitioned so rapidly into angry chanting for the downfall of the regime. This crowd eventually attacked a statue of Hafiz al-Assad. When protests transformed into the occupation of public squares across Syria, in Homs, Hama and Deraa, this act of spatial reclamation made clear that citizens were equal. Through occupation, those who were previously publically acquiescent began shouting out demands in what were formally highly controlled spaces.

Amongst rebel-workers in Beirut, political discussions about these events would often fire up after dinner, accompanied with Pepsi and cigarettes. In the early stages of fieldwork, I’d often try to steer the conversation back to early memories of the uprising; the men
remained adamant that each demonstration they heard of or even attended, was deeply shocking but also incredibly exciting. This was in spite of the fact the Syrian protests came after the outbreak of uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Evidently there was still a sense of disbelief that revolution might come to Syria. Indeed, it was hard to escape the impression many had previously accepted the logic of Bashar al-Assad and the regime that ‘Syria is different,’ and while gradual reform might be possible, the president was a red line. For example, in an interview Assad gave during the opening stages of the uprisings he stated that “We never said we are a democratic country […] it takes a long time, it takes a lot of maturity, to be a fully-fledged democracy” (Assad 2011).

Rancière’s later work developed a more explicit analysis of aesthetic practice by looking at what exactly would constitute political art within his broader philosophy of dissensus. His basic argument is that for art to be political, it must ‘rupture the sensible’ and thereby interrupt and reframe physical and symbolic space (2009: 34). Rancière is thus concerned with what turns out to be quite distinct regimes of artistic practice that ‘restructure’ and not merely (re-)present the ‘symbolic dimensions of the sensible.’ In other words, ‘restructuring’ is not achieved through one popular style of artistic production in the context of the Syrian uprising: the (re-)presentation of the event or structure to which the creator is politically opposed. For example, consider the work of Syrian artist Sulfa Hijazi who sees herself as opposing “the cycle of violence in Syrian society” (Hijazi 2014 in Halasa 2014: 11). Her work includes paintings made up of prayer beads that are composed of decapitated heads, a foetus inside a swollen rifle, and a woman giving birth to automatic weapons [fig 2.9]. Reflecting on her work, Hijazi writes, “the sound of weapons drowns out the voice of peaceful activism” (ibid: 13). What seems to be informing this political-aesthetic engagement is the idea that the (re-)presentation of economic, political or ideological domination will lead somehow to the sparking of a (peaceful) revolutionary subjectivity. That is to say, ‘displaying the marks of domination’ will push the dominated into resisting the dominator. By contrast, Rancière has argued that the efficacy of political art is located in a capacity to rupture those taken-for-granted socio-symbolic orders. From this position might we consider Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation as a piece of (extremely) radical performance art? Is disruption not principally what the children of Deraa achieved when they spray-painted Egyptian revolutionary slogans across their schoolyard walls? And wasn’t this what the videos and photo slideshows of protests in Mohammad’s village neatly captured?

In sum, ‘revolutionary art,’ if it is to be considered as such must, in Rancière’s reading, work to evince a ‘rupture’ in the taken-for-granted normalisation of hierarchical
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arrangements. Yet, the actual social processes through which ‘rupturing’ occurs still demand further examination, for this task I turn to Alfred Gell (1998). This is because Gell — through his own antipathy toward representational analysis of art objects — provides a fitting alternative to ‘aesthetic theory’ that can be quite easily adapted to revolutionary contexts.

In his book, *Art and Agency* (1998) Gell establishes an analytic framework that builds from ‘doing’ rather than ‘representing.’ His ‘action orientation’ toward art is best illustrated by the author’s own example, the Asmat shield. Visitors to an ‘ethnographic museum’ may opine that the shield’s patterns are beautiful, or technically marvellous, but this is not what the shield is intended to do. It is designed to strike fear in the heart of the warrior misfortunate enough to be facing it (1998: 6). The shield, for the Asmat, is an effective shield not because its beauty can captivate a museum’s audience, or because of the ‘intricate meanings’ assumed encoded in the patterns, but because it generates dread. An approach which begins from ‘action’ is thus “preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts” (ibid). The social processes that concern this chapter then are the ‘uprising’ and the materialisation of ‘revolutionary subjectivity.’

To return to Abdullah and his critique of Azzam’s interpretation of Klimt’s *The Kiss*: perhaps the reason this work failed to generate resonance is better explained with reference to what his work was ‘doing’ (or, rather, what it was not ‘doing’) for these recipients. From participating in hours of online and offline group discussions, it had become clear to me that the images rebel-workers enjoy displaying and sharing are those that: buffer their pride in military strength and willingness for sacrifice; generate for them a sense of oppositional unity; highlight ‘the people’s’ capacity to overthrow the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and delegitimise the regime’s claims to power. For example, images coloured in the Syrian opposition flags [e.g. fig 2.4] rupture any possible regime claim to total power or representation by bringing into view an alternative model of political identity. Moreover, even the act of displaying these contentious images can generate further disruptive impacts vis-à-vis the naturalisation of regime authority over what can be shown and seen. In chapter four, martyrdom imagery is also shown not only ‘represent’ the atrocities of the regime, but to narrate the result of those atrocities into a broader discourse of revolution and heroic sacrifice.

Within these basic points are significant nuances to which we will return. For now, one simply ought to heed note that the initial images shared during the opening stages of the uprising were understood as effective if they punctured the ideological pomp surrounding the regime, this alone mediated strength by overcoming ‘fear of the regime.’ Or, as Bilal from
Idlib reported, “it was amazing when I first saw Bashar as a donkey [fig 2.3]. I felt freedom, I felt I could breathe.”

When Bilal displayed, in turn, this iconoclastic image over WhatsApp he was both participating in symbolic struggle against the regime and mediating to others his position: “I am no longer afraid.” The image is thus working by articulating Bilal’s challenge to the socio-symbolic ordering of regime dominance. Bashar as a donkey is, therefore, a materialisation of Bilal’s revolutionary subjectivity.

As the revolution transitioned to a civil and proxy war, the images my informants shared revolved less around this straightforward position — for pomp was mostly gone — and instead became concerned with mediating new oppositional identities, these identities could emerge from the FSA or Jabhat-al-Nusra. Bilal eventually seemed to grow tired of the donkey and, in-line with his growing sympathy toward Nusra, switched his WhatsApp picture to their flag [fig 2.1].

“I see you’ve got Nusra’s flag on your WhatsApp now,” I said to him, noticing the change, “So, you’re going to cut off my head now or what?”

Bilal, thankfully, insisted that would not happen.

“Why did you put it up then?” I asked.

“People I know who might still, secretly, prefer the regime could see it,” he said, “and then they’re going to be scared, they’ll think I’m with Nusra now.”

Putting aside the classificatory questions as to how far such an organisation is actually ‘revolutionary,’ at issue is that my interlocutors maintained a set of expectations regarding what, for them, ‘properly political’ art ought to do; how it should make them feel; and what it should communicate to others should they display it. Thus, for my informants, images must ‘do something’; following Gell (1998) we might say they require ‘agency,’ specifically defined as:

[…] attributable to those persons (and things) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who ‘causes events to happen’ in their vicinity. As a result of this exercise of agency, certain events transpire (not necessarily the specific events which were ‘intended’ by the agent). Whereas chains of physical/material cause-and-effect consist of ‘happenings’ which can be explained by physical laws which ultimately govern the universe as a whole, agents initiate ‘actions’ which are ‘caused’ by themselves, by their intentions, not by the physical laws of the cosmos. An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe. (Gell 1998:16)
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Gell is not suggesting that art objects actually are persons in the way that humans are persons: “the concept of agency I employ here is exclusively relations: for any agent there is a patient, and conversely for any patient there is an agent. This considerably reduces the ontological havoc caused by attributing agency freely to non-living things” (1998: 22). Thus an ‘agent’ acts in respect to a ‘patient.’ These ‘agents’ and ‘patients’ can take four forms within Gell’s analytical framework, together forming the ‘art nexus’:

1. Indexes: ‘images’ or ‘art objects’ are referred to as ‘indexes’; an index is the ‘material’ (or here the ‘digital’) thing, which has agency insofar as it encourages inferences (abductions), responses or interpretations about those who create and display. It could motivate fear like the Asmat shield or incredulity toward once taken-for-granted justifications for Bashar’s rule, i.e. Bashar as a donkey.

2. Prototypes: these are the ‘things’ that the ‘index’ is thought to represent or ‘stand for,’ such as persons or concepts ‘depicted’ in a painting.

3. Recipients: this is audience whom the ‘index’ is intended to ‘affect’; though, in some cases ‘recipients’ themselves are agents impacting upon the form of the ‘index.’

4. Artists: are those considered responsible for the existence and characteristics of an index, but they need to be considered the self-subsistent ‘creator’ in Western common sense understanding. Artists could be absent, or they could be Gods (Thomas 2001 4 – 5; Gell 1998: 27).

These terms can be arranged in any number of sequences, with terms further to the left holding greater degrees of ‘agency’ in ‘affecting’ the ‘patient’ to the right. This is the direction of the arrows, with the final long arrow moving from the image to the viewer. A clear example provided by Gell is of Reynold’s painting of Samuel Johnson (1998: 52-53) [fig 2.2]:


This portrait [fig 2.1] is seen as being primarily a representation of Doctor Johnson; it is Johnson (the prototype) who is dictating the way the picture appears. The brackets enclose all the ‘relations’ that coalesce around the image. The result is that when one looks at the portrait, one sees the lexicographer first before the artist ‘behind’ the image. This stands in contrast to the Mona Lisa:
Thus,

The situation is quite otherwise in the case of a portrait or ostensible portrait, such as the Mona Lisa. The priorities are reversed in this instance; the features, or some semblance of the features, once possessed by the women referred to in Leonardo’s picture are significant only in so far as they mediate our awareness of Leonardo’s art as a painter (Gell 1998: 52).

These two examples illustrate the difference in representations when the source of ‘ultimate agency’ abducted by the recipient is either ‘the artist’ or ‘the prototype.’

**ESTABLISHMENT ART**

What then of Azzam’s work? Can we now answer the riddle as to why it gained such an impressive following with one socio-economic group yet remained relatively unknown amongst another?

The series from which figure 2.0 is a part comprises of many photographs of destroyed Syrian buildings upon which Western masterpieces are digitally inserted over the scene. In line with Gell’s art nexus analytics, the social processes mediated by this series are:

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The Artist stands for Azzam, the primary agent, redeploying though his technical prowess and creative imagination index(1), an image of Klimt’s *The Kiss*, which is then reconstituted and digitally edited to ostensibly ‘protest the suffering’ captured a photograph of a bombed building — which here stands for a presumed unmediated record of reality, thus:

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[Prototype-A – > Index – A]
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This arrangement is what’s basically expressed in Azzam’s gallery biography:

In early 2013, Azzam made headlines worldwide when his work Freedom Graffiti went viral on social media. He enlisted one of the most iconic kisses in art — Gustav Klimt’s The Kiss — to protest his country's suffering, superimposing this image of love over the walls of a war-torn building in Damascus.
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The work was one of a series, Syrian Museum, in which he placed imagery taken from masterpieces of Western art history into photographs of scenes of devastation across Syria, to both highlight the destruction of Syria’s cultural heritage and to juxtapose some of the greatest achievements of humanity with the pain it is also capable of inflicting (Ayyam-Gallery 2016).

Two points emerge here: first, Azzam himself ‘made headlines’; when my informants viewed his work immediately they referenced ‘al fannān’ [the artist]. “He is talented”; “is he with the opposition or the regime?”

For these men, Syrian Museum appeared to first index some particular individual as the primary agent in the image’s creation. By point of contrast, we shall see below that the pictures rebel-workers prefer to share were often images in which the artist is more anonymous; the emphasis being less on a sole agent’s creative capacity objectified through an index, and more to do with the objectification of certain oppositional subjectivities as well as iconoclastic subversions. It is, in short, not for nothing that there is a ‘clipart like’ homogeneity to images represented by Figure 2.3 and 2.4.

Secondly, while Azzam has insisted that he supports the revolution, this particular artwork seemingly mediates an antipathy toward the uprising’s violent dimensions and it achieves this through a process which is structurally akin to ‘volt sorcery’ (Gell 1998: 62-65). Digital reproductions of Western artistic achievements have been here inserted (like nails into a fetish) to ‘disfigure’ or ‘alter’ photographs capturing the civil war’s devastation. In doing so, this artwork is reconstituting both a photograph — standing as an assumed unmediated representation of reality — with a famous example of Western art. The impact is an attack, or at least the passing of negative judgement, toward those humans inflicting “the pain” represented in the photograph.

The use of Western art is particularly expressive: the nails are imported. Work by Dali, Picasso, Van Gogh et al., are not ‘Syrian achievements’: the Syrian achievement here is destruction, ‘highlighted’ and rendered as ‘painful.’ These ‘modern works’ are themselves deconstructed by Gell into formulas that flag the artist as the primary agent in their creation (ibid: 56 -57). The end result is almost as if Klimt himself has been summoned from the dead to join with Azzam in decrying the ‘senseless violence’ indexed by the photographs.

Here we finally reach the central problem: for my informants this initial violence was not senseless; violence had a meaning within a moral universe constructed around struggle — whether they conceptualise the Syrian regime as an extension of Israeli/US imperialism; Iranian/Russian imperialism or even both — they understand it as something fundamentally
external, as a continuation of colonialism and the principle actor in their denial of autonomy and freedom (cf. Said 1993). With this in mind, the exchange of violence between the regime and the opposition (settler and native) “balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity […] the settler’s work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native’s work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler” (Fanon 1963: 206). The regime of Bashar al-Assad directly connects back to colonial practice:

What is essential to the regime and connects back to colonial ideology is the idea that we are dealing with a bunch of terrorists, fanatics, barbarians, the uncivilised, and the primitive, which are all attempts to legitimise force and violence, and label any kind of counter force as automatically evil. The violence is asymmetrical, that is to say, the regime not only bombs from the air, but also kills indiscriminately, because it sees the people as the enemy, as supporters of the terrorists, etc. […] Counter-violence against the colonial regime is liberatory because it is an act, and by acting, the absolute power of colonialism, internalised by the colonised, is shaken (Munif 2012).

These two different modes of violence are collapsed together by Azzam; the asymmetry erased, and devoid of perceptible nuance, the opposition becomes an equal victim to ‘volt sorcery.’ With this in mind, Haytham’s initial confusion toward the artist’s political intentions is clarified. Haytham had a sensitive disposition and was often visibly distraught over the levels of destruction and violence occurring in Syria — and at times also apathetic toward official opposition currents and their myriad failings — yet he, like the others, would stop short of comparing two different types of violence. In addition, many men within my network have themselves directly undertaken acts of destruction, and these are the kinds of acts which are lamented in recent examples of Syrian establishment art (see: Halasa 2014). Abdullah, for instance, in the summer of 2013, on a return visit home during Ramadan ran away with his family’s Kalashnikov and joined friends in what he described to me as a ‘supporting role’ in skirmishes occurring around Deir Ezzor city.

The point is that when conversing about the uprising more generally, opposition-committed individuals rendered suffering politically meaningful: it is to be celebrated rather than framed as another senseless loss in a conflict marred by senseless loss. The retreat of middle-class activists and establishment artists from the conflict as it transitioned into ‘civil war’ has been noted elsewhere (Al-Abed 2012). In determining the course of events, the sword has proven mightier than the pen but, as we shall see, the pen is not entirely without use. If anything, its role now is to record the sword’s heroic deeds. In disavowing the sword,
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however, the pacifism of Azzam’s work can only be understood as ‘revolutionary’ in the sense that it was produced in response to the revolution: it is not doing the same job as the art objects shared by worker-refugees do, it is not ‘rupturing the sensible.’

This argument is generalisable in so far as we appreciate how the majority of Syrian establishment artists have, physically as well as intellectually, moved away in response to the militarisation of the uprising (al-Abed 2012; Jadaliyya 2014; Hasala 2014). As with Hijazi and Azzam, many proponents of a ‘peaceful revolution’ have largely opposed violence and have responded to this opposition by generating products that reproduce scenes of death and destruction with the hope that drawing attention is enough to constitute or cultivate ‘resistance’ to violence (ibid). It is then no wonder that these images were not shared by opposition-supporting worker-refugees and that new technology has not, in and of itself, implied a democratisation of other socio-economic distinctions. Moreover, criticism has already been levied against what others see as a defeatist subtext:

[the] depiction of mutilated bodies, severed heads on plates, and mangled crowds are employed to call attention to the havoc that has mounted since the Syrian regime began to address protesters with military force. Paintings, sculptures, photographs, and installations are submerged in red in references to blood. In a handful of short films and videos, actual footage from autopsies is incorporated for further effect […] while the indescribable has been set into motion and the catastrophic is quite real, reproducing these scenes will only fortify the devastation. Through a political system that attempts to capitalize on the trauma of hushed nightmares, Syrians have been instructed to expect the unthinkable — a tormenting of the national psyche that once pierced the everyday existence of millions. In order to honor those who have lost their lives, the artist’s gaze must be disengaged from the gruesome details of their demise. The act of expressing dissent, of placing one’s body in direct confrontation with peril is enough indication that Syrians are rejecting the tangible horror that lies before them. Asking them to relive it through art that is created exclusively for its shock value betrays the point of the uprising (Jadaliyya Editorial 2011).

Rancière would agree, and so too do rebel-workers who responded to militarisation, not by retreat, but through accepting the delineation of new oppositional identities, which, rather than ‘despair in destruction, act to render these acts of destruction meaningful, rhetorically strengthening and re-enacting the deeds themselves. Admittedly on a structural level, much establishment art may vary from the volt sorcery discussed above; however, this body of work is broadly united in the sense that: (1) agency of ‘the artist’ is primary in the creation of these ‘indexes’; (2) the artist mediates via his creation a ‘response’ to the uprising and (3) that response has frequently come to ‘represent’ violence, without qualification, in the hopes of ‘resisting violence’ writ large.
So, while the social processes underpinning particular work may vary, establishment art has largely responded to the increasing violence of revolutionary civil war with shock and retreat, and by not rendering opposition violence as a meaningful disruption to the pattern of regime violence, it ultimately reinforces the power of destruction itself to suppress and terrify and it strengthens the hierarchical relationship between regime and citizen. It, therefore, works to buffer the assumptions upon which regime dominance is built and does not emerge in dialogue with, or materialise, the awakening of revolutionary subjectivity that I have argued was central to rebel-workers’ lives.

**OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITY ART**

As a point of contrast, the work I turn to now is work that celebrates nationalism, sacrifice and victory [fig 2.4]. Consider the tears of blood, doubtless also a despairing image, yet the tears are already drying upon a face painted with the opposition flag. Here we have sacrifice, rendered in a secular/nationalist tone, mingling with an acknowledged suffering inflicted by the regime. What the image does is render loss and death intelligible, purposeful and present in the lives of rebel-workers. It made Abdullah and Haytham ‘feel’ something.

“Why do you like this image?” I asked Haytham, shortly after I noticed he’d set it to his WhatsApp picture.

“You know I just like things that are ‘very revolutionary,’” he replied, “and this is also a little bit sad, because she’s crying, but still my friends will see it on my profile and know I’m with the FSA.”

The dove is a traditional symbol of peace, but here it is engaged in the uprising in flight and also splashed with the colours of the FSA, it is mediating the goal of peace and, through its flight, a sense of freedom. Depending on the ‘point of view’ one adopts, two different formulas can summarise the social assumption and relations that are recognised through these particular art objects. Beginning with the perspective of Abdullah when deciding upon which images is suitable for his WhatsApp display pictures:

Recipient – A - - > Index –P

This is the simple formula Gell offers the reader for ‘patronage.’ Here, however, the individual is a patron to the image not in the same direct sense as, for example, Louis XIV was when he financed and dictated the manifestation of his appearance as painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud (Gell 1998: 37) yet Abdullah is patron in so far as he selects from an
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oeuvre of indexes the one which suitably reflects his own position. Gell notes that, “there is almost always a sense in which the recipient of a work of art can see their own agency in the index” and that “even if one is not ‘the patron who caused the work of art to be made, any spectator may infer that, in a more general sense, the work of art was made for him or her” (ibid: 34). Now returning to the aforementioned Mohammed, the process which allowed him to abduct the identity of others from images they select for display:

[ [Prototype –A] - > Index -A] - - > Recipient -P

When Mohammed inspects these particular art objects, the ‘index’ appears as, primarily, a manifestation of the politics of the individual choosing to display it. The prototype materialised on the index is here not a human being, but a particular set of political principles. The index ‘affects’ the recipient so that he can formulate an abduction about the individual who chooses to display it. Thus, this prototype exercises agency over Mohammed in so far as he abducts, ‘well, this guy is with the opposition,’ or ‘he supports the sacrifices required to liberate Syria’ and ultimately, either, ‘I should maintain my friendship with him’ or ‘I should be wary of him.’ In this sense too, the assumed political subjectivity of individuals who display these images maintains a determining force over the prototypes deployed by the (anonymous) artist via an index. Nonetheless, I have removed the assumed ‘artist’ from both the above formulas with the intention of signalling that — from both perspectives — when these images mediate revolutionary subjectivity they are mediating just that; they are not intended to awe their recipients with particular artists’ ingenuity but to awe individuals in respect to the uprising, its goals, the transformations it has made in what can be said and not said, the end of acting as if’ and the disruption of the taken-for-granted dominance of the regime.

Mohammed was always concerned with making friends of the ‘correct’ political persuasion: during our long evenings spent playing cards he occasionally would clandestinely usher me aside to whisper apologies for what he perceived as the ‘ignorance and ‘backwardness’ of certain individuals who passed by on an evening. Mohammed preferred to spend time with individuals who were not, as he saw it, ‘with the opposition because all their friends are’ but rather with ‘cultured people’ who thought through their support and were ‘committed from the heart.’ Mohammed made friends like these away from the site, during trips to the Sunday market, through his extended network or at the local internet café. After making a new acquaintance and swapping numbers, chatting would begin over the WhatsApp
network. Again, the important point is that, in this mobile application, contacts have a display image positioned within the address book and above active chats. Rarely would these profiles consist of actual personal photographs. Instead, they were typically made up of images like Haytham’s tears of blood. An interaction between technology and artistic regimes of production was thereby accelerating the process by which these men could distinguish between comrades and enemies, an identity which might once have been established through complicated conversational clues or dangerous questions are now established by the touch of a button.

This alluring capacity to mediate revolutionary subjectivity and identity is perhaps one of the main reasons why so much of my fieldwork was spent looking at screens or looking at people looking at screens. Yet there are still dangers in this process just as there were dangers prior to the widespread uptake of smartphones. Before Lebanon’s 3G network rolled out, Mohammed and Bilal decided to try and bring a little bit of the Syrian uprising to their construction site in Beirut. As stated, the area in which they lived is, like Sabra, aligned with political forces close to the Syrian regime. Following a crackdown across the boys’ home region, they felt disconnected and longed to be back home and not surrounded by those ‘people who hate us.’ In what sounded like a typical display of bravado from Bilal he grabbed a spray can from the site’s supply and spray painted, ‘thawra’ [revolution] and ‘al-sha’b yurūd isqāṭ al-niẓām’ [the people want to overthrow the regime] across the external walls of the site. I never personally witnessed the graffiti, it was painted prior to my arrival in Beirut but what the men reported to me was that an older local man was passing by and, seeing the graffiti, asked them, what the hell they thought they were doing? He stressed to the guys how dangerous and foolish such an act was, especially given their particular location in Beirut. Mohammed, often more sensible than his cousin, agreed and made Bilal go back over the signs before the paint was even dry. But, would similar acts of anti-regime posturing be ‘less foolish’ if they took place on smartphone networks?

Displaying revolution-aligned images across the internet does still seem to carry dangers. This is especially the case back in Syria, where the regime understands these digital practices. Should one be arrested, handing over Facebook information is typically the first order (Sayed 2012: 210). Indeed, a similar fate awaited those apprehended by political party forces in Beirut.

In the late winter of 2013 I lost contact with Haytham, he had not ‘appeared online’ for two days and finally, when I received a call, he explained he had been apprehended by Hezbollah. The date, precisely, was February 14th, and he had been travelling in Dahieh, the
southern suburbs of Beirut, to meet his girlfriend. As a good Valentine, he was carrying with him in a bag a box of chocolates and an oversized cuddly bear. When he told me the story, I immediately thought this was incredibly risky, considering his girlfriend is Shia and engaged to another man.

“Don’t you get scared you’ll be stopped, especially with all these increased security measures?” I asked.

“I fell in love. What can I do?” he replied.

With love, my friend cared not for my trepidations and made his way to his girlfriend’s house, despite the fact that this saga was unfolding during late winter 2013’s chain of car bombs that were designed to hit the Shia population of Dahieh. This was the point at which Hezbollah appeared to be turning the civil war in the regime’s favour through their active deployment in Syria. Opposition groups had been reduced to carrying out responses in Lebanon that targeted civilians and were ostensibly then aimed at weakening local support for military action. Consequently, security had been tightened, and Dahieh was considered a ‘no go’ area for some of the rebel-workers I knew. Haytham climbed to the top of his girlfriend’s apartment block, but no sooner had he entered the door than he heard a knock and found, in his estimates, ‘at least 30 Hezbollah militia’ lining the stairway. This likely exaggeration aside, the first thing they said to him was, “hand over you phone,” and the men began searching his files.

A guy then asked what was in his bag; Haytham passed it to him, but the man was too scared, he started claiming it “might contain a bomb”, and another shouted at Haytham to open it. He opened his bag to reveal the bear and the chocolate, in so doing ruined the surprise for his girlfriend. But within moments the men had uncovered a treasure chest of pro-opposition images. Haytham was ordered to follow them before being subjected to a lengthy interrogation, culminating in him signing a document proclaiming that he does not, in fact, support the opposition. His phone was never returned.

The point of this story is that these online spaces must be understood as only ever semi-secure and just as technology has reduced the distance required to send, receive and view art objects it has also accelerated degrees of peril. Graffiti can be scrawled on a wall, and the scrawler can run whereas on a phone an individual is permanently walking around with a gallery of images which, unless he deletes them, will allow others to read what they may assume to be the bearer’s ‘true’ political position. The interrogated may insist otherwise, but it would likely be as useless as pleading one’s innocence while dressed in Free Syrian Army fatigues. What the ever-present dangers inherent within these technological-aesthetic-political
intersections reveals is also the depth of ‘offline’ structures dictating worker-rebel lives. The mounting degrees of conflict in Syria, Lebanese party involvement, and evident sectarianisms interacted to delimit the mobility, freedom of association and the possibility for self-expression. The very fact that Haytham’s teddy bear and chocolates were not enough to persuade Hezbollah’s militia of his innocent intent ought also to dispel any doubt as to whether these images are actually doing political work. These media objects are clearly troubling enough to established hierarchies that they felt the need to re-exert power over Haytham and demand that he performs the farcical gesture of ‘signing away’ his opposition.

PROPAGANDA AND ICONOCLASM

The above has shown that for Syrian rebel-workers the art object that they shared seemed ‘thawr’ [revolutionary] in so far as they achieved two interrelated functions: 1) they indexed the emergence of a contentious political identity; 2) the displaying of these art objects meant taking part directly in the fight against the symbolic domination of the regime. The argument can be clarified further by turning to what is perhaps the sharpest example of art as dissensus: the creative destruction and re-purposing of ‘regime propaganda.’

In the symbolic battle, the iconoclastic dismantling of propaganda is equivalent to an elite front-line combat force. Throughout the global history of political uprising, official statues, portrait and the like — i.e. the most archetypical symbols of domination and hierarchy — are often first to face the firing squad. During these skirmishes, the grip of the ruling elite weakens in its capacity to control the meaning invested in its own symbols, be that investment an actual commitment to institutionalised power or merely an acquiescence to domination. In other words, when a statue is pulled down by ‘the people’ it transforms from a work functioning as a disciplinary mechanism to a symbol of resistance.

Uprisings are periods not just of meaning loss but also instances of meaning-creation wherein symbols of the old guard can be re-appropriated for revolutionary work. In this process, art objects, images, and video are conscripted into the battle over who has the right to power and the right to rule (see: Thomassen 2010; Manning 2007; Keane 2003). During uprisings, the re-fashioning, or simply just ripping up of the most blatant material/symbolic manifestations of regime dominance is, then, a key rallying point. But what socio-political relations do these bombastic statues, and overly flattering portraits mediate in the first place? Why are they ‘good to smash’?

Gell makes reference to propaganda, though only in passing:
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Prototype – A -- > Recipient – P. One might call this the ‘idol’ formula. Here the prototype, who, besides causing the index to assume a certain appearance, exercises agency *vis-a-vis* the recipient. A typical instance of this is the practices of dictators, such as Mao and Stalin, in having enormous images of themselves posted on wall, keeping the population under contentious surveillance and control via their images (1998: 40).

The series of ‘enormous images’ that dominated Syria were those that followed the coup d’etat of November 1970 [e.g. Fig 2.6]. This coup witnessed Hafiz al-Assad’s rise to the presidency and, with it, an attendant cult of personality that enveloped him and his family. The exact manner and mode of control which this proliferation of idol-like propaganda imagery was able to exert over the population have been explored in depth by Lisa Wedeen (1998). Chapter one noted how her argument revolves around the fact this cult only appeared to have the capacity to generate a politics of ‘as if,’’ meaning that citizens understood how they were to act as if in reverence for the leader. The cult of the president produced guidelines for acceptable behaviour, but not an unquestioning belief. It operated, therefore, as a disciplinary device. In the previous section, when Haytham signed Hezbollah’s agreement that he was ‘no longer with the opposition,’ was this not a small-scale exercise in political spectacle and an exercise that was not then as alien as one might have first presumed?

Wedeen maintains that power is not located in the production of hegemonic understandings; her documentation of citizen contestation convincingly reveals that the phantasmagoria produced by the regime was hardly always ‘taken-for-granted common sense’ (1998: 87-142). Instead, the practices and language of the cult nurtured Assad’s grip in another and more important ‘taken for granted’ way: in practice and in language. By ‘acting out’ the cult, citizens made it real.

[…] there is a dialectical relationship between practices and ideology in which practices produce ideological representations, and ideology is material because it is “inscribed in practices.” In the case of Syria, the idea being reproduced in the specific practice of uttering patently spurious statements or tired slogans is not the one expressly articulated — [Assad] is in no meaningful literal sense the “premier pharmacist.” Rather, [Assad] is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd (ibid: 12).

Thus we can somewhat avoid the tricky question of ‘how far citizens actually believed’ the ridiculous things the regime claimed, and instead simply grant that they believed the regime to be powerful *because* it made them say ridiculous things. This device was passed to Bashar
following the death of his father in June 2001. Although he was reportedly initially reluctant in allowing the cult to continue, it nevertheless did (Wieland 2012). Complicity again returned to creating practices in which citizens themselves, by carrying out practices, upheld the basis for the Assad family domination (Wedeen 1998: 7).

Mahmoud — Haytham’s cousin, the Gypsum board installer and excellent house chef — once relayed to me a story encapsulating both these early forms of regime contestation and the dialectical interplay between the quotidian materiality of the personality cult’s symbols, signs and slogans and the ideas surrounding these materials. In the summer of 2008, Mahmoud’s father, Abdul, was adamant about erecting a new wall to mark off an area of land adjacent to the house. His family did not get permission for the wall so they worried it would not be allowed. Nonetheless, erecting walls was a matter of course given the weak physical presence of the regime authority in the rural areas along the southern sections of Deir Ezzor. Abdul went ahead with his plans, just as animosity between two families drawn from opposing tribes had reached a breaking point. There had been a murder; a fight led to knives being pulled and a member of an opposing tribe had had his throat slashed and died. Reprisals spun out of control, and the regime deployed some armed men to keep the peace.

Mahmoud told me that his father fretted that his illicit wall would not go unnoticed. In the back of a cupboard he found an old framed picture of Hafiz al-Assad, which used to hang in his grocery shop. He had taken it down when redecorating. He hammered it to the wall. Mahmoud thinks his father was quite convinced this was the reason his wall was ignored by passing regime forces.

To assert that Abdul thought at that moment that a representation of Hafiz al-Assad would exercise agency over passing regime forces is not to suggest that, at that particular moment, it actually is Hafiz. It might be tempting to reduce propaganda and its effects to idol worship; in fact, the social relations involved are remarkably similar. But it would still make little sense to Abdul if one began suggesting that when he hammered up this dusty old photograph, he was, in reality, hammering up the dead president of Syria. Rather, the index acts as a material deposit for some of Hafiz’s agency, transmitted through the photograph, and acting upon the passing soldiers whom he assumed thought, “best just ignore that wall over there, we can’t be seen destroying a picture of Bashar’s father!” So Hafiz al-Assad is exercising agency in firstly, a basic sense: his actual appearance determined the photograph (the index). But further, “it is not just that the person represented in the image is ‘identified’ with that image via a purely symbolic or conventional linkage; rather, it is because the agency of the individual represented is actually impressed on the representation” (Gell 1998: 102). So
secondly, this representation of Hafiz al-Assad then, is almost standing for Assad himself, exercising agency over Abdul through his reaction that the photograph could be the wall’s saviour and also over the passing soldiers whom he imagines would never dare knock down a wall with a picture of the president attached. In Gell’s terms:

[ [prototype – A] - > index – A] - -- > Recipient - P

Recipient here being both Abdul and the soldiers. Mahmoud speculates that his father, whom he describes as an overly nervous man, need not have troubled himself with this tactical operation. There was, at the time, an ongoing gunfire exchange and this likely concerned the soldiers more than his illicit wall. Regardless, even in seemingly strategically subverting the cult of personality for his own good, Abdul’s practice effectively (re)cultivates the power of the regime itself. Power is producing its own mode of resistance, and we do not yet have an instance of Rancière’s dissensus but instead only of the tactical use of consensus for individual ends. The ‘compartmentalisation of the sensible’ has not being challenged; soldiers are still soldiers; citizens were still less than soldiers and all unequal in the face of the Assad family.

Dissensus enters with the spread of uprising to Syria in March 2011. When soldiers desert from their ranks they transition into rebels or traitors when citizens occupy public squares, they become protesters or saboteurs, and when these groups topple statues of Hafiz al-Assad, the leader is symbolically dethroned. Photographs, posters, and statues of Hafiz al-Assad, which, according to Abdul’s reckoning, had the capacity to ward off regime soldiers, now have the misfortune of becoming key targets in a revolutionary movement: posters are ripped down from street hoardings and set alight while statues have their heads kicked in. As already outlined in preceding chapters, many of the Syrian rebel-workers had, at some point, directly engaged in this form of iconoclasm, often during their return home, or prior to venturing to Beirut. Those who had not found direct avenues to join their comrades could still engage with this act of dissensus by sharing either photographs or videos of the destruction itself or even wholly digital re-fashionings of regime propaganda [fig 2.7].

Back in Haytham and Mahmoud’s apartment one evening in March 2013 we watched, on their newly purchased second-hand laptop, a YouTube video they had downloaded showcasing the toppling of the statue of Hafiz al-Assad in Raqqa’s central square [fig 2.5]. This was the culmination of a siege waged in March 2013 by the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham (Al-Jazeera 2013). When we heard the thud of the statue falling
on the tiny speakers, the glee across my friends’ faces was evident. In generating this glee, when the noose was slung around the statue’s neck, a number of things appeared to be going on. It is possible to think again about ‘volt sorcery’ here because the suffering of an index -- a statue of Hafiz -- appear to connote the suffering of the prototype which could be both Hafiz himself, as well as the regime for which he stood as the symbolic figurehead. In Gell’s discussion of iconoclasm in regards to the suffragette-inspired slashing of the Rokeby Venus by Mary Richardson, he makes clear that underlying these acts there appear typically strong political, social or religious motivations (1998: 62-64):

For instance, it was not by chance that the latest picture to be attacked in the National Gallery (in 1978) was Poussin’s *The Golden Calf* itself. Nothing was made of this at the time, but [surely] this picture was chosen precisely because it depicts idolatry in process. The attack was directed against idolatry (Gell 1998: 62).

Should an individual actor be able to overcome the taboo against defacing artworks displayed in the National Gallery, they are not necessarily demonstrating they are no longer enthralled by art, for they can appear more blinded by it, in the sense that they ‘attack art’ as a substitute for the ‘real thing’ (ibid: 64). This also appears the case when rebels tie a noose around the neck of a statue, and it is therefore why this act, and the social processes it mediates, are different from the processes that were mediated by Abdul. “Art-destruction is art-making in reverse” (ibid), and iconoclasts exercise a degree of artistic agency. Thus, it is not the case that when crowds were destroying regime propaganda they demonstrated a lack of enthrallment to images, but a rupture has nonetheless still occurred in place this imagery once occupied in the subjugation of the Syrian population. The history of regime propaganda has not suddenly eroded. Rather, these images are good to smash precisely because of what they once did and what they once stood for in the mind of the smasher. If art-destruction is art-making in reverse, then the new work of art we were watching being created over YouTube: ‘The Fallen Statue of Hafiz al-Assad’ by ‘the people’ — has endowed the index with fresh life:

The old life of the Raqqa statue can be expressed in the elementary formula Gell provides for the propagandistic function:

[Prototype –A ] → Recipient – P
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When revolutionary conditions emerge, the recipients in the above formula transition into agentive artists who set about constructing a new index:

[Artist – A - >] – > Index/Prototype – P

And finally we reach the point of view of those who display, share and view the new artwork created by our recipients-cum-artists:


A symbolic order was toppled by this new work of art, and thus the dissimilarity between acts of iconoclasm and representational art should finally be moving into focus. The glee the men expressed results not from their position as recipients, informing an artistic intervention which sees the fallen statue transform into a crystallisation of artistic/revolutionary agency; this is captivating not simply due to some ‘technicality’, i.e. how they were able to pull the statue down in such a dramatic, rapid or abrupt manner, but because this new index now acts to mediate the capacity of all Syrians to overthrow regime dominance. In other words, it is a real world materialisation of what results when revolutionary subjectivity awakens. In this, rebel-workers could see themselves in the act. It is their will, realised through the crowd. And so, as with oppositional identity art, they see ‘something of themselves’ in the video. As the video reached its conclusion, Haytham turned to me and shouted “Come on! Let’s go pull down that poster of Bashar near Sabra.” I hoped he was joking; I did not want to spend Friday night getting beaten up. Regardless, he clearly recognised in this recorded act his own capacity to re-order the symbolic universe. This is why, in Rancière terms, iconoclasm is a distinctly political act. Statues in Syria once served as symbols ‘forcing out’ the populace from political contestation, but as this one fell, the people were — if only for a moment — forced back in.

CONCLUSION
This chapter has tried to fill an empirical gap in much of the analysis that has tried to make sense in the surge of artistic production that emerged during the time of the Arab uprisings. In moving away from street art and museum walls, and shifting focus to the circulation of digital images, videos, and photographs over smartphone networks, attention has been drawn here to the role of art and communication technology in the constitution and materialisation of revolutionary subjectivities. This is important because one of the mechanisms through which
the Syrian regime maintained its authority has been through the disciplinary function of statues, pictures, and portraits. These alternative media circulations emerge through and reinforced a rupture in state-citizen relationships.

The specificity of this media emerges through a contrast with ‘representational art’ that, without such a distinct connection to the revolutionary moment, risked functioning ideologically to reproduce the power of violent state repression. Indeed, chapter one described how the legitimacy of the Syrian regime was gradually eroded for large swathes of the population who faced increasing impoverishment. And without economic legitimacy, compliance increasingly rested on the capacity of the state’s violent apparatus to suppress; that is, to generate and maintain the ‘barrier of fear.’

Establishment artwork often exhibits reactionary (re)presentations of barbarism to which the artist, as the primary agent in the creation of the index, materializes his objection. Yet this mode also seemingly mediates often a symmetry between the violence of the opposition and violence of the regime. It thereby fails to ‘tap into’ broader rebel discourses of liberation and oppression as documented in chapter two. These discourses understand there to be a profound distinction between a dictatorship deploying its military arsenal to suppress its own people and a rebel force acting in response to this suppression. Instead, the uprising art popular amongst my informants is concerned with the overcoming of fear toward state violence. The two examples of alternative media formations explored here achieve this goal by delineating oppositional identities and dispelling the ideological pomp of the propaganda regime.

These differences are somewhat related to the class position of the typical establishment artist who may have supported the revolution in its first instances but, with the financial and political resources available, has since withdrawn from the conflict and thus distanced himself enough from the violence. The priority of overcoming the fear of the regime has, for many of these artists, seemingly transitioned into all-encompassing abstract horror.

Locating art objects shared by rebel-workers has meant shifting the focus away from street art and galleries and toward new technology. This is because technology has functioned to widen access to image creation, circulation and display. Yet this technology is only a sufficient but not a necessary condition for artworks to garner popularity amongst opposition committed individuals. They must additionally ‘tap into’ and ‘materialize’ those broader discourses of liberation and oppression.

The key point is that, first, from the perspective of rebel-workers, many of these objects can be seen to have, as the primary agent in their creation, the individuals themselves
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who choose to display them. This is because they work on the social level to both ‘identify’ and ‘materialise’ revolutionary subjectivity. Thus when rebel-workers set images indexing new oppositional identities as their display pictures, they were directly displaying themselves and their revolutionary commitments. Second, iconoclastic images, photographs, and videos act as materialised instances of revolutionary agency: in the smashed statue or digitally modified photograph of donkey-Bashar al-Assad, this work achieved distinct political goals. It weakens taken-for-granted naturalisation of hierarchy thus somewhat removing Wedeen’s (1998) as if. The final point of evidence that it is these images and not others that succeed in achieving some form of revolutionary work is the fact that they are dangerous. Technology has not simply liberated a ‘safe space’ for diasporic worker-revolutionaries in Beirut to engage with the uprising but has generated as many new predicaments as much as it has generated fresh opportunities.

60 WhatsApp is a cross platform messaging subscription service for smartphones which makes use of mobile or wifi internet connection. Users can send not just text but also now voice recordings, images, videos and locations. The software runs on all major mobile operating systems and is thus the favoured mode of communication over BBM or iMessage, which are locked to blackberry and apple products respectively. There is no fee to download the software or to send a message. The only fee involved is the general cost of maintaining either/or a wifi connection and mobile Internet connectivity.

61 The images referred to throughout this chapter begin on p. 129.

62 In a sense, Chapter five returns momentarily to this digital divide by revealing the role of the smartphones, as objects of everyday life. I show here the position of certain models within broader frameworks of cultural and symbolic capital. Indeed, just because all men could afford the price of a basic smartphone, does not mean they somehow sit outside broader webs of consumer capitalism that generates desires toward high-end smartphones.

63 Doubtlessly a similar or even counter process might be informing the images being shared by regime supporting individuals; however, given that my network of participants was limited to those aligned with the opposition, this chapter, as with the thesis in general, will be necessarily limited in scope.

64 The Syrian regime’s symbolic domination is not unique in SWANA or beyond (Khatib 2013). In fact, the combination of political control with a certain aesthetic — ‘the projection of images of power and the powerful into everyday life’ 00 ??is a feature of all states. Where the Syria and related cases of one-party rule in SWANA stand out, is in the explicitness of these project, with most public squares featuring some picture of Assad gazing out over the space. In short, this is a technique making for the aesthetic personalisation of political power (Cooke 2007; Wedeen 1999; Lacouture 1970).

65 Abduction is a term used in the philosophy of logic to refer to inferences of meaning that are not established or verifiable but hypothetical and derived from something about the thing being considered (Gell 1998: 14-16). In simple terms, they are ‘educated guesses’.

66 It’s beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore the nature of ‘online personas,’ but in a future work I will reveal how a strict separation is problematic given that an online worker-rebel persona exists in contrast to an (assumed) offline reality. But these distinctions can only exist through their relationship. Moreover, online personas were often cultivated because they were hoped to have offline effects.
A basic Google search for the term “Tammam Azzam Syrian Museum” produces 548,000 results (03/06/14).

My understanding of ‘establishment art’ is informed here by an achieve of images shared across a whole host of opposition groups in Facebook, as well as my participation in online discussions, and the holding of informal semi-structured interviews with activists and artists in Beirut.

This exhibition featured a number of prominent artists from the Middle East. While the focus on death, destruction and brutality was not as pronounced during these pre-2011 productions, a representative take on exploitation was evident (see Darwent 2009).

“A regime of sensibility determines “what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2013: 13) by privileging certain modes, objects, and subjects of perception over others. As Rancière explains, “the distribution of the sensible [is] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (2013: 12). For example, whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity are all forms of sensibility that are, in the language of much counter-hegemonic discourse, “centered” by contemporary American norms, institutions, and practices; the centering of whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity doles out privilege to those who are perceived to conform to these norms, and literally marginalises those who are perceived to be insufficiently white, heterosexual, and/or masculine. A stable, hegemonic distribution constitutes what Rancière terms “the police order” (Rancière, 2010: 37).
Chapter four deals explicitly with these media tropes in relation to martyrdom commemoration material and practice.

Needless to say, examples of style go well beyond the Syrian uprising. Rancière’s (2015: 142) own instructive discussion of the genre moves from ‘genocide photography’ to a performance artist who paid Mexican workers to dig their own graves.

The fact different socio-economic positions lead to aesthetic reactions to revolutionary violence is taken up below (p. 111 – 112).

This anti-representational position is entirely consistent with Rancière’s critique of philosophy as a mode of science that ‘reveals the structure of oppression’ with the assumption that, once the fog of false consciousness is lifted, oppressed workers will finally man the barricades (2015).

Nonetheless, a debate is found amongst scholars concerning Gell’s exact position on materiality; Morphy (2009) maintains that Gell overworks his analogy and that objects are awarded too much agency versus peoples. Others propose the opposite: Gell does not go far enough in challenging common sense ideas of things and people (Holbraad and Wistell 2007; Miller 2005).

This chapter avoids debates around “ontology,” for it would be rather strange to suggest Syrian worker-refugees understand the images they exchange as “persons” in anyway comparable to how understand each other or the anthropologist ‘as a person”; such a line is troublingly reminiscent of a scene in Lawrence of Arabia when a camera is snatched from a photographer because, apparently, ‘Arabs fear it may capture the soul.’

There are purer forms of this particular relationship which might be further illustrative:

Photography was once imagined an activity devoid of artistry, and is still popularly understood to be a more or less direct capturing of an actually existing materiality. Thus, it is “considered to be an artist-less mode of image-production. The image when forms itself out of the light is emanating from the prototype” (Gell 1998: 35)

Artistic Agency: Artist –A -A -> Index –P,
The index here leads to the abduction of the agency of the individual who made it. “Much post-Renaissance Western art projects the artist’s agency in a very salient manner. The brushwork in works by Van Gogh emanates an almost palpable sense of the artists presence” (ibid)

Volt sorcery here refers to the practice of making modifications to an image (sticking in pins, etc) with the aim of affecting a change in the being represented by the image.

In reality Dahieh is composed too of a substantial Maronite Christian population as well as some Lebanese and Palestinian Sunnis and now a large proportion of Syrian workers and refugees.

For a more detailed description of the various symbolic and physical forms of control and affiliation that manifest in Beirut’s neighborhoods see Battah (2015) and Bou Akar (2012).

Given Lebanon’s often painfully slow internet the use of ‘ripping’ programs that download YouTube videos into a mpeg file is popular. This file can then be circulated more rapidly over a local Bluetooth network or placed on a USB memory stick.
IMAGES

Chapters 1 - 3

Figure 1.0

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2
Figure 1.3

Figure 2.0 [From Tammam Azzam’s Syrian Museum]
Figure 2.7 [From top left: Bashar as demon, vampire and donkey]
Fig 2.8 Khalil Younes The Comb (2011)

Fig 2.9 Sulafa Hijazi Birth (2012 Left) and Untitled (2012 Right)
CHAPTER FOUR
Rebel-Martyrs: Betwixt and Between No More

INTRODUCTION
I slid my smartphone out from my jean’s pocket and squinted down at the tiny screen through midmorning sun: “Bilal has sent a voice recording,” I read. Abdullah and I were taking a break from our regular Sunday walk, we had scrambled down a sea wall onto a rocky outcrop facing the American University, and there we sat sipping strong espresso coffee from plastic cups. We looked out across the Mediterranean and, with this sea before us and Beirut behind, it was clear why my friends relished these tranquil spots. I lifted the phone to my ear:

“Hello Philip, how are you?” Bilal’s voice crackled, speaking in fuṣḥā [formal Arabic], “I’m near Idlib now. There’s artillery fire and warplanes. Sorry if you can’t hear me clearly. I wanted to tell you that my brother has been martyred. A regime sniper shot him. God rest his soul,” slipping back now into his dialect he continued, “and fuck the regime. Khalil [the brother] is a martyr; he died for Syria. I’ll send you some pictures. Please put them on Facebook and WhatsApp. Bye.”

My surroundings fell away with the sudden reappearance of the uprising’s grim realities, and my fears for Bilal’s life flooded back. In truth, I’d been predicting he’d return to Beirut in no time; I just didn’t believe he was made for frontline combat: too short, too thin and no military experience. He was also not exactly a ‘disciplined’ sort of guy; he was constantly cheeky and always setting up practical jokes. Yet with news of his brother’s martyrdom, I imagined his sense of duty was torn between twin imperatives: to revenge Khalil’s life and to provide for his family. I pressed a button on the phone to begin recording my response.

“God rest his soul,” I said, “He is a martyr, for sure.”

I agreed to carry out his wishes and explained how sorry I was that I never had the chance to meet his brother.

“Stay safe,” I said, signing off.

****
This chapter is about martyrdom commemoration amongst Syrian rebel-workers in Beirut. Such practices represented an important technique through which these men were able to participate in a form of contentious politics at home and abroad. Following on from the
analysis of rebel art objects in the last chapter, here I examine how ‘martyrdom media’ further constituted, facilitated and materialised new revolutionary subjectivities. In the creation, discussion and sharing of these images, the otherwise rather fluid category of istishhād [martyrdom] can be seen as ‘fixed’ in a mutually understood and socially recognisable way. In this framework, the shahīd [martyr] is not a ‘liminal character’ who is ‘betwixt and between worlds,’ but is instead a character brought back into the world of the living through everyday rituals of commemoration that award this recognised posthumous title (cf. Pitcher Nanning 2016; Pitcher 1998; Sanitise 2005). I propose, first, that contemporary Syrian rebel-worker commemoration practices point toward a ‘rebel-martyr’ who is defined and recognised through intentional heroism and transformative suffering. Second, I posit that the described martyrdom commemoration practices simultaneously ascribe and mediate resistant intentions by at once constituting and signifying the martyr’s return from liminality and thus their reintegration into the social.

As we have seen, rebel-workers in Beirut form a kind of ‘revolutionary diaspora.’ While some of these men did, from time to time, participate directly in the uprising, for the most part, they lived at a considerable distance from the front lines. Yet the men did not see themselves as merely ‘watching from the sidelines,’ or as detached from the political transformations occurring in their homeland. Regardless of geographic distance, rebel-workers were neither able nor willing to escape the uprising’s more violent dimensions. This was at its most apparent when the news of death reached Beirut. Not soon after word arrived, a series of pictures, videos and photoshopped graphics of the dead would rapidly circulate across the men’s extended digital networks. Accompanying these circulations would come a series of conversations, offline and online, in which the label ‘shahīd’ was readily deployed. In aesthetic and narrative practices, the dead individual’s life was thus placed within wider webs of revolutionary meaning.

Rituals of commemoration appeared to designate ‘revolutionary subjectivities’ and ‘intentionalities’ where they might have otherwise been presumed absent; for example, amongst early child shuhadā’ [martyrs] like Hamza al-Khatib. Hamza was arguably the first ‘public shahīd’ in the Syrian revolution; his name was familiar to all the men who feature throughout this thesis. The circumstances that led to Hamza’s death when attending a protest, and his consequent re-emergence as shahid are detailed below. These conditions differ from those of Bilal’s brother, Khalil, a rebel fighter who was martyred in battle. However, the highest degree of intentionality in death appears in an ethnographic vignette below detailing the attack on the Iranian embassy by the Abdullah Azzam Bridge (Joscelyn 2013). The
opening exchange above, and those that follow point toward the centrality of a ‘political cause’ in relation to which a self-sacrificing hero is designated. The first section of this chapter builds on these exchanges and argues that while the concept of istishhād may have a somewhat distinct trajectory within Islam(s) — in comparison to the concept of martyrdom within the other Abrahamic faiths — yet, in the context of radical upheaval, it is the political process and attachment to a cause that actually determine who is and who is not identified as a shahīd. The second section moves on to describe how commemoration rituals act as the close to a ‘rite of passage,’ bringing dead individuals back into the social, with a new posthumous title and social actions and expectations it brings.

Hamza al-Khatib
Syrian revolutionaries appointed April 29th 2011 ‘The Friday of Ending the Siege on Deraa,’ a siege that had been maintained for well over a month. Some 6,000 Syrian Army troops were deployed, 244 people killed and 1,000 arrested (BBC 2011). Popular unrest had arrived at this southern border city following a series of events that began March 6th, 2011. A local state security branch under the leadership of one of the president’s cousins, General ‘Atif Najib, arrested 15 young boys, between 10 and 15 years old, with the accusation that they’d painted the walls of their school the famous revolutionary slogan, ‘al-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām’ [the people want to bring down the regime! And below they added ‘ijāk al-da‘ūr yā duktūr’ [It’s your turn, doctor] (Christian 2011; MacLeod 2011a).

Alongside the regional context of mounting revolutionary moments, broadcast over satellite TV, and social media networks, local conditions were also catalysing popular opposition and mass resentment. What might have been framed as yet another arbitrary exercise of violence by a regime whose rule, as we’ve seen, was increasingly relying on its repressive apparatus alone, still somehow transformed into the rupturing event that would begin Syria’s transition into revolutionary civil war. On the one hand, it turned out that the 15 arrested boys were drawn from nearly every prominent local family: the Baizides, the Gawabras, the Masalmas and the Zou’bis (Macleod 2011a). On the other hand, Syria’s rural population, as outlined in chapter one, had suffered, for a number of recent years, under increasing economic strain, with the gap between wages and prices continuing to accelerate thanks to the removal of agricultural input/output price caps, and the destruction of domestic production through trade liberalisation and thus the introduction of “competition” with cheaper foreign imports (Azmeh 2014; Kila 2013: 16–19). These prominent families were able to mobilise both local loyalties and a general sense of discontent. So they marched, with
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religious leaders in tow, to the governor’s house. Security forces responded with water canon and tear gas. They made another surge forward, and now live ammunition followed; blood was spilled, but numbers continued to grow. There were now 200 people, who could, as one amongst them claimed, “no [longer] compromise with any security branches,” (Macleod 2011a). Protests continued day by day, swelling on Fridays. On March 18th four people lost their lives, and in response, two days later, Ba’th party offices were burned to the ground, and 15 civilians were killed. Calls for freedom and an end to the emergency laws rang out for the first time. The courthouse was set ablaze next, shortly before Syriatel’s regional office was razed to the ground (Shadid 2011a; MacLeod 2011a; Badran 2011).

Eventually, the 15 children were released but only after Damascus intervened and dispatched a high-ranking delegation to Deraa (HRW 2011). This group included members of government with their own kin ties to Deraa, yet these actions failed to quell mounting public anger. Little could stem the parents’ disgust when welcoming back their offspring, they discovered that their bodies bore the marks of torture, their flesh covered in bruises and their fingernails’ pulled (Macleod 2011b). It was all too much for the population to accept, and, with the so-called “barrier of fear” now collapsing, the protests looked set to continue. By March 23rd, Deraa’s central Omari Mosque was under siege (BBC 2011; Shadid 2011b). Activists had transformed the mosque into an organisational node and field hospital for the injured. Rumours circulated that Syrian Special Forces carried out the siege, under the command of Maher al-Assad, the younger brother of the president. Flash bangs and smoke grenades filled the inside of the mosque; five were shot dead including a doctor treating the wounded (ibid). By April 8th, a total of 27 protesters were estimated killed, and the protestors were chanting “Maher, you coward, send your troops to the Golan Heights” [i.e. to liberate Syrian territory from the Zionist occupation rather than kill protestors] (Hanano 2012). At this point a pattern was setting into place — after every victim’s funeral, concerned citizens gathered, vented their disgust at state security, and in the ensuing fracas more would lose their lives; then more funerals, then more protests and then more fatalities.

On April 29th, thousands of protestors hoped to enter into Deraa to break the siege. One-hundred-and-fifty-six people were arrested according to the military (Al-Jazeera 2013). Amongst them was a 13-year-old boy called Hamza al-Khatib, from the small town of Jiza, close to the Jordanian border (Al-Arabiya 2011). Hamza had travelled with his friends and family to a solidarity protest in their neighbouring town of Saida. “He didn’t burn for politics,” reported an unnamed cousin, but still, he walked the 12km to the demonstration because, “everyone seemed to be going” (Macleod 2011b). Hamza, like many of the local
boys, enjoyed swimming in irrigation ditches during the wet months and raising homing pigeons in the remaining seasons (ibid). His family were not wealthy but managed to make do with what little land they had. As they arrived on the outskirts of Saida, state authorities were in waiting and reportedly began immediately shooting into the crowds; in the ensuing chaos, the anti-terrorism branch of the Air Force Intelligence swept Hamza away (Al-Jazeera 2011). His body was returned after one month. His relatives found he’d been horrifically mutilated; his corpse showed lacerations, bruises, and burns. There were further signs he’d been whipped with cables and electrocuted (ibid). Many of the men I knew who’d been arrested in Syria, though lucky enough to leave with their lives, bore similar disfigurements. Yet Hamza’s treatment went beyond the typical list of regime abuse; he had also been shot through both arms; a bullet was lodged in his stomach; his chest showed severe deep burns, and his penis had been cut off. These wounds were made available for public inspection through a series of videos uploaded to YouTube. In one video the cameramen, presumably a relative, pans across the boy’s body while introducing viewers to the martyr Hamza al-Khatib. He lifts the boy’s arms, and we see the bullets’ entry points, all the while he is narrating further details of Hamza’s story. We’re told Hamza was aware of what was happening in Syria, that the people want to live in “freedom and dignity” from “oppression and dictatorship,” we’re asked where are the human rights committees and the International Criminal Court.

Many deaths and injuries built up to this central moment in the early history of the Syrian revolution, but here was a 13-year-old child brutally murdered while in the custody of the regime. Perhaps it was his apparent powerlessness, set obscenely against the seriousness of his injuries, read as intentionally inflicted, that assured the young boy would soon acquire his new status as shahīd. Hamza was buried the next day after a customary service at his local mosque during which prayers were said for his soul. Following the burial, the children of Jiza marched through the streets carrying images of a smiling Hamza above their heads. These pictures starkly contrast with the YouTube video that continues to haunt one long after viewing. At this moment, the Syrian revolution welcomed a new symbolic focal point: the first martyr [fig 3.0].

Abdullah Azzam Brigade

The popular fava bean dish Fūl is extremely filling, so soon after finishing my bowl, I relaxed back into my chair, reached to light up a cigarette and gestured for Abdullah to take one.

“But you know I’m trying to cut back,” he said, “But o…”

A thud broke the reply, followed, shortly, by a second.
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“A bomb?” I asked, panicked.
“I think so,” said Haytham,
“‘āmalīya istishhadīya?” [A martyrdom operation?] asked Abdullah before he reached for the television remote and flipped station to the pro-regime station, al-Manār.
“Possibly,” Haytham replied, “but not that close.”

From television reports and WhatsApp conversation, we quickly discovered that the target had been the nearby Iranian embassy in Beirut. Later an al-Qaida-aligned group calling itself the Abdullah Azzam Brigade would claim responsibility (Joscelyn 2013). In total, 23 lives were lost and over 140 people injured. One man, who either was on foot or riding a motorbike, triggered the first suicide bomb followed by a second larger payload that was triggered by an individual waiting in a parked 4x4.

WHAT IS A REBEL-MARTYR?
How is it that despite the quite plainly different degrees of agency hinted at in the opening vignettes, a suicide bomber, rebel soldier and murdered child all come to acquire the same label: ‘shahīd’? In other words, what exactly are the criteria for martyrdom in the above contexts?

As evident in previous chapters, death loomed large in these men’s day-to-day lives, with countless hours taken up with discussions around particular losses, tragedies, and acts of military heroism. In internet cafés and on our mobile phones we’d sit together sifting through lists, stories, and photographs of the dead. This media was regularly uploaded to Facebook by relevant Local Coordination Committees and other assorted online groups. We’d share photoshopped graphics of the shahīd, or even design our own using a breadth of downloadable intuitive image-editing applications. Popular too were those YouTube videos that documented actual martyrdom operations, recorded individual testimonies and even showcased corpses. For some, these commemorative practices appeared to prompt a melancholic reaction; they bemoaned the material obstacles preventing similar spiritual/revolutionary achievements; for others, there were stories of martyrdom motivating temporary, and sometimes fatal, sojourns to the front. In line with chapter three’s analysis of circulated art objects, it appeared that these pictures, videos, and narratives, were also doing things within the political struggle and concomitant emergence and maintenance of revolutionary subjectivity. Martyrs were not ‘absent’ but made symbolically present in the social lives of informants, working in often comparable ways to motivate action, emotional responses, and social considerations. And all this despite the evident particularities in each martyr’s story.
These particularities were already displayed in the introductory vignettes. The final story described the moment a suicide attack was carried out on the Iranian embassy in Beirut, an attack that Abdullah classified as a “martyrdom operation.” Operations like this are timed so as to kill first responders. Evidently, they are intentional acts, the individual annihilating himself to kill others for imagined political gains. Such devastation was framed by Abdullah Azzam Brigade as a necessary response to “Iranian and Hezbollah interference in the Syrian conflict” and should these forces not cease their involvement, then a further series of attacks were promised (Bassam 2013). Against this consider Khalil’s death — Khalil, the elder brother of Bilal, was 25 when he was martyred and he’d only recently completed his compulsory military service. He made a snap decision to offer these skills to a Free Syrian Army brigade in Idlib. According to Bilal, his brother’s motivation was initially informed by his middle-of-the-night arrest the previous year. He was beaten and tortured in state custody, and his feelings of anger and humiliation remained largely unaddressed — “He was furious but didn’t know what to do at first,” Bilal told me. Like many of the accounts of individuals snatched from their homes by security services, he was first questioned regarding his attendance at protest rallies — officers then demanded names and more information.

“If they use violence like this on us,” Bilal once memorably reflected, “shouldn’t we also respond to them?”

In contrast to the embassy bombers, Khalil didn’t awake the morning of his death with the knowledge that that day would be his last. But, nonetheless, as a rebel combatant in an asymmetrical conflict, facing regime bombardment and bullets, he probably knew he risked death every day. However, there was still no point at which he made some definitive decision to die, this was no suicide operation, just an unlucky dash between buildings under fire. And what then to make of the first popular martyr of the Syrian revolution: Hamza al-Khatib?

The Oxford dictionary’s definition is more encompassing; here we are told that a martyr is: “one who undergoes death (or great suffering) on behalf of any belief or cause, or through the devotion to some object” (Middleton 2011). This definition focuses less on intentionality and more on ‘cause’ or ‘belief.’ One ‘undergoes death’ but it is not necessarily a direct decision; rather, death must only be ‘on behalf’ of some ‘belief or cause.’

In the context of an already brutal crackdown, Hamza probably woke knowing there were definitive dangers that day. But Hamza wasn’t a soldier; he was a child and, as his cousin claimed, he joined the demonstration, “because everyone seemed to be going.” It appears even harder to attribute agency to Hamza’s actions than it does Khalil’s. On a strict reading of agency in self-sacrifice, only the embassy bombers seem to fit the bill. In the
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definition, what level of intentionality one might read into the word ‘behalf’ remains unclear. This aside, on the level of ‘causes,’ we know the goals of the Abdullah Azzam Brigade bombers: the withdrawal of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah forces from Syria. We are aware too that Khalil supported the revolution — Bilal stressed this to me countless times that he and his brother were willing to die if it “brought down the regime.” Yet how far these statements represent a genuine commitment rather than dashes of bravado for my, or the other guys’ sake, is more difficult for me to say. In this framing, Hamza al-Khatib’s death appears even more distant. Perhaps then, the 2011 uprisings ushered in a novel definition of what makes a martyr?

In a recent article, Buckner and Khatib (2015) make exactly this point; they suggest that the 2011 uprisings were catalysed around new forms of martyrdom representation [e.g. fig 3.3], arguing that the uprisings transferred martyrdom image production from the state to citizen. This transferal has occurred due to a general “widening of access” to image production, related to the mass take-up of new communication technology [mobile phones, 3G, satellite dishes] and the increasing circulation of universal human rights discourses. Shuhadā’ from Iran, Palestine, and Hezbollah are, conversely, represented as having undergone noble heroic sacrifices for the larger national or religious community, whereas during the uprisings, citizens, with this new material and discursive resources, began to commemorate everyday stories of suffering at the hands of repressive dictatorships. Through satellite TV stations as well as the internet, members of the public discovered rich and relatable details of Khalid Said’s life before he was murdered by the Egyptian police, or they found that they could identify with the economic difficulties and acts of humiliation that were understood to have pushed Mohammed Bouazizi to his self-immolation. In sum, shuhadā’ are recognised in these contexts as “needless victim(s) in the fight for universal values of dignity and human rights as both a product and producer(s) of meaning associated with agency” (ibid: 1).

This argument is at its most persuasive when limited to the deaths of early ‘citizen-martyrs’ in Tunisia and Egypt and less persuasive when expanded to deaths resulting from particularly violent responses to protest gatherings. While physical violence was, and remains, a standard reaction to popular unrest across SWANA, in Syria violence, seems to stand apart in just how swiftly it was generalised. In Deraa no one was chanting, “the people and the army are one hand” as they did in Egypt; there was no fraternisation between the military and the people (Ketchley 2014: 155–186). The regime appeared to rebel-workers as a repressive alien entity to which the armed forces and security agencies were intimately
welded. In Deraa, the popular chants were not “join us” but, “leave us and fight in Golan.” This is likely not a serious piece of popular policy advice; rather, it is a taunt alluding to mutually understood political subscripts. These scripts include the regime’s failure to confront Israel, its use of (genuine) imperialist threats for self-legitimatization alone, or, even, an imagined direct complicity between, Zionism, al-muqāwama [the resistance] and the Syrian government. These three theories of international relations have all been stressed to me at different points by rebel-workers.

It is worth noting here too that Said and Bouazizi’s deaths preceded and therefore are understood to have ignited the uprisings in the first instance, whereas Hamza’s murder came one month into the Syrian state’s already militarised response to a protest movement — his martyrdom is, therefore, best framed as ‘fuel to the fire’ rather than ‘ignition.’ In all the reports of revolutionary participation, rubber bullets were almost immediately replaced by the metal variety. Elsewhere, analyses have pointed toward the fact that armed men may well have infiltrated the protest movement from the beginning (e.g. Anderson 2015). Regardless, in re-tellings of his story, Hamza was understood to have been swept up from a protest rally. So in his very act of attendance, regardless of his actual intentionality, he was already available for discursive framing as an ‘opposition figure,’ prepared to stand in harm’s way. And later, when large sections of Syria seemed ablaze, and the discursive division between ‘us’ (the people) and ‘them’ (the regime) was firmly drawn, any citizen’s death resulting from regime violence could be framed as an opposition death. By contrast, the police beat Said to death after dragging him from a cyber cafe, and Bouazizi committed suicide after having his wares confiscated by the police. They were, in these moments, not ‘protestors’ in the same way as Hamza was part also of a ‘collective,’ but, as Buckner and Khatib rightly suggest, ‘everyday individual citizens.’

In line with these differences, I propose an alternative model: the ‘rebel-martyr.’ Rebel-martyrs embody both the heroic-liberationist ideal as well as personalized discourses around ‘victimhood,’ ‘universal rights’ and ‘dignity.’ Images, videos and stories my informants shared seemed to blur together both personal details with newly acquired collective identities of opposition. Any particular shahīd may be known to have suffered from relatable hardships, and this identification might emphasise the economic: ‘Hamza al-Khatib was from a poor rural family like us’ or the political, ‘he was tortured just like they as tortured me/my friends’ but Hamza didn’t just suffer in silence. He was also killed ‘acting against the state’ and thus, despite his young age, and seemingly necessarily unclear commitment, the very fact he was seized while trying to attend a protest was enough to subsume at least part of
his identity within a more collective ‘muʿārada’ [opposition] or al-shaʿb [the people]. As the revolution moved increasingly towards militarization, these collective identities were understood by rebel-workers to be still present, though increasingly fragmented into particular units such as the Free Syrian Army or Jabhat al-Nusra. Thus, despite the flow of capital from the Gulf states as well as the West, these units were not, at least in earlier stages of the uprising, understood as an artificial imposition but as a necessary development (e.g., Blair 2014; Rogin 2014; Rozen 2013). Regardless of the emergence of organised units, martyrdom images kept a number of personally identifiable details prominent. Media objects shared to commemorate shuhadāʾ often included scenes from work and play, as well as pictures of the individual pointing rifles, firing mortars or carrying out any number of military tasks. In some instances, these repertoires were merged together in the same image, with either two photos, one pre-uprising and one post stitched together or even a ‘serious fighting’ picture stitched beside a ‘joking around with my gun selfie’ [Fig 3.1 / 3.2]

It is the move from ‘submissive citizen’ to ‘politically awake rebel’ ready to resist domination that was particularly highlighted in the commemoration practices deployed by rebel-workers. It seemed that jumping over the ‘barrier of fear’ was, in and of itself, the critical heroic intentional act, especially when beyond that barrier was a regime understood to have begun killing citizens almost immediately. The regime was widely understood by rebel-workers as if it was an ‘alien entity’ from which the opposition-aligned hoped one day to be liberated; it was alien in a ‘direct’ sense, imagined to be in secret cahoots with the Zionist occupation next door, or, less conspiratorially, as ‘the same thing’ (an oppressive occupation that deprives citizens of rights, dignity, and welfare). In chapter six we examine further how such political fictions are maintained through conspiracy theories. For now, the critical point is that these ideas of martyrdom highlighted how the dead had suffered, or seen those around them suffer, denials of dignity, basic rights, and welfare. But it was the experience of suffering or empathy with the suffering of others; that was said to have informed individuals’ decisions to move into harm’s way. Harm here widely understood as emerging in the attendance of protests, in fighting with a rebel combat unit, or in undertaking a suicide operation. Clearly, these three acts of rebellion are qualitatively different in intensity, yet all sought to ‘rupture’ the existing order (Rancière 2011).

Nonetheless, in searching for such a model, one naturally risks obscuring a diversity of socio-cultural, secular and religious nuances. Conversely, giving too much stress to these nuances risks entering into obscuring orientalist reduction. For instance, it is true that the Greek origin of the English word ‘martyr,’ martus, and the Arabic root of shahīd [martyr]:

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shahida, spring from similar verbs, both meaning ‘to observe, witness or testify.’ And it is true that ‘witnessing’ has a central place in Islam; the call to prayer adjoins Muslims to bear witness that there is no God but Allah [ashhadu an-lā ilāha illā ʾllāh] and that Mohammed is His messenger [ashhadu anna Muḥammadan rasuḥu ʾllāh] and that when blended these verses form the shahādah, or ‘testimony of faith’ regarding the “oneness of God.” Accepting this testimony is the first of Islam’s five pillars: there is no god but God; Mohammed is the messenger of God [lā ʾilāha illā ʾllāh, muḥammadun rasūlu ʾllāh].

The anthropologist Talal Asad’s influential book *On Suicide Bombing* (2007) hit a cautionary note regarding any simplistic connection that might be drawn between ‘war’ (and ‘jihad’) with acts of intentional purposeful self-sacrifice ‘for Islam’ as a ‘testimony to faith.’ These arguments risk (re)laying the intellectual foundations for a homogenising orientalist tract that paints Islam and its supposed “culture of death” as the new universal key to finally unlocking “the Arab mind.” For Asad, such argument neglects, for instance, the fact the Hadith records Mohammed recognising a multiplicity of untimely deaths as qualification for shahīd status, his list included death while defending possessions, death from falling off a mountain, or being torn apart by wild beasts. Asad develops this distinction into a general explanation as to why, for example, *all* Palestinians murdered by the Zionist occupation are universally recognised as shuhadā. He writes:

I […] suggest that the reason Palestinian civilians who are destroyed under the Occupation are regarded as shuhada is twofold: first, they have been struck by a catastrophe, and, second, their mode of death gives them immortality. The idea of immortality here is not strictly speaking physical because everyone recognizes that the individual’s physical existence is ended by death. At any rate, to be struck dead by an external force has nothing to do with motives. But it does have to do with violence — violence not as it appears in the spectacular act of killing others by killing oneself […] but as it relates to the idea of mortality. All untimely death that is not the result of legitimate punishment is a violation. The believer who dies in a so-called justified war (actively or passively) belongs to that category, but the category itself is not defined by participation in “justified war.” (2007: 49)

In Palestine, Asad is suggesting, the fatally violent encounters with the occupying enemy and resultant ‘untimely death’ constitutes a violation in life trajectories. Therefore, it is the sudden ending of life and not the (self-)sacrificial ending of it that he argues provides the necessary conditions for ‘martyr’ status. This might well be ‘theologically accurate,’ but how far Palestinians themselves think along these lines is not exactly clear (cf. Allen 2009; Khalili 2007; Peteet 1997; Pitcher 1998). Rather than *untimely death*, the key factor in the social
recognition of martyrdom appeared to be the relationship between death and the overarching political struggle. This fight has a further quality that marks it as distinct from the struggle in Palestine. Rebel-workers would suggest that their struggle against the regime is comparable to the fight against Zionism. But such theories must contend with the fact many Syrians, in fact, do not identify with the opposition. By contrast, Palestine is under an occupation; it is therefore not a ‘regime’ in the same sense. It could be argued that a death in the context of settler-colonialism is more readily cast as a martyr’s death regardless of the individual’s political disposition or their intentionality and therefore, in the situation of a contested uprising an individual’s ‘attachment to the cause’ becomes even more important.

A WEDDING TRAGEDY

On this particular morning, the scheduled electricity rationing was running between six and nine in the morning, my fan ground to a halt, waking me before my alarm. I crawled from my bed to prepare coffee. There was no rush — not a great deal special planned — just another Saturday with the guys. Mahmoud and Khalid had work this Saturday morning, but they’d return promptly in the afternoon. In the meantime, I was going to take a cab over to Souk al-Ahad [the Sunday Market], which, despite the misleading name, was also open on Saturdays. Once there I’d meet Abdul Aziz, Abdullah, and Haytham and we’d do our usual thing of browsing, chatting and snacking away the morning.

I threw on some clothes, grabbed my phone from the desk and, just as I was heading to the door, noticed an unread WhatsApp message from Abdullah.

“Hi Philip,” I read, “Sorry, we can’t come today, Haytham’s brother has died.”


Thanks to the brevity of Abdullah’s message, my mind jumped around trying to fill the gaps. Immediately I felt overcome for Haytham — he is such a gentle guy and at that time he’d already taken to bouts of depression thanks to his tragic romance story with the girl from Dahieh. Haytham was also the most ambivalent toward the merits of political violence; he wasn’t a pacifist, but rarely did he talk with the same longing to (re)join the revolutionary fight like the others. I suspected this had, at least, something to do with the all-encompassing object of his affections.

Haytham had four brothers, two living elsewhere in Lebanon and two at his family home in rural Deir Ezzor. I knew the latter were young — at 12 and 15 — so assumed it unlikely either had been killed fighting, but without a second thought I’d imagined a death
tied up in the uprising. This wouldn’t have been the first time a participant in my network experienced loss; throughout the time I’d known these men, they’d faced a running stream of bereavement. Perhaps, I thought at the time, Haytham’s brother had been killed by a regime air strike or ground troops had stepped up an assault on their ‘liberated’ villages and he’d been struck down in the crossfire.

“No, he was killed by mistake,” came Abdullah’s reply, finally, “I’ll call you soon,” he added.

An hour or so passed, and then my phone rang. Haytham was too upset to talk, but Abdullah had slipped outside to explain the details. There had been a wedding celebration in a neighbouring village and Abbas, Haytham’s 15-year-old brother, was in attendance. With the men, he stepped outside to conclude the ceremony with celebratory gunfire. He asked his uncle for permission to fire one of the family’s AK-47s. His elder cousin went first. Abbas was impatient, nagging his cousin who relented and paused the firing. He began to pass the rifle, the barrel facing outward towards Abbas’s chest and Abbas, not seeing his cousin’s finger wrapped around the trigger, snatched for it. A round was fired and entered into his upper torso — he died almost immediately.

Within two days everyone who knew Haytham had switched their WhatsApp profile pictures over to images of his late brother, those with Facebook accounts uploaded pictures of Abbas to their walls. On the surface these practices seemed to be replicating the same commemorative gestures that I had been participating in when friends or relatives were killed in combat; as well as images I had seen from the earlier stages of the uprising. Indeed, some of the guys used image-editing applications, cutting Abbas’s picture out from the dry landscape of eastern Syria and pasting him over the artificial countryside in scenes replete with bubbling waterfalls and bright blue skies. Others selected images of Abbas smiling as he readied himself to jump into the Euphrates; some picked more intimate family moments, shared between Abbas and Haytham, such as the two of them fooling around with Abbas clambering over Haytham’s back. Occasionally verses from the Qu’ran were inserted into these images, such as those customarily said in the context of loss and bereavement: innāna li-llāhi wa innāna ‘Ilāy-hi rājī‘ūn [We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return]. And yet, despite a replication in general form, not one of these images or narratives I heard about the event, ever mentioned the word shahīd. So finally, when time had passed and the dust settled, I found some space to open a more general discussion with Abdullah and Abdul Aziz. I asked them if Abbas was a martyr:
“No, his death was a mistake, Philip. It’s not like al-thawra [the revolution]” said Adnan.

“What is a martyr then?” I asked.

“A martyr is someone who dies for Syria, for the revolution, and for the people,” Adnan replied.

HEROES AND MARTYRS

Talal Asad’s intervention concerns limited readings of Islam in which a rich multiplicity of traditions has been collapsed into monolithic tracts on an inherent “cult of death” (2007). His focus is (deliberately) limited to religious texts, and through this reading demonstrates how certain Christian doctrines on sacrifice, martyrdom, and intentionality has problematically obscured the manner in which analysts described ‘martyrdom’ within Islam (Asad 2007: 51; e.g. Étienne 2005; Jayyusi 2004; Strenski 2003). However, in seeking to avoid “… current fashions in explaining suicide operations as perverse forms of national politics …” (2007: 50) his analysis risks reifying religious discourse further at the expense of contentious political realities. This is problematic when searching for an on-the-ground framework flexible enough to interpret the above (and below) ethnographic data. In circumstances of contentious politics, political ruptures, and repressive state violence, a critique based largely in religious texts has little explanatory purchase.

It may be the case that “the concept of istishhād as a technique of jihad in which the combatant (mujahid) annihilates himself is an entirely modern idea,” (2007: 52) and that other association are drawn between intentionality, liberationist politics, Islamism, suicide bombings and martyrdom are not historically-religiously eternal. But my suggestion here is that my informants’ understanding of istishhad — understandings that excluded Abbas but included Khalil, the Abdullah Azzam Brigade bombers, and Hamza al-Khatib — are, at least in the Syrian context, not informed by (auto-)orientalist distortions but by revolutionary discourses and practices more generally.

At first glance, there does appear to be a ‘religious’ tone to much of my informants’ commemoration practices, especially given the frequency with which they voice Qur’anic phrases and expressions, along with the lines they occasionally wrote over the images created and shared. What then is the role of Islam in the making of rebel martyrs?89

Laleh Khalili, in her Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine, provides a heuristic definition of Islamic politics as, “The utilization of religious practices, discourses, and symbols to achieve concrete political goals, almost always within the territorialized nation state” (2007:
27). What this means is ‘political Islam’ shares a number of important values with those values expressed within liberationist, Marxist and nationalist ideologies (ibid). That’s not to suggest there is no specificity; rather, that this specificity can’t even be grasped if religious politics are isolated from “national politics” writ large. Therefore, key to understanding the commemoration of martyrdom, in either secular or religious tones, are processes of decolonisation; dependent capitalist development; urbanisation and proletarianisation; mass education; resentment to the entry of women into the public sphere and the rise of identity politics more generally (ibid 28; Keddie 1998; Mamdani 2004). Khalili convincingly shows there to be no radical shift in certain underlying structures of understanding and meaning between leftist-liberationist-nationalist ideologies and Islamism. Both exhibit, for example, a central importance around ideas of “the masculine hero” actively pursuing strategies of violence so as to realise political ends. Rather, the largest structural shift in understandings occurred during post cold war domination of liberal discourses fixated on rights. This usher in a ‘politics of pity’ wherein the heroic masculine martyr has been replaced with a feminized victim of oppression (Khalili 2007: 39–40). Again, it appears that, in Syria, the representations of martyrdom blend these two features together: the ‘feminized victim of oppression’ is replaced by stories of men, who having witnessed victimization, empathised with it, or themselves been victimised, became heroes seeking to dismantle the source of their victimisation actively. Again, the politics of pity and the politics of political violence appear to have run side by side during the Syrian uprising, generating commemorative practices that highlight an individual’s capacity to disrupt a political order. These figures are, as the following suggests, symbolically present in my informants’ day-to-day lives.

**NADIR**

“Jisr al-Matar,” Abdullah called out as the service driver brought his battered Mercedes to a crawl along the pavement’s edge. “Taxi?” he answered; “Akād la” [certainly not] I muttered and, with a tut and slight lift of the chin, Abdullah conveyed our refusal. The driver continued along Hamra’s Sadat Street leaving us to stand and smoke in the morning air. Other cars passed, but no driver was willing to take the fare. “It’s getting harder to find a service to Sabra and Dahieh these days,” Abdullah said, breaking the silence. “It’s because of the revolution and the intervention of Hezbollah, people are not travelling around as much, they think there’ll be an attack.”

“And you don’t get scared?” I asked,
“No, I don’t care. I’m not afraid” he replied. “You know, naturally, there will be an attack — it’s a matter of tactics. They hit us in Syria so we must hit back in Beirut.” “Jisr al-Matar,” Abdullah suddenly called out as another car edged towards us, dipping momentarily out the traffic flow.

“Ţla’” [get in] he answered. We clambered together into the back seat. It was still early enough that the roads were mercifully quiet, not yet jammed by the morning’s traffic; we sped south along the coastal road, the Corniche empty aside from the occasional jogger and solitary figure — “nobody to pick up” complained the driver. We veered east at Pigeons’ Rock, leaving the sea and luxury coast front apartments at our backs, weaving up through the streets of Mazra’ and Tariq al-Jadida, south again at the Cola junction before briefly joining the ‘Ḥafiz al-Assad’ highway. We passed Beirut’s stadium and joined the exit bringing us down onto Musa Sadr Street — named in honour of the revered Shia Lebanese-Iranian leader who disappeared in Libya in 1978. Streets are decked in the placards and logos of the March 8th-aligned Amal movement and, unless anyone were to doubt the party and sector’s official affiliation, these decorations are sometimes further complemented with posters of the Syrian president, often in green military fatigues and reflective sunglasses, sporadically dangled from apartment buildings or taped to street furniture. Just after the turn-off we passed a set of ramshackle offices selling bus tickets to all the main Syrian cities, and providing money transfers to the migrant workers who’ve made this impoverished district their home. It was from outside these offices that I’d come to wave goodbye to friends returning to fight or to comfort their families as they grieved for a lost son turned rebel-martyr.

Migrant Syrian workers are drawn to Sabra by low rent, a relatively central location and affordable goods and services. All the men I knew here opposed the regime — granted the enthusiasm they expressed toward the revolution and its official outfits waxed and waned with losses, victories, and personal tragedies — they were, nonetheless, prepared to live amongst these material manifestations of regime support. And it is not as though displays of political authority were alien to Syrians; yet, as the preceding chapter revealed, back home these objects of power had become ‘good to smash,’ re-purposed through either digital or literal iconoclastic acts. With this fact in mind, I probed Abdullah a little further, asking why he doesn’t get angry about these images.

“But what can I do?” he answered back, “it’s not like we’re in ‘liberated Syria,’ I can’t rip them down … You want me kicked out of here as I was in Chiah? I know better than to start fights like this now.”
I discovered later that what troubled the men most was not the party posters, nor was it the pictures of the Syrian president; rather, what they disliked were images that celebrated the martyrdom of Lebanese militia who had crossed the border to fight on the side of the regime. The commemoration of dead regime-aligned militia appeared a particular affront to rebel-workers given that their lives had been lost fighting against forces to which they see themselves aligned, these men are the very opposite of dead heroes — they are dead villains. Indeed, as the uprising moved through various military stages, I was struck by the seemingly constant funeral prayers that emanated from local mosques with prayers that were occasionally punctuated by rounds of celebratory — or, as my informants heard it, ‘warning’ — gunfire. This was read as a warning to Syrian workers that they are in enemy territory, and must remain silent because ‘we have the guns.’ On one occasion, when I thought I heard shots scatter across the metal cage of the football pitch AstroTurf, I asked a fellow spectator what exactly was going on: “They’re firing for those members in Hizb al-Shayṭān [‘The party of the Devil,’ a play on Hezbollah, the ‘Party of God’] who died fighting in Syria” He answered, “But I swear to God they’re not martyrs, they’re dogs. Don’t be scared.”

Back in the taxi and we moved slowly down the forever-congested road that intersects with Sabra’s main entranceway, Abdullah caught my eye and suggested we pick up a few cartons of fūl and fatta on the way to Haytham’s place. “We should eat breakfast together as usual,” he said, and I agreed. “We’ll get out here,” I told the driver, handing him 4,000 Lebanese pounds. We walked down the market’s main street, flanked on both sides by stalls that overflow with affordable clothes; plastic kitchen gadgets from China; mobile phones; cigarette cartons and snacks. We stopped at a fūl vendor and Abdullah put in the order.

“How much is cheaper here, you know,” he said, as we waited, “Whatever you want, you can find … I’m going to leave Hamra soon. There are too many problems at the flat … it’s all because of Ibrahim, and I can’t do anything about it. I mean, what can I do?”

I knew enough of the situation to understand what Abdullah was getting at and, indeed, had myself felt it increasingly awkward whenever I visited his apartment. Ibrahim presented himself as something of a ‘tough guy,’ through both the stories he told and through his work as a guard in a luxury waterfront building complex. He was a braggart too, never ceasing to point out that he was, apparently, on speaking terms with one of the most famous residents, the Lebanese pop star Haifa Wehbe.

Originally from urban Deir Ezzor, not the countryside like Abdullah, it was clear that he also imagined himself the head of the apartment. He had found it, he had been there the longest, and he handed the money over to the landlord each month. He was “responsible.”
a reward, Ibrahim had taken the only proper bed, a double in fact, and a room for himself and his Filipino girlfriend. For the more pious residents and guests this caused problems, sometimes they wished to avoid ikhtilāt [gender mixing], yet the bathroom in this tiny apartment was connected to Ibrahim’s room. The only solution was to deploy the balcony as a kind of ‘intermediate space.’ This didn’t bother Abdullah — he found it somewhat amusing — not one for strict the conservatism of older men. Nor did Ibrahim’s tough guy posturing particularly intimidate Abdullah. In truth, he is the bigger of the two, and if it ever came down to a fight I’d already told Abdullah I thought he’d win; puffing out his chest he said simply, “ṣaḥḥ” [correct].

Nonetheless, it might still appear that the principal reason for Abdullah’s difficulties can be located in Ibrahim’s inconsiderate nature. And violence was actually rather unlikely. There was a previous dispute that centred on the number of Ibrahims’ relatives he’d invited to sleep in the flat, and it looked as though it would soon spiral out of control. But the two managed to settle it quite amicably. And this was a good thing, as, at one point, I counted 15 people residing in that tiny apartment; they worked alternating shifts, some on days, others on nights, and thus found ways to ration the limited bedding. Abdullah eventually took Ibrahim for a walk around Hamra to confront him; he told him it was unacceptable, and Ibrahim apparently stressed, in response, that they were relatives, and there was little he could do, but, within a week, the number of permanent residents dropped back down to five.

Abdullah’s latest problem was tied up with something all the more socially problematic; it combined the moral weight of money and martyrdom — a loan to be exact. Ibrahim’s brother, Nadir, had been martyred a month earlier, in one of the August 2013 clashes between a Free Syrian Army brigade and the regime forces in Deir Ezzor city. Nadir was struck down in an exchange of gunfire. In response Ibrahim cut back on his expenses so he could send a few larger remittances to his parents; they’d been internally displaced to a neighbouring region. Ibrahim was also saving money to return home, where he planned to stay for at least a month. I suspected, as with Abdullah’s occasional month-long trips discussed briefly in chapter two, Ibrahim also planned to go and join the frontline, to fire at least a few shots at regime troops in his brother’s memory. To assist in all this, Abdullah lent $400 to Ibrahim.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Abdullah told me, “we all help each other. It’s our tradition [taqlīd]. If I’m in a good position, I help those in need.”

But now we had reached winter, and there was still no sign the money would be returned, and it was no secret that Abdullah’s wallet was particularly stretched. He’d cut right
back on his labour hours at the sports nutrition shop so as to free the time he needed to study for his winter exams. Yet he explained to me how he felt he couldn’t directly confront Ibrahim about the money given Ibrahim was a baṭal wa shahīd [a hero and a martyr].

The combination of baṭal with shahīd was by far the most common phrase used when other men I knew described dead relatives and friends [fig 3.4]; it was also persistently written across images. When news of Nadir’s death had first arrived, the men in Abdullah’s apartment had talked a lot about the stories they’d heard from Ibrahim about Nadir’s fighting skills. They discussed how he apparently once hit a tank with an RPG, and how he was the quickest at breaking holes through walls to expand opposition territory through adjacent buildings.

In a response that’s reminiscent, yet different, to the response that followed news of Abbas’s accidental death at the wedding, Abdullah and the other men displayed images of Nadir on their WhatsApp profile pages and uploaded pictures to their Facebook walls. Now, unlike the pictures of Abbas, clear inscriptions were here recording biographical information, like “The hero and martyr Nadir al-Ghanem, killed in the battle of Deir Ezzor” as well as contextually appropriate verses from the Qur’an. This time, the word shahīd occupied a central place in the lines of text written over images of the young man. And, as usual, the photographs of Nadir seemed to fall into two ‘types.’ First, there was Nadir as a rebel, often holding his Kalashnikov (or even in one, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher). Second was Nadir as a young guy, playing football, lounging around, picking fruit and even taking a selfie. Those who displayed these images sometimes rotated between the two and, in other cases, they were actually blended into the same picture: ‘rebel’ and ‘regular guy’ appearing side-by-side.

Finally, there was a widely shared video clip sent amongst this network of rebel-workers. It was shot on a shaky handy-cam and had a similar style to the video of Hamza al-Khatib, panning across his body, his corpse is weighed down by blocks of ice, blood can be seen around his neck and mouth, Nadir’s face is grey and his eyes closed. His comrade, holding the camera, speaks of the battle, his hatred of the regime and that, God willing, soon they will ‘free Deir Ezzor.’

Abdullah was committed to the struggle in which Nadir had paid the ultimate price. Is it then little wonder that Abdullah felt unable to broach more worldly material financial matters, like a loan, when Nadir’s death hung so presently over the group? And it doesn’t just hang there in a discursive sense, or in bouts of storytelling, but it was also made materially manifest, mediated through images and videos that equally proclaim his martyrdom status. To
understand what role this phenomenon plays in the making of rebel-martyrs, I turn below from classification to explanation to reveal how these practices of commemoration, representation and circulation acted as a ‘close’ to a *rite of passage* thereby bestowing upon the individual the socially recognised status of ‘martyr.’

**HOW ARE REBEL-MARTYRS MADE?**

With each revolution-related loss, the men inevitably repeated a series of commemoration practices. Because of this reputation of speech acts, image creation, and circulation, I began to feel that I was observing and participating in ‘a ritual.’ Indeed, are these commemoration practices not, ultimately, about the conferral of a new status -- ‘martyr,’ -- upon the departed?

Anthropologists have, since Arnold Van Gennep ([2011] 1909), traditionally understood rituals that concern the social recognition of a new status as ‘rites of passage’ (Leach 1961; Turner 1967). Rites of passage are rituals that mark an individual or group’s transition into another stage of life; these are the rituals that typically accompany birth, puberty, marriage and initiation. Van Gennep (2011) distinguished three kinds of rite — rites of incorporation, separation, and transition. All three elements are present in a rite of passage: separation, transition, incorporation, but the stress on particular aspects varies depending on the nature of the ritual. For instance, funeral rights are thought to stress separation and marriage rites incorporation. If martyrdom is framed as such a rite, then — given the physical destruction of the biological person — at issue is how departed figures are brought ‘symbolically’ or ‘discursively’ back into the realm of the living. In contrast with funeral rites which mark an ‘end,’ martyrs appear not ‘separate’ but ‘present’ and for this reason, commemoration practices act to ‘initiate’ dead rebels as shuhadā’.

Practically this means we need to ask what the objects and stories shared by Syrian rebel-workers are “doing” within existing patterns of social relations and political conviction. At issue are not fixed objects merely being ‘read’ or ‘heard’ but are the result of actions that seek to reintegrate and fix meaning and to award resistant intentionality even where it might at first appear absent. From the perspective of commemorators, their practices seemed to bring about the closing of a *rite of passage* and therefore marked the ritual reintegration of the rebel-martyr into the social, and thus into a pantheon housing the heroic rebel-martyrs of the Syrian revolution.

In many ways, the ‘action orientation’ of Gell’s (1998) theoretical model — described in the preceding chapter — is also helpful here because martyrdom images, videos, and narratives seemed both to mediate and to designate a dead person’s revolutionary agency.
They ‘designated’ it in the sense that, as with symbolic oppositional art, these particular regimes of artistic practice were not concerned with the simple (re-)production of the horror that led to violent ends but of overcoming these horrors and ‘rupturing’ via the martyr’s body, the regime’s capacity to spread terror through physical violence. Horror was still present; it could be seen in bloodied faces, in the rising plumes of smoke and in disfiguring bullet wounds. It was there one summer evening in August 2013 when Mahmoud, Abdullah, Haytham and I went through the particularly harrowing photographs and videos that surfaced after the Ghouta chemical attacks. We expressed together our horror and disgust at the massacre. Yet we were not alone in our indignation, the video’s gaze did not pan across scenes of death, our gaze was directed in concordance with particular narrative tropes of martyrdom. As the camera passed over the swollen grey bodies of poisoned children, the cameraman’s voice announced the names and dates of martyrdom, before swearing vengeance.

I can’t recall ever seeing a photograph or video of shuhadā that was left plain without details or audio narration acting to frame the lost life within that bifurcated structure of ‘al-sha’b’ and ‘al-nizam.’ These practices designated and thereby constituted the rebel martyr, even when victims were killed in their sleep.

While writing this chapter I clicked ‘like’ on some recent images of Khalil that Bilal uploaded to Facebook. One picture stood out; in it, Khalil is posing with an RPG, while his friend is stretched out on the grass, calmly resting his head on an upturned hand as he looks coyly at the camera. In this one image stood two different people with two different roles: Khalil the ‘heroic soldier’ and his friend, the ‘everyday citizen.’

Within seconds of my ‘liking’ marathon, Facebook chat popped up, and Bilal thanked me. Soon we moved our conversation over to Skype because, as is often the case, my friends get bored thanks to my incredibly slow Arabic typing.

“So,” I said, “I’m coming back to Beirut in March. Will I see you?” I asked him.

“I don’t know Philip,” Bilal replied, “I’ve got to stay in Idlib, I have to keep fighting.”

It was a surprise to me that he had not yet returned, so I said to him “… And what about that girl you used to ride up and down the coast road with, her on the back of your moped, don’t you miss her?”

“I do,” he replied, “but, Philip, anyway, can I come to England as a refugee?” he said, quickly changing the subject, “can’t you help me?”

It has become increasingly common for me to hear this as friends now find themselves trapped and having lost degrees of faith in a revolution they understand to be now
systematically crushed across multiple angles. I told Bilal I think the British government is wrong, and that I’m ashamed my country has granted, at that time, asylum to less than 100 refugees, but there was also very little I could do.

“Fine,” he said, “When I have doubts about the fighting I try and think of Khalil,” and, “I know the problem is with your government and not with the British people,” he added for my benefit.

Elsewhere it has been argued that the martyr discursively sits between the world of the living and the dead and therefore she is a liminal figure (e.g. Pitcher 1998; Ballengee 2009: 102). In ritual theory, the word ‘liminality’ refers to the middle stage in initiation rites — a point of ambiguity or disorientation. The individual stands at a threshold, ‘betwixt and between’ two modes of structuring identity, one is being cast off, and the other moved toward. The martyr’s meaning is therefore seen to be uncertain, unable to be pinned down neatly and definitively within socio-cultural structures. Contrary to this argument, the data outlined here suggests shifting attention away from individuals themselves and instead trying to adopt the perspective of martyrdom commemorators, that is, living humans with their rituals of remembrance and incorporation. Of course, the biological individual can’t literally return; only Christ can pull off that particular trick. Rather, what I mean is that, in adopting an etic perspective, it might well appear that the martyr floats outside of social structure given that their (dead) bodies appear capable of standing for various political projects at different, or even the same time (see also Verdery 2013). Yet from an emic point of view, that is, for my friends, these figures were not ‘outside of structure,’ nor were they ‘betwixt and between’; rather, they appear to have ‘fixed’ meanings and through this meaning they generated a series of expectations, practices, and emotions, even in the face of revolutionary doubts. In fact, as the uprising moved toward the present bloody stalemate, and the sentiments of hope described in chapter two moved toward deepening uncertainty. Against all this flux, the figure of the ‘rebel martyr’ often appeared one of the few ‘stable’ figures left for these men.

Yet these images exist, as with their revolutionary art objects, within a semi-public and semi-private world of Facebook walls, WhatsApp profile pictures, and portable SD memory cards. Therefore, what for Syrian rebel-workers might be understood as a celebration of bravery and self-sacrifice is, for those who oppose the revolution, quite easily read as the glorification of Israeli and/or American agents, the adoration of terrorists, saboteurs and Sunni religious extremists. However, rather than weakening the argument, this change in perspective seems only to strengthen further the general thrust: meanings are still ‘fixed’ by
commemoration practices and thus integrated into a particular ‘structure of political affect,’ even if the valuation of the result is at the opposite spectrum.

**THE FIRST BRITISH BROTHER**

Having returned to the Sabra apartment after an evening’s football match, I sat on the window ledge to smoke a cigarette with Adnan. Mahmoud was preparing his delicious stuffed chicken in the kitchen while Abdullah monopolised a laptop in the corner of the room. Adnan was just beginning to broach the juiciest details in a story of unrequited love when I heard Abdullah shout “quick, Philip! Come here.”

Last month this household pooled resources and purchased a $400 laptop and, a week later, they installed a fixed line ADSL connection at $50 per month. With this investment, my fieldwork became even more dominated by the presence of screens. They’d switched the laptop’s system language over to Arabic; yet, the translations were often incomplete and, in Abdullah’s rather bullish approach to all things electrical — he went through five mobile phones in 24 months — I often found myself in high demand as IT support. An error message in English had appeared but having no idea what it referred to or indeed how Abdullah had managed to cause it; I just kept pressing ok until it went away. But now he had my attention, and Abdullah, not letting me return to Adnan, began to ask me about the YouTube video he was in the process of ‘ripping’ from the internet.91

As the video moves into its opening scenes, one immediately hears the call and response, “takbîr” — “Allâhu Akbar.” These shouts dominate the other sounds of general commotion and frantic radio communication. And therefore, before the ticker text had even begun to scroll across the lower section of the screen, I’d guessed this would be a recording of a suicide mission and then there it was, confirmed, “Martyrdom Operation — Jabhat al-Nusra,” I read. While in the top left, digital flag flutters, denoting this aforementioned organisation.

It is February 7th, 2014 and a man known as Abu Suleiman al-Britani is at the wheel of a truck laden with explosives. The viewer can just about spot his heavy goods vehicle, with its metallic front armour, as it speeds past cracks in a smashed up perimeter wall. These walls form part of Aleppo’s prison. Britani’s destination: the front gate. On impact, an immense mushroom cloud of smoke rise into the sky and, on some videos, this is the point at which a nashîd begins to play. Rebel soldiers then flood in, engaging the remaining regime soldiers. Hundreds of prisoners were set free that day.
“And you know, Philip, he’s British!” exclaimed Abdullah, “Like you!” and, inevitably, he then joked, “… so, when are you going to go and make a martyrdom operation for the Syria!”

“After yours, comrade,” I answered back.

New communication technology was central in breaking the news of this martyrdom operation; it was first revealed over Twitter when an individual shared a photograph of the vehicle followed by an image of the detonation and then a raw video clip of the impact. Shiraz Maher, a British research fellow at Kings College in London, made contact with British citizens known to be in Syria in order to confirm the reports. In an SMS reply, he was told: “Lol, yes, news travels fast. The first British brother!”

The others soon joined us around the laptop as the video was reaching its conclusions. Stopping him before he could click on related links, I asked Abdullah what he thought when watching these videos. At first, after the others had moved away from the laptop, he jokingly told me not to worry and that he wasn’t planning on blowing himself up anytime soon:

“I like drinking XXL [a vodka energy mix drink] and flirting with girls too much,” he concluded.

But then, switching to a more serious tone, he added that it did make him feel he ought to at least go back and fight because, look at Britani, he wasn’t even Syrian, yet he was ready to carry out a martyrdom operation.

“That’s true,” I said, “So, why do you think he felt it was his business to fight in Syria in the first place?”

Abdullah then talked of solidarity between Muslims, and Adnan, overhearing us, agreed; Muslims, they felt, ought to be prepared to fight for the rights of all their fellow believers. The consensus, as usual, was that Britani was ‘batal wa shahīd and that he carried out his operation because he empathised with the suffering of the Syrian people. These art objects and narratives seemed, then, to be directly mediating the acts of biologically dead individuals and therefore making present the dead person in the social lives of the living. How is this achieved?

To answer, I return briefly now to Alfred Gell’s (1998) theoretical model as sketched in Art and Agency. If we try to adopt the perspective of the men gathered around me in front of the laptop, watching the video of Britani, the clip will be seen as direct representation and therefore seen to be unmediated by a particular artist (i.e. the cameraman) or other actors, (i.e. those performing the takbīr). The text and logos of Jabhat al-Nusra were not seen as
impositions but as genuine reflections of the man’s actually existing politico-revolutionary commitment. In Gell’s terms the formula would look something like this:

[Prototype – A > Artist – A > Index – A] – Recipient – P

What this means is that the primary person understood as responsible for the video (the ‘index’) from Abdullah’s perspective (the recipient) is Britani himself (the prototype). This takes precedence over the artist (videographer, other rebels). Only if I pointed out these factors of filmography, or pushed the men to think about them, would they offer any comment. Editing, soundtracks, photo filters and the like were secondary to discussions of the individual martyrs themselves. In fact, where these techniques were valued was precisely in their capacity to capture the ‘true’ essence of a martyr’s heroism. For instance, given that Britani was framed as a heroic Muslim, the chanting of the takbīr and the overlaying of a nashīd were merely the appropriate response rather than additional flourishes facilitating the sense of excitement and awe generated by the clip.

So, when Abdullah et al. watch the video they primarily understand it to be an unmediated representation of an actual act, and thus the individual is brought back into the world of the living through these commemoration practices because of an apparent direct representation of the individuals themselves. Sentiments are captured by an ‘artist’ or ‘storyteller’ but these acts of creativity are not valued for their creativity but for their capacity to reintegrate the rebel as a martyr.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have suggested a model of martyrdom for understanding the chains of meaning rebel-workers attached to those who died during the uprising and militarized stages of the Syrian revolution. The (dead) rebel is understood to have moved into ‘harm’s way’ and therefore ‘overcome’ the barrier of fear to confront the ‘entity’ that is imagined to be denying citizens their rights, welfare, and dignity: the regime. Given the biological destruction of the individual, I suggest we look at how commemoration practices function to reintegrate a martyr into particular social relationships. They achieve this reintegration because stories, pictures, and videos are seen as ‘representations’ of the individual martyrs themselves, and are therefore capable of directly standing for the person and his bravery rather than creatively conjuring revolutionary internationality. In other words, martyrdom images were not understood as a type of propaganda but as truthful representations of heroes.
“Philip,” said Abdullah, beginning a message he sent over Facebook, “do you remember Mohammed?”

“Which Mohammed?” I replied.

“Mohammed Saab, the guy who wanted to travel to Canada; well, they found his body yesterday, it was in a mass grave. Da’ish killed him because he wanted to go to Canada. They said he was an unbeliever because he wanted to emigrate to foreigners’ lands.”

Mohammed had studied English literature at Tishreen University and before the revolution broke out he’d been working as an English teacher in a rural Deir Ezzor school. He didn’t take part in many protests, he went to one or two, but tried as best he could to keep working and making money. He would tell me how much he hated the regime and counted himself amongst the opposition, but what he really wanted to do was immigrate to Canada. He didn’t imagine this was too unrealistic an ambition; after all, he already spoke a good degree of English. On his mobile phone, he had created a gallery of images he’d downloaded from Google of typical Toronto streets. “One day, I’ll be in those pictures,” he told me.

When Mohammed began searching for master’s scholarships online he discovered he didn’t meet the requirements; so instead he decided to try for a work visa, and for that he’d heard about offices in Beirut that provide legal and advice services for these would-be immigrants. Mohammed was lucky in that he already had a few friends and neighbours in Beirut, like Abdullah, so decided to take his savings and give it a shot. He had $1,500 in his pocket and a cheap place to stay. Nonetheless, he’d need a job to support himself during the application process. Mohammed never found a job. Everywhere he turned there were no vacancies, and he was not prepared to work in construction; he had a degree, after all, he told me. And so, after one month he returned to Syria.

In July 2014, Islamic State crossed the border from Iraq into Al-Sheitāt territory. According to Abdullah’s estimates, 1,500 were killed, many of them ‘civilians.’ Mohammed was amongst them. The final chapter will further describe the conspiracy theories my friends developed in response to the wave of doubt and chaos spread by these events, but my point here is to do with another shift — a shift in commemoration practices. After the discovery of Mohammad’s body, I was intrigued by the fact he was not referred to as a martyr. Abdullah used the Arabic verb “he was killed” and not “he was martyred” each time he described what had happened to Mohammed. Moreover, on images he sent me he’d only written, “God rest his soul,” the same phrase written after Abbas was killed accidentally at the wedding.
celebration [fig 3.5]. Perhaps, then, notions of who is and who is not a martyr had yet to adjust to the unfolding chaotic scenes witnessed at the time of writing. Chapter six will return to this chaos and ask, what happens to rebel-worker’s notions of heroism and uprising when a ‘third’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ actor has stepped onto the scene?

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85 A collection of videos can be viewed here. They are extremely graphic. (Accessed: 06/02/2015)
1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DalryExL9CI
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz10W8ExsMM
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zk_8xr_vURQ

86 Embedded video contains footage of these protests can be viewed here (Accessed 06/02/2015)
http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/05/28/150906.html

87 al-Manār (the beacon/light house) is a Hezbollah-affiliated satellite television station news channel. The significance of Abdullah flipping to it is that, given that we were close to the southern suburbs, he’d intuited any attack would likely have been targeting a March 8th (pro-Syrian regime) target.

88 I want to say something here about the relative lack of non-lethal crowed control weapons held by the regime in comparison to, say, the Egyptian government. But can’t find any sources as yet.

89 Given that all the men in this thesis are Sunni Muslims, the focus here is necessarily limited. There was not any notable talk of Christian or Druze Martyrs. In the Palestinian context, Khalili discusses how for secular resistance fighters anyone who dies in battle and revolution was considered a martyr (2007: 140). When I asked the men if they think anyone who dies for the revolution should be considered a martyr they all agreed with that principle.

90 This is a highly contested attack (for an outline see BBC 2013).

91 Ripping is a method for downloading YouTube videos that converts the flash file into an MPEG that can then be stored on a mobile phone’s SD memory and thus also shared as a file across the WhatsApp network as well as watched offline. For clarity, I’d installed this programme on the laptop but only at the request of Abdullah and Haytham, who’d both heard about it from acquaintances.
PART III

CONTAINMENT
INTRODUCTION

“Look,” said Shadi, folding the arghila hose back into the palm of his hand, “Frankly, I’m not thinking too much about marriage; at this time I don’t want it that much.”

“Surely everyone wants to be married,” I said, reaching for the hose. I looked out across the café; we were surrounded by families, the cooling sea breeze offered temporary respite from the humid summer air. We were sitting atop a rocky outcrop known as Dalieh, not too far from Beirut’s iconic Pigeons’ Rock. The café remains one of the few affordable spots left on this side of town. Patrons, mostly Syrian, were bunched together on white plastic garden furniture, eating, drinking, laughing and smoking. At the front there was even some rare open space in which children play, intermittently they broke into fights, kids fell over, and their parents ran to comfort them.

“It’s just that there are more important things on my mind now,” Shadi continued, “I’m trying to improve my financial situation, I need to support my mother and father [in Syria]. But you’re right, for some shabab [lads] stability is still the most important thing […] but frankly, can anyone have stability these days?”

In fact, Shadi’s family stabilised into a pattern typical of the Syrian rebel-workers in Beirut. His two elder brothers were fighting for opposition forces while he, the second from youngest, generated increasingly vital remittances to be sent back to his mother and father.

“Couldn’t you raise a family in Beirut?” I asked, “Wouldn’t that give you stability?”

“No. First, it’s too expensive. And second, I don’t like the environment here. I don’t want them to live in exile, amongst all these non-believers. I want them [to be connected] to the tribal lands, for them to [keep] going to the mosque and I don’t want my wife to show her hair in public like the girls over there,” Shadi gestured toward a group of well-turned-out women, sporting tight-fitting jeans and big hair who were slowly passing us by on the sidewalk.

Shadi hardly dressed conservatively. He had taken to ‘designer stubble’ and had recently acquired a new trendy haircut — he wears it trim, short across the sides, long on top, and finished with shaved-in pattern lines. This particular cut — ‘The Christiano’ (Ronaldo) —
is modelled on the internationally famous Brazilian football player. Shadi already displays a passing resemblance but, as his friend Abdullah has made clear, “they only look alike.”

In contrast with his doppelgänger, Shadi’s reputation is one of failure on the pitch. He tended to avoid the regular Sunday football matches. Nevertheless, these shortcomings are more than made-up by another reputation — his success and desirability amongst females. This was explained to me with reference to his height, his slender, yet muscular body, and sharp facial features. Shadi’s fashion choices play well to his physicality, long legs emphasised by slim-fit jeans and a naturally V-shaped torso highlighted by a tight-fitting white t-shirt. In fact, a few weeks earlier, Abdullah had complained to me over dinner about his ballooning belly, and how he wished, he could have Shadi’s “much nicer stomach and chest.” Joking back at him, I pointed out surely he’d also want Shadi’s posterior, lest his body appear out of proportion. In reply, he stressed he was content with a “fat ass,” it works in the bedroom, so Abdullah maintains, as a perfectly weighted counter-balance.

Back to the café, and with these ostensibly discordant attitudes, consumption practices, dispositions and values in mind, I remarked — in reference to the passing young women — “I thought you liked that style of girl!?”

“You’re right, I like them, but this is Beirut!”

****

The preceding chapters have documented the collapse of the Syrian regime’s authority and the eroding of whatever legitimacy it once held amongst a group of rebel-workers in Beirut. I have shown how in this collapse a section of the population developed ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ and how in that process ‘the people’ emerged determined to fight ‘the regime.’ This is a fight that did not only take place on the street; it was further materialised and reinforced through rapidly circulated art forms that signified a committed revolutionary identity. These forms also took on an active role in the symbolic dismantling of the Assad personality cult. As the uprising continued to militarise, these art objects were gradually displaced by photographs of the dead. Martyrdom imagery, while often based on tragedy, nonetheless facilitated the continuation of revolutionary heroic meaning in the face of often futile loss.

In the midst, all of these dramatic processes of transformation, retreat and loss, the lives of rebel-workers were continuing in Beirut. But these basic facts of life can’t themselves be wholly isolated from the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity. In Ernesto Laclau and Chantelle Mouffe’s, earlier work, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical
Democratic Politics (2001) they argue that ‘social antagonisms’ appear not when identities are ‘fully constituted,’ as in the orthodox Marxist final showdown between the proletariat and the bourgeois, but when they are threatened. For example, a worker on a production line in England who finds that his pay has been slashed doesn’t merely begin opposing the owner because of this slashing alone. His reduced pay has a direct impact on the rest of his socio-cultural world. For example, low wages could mean he can no longer afford his season ticket to Sunderland football club, thereby denying him an essential part of his self-constructed identity as a loyal fan. In the Syrian case, I’ve described how the most popular example given to me of increasing commodity prices was always the sack of sugar. This is not an antagonism that exists purely on a level of state-society relations; it also exists on the level of social identity. The serving of sweetened black tea to guests is such a central part of what it means to be a ‘good host’ in Syrian daily life that an increase in cost that can lead to forced frugality also becomes a denial of ‘Syrian-ness’ itself.

Bearing this in mind, I want to explore the ‘masculine identities’ of rebel-workers in Beirut and how far a series of mounting barriers have threatened the realisation of ‘masculine expectations’ or prompted their negotiation.

At issue is how young Syrian migrant workers and refugees — “the shabāb” — acted, consumed and talked about themselves in relation to divergent and often contradictory models of behaviour, including experiences of ‘freedom,’ freedom that’s tied up in, and spatially fixed to Beirut. This freedom that entails ‘pleasure seeking’ and ‘permissiveness’ and so was often in other contexts dismissed as “mish jīdī” [not serious], “baṣīṭa” [simple] and actually the result of fawḍā [chaos]. Yet despite vocal disavowals, experiencing this freedom constituted a central preoccupation.

This is expressed in consumption practices and the desires these young men direct toward certain consumer objects which came to occupy a pivotal role in self-construction and other recognition. In revealing how far these ‘practices and desires’ suggest masculinities are in crisis, I want to ask how they evidence ‘a crisis of masculinity’ that is not unrelated to the Syrian crisis more generally.

‘Masculinity’ refers here to patterns of ‘expectations, desires, and values’ that become predominantly associated with ‘men’ and not with ‘women.’ The fact that one can identify contradictions and divergences in such patterns is not novel but reflective of the complicated overlapping expectations that surround men at many different points in their life trajectories. However, what appears new — or at least what seems to be growing — is another moment of rupture, this time, located in the broader patriarchal order.
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Instabilities, I argue, are intensifying around ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ and this is thanks, in part, to the ever more precarious politico-economic base upon which they build. ‘Hegemonic masculinity,’ meaning the most ‘valued way’ of being or acting ‘as a man,’ is a model few can fill, those who answer all its demands are rare, if not necessarily non-existent. At issue is less an achieved reality of practice but more the values — realised or not — that envelop ideal types, or exemplars of masculinity, in any given society (Connell 2005: 832). As the influential sociologist of gender Raewyn Connell puts it, hegemonic masculinity is “embodied [in] the currently most honoured way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men” (ibid). Critically, this does not necessarily mean the use of violence, at least violence in a direct physical sense; rather, the ascendency of these values is achieved through culture, small acts of persuasion and broader institutions (ibid). What comes to constitute the ‘hegemonic’ is neither transhistorical nor transcultural; the term ‘hegemony’ itself admits the possibility for change — a space for ‘counter-hegemonies’ — and thus ‘subordinate masculinities’ might not forever remain so.

We have seen in earlier chapters that a Syrian man’s capacity for ‘social and economic reproduction of the household,’ appears to be crumbling further across multiple fronts. Amongst these ruins sit other ideals of masculinity less attached to structures, structure in this context meaning wage labour; domination within the family; property and land ownership; ‘breadwinning’ or being ‘connected’ to the job market. What was open to young Syrian worker-refugees were identities expressed through consumption patterns, fashion, style, the image, and the presentation of sexual/physical prowess. These ‘alternatives’ — in and of themselves — aren’t new. Syrian workers have never been ‘excluded’ from well-documented consumer cultures in Lebanon (cf. Khalaf 2012; Chalcraft 2006).

Shadi’s retort that, “This is Beirut” built on long-standing notions that have rendered Beirut a zone of permissiveness; a place spatially and morally distant from the village; and a city with streets brimming with otherwise forbidden pleasures. But while engagement in Beirut’s consumer culture might be longstanding, what’s changed is the context; that is to say, there has been a decline in the degree of certainty a worker might once have maintained that his migrant life was ‘temporary,’ ‘occasional’ and a mostly ‘transitionary affair.’

Young rebel-workers have little idea when, or if, they’ll go back Syria and even, should they make it home, they’re now doubtful that if they will arrive back in their village with an improved socio-economic standing.
“I’d not go back,” said Abdullah one autumn evening. “Don’t you know what happened to Ibrahim’s cousin?”

“Remind me,” I said.

“He went back just before the revolution; he was working in that man’ousheh place you like.”

“Mashrouḥa?”

“Yes, anyway, he took the skills he picked up there and opened a small restaurant in Deir Ezzor city. He called it ‘Taste of Beirut’ [in the English]; it was in an area like Hamra, just without the alcohol, naturally. Well, of course, it’s been destroyed, he’s lost everything, so what is there for us in Syria? Nothing.”

Abdullah could react to this now uncertain future in Syria by instead attempting to embrace some form of new life in Beirut, and seek, in other words, an alternative sense of stability or even a ‘future’ found in the city. And regardless of regional turmoil, Abdullah is also still a young man, far from home, in a city that offers countless beguiling diversions and vices: an abundance of consumer goods, drinks, bars, brothels and sex. But to even gain access to these diversions, certain ‘regulatory structures’ such as the hierarchies of class and nationality must be successfully navigated. Many of these ‘strategies of navigation’ appeared to play out around ‘objects.’ Focusing on how these objects are accessed and made use of maintains an analysis of the concrete instead of a more general celebration of ‘actor agency’ or ‘inventiveness.’ Indeed, even where strategic acts of ‘negotiation’ are successful, fresh dilemmas and new questions appeared to emerge around Beirut’s distance from the village and hence its ‘permissiveness,’ when older, and once financially established, relatives return — pushed back into migrant labour by deteriorating economic circumstances. Or what if brothers come to stay, fresh from the frontline, and burning with revolutionary zeal?

These questions build from the shrinking of geographic separation, but what’s also shrunk is Abdullah and Shadi’s capacity to transition smoothly from migrant labour and bachelorhood to marriage and fatherhood. In the above, Shadi may have expressed — after some prompting — certain ideas as to what environments are appropriate for a future family life, but he also admitted that he isn’t thinking about marriage, he has got ‘more important things on his mind.’ Those things are overbearing concerns in the present — he has little space for planning a future. It is as if he is in stasis, his future on hold. Often he talked to me about the weight of responsibility he felt in just maintaining his job, minimising expenditures and ensuring that remittances, a now vital lifeline to his family, continue flowing. With his family’s agriculture holdings in eastern Syria now fallow, his wages have been transformed
from something that might once have contributed toward a future of productive reinvestment or small business holdings into “maṣrūf al-bayt bas” [just household expenditure].

Shadi’s circumstances and Abdullah’s cautionary tale express that what it means ‘to be a man,’ as well as achieving socio-culturally defined ideals of ‘manhood’ are impacted by the high degrees of pauperisation which rural Syria witnessed prior to and after the uprising. Incomparable conditions elsewhere, when young men are no longer able to envision a transition into their traditional roles within patriarchy, and when ideas of what ‘being a man’ appear unstable or uncertain, popular and scholarly discourse has written of an impending ‘crisis of masculinity’ (For example Beynon 2001; Brooks 2001; Edwards 2006; McDowell 2000; Morgan 2006; Smith 2004).

I will return to this crisis and its discontents later. For now, let me acknowledge that, in the preceding chapters, there were evidently many other implicit ideals of masculinity. These ideas were informing, for example, how rebel-workers came to reflect on their own personal-political transformation and the materialisation of revolutionary subjectivity through a certain aesthetic. Ideals of a masculine heroism, militarism and self-sacrifice were also implicitly informing the styles of commemoration awarded to fallen comrades. The aim here is to transform these backgrounds into an explicit object of inquiry. These descriptions and their significances must be placed in the overall context of a gradual ‘falling away’ of a once more or less temporary labour migration pattern between Lebanon and Syria, coupled with its more totalising collapse since the rupturing events of March 2011. In sum, a broader reshaping of politico-economic arrangements appears to have set in motion a series of ripples disturbing, and in some cases even denying, certain modes of masculine self-fashioning. In the face of obvious threats to the realisation of hegemonic masculinity, other patterns, and models of behaviour have gained increased significance.

**MODELLING MASCULINITY**

The remainder of this chapter places ethnographic descriptions in the context of three analytic models, with a primary focus on 1) al-shabāb; [the lads], versus 2) al-kibār [the elders] and 3) al-thuwwār [revolutionaries]. All these models appear against a context of broader politico-economic change; they are not to be read as hermetically sealed. Rather, they’re ‘constellations’ around which certain desires, practices and values circle, and can be ‘mapped,’ in a manner making ‘categories of men’ recognisable to both anthropologist and informant alike. This social recognition, I argue, relates to three different foundations respectively, 1) consumption; 2) structure and 3) revolutionary practice.
The lion’s share of this chapter is given over to the shabāb for the simple fact that the majority of the men whom I spent my time with talked about themselves as, and classified themselves as, shabāb. Kibār and thuwwār were present — sometimes physically so — but more often than not they are spectres hanging over conversation; their voices picked up on phone calls, or read about in WhatsApp chats. While these men participated in the revolution, sometimes directly, the distinction between the shabāb and thuwwār is that the latter category of men was more or less engaged in fighting full time.

For the shabāb, consumption, fashion, and style are the key ‘materials’ for their self-image. The shabāb — typically between eighteen and thirty years old— lead a precarious existence, falling neatly into what the economist Guy Standing (e.g., 2011) has described as a ‘precariat class.’ The shabāb look toward uncertain futures. But against their evident structural precariousness, much of their free time, and what little surplus money they had, were directed toward the acquisition and consumption of things. These fashion objects — iPhones as much as t-shirts — were explained to me as desirable not just in and of themselves, but also in the ways they enable access to other activities. They work to establish new valued forms of social relations. Put bluntly, what these men imagined, like many men elsewhere, was that they could ‘impress women’ with their ‘sportiness,’ ‘taste,’ ‘style’ or ‘money,’ thereby get dates, acquire girlfriends and have sex.94

In Western sociology, comparable patterns of behaviour — framed often as reaction to the ‘crisis of masculinity’ — have been placed under rubrics such as ‘new manism’ and ‘new laddism,’ pointing to how images, objects and the ‘performance of masculinity’ has grown in response to a decline in more general ‘structural stability’ within patriarchy.95 But narrowing in on the actual material objects of gender performance is also a literal response to an infamous misreading of Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (2011). In this straw man understanding, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are rendered as equivalent to shirts in a wardrobe, something one ‘puts on’ or ‘puts off’ at will. Butler herself summarised it as so:

“The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism […] [treating] gender deliberately, as if it’s an object out there, when my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way — that gender is not to be chosen and that ‘performativity’ is not radical choice and it’s not voluntarism […] Performativity has to do with repetition, very
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often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms [. . . ] This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Butler cited in Kotz 1992: 83).

But what might happen if we actually do look at what’s in the wardrobe, where do the items inside come from? What sort of technology is it?

I think if we look at the relationship that shabāb establish with things — both desired or possessed — we can identify the space these objects occupy in ‘constructing a sense of self’ and secondly determine the space that these objects are used to ‘recognise others.’ So, if masculinity is performative, then the likes of aftershave, cigarettes, t-shirts, fast food and vodka energy drinks are its ‘props.’ But — as with the difference between a West End production and a local amateur dramatic performance — capitalism necessitates that access to ‘props’ is already determined by material and structural circumstances. So, for the shabāb at least, these material cultures are beguiling precisely because of this, because, that is, of an antagonistic interplay between exclusion and inclusion, between ‘luxury’ and ‘cheapness.’ As neither ‘resistance’ nor ‘submission,’ the avenues through which these young Syrian men carve up space to engage with Beirut’s alluring consumer cultures is really ‘negotiation.’ Some men might find some pleasures and some ‘meaning’ or even escape from some problems, but in the end, these practices and desires remain profoundly constituted by, and reproductive of, gender norms and class under capitalism. A revolution against patriarchy this was not. 96

‘To be shabāb’ is enacted through objects but also is ‘defined relationally,’ not only to women but to other men. The second section of this chapter looks more closely at how shabāb explain who they, and who others are, by who they’re not.

If the shabāb represent an iteration of already-established expectations of urban migrant youth then, likewise, the kibār are constituted by already-established expectations of older Syrian men. This is the pattern that most resembles the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’; for these men are the ‘heads of households,’ the men who, having returned to Syria following a youth labouring elsewhere, successfully position themselves at the pinnacle of kin relations. Yet, and as is often the case even in more peaceful times and places, the actual capacity for men to entirely live up to the normative expectations, to these ‘exemplars’ of hegemonic masculinity was far from given (O’Brien 2009). By contrast, the thuwwār is both external and yet also somewhat in between the former two models. The thuwwār displays values that could be connected to the more ‘spatially fixed’ patterns of behaviour, he incorporates, for example, ideas of ‘adventurousness,’ ‘feats of bravery,’ ‘physical strength’
associated with the shabāb but also the ‘self-sacrifice,’ ‘acting in the common good’ and ‘handling of responsibility’ expected of the kibār. However, by forging an association with — and being recognised in relation to — a transcendental political cause and the physical incorporation of ‘revolutionary subjectivity,’ the rebel exhibits a capacity to stand aside from both the structural position of the kibār and consumption practices of shabāb; he disrupts even further these always already unstable patterns within broader social stratifications.

Gender norms are best understood as inherently ‘unstable,’ ‘plural’ and ‘unfixed’; the capacity for performing any particular pattern is doubtless cross-cut and delimited by pertinent class divisions; concordantly, patterns must be continuously (re)produced (or not reproduced) in daily practice (cf. Gutmann 2006; Cornwall and Lindsfarne 1994; Ghaill 1994; Thorne 1993). And yet how is it — regardless of all the acknowledged doubt, flux and instability — the end result is that Shadi can reflect on his own behaviour, or that of his peers, as ‘typical’ of the shabāb in general?

Below tries to answer why he can do this, but this raises further questions like, what does the relationship between these models look like? When are they stable? When do they conflict? And more broadly, what role is masculinity playing in the justification and naturalisation of other social stratifications?

**DON’T I LOOK LEBANESE?**

“What do you think about these?” asked Haytham, holding up a pair of red skinny fit chinos that he’d found poking out from a mountainous pile of unsorted jeans and trousers.

Haytham is extremely handsome, with dark eyes and sharp cheekbones. He would often impress me with his eye for style and knack for identifying hidden gems on the weekends we’d enjoy bargain-hunting in Sabra market. His find that day was located in the covered section of the market, an often extremely crowded environment, full of noisy echoes as hordes of men engage in heated negotiations over whatever mobile phone case, pair of leather shoes or Chinese consumer good may have taken their fancy. This section is also by far the cheapest; it is here that one finds stacks of items hastily spread out across rented wooden tables rather than hanging neatly categorised by size and style as with the individual shops outside. It is a smoky, dirty space; the smell of old clothes mixes with frying falafel close by. The only women in sight are those who sit on the floor toward the entrance, veiled they beg for spare change from the passing shoppers.

“They’re good trousers. On trend,” I answered back. Haytham agreed and succeeded in haggling the price down to $8. I reached over and felt the material, it wasn’t great, but I
knew that wasn’t really the point of his question. These were not bought to last, they were not bought for work, but they were bought simply to impress Haytham’s secret girlfriend from Dahieh. Walking the short distance back to the apartment, we grabbed a bag of fresh almonds, and I paid for two chickens from the butcher, killed on the spot for us. I was to supply the meat to his cousin, Mahmoud, who’d prepare it later for our usual weekend feast.

The moment the apartment door closed, Haytham rushed to the bedroom to try on his chinos; I sat down, turned on the television and lit a cigarette. Appearing in the doorway two minutes later, he shouted for my attention.

“Don’t I look Lebanese?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

Satisfied, he returned to the bedroom. But to now question his question: what does it mean for Haytham, a young Syrian migrant labourer in Beirut to ask if he ‘looks Lebanese?’

It seems that, primarily, what informed Haytham’s question — and why he felt the need to ask it — are his everyday experiences of class, domination, power, and race. This issue is not centred on just any of, or an amalgamation of, the multiple identities one encounters in Lebanon; rather, his question hangs on our presumed mutual understanding, as well as a capacity to recognise that ‘Lebanese’ here really only stands for consumer practices associated with Beirut’s internationally orientated male urban bourgeois, and, in this instance, their ‘fashion choices’ (Khalaf 2008: 176-181).

Bright red chinos aren’t work clothes, they’re not ‘ordinary trousers,’ they’re nothing like the atypical, hardwearing, prosaic blue jeans which the anthropologist of material culture, Daniel Miller (2012), has suggested carry signification only in so far as they carry an imagined lack of signification. On the contrary, sending the ‘right sign,’ through the material object, is what is at stake here precisely. These trousers were at once intended to generate a (positive) impression with his Lebanese girlfriend and thus to suggest Haytham’s equal access to a cosmopolitan image-driven lifestyle as the next Beirut guy. They’re as much a marker of an (imagined) ‘disposable income’ as they are a certain level of ‘cultural capital.’

Haytham’s purchase “[translated] the object from alienable to an inalienable condition; that is from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations” (Miller 1987: 190). As convincing as this might be, the use of ‘consumption’ as an analytic category is not without controversy — and while it is beyond the scope here to do justice to the myriad critique invoked by the ‘turn to consumption’ — a response here to some of the arguments made by the anthropologist David Graeber is helpful in narrowing down what’s going on.
In Graeber’s influential article *Consumption* (2011) he takes issue with the production and consumption divide itself, he questions ‘the vagueness of terms’ as well as any uncritical adoption of a simplistic distinction between them. He argues that this bifurcation does not have its origins in universal trans-historical human practice but was born of liberal political economy and thus emerged only in the light of expanding market economy. ‘Consumption,’ he argues, entered popular usage because it solved certain dilemmas at the heart of ‘property rights’ (cf. Pottage and Mundy 2004). When Haytham exchanged money for his chinos, he became their ‘owner,’ which thereby excludes me, and everyone else, from wearing them — at least without permission. The implications are vast, so vast that people inevitably naturalise what is fundamentally a social relation into a connection between individuals and things — rather than people and other people via a thing (ibid: 499). From this, the ultimate proof of ownership is *dominium*, meaning, in the case of the sovereign, the right to have citizens killed. It might be argued that in medieval law the distinction between ruler *dominium* and property rights was indistinct, whereas the distinction under capitalism was clarified (Coleman 2000). For Graeber if we expand this idea of dominium to the object then it would signify the right to destroy it, that is, to ‘use it up’ and thus to ‘consume it’ is the strongest marker of ownership.

In much contemporary analysis, any activity involving the purchase, use or enjoyment of some commodity that is not *directly related* to the production or exchange of new commodities is framed under ‘consumption’ (Graeber 2011: 491). Graeber's counterargument is that really things are more ambiguous between these two assumed separate spheres of activity. This is certainly convincing when he is explaining forms of identity fashioned around television: “When a 16-year-old girl writes a short story about forbidden love between Kirk and Spock, this is hardly consumption anymore; we are talking about people engaging in a complex community organised around forms of (relatively unalienated) production” (ibid: 500). However, in situations of encroaching market penetration, he goes on to suggest,

Rather than looking at people in Zambia or Brazil and saying ‘Look! They are using consumption to construct identities!’ and thus implying they are willingly or perhaps unknowingly submitting to the logic of neoliberal capitalism, perhaps we should consider that in many of the societies we study, the production of material products has always been subordinate to the mutual construction of human beings and what they are doing, at least in part, is simply insisting on continuing to act as if this were the case even when using objects manufactured elsewhere into self-conscious resistance to—or, for that matter, an equally self-conscious enthusiastic embrace of—consumer capitalism. But in many cases, at least, I suspect that our issues and categories are simply irrelevant (ibid).
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But if we read clothing and style through its correspondence with class and gender, then I’m not sure how far it is still accurate to talk still about the “mutual construction of humans”; is the consumption of style, not itself necessarily also about social inclusion intersecting with social exclusion? Isn’t it really about ‘distinction’? (Bourdieu 1984).

MOBILE PHONES AND SPORTS

The shabāb themselves, of course, are aware that objects can render visible certain images and ideas about who they are. Haytham’s chinos were desirable precisely in terms of their imagined ‘social effects.’ This is why clothing can be read as an intentional ‘prop’ or even ‘technology’ that “intervenes in the world” to “influence people” (Tilley 2006; see also, Crane 2012; Parkins 2002; Zakim 2006). On this point, Abdullah would agree, he had made this apparent a few weeks after we first met. We arranged to jog together on Beirut’s seafront; his aforementioned ballooning belly had led to a desire for action, and, on discovering that I’m a keen runner, he suggested we train together. Following the fieldworkers’ rule of ‘never refusing an invitation,’ I turned up on the allotted morning, kitted out in my shabby running gear, my hair unkempt having postponed showering. Thirty minutes later my new friend arrived, casually strolling across the road in my direction. I noticed he was smoking a cigarette, wearing (‘fake’) branded sports gear and unspoiled sneakers. His hair was meticulously styled, pointing upwards and divided into spikes, and on his nose rested a pair of oversized metallic, reflective aviator sunglasses.

“Abdullah!” I scolded, “I don’t think you should be smoking if we’re about to run…”

“No, it is fine, we’ll run in a bit; now let’s take a few pictures […] don’t you think I look really sporty?”

With that, he jumped up and sat on the barrier separating the pavement from the sea, and began to strike a collection of rehearsed poses. I was directed to take the shots. This became a 15-minute photo shoot, and we almost ran the camera phone’s battery flat, alternating between taking ‘selfies’ of us both, solo portraits of Abdullah, or even my own reluctant self. Finally, when he was happy with a good few, I said, “So you just want to look sporty? — I thought we were here to do some sport, no?”

“Look; if I seem sporty in pictures, then girls on Facebook or WhatsApp will think I’ve got a beautiful body, that I don’t get tired of sex. You know girls don’t want shabāb who get tired of sex. They like it too much.”

For Abdullah, the appearance of ‘athleticism’ is a higher priority than athleticism itself, and this priority emerges in correspondence with another common anxiety experienced
by the shabāb: the imagined insatiable sexual appetite of women, and man’s limited capacity
to satisfy them. Often I was drawn in to consult on these matters — wrongly presumed an
expert. Haytham, for example, was perpetually disheartened by his failure to ‘make progress’
with his secret Shia girlfriend. Indeed, amongst these young men, the popular representation
of Shia women is that they’re by far and away the most sexually active and experienced
women encountered in Lebanon. This cliché, common across the Levant, was evidenced, or
so he thought, in the Shia practice of nikāḥ al-muṭ’ah [temporary marriage].

“Well,” I said, “Americans refer to ‘bases’ from the game baseball when they’re
discussing sex. So the first base is kissing, second base is using hands.”

“I’ve held her hand!” Haytham replied, “So, I’ve reached second base.”

“Congratulations,” I said, not wanting to spoil his sudden good mood.

It is worth noting that Abdullah, despite at this point working only a part-time job in a
sports nutrition shop, had come to acquire an iPhone. While second hand, it represented a
substantial investment, setting him back $400. Part of the initial cost was defrayed by trading
in an old handset. All the men were preoccupied with the slow upgrading of mobile phones
and displayed anxiety about owning cheaper models. This might be resolved should they
reach the top of the ladder, and get their hands on a Samsung Galaxy or an Apple iPhone. Of
course, these were only ever temporary victories, for the ladder extends ever upwards.
Regardless, functionality alone can’t explain these desires: my simple yellow $100 phone
received internet access and WhatsApp too — and perfectly efficiently — but it also received
bemused derision from the shabāb.

“For real?! You must have the money for a better phone than that Philip,” Shadi
remarked. Haytham once even asked why I was not embarrassed by it. Reactions like this
were also followed by the suggestion that they are mates with so-and-so worker at a particular
market stall and could if I so wished, get me a much better deal.

Phones were, on a different level, important in much the same way that appearing
‘sporty’ was; a new and expensive phone was thought to appeal to women. In fact, they
overlap even more directly, in so far as Abdullah would sometimes set the results of our photo
shoots to his WhatsApp profile picture, or exchange images of himself across the network to
potential girlfriends at home and in Beirut. Other graphics, like that in fig 4.0, were shared by
the guys over their phones and uploaded onto Facebook walls. Fig 4.0, in particular, seems to
blend neatly a common concern with physical appearance and the degree to which that
appearance is desirable to women.
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In a related sense, the possession of an expensive smartphone was imagined to negate other potentially less favourable impressions.

Abdullah, in the first quarter of 2014, began working full time on a construction site; he wasn’t pleased about this; at that point he was completing his degree in Social Science from the Lebanese University and didn’t think intense manual labour appropriate either for studying nor given the fact he is now ‘educated.’ However, he had just lost another job in retail and needed the money. When we met one day outside of the site he expressed to me what was basically a sense of status anxiety around the entire situation; he was working, so he told me with “uneducated people” who, “don’t know about politics or events in Syria”; actually, he added, they “know nothing.”

Yet, despite working a job he classified as demeaning, he excitedly told me of a recent occurrence. One day, taking the bus back from work, he was listening to music on his iPhone and an attractive Lebanese girl next to him struck up a conversation, and it all began with her complimenting him on his choice of mobile phone. She gave him her number and soon began a rather brief flirtatious WhatsApp exchange. So despite his having spent the day labouring under taxing conditions, his ownership of a luxury commodity is framed, in his mind, as having facilitated access to a much more desirable and meaningful social relation. True, nothing came of this exchange, but whatever ‘objective’ he had was ambiguous. In the midst of this particular flirtatious exchange, Haytham and I took a trip with Abdullah to visit some friends in a different area of the city, but for most of the day Abdullah was only attached to his phone, occasionally engaging with us, but actually just seeking advice on how he ought to reply to a particular message. “What’s going to happen with this?” I eventually asked Abdullah.

“Nothing” he replied, “of course I want to marry a Syrian woman, but I’m having fun. But I don’t know really. Maybe.”

One way to understand this ambiguity might be that the social relation Abdullah generated through his possession of the consumer object par excellence, the iPhone, couldn’t be ‘serious’ given not only all the class/nationality boundaries to any future partnership with a Lebanese woman, but also his own insistence on just “having fun” in Beirut. This “having fun” connects back to ideas of non-permanent migration, with permissive pleasure seeking during free hours in the city while, at the same time, imagining and building toward a future of patriarchal stability by “marrying a Syrian woman.” Ambiguity enters the equation when Abdullah, like Shadi, reflects on whatever potential remains in the face of mass pauperisation, socio-economic destruction, war, and the complete impossibility of generating savings. In
spite of all this, in early June 2015, Abdullah, as we have seen in the introduction, would marry Dala, a Syrian student originally from Idlib, who studied with him at the Lebanese University. But Dala cannot provide answers to overriding structural instabilities; rather, at the time of writing, they are falling together into new degrees of debt-ridden uncertainty.

Back to the point: there were always high levels of self-awareness involved in shopping trips. Our outings to market carried the explicitly stated aim that we would find things that “could’ve been bought in Hamra” [an important commercial area of Beirut], that look, and often using the English terms, “classy”; and certainly not “cheap.” In this regard, Haytham’s purchase of the red chinos was a triumph; his trousers did look, at least to me, as if he could have bought them from Hamra Street’s plush glass-fronted H&M. Of course, that also means they could have been from any H&M in the world. But it is in contexts like this that I think asking how far Haytham or Abdullah are actually ‘duped’ by the logics of consumer capitalism — with its correspondent obsession with the ‘image’ and the ‘individual’ — is a generative line of inquiry: are they submitting? Or aren’t Haytham and Abdullah actually, and knowingly, ‘resisting’ socio-symbolic markers that would otherwise designate them as just more “Syrian workers/refugees”?

As foreshadowed, I think the answer falls between submission and resistance. That is, by literally fashioning themselves, Haytham and Abdullah connect, in a more or less conspicuous way, to certain visions of Beirut that materialised in consumer culture, leisure activity, ‘style’ and the pursuit of women, that is the behaviour expected of shabāb but not kibār. That passing as Lebanese is conceivable is due to Syrians sharing phenotypical and linguistic (but not dialectic) commonalities with the host community; therefore, it is precisely small differences — what Freud (2004) called ‘the narcissism of small difference’ — in ‘dress,’ ‘accent’ or ‘behaviour’ that come to acquire sometimes obsessive attention to detail.

This situation isn’t too far removed from that described by anthropologist Ana Nga Longva in her ethnography of Kuwait City. Here too Arab “ethnic relationships cannot then be expressed in the terms of race relationships in the way that they may between, for example, blacks and whites in the USA, South Africa, or the Caribbean” (1997:114). Such surface variations — often awarded dangerous credence elsewhere — are so negligible that the stratification of Kuwaiti Arab society is almost entirely and unambiguously along socio-cultural characteristics. In the absence of any ‘racial distinctions,’ other identity signifiers come to the surface. Longva’s argument hits too on dress code as a key to understanding the kinds of meaning informing daily action in Kuwait, and clothing, she argues, plays a major role in ethnonational signalisation (Longva 1997: 116). Rather than the ‘style’ of clothes in
Beirut, in Kuwait City, it is the dishdasha, a long white garment, and headdress. It is, with few exceptions, worn by all Kuwaiti men (ibid). Modernisation and the introduction of Western fashion led have resulted in the decline of the dishdasha. Outside of the Gulf similar forms of dress, though often not white in colour, are widely associated with the old, the poor and the traditional, rather than the educated middle class. In the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula, its use remains quite persistent.

Longva locates a “curiously strong sense among foreigners that the wearing of the dishdasha was a uniquely Kuwaiti preserve” (ibid). There are no explicit rules that limit its use or demanded that only Kuwaitis wear it, yet young men systematically donned it between the ages of 18 and 20. Why, then, did Arab expatriates not, so to speak, ‘follow suit?’

For some non-Kuwaiti Arabs, Longva suggests the wearing of traditional dress is locked into prejudices regarding the fallāḥīn of their native lands; for others, “It was a vague reaction against the unwritten norm that kept the use of the dishdasha exclusively for Kuwaitis” (ibid: 119). The public use of this dress style by any person from outside the Gulf was typically viewed as ‘pretending.’

The dishdasha is an eye-catching symbol of masculine Kuwaitiness, but Longva’s non-Kuwaiti Arab participants were unwilling to wear it, despite its relationship to social privilege and power. In Beirut, however, there isn’t a comparable ‘native dress,’ rather, it is all ‘Western fashion,’ vaguely defined but with variance found in nuance, in the “style” of trouser, the cut or branding of t-shirts, or the ‘quality’ of clothing. As one 30-year-old male Beirut artist summed it up to me:

I can always spot a Syrian, even if they’re from the middle or upper class because their clothes and their style is about 10 years behind ours. For example, you know those ‘breakdancers’ who are always near the beginning of Hamra? They’re all Syrian. Why? Because they’ve got tight jeans tucked into boots, and they use too much hair gel. It’s really that simple […] And I mean come on, who does ‘breakdancing’ anymore anyway?

But what seemed obvious to the artist was not always obvious to me, or at least not in the same way, a dishdasha would contrast with a cut of jeans. So, perhaps it is actually this lack of native dress, this real potential closeness that negates any worries about “pretending” and instead drives an obsession with seemingly minimal ‘tells’ and draws the shabāb ever further into devoting such time and financial resources on their image.

EATING WITH YOUR HANDS
To “look Lebanese” is to “not look Syrian” and thus ‘style’ and ‘fashion’ appeal in their capacity to award access to spheres of class/nationality/race-based privileges, or just to pass without difficulty, in contexts where one’s clothing and the like act as recognisable signs to what was understood to be a rather hostile host population.

This understanding emerges from actual dangers that have confronted the men in Beirut. For example, the suspicions that Haytham and Abdullah invoked when travelling around areas controlled by Lebanese political forces aligned with the Syrian regime. In chapter three I detailed how Haytham was detained trying to visit his girlfriend on Valentine’s Day in Dahieh. And these actual experiences pair with the constant circulation of stories and rumours involving various militia seizing men’s mobile phones, extorting cash from market stall vendors, and general interrogation and humiliation in the streets.

Given these threats, there appeared an additional set of social relations generated through consumer goods: it is not only that Haytham wished to own chinos, to ‘consume them’ through the exclusion of others, but he also desired those chinos precisely because of their surface similarity to clothing owned by other higher status men; other people are also ‘consuming them,’ and those other men are less likely to face such difficult encounters on Beirut’s streets. Or, as simple as the old cliche would have it, Haytham is “keeping up with the Joneses”; but of course, the Joneses in Beirut could also smash your television set, confiscate your phone, or subject you to several hours of questioning.

In this sense, the social relations woven through the object can be expanded further to encompass the semiotic role played by clothing in legitimising and naturalising higher status men’s access to spheres of privilege. Is participating in ‘fashion trends’ not a beguiling prospect precisely because of an inherent capacity for inclusion through exclusion?

Returning to our shopping trip, Haytham was not interested in the second-hand shapeless jeans, battered leather jackets, oversized dress shirts or cheap cotton t-shirts that dominate a market that’s come to cater for Syrian labour. These are the clothes worn by the likes of Khalid or Jaber, older men, kibār, who, to quote Haytham, “don’t care about fashion.”

Haytham was, as with most of my informants, perfectly aware of what ‘looking Syrian’ means, and seemingly seeking to subvert this though a material-symbolic means of excluding himself from one set of associations, and including himself in others. Graeber (2011) ends his critique by re-stating that ‘consumption’ masks how human social life is really always about the “mutual production of human beings”; but, in stratified, patriarchal, racist and classist society is it really appropriate to look for signs of this ‘mutual production’?
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I think not and that it is better to look critically at how consumption in these contexts generates social inclusion only via exclusion, that is to say, conspicuous consumption means the non-mutual production of humans.

A few weeks prior to the day at the market I’d experienced another informative moment of identity reflexivity. It began after we’d finished stuffing ourselves with Mahmoud's cooking; Khalid, one of the kibār, looked across to my side of the room and exclaimed, “Philip! My god! You didn’t make a mess.”

Gradually I’d become accustomed to kneeling with the guys in a circle collectively eating from the central plate, our hands as cutlery. The kitchen was stocked with knives and forks, but the men preferred to eat this way, to eat, as they’d claim “like we’re in the village.” When I’d probe further around why this is preferable, the response was usually just that they were “protecting/conserving tradition.” This tradition was even occasionally reflected upon as even being essentially about forms of solidarity or egalitarianism; Khalid, for instance, explained to me that all of us sharing water from a single jug, intermittently passed around the circle, shows “there’s no difference between us.” On another occasion, Shadi mused, “Beirutis would die if they saw us eating like this. They already think we’re backwards/regressive.”

Haytham asked me if I tell my Lebanese or foreign friends about how I eat with my hands; I replied, “yes.”

“And what do they say!?” he fired back.

For a novice, eating with hands demands a particular level of bodily discipline, so at first when I’d scoop up the chicken and rice it always resulted in a terrible mess. But finally I’d done it, and even managed to impress Khalid.

“Hala inta mustashriq haqīqī!” [you’re a real orientalist now] he shouted.

After tea and a cigarette, he caught my attention once more and continued the theme, “you know”, he said, “if you keep coming here, eating with us, playing football, eventually, you need to start dressing Syrian too!” Khalid was getting an idea. “Ok, come next door, I’ll give you some clothes.”

He reached for some baggy blue jeans and a white dress shirt and, excitedly, told me to wear them. He returned to the living room; dutifully I carried out his orders. Stepping back into the living room, I was met with an instantaneous burst of laughter.

Haytham decided I could be from Aleppo and then, mocking my British-accented Arabic, started listing off my usual semi-structured interview questions, “How much land do you have?”; “Did you go to any protests?”, “Are you still able to farm?”
It was all amusing but also very instructive: these men were evidently aware of what ‘dressing’ or ‘eating’ like ‘a Syrian’ means and how it is achieved; they’re also not ignorant regarding the symbolic violence and degrees of racism that run through popular Lebanese discourse and media representations, phenomena that render their practices and traditions “alien,” “backwards,” “other” or as that artist above put it, “10 years behind.” Against this, it is perhaps not surprising that the shabāb would, at times, express a desire, and display a capacity, to distance themselves from ‘negative’ associations, to subvert, on the level of the image, these manifestations of stratified cultural and symbolic capital, despite evidently limited economic resources. And there is plainly a difference between “maintaining traditions” in the type of food consumed and the manner in which one does that consuming in the private household, versus how one dresses and acts in the public street.

This capacity to switch, subvert or just play with codes, rather than ‘being subject to them,’ might be read by anthropologists as yet another example of ‘everyday resistance’ or perhaps with more nuance as, ‘everyday negotiation.’ Consumption desires, of course, exist in correspondence to and emerge within, the class system under capitalism. Or, as, Michael Brown writes, “All social life entails degrees of dominance and subordination, which mirror the hierarchy intrinsic to the family and to the socialisation process itself” (1996: 224). But, he goes on to caution:

Resistance to such power can no more explain the myriad forms of culture than gravity can explain the varied architecture of trees. The task of cultural anthropology remains, as it always has been, to illuminate how human beings use their emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and material resources to thrive in a range of social settings (ibid).

‘Resistance to power,’ if isolated from a more dynamic reading of history and society, perhaps can’t explain ‘myriad forms of culture’ if, by that, one really means that we don’t know why these chinos and not those denim shorts. However, as an analytical starting point, it rightly pushes us to illuminate how human ‘thriving’ under capitalism, in any circumstance, difficult or otherwise, necessarily and unavoidably relies on the degradation of others. In other words, when Haytham picks out clothing associated not, in his mind, with fellow Syrian male labourers but with an urban Lebanese male bourgeois it is true he is, at a minimum, ‘negotiating’ — the easy labelling of his class position through acts of consumption, performance, and self-cultivation. But these acts, at the same time, inevitably also (re-) produce these same socio-symbolic markers of stratification. Yet, beyond even this — or
rather, ‘below’ this — comes the realisation of the ‘material resource’ itself. The mass-produced cheap red chinos, designed to mimic mainstream labels, came into existence only off the back of labour exploitation elsewhere. The label reads, “made in Bangladesh,” that is to say, made by a highly feminised global garment production regime. Whatever ‘everyday resistance’ Haytham’ carved out — or even just his capacity to navigate a material-symbolic system so as to ‘maintain face’ with his secret Lebanese girlfriend — arises through an international gendered division of labour that, in Bangladesh, has itself fed the transformation of peasants into a highly exploitable insecure industrial proletariat (See Kumar 2015).

In other words, if conceptually detached as exclusive categories, ‘gender’ and ‘consumption’ mystifies base disparities; it is critical that one not loses sight of how men’s masculinity ultimately reinforces these diversities of hierarchies (Broad and Kaufman 1994). What masculinities do, as socio-symbolic resources, is furnish men with interpersonal power mechanisms that, when enacted, (re)validate multiple stratifications. These gendered social practices expressed here through consumption practices and acts of self-fashioning, are produced in relation not only to femininities but also to working and upper-class masculinities (Pyke 1996; Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 1993; Messner 1989, 1992). The masculine consumption desires, fantasies and performances described here are better read as the material-symbolic matter of, and therefore matter for, stratifications in so far as they’re indications of an individual’s ‘cultural capital’, i.e. how these masculine ‘tastes’ correlate with particular educational levels, family circumstances and access to economic resources (Bourdieu 1984). Processes of class formation resound in masculine expectations. As these men come to reproduce and refine their own self-image, it is clear that any space imagined open for ‘navigation’ let alone ‘resistance’ is, in reality, rather narrow when considered in a wider class context.

Fashion and style are an important preoccupation for the shabāb given the signals these objects send about themselves, about who they are, and what they’re not. These are ‘props’ in the sense that they allow for more convincing performances that facilitate desired forms of social recognition. Abdulla’s iPhone was seen to have opened a connection with a Lebanese girl on a bus, Haytham’s chinos create the impression that he is connected to style, fashion and hence the image-driven urban lifestyle of Beirut. But at the same time whatever ‘thriving’ these men have located by tapping into an image and consumer-orientated masculinity also simultaneously reproduces other constraining socio-symbolic systems that they are trying to navigate. Hence at other times these “freedoms” are dismissed as “not
serious,” and are understood as a reason Lebanese people are tricked into “thinking they’re free.”

But is the time devoted to these activities not also a response to the increasing inability of these young men to imagine “deeper freedoms,” i.e. the freedom located in structural stability, ideas of working class sovereignty, security and patriarchy? Is this attention to objects and images really just another example of what’s been generally called the ‘crisis of masculinity’?

ARE THE SHABĀB IN CRISIS?
Advocates of economic liberalism maintain that free markets promote greater ‘individual socially mobility’ than fixed forms of social organisation, i.e. the ‘feudal’ or ‘caste’ systems. Scholars of consumption, gender and class have since replied that seemingly ‘individual’ desires, tastes and values work to limit, or promote, an individual’s potential for ‘social mobility,’ as well as discursively justifying and naturalising existing forms of unequal economic distribution (Schor and Holt 2000). The British sociologist Paul Willis’s book Learning to Labour (1981) is a classic in this genre. Willis shows how an anti-academic anti-authority culture of working class lads in an English comprehensive school might, at first, appear an imminent critique of power, capital, and bourgeois mystification, but ultimately these norms are shown conducive, and readily transferable, to the masculine expectations of industrial labour. Yet, during Willis’s time, and in his place of writing, that is, middle England of the 1970s, these boys, for the most part, had traditional working-class employment upon which they could rely. A comparatively higher degree of socio-economic security was still located on the factory floor, and ostensibly it was this structural reality that filtered down to inform the relative stability of the working and middle-class masculine culture he describes. Britain’s welfare safety nets were largely still in place. The contrast with Britain reminds that it too has undergone, like Syria, ‘reforms’ that functioned to hollow out the state. In Syria, this economic agenda further distorted along and simultaneously reinforced, patrimonial class-sect identities. Damascus initiated a series of reforms that coupled the removal of import restrictions with the stripping of subsidies and basic commodity price capping, contributing to the destruction of local production and agriculture in the face of global imports.

So how then does this ‘collapse of a future’ manifest itself into the lives of young Syrian workers in Beirut? And how do they react against or through this loss?
On a Sunday a few weeks after Haytham’s shopping trip, I stepped out of the shower into the adjoining kitchen in the two-room Sabra apartment, reached into my bag and slipped a small bottle of vodka into my back pocket.

A day earlier I was travelling by service across town and found myself in a rather familiar argument with the driver. “Look, I know the rules,” I said, my voice rising, “if you don’t say taxi when I get in, it’s a service, And that’s how it goes.” The driver enraged, slammed on the breaks, pulling abruptly to the side; he was about to begin his angry response when my mobile phone rang. The interruption proved a welcome break in the exchange. Without even glancing at the caller ID I hastily answered and heard the familiar voice of Adnan, Haytham’s cousin, and a co-resident in that Sabra apartment; he is a roadside billboard-installer originally from their small Deir Ezzor village along the Euphrates.

“Hi Philip, what’s up?” he asked.
“Everything’s fine Adnan, how are you?”
“I wanted to ask you, Philip, what do you think about bringing a bottle of vodka with you tomorrow, just a small one, we’ll drink it after football.”

His request took me back a little; I knew Adnan occasionally enjoyed drinking vodka energy drinks, but as far as I was aware it was always one of his clandestine pleasures, to which I was welcome to take part, but certainly not an activity I imagined he’d conduct in the presence of his kin or close village friends.

“It’s not a problem for me,” I replied. I was open to the men; they knew I drank, in fact, Adnan wasn’t the only guy who would occasionally join me for secret drinks along the seafront, down by the rocks, away from familiar eyes. The men were not wholly reliant on me as a drinking buddy, Abdullah, for example, when he found a new job in a white goods warehousing, became friends with a Lebanese Christian co-worker and with him he told me he’d “partake in his tradition” by which he meant downing beers.

“Look, see how secular we are?” said Abdullah, concluding that particular story.
“But are you sure nobody will mind?” I said, back on the phone to Adnan.
“It doesn’t bother me,” he replied. “My love, she has hurt me, she is marrying another. I drink to forget.”

We walked the short distance from the football ground to the apartment, climbing the external staircase, the men were laughing and joking about our victory, in spite of Adnan’s embarrassing fall and my own laziness on the pitch. We stepped inside, and everyone took their places around the circular ring of sofas. Here, we waited for our turns to shower and in
the mean time we would chat, light up cigarettes and go over the game’s highs and lows. I showered just after Haytham, who switched directly into his red chinos.

“I thought you were saving them,” I asked.

“I’m just trying them out!” he replied.

As usual, the television was on. And that particular evening it was tuned to X-Factor Arabia — an ever-popular talent contest. The men only ever give it intermittent attention though many would later download YouTube clips onto their phones, going on to ask me during the week if I’d seen some particularly creative, rude, or funny act, despite having nearly always been present when it played live during the weekend. Rather, the show served as background noise to the dinner and conversation that followed our match. Sometime later everyone decided they were thirsty, Adnan excused himself from the group and shouted for me to come help him with the orange juice.

I stepped into the kitchen, and he whispered, “have you got the vodka?” I pulled out the small bottle from my pocket.

“Ok, pour a drop in my glass.” I poured about a shot’s worth and, looking at it, Adnan decided, “That’s a lot” and emptied it into the sink.

He reached over and took the bottle from me; he must have added about teaspoon’s worth to his cup. Now I began to realise he was not, as I’d presumed, planning on drinking openly. Rather, we’d both know his cup had alcohol in it, but the other men would remain none the wiser. This was a very stealthy act of transgression indeed; done perhaps for my benefit, or perhaps for the sense of thrill Adnan felt breaking the code, albeit secretly, in front of kin, kibār and village friends.

“It’s a special orange,” he said, “do you want one?”

I was torn by the question, on the one hand, sensing an opportunity to strengthen my relationship with Abdul through illicit consumption, but on the other, I didn’t want to risk offending anyone. Yet also — and little did Abdul know, or, at least, little did he “officially know” — that sitting in the next room were a number of men who would also occasionally share a ‘secret’ drink with me; some even visit prostitutes; others maintain girlfriends; dance in nightclubs-cum-brothels and chase after Filipino, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi domestic workers. But it is true too that others would devote their free time to more earnest discussions of the revolutionary developments inside Syria, often picking fights with those who disagreed. These men — thuwwār — who, having committed to the armed struggle, returned to Beirut equipped with stories of military heroism and personal feats of bravery. Against all
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this flux there were those older men — kibār — who occupied, or tried their best to maintain, more traditional positions of structural authority over younger men.

So, with our ‘special orange’ in hand, we stepped outside to the apartment’s balcony. In reality, it is just a window ledge and a small concrete separation with about a foot of space along which to shimmy — it is always full, overloaded with washing lines extending out, blocking any view out over the camp. Yet, in the extremely confined apartment, with just two small rooms, one or two guys often would sit out on it, legs dangling over the edge, away from earshot. It was here Adnan told me a story of failed love.

He met Rawan in 2010, a year before he first came to Beirut. She was from a prominent family in the next village up from his on the Euphrates. At that time he was working on his father’s clothing stall, set up in a local market. In fact, Adnan still has the patter of a market vender; he is a quick-witted, confident sort of guy. And the way he tells the story is that she truly did love him; they’d been messaging each other for several months in 2010 when he first came to Beirut. He had snuck her a secret mobile phone that he’d managed to deliver to her through a cooperative cousin. In fact, during my time with these guys, I lost count of the number of phones that were secretly sent to Syria by some lovesick friend; Abdullah too is especially bad at this, often sending a newly acquired and costly phone directly to some girl he vaguely knew.

Adnan’s plan was a familiar one; he had come to Beirut to start making money, thereby bettering his circumstances and increasing the likelihood Rawan’s parents would consent to a future marriage. Disaster struck when Rawan’s mother found the phone and informed her father about what was going on. He disapproved of Adnan and claimed the match was inappropriate, that his family was not of the right social class for his daughter.

Adnan’s father had been arrested a few years earlier for running a smuggling operation between Iraq and Syria, and this had significantly damaged both his family’s reputation as well as its financial standing. From this, Adnan more recently reflected with irony about the dismantling of the Iraqi-Syria border, point out, half-jokingly, that if Islamic State had occupied the territory earlier, he would probably be married by now.

Adnan wasn’t entirely disheartened by his first ‘no’; initially, he hoped that given enough time working long hours in Lebanon, and sending remittances to his family and establishing his own savings, her father might yet have a change of heart. The day he telephoned asking to bring vodka was, sadly, the day Rawan’s cousin had sent him the worst possible WhatsApp message. He broke the news that Rawan had now become engaged to a significantly older, and considerably more established, local man. I asked Adnan why he
thought this had happened, and his answer hung on the context of the revolution. Had he been able, he mused, to move more frequently to and from Lebanon, to establish savings rather than just ‘existing’ in Lebanon, he might have stood a chance.

“Now we are just commodities; objects, like a thing. We’re exploited, and we just work to live,” he said.

These circumstances were seen as beyond Adnan control. There was a clear sense of powerlessness running through his narrative. He once saw before him a particular trajectory and he was convinced he’d follow it, moving from his days working in roadside signage to returning to Syria eventually, and marrying Rawan. After that, he was intent on opening up a clothes store at the local market.

Adnan’s story reveals the correspondence between an eroding material base — a base on which he once imagined he’d move his life toward the normative values surrounding a particular conception of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ [kibār] — and patriarchy. His time spent accumulating money through wage labour in Lebanon would, he thought, be transformed one day into the opening up of his own clothes shop, getting married and having children, i.e. leading to other forms of economic and social value. In contrast to his father’s riskier illicit avenues of money making, Abdul imagined he was choosing the safer, more stable option.

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The erosion of the material base for the structural stability of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is typically identified as one of the causes of the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity.’ Sociologists, working predominantly in Western societies, have identified the rise of alternative masculinities in relation to increasingly insecure labour, associated with ephemeral body images, fashions, consumer cultures and performances. As my young Syrian interlocutors find it hard even to imagine themselves moving into the position of the kibār, does this change what it means to be shabāb?

The ‘crisis of masculinity’ thesis is actually composed of two interlocking assertions: that men are facing a crisis from without and a crisis from within (Edwards 2006: 5-7). ‘The crisis from without’ builds upon the claim, or perception, that men are losing their formally stable positions of power and privilege within key institutions such as the family, workplace or education (i.e. structural positions). ‘The crisis from within’ concerns a related transformation in men’s experience; that is, an unstable shift concerning the socio-culturally defined positions of ‘men’ and what ‘maleness’ means engendering a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness or uncertainty assumed at the heart of contemporary gendered modes of
self-fashioning and self-identity (ibid: 6). The two positions are usually framed as ‘mutually informing and intersecting’ and are thought to correspond to such diverse processes as deindustrialisation, mechanisation, the feminisation of labour, a decline in masculine-valued manual work, the entrance of women into the workforce, the liberation of women and non-heteronormative sexualities, increasing precariousness across even middle class professions and men’s inability to live up to culturally valued social norms as ‘the breadwinner’ (ibid). These transformations are further assumed to inform such diverse negative and reactionary phenomena amongst men, such as supposedly increasing instances of alcoholism, education failure, domestic violence, divorce, suicide and violent crime.

Sociologists of gender have responded to this construction with a series of critiques targeting the general validity of a ‘crisis.’ Counter analyses maintain it is nothing new (e.g. Connell 2000b); that it is overstated or that masculinity is, itself, constituted as a crisis (Edwards 2006). Others have suggested that any general claim for the existence of such a ‘crisis’ ought to be limited by the fact that the majority of masculinity research has focused solely on men in the Western metropoles (e.g., Connell 2005a Kimmel 2004).

If Shadi is taken as a test case, then firstly it is accurate that his family exhibits a division of labour typical amongst my network of informants. His two brothers are now fighting while he labours abroad. His labour secures vital remittances for his family as they try to eke out an existence while internally displaced in Syria. Had the revolution not commenced, Shadi, as the youngest of the three, would likely have joined his brothers for work in Lebanon. His father once laboured in Beirut too, his extended family of uncles and cousins have a history of irregular migration across the border. Yet the early stages of the armed uprising, and the fact he’d not completed military service, meant it made the most sense for Shadi to avoid fighting, to leave the protest movement in which he’d initially participated, and instead join his cousin for work cleaning dishes in an upmarket restaurant. When Shadi reflected on this division, he would often stress his brother’s bravery and heroism along with his willingness toward self-sacrifice, but then he’d also frame his own labour as, itself, essential and that this was just the most rational arrangement, due to his own lack of military experience. But on a more structural level, one can already identify the types of transitions at the heart of this chapter, and it is these transitions that appear best suited to explain the intensified degrees of uncertainty and precariousness to which my informants are subjected. Shadi’s youth is being spent labouring abroad, once this might have established the financial foundations required for his eventual transition from shabāb to kibār, but if remittances move from saving to subsistence he is effectively now also subsidising a space
carved out for his brothers to fight, and in the act of rebelling, his brothers are gaining access to new forms of masculine/militarised prestige — as thuwwār — to which he himself is not privy. This also seemingly comes at the expense of his own short-term future, a future that is being exchanged for a long-term potential and a now disappearing future in whatever a post-revolutionary Syria might look like.

KŪFIYYAT AND AK-47s

“Who’s that?” I whispered to Abdullah, glancing across the kitchen into the adjoining room. It was early evening, late into the summer of 2012. The moment I stepped inside his Hamra apartment, he had grabbed my arm, pulling me aside to the kitchen area. My friend was in the midst of preparing an assortment of tea, maté and Nescafé for other men. Outside the temperature soared, but thankfully the guys had pooled money for a portable air-conditioning unit. While not as effective as its wall-mounted cousins, it still succeeded in bringing the temperature down in the already crowded apartment.

Abdullah’s confrontation with Ibrahim still was months off, his ‘guests’ from Deir Ezzor city were, at this point, still only an occasional annoyance. That day when I spotted an unfamiliar face, I presumed the man was connected somehow to Ibrahim. He sat cross-legged, his back leaning against the wall, his face swarthy, marked by the sun; probably a construction site labourer I thought. His jeans were blue, dotted with stains and he wore a simple black shirt; around his neck sat a scruffy brown and green kūfiyyah. This item of clothing marked him out as somewhat unusual — true, another one of Abdullah’s friends who was a Kurd would occasionally wear the red chequered variety, but otherwise this wasn’t common amongst the men.

“That’s Basim,” Abdullah answered, “he arrived just the other day.”

“Basim — you mean that’s your brother!? — the one who’s fighting in Syria? What’s he doing here?”

“Visiting me; I didn’t even know he was coming, or how long he’ll stay, or if he’ll go back. He’s undecided.”

Abdullah gave me a brief overview of the situation; his brother is a serious guy unlikely to approve of his pursuit of women, occasional drinking and the money he’d probably be seen as ‘wasting’ on clothes, hair softening creams, moisturisers and the like. Basim’s military role was in a mortar division; he had fought in a number of the battles waged between the regime and the opposition in the fight for Deir Ezzor city in the June/July 2012 confrontations. Abdullah told me that his decision to join an opposition outfit during the
armed stage of the uprising came in the wake of his own arrest and maltreatment at the hands of the local secret police. A familiar story.

After Abdullah had returned to Beirut, Basim would join the guys in the village for their small protest meeting on Friday. His name was recorded by what was presumed to be village-based secret police informants. As with most of these stories, it begins with a knock at the door in the middle of the night, proceeding to several days in detention with the forced handing over of his Facebook details and names of friends at the protest. His hand shows scarring from where he claimed to have been administered electric shocks. I’d seen similar injuries on a number of young men who were arrested in the early stages. The revealing of Basim’s bodily harm, and accompanying stories invoked a silence amongst the other men, who, if they did interject, would do so only to curse the regime loudly (see also Peteet 1994).

I stepped into the living room carrying a tray of teas. Basim looked up from the corner, immediately jumped to his feet, relieving me of the tray, and placed it down in the centre of the room. I reached out to shake his hand, making cursory introductions. Soon into the conversation it was clear that Abdullah was not his usual self, the mood felt different and with Basim’s presence, the often-flowing conversation narrowed to pleasantries and general comments over the Hollywood action film playing on the television.

“Let’s sit and smoke on the balcony,” I suggested, using one of my go-to plays to get us away from the television.

I stepped outside with Abdullah and Basim; Ibrahim got up to join us too. Naively I ask, “so, how’s the fighting?”

Basim described the hardships, the dangers, the friends he has seen killed and the day-to-day life at the front. Ibrahim, who usually only interrupted to turn topics to himself and his own achievements, remained uncharacteristically respectful. Noting this, and suspecting it was simply to do with Basim’s direct connection to the revolution, I later asked the guys what they think of him.

“He’s fighting for us,” Ibrahim says, “like my brother too, so for this I have respect.” Abdullah agreed. While it is true that a large section of the shabīb reported participating in the ‘peaceful’ uprising stage of the Syrian revolution, only a few stayed in Syria as these demonstrations transitioned into civil war. Participating in these ‘peaceful’ demonstrations can be read itself as a response to a certain sense of ‘crisis’ and ‘disempowerment’: it was an attempt, through political action, to regain control over one’s destiny, to re-assert oneself.

Those who remained and took up arms gained further access to ‘respect,’ for they were also tapping into longstanding ideals of heroic ‘military masculinity.’ Joining a rebel
battalion provided access to institutional identities and symbols that correspond with ideals of male aggression, emotional control, fitness, discipline, the willingness and possibility of deploying physical violence and self-sacrifice (Hinojosa 2010: 180 see also; Hockey 2005; Highgate 2001).

Basim ended up staying in Beirut only for a few days before he returned home, but even during those days Abdullah would privately bemoan his brother’s ‘lack of culture,’ his inability to get along in the city, his ‘simpleness.’ He was seemingly defining himself to me in contrast to the military masculine ideals by stressing his own education, urbanism, sophistication and acquisition of style instead. But all this appeared to me as really just a reaction to the thuwwār’s capacity to establish a connection to a transcendental ‘revolutionary cause,’ to appear more ‘manly,’ and seemingly upset established hierarchies, causing Abdullah to articulate his own self-image in contradistinction to his brother.

A week after Basim left, Abdullah and I went to pay an evening’s visit to Mohammed and Bilal, the guys from Idlib and residents of the construction site in Az Zarqā.

We stepped onto the site; I called out to alert the guys to our presence. Mohammed emerged first outside the breeze block shack.

“Welcome! Welcome! Philip.”

He was followed by a guy I didn’t recognise. Light-skinned, he had brown hair, green eyes, and a particularly scruffy physique.

“Hi,” I said, reaching across to shake hands.

“I’m Aziz,” he said.

We stepped inside, I opened the sugary fizzy drinks I’d brought, and Mohammed dealt out playing cards; we began a game. I turned to Aziz and asked him how long he has been in Lebanon. “Just arrived,” he replied.

Aziz knows Mohammed and Bilal from school. He hasn’t been doing much these past few months. Like them, he is also from Binnish — which was, at this point, a rebel stronghold. During the popular uprising, Aziz was travelling by bus between the city and his village; he had been helping a friend sell fruit when suddenly they hit a regime checkpoint, he was, along with the other travellers, pulled aside and made to swear an oath to Bashar. It was an exercise in domination and humiliation, for this area of Syria was apparently known for being active in the protest movement. Aziz swallowed his pride, doing as he was instructed. Months went by — the uprising became increasingly militarised — and one day he returned home, walked into his bedroom, and saw a Kalashnikov on his pillow. His father put it there.
Aziz told me his father is a drunk and wears a long scraggly beard. This beard had raised suspicion the previous day when he himself was stopped at a checkpoint, interrogated for being, presumably, an Islamist. Mohammed laughs and tells me his response to questioning was probably just, “How can I be a fundamentalist? I’m drunk!”

But Aziz didn’t want to fight; it was his father who’d been simmering with resentment over his son’s humiliation and then his own harassment. This is somewhat exceptional as the men whom worker-rebels would identify as kibār were usually thought to be more likely to express antipathy toward the uprising. They belonged to the generation that could “remember Hama” — the 1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising that resulted in thousands killed. Kibār were thought to be more opposed to the revolution’s armed direction.

At the time of writing, Abdullah’s former household had become completely split over the emergence of the Islamic State. The men classified as kibār, Jaber, and Khalid, refuse even to engage with the shabāb. They won’t debate it anymore.

Returning to the point, Aziz, who had not completed military service, barely knew how to fire a rifle. So his response was to leave, to cut off all contact, and to search for work in Beirut. No one questioned the decision or viewed it as a sign of weakness. In fact, upon arrival in Beirut, Mohammed and Bilal quickly introduced Aziz to Beirut. That evening we walked over to a large local Western-style supermarket where the boys bought whiskey and XXL. Aziz was reluctant at first, but Bilal quickly added, “Try it; you’re in Beirut now.” In contrast to Adnan’s ‘secret orange,’ things were always seemingly much more open on the construction site.

What Aziz and Basim’s stories illustrate is that while there is much value vested in being thuwwār, access to it remains determined by specific life circumstances. No one would have expected Aziz to fight, other than his drunkard father. Basim, Abdullah’s brother, however, had completed military service, had been arrested, and his fighting was seen as appropriate. And in fighting, and as in shuhadā’ commemoration, the engagement of an individual in the revolutionary cause acts to disrupt and distort existing social hierarchies and relations.

For the most part, the men who were identified as kibār were reluctant to discuss the revolution with me, though they were still occasionally deferred to, given their assumed knowledge of the labour market in Lebanon, structural position as the ‘connectors’ between new labourers and potential employers, and traditional knowledge concerning land, labour and work back home.
My questions regarding farming practices in the village would meet the refrain, “Philip, what do I know, ask Jaber!”

Jaber, like his brother Khalid, is in his 40s, and both had returned to Lebanon years before the uprising began. Both found themselves back in Beirut, sharing an apartment with friends and relatives many years their junior. In chapter one we saw that Khalid’s hasty return to Syria, a decision that ultimately proved ill-fated, his desire to escape his wage-labour by returning to work the land, proved impossible. Khalid was lucky; he came back from his misadventure just before the Lebanese-Syrian free movement of labour agreement was nullified through the introduction of a work sponsorship system in December 2014. Given such failures by other men to regain status, it is little wonder that increasingly these forms of authority were also framed in the past.

“Jaber used to know all the foremen who’d get you a job. But you know, it is different now from when he first came to Beirut [in the early 2000s],” Abdullah stressed to me, just out of earshot of Jaber.

Abdullah continued to explain how it was that Lebanese bosses over recent years gained access to an increasing surplus supply of Syrian labour, all searching for work. It appears that whatever ‘prestige through wasta [connections]’ once open to older, more respected workers, in securing jobs for friends and family, has significantly narrowed. Work discipline itself, once achievable through traditional pre-existing kin or social relations, has now seemingly been replaced with what my informants experienced as an all the more effective ‘mode of control’: their precariousness.

“It’s like this, if I don’t work hard enough he’ll just tell me, ‘there’s hundreds like you, get out’” Abdullah said, illustrating the point.98

CONCLUSION
It was late June 2015 when my phone bleeped with the arrival of a WhatsApp voice recording. I pressed play.

“Hi, Philip. How are you? … so, I’m getting married in two weeks; I want to invite you to the wedding, please bring guests, some beautiful foreign girls you know”99

“Abdullah!? You’re marrying Dala! Congratulations. Do you really want me to bring foreign girls…surely not?” I send back.

“Thanks, Philip,” he said, deliberately ignoring my question, “The wedding, well it’s a difficult subject. I need money for it; so all my friends are pooling money and lending me some — so we can still do it.”
CHAPTER FIVE

Abdullah’s marriage — described in the introduction to this thesis — can be read here as an attempt to salvage the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ once associated with men as they transition from shabāb to kibār. His remaining attachment to shabāb performance, and that performances linkages with heteronormative patriarchy, was nonetheless briefly summoned by reference to my foreign female friends, who often found themselves constructed as objects of Syrian rebel-worker desire.

Yet Abdullah, who had recently lost his father to cancer, was, at the point of this conversation, the primary provider for his mother, sisters and even his former resistance fighter brother, Basim. In late 2013 Basim had given up on front-line fighting and has since been unable to secure peaceful work in Syria. Abdullah’s entire family are internally displaced. Basim would prefer to return to Lebanon but with the implementation of the labour sponsorship system, he is now not able to return so easily.

Just after his engagement, Abdullah lost his job. He had been working alongside his wife-to-be in a homeware supply wholesaler based in Dahieh. It was, in fact, Dala who secured the job for him. She is still working there. Abdullah, however, was fired. He told me that he had be going around the warehouse floor trying to organize secretly his fellow workers so that they might find a means to demand better conditions, wages, and force the company to pay to sponsor its workers. During breaks or simply in passing he had been spreading the idea that they had to do something, and soon. But his fellow workers, he tells me, all kept responding that they could not risk it, that they have families to look after, and can’t jeopardise their remittance flows to Syria.

“What did you reply to them exactly,” I asked.

“I said, ‘how can you even feed your family on these wages?’ he replied, but they don’t care.”

In fact, a co-worker — so Abdullah claims — let slip to the bosses what he was doing. Abdullah was immediately fired.

“There is no solidarity anymore,” he said, repeating his favourite refrain whenever schemes like this went wrong.

At the time of writing, it appears much of the material basis on which the transition from shabāb to kibār was built has now eroded. What this potentially means is that ‘hegemonic masculinity’ has, for these men, become something only possible on the level of image and pure performance. Yet for some a structural shift in their positions has also still occurred, Abdullah is at the pinnacle of his family in the sense that it is his remittance flows
that are essential, but these wages are simply not enough for him, his wife or his family back in Syria to subsist on in any stable manner.

During Abdullah’s first Ramadan as a newlywed, he told me how depressed he was getting; he desperately wanted to invite his friends over for the iftar meal.

“I pick up my phone and start messaging them,” he told me, “but as soon as I’ve written it, I delete it and don’t press send. I know we can’t really afford it. I’d be embarrassed about what little food I can offer.”

Abdullah on his wedding day did look the part, here was a 26-year-old man transitioning into his newly married life. But without the material basis on which to build this life, his matrimony appears to have instead contributed even further to his own precariousness.

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This chapter has described some of the transformations occurring in masculine self-fashioning amongst Syrian rebel-workers in Beirut. As the uprising has collapsed into a civil and proxy war, many of these men face the prospect that social reproduction will not be carried out in Syria but in Lebanon. Young men try to build lives for themselves in the city, but this building requires the navigation of other potentially restricting structures of classism. In this struggle, consumer goods, such as iPhones and sports gear became props to performance and image. Yet in the acting of these performances themselves, rebel-workers reproduce the socio-cultural manifestations of the class structure and patriarchy. These men know what it means to appear like “a Syrian worker.” Understandably some seek to avoid this but in so doing must reproduce the logics of discrimination based on sight.

As these men grew older, some, like Abdullah, tried to replicate a life that would in a different time have begun back home in Syria, but this life was based on an increasingly fleeting image. Indeed, as Abdullah said of Jaber, ‘he used to know all the foremen…”

With this kibār identity threatened, the emergence of thuwwār can be understood as, in some sense, a reaction to a feeling of emasculation that emerged in line with a decline in men’s capacity to live up to the expectations of patriarchal culture. Rather than challenging patriarchy, the demands of the uprising documented in chapter two represented more an attempt to rebuild its foundation. Yet, with the now total destruction of socio-economic life in Syria, the actions of the thuwwār have not resulted in a return to stability but have further plunged their homeland into deep uncertainty and precariousness. The final chapter turns to
the role of political theories in accounting for this state of affairs and how what might be labelled ‘conspiracy theory’ responds to these senses of guilt, responsibility, and loss.

92 An edited version of this chapter was published as, Red Chinos, Resistance, & Masculinities in Crisis (Proudfoot 2014)

93 ‘Patriarchy’ is used understood here to mean literally rule of fathers’ and is used in this thesis to identify those social structures of male control over women, as well as the domination of older, higher status males over younger, lower status men. ‘Hegemonic masculinity,’ by contrast, is concerned more with more diffuse aspects of culture and society that act, so it’s argued, to re-construct, legitimise and naturalise this male order. The concept sprung from feminist theory and Marxism, via Gramsci. For the latter, ‘hegemony’ is the means through which bourgeois rule finds its justifications and reproductions in sociocultural life; that is, in universities, the media, the family and the like

R. W. Connell expanded the term to incorporate gender, and thus ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ came to designate how patterns of practices, and not just ‘role or identity expectations,’ facilitate and re-produce patriarchal social structures (e.g 1982, 1983)

94 The actual voices of the women with whom my informants claimed to be having relationships are, for the most part, absent. This is down to issues of access, aside from brief encounters after much insistence, I was mostly kept separate from these aspects of my informants’ lives; therefore I’m necessarily limited to what men say about women. Nonetheless, when Abdullah married his wife Dala, in the summer of 2015 I have found myself with increasing access to Syrian rebel-worker family life. This data is still being collected so will have to wait for a future project.

95 The British film, “The Full Monty” (1998) is a great example of this shift; the film’s story revolves around a group of unemployed steel workers who suddenly find new meaning in their lives by performing as strippers, self-esteem is regained as men deploy their bodies to “satisfy the female gaze.” And thus from a masculine identity secured through ‘work’ to one that hangs on the ‘image’. (Farrel 2003).

96 In fact, the most significant assault against ‘patriarchy’ was carried out under the Ba’th party. In its early days, the party aimed to abolish the ‘feudal, tribal and patriarchal’ (Rabo 1996: 161). Gains were made, women increased their share of parliamentary seats and their presence in state sector employment grew; yet, their burdens increased concomitantly given that they were still expected to carry out domestic tasks. After the Islamic uprisings in the 1980s, culminating in the Hama massacre, president Assad was understood to have offered concession to the Islamists — there were no renewed efforts to institute a civil personal laws (ibid: 170). This was a concession for the men who refused to “relinquish control over women ‘in private – that is, within the family. Women who had been victims of public violence could continue to be victimized by male ‘private’ inequalities or violence” (ibid: 171).

97 It can be argued that the WhatsApp platform is particularly suited to flirtatious exchange thanks to its ‘time and received stamps’ on messages and a ‘last seen online’ notification. What this means is that the sender is provided with information when the message has been read, signified by two blue ticks. Nonetheless, one can ‘opt out’ of relaying this information, but if one does so then the information is not provided with regards to recipients either. The result is that sent, seen and response times contribute toward the flirtatious dance.

98 Yet in spite of this when in late 2013 Abdullah lost his job on a construction site it was still Jaber who stepped up to secure part-time work in the gibson board company with which he has a long standing relationship. Jaber, in that moment, finding a little space still to play the wāsil (connected person) for work. But aside from these moments, the older men occupied an ambiguous position in the household

99 Nina is a blonde British journalist friend who often, through my Facebook account, found herself the object of my friends’ affections.
Figure 3.0 [They killed you Hamza our lion cub; you awake in us Hamza the Lion]
Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3 [We are All Khalid Said]
Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5
Figure 4.0 [Men: What style beard do you have? / Girls: What [style] do you prefers?]
I’ll tell you how I know [Islamic State] are not real Muslims and are actually regime gangs. Look at what happens when they capture someone: they cut their heads straight off. This is not Islam; [the regime] want people to think that this is Islam. In a [genuine] Islamic state there should at least be a trial and a judge; there are laws for this. Who cuts off heads like this? The regime and their gangs — not Muslims.

- Shadi

INTRODUCTION
How is it that Shadi came to know the Islamic State was created by the Syrian regime, that they’re not ‘real Muslims’ but in reality a ‘false flag organisation’ designed to discredit the uprising?

To answer this, I describe here the context and substance of ‘conspiracy-making’; in so doing aiming to avoid analyses which treat such phenomena as ‘paranoia’ or ‘gullibility’ maintained through ‘confirmation bias’ (e.g. Brotheron 2015; Keeley 1999; Pipes 2006). Instead, by describing the socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances that give rise to, and interact with, conspiracy theory, I ask how these theories relate to and interact with, ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ more generally. What exactly is driving their popularity? And might some of these theories even be correct?

One approach to answering these questions would be first to sidestep the ‘truth value’ of Shadi’s theory and not to engage on an epistemic level. Indeed, ethnographers, when confronted with similar phenomena elsewhere, have tended to limit their framings of informant ideas to “explanatory devices” with a “use value” in apparently “render[ing] meaningful and/or critique[ing] the murky world of political power” (see Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 73, e.g. Sanders and West 2003; Silverstein 2002). But, as Pelkmans and Machold (2011), suggest, a heavy-handed functionalist rendering surely misses a great deal, such as the social milieu and dynamic interaction through which theories are articulated, transformed and put to more diverse uses than simply, ‘understanding the world.’ On top of this, to frame ‘conspiracy-making’ as akin to a ‘proto-scientific mode of comprehending certain truths about power in a vastly complicated world’ risks simultaneously reproducing elite positions and existing distributions of epistemological power (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 73).
Indeed, the theories of political conspiracies outlined here seemed to generate social effects that went beyond ‘understanding.’ In one sense, conjectures such as Shadi’s helped to retain and reinforce the outlined bifurcation of ‘al-sha’b’ [the people] and ‘al-nizām’ [the regime] doing so in spite of increasingly complicated splintering. But aside from that, telling a good conspiracy story seemed to express and vindicate the originators’ ‘cultural and social capital’ (Bourdieu 1986). In other words, colourful theory building enhanced social standing. It is in this light that I came to see conspiracy-telling as a parlour game, a debating club where the victor is the one who most convinces the previously duped. Finally, the impact of many conspiracies seemed not a banal ‘understanding of the world,’ but actually a (mis)recognition of exploitation via the mystification of base socio-economic structures. Theories that meshed together disparate forces into the category ‘al-nizām,’ thanks to presumed sectarian identity, and regardless of an individual’s relationships with structures of governance, appeared, in practice, a late stage mutation, or even degradation, of revolutionary subjectivity and the populist logics discussed in the preceding chapters.

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“But are you ready for this?” asked a taxi driver, one late summer evening in 2013. The sun was setting and deep orange light flooded down Beirut’s streets, a warning to Abdullah, Haytham and myself as to just how late we were for the regular Sunday football match in Sabra, the Palestinian camp. It was an important game; we were to play a local team that typically outperformed us. But as the conversation in the car landed on conspiracy, our driver, obviously rather excited, responded by slowing down the vehicle, wanting to ensure he made the time to develop each and every point.

“What do you think of September 11th — It was an inside job right? …” he asked, “are you Christian? … cross yourself. I’m going to tell you the truth; maybe you won’t believe me but, on that day, no Jews went to work!”

“Oh come on!” I said, “really … you’re going to tell me you think that’s true; it’s such an old one. I know it. Now you’re going to say to me that the Israeli embassy called them up? I bet you learned about this on the internet or something?”

“Dude! I’m telling you it’s true. I swear to god.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s a famous one. But in reality, a few hundred Jews died that day and amongst them some Israelis.”

“But it was an inside job. What about them wars afterwards, Americans wanted war. They just faked the records. You think they can’t fake records?” our driver concluded.
Yet the argument did not conclude, I returned to the point, stressing that just because the attacks were likely not a direct result of American internal action does not mean we can not say 9/11 was not a beneficial catalyst to American interests more generally (e.g. Risen 2014). In fact, I suggested to our driver that the entirety of the war on Iraq is ‘a conspiracy’ and this conspiracy is a necessary foundation for explaining the current mess enveloping Syria. Abdullah chimed in at various points to agree with me, though previously I had heard him articulate similar theories to our driver’s. I felt then that his interjections were more an act of solidarity with me. Moreover, when we talked about the argument with the other men later that evening, he agreed I’d done well. The driver, he concluded, was clearly ‘ignorant.’

Admittedly, I was also playing at impressing Abdullah. By this point I’d realised that whenever a guy jumps into conspiracy-making and succeeds in credibly dismissing a tall tale, this was akin to ‘a score,’ and with that came some degree of respect, redeemable when the next political-conspiratorial argument broke out.

Conspiracies are, in short, fun. Particularly successful interventions like the above were often followed typically by rather amusing whispers, be they vocal and digital, like, “That driver was simple, the Lebanese… ‘mā ‘andun ‘aqel’ [they don’t have reason].”

Conspiracy-making as a game relates to one of this chapter’s main contentions. Given the centrality of ‘argument truth and verification’ to the game, it would feel disingenuous to sidestep the issue of veracity and claim that ‘truth’ doesn’t matter in relation to ‘function,’ or to take some ‘ontological turn’ and argue these theories result from my informants’ ‘radical alterity’ (Graeber 2015b).

The constitution of what is ‘fact’ and what is ‘conspiracy’ in SWANA often seems particularly contested, and a contestation that expands at moments in which various socio-political orders begin to rupture. The tempo of conspiracy-making in SWANA should, from the outset, be read related to the fact that conspiracies actually do happen and in this region they happen a lot, from the foundational Sykes-Picot agreement (see Barr 2012; also Visser 2013 Provence 2002) to the claim ‘Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction’ (Cockburn 2007), through the multiplex CIA plots that have destabilized and dethroned progressive leaders (Wilford 2013) ending, in more recent years, with a region-wide imposition of neoliberal policy actively working against pro-poor economic development (Kadri 2014; 2015).

Partially informed by this context, the Arabic word ‘mu’āmara’ — usually translated into the English ‘conspiracy’ — does not carry all the same negative meanings or connotations. Making mu’āmarāt (conspiracy plots) is a more explicitly mainstream
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phenomenon. In the Western context, the word ‘conspiracy’ can evoke the image of ‘the right-wing nut’ hammering out ‘New World Order’ pamphlets deep in the American wilderness; whereas, in SWANA, a Syrian rebel-worker who is able to defend and convince others that his theory is the right one gains the reputation of an astute thinker. Thus — at least on the emic level — he does not display the ‘paranoid style’ more associated with conspiracy in the West (e.g. Hofstadter 2012; Walker 2014).

Given this context let us take Abdullah, Shadi and Haytham and the others as seriously here as I would do in person. Evidently, theories were not narrated to passive audiences, but to active contributors and interlocutors. Because of this, I shall say where I think they are going wrong, and why I believe they go wrong, but also point to where they appear to get quite a number of things right.

To set the scene let me first describe the intermingling of suspicion, conspiracy, and counter-conspiracy enveloping the Lebanese trash crisis of 2015. This was a crisis in which Syrian workers and refugees appeared generators, reproducers and objects of conspiratorial conjecture simultaneously. From this entry point, we can see how the state and the ruling class lacked the power to define roundly what fact is and what is fiction. Where there is a lack of authority to enforce ‘narrative stability,’ a host of alternative epistemic foundations for theory flourish. This point is further developed through the conspiracies spun by rebel-workers concerning Hezbollah’s entrance into the Syrian uprising.

Steps were taken between what could be termed ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ conspiracies initiate obscuring processes of essentialism and boundary-making (Grey 2010: 5). ‘Micro conspiracy’ refers to theories that purport to identify specific ‘hidden positions’ or actions behind ‘official statements.’ If the United States officially blames faulty intelligence for the suggestion that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction [WMDs], then micro conspiracy answers, ‘well there really was a secret agreement to fabricate evidence in order to justify a war aimed at securing Anglo-American oil interests.’

It is on this analytic plane, of secret deals, material interests, and hidden agents, that men like Shadi asserted theories that were often, at least hard to dismiss and, at times, defensibly accurate. In the context at hand, when Hezbollah initially denied their involvement in the Syrian uprising, rebel-workers insisted, correctly, that their militia had already been deployed.

‘Macro conspiracies,’ by contrast, attempt to weave together these plots into singular grand narratives in which certain unifying features of the proposed perpetrators are flagged and essentialised. ‘Macro conspiracy’ proposes other hidden or not so hidden commonalities
across the world’s rich and powerful; aside from being just rich and powerful they’re also all Stonemasons, Jews or space lizards (e.g. Ike 2008). Such macro theories interpret immiseration and pauperisation as resulting from some group’s secret grip that forever stacks the deck in their favour. Macro conspiracies move beyond material realities to forms of essentialism and exclusion: this is where I’d insist rebel-workers were ‘going wrong’ but ‘going wrong’ in a way both (re-)productive and useful to the dominant power structure.

For example, when Abdullah at times apportioned blame for his family’s increasing impoverishment on an ‘exploitative Alawi regime,’ understood as an inherent Alawi (or Shia) tendency. Yet his family’s impoverishment is perhaps more accurately traced through systems of rural dispossession, displacement and capital accumulation: processes that have similarities right across the whole world wherever the neoliberal agenda has been imposed. Likewise, in the macro framework, Hezbollah’s intervention is shifted from a secret but tactical deployment to protect their nearby allies or supply lines, to one act in a larger play of international relations aimed at the establishment of Shia dominance over the Levant (cf. Helfont 2008; Proctor 2008). Critically, slippages between these two modes are common and structurally interlinked. This process of (mis)recognition and essentialisation emerges within a social context of competitive debate, where the veracity of a theory propounded is ensured through the narrator’s ability to form intriguing connections to other interlocking identities, experiences, and political disposition.

In the next two sections, we shall ask why these macro conspiracies were appealing and identify some of the assumptions on which Shadi’s theory of Islamic State’s regime origins was built.

OBJECTS AND ORIGINATORS OF CONSPIRACY

In the summer of 2015, the compound failures of the Lebanese state to provide the most essential services had reached a rather literal ‘tipping point.’ Beirut’s saturated landfills finally closed, and with no alternative disposal systems in place, the streets began to fill with stinking piles of garbage (Stel 2015).

This wasn’t the first time I’d witnessed trash in the streets. On prior occasions trash mounted due to collective action taken by trash collectors and residents local to the dump who, perfectly aware the dump/landfill infrastructure was failing and hazardous to their health, reacted by sending back all incoming garbage trucks. Now it was completely full — there could be no negotiation with this reality.
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For all Lebanon’s residents, these failures are painfully familiar, with political stalemate having reigned supreme since the latest election, held in 2009. Re-elections have been due, but parliament instead twice extended its own term, and racked by further political infighting, Lebanon has been without a president since April 2014 (Holmes 2014).

Beyond these flawed institutional political arrangements, Lebanon endures persistent scheduled and random electricity cuts; low quality water or complete stoppages in water supply; accelerating rent and property costs; large-scale youth unemployment; over-determining networks of patrimony across all public and private sectors; one of the world’s slowest yet most expensive internet services; an overpriced telecommunications network controlled through monopoly; a lack of rule of law; a ‘refugee crisis’ without adequate international support; a dysfunctional public education system; poor air quality in urban areas; mass appropriation of public property for private interests; a disorganised public transportation system; poor road safety; a disregard for LGBT rights; many violent de-development outcomes due to sharing a border with the Zionist occupation and a poor record on women’s rights (Galey 2012). And then, in July 2015, the companies contracted by the state could no longer collect the garbage.

With this latest and potentially environmentally catastrophic failure, a large-scale movement erupted. The movement was initially mobilised by an alliance of existent, or nascent, grassroots civil society and socialist organisations. Things progressed rapidly and, on August 23rd, the largest demonstration in this series of protests was held in Beirut’s Downtown district (Stel 2015). By the afternoon, major clashes had broken out, thanks in large part to state security’s decision to disperse demonstrators forcibly with water cannon, tear gas, and truncheons. By this point in the afternoon, members of the “civil society movement” had seemingly disappeared from view. Their bourgeois-NGO demands were still primarily locked into the ‘trash crisis’ — with some decorative secondary spluttering around ‘accountability,’ ‘good governance’ and ‘transparency.’ By contrast, the street appeared now to be the stage for a collective expression of working-class outrage (Nayel and Moghnieh 2015).

The bourgeois opposition was not that structurally removed from the state and its political class. For instance, no member of parliament would ever directly oppose a call for ‘solutions to the trash crisis,’ nor the need for ‘good governance’ — at least on the public rhetorical level. But with the participation of the working class, the possibility for serious political transformation was now beginning to be manifest. And it was at this point that the conspiratorial rhetoric first began to flow.
In this sense, establishment responses were two-fold. Media networks and the interior minister Nouhad el Machnouk claimed the protests were really the result of ‘gharīb, mukhaddirāt and irhāb’ [foreigners, drugs, and terrorists] (ibid). ‘Foreigners’ was here a mutually recognised cypher not for white liberal NGO staff — but Syrian refugee workers. Moreover, the word ‘irhāb’ can easily be associated with Syrian and the civil war. Within the protest movement, the bourgeois component, likely unnerved by what they had unleashed and its capacity to radically re-arrange their own privileges drawn from the status quo, also contributed to this distancing conspiratorial rhetoric (ibid). They also simultaneously physically distanced themselves in the street from what their own movement had seemingly brought to Downtown. In other words, while the movement officially ‘opposed sectarianism’ it suddenly found what it imagined to be a sectarian component amongst its constituents; the bourgeois element responded by trying to sanitise its own image. Their tactic amounted to an echoing back of the state’s own sectarian-conspiratorial rhetoric (ibid).

In the weeks that followed, street mobilization fell away and more passive ‘flash mobs’ and ‘creative activities’ assumed centre stage. Those with far more ‘real’ material grievances toward the state were abandoned, dismissed as “mundasīn” [infiltrators] (ibid). The working class component, foreign or not, appeared more disposed to overthrowing the state, rather than just reforming it into a functional, streamlined and transparent organ of bourgeois class interests. These class and conspiratorial dynamics are summed up by the journalist Moe Ali Nayel and the anthropologist Lamia Moghnieh (2015):

The classist aspect amongst protest organizers especially among the You-Stink movement has a) criminalised and alienated protesters who have come from low income areas with vengeance and stood up to police brutality during protests and b) supplied Lebanese politicians a pretext to delegitimate the protest for being “infiltrated by agent provocateurs,” simultaneously blocking the way for participation of migrant workers and refugees and serving further bogiemanization of the latter.

During the height of the protests, I took my regular evening jog along Beirut’s seafront. I walked toward the coast and at points, I had to navigate overflowing piles of garbage spilling physically out into the middle of the road — trash was now seemingly interrupting traffic. This was the unusual element of the crisis: the object of contention, if left unaddressed, would soon constitute its own auto-protest. Waste was beginning to stem the flow of vehicles, and, by extension, the movement of capital.
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Getting away from the stench, I turned south toward the public beach, Ramlet al-Bayda, but just as I’d started my jog I heard a familiar voice call out my name. I stopped, turned, and saw Abdullah. He was accompanied that evening by his newly-wed wife, Dala.

This seemingly chance encounter wasn’t that unusual, the Corniche is one of the city’s few remaining strips of public space. On previous occasions, I’d chanced upon Abdullah with a group of mates from Lebanese University or close village friends. This time, he was surrounded by Dala’s kin. Brothers, sisters, and spouses were eating fruits and snacks, sharing an arghila and gossiping. It was pleasing to see Abdullah content and embedded in family life. This was a change given that most of his family remained internally displaced, unable to return to Lebanon thanks to newly imposed anti-migration policies. The same was becoming true for all the men from his region. Haytham, Abdullah and Mahmoud’s family members in Syria were all now also internally displaced.

Abdullah’s father had not been working for a number of years given his ill health, but still, he talked about re-starting the family’s agriculture production. His death, compounded by the debts my friend had incurred through his marriage and the establishment of a household, had, as we have seen, placed him in a particularly precarious position.

Dala is never pleased when Abdullah and I ‘talk politics,’ often she raises concerns about who might clandestinely be listening, that her husband is an over excitable fellow (he is) and effortlessly gets himself into all manner of trouble (he does). Indeed, her concerns find backing in a wealth of evidence, ranging from Abdullah’s multiple political fights to the time he was chased out of his former neighbourhood for name calling a local group of Lebanese “regime-supporting” men. But with events in Downtown, it was clear both of us were playing at micro talk, itching for the opportunity to sneak away and debate what’s really going on.

For such occasions, Abdullah had fashioned his own micro conspiracy that he imagined kept his wife’s worries at bay. ‘Officially,’ we’d begun working on a new research programme to record “the cultural traditions of eastern Syria.” It worked pretty well; Dala, who’s from urban Idlib, doesn’t care one bit for the topic. One evening at dinner, with the couple newly wed, she explained to me how boring she imagines village life. As previously mentioned, Dala was raised in a city by a family of traders, so her marriage to a fallāḥ farmer wasn’t exactly universally approved. But as Abdullah explained he was, at that time, undertaking a degree, had (occasionally) some fixed steady work and, anyway, those notions of socio-economic standing counted less in view of the total collapse of the Syrian economy — especially in Idlib and Deir Ezzor.
Dala still worries about the socially oppressive atmosphere of the village; being away from her neighbourhood friends, the slow pace of life, the hot sun, the tribal politics and hard agricultural labour. At the time of writing, Dala, who had agreed prior to the wedding that she’d return to Syria with her husband to start a new life in a post-war Deir Ezzor, is now outright refusing even if the war should end. But, at this point, the cover was a good one. Dala wanted nothing to do with our imaginary project.

“Let’s go for a little walk,” Abdullah said, “you’re here to do sport, so we’ll walk, and we can talk about the new research project.”

Abdullah offered me a cigarette; I lit it, accepting that I would probably not complete my run after all.

“So, I know you’re one of those infiltrators?” I said, joking, and grabbing Abdullah around the neck.

Abdullah giggled but replied, “well they are infiltrators.”
It turned out that my friend entirely bought the stories circulating that the leader of Harakat Amal, Nabih Berri, had dispatched group loyalists into Downtown to infiltrate the protest, their mission, apparently, to sow chaos and violence and disrupt the genuine movement. This, Abdullah said — now following the conspiratorial line — would mean Berri could protect his own interests by squashing any emergent possibility for change.

“But didn’t the regime say similar things about you guys, I mean, during the first protest in Syria?” I asked, “and you know the Lebanese government are also saying it’s terrorists and Syrians who are causing the violence?”

“That’s different,” he replied, “For real? You know they were all shouting, “Berri Berri Berri, Shia Shia Shia — didn’t you see that? You know what the Shia are like! They love the [Syrian] regime,” he said.

“But that doesn’t mean they were sent by Berri directly; maybe they say they support him,” I replied “but they’re poor, so of course, they have to say they support him; it’s the system. It’s complicated.”

“It’s not complicated. They’re just stupid. Berri is a criminal,” Abdullah concluded.

Abdullah’s antipathy toward Harakat Amal springs from both his anti-regime commitments, and his day-to-day experience of life in Sabra and the southern suburbs. He often has to listen quietly, though occasionally not-so-quietly, to the rhetoric of pro-regime neighbours and party members. As a member of an out-group, he is himself the object of broader conspiracies and networks of exploitation. For instance, standing at the football match one evening in 2013, a local Lebanese man began chatting with me, asking what I was doing. I
explained that I was writing about the lives of Syrian workers in Beirut. He told me he thought that sounded interesting but then asked if I knew about the Sunni conspiracy to fill Lebanon with Syrians to shift the demographic balance.

It is not surprising that rebel-workers respond to these theories by re-appropriating their logics and redeploying them against Amal and Hezbollah. I told Abdullah and Mahmoud what this man had said later when we were in the kitchen preparing dinner. Both laughed, and said this man basically loves the Syrian regime and was talking nonsense. People like him are the ones who really actively forward conspiracies to maintain political control and prevent (genuine) political transformation. This kind of logic was also deployed to explain to me how a relatively small sectarian group can come to dominate Syria’s political and military institutions. Individuals would suggest that the Alawis really must surely have made secret deals with other power blocs to secure the pacification of the majority. This is where the notion of the Syrian regime as a secret ally of Israel would enter in, along with the much-repeated line that, “no bullet has been fired in the Golan for 30 years.” Rather than reading this as a desire for the regime not to commit military suicide against one of the most advanced occupying military forces in the world, it is read as evidence for a secret collusion with Zionist political forces.

After the summer of the trash crisis passed into winter, one day I was sharing a few beers with Abdullah; our conversation wandered back to the now de-escalated protest movement. I proposed to him that the difference between the trash protests in Lebanon and the uprising in Syria is not really on the level of ‘demands and actions’ but also the kind of language deployed by political leaders to describe and denigrate participants.

Bashar al-Assad, I said to him, rarely used the word, ‘mundasīn’ to talk about those involved in the early stages of the uprising. Perhaps this is because the word contains some indirect recognition of legitimacy — that there is some form of rightful ‘movement’ with certain degrees of merit found in their objectives, but that this movement has now been subverted through alternative, dangerous political machinations. By contrast, and right from the start, Bashar al-Assad’s collective nouns of choice were ‘mukhribīn’ [saboteurs] and irhābiyyīn [terrorists]. These words are significantly more antagonistic and rejectionist. Presumably, this relates to the fact that the Syrian state imagined itself the only legitimate entity given its totalitarian composition. Therefore, protests must be the result entirely of saboteurs, external enemies and terrorists. The degree to which such elements might have been actually present and acting to catalyse violence is a subject of contention (e.g. Anderson 2015)
but what is certain is that persistently drawing attention to ‘foreign plots’ simultaneously excuses the regime’s own socio-economic failing.

It is rare to hear Syrians repeating the common Lebanese refrain ‘mā fi dawla’ [there is no state]. For worker-rebels, the Syrian state was made violently manifest in their lives, from its secret police and underground interrogation cells, in the impossibility of cutting through its imprisoning webs of bureaucracy, to the physical marks of torture written across feet, fingers and torsos.

“When it started, I wanted to go down to the protests,” Abdullah said, interrupting my rambling, “but then when they began using that word, mundasūn, I thought if I went they’d say that about me.”

“But a few months ago you told me you think there were mundasūn sent by Berri.”

“I still think that,” he replied, “But look it’s hard. Some went with bad intentions, but I could still go because I know I’m not mindās. You know, I said this to my friend, he didn’t want to go; I told him, ‘you know you’re not mindās, so whatever they say, it’s ok.”

“But you are on Machnouk’s terms; you’re not Lebanese,” I replied.

“Do I not live in Lebanon too? Do I not suffer? […] Do I not suffer more than the Lebanese?”

Abdullah appeared to me to be juggling here with being both the object and originator of conspiracy. Running under all this is also a sense of resentment around the very idea that ‘foreigners,’ i.e. Syrians, can’t protest the actions of the Lebanese state, given its role in the propagation of ‘zulm’ [injustice/oppression]. The formations of structural violence propagated by the Lebanese state impact Syrian worker and refugee lives far more than the state’s violence impacts the average Lebanese citizen (e.g. Holmes 2015).102

But more broadly, what Abdullah accepts, and what he rejects, connects back as much to the overlapping political projects to which he is committed as it does his day-to-day life in Beirut. Evident are historical echoes running from the affective experience of rising up in Syria, becoming revolutionary, only to be then informed by various state-aligned media that such actions were in fact just because of external manipulating forces, thereby denying his and his comrades’ agency and their genuine desires for a better future.

Nonetheless, by then going on to accept the conspiracy theory that ‘the violent elements of the trash protest were dispatched by Berri,’ Abdullah ultimately also reproduces the very same conspiratorial move — though with different objects of suspicion — that denigrated the Syrian uprising as being ‘a sectarian Sunni plot against a secular republic.’
Finally, on a different but equally important and related level, Abdullah deploys a macro conspiracy. His theory that this is exactly the sort of thing one would expect from Amal and Berri neatly fits with other expanding assertions that the region as a whole is subject to a Shia plot. This level of analysis is manifest in the line, ‘you know what the Shia are like.’ This (mis)recognition is alluring not simply because Abdullah is ‘sectarian’ but also because of the political consequences of this line. It functions to keep consistent the bifurcation split between ‘the people’ and ‘the regime,’ putting all those who are with and all those who are against in encompassing opposed categories. But at what cost?

THE STATE, TRUTH, AND POWER

In English, the term ‘conspiracy’ refers to a type of explanatory hypothesis that proposes secret collusions between individuals, groups or organisations. The narrator of these theories purports that she is identifying the ‘true centres of power’ clandestinely responsible for world events. But even this seemingly broad definition of ‘conspiracy’ is not — without some clarification — wholly innocent. ‘Conspiracy’ is not ‘a neutral term’ but a ‘powerful label’ (Pelkmans and Machold 2010: 66). This is especially so in its modern English usage, where the word is readily associated with ostensibly ‘eccentric theories’ like ‘the moon landing was faked by Stanley Kubrick’ (e.g. Wisnewski 2007) or, ‘the British royal family are a race of intergalactic space lizards’ (e.g. Ike 2010).

English speakers who wish to avoid these negative images might choose to refer instead to ‘plots’ which — while carrying much the same meaning as the aforementioned — come with perhaps fewer visions of men in tinfoil hats. But that linguistic manoeuvre is not viable in Arabic, both terms are subsumed under the singular, ‘nazarīyyat al-mu‘āmara’ [conspiracy theory]. One can talk of “la’bāt sīyāsīya” [political games], yet this contains broader meanings, more akin to a ‘political manipulation for the purpose of self-interest’; in short, it misses the specificity of ‘plots.’

‘Secret dealings’ in Arabic can also be carried out “taḥṭ al-tāwla” [under the table] but this phrase describes not so much ‘systematic and strategic manipulation’ but instead points to quick ‘tactical negotiation of socio-legal limitations,’ like receiving pay ‘off the books,’ or entering Lebanon without the correct paperwork.

But these linguistic limitations are not a serious problem given that arguably the term ‘mu‘āmara’ does not hold comparable baggage to the word conspiracy. This additional point will be developed further; however, for now, with the bias of language in mind, the political anthropologists Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold (2010) have suggested scholars of
conspiracy pay closer attention to the paths and processes through which ideas ‘become labelled as conspiracy or not.’ They provide a convincing example as to why this is important. Perhaps the most politically, economically and socially influential conspiracy of the 21st century thus far concerns the circulation of ‘evidence’ that Saddam Hussein has ‘weapons of mass destruction’ (WMD) and can launch those weapons at ‘the West’ within 45 minutes. However, seldom is this referred to by anyone as an actual example of ‘conspiracy.’ Prompt friends and students alike for examples and they are more likely to talk about JFK being murdered by the US government, or that Prince Philip killed Princess Diana. The so-called ‘dodgy dossier’ rarely enters anyone’s mind. In fact, a 2006 survey demonstrated that 50 percent of American citizens continue to believe — despite the proof and admissions to the contrary — that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs (Hanley 2006). What’s at stake here is the ‘closeness of explanation’ to certain centres of ‘epistemic power’; it is this proximity or distance that functions to define and delimit what’s conspiracy and what’s fact.

Staying momentarily with the US-led invasion of Iraq, but switching sides, reveals another important feature of conspiracy that — while not unique to SWANA — is certainly notable. Take, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, a now somewhat forgotten figure, who was at the time of the invasion Saddam’s information minister. As the voice of the state, he became a figure of ridicule in Western media. This man, “comical Ali” or “Baghdad Bob” — as the tabloid press liked to nickname him — appeared each day before state and international television cameras to forcibly deny the progress of imperialist forces and the quite evident reality of US aggression (Deprang 2013).

“There are no American forces in Baghdad,” he announced to the camera, with audible shelling in the background, “their troops are running away […] we’re pounding them,” and, “In their hundreds, they’re committing suicide at the gates of Baghdad” (ibid).

Al-Sahhaf’s role in the circulation of propaganda, counter-narratives, and conspiracy points toward how SWANA states themselves circulate alternative political narratives. This was evident also in Machnouk’s response to the trash crisis laid out above.

To be very clear: this is not some feature wholly unique to SWANA states. However, as Matthew Grey has argued in his book Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World, that even if one is unable to present ‘empirical proof’ that the tempo of conspiracy making is higher in the Arab World, “that it’s common should be beyond question” (Grey 2010: 3). Yet it is also common that within most contemporary nation states there is a desire to form public opinion, generate enemies, designate insiders, and constitute national objectives and identities. For these goals, the conspiracy-making has laudable qualities.
Grey summarises the rationale and structural influences for conspiracism into four beneficial impacts concerned with legitimacy-making practices in contemporary Arab states, especially in those states struggling with alternative challenges such as supra-state Islamic movements or internal civil society organisations with the evident need to redirect popular anger (Grey 2010: 136-137). First, they reinforce popular nationalism, mobilising people away from anti-state lines toward identities that are non-threatening or even beneficial. Second, the people’s attention can be directed away from particular institutional failings of the state and anger re-directed to (constructed) enemies. Third, the state’s legitimacy as ‘protector’ is enhanced in the face of these ‘threats’ by also generating doubts in people’s minds as to the possibility of an alternative to the status quo. Finally, Grey suggests conspiracy theories work on some deeper level by ‘delimitating reality’ and determining what can be said publicly and what cannot.¹⁰³

Because in SWANA the state, the media and ‘the street’ all (inter)act in the constitution and circulation of often overlapping and sometimes opposing conspiracy theories — and because the word ‘muʿāmara’ does not carry the same weight of negative associations as its English equivalence — locating singular ‘epistemic centres of power’ becomes more challenging. Indeed, at least anecdotally, one gets the sense that much more widespread is the belief the war on Iraq was a wholly unjustified aggression, launched on the back of lies. This position was usually revealed when I was, many times, asked the question, “so, what do you think about Saddam?”¹

Not once have I come out from that particular conversation, in Lebanon, as in Syria, with a sense that my interlocutor thinks Saddam really ever had WMDs — even if they oppose him politically. The difference, then, between the Lebanese, Syrian and Western states appears to lie in their capacity to function as ‘epistemic powers’ i.e. how far they do actually ‘control the narrative.’

First, the Lebanese state lacks the centrality, capability and integration necessary to compose singular narratives about political events; a ‘free press’ ostensibly does, somewhat, exist, but much of this press, like the press everywhere, is so obviously partisan that its colours show before words are even written. Second, the Syrian state has — or had — more capacity to propagate coherent conspiracy, thanks to its tight control over the media, education and the like, as well as through the terror practiced by the security apparatus. This control is what led citizens to behave — at minimum — as if conspiracies exist (Wedeen 2013). But as the state began to crumble, the strength of this control over public ‘truth’ has declined in turn. In comparison, the majority of citizens in Western countries are perhaps unlikely to question
seriously the grounds of reports flowing from their ‘free press,’ itself a press run vested class interests (Greenslade 2004). For this reason, the constitution of conspiracy narratives in the West often goes comparatively unseen.

So the seemingly greater fluidity in ‘truth criteria’ and ‘verification requirements’ pushes a conclusion that ‘the constitution of fact and conspiracy’ in Lebanon and present day Syria has less to do with ‘monolithic institutions of power’ or the ‘ideological state apparatus’ and more to do with other factors such as ‘force of argument’; ‘rhetoric’; or the fit of particular theories to everyday or exceptional experiences, or general causes, like the revolution, i.e. causes in which my informants have internalized following the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity.

The above goes some way in explaining why the state and individual circulate conspiracy, and how awareness of conspiracy and fact comes into existence but it does not yet answer what exactly conspiracy is. Is there really nothing inherent to this form of argument that would see a similarity between 1) Shadi’s opening remarks concerning the secret regime origin of Da’ish; 2) Abdullah’s instance that Berri did dispatch infiltrators into Downtown; 3) Bashar al-Assad’s claim that foreign saboteurs generated the protests in Syria and 4) the claim that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction?

In short, is the constitution of reality really all just ‘down to power’?

**YOU CAN’T TRUST [SHIA]**

It was a spring morning in June 2013, and I spent a Sunday afternoon with Abdullah, Shadi, and Haytham, strolling along Beirut’s seafront. As usual, we were surrounded by groups of other Lebanese and Syrian friends and families. Children were running; lovers sat behind the railings, looking out across the sea.

I got up from the bench during a lull in our conversation and went over to buy a round of strong espresso coffees.

“Abdullah,” I say upon my return, “so … I know you’re always saying how much you’re against Hezbollah — but what do you think about their role in liberating south Lebanon and the pressures they still place on the Zionist occupation?”

At this point in the year, there still were a couple of months to go before Hassan Nasrallah would officially announce Hezbollah’s active involvement in Syrian territory, but these guys had no reason to wait for anything ‘official’ — they were already convinced his militiamen were present. An array of images, second-hand reports, and videos had, for quite some time been leaking out of Syria and circulating amongst the men. These clips were
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generating an enlivened sense of anger for here was video evidence that the political forces are controlling many of the Beirut’s neighbourhoods in which these men lived, as well as the owners of the workplaces in which they worked, were intervening to scuttle their revolutionary process. The data contained on these mobile phones came to constitute the key material evidence for arguments forged concerning the collusion between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. This proof ranged from slick but ‘unofficial’ party propaganda films, to grainy mobile phone footage capturing acts of brutality, allegedly committed by Hezbollah militia.

Then came the official announcement. “We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory,” said Nasrallah, addressing thousands of supporters during the Liberation Day ceremony — the 13th anniversary of Israel’s unconditional withdrawal from south Lebanon (Hasham 2013).

But even after this acknowledgement, new videos continued to surface amongst networks of rebel-workers. No longer were these videos circulated with the aim of ‘proving Hezbollah involvement,’ for theory had now been proved fact. Instead, these images, videos, and stories worked to articulate, primarily, an equivalence between the regime’s security apparatus, its ‘unofficial’ armed militia supports — the shabbiḥa — and Hezbollah. They are all part of the regime and therefore collapsed together as all the enemy, so the theory went. Second, Nasrallah’s official announcement contained a stated condition that the party would ‘protect the Lebanese border,’ as well as ‘religious Shia sites inside Syria’ only. But if this was truly the case, why, Shadi wondered, could he now show me a clip on his mobile phone in which Syrian rebels have their hands tied behind their backs and are pushed down to the floor, insulted, and shot at by Hezbollah militia brandishing submachine guns? Thus, even after the official ‘admission of intervention,’ new conspiracies soon formed concerning its real scope, depth and ultimate mission. If the fate of the civil war was beginning to turn against the rebels, despite their initial victories, then this turn and loss can be explained through such conspiratorial arguments that concerned the serious deployment of Hezbollah forces acting well beyond ‘defence and protection.’

In content and form, these videos resemble earlier clips I’d been shown that were beamed out of Syria and documented instances of the regime and shabbiḥa violence. The documentation of brutality would materialize again in a related form when videos of Islamic State that began to fill my friends’ mobile phone screens. Shadi’s reasoning about Islamic State’s regime origins, as expressed in this chapter’s opening quotation, somehow rests on these raw similarities.
Returning to Abdullah’s opposition toward Hezbollah. Abdullah is, as with all the Syrian rebel-workers I know, a self-described ‘anti-Zionist,’ who expresses consistent solidarity with the Palestinian cause. He nonetheless shot me an incredulous look when I suggested Hezbollah prevents Zionist aggression in Lebanon. In reality, this look was unnecessary; I knew my question was mischievous.

“Israel,” Abdullah replied, “isn’t really fighting Hezbollah, and Hezbollah is not fighting Israel. There’s a secret alliance. It’s obvious. And you know, they’re all friends with Bashar al-Assad anyway. Money and their own interests are the important things, not liberation.”

“Have you heard about the Freemasons? They really control everything,” Aziz added. “That’s also true,” Haytham continued, “[…] it’s unknown whose dick is in whose ass.”

I laugh, but it’s not the first time I’ve heard this refrain.

“Freemasons, yes, I’m sure they do something. But in truth it’s a Shia and Alawi conspiracy,” answered Abdullah, “though maybe not everyone thinks this way — but the leaders think that way and who pays the bill for this? We do.”

The general sense that there is an Alawi-Shia conspiracy against Sunnis emerges out of a reading of particular experiences. These experiences are exceptional, but they’re also found in the everyday.

By everyday, I mean stories such as the one once told by Khalid after dinner in the summer of 2013. Adnan had heard of a work opportunity in a village just outside of Sour in Lebanon. It was a construction project and apparently the pay was good at $25 per hour. That’s $5 more than he was making installing signage. He was planning on going down with one of his neighbours, a Syrian worker who’d heard about it and passed on the information. Khalid was sceptical; he had been working near the southern city of Nabatiya a few years earlier. The site was understaffed, and he had to work like hell to keep up with the foreman’s demands. It reached the end of the month, and the workers heard that the site was going to halt work for a while. Eventually, when he received his pay, it was light by several hundred dollars. Immediately he tried to complain but was politely reminded where he was and that the owner apparently had political connections.

“You can’t trust them [the Shia],” he concluded.

More extraordinary are stories that date back from the time of the guys’ military service in Syria.

“They’d feed us only potatoes,” said Mahmoud, recalling for me one of his stories from military service, “they’d make us sit on our hands, look at the food, which was not
enough for us anyway and then one of the [Alawi] officers would sound a whistle, and we could eat. If you didn’t grab it before the others, you’d go hungry.”

These initial experiences — typically explained to me as an example of sectarian hierarchy — were magnified in their importance when rebel-workers moved to Lebanon. For many of these men, the areas in which they could afford the rent were associated with political forces allied with Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, many of their employers were also Shia. These are structural relationships of exploitation. Employers and landlords alike — by virtue of market mechanism rather ‘sectarian dispositions’ — are driven to extract the maximum amount of value possible from their workers and tenants. That’s not to suggest sectarian formations fail to enhance a general capacity for exploitation: stories revolving around bosses refusing to pay wages abound and the workers’ capacity to refuse is often based on the mutually understood trouble they could make for the worker should they activate their party-political connections.

When the winter bombings hit Lebanon in 2013, I was surprised to find a number of rebel-workers justifying the attacks. One December day, Haytham, Adnan, and myself decided to try out a clothing warehouse supplier about whom Haytham had learned of in an area of the city called Chiah. I was waiting for Adnan to try on a pair of jeans when I asked Haytham what he thought about the accelerating violence.

“I don’t know Philip,” he said, “of course violence is ugly, but all Shia love the regime. They might say they don’t. But you just have to push them, just a little, and then you’ll see, in reality, all of them are with Bashar.”

“Does that make them targets? Is that right?” I asked.

“We’re targets in Syria because we’re Sunnis, and they exploit us here,” he answered.

In other instances, what might be understood as a sectarian iteration on everyday exploitation under capitalism was read back through the lens of other experiences, such as popular stories of abusive military generals in Syria or tales of brutality from the uprising. It was then not the structural position of workers and bosses that led to exploitation but the disposition of Shia to exploit more generally.

Taken together, conspiracy theories of this ilk kept a specific socio-political reality ‘in order.’ They did so by neatly (re-)drawing ‘cognitive maps’ in the context of radical political transformation (Laszlo 1993). But, at this point, ‘revolutionary subjectivity’ appears distorted. In moments of conspiratorial conjecture, rebel-workers were less concerned with the demands for dignity, freedom, and justice and more intent on drawing up boundaries of sectarian exclusion. Here, micro conspiracies that had seemingly correctly identified Hezbollah’s
realpolitik were further incorporated into macro conspiratorial frameworks. The party’s intervention was now seen less as a necessary response protecting its supply lines and supporting its ally and more a part of a broader Shia conspiracy to control the Levant.

This cognitive map fits neatly with a narrative of a region-wide Alawi-Shia conspiracy against Sunnis. But, what sort of intellectual work must these men do to keep such a political analysis alive when it is a self-declared (Sunni) Islamic State, and not a Shia militia, that now appears to be tearing their uprising apart?

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC STATE
In the months that followed June 2014, Da’ish made lightning advances toward one central objective: dismantling the Syria–Iraq border. June witnessed the spectacular fall of Mosul in Iraq, bestowing a $429 million haul to Da’ish as well as caches of sophisticated weaponry and a serious propaganda boost. Overnight they became the wealthiest and best-equipped Islamist force in the world (Solomon 2015).

The conquest of Mosul was a critical turning point. A highly strategic city it is located at a key juncture between Iraq, Syria and regional oil production centres. Da’ish displayed sophisticated strategy and forward planning; from the very moment control was established, militia and engineers were redeployed to the nearby Ajil and Allas fields in northeastern Kirkuk and within days they commenced preparing oil for market. Da’ish eventually was driven out by Iraqi forces, but in their 11 months of control, they had added an estimated $450 million to their coffers (Soloman 2015). So significant was their control over wells that oil extracted in Da’ish territories has spread out across all Syria and Iraq, often ending up purchased in areas controlled either by the rebel forces with whom they fight, or even regime centers. “[...] Hospitals, shops, tractors and machinery used to pull victims out of rubble run on generators that are powered by Isis oil,” reports the Financial Times (ibid).

But along with Mosul, other critical events in June were playing out across the border in eastern Syria. Infighting was growing in ferocity between Free Syrian Army rebel units and Jabhat al-Nusra. These events came to a peak around the same time that Da’ish began mobilising forces away from Mosul, rallying instead on the Iraqi side of the Syrian border town, Abu Kamal. Within a complicated web of local antagonisms and pressures, the branch leader of Jabhat al-Nusra turned coats, declaring his allegiance to Da’ish (Sly 2015). Vastly outgunned, the Syrian rebels stood little chance; they offered sparse resistance and Da’ish swept across the border, moving upward through a string of villages and farming communities along the Euphrates (Cheterian 2015). Anyone daring to stand in their path was publicly and
violently executed. These communities and settlements were the homes of Abdullah, Haytham, and Aziz. They were the ancestral lands of the Sheitaat.

I was in the United Kingdom when the news arrived, sitting in a south London café, writing up the earlier chapters of this thesis. At some point, I noticed a series of rapid-fire messages across Facebook chat. It was Abdullah. He said that his parents fled to a neighbouring village — everyone back in Beirut was concerned, the atmosphere tense. Communication between Lebanon and Syria was proving difficult — though as far as the guys knew, all close kin had evacuated in time. Nonetheless, a number soon discovered that many friends had stayed behind. These communities are small, tightly connected and typically inter-married. It just wasn’t possible for the impending tragedy to leave any man untouched. Abdullah signed off. “What can we do?” he asked, “Da’ish is not Islam […] and the world doesn’t know even know what’s happening.”

But the world’s leaders did know and in the wake of these June advances, senior figures in the American and British establishment reportedly even began considering working with the Syrian regime to ‘fight’ — or at least to appear to be fighting — the threat posed by Da’ish (Metague 2014). With time these debates became academic, for Western bombs were then and still are falling over the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, and Raqqa. We don’t know if the regime clandestinely offered approval, or if approval was even sought, but really it doesn’t matter. Indeed — aside from stressing the need to ‘respect international law,’ to ‘cooperate’ with the Iraqi government, and to ‘protect the lives of civilians’— no official condemnation for Western intervention has been issued by the Syrian regime — this is telling enough (BBC 2014).

Yet back in 2013 a parallel debate was raging, at that time the issue concerned military action against Bashar al-Assad. This action was framed as the necessary response to the regime’s purported crossing of Obama’s ‘red line.’ An area of Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, was subject to a sarin gas attack on August 21st, 2013. Sarin is 26 times more deadly than cyanide; direct exposure results in convulsive spasms and eventual suffocation. Estimates for numbers of the dead begin in the low hundreds, running to 1,429 according to the United States or 1,729 according to the Free Syrian Army’s office in Paris (Daily Star 2013). By and large, blame became attached to the regime and the military. Russia, the Syrian government, and some commentators nevertheless maintain that the attacks were a ‘false flag’ operation undertaken by the Syrian rebels, aimed at inciting Western intervention and thereby at shifting the balance of power in their favour (Hersh 2013).
At that time Mohammed, a construction site labourer, said to me, “Assad is a wahish [monster], no real Muslim would commit such massacres, we need to be rid of the tyrant.” Abdullah’s cousin, Haytham, questioned what actually lay behind the West’s desire for intervention; certainly not, in his eyes, the ‘red line’ having been crossed: “what is the difference” he asked, “between a child killed by chemicals and a child killed by a bullet?” concluding, “there is something we don’t know.”

Syrian rebel-workers were quick to dismiss the regime’s false flag theory as yet another obvious regime conspiracy, just as they dismiss most of ‘official theories’ they see as being generated and propagated by the state.

To return to June 2013, it soon became apparent that the Americans were planning not for a decisive blow to regime infrastructures but rather ‘punitive strikes’ against ‘certain facilities.’ With that, what little support there was for Western powers evaporated. What remained among the rebel-workers were the beliefs that the regime is fundamentally un-Islamic, and that certain global secretive political forces are really the determining factor in the Syrian conflict. These latter theories were strengthened all the more when a deal was struck in September 2013 between the regime and the US concerning the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapon stock.

It is not possible to identify a unifying position amongst my informants regarding intervention — a “for or against” — but rather there was a complicated mixing of affective desire for revenge with a longing for victory, set against a cynical disposition toward the ‘real’ nature of geopolitical arrangements. Nonetheless, nobody questioned that it was the regime who committed these atrocities; rather, what questions there fixated on the ‘real intentions and interests’ that lay behind official Western discourses. These ‘micro conspiracies’ were thus more akin to “street realpolitik” (Pelkmans and Machold 2010: 72; see also Silverstein 2000, 2002).

But now, one year later, these same men came to view Da’ish as the ones who were really now flying a false flag.

In a period of just over 12 months, the West shifted from debating strikes against the Syrian regime to a Western-led alliance bombing the ‘regime’s enemies.’ To outsiders, this change may appear surprising but for my opposition-aligned informants, these events were, in fact, a long time coming (Proudfoot 2014).

Against many radical transformations in the Syrian civil war, the worker-rebels find further evidence for Bashar al-Assad’s cunning plan reaching its fruition. Their theories have a number of surface variations regarding the level of details, and there is a diversity in which
facts are given the most emphasis, but the core propositions resemble the lines of Shadi’s argument that introduced this chapter. For Shadi, Da’ish is not actually a genuine formation of the opposition; rather, it was directly created by the regime. It is designed to present a distorted image of ‘Islamic government’ and to appear a credible ‘threat’ to the West. Ultimately, this cunning representation came to catalyse the most recent round of military interventions, interventions that function to ratify Assad’s self-presentation as the only line of defence against Islamic radicalism. Da’ish’s extreme practices go on further to weaken Syrian popular support for the uprising — especially for its more “Islamic dimensions,” broadening division and deteriorating genuinely revolutionary forces.

THE ALLURE AND FOUNDATIONS OF (MIS)RECOGNITION

The professor of political science, and specialist in conspiracy theories, Michael Barkun, has postulated three features of argument he thinks inherent to conspiracy:

(1) Nothing happens by accident
(2) Nothing is as it seems
(3) And everything is connected (Barkin 2013: 4-5)

These elements can be located within the above account of the nature of Da’ish. If Da’ish were directly created by the regime then, first, they not are understood as an accidental ‘side effect’ of imperialist and dangerously naïve wars in the Arab world as some analysts have argued (e.g. Cockburn 2015). Second, it might appear Da’ish are the ‘unintended’ result of these wars, or it might appear they are connected to numerous Islamist elements within the Syrian opposition, but, for Shadi, these appearances are designed to deceive. Instead, and thirdly, he connects everything back to the regime and specifically to the regime’s tactic of discrediting an uprising to which he is committed. This same self-protecting logic was employed by Abdullah when he insisted to me that the story of violent ‘infiltrators’ sent by the leader of Harakat Amal was accurate.

We have seen that from the very beginning, the Ba’th party’s media wing circulated accusations that the 2011 protests were organised by saboteurs, spies, and terrorists. The possibility that foreign intelligence operatives were in fact on the ground should not be too easily dismissed; it is hardly inconceivable that the regime’s enemies saw an opportunity to sow productive chaos in Syria (Anderson 2014). However, as previously stated, if these tactics
were successful, this was because they interacted with socio-economic discontent entrenched in areas of rural poverty created by the regime’s neoliberal economic policy.

Nonetheless, rebel-workers dismiss the regime’s line of argument outright; they argue that the state instead shifted gear when the protests kept rolling and turned fiction into reality. The regime, they think, created the terrorists.

As the uprising became, simultaneously, a civil and proxy war, the myriad conspiracy theories rebel-workers propounded came with a gradual but notable escalation. At each stage, these men found themselves confronted with yet more bewildering fragmentations, fresh infighting, births of powerful enemies and the forging of precarious alliances. Rather than resign themselves to confusion and flux, opposition-aligned men instead engaged in forms of political speculation that, analytically, appeared to sweep up the mess and did so by stopping the buck at Bashar al-Assad’s front door.

So one proposition as to why an increase in frequency is that, on a performative level, conspiracy-telling is a ‘late stage mutation’ in the populist political style described in chapter two and witnessed in the initial moments of the Syrian uprising. That is to say that these theories became prevalent because the telling of them is a political act that delegitimizes alternative anti-revolutionary possibilities, rallies the opposition in face of ‘the real enemy,’ and expresses something like, “the people won’t be duped, the revolution is not lost, and we all know who you really are.”

But there is still a problem: my informants wouldn’t recognise the interpretation. They do not think they are being ‘allegorical about the workings of power,’ nor are they — at least explicitly — attempting to ‘rally the troops.’ Abdullah was not talking in metaphors when he accepted and recirculated the argument that Nabih Berri sent ‘infiltrators’ down to parliament. Shadi, in this chapter’s opening quote, is not saying that the harsh crackdown in the early stages of the uprising is what, inevitably, led to the birth of Da’ish. What he is trying to convey is that Da’ish really is the direct and intended result of regime strategy. Abdullah thinks Nabih Berri really did dispatch infiltrators into Beirut’s Downtown trash protests. Decisions were taken, actions and organisations followed. Indeed, the first question that introduced this chapter was “how did Shadi know that the Islamic State are not Muslims but created by the Syrian regime?”

In response to Shadi’s theory and others like it, we need to consider the role of two different identities, ‘Muslim’ and ‘revolutionary,’ and how the dispositions inherent to these often intersecting identities worked to produce an imminent critique of Islamic State.
CHAPTER SIX

But first, these theory-building practices must be read in the context of US, British and Russian warplanes all now potentially dropping payloads over Sheitaat villages (Proudfoot 2014). Before being incorporated within the Islamic State, various organizations and militia aligned with the Free Syrian Army had gained control over Abdullah, Shadi and Mahmoud’s villages and the neighbouring oil wells. Yet it was with Da’ish’s victory in Mosul in June 2014, and with their newly plundered advanced weaponry that sights were soon set on Sheitaat land. Despite being outgunned, the Sheitaat rose in defiance against Da’ish. This was the uprising that cost Mohammed Saab his life, the English teacher who dreamed of Toronto whom we encountered in chapter four.

Yet, Da’ish is ostensibly opposed to the Syrian regime, so why also the uprising? Why did the logic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” not play out in these villages upon the Euphrates?

One answer to these questions springs from the details surrounding Islamic State’s entry into this part of Syria. They initially faced little resistance, but after apparent control was secured over the Sheitaat land, local villagers began their ‘popular uprising.’ This resulted in 700 slaughtered: they were crucified, beheaded, and shot (Holmes 2014; Ghassan 2014). Allegedly up to 80 were chained to a block of concrete and drowned in the Euphrates (ibid). Economic life has since collapsed; what little welfare existed has evaporated.

The Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar reported, as did my informants, that the Sheitaat militia, who are tied to official opposition groups like the Free Syrian Army, had previously gained control over 21 oil wells since the 2011 uprising (Ghassan 2014). They witnessed significant profits, but with the entrance of the better-equipped Da’ish, control was fast lost over the oil fields. This picture must be set against deep changes and declining welfare in recent years, which, when followed by the entrance of Da’ish and its imposition of harsh rule, was enough to ignite early August’s uprising against them.

Yet as chapter one made clear, living standards had already been declining for a while. This was, as argued in the chapter, an outcome of another intervention: advised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, Bashar al-Assad had “enacted an investment-promoting decree; privatized state farms; introduced a private banking system; liberalized capital and trade accounts; heavily reduced customs duties; and promoted private sector-led investment at the expense of state-led investment.” Rather than producing “trickle-down” wealth, these reforms produced massive unemployment and underemployment. Before the uprising, some 62 per cent of rural Syrians already lived below the poverty line and the average Syrian worker income was estimated as $274 per month (Matar 2012a: 2).
Ziad Ghassan (2014), writing in Al-Akhbar suggests that elements within this “Sheitaat popular uprising” did not hesitate to request assistance from the regime. In late August, the regime responded by establishing training camps for the Sheitaat militia. But we cannot simply read this as a newfound love for the regime: it is rather a tactical decision, which, when I spoke to my informants shortly after the reported massacre, only further indicated the regime’s sinister duplicity and willingness to sacrifice lives for its own survival.

A series of material concerns are one factor driving the Sheitaat’s uprising, but my informants don’t answer the question, “Why are you fighting Da’ish?” with the response, “Because they stole our oil.” Rather, they answer, “Because Da’ish is secretly with the regime.”

Without neglecting the structural circumstances, we also need to explain how these explanatory and normative frameworks develop. How do my rebel-workers come to explain and delegitimize the claims made by Da’ish, the regime, and Western governments alike?

(UN)MAKING THE ISLAMIC STATE

“I don’t care who is fighting Da’ish; Britain, America, whoever,” Abdullah told me, “[...] as long as they’re killing them then it’s a good thing.”

“And why’s that?” I replied.

“Da’ish was created by the regime, so when they bomb it, even if it is just a game, I still feel like they’re bombing Bashar. I just wish more directly.” He added, “They’re brainwashing people, Philip. A friend, I knew him from school, we were pretty close. On the phone, I told him about you. You know what he said! ‘why have you not killed him yet. He’s British, he’s a nonbeliever, you can’t be his friend. You should have killed him’ [...] he’s brainwashed.”

“You’re not going to listen to his advice, right?” I joked.

Abdullah laughed and continued, “I decided to test him. I lied to him; I said I’d married a Shia girl. He started screaming at me: ‘What are you doing!? This is against god; This is a sin. If you ever come home I will kill you,’ and then he stopped and said, ‘Actually no, I won’t do it myself. But I’ll get another one of the guys to kill you.’”

With time, and under the strain of occupation, a number of Abdullah’s friends, he tells me, have now joined Da’ish. This is incredibly disheartening for him and his friends, but despite such adamant opposition to ISIS, these men remained unanimous in rejecting Russian intervention. They hear readily from friends back home that Russian jets are not bombing Islamic State positions, rather the positions of the Free Syrian Army. At the time of Russian
intervention, which began in September 2015, I had started speaking regularly again to Bilal via Facebook. He described to me the damage done to infrastructure and entire families wiped out by what he refers to as Russian bombs and a Russian plot to divide Syria and give the biggest portion to the Alawis.

“By god, we will not allow this,” he said.

This pattern of bombings fits well with the general view amongst rebel-works that Islamic State is a pretence, a false flag, because why would Russia — Bashar’s principle ally — turn around and bomb Bashar’s secret organisation? It follows that instead, they would bomb the opposition into surrender.

Many alternative ontologies of Islamic State have circulated across the internet, ranging from the suggestion that the United States directly founded the Islamic State — just as they produced the mujahideen in Afghanistan — to the assertion that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the regime’s self-proclaimed caliph, is really Elliot Shimon, a Mossad-trained operative. But these ideas were not popular amongst rebel-workers. Rather, it was Shadi’s argument that: “the Islamic State was created by the Syrian regime” that remained the most prominent.

If we consider how far the terms of the debate in the civil wars have shifted over the years, it is not surprising that individuals have reached such conclusions. It is also not surprising that the accusation of ‘conspiracy making’ comes from both sides: whatever control the regime once had over ‘truthmaking’ has now collapsed. Thus, as outlined above, without an institutionalized field of power and truth, the accusations of ‘conspiracy’ can be thrown, and often stick, to both sides (see Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 76 and Wedeen 1999). Or, as Aeschylus puts it, “In war, truth is the first casualty.”

With (official) truth-making damaged, conspiracy theories about Da’ish offer more ‘truths’ than those provided by mainstream political and media discourses. Such narratives tend to stop at the ahistorical orientalist description of Da’ish as a fundamentally barbaric and irrational phenomenon driven by “medieval ideology combined with twenty-first-century technology.” We are told that leaders are “tech savvy” yet “live like medieval lords in hilltop forts” while propagating a “baleful, nasty, medieval ideology” (Hall 2014). This simplistic argument delights in the supposed contradiction between a “super-evil organization” producing “its own infographics.”

Rebel-worker theories reach for something more; they are directly concerned with Da’ish’s origins — origins that remain rather obscure until now. But with Shadi’s assertion that they’re ‘not Muslims’ we can see his understanding of Islam acting as a ‘moral foundation.’ But this foundation is also supported by his own awareness that the Syrian regime
is no stranger to propaganda and political manipulation (Hinnebusch 2004; Wieland 2012; Wedeen 1999; Khatib 2011). In fact, where some contention between the men could be located it was on who exactly in the regime pulled the trigger on the Islamic State false flag plan.

In the spring of 2015, Abdullah took me for an argila with a new friend he’d made from his apartment building: Omar. Omar is a construction worker at a site near Ramlet al Bayda; I told the men I was thinking about writing a chapter on their theories of Islamic State’s origin. Both again insisted immediately that the regime created Da’ish. But Omar went on to explain that, as he sees it, the plans for Da’ish were laid long before. They are, in fact, a sleeper cell was set in place by Hafiz al-Assad shortly after the Hama uprising. For Abdullah this was outlandish, but Omar’s response to his new friend’s incredulity was that Bashar al-Assad is quite obviously an idiot; his father, on the other hand, was much smarter. He made this organization to sow discord amongst any potential opposition movement. For both, however, these assumptions build on the fact that Da’ish are not Muslims but agents spreading conflict within the opposition.

Islam should not be read here as some monolithic entity and, in fact, its deployment in these arguments was similar to an empty-signifier in the sense that Islam acted like a band tying together heterogeneous various ideas, experiences, and positions. So, when Da’ish or the regime seemingly violate moral principles, the statement that they are “un-Islamic” can then also just be simply as a rhetorical gesture that claims “they are not just, they are not good, and therefore they are not really Muslims.”

This productive thinness facilitates the prominent role Islam(s) have occupied in anticolonial discourse more generally. This fit is further strengthened by the disembedding of religion as a traditional force in the makeup of SWANA’s political institutions. I’m referring here to the secularizing reforms — archetypically represented by Ataturk but with Ba’thist reforms a not-too-distant cousin— which led to the ostensible, or rather ‘official,’ removal of faith from the corridors of power but with its endurance, however, in individuals’ daily lives (Khatib 2011; Hinnebusch 2002 Pierret 2013). Islam thus became “available for articulations of political resistance to the postcolonial order,” and this means not only as a vehicle through which secular demands could be expressed but also a means through which interests and identities were formed (Buck-Morss 2003: 45). Islam was thus set free to become an oppositional moral base. In the context of competing theory building it is these rhetorical nods and winks, connections and loops back to shared experience and identity that become the basis for strong argumentation.
CHAPTER SIX

Nonetheless, the regime never entirely “left Islam alone.” Shadi’s theory highlights the secret ploys the Syrian government has made to demonize the Islamic opposition. The Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm asserts that the regime relied upon fears of radical Islam as “an excuse to not change anything” (quoted in Wieland 2012: 164). Tayyeb Tizini, another Syrian philosopher, goes further, suggesting that the regime actively supports Islamists because it wants to keep them as “a visible danger to the secular opposition” (ibid). Yet, it is precisely because the regime has attempted to control the formation of an ‘Islamic opposition,’ and simultaneously to suppress the ‘ secular opposition,’ that public space for critique was largely destroyed — aside from the space offered by the mosque (Wieland 2012, 2006; Hinnebusch 2002).

Seeking clarity on these processes and forms of reasoning, I asked Mahmoud to explain what makes for a ‘real Muslim.’ He suggested the most important thing for a Muslim to do is to correct fellow believers when they go wrong — to keep them on the right track. Definitely not to kill unbelievers or those who are “ignorant of Islam, “education is vital,” he said.

As we were talking, he booted up the apartment’s laptop and let a video load from Qatari television that he’d shared on his Facebook profile. The scene opens with a father living with his two children in a rather luxurious home. Later he is seen alone in one of the rooms, ostensibly his own personal den he sits lounging with his feet up. The soundtrack suddenly hits a sombre note, and the video jumps to a small, cramped outhouse where an old man is lying in bed, trying to sleep. It is then revealed this is the family’s grandfather. Finally, after much melodrama, the grandfather is invited into the house, and the father is seen turning his den into a bedroom for his father. Videos like this point toward the degree to which the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood proliferated amongst rebel-workers. However, what is important is that in the rare instances the men discussed their relationships with Islam, they tended to stress Islam as a moral code for living rather than a strict guideline to political practice. Therefore, I came to see rebel-workers’ multiple understandings of Islam to be more akin to a moral foundation for the good life. Some of the men pray, some attended the mosque on a Friday, but Islam never appeared, in and of itself, an all-encompassing defining factor in their lives. Previously, we noted how, presumably through Gulf funding, an organization in Abdullah and Haytham’s home village tried to launch Arabic and Qur’anic literacy classes — but this was stressed to me as critically “not fundamentalism.” In fact, when this story was told to me, the religious component was played down. Direct expressions of faith were a little more common online, but even then it was typically just Mahmoud and occasionally Khalid.
who would post religious statuses: these were posts admonishing fellow Muslims to read the Qur’an and asking god to forgive people for their ignorance. The textual tradition of Islam was here enabling Mahmoud and his uncle to generate both pious self-images and, if you knew them personally, to read between the lines an implicit politico-religious critique of the Islamic State.

Pelkmans and Machold (2011: 72-73) suggest that reservations regarding conspiracy theories are most warranted when they slip from “distrust to disgust” and when they appear to “seal the boundaries around an imagined community,” i.e. when they involve the aforementioned ‘essentialist’ step. This point seems particularly sensible when encountering instances of fascist or nationalist propaganda, but the process of boundary sealing appears here in the context of civil war and populist politics. The creation of an “us,” the people and “them,” the regime, requires, as argued in chapter two, empty phrases to be filled with content (Laclau 2007). Regime ontologies of Da’ish generate this content by sealing off the opposition as distinct from both the regime and its presumed duplicitous attempts to instil chaos and counter-revolution. But when reasoning is read into Hezbollah or regime action as being down to ‘a Shia plot,’ or ‘Shia mentality’ the move has been made to seal the boundary of a community, and the need for ‘cleansing’ rather than ‘wealth re-distribution’ is never far from view.

CONCLUSION

May 25th, 2013, was Liberation Day in Lebanon. On this day, members of the muqāwama [resistance] movement celebrate their victory over the occupying Israeli army. I was at Haytham and Mahmoud’s Sabra apartment, lounging around as usual when suddenly gunfire seemingly erupted, shots were being fired in every direction. I must have looked scared because the guys started laughing at me, “it’s Liberation Day,” said Khalid, as he turned the television over to Hassan Nasrallah’s speech. The men watched it, intermittently cursing the leader of Hezbollah, or making fun of his soft pronunciation of the Arabic letter rā’.

“It’s something funny that they celebrate liberating the south, and now they’re occupying us,” said Adnan.

Later that evening, a neighbour came by for tea just before football, his name: ‘Nasrallah,’ our goalkeeper.

“See,” Abdullah would later say in private, “we’re not sectarian!”

We walked down the stairs the short distance to the Astroturf, and I snuck off to the side, not intending to play if I could avoid it. Instead, I wanted to talk to the spectators as
usual. Fifteen minutes into the match there was lots of noise, insults were being flung at Nasrallah for having let in, by this point, three goals. It was seemingly getting rather heated. My own sense of tension wasn’t helped by the fact there were still intermittent rounds being fired off in the surrounding area.

“What is this Nasrallah!?” shouted Mahmoud, “a conspiracy! — ‘amaliyat takhrīb?” [a sabotage operation?]

Mahmoud’s good-humoured intervention rapidly defused the situation by making in that instance a number of things explicit. For example, in this joke, Nasrallah’s own presumed sectarian-political affiliations are raised, so too is the fact he likely thinks they think he is with the regime, as well as the comical acknowledgement of their concerns around general Shia conspiracies and duplicitousness.

In a similar manner, this chapter has attempted to make explicit the context and substance of conspiracy-making amongst rebel-workers in Beirut. I have argued that one of the reasons Shadi can know Islamic State as created by the regime is because in a context of multiple and competing ‘foundations of truth’ this particular assertion chimed in with other experiences and identities that unite these men. In a context of weak state coherence and authority, the possibility for establishment and ruling classes to opaquely set the standards for ‘truth’ and ‘conspiracy’ is today less pronounced in SWANA. Moreover, conspiracy-making does not have the same negative and dismissive associations as it does in a Euro-American context (‘mu‘āmara’). This, coupled with the fact the history of the modern Levant begins with a conspiracy between Sykes and Picot, means that conspiracies are more likely to be seen as ongoing and real. Therefore, identifying them carries higher stakes.

However, in attributing all power to the Syrian regime, and locating behind it a regional Shia plot, these theories risk a (mis)recognition of other more pressing imperialist realities that are driving factors behind the men’s mounting immiseration and pauperisation. Theory building in a politico-economic context of worsening material conditions can not be rendered as just some banal mode of ‘understanding the world’ but an ideologically useful mode of ‘misunderstanding.’

Nonetheless, while we lack evidence of direct collusion between the regime and Islamic State, many have now revealed how, in the earlier stages of the Syrian uprising, Bashar al-Assad seemingly avoided targeting the Islamist oppositions and thereby facilitated the destruction of “more secular” rebel groups. Some important allies of the regime have even said this was the goal all along: to make the world choose between the regime and the extremists (Abi Habib 2014). More tangentially, the socio-economic policies of the regime
toward the rural hinterlands have generated vast amounts of unemployed, angry young men, an easy recruiting pool for jihadist organizations.

However, the theories of political conspiracies outlined above created other social impacts. Fundamentally, these conjectures helped to retain and reinforce the bifurcation of ‘al-ša’b’ [the people] and ‘al-nizām [the regime]. Yet these theories also mesh together disparate forces into the category, ‘al-nizām’ on the basis of presumed sectarian identity, and not an individual’s position within a structure of governance. In the move from ‘micro conspiracies’ concerned with material interests to ‘macro theories’ of region-wide plots, this late-stage mutation in populist logic and revolutionary subjectivity risks degenerating further into an all-encompassing and fundamentally mystifying idea of sectarian struggle.

100 This chapter, as a whole, attempts to add complexity to any simplistic definition as to what constitutes a ‘conspiracy,’ although in Western media and analysis, the English term ‘conspiracy’ has been generally used to refer to ‘small groups of powerful people secretly working together to create or alter events in their favor’ (Knight 2003: 15)

The degree to which ‘conspiracy’ is directly translatable to the Arabic, ‘muʾāmar’ is also considered below. The fact these words have different trajectories, and that rebel-workers would label their own ideas as ‘muʾāmarāt’ [conspiracies] leads me to retain the terminology; but this distinctiveness should be assumed when muʾāmar is translated below into ‘conspiracy’.

101 That is not to suggest conspiracy-making doesn’t go on all the time in the West — but when it does occur it’s often rarely recognized such.

102 A comparison can be made with the condition of Palestinians in Lebanon who also overbearing formations of state-level structural violence (Roberts 2010; Barbosa 2013). Many of the rebel-workers who feature in this thesis live in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila, nonetheless their networks rarely crossed.

103 This final point was central to Lisa Wedeen’s (2013) formulation of propaganda in Syria: generally people didn’t really buy that Hafiz al-Assad is ‘the world’s number one pharmacist’ but act as if that were the case, and this compulsion to act is where the states true power can be located. In other words, conspiracy narratives provide clues to ‘state sanctioned terminology’.

104 The first video I was shown of ISIS violence can be viewed here: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=73e_1389191167 (accessed: 16/02/2016). This extremely graphic video show three truck drivers from Syria being pulled over in the Iraqi desert. Their ISIS interrogator asks them a series of questions about Islam and when they fail to answer correctly — how many kneeling’s do you make during different prayers? — he accuses them of being Shia. Promptly they’re executed. When this video was shown to me it was presumed to evidence the fact ISIS are not ‘real Muslims’ and that this is ‘not Islam’ but a ‘regime conspiracy’. Haytham pointed out that, if they don’t know the answer or how to perform prayers correctly, the first response is obviously not to kill them but to educate them.

105 Not once did these men describe Da’ish as following a “medieval ideology.” Such a description wouldn’t make a drop of sense to them: the medieval Islamic world is the world of scientific advancements, Ibn Khaldun, poetry, (comparative) religious tolerance, and rule of law. It is not beheading Christians, it is not zulm (oppression, but lit, “putting things out of place”).
CONCLUSIONS

It’s Your Turn Doctor

Jamal once told me a story from his native city of Hama. It began in mid-December 2003 when a group of local teenagers snuck out from their parent’s home in the dead of night and with them they carried brushes and tins of red paint.

A week earlier the news had broken that American forces in Iraq had captured Saddam Hussein. ‘Operation Red Dawn’ had found the deposed leader hiding out in a spider-hole on the edge of ad-Dawr, a town close to the city of Tikrit. News and images of Saddam’s capture soon spread rapidly across the Arab world and beyond, including controversial footage of his medical examination. The occupying forces reported that the rationale for showing these scenes was that they would, “help the Iraqi people no longer fear Saddam” (Moreno 2004). As silly as that might sound, Jamal’s story revealed that, perhaps, this event had even broader impacts.

As the group of teenagers from Hama reached their local school, they loaded their brushes and wrote across its external walls the line, ‘ijāk al-daūr yā duktūr’ [It’s your turn, doctor]. Jamal thought that this particular refrain was made in reference to the fact that Bashar al-Assad had previously trained as an ophthalmologist. And this exact sentence was, in fact, reportedly one of the lines the teenagers from Deraa painted on their own school’s walls in March 2011. It was also reported to have been hastily painted below a Damascus bridge on the night of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s fall on February 11th of that year (al-Khoury 2011; Ortiz 2012).

“It wasn’t Deraa or Damascus, it was us, eight years ago. Hama made the slogan,” Jamal said.

Early the next morning, a passing group of policemen apparently discovered the graffiti and, fearing they’d be held responsible for allowing such a thing to occur, immediately went out and bought some white paint to mask the red scrawl. By the afternoon, the paint had dried but the red lettering showed back through the first coat — panicked, they applied it again. But it kept reappearing. By this point, local residents had seen and talked about it. But nothing happened to the kids; Jamal suggested that nobody even thought to look for whoever was responsible; they had all in fact just assumed it was local teenagers up to no good. Eventually, the paint faded and so too did the story.

At the time of writing, it is five years since the Syrian uprising began, hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost, and large sections of the country have been bombed into the
ground. Against such extreme destruction, a resultant ‘refugee crisis,’ the emergence of widespread counter-revolutionary forces, and the continued practice of indiscriminate bombing, this thesis has sought to describe and examine the initial foundations and mechanisms through which a populist revolutionary subjectivity emerged, was maintained, and began to degrade amongst a network of Syrian rebel-workers in Beirut. What I hope to have revealed are some of the intersecting cultural, socio-economic and technological factors that meant when the graffiti Jamal had insisted had originated in Hama appeared once again in March 2011, this time, the lines did not fade into memory but exploded into an uprising.

As is typical of urban anthropology, the ethnographic focus was not here bounded by a ‘field site,’ but on a network of men dispersed throughout the city. This diffuse quality was heightened further by the impossibility of visiting the men and their families in Syria. Indeed, from the summer of 2014 onwards, many men found their lands and villages occupied by the Islamic State. A similar research project in a different time would have moved with workers between Beirut and Syria, observing in the process the degree to which life at home is more socio-culturally bounded, predictable and stable, or revealing the extent to which things are, actually, a lot more fluid below the surface. To give a sense of the past, circumstances necessitated here my reliance on memories, secondary sources and historical reconstructions. Thus, a more ‘mobile ethnography’ of a peaceful Syria may have focused more explicitly on histories of agricultural production, family strategies of migration to Beirut, changes in land ownership, the character of women’s work, and the role of remittance flows in transforming or (re)enforcing class hierarchies as well as maintaining patriarchal forms of control (e.g. Chalcraft 2009). But faced with the uprising, these previous continuities — which are, of course, only comparatively ‘stable’ — appeared to have been replaced by more encompassing instability and rupture. Remittance flows were now directed toward consumption expenses, a pattern of temporary migration to Beirut was disrupted, families were displaced from their lands and villages, and many workers who already resided in Lebanon were transformed into de facto refugees.

This fieldwork, then, was carried out on the borders of an uprising and it looked to Syria from the margins. In so doing I have emphasised the ways in which these men came to know and not know the uprising, to participate in it, and yet also to miss out. This context appears reflected in both the ethnography and the style of theoretical argumentation. Here, in addition to some more general reflections, in closing I shall summarise two central ethnographic and theoretical themes: the relation of populism and neoliberalism, and the ways of knowing the uprising, participating in it, and navigating its fallout remotely.
The more I learned about the lives of rebel-workers, the more I was struck by the apparent similarities, but also stark differences, in the opportunities and structures that had determined my own life history. The majority of these men were around my age; they hailed from small villages often located at a considerable distance from either Damascus or Beirut. As I described initially in the introduction, I too was raised far from the capital, in a suburban town in the North East of England, surrounded by farms, factories and the remnants of the coal industry. When I was born, in 1987, the neoliberal policies of Margaret Thatcher had already generated socio-economic instability across much of the United Kingdom’s industrial heartland. This was a period that witnessed the replacement of the ‘post-war consensus’ with the ‘Washington consensus,’ with unemployment reaching over 10 percent, cutbacks made in welfare, the quality of life for many diminished. Overall, the UK displayed low growth rates and accelerated income inequality (Harvey 2007: 88). It was under these economic conditions that a new wave of wealthy business elites consolidated economic gains and thus, “if the project [of Thatcher] was to restore class power to the top elites, then neoliberalism was clearly the answer” (ibid: 90). Indeed, in the renewed attention that Marx’s work on ‘primitive accumulation’ has garnered by the likes of David Harvey (2003) and Michael Perelman (2000), much light has been cast on how the accumulation of assets through non-market means — via appropriation, networks of power, violence, and law — were methods critical not only to the early history of capitalism, but they continue to the present day.

In Britain, the top 1 percent doubled their share of the national income from 6.5 percent in the years after the war, to 13 per cent since 1982. Between 1977 and 2012 the UK’s Gini coefficient has increased from 0.24 to 0.33, denoting the countries position as one most unequal nations in the so-called ‘developed world’ (ibid; Equality Trust 2012). Likewise, Syria has witnessed, since the 1990s, the dismantling of its own socio-economic consensus through processes typical to accumulation by dispossession. Nonetheless, between Syria and the United Kingdom, there remain key differences in the pace, pattern and geographic spread of apparent ‘neoliberal solutions’ to economic problems. What this points toward is the complicated manner in which class composition, political forces, historical traditions and existing institutional arrangements come to interact and to shape how liberalization and capital accumulation occurs, and also the forms of resistance that might eventually come to oppose these process (ibid: 13).
In terms of resistance, both the United Kingdom and Syria were initially subject to policies aiming to weaken the power of unions thereby disrupting an important source of potential opposition. Bashar al-Assad cut off Syria’s peasant and worker union funding, and in the United Kingdom, various laws and policies eventually broke the power of unionised labour (Hinnebusch 2012: 99; Harvey 2007: 59). The very fact it was the Ba’th party that funded the unions points to one important difference: the regime had incorporated many of the organizations through which antagonisms to neoliberal policy might otherwise have been channelled and constituted. True, the UK Labour Party has strong connections to the unions, but the unions funded the party and not vice versa.

These differences in political structure go some way to explaining my own life as an activist in the UK, the language I use and the organisations to which I belong. Even under pre-Blair Labour, the language of struggle, socialism and anti-imperialism have never been a substantive component of the state, as in Syria. Thus, such a discourse remains readily able articulate antagonisms toward the neoliberal status quo. If I articulate a demand for socialism on the streets of London, it carries a very different run of associations to a demand for ishtirākīya [socialism] on the streets of Damascus.

In Syria, then, a more or less state-socialist system has crumbled over the past 20 years, and public assets have been syphoned off by a narrowing state elite. Yet under the rhetoric of Ba’thism, the language of socialism and struggle has remained monopolized by the state itself, and increasingly delegitimized by its own actions. Alternative leftist parties and trade unions have faced control and suppression. It is expressly in scenarios like this that a broad appeal can be lodged around the language of ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘justice’ and ‘reform’ (Ost 2005; Kalb 2010). But in situations that are nonetheless still determined by ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ this thesis has suggested it would be brash to presume that even these ‘bourgeois and liberal’ concepts reflected directly the future alternative society impoverished Syrian citizens such as Jamal were envisioning. Thanks to a commitment to neoliberal policy, mounting webs of ‘structural violence’ threatened to entrap large swathes of Syria’s population into a future defined only by expanding impoverishment and pauperisation, and it is with this fact that Jamal’s ‘awakening’ and his demand for ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ must first be considered.

Whatever legitimacy was once awarded to Syria’s state-socialist system was not won solely on the basis of external political factors, or the barrier of fear engendered by the repressive apparatus, but because of a politico-economic system that limited impoverishment and rampant inequality. To achieve this, the policies adopted by the post-1970 Ba’thist state
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opened limited space for the private sector to expand, thereby bestowing upon the traditional elite room in which to advance their interests. On top of this, Lebanon’s more liberal economy provided space for wealthy Syrian capital. This was important because, from independence onwards, infighting between elites had led to continuous political tension and instability. If these elites were threatened with more radical redistributive measures, greater hostilities would likely have followed. Protectionist trade policies also assisted bourgeois Syrians who had become engaged in manufacturing industries by preventing the local market from being flooded with cheaper foreign imports.

Beyond appeasing the elite, the state created an employment-generating public sector that invested heavily in civil infrastructure. The parents and grandparents of rebel-workers also benefited from subsidised food, electricity, and transport, as well as agricultural inputs like fuel and fertilizer. Sugar, transport, and fuel had been the object of up to 40 percent reductions since 1963 on global prices thanks to state subsidies. As a consequence, under early Ba’thist Syria, poverty diminished, and human development indicators continued to rise, even in Syria’s poorest regions (Khatib 2011: 132-137; Azmeh 2014; Hinnebusch 2012; Batatu 1999). On top of these pricing subsidies came universal health care and education as well as state-guaranteed pricing for agro-outputs and the possibility for gainful employment in the state sector that further limited unemployment.

At that time, Syria had one of the most redistributive taxation systems in the region, with a high rate of income tax on top-earning groups, although in reality the enforcement of a taxation scheme was lax, leading to minimal private sector contribution to overall state budgets (Azmeh 2014: 8). However, laxness kept the reactionary elite at bay, thereby maintaining political stability while gaps in the state budget were accounted for through resource-based extractive activity, i.e. oil and minerals, as well aid flows from other Arab nations and the Soviet Union (ibid). In sum, the Ba’th party’s economic compromise reflected Syria’s geopolitical realities, resource endowments, the country’s history of colonialism, continued imperialist threats, and particular socio-cultural articulations like Arabism that could bridge other sub-state loyalties.

By the 1990s this arrangement was no longer sustainable. A system of targeted privatization was not yet generating a significant flow to the state budget that could make up for losses in oil rent following a decrease in production, as well as a decline in geopolitical rent following the collapse of the Soviet Union. A significant demographic boom in the 1990s then coupled with a low rate of economic expansion that meant by the 2000s Syria was facing a series of challenges to the aforementioned model. In the face of global pressures toward
market openness, Bashar al-Assad responded by deepening liberalization that had already been initiated during later periods of his father’s rule. But the impact of these adjustments across Syria’s different socio-economic groups was not distributed in an equitable manner. The business-regime elite instead acted in a way that strengthened their grip over the economy, and the alliance between the security-military regime and the business community morphed them into a single ruling elite coming to preside over a crony capitalist economy (Azmeh 2014; Hinnebusch 2012; Haddad 2012). Rather than implement a taxation system that might have gone some way to maintaining the all-important pact between the city and the countryside, the cost of economic restructuring was, “to be borne completely by poorer sections of society through ending the earlier social compromise” (Azmeh 2014: 20).

From the mid-2000s onwards, nearly all subsidies were cancelled, with the exception of bread (Khatib 2011: 135). Even on the basis of official figures, the GINI index between 1997–2004 rose from 0.33 to 0.37, meaning an increase of 11 percent in inequality; in all likelihood, this was significantly higher on the eve of the uprising in 2011 (ibid: 206; al-Laithy 2005). This acceleration in poverty must also be read against the fact that many of these policies were implemented in a very ‘top-down’ hurried manner with seemingly no research with regards to conditions on the ground. Subsidies over energy, agro-inputs, and state purchase guarantees were cancelled even when much of the country was facing a severe drought (Azmeh 2014: 20; de Châtel 2014; Gleick 2014).

In 2003, the period in which Jamal’s graffiti story unfolded, certain geopolitical rents, tourism revenues and remittances from migrant workers all helped broadly to maintain Syria’s macroeconomic position and to prevent absolute poverty. The situation worsened over the later years. In 2007, Syria signed a free trade agreement with Turkey. This agreement, combined with the impact of Chinese goods, meant that by 2010, small-scale food producers and textile and furniture makers were unable to compete with cheap Turkish goods (Azmeh 2014: 15). On top of this, water mismanagement and structural adjustments over agriculture began to hit hard, a situation exacerbated by the 2006–2010 drought — the most severe in modern Syrian history (Mohtadi 2012; de Châtel 2014; Gleick 2014).

Ruptures in Syria’s socio-political order were able to spread as much due to this background of accelerating inequality and deprivation as to a foreground of revolutionary political practice that swept across SWANA in 2011. Resistance to ‘authoritarian upgrading’ mounted when parts of the Syrians population began to experience an awakening that (re-)organized the world into a firmly consolidated ‘people’ suppressed by ‘the regime.’ True, a collective recognition of a divide between citizens and ruling powers doubtless pre-dates the
uprising and is a core feature of any political system built around a distinct and distant political authority. But the point is that populist revolutionary movements everywhere build on this split specifically, and they oppose an incumbent regime of elites as fundamentally external and non-representative. Therefore, under populism, the bifurcation takes on a new intensity and a radical potential.

In light of the above, the fact that rebel-workers expressed through their populism through ‘democratic demands’ should not distort our understanding of just how important underlying economic conditions were in catalysing the revolution, i.e. massive poverty, unemployment, a rising cost of living and extravagance displayed by the narrow(ing) circles of the ruling elite (Azadian & Elsalem 2012). It could even be argued that social justice, economic rights, and equality were being equated with democracy, regardless of however wrongheaded that might be. This fact aside, the establishment of Local Coordination Committees, popular councils and the like, in limited parts of the country, are glimpses of what might have been possible under a genuinely mass revolutionary movement (ibid). Other than the LCCs, rebel-workers made very little of the self-declared official revolutionary leadership. The Gulf-funded Muslim Brotherhood, and Western liberal opposition leadership organisations, if talked about at all, were quickly dismissed as not genuinely representative of the uprising. “What makes them think they can speak for us?” Abdullah wondered, during the second round of Geneva peace talks, in January 2014. Nonetheless, we have seen in the above that when certain opposition forces did win the men’s respect, it was along the lines of their fighting capacity, their ability, in short, to bring about that overarching popular demand, ‘the people want the downfall of the regime.’

The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001; 2005) has been instructive in pinpointing how a ‘populist revolutionary subjectivity’ relates to the antagonisms generated by neoliberalism. If citizens’ grievances are responded to in a differential way, they tend not to transform into ‘radical demands.’ For instance, if some imaginary village is suffering from an inadequate water supply, the village elder petitions the local government official, and then men are dispatched to fix the supply, the matter would usually be considered resolved. But if the government official ignores the village — due perhaps to a policy change dictating that villages themselves must bear the cost of repairs, or out of an incapacity to meet the demand, then grievances can turn into antagonisms. Should the elders then contact the next village down and find that a similar response was given to their complaints about the conditions of their roads, these particular grievances might soon join up. Through a linking of grievances, ‘the people’ emerge as a socially recognizable category that stands in opposition to ‘the
regime.’ I argue it was this process that most underlies the awakening narratives made by rebel-workers when they reflected on the early stages of the uprising. In fact, are such processes of bifurcation and consolidation not a feature central to all recent populist uprisings in the Arab world and, even, beyond?

More broadly, this project has stressed that whatever meaning is given over to words and actions always depends on the wider discourse within which they are deployed. Admittedly, ‘discourse’ is itself a word in the social sciences that has so many uses (and misuses) that its meaning has become overextended to the point that whatever analytic purchase it once had appears rather limited. Nonetheless, ‘discourse’ has been used above to refer to a combination of signs and circumstances that together function to close the meaning given to a particular word or action. Thus, when in 2003 the teenagers of Hama wrote the words, “it’s your turn, doctor,” the meaning of these words and their action were not ‘closed’ in the same way that they became in 2011. In 2003 these were understood as the actions of silly teenagers or the police read a sign of their own malpractice and lack of vigilance. But in 2011, the exact same sentence was framed as a mark of insurrection, and this demanded the arrest of the children responsible. Their torture at the hands of the police was, in turn, read by the people as a call for action. Similarly, in chapter two, Abdullah’s reading of a biased referee’s decision at a Deir Ezzor football match in favour of a pro-regime team, which might have earlier been par for the course, or at least not controversial, was instead inflammatory given the collapsing quality of life in his province. This fact combined with the proliferation of other signs of revolt coming from inside Syria and across the Arab world.

Such a theory of discourse builds on the semiotics of Saussure to stress that every usage of a ‘sign’ is an attempt to reduce the potential meanings of that ‘sign’ to the point that clear communication and action is possible. The assumption is that any sign takes on its significance in a wider system of other signs. In the early stages of the Syrian revolution the word ‘ḥurriya’ [freedom] was able to stand simultaneously for more popular demands such as ‘freedom of expression’ and a ‘free press’ as it was for socio-economic justice. Conceptual words like ‘freedom’ might, I’ve argued, be better thought of as empty-signifiers given their capacity to bind together people in populist movement not bound together by a universal ideology (secularism, socialism, Islamism) nor a particular struggle (end military service, prevent rural poverty) but through antagonisms expressed toward a singular enemy: ‘the regime.’ If the meaning of ‘freedom’ can appear closed at any particular moment, then this is the result of discourse. In moments of mounting social antagonisms, meaning-making slips away from central hegemonic institutions, and words can become invested with alternative
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hopes and aspirations, thereby constituting a counter-hegemony. The battle over the meaning of words was recognized by rebel-workers too. When I’d ask questions that tried to uncover the demands being knotted together by words like ‘freedom,’ Mahmoud would occasionally shout back at me, in a mocking voice, ‘shu badak min ḥurriya!? ’ [what do you want from freedom!?] or just ‘badak ḥurriya ya Philip!? [you want freedom!]. In these moments he was satirising the well-known interrogations that protestors were said to endure if arrested, as well as the regime’s own attempt to close the meaning of ‘ḥurriya’ as the false demand of saboteurs and foreign terrorists.

In sum, the socio-economic life that came before the uprising should not be understood as an idyllic state of affairs. In fact, the social and economic conditions that pushed Syria’s rural hinterlands into a mounting reliance on fathers and sons working abroad are conditions on which the uprising itself was able to emerge. The rural and semi-rural villages and towns of Deraa, Deir Ezzor, Hama, Homs and Idlib were, for this reason, key focal points during the early stages of the uprising, areas that relied heavily on migrant labour. With this reliance stretched almost to breaking point, it is little wonder an uprising was quite easily sparked.

As this uprising degraded further into a civil and proxy war, rebel-workers became de facto refugees in Beirut. At first, this meant that whatever remittances they could secure became a vital lifeline for loved ones back in Syria, thereby further limiting any possibility for direct participation in the fighting. Later, when the Lebanese state established a labour sponsorship system aimed at controlling the migrant worker population, it became even harder to cross back across the border into Lebanon, should the men have risked returning to Syria. In such a context, the focus here has inevitably fallen on remote ways of knowing the uprising; through, for example, digitally circulated art objects, YouTube video clips, WhatsApp messages, conspiracy theories and popular tales of revolutionary bravery.

These sources were valued by rebel-workers as much for their capacity toward rapid circulation as for their presumed ‘direct access’ to the Syrian revolution’s advances and retreats. Furthermore, a sense of objectivity, authenticity and realism can be achieved more readily via a shaky phone camera or YouTube video in comparison to sleek propaganda reels. But, on the other hand, heavily digitally enhanced and edited images of martyrs, or evocative rebel art objects, were equally prevalent. These objects also conjured ‘authenticity’ in so far as they successfully captured and articulated an individual’s commitment to the revolutionary cause. This is presumably also the case for those who consumed pro-regime media objects. Rebel-workers did not appear hoodwinked by ‘opposition propaganda’ in any simple
unidirectional sense; rather, their selection and consumption of images and videos can be understood to have both reflected and reinforced an emergent revolutionary subjectivity and constituted digital community. This space for community was important given that socio-political limitations of living in Lebanon. Thus, the draw of media objects was then also down to the simple fact that rebel-workers in Beirut were separated from the uprising in the immediate sense. Instead, they depended on second-hand reports of falling bombs, stories of counter-revolutions and worsening socio-economic conditions. Yet, regardless of geographic distances and state borders, their daily lives, as well as whatever prospects they had for a future, remained intimately connected to the fate of the revolution. In-line with this connection, the men evidently found myriad means to participate in, and not just consume, some aspects of the uprising, with pride they presented opposition to the regime and displayed their revolutionary commitments as well as the commitments of comrades, kith, and kin.

Some manner of internet-enabled mobile device was possessed by every rebel-worker I met, and it is through these smartphones that the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity was made material, visible and recognizable. As a rebel diaspora, the relations formed through online digital networks were critical in how they facilitated participation, from a distance, in events that unfolded in Syria. The images circulated through these networks — set as WhatsApp profile pictures, made into Facebook posts and cover photos — all pointed toward the fact these media objects were intended not just to ‘represent’ but to do something. Their tasks were to elevate political consciousness, to express oppositional identity, and to take part in the destruction of the regime’s symbolic domination.

In contrast to establishment art, it was clear that the images popular with Syrian rebel-workers allowed them — as members of ‘the people’ — to be seen as responsible for the pictures’ creation, a creation that was due to their awakening. This has been particularly true for iconoclastic acts which targeted symbols of regime domination and thereby generated new images that had ‘the people’ as the creator and not the regime. But as the uprising militarized and transitioned into a civil war, the images which rebel-workers shared over smartphone networks became more concerned with the loss of friends, comrades, and loved ones. These objects seemingly constituted, materialized and made socially recognizable revolutionary subjectivity amongst the dead of the uprising. From the rupturing events of March 2011, these martyrdom commemoration practices pointed to the emergence of a character I called the ‘rebel-martyr.’ Ritual patterns of image circulations and speech acts closed the meanings around deaths caused by struggle and war. A death that might otherwise have been ‘liminal’
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and ‘fluid’ in the meanings attached to it became closed thanks to its articulation within a discourse defined by the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity.

In addition to knowing and participating in the uprisings, men had to negotiate some of its fallout. Focusing on the uprising’s impact on conceptions of masculinity, I described how young Syrian worker-rebels consume and talk about themselves in relation to different and often seemingly opposed assumptions, attitudes and patterns of behaviour in Beirut. There appeared to these young men in the city a particular type of recognized ‘freedom’ that was tied up with and spatially fixed in Lebanon. A set of consumption practices and desires were directed by these men toward certain portable consumer objects, such as fashion and phones. These objects sat aside but were not entirely detached from other political desires. But as these men attempted to assume their imagined future positions as patriarchal heads of households, ‘kibār’ [elders], it appeared that this project had become yet another image without a material base on which to build.

The necessity of finding some way to navigate life in Beirut was heightened by the uprising’s degradation into war, thereby blocking the men’s progress through a set of previously regularized life stages. In attempting to understand and to defend the uprising in the face of this degradation, a number of alternative political ideas and speculations were recurrently forwarded. Such speculations are, in some way, also a product of distance and opaqueness, an attempt to make sense out of news reports, testimonies, and sudden shifts in the balance of forces. But what these ‘conspiracy theories’ also appeared to do was to keep the split between ‘the people and the regime’ consistent. However, they did so at a cost. Thus, when the men proposed, correctly, that Hezbollah has been secretly ‘intervening’ in Syria they were proved correct. But when this explanation moved into the question of motivations, it all too easily split into the sectarian rhetoric of a Shia plot to build a new empire in the Middle East. These argumentative jumps both reproduced sectarian logics, while missing the essential class and imperialist components articulated through the Syrian uprising. The genesis story of Islamic State can move from being the by-product of the fundamentally destructive invasion of Iraq, to the product of a seemingly all-powerful regime.

In many ways the emergence, materialization and degradation of revolutionary subjectivity appear part of a global trend in populist uprisings. In Syria, however, neither the regime nor the official opposition is currently offering for these men any alternative vision of society that would seriously address deepening socio-economic inequalities. Indeed, a coercive socio-economic system was what, in the first instance, had led rebel-workers to
labour in Beirut. And it is fundamentally these antagonisms that will have to be redressed if any future Syria is to rise from the dead.

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This thesis began with Abdullah’s story and with his story it will end. Against the reality of the current moment of European refugee crisis, Abdullah began to face a compounding series of predicaments. He had been expelled from university and was compelled into highly precarious work. He married, but this brought little stability, and his movements were now constrained by a labour sponsorship system. I did not believe things could possibly get any worse. But then one evening in March 2016 my phone rang with yet more bad news.

Abdullah had been feeling extremely fatigued at work. At first, he put this down to the fact of manual labour on a construction site. Six days per week labour is, at the best of times, extremely tiring. But his condition continued to deteriorate, and he knew he needed to see a doctor.

In a different era, Abdullah would have returned to Syria and taken advantage of his country’s national health service, but this was impossible. Without his student exemption papers, he is wanted for military service. Abdullah has no health insurance, so he paid himself for his appointment at a local hospital. After a series of tests, it turned out he had contracted kidney disease. The doctor informed Abdullah that it is most likely due to poor drinking water. With his health weakened he can’t raise the money himself for treatment so, at the time of writing, he is trying his luck with a host of charities and NGOs.

In the meantime, Dala continues to insist he take an illegal boat to Europe. This boat might mean free medical treatment in Europe, a chance for gainful employment and a meaningful future. Other people they know have already crossed the Mediterranean, and from them the young couple have since learned that life is not so easy in a Greek refugee camp. But, surely, Dala once suggested to me, it would still be better than Lebanon. But still, Abdullah refuses to go. I can’t help but now wonder, what other option does he have left?

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106 Jamal is a car-window shield-installer originally from the semi-rural hinterlands of Hama in central eastern Syria. He featured previously in chapter two (pp. 107).
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