

ISLAM, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

radical dreams

french and belgian volunteers
in the syrian revolution

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

montassir sakhi

Radical Dreams: French and Belgian Volunteers in the Syrian Revolution

Islam, Culture, and Society

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Montassir Sakhi

Translation by Steve Garner

With a preface by Olivier Roy

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To the Syrian revolutionaries and those in exile,

To Justine,

To Nadia Fadil and Steve Garner, without whom this book would never have been published.

PREFACE

Getting to the core of what motivated the francophone volunteers who joined jihadist groups in Syria

*Olivier Roy*ⁱ

Religious radicalisation, *jihād* and terrorism are usually presented as a logical sequence. But we should not automatically conclude from this that everyone radicalised is a potential jihadi, and that every jihadi is a virtual terrorist. There are actually many more religious individuals who are ‘radicalised’ (whatever this label means) than there are jihadis, and many more jihadis (in this case those who went to fight in Syria) than terrorists (if we attach this label to the perpetrators of the Bataclan, Hypercacher and *Charlie Hebdo* attacks). Overall, from tens of thousands of ‘Salafists,’ we get a few thousand jihadis, and end up with a few dozen terrorists. This disproportion should raise questions about the relevance of the assumed continuity between these categories.

However, the dominant perspective in politics, the media and among many experts is that there is a pyramid whose small peak is supposed to be comprised of terrorists, resting upon a jihadi parallelogram supported by a Salafist base. The metaphor of the ‘funnel’ can also be used, where all the Salafists enter the funnel even if only terrorists emerge from it at the other end. Logically, it is therefore exclusively the issue of terrorism that, in retrospect, defines state policy regarding all the manifestations of religious faith and militancy that is associated with Muslim youth (both men and women, including converts). It is easy to understand why the state’s priority is security, at least in the short term. However, for the security approach to be effective (and not simply become a mantra), the parameters defining those who actually participate in terrorism must be precisely set out. Instead of that, we entrench a confusion that not only constrains the security apparatus to a time-consuming scattering of its resources, but also places a category of youth returning from *jihād* in limbo (and often in prison). These young people would have plenty to

say about their reasons for embarking on the ‘pathway of God’ and the failure of the great illusion they had believed in.

One set of problems is thus caused by placing categories in this type of hierarchy: the difficulty in designing a specific counterterrorism policy because the concept of radicalisation has been too watered-down, the poor management of ‘visible religious signs’ which ends up applying security control techniques to groups that are wearing them for exclusively religious reasons, the terrible treatment of ‘*returnees*’, who only have prison cells to look forward to. And lastly, the impossibility of dealing with a complex social phenomenon using solely political solutions. On one hand, this generates social tensions, and on the other, misses the actual target, i.e. people who actually end up committing acts of terrorism. Because for would-be jihadis, observing failure is more relevant than prison, and self-criticism is more effective than mandatory training in secular values.

In this book, Montassir Sakhi deploys a different and more heuristic approach. He tries to situate *jihadi* activity in Syria within its own spatial and temporal dimensions, without donning counterterrorism-tinted spectacles. He highlights that for the francophone Muslims whom he studies and gets talking, Syria is not just one jihad among many in a sequence of global *jihad* beginning with Al-Qaida and ending with Daesh. There is indeed a global *jihad* (with its own genealogy from Afghanistan to Syria, via Bosnia) and global terrorism (from Beghal to Abdeslam, via the Kouachi brothers),ⁱⁱ but the Syrian field has its own logics of time and space.

Indeed, Syria attracted a significant number of francophone volunteers unconnected to global jihadism or to ‘global’ terrorism per se, as they went only to Syria. Who are these specific jihadis, who have only been studied as if they are radicalised terrorists, an accurate profile only for a handful of them? And why is it important to study their specific circumstances?

Montassir Sakhi begins by trying to understand what really goes on under the term ‘jihad’ in Syria. In doing so, he rethinks the concept by inserting two original parameters: space and time. The guiding principle is the set of multiple meanings and intentions that these volunteers bundle into the word ‘jihad’. It is an approach that deliberately avoids theology and ideology in order to stick closely to the jihadis’ own interpretations of their struggle. Especially since, as Sakhi demonstrates, it

was neither religious studies nor reading theoretical texts produced for consumption by Al-Qaida or Daesh (the former produced very few) that motivated them, but an empathetic response to the revolt of the Syrian people against the Assad regime in 2011. Although there is no doubt that terrorist networks (from Beghal to the Kouachis and the Bataclan killers) preceded Syria, and that some of those individuals went to Syria to make common cause with Daesh from 2014, the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011 generated the development of a group of volunteers from Europe who were not part of the existing tradition of global jihad (from Afghanistan to Iraq via Bosnia, Yemen and Chechnya) and who became part of the Syrian jihad alone. Indeed, there was no massive mobilisation in French-speaking regions for other ‘jihadis’, especially to oppose France’s war in Mali from 2013, even though it had been explicitly framed by the French government as an armed struggle against jihadi terrorists, an event that could have mobilised apprentice French jihadis in particular. But this did not happen. They all went to Syria, and did so in 2011, well before the French participation in military operations against Daesh (2014), and none went to Mali.

What do the young people who joined the struggle in Syria before 2014 think? They left first of all, as Sakhi shows, to fight alongside the Syrian people against their arch enemy: the Assad regime. They were motivated by solidarity rather than the utopia of an Islamic state, and by dignity and honour rather than ideology or party: in Syria, everyone is religious and everyone is secular, because the struggle was not about the role of sharia but the toppling of a deadly regime. The adoption of armed struggle in Syria was a consequence of the regime, not the resistance, becoming radicalised: there was no longer any choice. Another way of conceptualising the violence was to emerge with Daesh, who would take back ownership of a genealogy of violence as purification rather than resistance. Yet we should never lose sight of the temporal aspect of this: the jihad between 2011 and 2014 was not ‘Daesh-ist’ and became so only for a minority of the volunteers. The others, however, would pay the price of the amalgamation of jihad and Daesh, all the more so as they would have difficulty explaining themselves, since their words and emotions had changed so much, without them feeling that they themselves had changed.

These volunteers came together in a space where everything was jihad: it was the struggle between good and evil, not a legal or ideological

concept. They experienced it as humble heroes wanting to do the right thing. But as soon as they arrived, they found themselves quickly at odds with the image they had in mind: the divisions between groups of fighters were difficult to grasp, and allegiance to one or the other was random at the outset. And they first chose whichever group welcomed them without asking too many questions. There was no neat dividing line between jihadis and Baathists, but intertwined networks of fluid and complex allegiances whose sociological basis and significance went right over the heads of the francophone volunteers.

However, the increase in Daesh's power in Syria changed everything. Daesh demanded that they choose, and the exacerbated system of violence it had established undermined the new arrivals' idealism. Above all, the West's intervention in Summer 2014 reversed the meaning of their involvement in one strike: until 2014, they had been against Assad, with the rest of the world against Assad, including François Hollande's France, which urged intervention against Damascus. But once the Western intervention against Daesh started in Summer 2014, the jihadis fell into the wrong side, moving from supporting the righteous struggle of the Syrian people against dictatorship to complicity in the global jihad. At that moment, several jihadis unproblematically embraced the Caliphate's cause, and reformulated their jihad as a fight against the West. The new volunteers knew what they were doing. But those who had arrived before Summer 2014, especially those who had returned to Europe before then, saw the meaning of their involvement change retrospectively. Their return thus assumed a new dimension, and they became suspect, all the more so when they did not challenge the motivations for going in the first place: participating in the jihad against a tyrant, supporting the *oumma* and attaining a renewed sense of Muslim dignity from their sacrifice (but not from suicide).

The concept of jihad cannot therefore be analysed only by acknowledging this timeline. The term has different connotations in the beginning of the uprising and in Daesh's peak of power.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet this was the moment, when many of the volunteers had already returned or joined other organisations, such as Nusra (which became Fatah al-Sham in July 2016, after breaking away from Al-Qaida, then became Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in 2017, which removed itself from the logic of global jihadism and even more so from terrorist activity, while still defending armed struggle).

Alongside this attention to timelines, the author adopts an original approach to the spatial dimension of Syrian society. Although Syria was a myth for the volunteers, on the ground, it was above all a complex civil society, with its specific political anthropology. Obviously, this society existed prior to the war, and the war did not destroy it. Rather it adapted itself and organised in wartime, and for the war, but without being fundamentally militarised. It was rebuilt in networks, enclaves, clumps of territory, in a juxtaposition of various types of power and forms of legitimacy, old money networks, new military commanders and both rural and urban families. The rebellion was massive and not ideological, civil society restructured itself outside of any model of what a state should be, while so many national liberation movements of the past in other regions had rushed to build a counter-state. This was both the strong point and the weakness of resistance against Assad.

The sudden emergence of Daesh in Syria would override the uniqueness of the rebellion in Syria. Daesh brought two ideas of rupture: a willingness to create a hegemonic state and the validation of violence. Space was no longer a complex interplay of networks and groups overlapping in the same country: it was time to choose, and as far as Daesh was concerned, everyone not on their side was a traitor. It was Daesh that decided what the correct motivation was, and who got to impose the narrative of jihad. Violence was no longer just a way to carry out war, it was the very essence of the willingness to purify both oneself and society. Death was no longer a risk you took on board; it became a value in itself: on the application form, volunteers would have to tick a box to choose which type of death they preferred, from simple martyrdom to suicide attack.

The Daesh era thus destroyed a particular discourse of jihad as being a humanitarian service to the community – see the provocative book *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* (2019) by historian Faisal Devji – a discourse that can be interpreted with a degree of scepticism in retrospect, but one which was indeed shared by thousands of volunteers. Henceforth these volunteers, like all those feeling tricked into fighting for a cause, no longer knew how to make sense of their own past. So an outsider's perspective, like Montassir Sakhi's, is needed to make sense of it.

INTRODUCTION

Studying the Syrian revolution and the jihad of the Europeans involved

This book is the result of fieldwork carried out in the Middle East and Europe between 2015 and 2023, and is also part of a longer, personal journey. It was actually during my political involvement in Morocco, with the socialist groups invested in the protest movement of 2011, that a political study of the revolution and its relationship with religion impressed itself on me as being of crucial importance. The critical power of the ‘Arab Spring’ thus fuels the entire book, resulting from the endless engagement of the ‘gaze’ of social science with my own critical involvement.

During the historical period of these revolutions, this critical power within the Arab populations was split into three major strands. First, the formulation of a radical position regarding sovereign powers embodied in the famous slogan seen across all the protest movements: ‘The people want to bring down the regime’. Next, the flexibility widely introduced into the traditional political world, symbolised by partisan organisations being left behind, as well as closer relationships being formed between supposedly antagonistic factions – in this case, Islamists and the Left. Lastly, in the face of the repressive exacerbation of the existing regimes, and with the protest movements having given up positing alternatives, the utopian revolutionary thrust of the Arab Spring coalesced into radical policies, tested particularly in Syria, and into support lent to the Syrians in their revolution.

The research as a piece of public writing

In Syria, the depth of the revolution – organically bound to the merciless repression quickly exercised against it by the Assad regime – is borne out particularly of the arrival of thousands of young migrants (*mouhâjirîne*) drawn for jihad from all over the world. I investigate this encounter in the light of my dual positioning as a political actor – who took part in the mobilisation against the regime in Morocco – and as a researcher studying modes of opposition in political modernity. My study of revolutionary politics in the shape that it assumed in 2011 is based on my own

participation in the collective experience of protest and activist learning – from 2005 to the present – within Moroccan left-wing organisations.

However, I have chosen not to research the ‘what is to be done’ of these activist organisations, located in the authoritarian contexts of postcolonial societies. The research whose findings I put forward here seeks to show that ordinary people experimented in terms of commitments to opposition and solidarity in the light of the Arab revolutions. By ‘ordinary’, I mean actors who did not belong to activist, partisan or avant-garde networks that claim to represent them. From this research positioning, the study aspires neither to make these actors models of the revolution or of jihad, nor to add my voice to the debate on what is to be done in the still open story of the Arab Spring. It is more a case of revealing the political thought expressed from 2011 in some parts of the Arab world, and by young people of ‘Muslim culture’ in Europe.

Public writing can, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu (2006) commenting on the work of Abdelmalek Sayad, be seen as ‘giving a voice to those who are most cruelly dispossessed of a voice, helping them sometimes, as much by their silences as their questions, to find their words [...] without ever adopting the role of spokesperson, or justifying the words, like so many arrogant defenders of good causes or virtue signallers’. Responding to the repression of the Syrian revolution by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, public writing is also a matter of recording mass crimes and showing the courage and power of resistance. In order to return the practices and discourses that had been excluded from public debate to its heart, because of both their rarity, and what was deemed the minority nature of their authors.

My Syrian interviewees, better than any political science modelling exercise, say why they sacrificed all their comfort and often their lives. Unlike overarching geopolitical categories that are so easy to transpose from one historical framework to another, and which obscure the deep undergirding of social conflicts, the interviewees narrate the meanings and objectives of their actions, including the peaceful mobilisation of the ensuing revolutionary war’s early days. The anthropology of the Syrian revolution sketched in this book thus aims to show, in a direct and uncomplicated way, the actors’ conscious paths, from the initial imperative of overthrowing the regime to its variations, produced by authoritarian organisations, that arose during the war. The role of collective morality, especially in its religious sense, will be a particular focus.

Understanding the Europeans' movements to and from jihad, in the actors' words

Writing publicly also entails taking account of the stigmatising explanations of the Europeans leaving for the jihad in Syria in the 2010s, following horrific terrorist attacks perpetrated 'in the name of Islam' in Europe, especially France and Belgium. It is actually essential not to neglect the timeline starting in 2011 in order to take the decisions of young Europeans to participate in the revolutionary activity seriously. These decisions could have led to a minority of them being involved in these attacks: a few dozen of the almost 5,000 people (2,500 of whom were French or Belgian) who reached the war zones in Syria during the 2010s (see box).

How many Europeans went to jihad in Syria?

Despite the ever-growing research and public policy projects on this topic, we have no precise or undisputed figures on the number of Europeans who went to jihad in Syria (and Iraq) from 2011. By 2022, this number was estimated at more than 5,000 men and women (mainly French, Belgian, German, British and Dutch), not including children who went with their parents or were born there, with at least one European parent (Capone et al. 2023). Until 2019, the number of people registered as 'fighters' from Syria returning to Europe had been estimated at 1,600. Out of the 5,000 estimated fighters, around a third are said to have died in action, not including children, women and men killed in the 2019 bombing of Bāghūz (which marked the end of the Islamic State's 'caliphate') or while they were incarcerated in the prisons and camps of Northern Syria.

The French Justice Minister stated in October 2022 that the number of French nationals who had lived in Islamic State was 'estimated to be 1,500',¹ without giving further details on the other possibilities (French fighters staying with groups other than Daesh, or those who had left and returned before the creation of Daesh). Other official figures suggested that 1,700 French nationals had arrived in Syria since the outbreak of the war.² At the start of 2023, estimates of the number of French minors who had returned from Syria stood at roughly 300, more than 80 of whom had been repatriated.

The number of Belgian nationals estimated to have gone to Syria is estimated to be *a minimum of* 413, between 2012 and 2018 (more than 600 nationals in total, including children brought by their parents or born in

war zones, but excluding women, who were not officially counted as combatants (Renard and Coolsaet, 2018). The authorities also presented the figure of 629 *foreign terrorist fighters* including, in addition to people who had lived in Syria, adults intercepted at airports prior to leaving the country or in transit countries before reaching Syria (Detry et al., 2021). The typical punishment for these ‘returnees’ required by the Belgian courts – when simply leaving for Syria was the main grounds for the accusation – was three to five years’ imprisonment. By 2019, 398 Belgians sentenced for terrorist offences since the start of the departures for Syria had been released. At least 103 of whom had been categorised as *foreign terrorist fighters* in the prison service’s files, whereas 122 had been categorised as ‘terrorists’, ‘hate preachers’ or ‘radicalised’ (Kervyn de Meerendré et al., 2022). This number had surely doubled by 2023, because in the meantime, a wave of prisoners had been released, and women deemed to have served out their time in Syrian detention camps had been repatriated (Cook and Vale, 2019).³

In the interviews I carried out with young French and Belgian returnees from Syria, they highlighted two issues in capturing precise figures. First, several of them who had left and returned before going to Syria became a criminal offence (2014 in France, 2016 in Belgium) are absent from the statistics because they were not prosecuted. Even if the criminal justice system, practising a law of exception, caught up with people whose actions (leaving for Syria) were not illegal, several migrants managed to escape its reach: ‘To slip through the net, it was enough for the parents not to have reported the departure to the police, or that the *Daesh* leaks of 2016 [see chapter 10] had not provided more information’, a young returnee from Syria explained to me. Next, another group missing from the official figures is fighters who died in Syria, and whose parents either did not contact authorities, or did not provide enough proof about the departure and fate of their child. Additionally, there was the difficulty in counting the dead when certain states such as France do not officially acknowledge death until ten years have passed since the person was declared missing, despite what the parents believed (which makes the process of mourning more problematic).

The important thing in my interpretation, unlike the political and legal security-focused perspectives that seek to explain the people leaving by using the traditional categories of ‘terrorism’ and ‘radicalisation’, is first of all to understand the personal nature of each radical commitment

of those involved and interviewed. Remaining faithful to the ‘people’s words’ according to the method advocated by anthropologist Sylvain Lazarus (1996), enables us to verify the substance of both the positive utopia that drove them, and its negative variant, which was likely to lead them to encounter murder and violence as part of their commitment. Contrary to how the majority of studies of radicalisation proceed, we need to reframe these departures for Syria in national and international contexts marked by the emergence of new forms of political engagement. Moreover, examining the full range of political motivations enables us to assess the emotional effect and ideals that this emigration brought with it, as well as how they were ‘updated’ in the field, when Islamic State (Daesh) emerged in 2014.⁴ The principle to which the narrative thread of this book is attached is therefore to reinsert the trajectories of these migrants into the timeline of the revolution, and then into that of the counter-revolution heralded by the coming of Daesh.

As for the place of Islam in this journey, it will be studied in relation to the interviews with my respondents, following the various forms that their renewal of devotion and personal reinvestment in the Islamic tradition assumed. Through an examination of the development of jihad, migrants’ thoughts, and the decisions taken before and after leaving and returning, the findings suggest the need to rethink the religious radicalism that emerged among the followers of a minority faith in Europe. This is because the protagonists’ own explanations for their departure for the revolution primarily show forms of solidarity influenced by the Arab Spring of 2011 and by the specific political experience of a generation resulting from postcolonial immigration, and which was discovering the updated uses of faith in Islam (Esmili, 2023).

The roots of this migratory pattern can actually be found in family relationships and Islam as a minority religion in the West. An initial observation that would require verification, by this study, is that this process of growing up as a minority should be separated from becoming involved in terrorist activity via an attack coming in the midst of war. This is why my study on departures for and returns from *jihad* in Syria was designed on an ethical and epistemological foundation consistent with taking account of both the political thought of the young people involved, and their connections to their families, particularly their parents (see ‘Methodology’ box). It is thus only after making long-term commitments to their families that a research relationship could be established with their children, first

in Syria and Iraq, then in France and Belgium once they had returned and come out of prison. This has enabled me to give a glimpse of a reality seldom seen in the public debate, i.e. the strength of family bonds and the role of emotions that amplified the disillusion stemming from the revolution's abrupt halt, as it became brutalised and Daesh's theological terrorism emerged. And as we look back and see how my interviewees' involvement had such terrorist potential throughout the very varied examples of their trajectories, it will become easier to understand the paradoxically minority nature of this involvement in an international war known for the savagery of the violence that left its mark.

Interviews with the migrants for jihad: methodological safeguards

I kept a thread of questioning in the meetings with both the Syrian returnees and their families, and those with the Syrian revolutionaries: how to discuss leaving for war in the time of the Arab Spring? And what did it mean to adopt a religious component to one's life with the possibility of death when you live in a Western society that appears peaceful?

Generally speaking, 'radicalisation studies', which developed within the disciplines of criminology, sociology and psychology since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, above all consists of assessing public policy and flagging up new routes to prevention and surveillance (Guibet Lafaye and Brochard, 2016). The topics of most interest then do not allow for a critical engagement with social movements and bodies located outside the institutional structures. These topics can be summarised as falling into one of three main categories.

Firstly, research that includes critiques, analyses the production of political discourses and measures of state action taken on radicalisation. This work tracks the development of counterterrorist laws and procedures, the deployment of the courts, and the history of policies for managing radicalisation. It offers a necessary contextualisation for understanding changes in counterterrorist policies, but loses sight of the experiences of the people involved and their perceptions of such policies. Indeed, while the majority of researchers have chosen to address the study of 'radicalisation' through an institutional lens, it is also because access to actors is expensive, requiring the establishment of links with them, albeit without intimate knowledge of their religious values and politics.

Second, there is research that focuses massively on the state practitioners (educators, social services, prison services, and new professions

linked to radicalisation, etc.). This work, at best, enables us to identify the transformation of professions for surveillance, for the application of court sentences or social work focused on crime and urban marginality. Yet this perspective neglects the empirical aspect of the relationship between administrators and those they administer, with the former subject to professional confidentiality that the researcher cannot breach. The researcher is often viewed as an 'inspector' by the public services, even when they are based in universities.

Lastly, there is sociological and psychological profiling. This corpus produces automatic profiles based on statements; statistical studies of biographical patterns related to departures to fight overseas, and terrorist attacks; and the analysis of discourse generated by the leaders of Islamic organisations that have adopted violence and terrorism. The profiling enables static studies to be produced that comply with pre-conceived ideas, with no chance of focusing on ruptures, doubts, the way thoughts meander, or the complexity of thought itself when it is faced with experiences like war, or emigration for jihad.

Anthropological enquiry can fill gaps in research hitherto carried out on 'profiles' and the value of counterterrorist policies, but solely on the condition that it introduces a fork in the road constituted by terrorism studies. In order to focus exclusively on my own research strategy, bound up with the specific sites involved, the characteristics of this two-way split, which seeks to break with the modelling logic of profiling, can also be summarised in three points.

First, studying sensitive topics requires a practical knowledge, first, of the relevant collective way of life and, second, of the political thought expressed in it. In the 'collective way of life' we have to be able to understand the phenomenon of departure and return, and the punishments meted out for them within the immediate environment of the family and the community. By 'political thought', I refer to the opposite of what classic sociological profiling would study. Rather this means addressing the complexity of politico-religious thought among people involved in political actions outlawed by the courts, while striving to grasp some principles in the history of religion that could illuminate the ideas that the interviewees express (Karsenti, 2022). Therefore we have to accept that legal truths are one form of truth among others, interacting in modern society, and accepting that politico-religious thought, as violent as it may be, is the offspring of this very modern society in which it is inscribed

according to various lived patterns (friend-enemy, national wars, forms of fascism, various and embedded ideological forms, etc.). In this way, the study exceeds the reduction of 'radicalisation' to a 'public issue', as it challenges a central dimension of the social sciences: violence and the division of social spaces, including therefore, the meanings of religion, the nation and politics in their broadest sense. This research also suggests that we engage with the actions of institutions that surveil and punish through the ways that those targeted make sense of such actions and discourses, as the public policies alone do not give us information about the processes of engagement with them, or disengagement from them. Neither does it tell us about the 're-integration' of individuals. Moreover, because although it targets a defined group, the state's counterterrorist apparatus can also be deployed against the whole of society, or at least against other social groups, thus exceeding the narrower matter of radical Islam.

Next, in practical terms, my methodological guidelines are oriented by the theories that generated the research. 1) Studying why people went to Syria is to understand the collective dynamic transmitting the values of solidarity with the Arab protest movement, but also the environment of European society, where social disintegration and the potential for violence being turned on Muslims is manifest. 2) Researching the return from war zones entails understanding the role of families in the ongoing integration of their children, taking care of grandchildren and the bonds of re-affiliation that had never been broken. 3) Focusing on the topic of political Islam means acknowledging; the interpenetration of colonial domination – inscribed in the power relationships dominating postcolonial immigration; the West's reinforced efforts to control its borders; and the history of a religious tradition formed within the imperial context, a tradition which is seeking modes of existence both distinct from, and in communication with Christianity.

Lastly, the final methodological guideline: researching sensitive issues also requires addressing the obvious political element of the departure process, instead of reducing it to a form of psychopathological deviance, the effects of religious propaganda, the 'problem of integration', or at best, to the effects of social exclusion and racist and Islamophobic discourses. Seriously engaging with the relevant actors entails exploring their political thought and grasping their trajectories, while analysing the social conditions in which these have been constructed, without reading

it off a pre-existing framework. In a nutshell, I replace the ‘radicalisation’ paradigm by a study of the phenomenon created from the actors’ perspectives, and their own reflexivity about their journeys.

Committed research

As I stated earlier, the research behind this book came to be as a result of my involvement as an actor in the 20 February Movement in Morocco, due to the historical sequence of events begun in 2011. In this way, it is political. In the Southern Mediterranean region, the work is part of a timeline and paradigm driven by a postcolonial and post-national generation (Mannheim, 2011). The study is, moreover, committed to a line that shows the strong points of revolutionary action and the limits experienced by its stakeholders on the ground.

From my perspective, the Syrian ‘field’ became a site for research and political apprenticeship as the next step of my initial political engagement, as the challenge that asserted itself there seemed to embody a transcendence of the politics that, in Morocco and elsewhere in the Arab world, managed to stop revolutionary momentum as a response to repression in its tracks by promoting false alternatives: either nationalist authoritarianism or neoliberalism. In my exchanges with revolutionary Syrians and their foreign supporters, I first sought dialogue about the momentum, the ideas and the way the revolution panned out, rather than just clarification of their individual motivations. Hence my later exchanges with the families of Europeans who had gone to Syria, the first entry point into the space for discussions about leaving and returning, with constantly renewed commitment in defence of their rights while security-led public policy asserted itself in Europe, pre-determined by the goals of counterterrorism. Beyond the substantiation of their children’s trajectories, my research was thus tied to very practical issues that these families encountered, such as legal threats to the parents for ‘funding terrorism’, the refusal to repatriate their children and grand-children, the denial of mourning for those who had lost their children, and the profiling and surveillance of the communities.

The original research with the families had enabled me to meet their children, returnees to France and Belgium, who were put on trial, incarcerated and released. The interviews I carried out with the latter were focused on revisiting the experience of leaving and returning, the

sharing of ideas and the holding of political discussions on the revolution in which they had tried to participate. This relationship gave rise to critical exchanges on their thinking around jihad, which led to a high-risk involvement, a collective analysis of the experience of the terror being carried out across the Islamic State, and an observation of what life under police and legal constraints after returning to France or Belgium was like.

I was first seen as an ally of the parents supporting the cause of recognising rights such as repatriation and opposition to the discourse on 'Islamist' radicalisation, before our interactions ever became discussions about politics in relation to the Arab revolutionary space to analyse what played out during the timeline of Spring 2011, and what remained of that movement's potential. My research practice 'in interiority', to use Sylvain Lazarus' (1996) term – attempting to discover the huge set of shared contemporary social problems, the heart of this work is therefore the attempt to reconstruct the various forms of utopian consciousness that appeared, from 2011, among 'ordinary' people, who were experimenting with politics that swayed between positive revolutionary utopia and negative, terrorist radicalism. This meant examining these forms of politics one by one: first the practice, Syrian revolution, then the emigration that fed it, and finally, the potential for terrorist counter-utopia. The interviews I use for evidence show how these political experiences competed with one another and occurred sequentially within the journeys undertaken by my respondents.

My own political experience in the 20 February Movement gave me the opportunity to encounter the Syrian revolution, the clearest (and most tragic) manifestation of the promise of liberation born in the Arab world in 2011. This experience led me from Morocco – where I did the first batch of interviews in 2015 with young Moroccan returnees from jihad – to the Turkish-Syrian border in 2016, then again in 2017, alongside anthropologist Hamza Esmili. These border zones – some of which would be destroyed in the terrible earthquakes of 6 February 2023 – were where our encounter with the historic reality of the Syrian revolution took place. Its story was told to us in the convalescence homes where the wounded were recovering, and in the neighbourhoods where exiled Syrians lived, by actors still partly involved in the struggle against the Assad regime.

The exchanges with the revolutionaries clearly brought out the complexity of the relationship between politics and religion at this historic time. Two faces of jihad in particular were revealed. One is utopian and

revolutionary, based on the moral resources open to Syrian society experiencing the truly extraordinary violence perpetrated by the Baathist State, the rogue inheritors of a political tradition whose glory days were in the 1960s.⁵ The other is Islamic State, which spread totalitarian terrorist violence against civilian populations, something I confirmed in a study carried out in Iraq in 2017, aimed at establishing an ethnography of Islamic State governance based on the experiences of those who had first-hand knowledge of it.

In summary, the research data used for this book brings together dozens of interviews carried out in France, Belgium and Morocco, as many with the mothers and sisters as with emigrant fighters themselves, the latter being returnees from Syria and just out of prison. Additionally, there are interviews done during two studies carried out on the Turkish-Syrian border (in 2016 and 2017), and another in Iraq (2017). To be precise, the ethnographic corpus generated across these projects includes: twelve extended interviews with European returnees from Syria between 2021 and 2022, when they left prison (six French and six Belgians, three of whom were women. I met most of these young people under court supervision or on probation due to friendships I had cultivated with their parents as part of my earlier research); five interviews with Moroccan and Tunisian emigrants between 2017 and 2018; twenty interviews out of the 60 carried out with Syrian revolutionaries, plus the participant observations done on the Turkish-Syrian border; 10 interviews out of around 40 with parents of French and Belgian emigrants to Syria, as well as participant observations of these families; and several interviews and observations from Iraq in the refugee camps for those who had fled life under the Islamic State government in Mosul.

In this work I also present several extracts from biographical and subjective statements. I am seeking less to illustrate a theoretical argument than to provide opportunities to read how people express a subjective relationship with politics, as such statements are sometimes more revealing than analysis. These unmediated extracts help us understand people's life experiences and beliefs, again posing the question of revolution and politico-religious utopias in a different way.

A bottom-up reinterpretation of the Syrian revolution in ten chapters

This book is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 presents the principal positions that polarised political and media representations in the West around the Arab revolts, the Syrian revolution and Europeans leaving to fight in jihad. A special emphasis is also placed on the discourses produced by the Arab Left, eroded by the Pan-Arab heritage impacting their view of the Syrian revolution. This is done to introduce a few ways of understanding the role of the old Pan-Arab ideology that in the vast majority of these left-wing circles deeply hindered solidarity with the Syrian revolutionaries' mobilisation against the savagery of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, on the pretext of evidence of foreign pro-Western powers' interference in the conflict.

In chapter 2, a review of the 2011-2012 period allows us, via the stories told by the revolutionaries encountered, to describe what was at stake in the initial peaceful protests, the claims made and the main characters comprising the 'revolutionary community'. We pay particular attention to the liberal utopia that emerges from my respondents' testimonies and its relationship to the more general period of the Arab protests. This chapter introduces the transformation of this utopia at the moment of repression into a revolutionary politics here and now. I also look at the role of 'wise men' (*woujahâ*) in the formation of the revolutionary community reacting to widescale repression. Lastly, this chapter demonstrates the dynamic of distancing the traditional activist organisations (unions, political parties, civil society bodies, student movements) for the benefit of a *hirak* (movement) unifying the revolutionary community on the basis of a renewed morality, and as a religious party, thus working around the modern mechanisms of political representation.

Chapter 3 deals with the Syrian state's response to the revolutionary community and the practice of controlling territory that enabled the regime to keep going, even while it was losing the battle for legitimacy in the cities and the countryside. While resuming the analysis already flagged about the tight security network woven around the figure of the president, this chapter focuses on the new agents of repression during the civil war, made up of the paramilitary groups institutionalised through official discourse, the paramilitary militias called '*a-chabbiha*'.

In chapter 4, I turn to the job of describing the social order prevailing in the Free Zones liberated from the regime by the revolutionaries. We will see that emancipation from the governing elite framework, although it provoked a serious conflict about the regime and its allies, does not mean that collective conventions did not exist. Certain institutions, such as the Free Police and the Unified Justice illustrate this reality specific to revolutionary society in the Free Zones. The study shows the way that the main court system under the revolutionary order functioned and how the forms of resistance opposed to attempts to form a new government worked. How did armed groups and civilians manage the non-centralisation of weapons while establishing a dual use of violence, on one side the jihad against the regime, and on the other, the internal struggle against the temptation of a new political institution (with, among others, the war against the Islamic State which erupted in the war zones)? The principal modes of organisation studied in the revolutionary period prior to the Islamic State's establishment in Syria were to be the armed groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the Free Police, the justice system and the 'administrators' of the revolution (*char'ī*).

Chapter 5 concentrates on the uses of religion in the revolution, particularly the use of the term jihad. Based on an anthropological analysis of the risk of dying on the battlefield and the transformations this brought about in the collective, I try to clarify the role of religious symbolism in the process of becoming loyal to the revolution in transnational Muslim solidarity. Beyond that, the research with the revolutionaries makes explicit the spiritual power authorised by the interpretation of religious texts, from the critical perspective of modern powers, in the revolutionary-held regions.

In chapter 6, I look at the neo-national jihad driven by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, as a counterpoint to the revolutionary jihad. Basing my account on the interviews with former Islamic State administrators and people who lived in areas governed by them, I describe the policies of territorial control and governance, and the way that the 'Caliphate' of Daesh was organised into 'ministries'. Going back over the history of how power was institutionalised under the IS, the chapter illustrates the government and bureaucratic acts that made religion – contrary to the case in the Syrian revolution – the heart of a politics of terror. We will see how the rapid imposition of a state order and a homogeneous behavioural code in the areas conquered by IS functioned by way of legal

and judicial mechanisms, accompanied by a kind of gradualism in the application of new laws that were foreign to the culture of the society to which they were applied.

The following chapters of the book are drawn principally from the interviews and observations carried out in France and Belgium, and is aimed at understanding the dynamics of departure for Syria, religious commitments and positive political utopias (involvement in transnational solidarity) and negative ones (terrorist attacks) by the French and Belgians who left for Syria. Chapter 7 therefore introduces the concepts of solidarity and brotherhood with the Syrian revolution, coupled with the wide range of motivations for joining jihad between 2011 and 2014, due to the absence of a centralising organisation in the revolutionary space. These forms of solidarity are studied first via the descriptions of the welcome extended to the international migrants in the revolution, then through an analysis of the trajectories of two French migrants. Lastly, the chapter shows how this solidarity was echoed in the families of these migrants for jihad.

After this 'conscious solidarity', chapter 8 examines the political underpinnings of the migration. It examines the millenarian religious dimension based on the migrants for jihads' complex understanding of the conflict and political struggle in the Arab Spring of 2011. Moreover, using six interviews with Belgian and French returnees from Syria, the chapter explores the politics of jihad carried out against the source of colonial (and postcolonial) pain, as well as the media's over-emphasis of the 'Islam problem' in their home countries.

Chapter 9 is about 2013. This was a turning point for the migrants for jihad in Syria as it represented the beginning of internal divisions that were to lead to the formation of IS. This chapter returns to the dangerous fusion between two disparate political situations (revolutionary Syria and an Iraq dismantled by colonisation). It presents the self-criticism of the migrants for jihad, articulated on the back of the experiences of their involvements. Using new interviews, it shows the same political values that had driven the original wave of emigration, compounded by the 'fear' and 'doubt' around the 'ambiguity' of the war, triggered a process of disengagement from action and the peaceful return to the country of origin.

Lastly, chapter 10 shows how this opportunity to return home peacefully was replaced by savagery and tragedy in the case of a tiny minority

of those returning from Syria that went on to embrace terrorism. So we also examine the basis for three types of terrorism deployed in the West: (1) the attacks on civilians by Europeans in response to the war waged by the International Coalition, and against the counterterrorist legislation that 'excommunicated' them; (2) attacks perpetrated by migrants unconnected to Syria or IS, but from former colonies, and acting in a Western postcolonial world becoming increasingly securitised at its borders; (3) antisemitic attacks whose roots lie in European antisemitism maintained via the silence of governments and reactivated by a new generation of people descended from immigrants, as part of the collapse of solidarity with Palestine and the amplification of several forms of tolerated racism.

CHAPTER 1

Political and Media discourse on the jihad and the Syrian revolution

The historical timeline referred to in this book begins in late 2010, when young Mohamed Bouazizi, an itinerant vendor, set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia. News of his death, on 4 January 2011, caused uproar across the country and marked the start of the Arab revolutions, led by a new generation of activists. The revolutionary politics that emerged owes their life to radically new social movements, far from historical protest organisations and their traditional agendas such as the clichés referring to the incursions of colonial powers in the region. This historical context should be outlined before we go into detail with our reconstruction of the revolutionary period, and that is the aim of this chapter.

Three key elements of the 2011 revolution

In Syria, the revolution that gripped the country in early 2011 constitutes a historical turning point, not only for the region, but also across the world, and was characterised by three major elements. The first is to do with national order and modern political thought: the Syrian revolution revealed a type of politics that was thought to be long gone and absorbed by the power of the modern state. It proves that the courage and resourcefulness of ordinary people can drive radical change challenging the Western model of the nation-state exported throughout the world via colonisation. The first hypothesis of this book is that this event relaunched the debate about the very meaning of the term, ‘revolution’, as well as about the forms that protest politics can assume worldwide.

The second element relates to colonial interventions that happened in the years following the outbreak of revolution, mainly the one led by Russia and its allies (Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah) and the one carried out by the International Coalition created in 2014 to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (United States, United Kingdom, France, etc., joined by the Gulf States; see box below). In response to the regime’s war on its own population, the international powers’ only plan was to win this

war in order to defend their own interests and hegemony, first by turning the Assad regime into a vassal state, and then by replacing it altogether.

The International Coalition against the Islamic State

The International Coalition against the Islamic State was launched as an ‘urgent project’ during the International Conference on Peace and Security in Iraq which met in Paris on 15 September 2014, at the suggestion of France and Iraq, to ‘express their commitment to the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Iraq and [create] a political framework to support Iraq, [in order to] support the new Iraqi government to successfully combat Daesh’ (the acronym of the Arabic name for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). On 24 September, this coalition comprised 22 member-states, which were then joined by dozens of others. Its objectives had been set a few days previously by then US President Barack Obama, in a speech on 10 September (Hudson, 2014). The creation of the Coalition was a continuation of a policy of American air strikes against Daesh positions that had begun in Iraq on 8 August 2014, before being carried over into Syria in September (Le Parisien, 2014).

During the first phase, consisting of aerial bombardments of Daesh positions in Iraq and Syria, the main states involved, apart from the US, were France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, the UK, Italy, Australia, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Morocco. On the French side, this mission, called Operation Chammal (North Wind), entailed the mobilisation of 600 soldiers – but other official sources in 2015 referred to 3,200 troops (État-Major des Armées, 2015). Among other weaponry, France deployed its aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, a nuclear attack submarine, one frigate and at least 10 Rafale aircraft. French troops also took part in ground operations supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces.⁶

In January 2019, the International Coalition announced the start of its withdrawal from Syria, and in December 2021, the Iraqi government declared the end of its combat mission on Syrian territory. See the official website of the International Coalition: <theglobalcoalition.org/en>.

Yet our research shows how despite the use of traditional methods of violent interference targeting civilians, in spite of the tragedies of the massacres, exodus and exile, it was the revolution that brought an end to the government's control over Syrian territory and to the Syrian Pan-Arab nationalism that had dominated social spaces – after 10 years of war, only the Damascus-Latakia-Hama area in the West, and part of Aleppo were still in the hands of the much-weakened Syrian administration. This was so even though the revolution, opposing all forms of organisation and representation, had deliberately left a vacuum in the place where power had been by choosing to respect the founding principle of the Arab Spring: 'bring down the regime'. This objective remained its principal tenet when the war intensified, and the temptation of partisan and sectarian politics loomed. Indeed, even when it armed itself to take on the war against the regime and other state powers, including the Islamic State, the revolution refused to organise itself like a 'government', while staying true to the Arab Spring slogans: *karâma*, *houriya*, *adala ijtima'iya*, *isqât an-nidâm* (dignity, freedom, social justice, the fall of the regime).

The third element, born out of the ongoing events in Syria, was the uses of religious faith in the revolution, a general analytical framework allowing us to grasp both local revolutionary practice and its openness to young Muslims from both the Arab-Muslim world and Western societies. This religiosity is actually characteristic of both the revolutionary forces when they turned to armed struggle, and, as we will see, of many of the migrants for jihad. This is undoubtedly the most sensitive issue raised in this book, although it is made less comprehensible by another event on the timeline: the arrival in Syria of the Islamic State and other groups claiming Islamic authority as the basis for anti-revolutionary practice, in 2014. Without evacuating this level of complexity, chapters 2-6 of this book show how religion, in all its forms, is a basic matrix of the revolutionary process. It was part of the initial days of peaceful demonstrations in 2011 and became crucial when the shift to armed struggle for the majority occurred as the only way out when faced with the Assad state.

But it has to be said that very often in the media and political debates in the West as well as those in the civil society of Arab-Muslim world countries, we see very poor levels of comprehension of religion's role in the Syrian revolution. This is the case to the point where that role has been used, with no basis, to justify very disparate strategies: the adoption of various counterterrorist policies in the West; the legitimization of a war

against the Syrians by the Russian army; and the ideological reactivation by certain Arab and Western elites of the old debate about the separation of church and state.

This research however shows that for the revolutionaries themselves, these debates are long since over. Religion for them is just one component of the revolution, whereas referring to Islam in order to establish a new government, means, in their eyes, the politics of terror and counter-revolution. Chapters 7-10 of this book will demonstrate that most foreign fighters in Syria shared this perspective, which allowed them, rightly, to be adopted into the Free Zones. The Syrian revolutionaries knew how to distinguish between the very small numbers of migrants (according to the witnesses interviewed) who believed in the theological statist and terrorist visions of the Islamic State after 2014, and those who had initially supported the revolution of 2011, and had joined up to fight the Syrian regime.

Yet this perspicacity, which is part of the evidence for objective observers, was far from being shared by the leaders of Western powers when the Arab Spring erupted. Their views of the societies involved had been overdetermined by the 'Islamic threat' since the 1980s, regardless of the fact that neither the Muslim Brotherhood⁷ nor the other radical Islamic groups had played the slightest role in the popular uprisings in Tunis, Cairo and Damascus against the dictatorships ensconced in these capital cities.

From the Western viewpoint: incomprehension and confusion

Because of this, in response to the initial uprisings in Tunisia against the Ben Ali regime, Western governments – whose reaction was expected by the demonstrators – produced ambivalent responses. The French government, via its Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, first responded by offering the 'expertise' of its forces of order (Le Monde, 2011). A few days later, when a hitherto unseen political horizon in the Arab world peeked through, Western diplomacy procrastinated and distanced itself before talking directly about this breach opening up in the former colonies and inside states bound to the West by contracts, cooperation in trade and development and complex relationships since independence. When calls for the toppling of these regimes rang out in the streets of the Arab world, European and American government spokespersons' speeches were

made in support of the demands for freedom, equality and an end to corruption. The West's official discourse had no other choice but to approve of its own founding principles narrative, while remaining vigilant about a possible 'Islamist Autumn'. At the very moment when the parties claiming authority from political Islam first entered into various governments, as a result of a set of free and fair elections, as in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, it was actually the military and tyrannical Autumn that was to steadily assume control in several countries against the background of deafening silence from the Western powers. This silence – in the case of Egypt for example – was also comparable in its tragic consequences to the interventions guided by colonial interests rather than by the defence of the populations massacred by the regimes, in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

It was on Syrian soil that the categorical rejection of the regime of terror was most forcefully expressed. Instead of viewing the wave of young Muslims leaving for Syria as the expression of religious 'radicalisation' stemming from an Islamic pathology, this research shows that this phenomenon can be explained first as transnational solidarity with the values fuelling the Syrians in their rejection of the Assad regime. Rather than the actual support of the UN and the forces legitimising power in Syria, the developing revolution witnessed unexpected bridges made with Muslim communities across the globe. The strength of the challenge mounted, bolstered further by the unprecedented levels of violence it was facing, led hundreds of young French and Belgians – and Europeans in general – to head for Syria and the jihad that was steadily gaining momentum. The logic of this wave of departures – generational in the way that German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) uses the term (Mannheim, 2011) – was to experiment with a new politics of solidarity. In the interviews, returnees from Syria describe this solidarity (see chapters 7 and 8). However, the political voices of this solidarity were ignored in the dominant discourses of the West, with the courts passing sentence on all those who left during the period marked by terrorist attacks in Europe and by the war. This war brought confusion to the political responses and media coverage of the conflict, and also over who the actors in the violence in Syria and Europe were. In Europe, there was however, a chance to calmly revisit the story of people leaving for jihad. The returnees from Syria were mostly dealt with through the courts, their words and stories told in very long trials from 2015 in France, and from 2016 in Belgium. However, what they said was afforded no political value in public spaces

as the theme of ‘radicalisation’ had become the dominant frame for understanding the politics of going to Syria.

In both the interviews and the trials, the Syrian returnees and their families referred to the political responsibility and the confusion of national and European elites when the Syrian revolution was becoming militarised. Indeed, until April 2013, Didier Reynders, then Federal Belgian Foreign Minister, particularly involved in the Syrian conflict, was able to distinguish between ‘terrorist’ departures and those fuelled by a spirit of ‘revolution’ and ‘idealism’. He even gave a subsequent acknowledgement to the Europeans who had left to follow the Syrian cause: ‘These young people who, perhaps idealistically are going to work in humanitarian roles or fight alongside the Syrian Liberation Army; might have a monument built to them as heroes of a revolution’.⁸ In Belgium, political stances during the first few years of the revolution (2011-2014) were shared. In the Chamber of Representatives, speeches against the criminalisation of departures and placing bans on them were commonplace. This is true of Jean-Marie Dedecker, the famous Flemish senator and Libertarian deputy in the Chamber, who emphasised this question during a parliamentary debate:

‘I think people who leave for another country, and do not feel at home in Belgium should not be kept here. In the past, when people wanted to go to Nicaragua or El Salvador, we called them freedom fighters. Many volunteers also left to fight in Spain during the civil war, or in Korea. I certainly make no demand that the people involved be kept here. I don’t feel responsible for them. Religion is a form of collective alienation and those who are indoctrinated should be allowed to leave’.⁹

In France, the discourse on the ‘Syrian problem’ ran into entanglements as confusing as the history of colonial relations and cooperation with Syria. Since the Hafez al-Assad era and the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, French diplomacy had viewed the Syrian regime as an actor providing stability, and a key to balance in the face of US hegemony in the region. Since his son, Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, France had presented itself as an expert mentor for the young president. Through statements and exchanges of official invitations, the French state looked kindly on the official promises made by Syria, which was determined to rehabilitate its tarnished image. These were the first years of political

'glasnost' by a president, who, after the electoral coup, was committed to reforming, modernising and opening up his country's economy to the world. This initial stance explains the wait-and-see attitude and the oscillation between condemnation and procrastination when faced with the Assad regime's first bloodily repressed demonstrations (Tannous, 2017). Indeed, in this period, France was informed by its ambassador, Éric Chevallier (2009-2014) of the repressive events that we go into briefly later in chapter 2).

It was only in June 2011 that France adopted a position of support to the self-proclaimed authorities representing the revolution and the future government. That is when the regime's war against the protestors was confirmed, and the revolution became an armed struggle. Beyond the geopolitical analysis that is not the subject of this anthropological study, it must be stressed that the discursive support of the French government in the first period of conflict (June 2011-December 2013) conflated 'Islamists' with other components of political representation, to the extent that Laurent Fabius, Foreign Minister (2012-2016), stated after a meeting in Marrakesh of the 'Friends of Syria' on 12 December 2012 that Jabhat Nosra (Nusra Front, established in January that year),¹⁰ which had just been put on the US list of terrorist organisations, 'carried out action that was effective and useful for the Syrians against Bashar al-Assad'.¹¹ This statement – as well as another more high-profile media quote attributed to Fabius without him ever confirming it in which he allegedly said that Nusra, 'was doing good work' on the ground (Sénecat, 2017) – would be picked up by families of French *departees* to Syria as a proof of laxity and even encouragement to them.

People returning from Syria and their families expressed shock at the criminalisation of these departures, referring systematically to this period when the European governments expressed their support for the revolutionaries. The latter, on the battlefield did nothing however – in the specific conditions that we will look at later – to hide their religious frame of reference and claims of jihad from the beginning of the militarisation process, in June 2011. While European governments, France and Belgium in this case, as they had done with Libya, ignored the obvious religious frame of reference with the goal of setting the stage for negotiations with representatives embodied by people distanced from the everyday reality of the revolution. However, these 'representative' bodies such as the *Coalition nationale des forces de l'opposition et de la revolution*

(CNFOR, National Coalition of Opposition and Revolutionary Forces), the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) included representatives of Muslim organisations – especially Nusra, Ahrâr a-Châm, and exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Effects of the ‘Islamist radicalisation’ discourse on the young people headed to Syria

The dominant European government discourses hid the real situation in Syria while claiming to support the revolution as those governments gathered representatives distanced from the battlegrounds. But this European policy neglected the fact that many young Muslims, both in the West and the Arab-Muslim world, were following the development of the situation in Syria through different frameworks, and using other sources of information which, like the television station Al Jazeera, were not invested in concealing the Islamic characteristics of the battalions waging war against the regime. And so it was that indirectly, many young people going to Syria watched Western governments support a revolution in which Islamic frames of reference were dominant. This is why both families of returnees and returnees themselves called out the ‘hypocrisy’ of European governments, and criticised the systematic criminalization of the act of leaving for Syria that occurred before the formation of Islamic State and prior to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks of January 2015. An example of this is drawn from an interview with Abderrahmane, a Belgian who went to Syria in January 2014 and came back in June of the same year. I met him in 2022 in Molenbeek (a Western suburb of Brussels) after his release from prison.

Abderrahmane: Before I left, there was no terrorist side to things in the neighbourhood or among my friends. On the contrary it was at-taqwa [fear of, and respect for Allah] and courage that led us to Syria. That’s how Muslims and our families saw things, and how they judged our decisions to leave. Later, when I came back from Syria, I was shocked. Shocked by the image of the people who’d left from here that they were giving in the media. And you’d have to say that this image began well before Charlie Hebdo. I was in Syria in 2014, and I came back at the end of the same year, so Charlie Hebdo hadn’t even happened yet. And I was appalled by some people in the community too. I told them: ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about’. At the start, in front of me, they used to talk, and as soon

as they found out I'd been over there, they said: 'OK, I'm sorry'. And then they began to listen more carefully when I told them: 'Look, instead of just repeating things you don't understand, you should listen first: I went, I listened, I sat down with people, I prayed with people who left Dawla [the first base, in Syria, of the Islamic State] to go over to Jabhat Nosra; and with others who made the opposite choice. There were also some who spent time on both sides and ended up leaving. I told them there were all sorts of people there: 'You're here judging us, but you could make an objective analysis with no judgement'.

As Abderrahmane describes, when the counterterrorism discourse was spread about the groups in Syria, it did not only affect relations between migrants for jihad and the state institutions. It also exerted an influence in the Muslim community and threatened relations of trust, within families. We will note however, that despite the division instigated by this discourse – which reduced a complicated situation to a matter of terrorism – families and communities remained the basis of support for the returnees. The latter, as Abderrahmane highlights, did the work of providing counter-information based on their first-hand experiences: work that was futile in the trials, even though as regards the sentencing of Syrian returnees, the prison terms were relatively lower than those meted out for those facing the serious allegation of terrorism.¹² Such rulings, while made on the basis of an counterterrorist discourse conditioned by the general climate surrounding terrorist attacks, did acknowledge the multiplicity of motivations for going to Syria, and the peaceful and humanitarian reasons underlying some of the departures. Mourad, a young Frenchman who went to Syria in December 2014 and returned in April 2015, and who received a seven-year prison sentence, told me after he was released, about the failure to understand his situation he experienced during his trial.

Montassir: *Do you remember the Syrian army brigade that took you?*

Mourad: *No. At the Syrian border, the Free Syrian Army met us and I didn't really know what brigade it was. Also, I didn't really speak very good Arabic. But actually, we didn't care, because we hadn't gone out there to join a specific group. When we reached Aleppo later, it was obviously ISIL that greeted us. We called that place Dawla at the time. At that moment, everyone was at the same stage in Syria. All the groups were together for the same cause. But what did they accuse*

you of in court? They told us that before we left, and for a year, we had been preparing to join the Islamic State. The State Prosecutor said: 'You wanted to join the Islamic State! For a year – from January to December 2013 – you were making preparations for when you reached IS' [makes an expression like he doesn't understand]. But they were completely ... What's more, our lawyer then took the Prosecutor to task. It's obvious that IS didn't even exist then! How could we know that IS was going to appear, and that it would go to war with France, etc.? At that time, there wasn't a war against France! [Silence, sighs]

At the end of the day, we just didn't care: we'd reached Syria and followed our local contact. He told us that we weren't going to ISIL or Nusra, but we were going to form our own groups and fight Bashar al-Assad's army. That's all! This is what we had in mind: 'We're independent. We're making an independent group that helps the various other groups fighting Assad's army'.

I was present for Mourad's trial in 2016. When I interviewed him twice in 2022, we recalled the exchanges in this famous trial which was presented as the first legal backlash against the attacks in France. Lawyers acting for the defendants urged the court 'not to conflate' the attacks with all the people who left and with the various forms of Islamic practice. Yet such warnings were not heeded because the 'Islamist radicalisation' discourse had already assumed a dominant position in the justice system, as it had in many other public institutions (Sakhi, 2018). This failure to understand had serious consequences, first on the lives of the people facing blanket accusations of terrorism after going to Syria, then on their families, charged with funding terrorism because they had helped their children when they were in war zones and were trying to leave. Beyond the Muslims living in Europe, the consequences of this institutional failure to understand nuance would more directly affect the children and women held for a long time in refugee camps, and men incarcerated in inhumane conditions in the Kurdish prisons in Northern Syria.

In the end, identifying all those leaving for Syria with terrorist activities, both in the political discourse and the European courts following the attacks in Europe had two significant consequences: one for the Syrian revolution, and the other for the development of what I call the 'utopian' politics of the 2011 generation.

First, the Assad regime and the Russian government both justified their scorched earth policies through discourses blaming Western 'foreigners' involved in jihad; and the same type of discourse was used to

legitimise the intervention of the Western coalition against Islamic State from September 2014, whose goal was in no way to open a space in which the Syrian revolution could survive. Second, the European migrants in Syria and their families identified such discourses as being responsible for the often tragic fates of the migrants. The severity of the laws passed against them in the West, as well as the bombardments by the International Coalition and the silence over the killings by the Russians, are alleged to have created a 'frenemy' scenario, that doomed some of the migrants to remain in Syria when the Islamic State took its terrorist turn.

Apart from the oppressive practices of the IS, who banned migrants from leaving the areas it controlled from 2015, and the international stigmatisation that separated Syrians from 'foreign terrorists', Western discourses criminalising the act of coming to Syria played significant roles in the loss of hope and the generation of violence. In the case files of the terror attacks in Europe and the fighters in Syria, it was the concept of 'religious radicalisation' that became by far the principal frame for understanding and addressing the issue of people leaving for, and returning from Syria, in both political and legal contexts. This erroneous direction taken in the use of key paradigms was exacerbated by the excesses of the Syrian regime, tied to its instrumentalisation of the heritage of Pan-Arab ideology.

Deleterious effects of the abuses of Pan-Arabism on the Arab Left

Syria split political movements on the Left and is thus one of the causes of division in the postcolonial world, as are Palestine, the Kurdish problem, the Western Sahara, etc. In the Arab world, there was a lot at stake in Syria because it had a Baathist government, which presented itself as a line of resistance against Israel, an advocate of Pan-Arab nationalism and faithful ally of the Soviet Union and its Russian descendant. In Morocco in 2011, I observed these hesitations expressed by both young and old socialist activists when there were calls to demonstrate at the Syrian Embassy against the Assad regime's crushing of the protests. Denial discourses such as considerations of a potential conspiracy against the 'axis of resistance' (*al moumâna'a*) that Syria was said to represent returned to the surface, demonstrating the divisions within social movements. However, in Morocco, Tunisia and other Arab countries, these debates only existed on the edges of national activist fields structured by colonial

history and the Cold War. The discourses hiding the crimes perpetrated by the regime in Syria thus reveal the longstanding relativist mode of ideology among some Arab elites. From this perspective, political positioning is done firstly in the name of a ‘vis-à-vis’ (reference to some other position), not on the basis of a rigorous analysis of the reality of a given situation, its discourses and its practices. The elites that experience post-coloniality as the continuing subjugation of society thus believe in the positive role that other international powers could play in the anti-Western discourses – the USSR, then Russia, are in the top level of these centres of gravity competing with the West.

From this history and those of the Western wars fought in the region has resulted an activist *habitus* driven by organisations like the Baathists, whose Pan-Arab ideology managed to convert the State into an apparatus of pure violence that broke the threshold of tolerance that enables a modern government to run a society: it was in the name of the defence of the nation against invasion that the Baath party allowed itself to destroy its own civil society. This *habitus* was fuelled logically by Western cynicism, closing borders and being involved in never-ending colonial wars (Sakhi, 2023), but the Baath mindset used this argument to translate it into war inside the country’s borders. It is the purveyor of slogans suspending belief and aiming to repair a collective psychology wounded by Western domination and superiority, particularly in the management of the migration problem and armed interventions. Among these slogans can be found the ‘anti-Zionist’ struggle and Pan-Arab solidarity against imperial politics. Yet through inverting violence, superficially militant observations convert the wrongs suffered due to Western domination into a rigid code suppressing any opposition and establishing the rule of terror. Before we look at the practices of the Baathists in revolutionary Syria and the nature of the resistance their rule provoked until the fragmentation of society was accepted in the following chapters, let us return briefly to the question ‘what is Baathism?’, in order to elucidate how this *habitus* became embedded, beyond the Pan-Arab organisations, in the wider Arab-Muslim world, and how this dangerous discourse found support on the international stage.

The Pan-Arabism that adopted the word ‘socialism’ and was demonstrated in Baath parties is anchored in the decolonisation movements in the Arab-speaking parts of the Muslim world, from the 1940s to the mid-1960s – although the roots of its ideas stretch back to Arab elites controlled

by the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth century. The political manifestations of this movement can be found in the political projects labelled 'Baathist' in Syria and Iraq, as well as 'Nasserism' in Egypt, and through a minority activist presence in most of the political systems of the Arab world. The essential characteristic of this ideology is actually that, beyond its own organisations, it cuts across all political tendencies – socialist, communist and Islamic – that emerged after independence. Its set of ideas, at the time when new nation-states were being formed, offered a story that could be shared by all the postcolonial actors: namely a tale of transnational collective construction that could embed itself into *qutri* nationalism (i.e. local and specific to each Arab country). This process of construction satisfied the dominant feeling among the elites of the nationalist movements guiding the passage to independence, according to which local nationalism would not be enough to withstand the former colonial powers that still exerted their control, and were forming discrete blocs, such as Europe, the West and the USSR, etc.

If we believe the writings of the intellectuals known for having created, adopted or integrated into the Pan-Arab organisations, we note that Pan-Arabism is above all a movement of 'relationist' thought, in that it is based on relational comparison to a main antagonist, namely a colonial power, perceived as a homogenous historical bloc. In this spirit, before taking power in Syria and Iraq (1963), Baathist Pan-Arabism presented itself as a revolution fired by the spirit of freedom from colonisation. Among its early thinkers, such as the Syrian co-founder of the Baath party, Michel Aflak (1912-1989), we can discern a hymn to messianic humanism with no other political consistency than the demand for the power of sovereignty and team spirit above the nation-state. Sovereignty is combined with a call for party political action containing a form of nationalist pathology inspired particularly by the European fascist thinkers:

'The coloniser has a theory of emptiness. It states that the emptiness our country suffers from is what has required filling it with colonisation. I think there is indeed emptiness, but it is not inside our country and our people. It exists in this region of the world, that has disguised and worked on values to the point of falling into hypocrisy after the contradictions with the principles we claim [...] The colonisers' civilisation quickly crumbles as soon as it practices injustice against weakened people. [...] Who will bring vitality to these empty Western values of

feeling and life if not those people who have experienced injustice and sadness?' (Aflak, 1977: 51).

'The Pan-Arabism we embrace is the love of all things. It's the same feeling bonding an individual to their family, because the fatherland is a big house and the nation an extended family. [...] And as there is no love without sacrifice, Pan-Arabism calls for this also: this is how it leads to heroism. Whoever makes sacrifices for their nation, defending its past glory and its happy future, is better than those who limit their sacrifice to themselves. [...] And there is no danger of Pan-Arabism tripping over religion. They are similar to one another. Pan-Arabism, like religion, comes from within one's heart and the will of Allah. They march together in solidarity, especially when religion represents the genius of nationalism and can be reconciled with its nature (Aflak, 1977: 134).

Until the present day, the metaphor of the 'house' and the trope of 'sacrifice' for the 'family' constitute the foundations of the freedom-destroying discourse through which the Baathist followers like Assad legitimise massacres. In this way, Baathism is not of the order of a metaphysical, intellectual strand of thought; it is part of materialist anthropological thought that converts nationalism into a form of fascism ready to act, via any form of violence, for the sake of a society's sacred structures. It is a type of conservatism that, when it competes with new Marxist, Islamic and liberal utopias in the postcolonial Arab world, affords a legitimacy to ideological domination (Mannheim, 1954). Domination such as it was established in the postcolonial regimes is perceived by Pan-Arab conservatives as part of the social order itself. By taking power through the organised act of coups d'état – and there is plenty of reflection about coups d'état in Michel Aflak's theorising – it is a question of administering society by turning these ideals into a rigid ideology. There is no society to reinvent, no rights to offer, nor powers to suspend: order already exists in the collective being as it stands. 'Socialist' Pan-Arabism suggests implementing a repressive government distant from any utopia critical of the traditional order, including liberal Islamism and an Islamism that reconnects with the ideas of a fallen empire. The version of Pan-Arabism proposed by Aflak considers communism as a form of 'atheism' that must be eliminated, and Islam as an apolitical ancestral tradition that must be protected against all forms of re-interpretation.

Pan-Arabism is therefore constructed relationally to other stories and discourses like those of political Islam and communism. Yet it does not draw its strength solely from the organisational acumen of its leaders and the conceptualisations of its thinkers. Its power is ensured in contemporary Arab history by the fact that several elites and thinkers from various schools of thought encountered it at a specific moment of political crises. These were born of foreign interventions and the permanent return of the traditional powers, in conflict with the process of modernisation (tribes, brotherhoods, local aristocracy, religious groups, etc.). The use of Pan-Arabism turned out to be helpful for: the leadership of nationalist movements in each new independent Arab state, pro-Third World Arab thinkers, supporters of Islamic tradition and socialist and communist theorists, because of a specific objective, namely to reconnect with a tradition to form a *blocus historicus*.¹³ This bloc is theorised by each of the groupings listed above as a revolutionary tactic to attain other ends, differing depending on the orientation of the party or group that integrated Pan-Arabism into its own discourse. It was thus incorporated into models of communist Arab society, the liberal nation-state, the social democratic state and the Islamic caliphate. The encounter with Pan-Arabism can also be explained by the contingency of postcolonial crises embodied primarily by the war against Israel – hence the centrality of Palestine, which became a principled cross-border theme among the most recently formed Pan-Arab organisations like the Syrian Baath party: ‘Palestine, the compass’ was the *modus operandi* of political decisions and the selection of political friend and foe.

Using the Pan-Arab paradigm as an intellectual guide and doing opposition politics in the Arab world by borrowing from the words of the Baathist movement conferred legitimacy on this movement in Syria and Iraq following the 1963 coups. This sovereign discourse was bolstered by the dominance of Nasserism and the *soft power* exerted by the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Assad over the Socialist parties of the Arab world after they came to power (in 1968 and 1970, respectively). Pan-Arabism’s temporary capacity to cut across and link opposition movements that became interested in it due to the political timing explains why, several decades later, Pan-Arab thought and the high esteem in which the Syrian regime was held continued to characterize the region’s political Left.

Lastly, how can we explain the centrality of violence in the development of Pan-Arab regimes and their refusal to negotiate? When it

experienced a crisis in its relationships with other political streams, Pan-Arabism had no escape route apart from violence, unlike its competitors—thus the socialist and Marxist movements found space for renewal in the international arena, whereas the Islamic movement, open over a long tradition of interpretation, found the option of reform. However, when the Baathists got to work in Syria, their hollow intellectual output and slogans rehashed colonial invasion – without explaining the reality of these colonial strategies – and it became an inert nationalism, doomed to total war when its ideals were challenged. This is why the uses of the Palestine issue, the threat of war against Israel and the claim of belonging to the Soviet, then the Russian camp were just some of the tools used by the Syrian Baathist regime to guarantee its acceptability to an Arab Left that was bewildered by new threats of colonial and Israeli invasion.

These reminders of historical heritage still active in the Arab world and the dominant representations of the region in the West will be useful guides for us in the unfolding of the revolution and the war in Syria, the subject of the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2

Year 1 of the revolution, as narrated by its participants

If we locate the start of the ‘Arab Spring’ as being in 2011, to remain faithful to the collective memory, when try to define a specific date, we have the choice of several departure points. The most traditional one, already referred to above, is 17 December 2010, the date when a 26-year-old itinerant Tunisian trader, Mohamed Bouazizi, committed suicide by self-immolation, which triggered a wave of protests ending with the fall of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011. This wave of protests went on to affect Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and Syria. Thus began the Arab Spring, in which demonstrators in a number of countries communicated with one another. The ‘fluid conjuncture’ that sociologist Michel Dobry (2009) refers to is real and can be explained by several structures common to the countries in the region – postcolonial history, national systems and liberal democratic aspirations. Yet while the departure points are similar, the aspirations of the various rebellious groups vary from one country to another.

18 March 2011: a key date in the Syrian revolution

In Syria, another date stands out in the collective memory. Although demonstrations took place in Damascus at the end of January, 18 March 2011 is the canonical date of the revolution. On that day, military security personnel in Daraa kidnapped seven 11-14 year-old children for having tagged a wall in the town with the message: ‘It’s your turn, doctor!’ (Bashar al-Assad is a trained ophthalmologist). The children were soon arrested, transferred to a nearby town’s police station, then tortured. The forces of order, under the authority of Assad’s cousin, Governor Atef Najib, were reported to have humiliated the families that went to find out what had happened to their children, saying, ‘Forget them and go and make some more; if you don’t know how, bring us your women!’ While accounts of this incident may vary, it is undoubtedly the revolution’s founding myth: the conjunction of state violence and its immorality led to any reconciliation with the regime being seriously discredited in advance. This

incident's run-of-the-mill brutality is deemed to have exceeded the limits of what was acceptable. One scene in particular made an impression: as a symbol of reconciliation and wishing to get the children released, a delegation of tribal leaders visited the governor. At the entrance to the official building, they laid down their '*agâ'id* (traditional turbans that men wear), an ancestral gesture indicating a willingness to negotiate. But a representative of state authority knowingly threw the '*agâ'id* into the dustbin. This can be explained by a routine refusal to negotiate – since the Baathists came to power in 1970 – when negotiation is set up by tribal representatives and civil society groups working unofficially with the state.

After the protests in Daraa had broken out, the state's repressive response was immediate: in the first demonstration, two young locals were shot and killed by troops brought in as reinforcements. Two days later, their funerals triggered a fresh outbreak of anger. The state responded in the same way, and two more demonstrators were martyred. Increasingly, the same cycle was repeating itself: in the course of large-scale demonstrations, the army and other forces of order repressed them, and then at the funerals of those they had killed, the protests resumed and in turn, so did the repression.¹⁴ However, concurrently with its immediate military response, the state tried to win over those tribal leaders that it had earlier alienated (Bishara, 2013: 87). It was too late: on 22 March 2011, in response to the growing scale of the protests, the repression moved up a gear. The town was put under siege, with all entry and exit points controlled by the army, the power supply was cut, and the al-Omari mosque, where the demonstrators were gathered, was stormed. 'They desecrated the qurans', people still say, several years after the events. During the night of 22 March, six demonstrators were killed and for the first time, one local labelled a 'terrorist' was executed in public (Bishara, 2013: 90). Despite this unprecedented level of state repression, the protest movement spread to the rest of Syria.

We have to explain the strength that this movement had from the outset. In March 2011, no-one was yet using the word '*thawra*' (revolution). The story was not known in advance, and the long succession of challenges violently put down by the state over the preceding decades were a powerful deterrent for anyone criticising its sovereignty. The unanimous support for the embryonic protests was thus exceptional: although the timeline of the Arab Spring obviously consolidated the idea of 'extraordinary times' in the minds of demonstrators, nowhere else but in Syria was

the revolution such a large-scale and long-lasting event. We should also go back here to what people who did not start out as revolutionaries told me. As we will see, everyone speaks in the same way about how the rebellion unfolded: the immediate state repression paradoxically led to the suspension of the state's monopoly of violence, both materially and symbolically. The free regions were free – at least symbolically to begin with – as soon as the first military brigade was dispatched to replace the ordinary police. But it is first and foremost the 'words of the people' (Lazarus, 1996) that explain the steady weakening of the state order.

Rising up for the liberal utopia against repression

Abou Kotaïba is a friend of Rayan,¹⁵ whom he met in Aleppo at the beginning of the revolution. In July 2017, we met in the house he had just moved into, in a plush modern complex in the suburbs of the border city of Kilis, in South-East Türkiye. He was living there with his brother and other companions from the armed struggle. They had all been evacuated from Aleppo by the Turkish authorities in December 2016, when the city fell into the hands of the regime and its Russian allies, and they were placed in this house, located a few metres from the first border check-point. The message was clear: we are ready to go back. The man who greeted us was indeed the leader of a sizeable brigade attached to the Free Syrian Army (FSA, created in July 2011). In revolutionary circles, he was reputed to be the last military commander in a surrounded Aleppo, and his unit's departure marked the effective fall of the city.

Montassir: *Let's go back a bit over the path you took in the revolution.*

Abou Kotaïba: *I'll tell you about Aleppo. Of course, we were thinking about the Syrian revolution as a whole, but I was in Aleppo, and it's Aleppo that I'm going to tell you about. When the revolution began in Daraa, it was after the Arab Spring. The demonstrations were popular, often led by children, because adults were liable to be kidnapped and raped. We thought that children wouldn't run these risks. They produced a spark of freedom and change, then they were arrested. All those who came to ask after them were arrested in turn [someone in the crowd, among the fellow fighters of Abou Kotaïba, said their nails were pulled out]. Daraa is an area where tribalism is still significant, so the tribal leaders*

went to see Military Security to free the children. But the director of that office humiliated them: he took their turbans and threw them in the bin.

Our *intifada* then began, and its repression constituted the opposite of every Arab and Islamic value. Lots of martyrs fell in each demonstration, where nobody was armed by the way ... Women, children, tribes, etc. The pictures were more and more gripping, until the children were freed and it was discovered that they had been tortured in an extremely savage way. It was also at that moment that Hamza al-Khatib was assassinated, during the peaceful demonstrations. Other cities started their rebellions for Daraa. They were repressed with the same blind, abject violence.

In Aleppo, at that time, the revolution had not yet started. The regime had tried to corrupt the main tribal leaders by offering them significant economic advantages. The movement had started at the same time as the one in Daraa, but it had gained little popular traction, unlike in Homs for example, where demonstrators had quickly realised the need to defend oneself physically when you were coming up against the worst elements of society, hired by the regime to repress the people.

According to Commander Abou Kotaïba, the spread of the revolution – he uses the term ‘*intifada*’ – is less to do with the initial demands made by the first demonstrators than the total repression that they were met with. He refers to the assassination of Hamza al-Khatib, a thirteen-year-old boy captured following demonstrations against the siege of Daraa on 29 April 2011. He died under torture. His mutilated body was returned to his family for burial on condition that they signed an administrative gagging order. The family decided to photograph and video his body and broadcast the images on social media. He became a symbol during the ramping up of the protests, and the shift to armed struggle that the revolution adopted. Abou Kotaïba thus justifies his involvement by the moral betrayal of the state that killed ‘women, children and members of tribes’ – symbols in which *horma*, the sacred elements of the community, is alive. Thus, from the outset, the protests dramatised the profound gap between the social body that features ‘Arab and Islamic values’, and the regime, which humiliates and demonstrates ‘extremely savage’ behaviour. Although Abou Kotaïba did not take part in the initial demonstrations, the state’s transgression of a sense of shared honour (Bourdieu, 1972) – the core of collective life – justified the radical shift from a position of benevolent observer to active participant ready to sacrifice everything.

Abou Kotaïba, who was a late arrival in the revolution, and went directly to armed struggle, represents the ideal type of the utopia of rupture with government order: this includes the community unmediated by the use of political representative organisations.

In returning to the early days of the Syrian revolution, it should be noted that the first demonstrations show the centrality of liberal demands made against the authoritarian state. The concept of a 'liberal utopia', taken from Karl Mannheim, is not defined by a rupture in the order of political ideas, but through the additional intensity which in turn defines the protestors' consciousness (Mannheim, 1954). Without even having a liberal opposition party in Syria, the existence of a civil society – albeit limited – is enough to relay the demand for the rule of law. So in 2004, a 'Damascus Spring' movement, relatively tolerable to the regime, articulated the demands of the intellectual elites (lawyers, academics, artists, Muslim reformists, etc.) for institutional changes.¹⁶

The first demonstrations thus featured some liberal slogans. The initially crucial presence and role of student activists turned the protests toward a critique of economic corruption, inequalities, the regime's lack of transparency, the absence of freedom of expression and political pluralism, and the Baathist Pan-Arab ideology that was stifling the cultural rights of minorities. Moreover, the urban character of the first phase of the protests embedded it in the intermediate social groups such as small business owners, students, civil servants and teachers. Coordination of the protests was first carried out through identifying common cause, contrary to the political science interpretation that emphasises the role of social media in the mobilisation (Khosrokhavar, 2012).

Although the utopia sought in the first few weeks was liberal from the beginning, the various mobilisations remained tightly bound to their specific social contexts. In Daraa, as we have seen, the tribal leaders demanded that the military administration give their children back. More generally, the revolutionaries – that is, the participants in the protests when they finally embrace the label 'revolutionary' – present the civilian mobilisation of the first few weeks as the advance guard necessary for the movement that followed. Tarek,¹⁷ an armed fighter and the commander of a brigade during the war, told me about the early days of the protests.

Tarek: Before the revolution, there was nothing you could call civil society. In the Syrian Constitution, it says the party in power is Baath, and that is one of the

reasons for our revolution. 'The Arab and socialist Baath party is the leader of the state and society'. Based on that there is no possible dialogue. The president is nominated by the party, and you have no say in the matter. NGOs, even the UN agencies like the Red Crescent, were co-opted by the regime. Moreover, the Syrian Red Crescent is not neutral at all, but completely loyal to the regime. So we had no foundation to build on, and what happened was a revolution by a people who said 'No, fifty years is too long, and we don't support you anymore'. There were the massacres in Daraa, the children whose nails they pulled out.

We came out to protest spontaneously, by surprise. The revolution, in the early days, had no ideology: 'The people want to bring down the regime', full stop. We were influenced by the Arab Spring, by what was happening in the region. We had political and intellectual elites, but we only got to know about them during the revolution. They had been in exile or prison. After a while, things began to get organised a little. There was the National Council, the Provisional Government, the Coalition, etc., a kind of weak establishment of political parties. It was fine anyway. We fought like ... We had grievances with the regime, we wanted it gone, that's all. I want a state, as soon as the regime falls, by the grace of Allah, I'll go back to my normal life, my home and my job. I didn't choose armed action, and I don't like it. Coming back to our lives, coming back to Syria, brother, being like any other citizen.¹⁸

The liberal response to a political situation determined by a one-party state does not call for a break with the state (per se) – Tarek clearly says he wanted to go back to the life he had prior to the revolution, on the condition that this life would be free from the restraints of the regime. This demand is articulated according to the terms of the rule of law, to which the Syrian state formally adheres. In other words, liberal demands are stuck in the gap between a modern government's official life and its real life. Up against the actual monopoly exercised by the party and the Assad family, Tarek was therefore initially opposed to the demonstrations of the concrete reality of people's rights.

Liberal demands do not claim to break with the global structures of capitalism or the ordinary violence of the state. More specifically, they do not critique these elements. The utopian character of its survival over the first period of protests is not evidenced by its ideas and intellectual appeal, but through its relationship with reality: based on the world as it is, the mobilisation calls for the world as it should be. The mobilisation thus places the government face to face with its own contradictions, in

other words, the gulf between its slogans and its reality. In this way, it is a critique of the discourse that had become a state ideology. Above all, it was the achievement of the liberal ideal 'here and now' in which people reinvested their hope during the first few weeks of the protests.

The emergence of the revolutionary community

As the demonstrations took place, a routine became established: in Homs, Daraa and Latakia (Bashar al-Assad's family fiefdom), a crowd gathered outside the mosque in the Old Town after Friday prayers; every week a different name was given to the forthcoming demonstration, using references to a variety of collective identities: 25 March, was the Friday of *al-'izza* (honour); 1 April, the *chouhada'* (martyrs); 8 April, *as-somoud* (the resistance); 15 April, *al-isrâr* (perseverance); 22 April, *al-'adîma* (Good Friday), etc.¹⁹ These demonstrations were given names to more effectively underline the exceptional time frame whose intensity left its mark on the biographical trajectories of the respondents. This demonstrates the movement from political sluggishness to enriching exchanges between the people and the state. Taking part in the initial demonstrations also became a rite of passage: this was the hyphen that dismissed one's 'previous life' and replaced it with a rebirth into the revolution.

Sociological analysis was, however, quick to see 'demonstrations that fit into the category of mobilisations without mobilisers, following the tradition of the events in Iran in 1979 and East Germany in 1989' (Backzko et al., 2016: 72). The mystery of the unlikely engagement 'by events outside the Syrian context, the Arab Spring, that enabled the Syrians to see a window of opportunity' was solved (Backzko et al., 2016, 76). However, if the explanation of the revolution is exclusively down to contagion, how do we make sense of the fact that in Syria it became something profoundly different? If revolutionary contagion is evidenced by both the circulation of the slogans and solidarity chants, and by the enthusiasm triggered in Syria by the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, it is not the case that a 'window of opportunity' was offered to already organised and self-sufficient actors. In Syria, the revolutionary process was neither the work of seasoned activists nor of organisations with set agendas. Even when the activists took part in protests, their strength cannot be explained by the encounter between a conjunctural supply and underlying political demand. Moreover, organisers in Syria were systematically

overwhelmed as much by the huge scale of the mobilisation as by what it became in political terms. And although orientalist discourse (Balanche, 2014) had a tendency to reduce any political conflict to the given ethnic or religious boundaries – Bashar al-Assad's basically Alawite²⁰ regime, from this perspective, is allegedly the protector of 'minorities' faced with the shapeless mass of Sunni Arabs – so much so that the cities of Tartus (Alawite majority), like Qamishli and Afrin, (Kurdish majorities) witnessed massive demonstrations throughout 2011.

Although the anger that erupted cut across the historical timeline of the Arab revolutions, it was however, according to Foucault's term (1997), the contemporary episode of an 'ongoing war'. From the outset, the internal history of the state's power game and the challenge to it was the basic focus of the critique that developed: when the civilian demonstrators, as well as the armed revolutionaries came to provide a rationale for their involvement, from the first few weeks of the mobilisation, they referred to the lack of an initial gap between the ordinary violence of the state and the escalation of violence it used immediately against the protest movement. Similarly, the succession of massacres fuelled the protests: so people were talking about the 1982 Hama massacres, ordered by Hafez al-Assad, which are estimated to have resulted in the deaths of several dozen thousand civilians. 'May God curse your soul, Hafez' was thus one of the canonical slogans of the movement.

On 8 April, during the 'Friday of resistance' (*as-somoud*), the first large-scale massacre took place in Daraa, where twenty people were shot dead by security forces. Ripples of this violence also disrupted the order within official discourse. Until that point, the President had only conceded the alleged existence of some troubles caused by 'infiltrators' (*moundassa*). But now, Assad acknowledged there was corruption in the state: the government was fired, and institutional reform and changes in political culture and practice were announced. In a speech on 16 April, he agreed with the demonstrators, and decreed a series of measures, from liberalising the field of politics and media, to pay raises and recognition for trade unions, via the incorporation of hitherto marginalised minority groups into the nation.

However, the mobilisation was already spreading. Responding to the mystery of an increasingly deep-seated challenge, Palestinian political scientist Azmi Bishara (2013, 107) put forward two hypotheses: one, 'the Syrian people are not paying much attention to the reform of the law

because they know that the regime does not govern according to the law'. Two, the delay which drew criticism of the government, between the start of the protests and the response of the President, rendered this response obsolete in principle (Bishara, 2013: 107). However, our respondents indicated a third interpretation: the reality of the repression that the state deployed against the peaceful protests dealt a serious blow to its legitimacy, as a result of which, this depreciation in trust was applied both retrospectively (as people used the government's past actions to drive the protests) and in advance (we will no longer deal with a regime capable of murder). From then on, as it became more popular, the protest movement was also becoming more radical: on the 'Friday of Honour', for the first time, demonstrators had torn up photos of Assad in public'.²¹ The regime responded by institutionalising the *chabbiha*: semi-state militia who committed the majority of the violent acts that people deplored. In Homs, on 18 April, the *chabbiha* killed fifteen people. Paradoxically, the normalisation of violence served to cause an anthropological break, marking the definitive starting point of the revolution. This gulf is evidenced by the involvement of a category of the population hitherto missing from the protests: the local wise man (*woujahâ*).

The roles of the smugglers and the 'wise men'

On 18 July 2016, I did an interview with Saleh in a café in Kilis, the last Turkish town before the border with Syria.

Montassir: *Can you tell me how the war started?*

Saleh: *It wasn't a war, it was a revolution. What happened wasn't a war between states, it was a revolution. Afterwards, everyone wanted to trade in the blood of Syrians, but us, what we did, was a revolution. You shouldn't call it a war.*

We had arrived in Türkiye a few days earlier and our respondent was one of the first activists we met. Saleh was not one of the young people that the sociology of revolutions literature focuses on: a forty-something family man, he had been the principal of a primary school in a rural community in North-Western Syria. Contact with him was made through a French family whose son had gone to fight with IS. Actually, Saleh, like many activists, had started off as a 'fixer' when 'revolutionary work'

(*al-‘amal at-thawri*) had gradually petered out beneath the Russian bombs and the regime’s explosive barrel bombs. His knowledge of the terrain and of the fighters had been useful to international journalists and other war correspondents, researchers too – and in a smaller way, to families who wanted word of their children that had gone to war. Saleh had an apartment in Kilis, outside the camp, acquired through the work he did with journalists, and where his family lived. His wife was a paediatrician. But he stuck it out at the refugee camp, where he ran the school – a form of ongoing commitment to the revolution, he would tell us later. We met him two days after the attempted coup d’état in Türkiye, and Saleh, whose refugee camp had been shut down by the authorities, came out for the first time to do the interview. This highly unusual timing challenged the ordinary structuring of the order of things after the event (i.e. the reality of exile for activists until then still active in the revolution), with the result that throughout the whole interview, Saleh was comparing his revolutionary experiences to the sudden ‘return of history’ on the Turkish, reputedly stable, side of the border.

In the interview, Saleh repeatedly manifested the torments of those who did not immediately join the protest movement – without being anything but clear about the arbitrary rule of the state. Saleh’s hesitation, however, shows that his disposition to rebel can be explained in the following way. He was prominent in the community and did not want to see it crumble. We need to see the facts in the whole: although the state’s ordinary violence began before 2011, there were also structures in Syria that gave meaning and rhythms to community life. Some were relatively external to state activities (such as marriages, funerals, clan and tribal membership, religious practices, etc.), others were linked to residual socialist ideals (schools, universities, hospitals, etc.). Saleh thus found himself at the intersection of various forms of social regulation. As Principal of a school in a rural village, his position was both marginal to the central state and acknowledged and respected by the community.

Many meanings are attached to the word so commonly used among people, *al balad* (the country). It is simultaneously geographical – from the village to the whole of Syria – and the hybrid social order in which the structuring of the state and ways of life that the latter could not entirely erase continued. Saleh was therefore one of the ‘wise men’ before the revolution; and when it occurred, he joined it – while refusing to shout slogans along with his former pupils. Such would be his stance throughout

the period: in complete solidarity with the revolutionaries, he nevertheless retained the status he inherited from the ordinary structuring of the community. In both ideas and practice, Saleh was the hyphen between the previous life and the revolutionary order that became established. In fact, his local area, Bidama, was the first in Syria to be liberated from the regime in June 2011.

Saleh: Of course, I didn't belong to any organisations, or any movements before the revolution. I was school Principal, an English graduate, and had taught the language since I had been appointed principal of a school for eight years. We stopped teaching classes in the month of Nisan [April], a month after the demonstrations in Daraa. The region was very sensitive, the Bidama region, which was part of the Idlib Governorate, 60 km north of Latakia and 60 km west of Idlib [...] A region right next to the Alawites. I had five Alawite teachers, as well as Christians ... A lot of religious groups in a sensitive area ... But we didn't have any problems, I had no issues with anyone as school principal.

When the revolution broke out, the demonstrations began ... The first to come out were the smugglers, about 25 people on 18 April. Why? Because smugglers had personal issues to resolve with the regime. We, the people, certainly hated the regime, but the demonstrations were peaceful. The smugglers, however, brought guns to the demonstration from the off.

In this village close to the border with Türkiye, smuggling was a very significant economic activity. Such statements about the smugglers can be found in several interviews with people living in border areas next to Iraq, Libya, Türkiye and Jordan. The smugglers played an important part in arming the revolution from the moment the regular demonstrators took up an armed struggle, especially in the areas like Daraa, Idlib and Homs, where tribes still retained solidarity with the people that had survived the long domination of the state. Since Syria's independence, the relationship between the security forces and the smugglers had been marked by instability depending on whether it was wartime or peacetime: smugglers were sometimes tolerated and used in wars or to de-escalate an explosive social situation, and sometimes incarcerated or arrested until they paid large amounts to be released.

Montassir: But who are these smugglers?

Saleh: *We live in the border zone next to Türkiye, and the smugglers bring tea, people, weapons as well, across the border. Anything and everything... To earn money to live, do you understand?*

Hamza: *Since before the war?*

Saleh: *Of course. Well before the war... It was a job, the best ... Look, I am a civil servant and my monthly salary at the time was 15,000 Syrian Pounds, that's around 300 dollars; a smuggler could earn that much in just one night ... He smuggled cows, fifteen cows [loaded up with items], see... The smugglers and people they call sâhibî, people who loaded up the cows on the Turkish side of the border, they had money and weapons. Of course, they had a bad relationship with the regime because the regime systematically shook them down [...] and the regime's shakedown was permanent, every month they took one, who then spent the day in the Intelligence Service office until they gave up information ... The smugglers communicated with one another and if there was someone taking fifty cows over the border, they decided that there was another one who had to surrender to the police ... They were communicating together and in direct conflict with the Intelligence Service [...]*

So around fifteen smugglers from Bidama and the border area went out to demonstrate. I was at home after lunch, at about two or three in the afternoon, when I heard the takbir ['Allah Akbar', God is great] in the street. I was very surprised. Who was that? People were talking with the teachers, people they could trust, trying to find out who had grassed on the smugglers. People were scared. They didn't want to ... But I had warned them that very day that if we didn't go on the street to demonstrate, others would, and it wouldn't be in our interest for that to happen. So actually, the smugglers protested. I went out as well, just after mosque [Friday prayers]. With or without shoes on, I can't even remember. We watched Al-Jazeera, and it was difficult to watch people on the streets in Daraa, Baniyas, Latakia, etc. [and not do that ourselves]. A lot of the demonstrators were my students, shouting: 'Professor, come on! Professor!'

I went out with them. But I couldn't shout slogans! I walked with them and after some distance, (we were in a mountainous area) they said: 'Down with the regime!' I asked them: 'What? Down with the government? Why are you shouting that kind of thing?' To be honest, I quickly adopted a centrist stance, I didn't want a smuggler to be leading me down a path. And I said: 'Be careful. We should only be chanting slogans about democracy, and freedom, the popular slogans. And they started shouting: 'Democracy and freedom!'

When the demonstrations began, and before the revolution turned to armed struggle, the distinctions between an ‘us’ (that means ‘trust-worthy people’ like ‘teachers’, ‘students’ and people with a certain social status recognised by the state in general) and a ‘them’ here, like smugglers – were recurrent. It was when the struggle became armed that this structure changed radically, going as far as to erase such distinctions in some areas under insurgency. Saleh continues remembering and describing how he was trained to protest about and negotiate his goals within zones that later became places where the revolution was militarised.

Saleh: So we carried on marching. [...] But someone chanted: ‘Down with the regime!’ I said: ‘There is no God but Allah, God bless the young people, give us democracy and freedom! United, the Syrian people are united!’ Dignity, freedom, those kinds of things. Individual freedom, we knew about that, and you saw it on television. We marched, starting with twenty-five demonstrators, it went up to thirty, then forty, then fifty, etc. When it reached around 100, someone suggested we should go and protest outside al-makhfar [the police station]. I said: ‘May Allah help you, what do you mean, protest outside the police station?’ We knew there were eleven Alawites in that police station and the smugglers wanted to take it by force, they’d brought guns in their cars. They wanted to take the police station to get hold of the police’s weapons. I said: ‘No, no, we need more people, at the moment there aren’t enough of us to win. Wait until there are more of us’. I also told them that if they carried on going to the police station, I wouldn’t go with them and the most people would do the same. And they said: ‘Let’s do what the professor says’. So we changed direction, it went further. There were more of us, when people saw Saleh, Ahmed or Mustafa, they took heart. Gradually our numbers exceeded 2,000. The other regions saw us and joined in. The police chief ended up calling us to say there shouldn’t be an issue. When we finally reached the police station, I told the police chief everyone had had enough of the situation and that he had to evacuate the station. The chief told me nothing would happen on his side, that there would be no problem. Then I asked the young people to organise a line separating us from the police, so there would be no skirmishes. But I told the police chief that the soldiers and police were his responsibility to keep in line, and that we’d be responsible for the demonstrators. Later, he told me what he had said to his men: ‘I swear to God. I ordered them to turn their faces to the wall; “Sir...”; “Your face against the wall!”’ The police came out holding their weapons, but facing the station walls.

People stopped in front of the police station: 'The people want the regime to fall' 'The youths, look, there was nobody to reply to us or do anything crazy'. Obviously, it was the youths, among them were smugglers, and they ended up dispersing and everyone went home, and nothing happened, hamdulillah. [...]

Montassir: *When you say 'we' are you talking about a protest organisation? The Baathists, the Muslim Brotherhood?*

Saleh: *No, it was a popular revolution. For the people. Nobody knew anybody else. In our region, honestly, we didn't know each other. Groups formed ... For example me, as school principal, I used to talk to the teachers: people organised demonstrations.*

The wise man as protector of the community

Throughout the interview, what came across was the paradox of the exceptional nature of the revolution, and the 'already-there' dimension of the tensions that it brought to light. In fact, rejecting the bureaucratic order and the restrictions it imposed preceded the revolution: as a student, he had reluctantly been forgiven for his religious faith, before being courted to be a member of the state-party. As primary school principal, in other words a unique part of the administration whose aim is to nurture good behaviour, he did not, however, abandon the principles forged in a community resistant to the state's constraints. Although he is a respectable man – hence his condemnation of the smugglers – he still maintains distance from the institution: 'I always wanted to help the poor [...] I am still, and despite my work, a religious man'. So Saleh founded a charity – an ordinary but already radical act: 'Because everyone that started a charity over the last twenty years has ended up in prison! Some are dead, some escaped!' By way of proof, Saleh himself asked the state-party to monitor his NGO: he wanted 'to do something from the inside'.

In this way, the gap between administrative power and the 'behaviour' it approved of (Foucault, 2004) on one side, and the lives people actually lived, on the other, predate the revolution. The space that became inexorably bigger was therefore people's awareness of the incomplete 'alienation' from 'foreign powers'²² that state authority represented. From then on, the revolution constituted the highest point of a subjective and patiently developed dissidence. The opening of a new political period in

2011 is therefore the frame for a personal commitment by agents positioning themselves in the new ‘field’ of the revolution. Possible and probable death is seen as the tragic price to pay for ultimately achieving an existence independent of the state’s bureaucratic apparatus. This simultaneously subjective and collective reshaping was essentially constructed out of two utopias: the first, which was initially presented from the perspective of its liberalism, developed steadily toward humanism during total wartime; the second was called ‘religion’.

It is true to say that during the revolutionary moment, integration by the state and organic solidarity showed structural weakness. Durkheim (2017 [1893]) himself was aware of this – as evidenced by his interpretation of the growth in a modern context of what he termed ‘selfish suicides’ (Durkheim, 2007 [1897]), but the general trend was manifested in Syria by other forms of collective pattern. The figure of the *woujahâ* (the wise man) – of which Saleh is an example – is symptomatic of the structuring of the community that coexists with the state order in the context of civil peace and from the outbreak of the revolution provides an alternative to fixation on bureaucratic structures. Although the role of the wise men has not been studied in the political sociology scholarship of the Syrian story – the organic relationship between the social sciences and the categories of state has already been referred to – it is crucial in founding and sustaining the revolutionary community.

The figure of the wise man does not refer to a group defined by its economic capital or the administrative roles occupied before the revolution, even though Saleh was a primary school principal, and the group includes former *mokhtâr* – representatives of the lowest level local bureaucrats of the Ministry of the Interior – and retired military officers. The figure is linked to the disjunction between the legitimate monopoly of violence – effectively completed in Syria – and that of ‘truth telling’ (Bourdieu, 2012)²³ in which numerous forms of resistance enable that monopoly to be attenuated and even cancelled. The *woujahâ* are the expression of one of these alternative structures of the community, often religious, with intellectuals and clan or tribal leaders. Mohamed, a fighter we met in a convalescent home in Southern Türkiye, attests to this role emerging in a context where the regime was exceeding moral and collective limits. He goes back to what is retained by collective memory in terms of the ultimate reasons that explain the spread of the demonstrations: the flouting of the honour of families, women and children.

Montassir: *What were the slogans at the beginning?*

Mohamed: *'Houriya, Houriya, Houriya' (Freedom, freedom, freedom); 'Wahid, wahid, cha'b souri wahid' (One, one, the Syrian people are one); 'Silmiya, silmiya' (peaceful, peaceful demonstration); 'Yâ dar'â lâ tahtammî bafdik brouhî w dammî' (Daraa fears nothing, I sacrifice my blood and soul for you); 'Inhae al fassad' (No more corruption); 'al Karama' (dignity), etc. As well as slogans about defending Daraa.*

That began in Daraa because it's a tribal area, people followed the 'acha'ir (tribes) which couldn't bear the state's offenses against them. At the start, the tribal representatives and people who mobilised in Daraa only demanded one thing: remove the governor. But the state refused and carried on with the total oppression of the movement. And that's where it became 'Down with the regime!' There was this massive offence committed in Daraa. Imagine, the tribal woujahâ' went to negotiate and the governor told them: Bring us the other children who wrote slogans on the walls or go and bring us your women!' You have to understand that the woujahâ' were representing the families and were therefore protecting the families' honour. Words like the ones the Governor used were unacceptable and could only provoke violence.²⁴

But we should be careful of the orientalist reading that summarises the revolution as exclusively a game of codes of honour. Instead, we should follow the whole process of degradation that enabled a form of social cohesion in a Syrian society completely dominated by the state. The figure of the wise men could be enough on its own to show the complexity of a negotiation based on honour, but also history and balances – envisioned according to a rational calculation – between state order and society as a whole. In 2011, when the then peaceful protests broke out, the wise men were sometimes on the regime's side, and other times, supported the revolutionaries (as did Saleh), and were most often neutral. However, it does not appear from our interviews that these positions undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of the demonstrators, at least not in the first few weeks of the protests. Everything happened as if it was acknowledged that they had a political timeline different from that of the protests. From the outset, the *wajih* (the wise man) – older than the demonstrators – insofar as he was a bulwark of social order, was bound to be careful, to ensure that the community was not damaged, as much by the state as by a poorly controlled protest.

However, once the regime attacked people and adopted a scorched earth policy – the most famous of Bashar al-Assad’s followers’ slogans was then ‘*al-Assad aw nihriq al-balad*’ (Assad, or we burn down the country) – the same ‘wise men’ who were carefully observing the protest movement were in the front line of the defence of the community under threat. They fought, funded the purchase of weapons, and provided moral support to the movement that had become irrevocably revolutionary. Furthermore, the wise men, in addition to enabling the revolution to begin, ensured its independent character: as a grassroots group, they were not tied to a party or activist organisation. The shift to the revolution was immediately inscribed into the coordinates of people’s lives – as it thus became the dominant moral norm, and the unanimously acknowledged limit to revolutionary power itself.

However, tension emerged between political action and the wise men’s prudence, with the result that their authority could only be formal. But through the recognition *de facto* bestowed upon them, the wise men’s word functioned as a buffer between the people and all outside power. This essential role prevented any monopoly over discourse and representation from being established. The distinction was thus understood in the revolutionary community: the wise men acted within the social body that produced them, and of which they were the voice, unlike the parties that had agendas based on the forms of capital legitimised by other social fields. The wise men’s discourse was devoid of practice other than being the articulation of the community, thus reproducing the pattern identified by anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1934-1977) when observing Amerindian societies without states: ‘The chief probably preaches in the desert sometimes: the Toba of Chaco or the Trumai of Upper Xingu which are thus delivered to general indifference. [...] The language of authority, say the Urubu, is a ‘*ne eng hantan*’: a hard language that expects no answer. But this hardness in no way compensates for the powerlessness of the political institution. The exteriority of power is mirrored by the isolation of its words, which, spoken harshly only to be barely heard, bear witness to its weakness’ (Clastres, 1962: 51-65).

Actually, what the revolutionary community dismisses via the figure of the wise men is the modern authority of intermediate bodies, i.e. political parties, trade unions, civil society organisations, academics, etc. Pre-revolutionary Syria thus embodied a perfect sociological continuum with the reality of the modern state. This ordinary political order was

explicitly challenged by the revolutionary community. A fighter, Abou Youssef, stressed this in an interview.

Abou Youssef: You have to note one thing: the organisation of the hirak [the movement] in Syria had nothing at all to do with the Muslim Brotherhood or any other organisation.

Montassir: Including a set of ideas conveyed by the Brotherhood?

A. Y.: The majority of the people are Muslims, but we had absolutely no political organisations – Islamic or otherwise – before the revolution. For forty years of oppression in Syria, no organisation except the regime emerged. And there was a void in terms of organised political thought. You also have to know another thing: the Muslim Brothers oppressed in Hama, Damascus and Homs in the 1980s were part of us. In those governorates, during the years of repression, the demonstrations that took place were not specific to the Muslim Brotherhood, they were popular uprisings. [...] I'm not defending the Muslim Brotherhood, just telling you that the security apparatus destroyed the people in the 1980s using the war against the Brothers as a pretext. Rifaat al-Assad used planes at that time to fire on the people in Hama, thus making 40,000 martyrs... Do you think they were all Muslim Brotherhood? It was the people that they massacred. [...]

And today, within our revolution, the ones who organised for a partisan cause were indeed the Muslim Brotherhood. But they were acting from abroad where they were in exile. They tried to get a foothold in the country, but they were only a marginal presence in the revolution. Of course, their goal was to participate in post-revolution politics. If that ever ended up with holding elections, they might win them or get representation, but getting into the revolution was something else entirely: they were emphatically a minority. And in my personal opinion, any person working for a partisan cause – during the revolution – is a traitor to the revolution. There are no political parties in the revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood got involved late, they didn't participate in the initial hirak. And it's the same story for the Al-Nusra Front [linked to Al-Qaida] and Daesh: they weren't in the hirak. Those organisations got there much later. The hirak was a popular rebellion, not subject to any organisation, and it didn't come out of any organisation.²⁵

What do ‘the words of the people’ tell us?

Here we see the rejection of activist and partisan forms of organisation from the very start of the *hirak* – the peaceful mobilisation. It was thus acknowledged among the people that the protests should be independent of the political field. And if earlier we referred to the liberal or humanist utopia at work, this was put forward by elements of the revolutionary community and not through coordinated action carried out by a party. Such a rejection crystallised in a lexical outpouring: the revolutionary movement is designated by the term ‘*hirak*’, as opposed to ‘*haraka*’. The two terms share the etymological root that refers to movement from one place to another. However, ‘*haraka*’ is the canonical word – since the independence struggles – used to refer to political movements and parties.

When the revolutionaries criticised the intermediate bodies, political representation was the first target: the state and the organisations acting in the name of the people instituted the external power that the revolution was fighting. So the protests against this were the *hirak*,²⁶ the community with blurred edges, that everyone could join. Furthermore, beyond these terms, collective action was already decoupled from any mediation or agenda-setting apart from ‘bringing down the regime’: the practical experiences of the *hirak* produce a heightened image of the exteriority and strangeness of the state’s power. This gulf is placed in a chronological context by Abou Youssef, distinguishing the revolution from its potential re-imposition. Through a critique of the most well-organised party, the Muslim Brotherhood, he explains the pre-emption of any representative political structure by the act of revolution; so it is not the Brothers’ ideology that was rejected – ‘Syria is a majority Muslim country,’ he says – but rather the political structures that produced them.

Such suspicion towards the discourse in the name of the community being successfully monopolised runs parallel to the localism of the revolution. It was not confined to one place (Daraa was only a departure point) and was fragmented into areas of necessarily specific activity (Abou Youssef operated in Marea, and Saleh in Bidama, for example). Only the opposition to the regime was therefore contained within a specific, bordered territory. The revolution had its spaces (mosques, central squares, working-class neighbourhoods, rural areas, walls with drawings on them) just as the state had its own (other neighbourhoods, police

stations, party headquarters, main roads, entries and exits of cities, prisons and local bases for various security forces).

It is according to this logic that we should understand slogans that sit outside an organisational logic referring to specific ideologies. The slogan crucial to the start of the revolution – ‘One, one, the Syrian people are one’ – does not refer, in my reading, to a demand for the construction of an indivisible nation, as has been assumed by several interpretations. In the words of our respondents, it refers to an alliance against the state government. It was a union not contingent upon a shared fate, but in the opposition between the ‘ones’ (in the slogan) and a state power outside of the people. This meaning can be understood according to a logic of protest when we realise that in the first days of the demonstrations, the central power allowed the phenomenon of the counter-demonstration called *Al Lijân Cha’biya* (Popular Committees) composed of regime sympathisers and, therefore, a frontline of social dissidence, hinting at the inevitable civil war threatening to break out. The slogan, ‘One, one, the Syrian people are one’, worked internally to the society: as a form of discourse aimed at bonding and warning people of the civil war in the pipeline. It was indeed this civil war that started up when the regime bolstered its police deployments, its repression of the demonstrations and its strategy of infiltrating revolutionary circles’ ‘spaces’. Addressing the logics of representation went hand in glove with a policy of using specific vocabulary. Responding to the political slogans conveyed by the government and the National Syrian Council, which claimed to represent the revolution, the demonstrators put forward a different vocabulary. They emphasised words devoid of ideological connotations. These words placed concepts of ‘dignity’, ‘honour’ and ‘freedom’ at the heart of the revolution. But it was also the name of Allah which, as in the Iranian revolution of 1979, provided momentum for the Syrian revolution with strength independent of political agendas, and a capacity to ‘bring people together’ around a symbolic order without the need to set out demands in terms of political measures.²⁷ For instance, the slogan chanted by Syrians ‘*Ma lana ghir Allah*’ (*We only have Allah [to help us]*) acted as the acceptance of a tragic fate comprised of massacres and the silence of the ‘international community’. With their chants, dances and collective prayers, the revolutionaries paid respects to their dead and created space for the ‘people’ to become a reality in the margins of the state arenas. The name of Allah regenerated this motivation and lit the subjective and collective

flame that drove the resistance, sustaining the people's appetite for conflict. In an interview carried out with Abou Ilyas (see above), it is easy to measure this dimension because the feelings he previously experienced return to him: 'Sorry, but I just felt something like those chills I felt the day of the first demonstration', he said, before telling the story of a man in his seventies who had been in tears because he was scared of dying without ever witnessing a day such as this!

Lastly, to make a connection with the Marxist analysis of revolutions – apart from class contradictions, which has no relevance for the analysis here – the reading based on the 'words of the people' we came across mirrors Engels' and Marx's insights regarding the state: the idea of a state becoming increasingly distant from society or placing itself above it threads through several texts by these two thinkers (and activists).²⁸ This reading had mainly been squeezed out by the dominant analyses of vulgar Marxism since the advent of communist electoral machine politics.

The imperative of toppling the oppressive and corrupt state

What is it that makes an individual – and the group they belong to – switch to a utopia whose outline as well as future are blurry and uncertain? This is less of an anthropological than a historical question: the Syrian revolution had neither theoreticians – at least not according to the common meaning of that word – nor organisations or classes 'in themselves' or 'for themselves' capable of framing flow and destiny. Even the excess of religiosity in the period beginning in 2011 was resistant to an immediate translation, so that the observer would be restricted to describing scattered subjectivities. These expressed the multiplicity of utopian thought that gripped the community when it launched the revolution.

Among these individual journeys is that of Abou Ilyas. This man was thirty-five in 2011, and living in Marea, a town deep in the rural surroundings of the Northern Rif, 35 km North of Aleppo. In his town, he was one of the initiators of the initially peaceful demonstrations. Then, when the revolution became an armed struggle, he was one of the first to bear arms, in full sight of everyone and always on the edge of the demonstrations, he was thus charged with protecting the revolutionary community against the para-state *chabbiha* militia. Arrested, then tortured for a long time, he was later freed by the regime as part of a prisoner exchange. I met him in Gaziantep in 2016.

Montassir: *Let's go back to your life before the war ...*

Abou Ilyas: *In 1999, I did mandatory military service. In 2000, I started working in business. I opened a fabric-selling firm. By 2002... [...] But let me tell you that it was not that life that led me to the revolution ... We had to get rid of that regime. Let me take you back to 2011 to show you how I really arrived at that point. Because it's true, we continued to live modestly, each person focused on their work. Our lives were recognised socially.*²⁹

As is often the case, at the beginning of the research I began the interview as a sociologist piecing together people's biographical trajectories; however, my interviewee soon criticised my claim to objectify them. At that moment, a change occurred, and the newly reflexive researcher found himself in a position to abandon the model of reason that he was supposed to follow in order to examine only the strength of the interviewee's subjective experience. The latter thus refers to the various social positionings he assumed during the revolution: established family man with a 'socially recognised' life, which then involved him first as a peaceful revolutionary, then the leader of a clandestine armed group hunting senior civil servants from the state's security apparatus, and finally a horribly tortured prisoner, before being freed and exiled in the negotiations of war.

Abou Ilyas: *It was because of my business activities that I was in a position to compare Syria to other countries. I travelled and visited several countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. I visited Togo and Ghana, and I saw they had a lot of freedom compared to Syria. In late 2010, the Arab revolutions broke out. When people rebelled in Tunisia, we began to see a hâjis [a ghost] in Syria. Me personally, and a lot of young people in Syria.*

Abou Oday: *This ghost was built out of the lives that each one of us led locally. Because each of us was experiencing contradictions, hardships.*

Abou Ilyas: *So the question each of us was asking was: how can we successfully band together? How do we each manage to take someone else's hand and get up? We had this fear because everyone knew what was in other people's inner selves. And each person, depending on their experience, knew that this regime should not continue to exist. Of course, people had specific pressures and experiences.*

And the intellectual class couldn't accept that this permanent oppression experienced by Syrians would last indefinitely. The revolution left Tunisia and unfolded next in Egypt. And here, in a town 35 km from Aleppo, in Marea, slogans and graffiti started to appear on the walls. This was days before Daraa.

Montassir: *Slogans saying what?*

Abou Ilyas: *Demands for freedom, an end to oppression, justice. It was the kids, like in Daraa.*

Abou Oday: *There weren't calling for the fall of the regime yet. It was: 'Freedom, justice, etc.'*

Abou Ilyas: *So in Syria, it began with the Arab Spring and graffiti on the walls. We weren't doing a lot of activism on social media.*

Montassir: *What did the word 'freedom', written on walls in Marea, mean for you at that time?*

Abou Ilyas: *In 2008, the security police locked me up. I was accused of falsifying my passport. I had to pay a lot of money to get out of prison. I spent ten days in the security police division, then they sent me to the criminal security wing, then the court. I paid more than 4,000 dollars 'bribes' for them to release me. All in all, I was under arrest for about twenty days. When they transferred me from the prison in Aleppo to one in Damascus, I witnessed how political prisoners were being treated, in special cells. And I knew other friends arrested by the various sections of the security forces, including the air force.*

So I know all about security: it's an illusion. An illusion by which control of society is carried out through the various sections of the police. When people hear the word far' amni [security section], they get more and more scared. If you get arrested by one section, neither people close to you nor lawyers are allowed to ask after you. But in my work, I realised that this illusion can be corrupted: all it takes is for money to be given, following a specific protocol – for example finding the section chief's wife and giving her cash in an envelope to give to her husband – and you can fix your own freedom. Of course, that's separate from accusations to do with politics. Because when politics come into play, there is no chance of negotiation. [...]

There are also absolutely loads of abuses of power: a state agent can come into your place of business, seize your merchandise or unfairly decide to close your shop, without it going through the system. Your arrest also happens without a warrant. I was arrested at home, and they transferred me to Damascus without a warrant – that's called a common warrant. And I had to pay 4,000 dollars to lift the common warrant, when I was handed over to the courts, then to bribe the judge to release me. Why did all that have to happen? Because actually I changed something in my passport without going through them first. Because if you change anything at all – like your address – you have to change your entire passport, which is process that takes forever and involves all these police sections that have to see all the documentation to issue you a new passport. So having falsified this document, I was then persecuted by all the sections I'd set out to avoid. It's trivial, absurd stuff. When I go to Germany, I look for a car and spend less than an hour sorting out the right official papers, and then I'm out of the airport. In Syria, buying a car is a business that lasts several days. You have to bribe an entire chain of administrators to get the right to buy it. [...]

All these things I'm telling you about, my arrest, the corruption of what you think these state institutions are, suffering because of the state bureaucracy, etc., that's what made me personally join the revolution. And it wasn't just for me, it was especially for my children, for the future generations. We'd had enough of this oppression. We'd had enough of there being minorities and families that were profiting from a system that was crushing us.

The gulf spoken of here in the practice of school principal. Saleh can also be seen in Abou Ilyas's story: on one side, the experience of a businessman who 'travels and compares', and on the other, the expectation of what people fear actually happening to him, juxtaposed with the illusion of 'security' and civil peace. The theory of contagion among Arab revolutions, while it is not completely inaccurate, is nevertheless reductive: the blast was expected and hoped for by people who were not activists (Abou Ilyas for instance, had no link at all to the traditional structures of opposition).

Brutal repression of the first few peaceful demonstrations

Abou Ilyas's relationship with the state is based on daily interactions with the arms of a state bureaucracy claiming to be omniscient, yet as slow as it was corrupt. This is perfectly exemplified by the four 'security'

sections within the Syrian state (military police, air force police, political (or security) police, and judicial police), with which everyone had an ongoing requirement to engage: getting hold of or legalising any type of document was done ‘with the police’. With the lion’s share of administrative tasks thus delegated to the security forces, a threat was always there: people feared they might be incarcerated and/or tortured. The intersection of the various forms of sovereign power can thus be found in Abou Ilyas’s journey via a painful encounter with the corrupt legal system, that enabled him to cut short his sentence – and a spell in political police prison because he had violated an administrative norm that reminds us a great deal of the way that modern bureaucracies function, including in Western democracies. Following the interview, when I asked him about social inequalities in the school system, Abou Ilyas countered me with a still more sensitive question about domination, pure and simple. It is another form of modern hegemonic and disciplinary power that complements Ilyas’s practical experience of being moved to insurrection.

Abou Ilyas: The private school issue as you’re framing it, is problematic. In general, these issues do not exist in this way in Syria, all the more so because there aren’t many private schools. Also, whether they are private or public, schools do the same thing everywhere. They have the same textbooks, the same programme and the same system of political integration into the branches of the Baath party. I understand your question also in relation to class inequalities ... You have to know that ‘socialism’ was just an empty slogan in Syria. These slogans are repeated in the schools, but in reality they’re not true. Because there is co-optation, nepotism. [...] And at school, the children have to do Baath party activities from their first year onwards. In 2011, my daughter was part of the ‘Baath Advance Guard’ organisation. In high school you have to join the Baath Youth Wing. Always the Baath party, always ‘Long live Bashar’, etc.

Apart from the issue of ‘class inequality’ that he says he does understand, Abou Ilyas describes and criticises the disciplinary way in which the school is used, and its role in national integration. So the imposition and homogenisation of points of view can be identified in the way in which a child’s journey through the school system is institutionally bound up with the youth elements of the one-party state, and even more exemplary, in ‘Pan-Arabism’ lessons (*qawmiya*) – a de facto civic and moral education class. More generally, the state’s actions are thus interpreted

by Abou Ilyas: if all state domination assumes submission – according to Weber’s framework (2003)– such submission may be a catalyst for rebellion in conducive historical circumstances. In the same logic of national homogenisation, each citizen’s experience is by definition unique, and carries within it the possibility of resistance to the nationalist framing. Therefore, from the outset of the protests in 2011, Abou Ilyas threw himself completely into the revolutionary process and its embryonic community actions. Talking about his commitment and the role played by the wise men in the revolution’s early days, he summarises the story that a lot of other Syrian revolutionaries have also told me.

Montassir: *Let’s go back a bit to the revolution...*

Abou Ilyas: *The revolution began in Daraa on 15 March 2011. It was the demonstrations after the children had been arrested and tortured. Since February, revolution had been symbolised by graffiti and slogans on the walls. On 17 March, the collective protests started in the Hariqa area in Damascus. The demonstrations then spread from one town to another. Personally, I was anxiously following things through the media reports. In Damascus, the regime was holding firm. A few young people had come out spontaneously in some neighbourhoods and chanted ‘Freedom, freedom’, etc., then ran away, or got arrested. But everyone knew something was going on. [...]*

The first demonstration in Marea was on 2 April 2011, one month ten days after Daraa. The demonstrators gathered after some families had put out an appeal – in our place, in this region, it was all about the families.³⁰ For example, the al-Khalil, Makhoulf, and Hakam families, etc. Next there were activists who were members of these families, aged between twenty-five and forty, who couldn’t tolerate the oppression of Daraa, Damascus, Homs and Hama, and who turned up at the demonstrations. It was people from twenty-five to forty because people over fifty were scared: they knew what the regime was really like and feared that the whole family would be punished, like in Hama in the 1980s. I was twenty-three in 2011 and with a few friends, I looked forward to this event. We were hoping for change, for an end to being oppressed. And I repeat, I had no personal stake in participating in the demonstrations. It was for my children and the next generation.

This is how it started. Five or six young people went to the Market Square in the city centre. They were each waiting for the other to get started. In fact, we weren’t used to that. It was all new to us. We were used to other types of

public gatherings. They moved us around like cattle and gave us photos of the 'father and leader of the nation, and asked us to say, 'Bi rouh bi ddam nafdik ya Hafez' (with our lives and with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for you, O Hafez). And even when it was about Palestine, the demonstrations had been staged, so we didn't know how to plan a demonstration.

So that day: 2 April 2011, a young man named Abdallah began the first demo, shouting 'Freedom!' There were thirty or forty people at the beginning because it was spontaneous. We didn't have flags or balaclavas. There was a funny feeling [his voice is emotional, and he then falls silent]. We had an indescribable sensation from being in Syria, and shouting 'Freedom!' At that moment you felt like you had put your foot on the first step of the stairs that would take you towards what you'd hoped for ... Sorry, but I just felt something like the chills I felt on the day of the first demonstration.

Anyway, we began walking through the main streets of the city. Among the people who crossed our path were spectators who greeted us and wished us good luck. I can remember the faces of people who were crying too. A seventy-year-old man cried when we went past him. I saw him again after the demonstration, he considered himself a follower of Nasser, therefore against the Baath party. He took me in his arms and told me, with tears in his eyes, 'I was afraid I would die before this day came'. We had a privileged place in the hearts of the people of Marea because we were the first to dare break the silence. During this demonstration, the police had not been ordered to put it down. It was an incredible feeling, demonstrating in front of the police, who did not react, in Syria!

We defied them all the way to the area where they were based. They didn't intervene, but kept a dialogue with us throughout that first day, via the *woujahâ* (wise men), particularly the *mokhtar*. We refused their requests to surrender and abandon the demonstration. That first day, we moved around the whole city so that everyone knew what was happening. When we got home, immeasurable joy was expressed. But we knew a sad fate awaited us. We only went home to say hello to our parents, loved ones and children. Then we went straight out again towards the areas where the police couldn't reach us, particularly the farms, to stay with distant family members. As predicted, the police raids began early next day. My house was targeted and searched by the police a dozen times in two months. Several demonstrators were arrested, including my brother and my cousin.

After the first demonstration, we came back home secretly, during the night to see our loved ones and then left again immediately to hide in farms and bushes near the city.

Following the peaceful demonstrations, the repression of the sit-in at Clock Square in Homs (17 April) was a turning point of the first few months of the revolution, enabling people in the various administrative regions to engage in a great deal of solidarity. Families and activists called for demonstrations to protest the deaths of seven young people from the city. Massive protests lasted all day. In the evening, hundreds of demonstrators decided to have a sit-in and put up tents – as people had done in Tahrir Square in Cairo – the city’s central square. The police then perpetrated a massacre after initially giving the protesters two hours to end the sit-in. This intervention took place less than an hour after the announcement of that ultimatum. A report on the massacre would be broadcast by Al Jazeera, thus enabling news of it to reach Syria.³¹ Abou Ilyas talks of this founding moment.

Abou Ilyas: Among the first and famous demonstrations, there’s the sit-in at Clock Square in Homs. One night, the police came and killed five hundred people, including martyrs and the disappeared. It was a proper massacre. And us, in Marea, we came out at the same time, towards midnight, in solidarity with our brothers in Homs. We chanted Allahou Akbar without going into a single mosque. We wanted to alert people about the killings in Homs. It was an ad hoc demonstration in the rain, but which managed to get more than a thousand participants. We sent our videos to Al Jazeera and other big media companies.

But our voices didn’t carry to anywhere in the world. It was an illusion to believe in human rights and that the international community would protect Syrians. We left to demonstrate with olive branches and headbands setting out our demands for freedom, while the police fired on us. The police systematically shooting at demonstrators became common practice from May 2011. And for the entire year we committed no violence at all. You should note that the flag we used at the start was the Syrian flag: the same one as the regime uses today! There was no division between us.

Beyond the state’s directly institutional strategies, the interview with Abou Ilyas shows the respective territorial scales of the nation and the revolution. The revolutionary community was above all based on direct circles of contacts. And as a mirror image, the repression – at least in the first few weeks – was carried out by local and widely known forces of order. After that, although localism combined over the course of the protests with a global identification with the Arab revolutions and the

martyrs of other cities – mainly Homs and Daraa – the reality of the revolution could scarcely be translated from one city to another and the geographical fragmentation of the early round of demonstrations, and then of the free zones in the second phase meant that the link was essentially symbolic. When war broke out, this symbolic and in practice ineffective identification took a name: the Free Syrian Army.

In conclusion to this chapter, let us underscore that going back over the 2011-2012 period has, by using the words and stories of the revolutionaries we encountered, allowed us to develop a picture of what was at stake in those initial peaceful demonstrations, the demands they introduced and the main characters within the revolutionary community. Unlike what was later to mobilise both Syrian and foreign supporters and fighters in the jihad, it was the voice of liberal utopia which articulated itself first in the initial demonstrations, echoing the more general timeline of the Arab rebellions. We also witnessed the process by which the whole of society entered into the revolutionary moment particularly via the ‘wise men’. This was a collective choice subject to a considered consensus about whether to turn to an armed struggle, as a last resort, in response to the large-scale repression marshalled by a regime riding roughshod over honour and the last bastions of what remained of civilised society. Lastly, this chapter briefly discussed the dynamics of the revolution’s distancing of activist organisations (trade unions, political parties, civil society associations, student movements) in favour of a *hirak* that unified the revolutionary community on the basis of renewed and partly religious moral standards – which we will study more closely in the chapters to follow – thus evading the modern mechanisms of political representation.

The regime's repressive violence and the slide into armed struggle (2011-2012)

Saleh's distinction – 'it was a revolution not a war' – made systematically during the interviews, expresses a misunderstanding: the revolution, even when it became an armed one, was neither a civil war for power nor a confrontation of globally powerful states on 'neutral ground', following in the great story of East-West conflict. The geopolitical thesis must also be thrown out in advance: the revolution and war against the regime were not predetermined by the funding or support allegedly provided by foreign states. Although the thesis is most often wrong because it so ignores the motivations of the people concerned, the reality that it claims to describe lies far beyond the multiplicity of collective journeys and subjective meanings emerging over this period. As for the regime, whose support from the Russian and Iranian armies and militias is official (Bouvier, 2022; Berg, 2017; Clamadieu and Lambert, 2018), the war it waged within its own borders cannot be reduced to the reputed global or regional interests in play. The theory of 'remote control' is therefore incapable of correctly identifying the line of conflict that determined the reality of the historical period begun in 2011.

The opposite theory that this research puts back into play is the following: the geopolitical struggles engaged in by the international and regional powers only become apparent through the logics of concrete and local struggles in Syria. It is because there is a revolutionary reality stemming from the Arab Spring and a local insurrection rooted in its own distinct existence, combining utopian liberation struggles and state repression, that the logics of outside dominations emerge and attach themselves to this situation.

Repression fosters the military option

The undeniable reality of the 'civil war' [not the words of the people] saw the advocates of the state order pitted against those practically liberating themselves from it. The dividing line was clear, and it brought about different modes of political thought: for the regime, the conflict was defined

by allegiance to the state and the clan that ran it, whereas for the revolutionaries, it entailed challenging power in all its forms. Viewed from Aleppo or Homs, the main Free Zones from 2012 onwards, the war was therefore ‘civil’ rather than revolutionary.

However, the space between one phase of the Syrian revolution and the next was distinct: the first was basically peaceful, characterised by large-scale demonstrations in urban areas throughout the first quarter of 2011. The second phase was armed revolution, when the regime’s violence made self-defence, then offence, necessary. Although the timeline is relevant, it is actually based less on a break between forms of protest than on a logical development. Even when reluctant to militarise the revolution,³² the revolutionaries pinpoint the state’s exclusively aggressive perspective, whether historically in the course of the ordinary exercise of its power, or in response to the emergence of peaceful protest. My respondents freely acknowledge both Clausewitz’s original aphorism (‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’) and Foucault’s inversion of it.³³ In this way, the slide into armed struggle is only the next step – made inevitable by the sheer violence of the repression of the original protest. Earlier, awareness of the need for self-defence against state aggression had evoked the memory of prior massacres, such as those carried out by Hafez al-Assad in 1982 in Hama and Aleppo. Abou Ward is a survivor of the Hama massacres. He became a revolutionary in 2011 before going into exile to care for the wounded in a convalescent home in Türkiye. He explained this influence of the collective memory of the Hama massacres.

Abou Ward: *In Syria, several revolutions preceded the one in March 2011. There was the one that began in 1975 and ended in 1982 with the Hama massacre. Three quarters of the city was destroyed. The revolution had begun to spread beyond Hama to Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib and Aleppo, etc. And when Assad senior saw the perimeter of the revolution getting bigger, he literally destroyed Hama. I can tell you the names of the neighbourhoods, one by one, and I have photos from that time, showing how three quarters of the city was destroyed: Brazil, Tawafra, Kilaniyeh, Baroudiyeh... These were very old, working-class neighbourhoods. The city’s genuine heritage. He destroyed everything, killed 100,000 people and arrested 100,000 more. Over 100,000 other young people fled the country to Iraq, Jordan, etc. If you walked through Hama after 1982, you’d mainly find women and children. In 1982, Assad senior wanted to make an example out of Hama to ‘educate’ and discipline the whole of Syria. Despite this great injustice in 1982, a*

*revolution broke out in 2011. Why? Because people experienced humiliation and the only response to it was uprising!*³⁴

Above all, the entrenchment of the revolution in people's lives – and thus of the critique of the state – fostered the military option independently of any political programme. Taking up arms was just the translation of people's ordinary experiences of state order. Starting from there, although the war aimed exclusively to topple the state, the fact that it was not attached to a particular ideal drawn from the field of politics then being imposed onto the reality of the Free Zones – being a revolutionary increasingly became a synonym of bearing arms – fed the level of conflict which was less normative than defined by the relationship between the section of the population involved in the revolution, and those still subject to the state.

In contrast, although the revolutionaries labelled their reality – of bombardments and combat zones – as a war, the state refuted this term, condemning a vague kind of conflict allegedly unleashed by a coalition of Bashar al-Assad's enemies – he names the US, Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood, etc. Similarly, the revolution and its repression were deemed merely 'events' by the regime.

Therefore, their different relationships with reality held each side of the line separating Free Zones and spaces still under state authority paradoxically led to an absence of ill-feeling among the revolutionaries for those remaining in government areas, and who were assumed, at least formally, to support the regime. Family and clan relationships did endure the experience of geographical fragmentation brought about by the revolution, but the revolutionaries' refusal to put those people on trial for treason was first bound up in the very structure of armed conflict. Although the regime confirmed its state of denial during the period from 2011, its base of support and those attached to it also suffered as a result of the war. A revolutionary from Daraa told me in their interview: 'We all lost family members: people in the revolution as well as those on the regime's side. We wanted the regime gone, but the war spared nobody. Today, there is no hate except for the regime'.³⁵ From the beginning, because patterns of relationships at least partly explained which side people chose in the war which spared nobody, the clear dividing line between revolution and the state did not overlap in any way with the struggle between the

'races' generated in the conflict.³⁶ The war thus *de facto* played the role of hyphen within the community, whether revolutionary or not.

Everyone was a victim of this war, whose nature must be stressed: in response to the radical character of the protest against its monopoly of legitimate violence, the state countered, as noted above, with a scorched earth policy. The total violence set in motion was unclear: like a barrel dumped with no steering system on the Free Zones, the whole of society independent of the state was being targeted. Although the debates around militarisation among the revolutionaries were sometimes heated, they were incomparable to the exorbitant nature of annihilation as the only way for the state to reimpose its power of life – and death.

How taking up arms worked

It must be noted that even before the shift from peaceful protest to armed struggle, the chance of dying was everywhere within the protest movement. The death toll was serious: over the first six months, 2,355 demonstrators died in the state repression (including a hundred children, seventy-six women and a hundred and eight-four dissident soldiers), while ninety others were tortured to death in prisons and police stations (Bishara, 2013: 194).³⁷ Among the revolutionaries, I was told in the interviews that a kind of routine became steadily established, where around a dozen martyrs fell at each demonstration.

So the considerable extent of the state's violence had already been proven during the period when the protests were peaceful – '*silmiyya, silmiyya*' (peaceful, peaceful) the demonstrators chanted. From the beginning, the gulf between phases of repression had been less quantitative than qualitative: in the first quarter of 2011, massacres were the domain of the police. At the same time, as the promises of reforms and initiatives for negotiation were aborted at the last moment – repression, even when perpetrated by the army, remained within the rule of law: demonstrations were allowed or prohibited, arrested demonstrators were held at the police station, urged to sign minutes (of their interrogation) and brought before a judge, who in turn suggested they sign a commitment not to take part in any further protests. The surge in serious levels of violence did not immediately challenge the state, which was following the law. The documents 'suggested' for signing were thus underwritten

by torture and the possibility of murder. Anas, a revolutionary, who had been held and tortured tells us from experience.

Anas: In the first set of demonstrations, you were held for between fifteen and twenty-two days in the main prison after processing by the military security unit, followed by processing by the judge and then the obligation to sign an agreement not to participate in the next set of demonstrations. And you never know exactly what is in the signed document: they take your fingerprints and make you sign four or five blank pages. There are four units you have to go through: state security, military security, political security and lastly criminal security. And then they send you before the judge who releases you after you've paid a deposit of 5,000 Syrian pounds (100 dollars).³⁸

Tarek, later a fighter and head of az-Zinki (FSA), one of the main revolutionary brigades in Aleppo, also told us about his experience of incarceration in 2011.

Tarek: When the revolution started, we joined its ranks on day one. I was arrested on 11 September 2011, and held for ninety days by the intelligence services. I experienced all forms of torture. It wasn't an official prison. It was a cell inside a police station. When I went before a judge at the end of the ninety days and he saw the torture marks all over my body, he ordered my release. I then went back to revolutionary work even more determined, because when you know about injustice in theory, it can't compare with living it and having skin in the game.

Paradoxically, legal amnesty – after a long period of incarceration and several sessions of torture – was commonplace throughout this period. It ran parallel with the institutionalised practice of murder and torture via the use of both the law of exception (as was the case for public executions by the army and paramilitary militias) and ordinary and criminal law used in peacetime, the state often pardoned and urged its insurgent people, who were then exiled, to return home. This parallel rationality – which for a while went as far as continuing to pay the salaries of civil servants in Free Zones – thus connected warlike practice with the cold, neutral bureaucratic acts of the state. Because even formally and at the heart of the massacre, the Syrian state would continually claim the legality of its government.

The fact remains that the unparalleled levels of state violence caused the demonstrators to ask questions early on: how to respond to it? In the chronology of the process by which the revolution turned to armed struggle, one date seems key: 10 June 2011, following yet another massacre,³⁹ demonstrators attacked their local chief of police's station in Jisr al-Shughur in the far North-East of the country. The official version noted that the police lost one hundred and twenty officers, which cannot be verified, but it is beyond doubt that the police station was attacked, and many police officers lost their lives. Although the departure point of the 'askara (militarisation) differed from one place to another, the attack on Jisr al-Shugur indeed seems to be the launching pad for the armed struggle phase of the revolution.

It is important to go back over the military option, which we have seen did not mean a radical break, and the trajectories of those who became fighters. Because although there were still militant pacifists – including those who, within the community, could not serve at the front (women, children, elderly people) – entry into the armed struggle phase meant that from that moment, the ultimate revolutionary act was to bear arms.

Let's return to Saleh. This man, mobilised by his pupils, was there on the day when the Jisr al-Shugur police station was attacked. Here he narrates how things unfolded and ended up with the attack.

Saleh: [During the first demonstration in the village], the smugglers were buoyed by seeing 2,000 people in the street. Two days later, the smugglers attacked the police station and took the weapons. You should know that in 2011, the initial military operations in Syria took place in Jisr al-Shugur, when the smugglers launched an attack on the state security buildings. The security officers surrendered, as well as the regional chief – the one you'd call 'the governor' in Europe. In the military security unit, there was a man called Abou Yaaroub, who refused to surrender. There were intermediaries, but they were in vain. The regime was in a position to finish it: just one plane [with bombs], and history would have been different. But it let the smugglers go ahead. They then became more ambitious, and it was their greed that enabled the regime to prove that the protest movement had become an armed struggle. We'd suddenly lost influence due to the regime's trick, and the smugglers' greed. Because they only wanted to get hold of the weapons so they could sell them on. At the time, a rifle cost 200,000 Syrian pounds, considerable sum! 4,000 dollars! And they took all the weapons.

We finally entered the state security buildings. While it was over and Abou Yaaroub didn't want to surrender, a smuggler in a lorry drove a barrel full of explosives into the building. Shots were fired and the barrel exploded. This killed several people and wounded others, who had blood oozing out of their eyes and ears. Abou Yaaroub himself came out of the building completely dazed. They wanted to arrest him, but someone shot and killed them. They killed, [...] I don't know the precise figure, about two hundred people. That was around mid-June 2011.

Obviously at that time the smugglers were all armed. And do you know what the regime did? It released the bandits, thieves and people with criminal backgrounds. They pardoned them all in June 2011. It was an attempt to spread the idea that the people in the streets were armed gangs, not revolutionaries. To tell the Syrians and the whole world that there was no revolution.

Clearly, Saleh, who as we saw was one of the community's wise men, did not approve of the attack and blamed smugglers. This fact is demonstrated – it is a border zone with Türkiye and our respondent spoke at great length about the various forms of trafficking going on – but Saleh also describes more generally the development from respectable protest (careful not to further provoke the ire of the authorities) to revolutionary war. From the start, although Saleh, a teacher and primary school principal, disapproved of the new form that the struggle took, he was fully in support of the bandits, marginalised groups and smugglers who took weapons. He thus continues his story.

Saleh: My pupils... [He stops to wipe a tear from his eye.] Many of them died as martyrs: after I came to Türkiye, I found out that a lot had been killed. But many others were still in Syria and sometimes they told me: 'Professor, we went on a demonstration because you told us to'. Even as principal, I never separated myself from them. I carried on teaching English to year 4 students. Outside the teaching I spoke to them about various political forces, conflicts, our reality and experiences in other societies. The day the revolution began in Egypt, I spoke to them about Egypt and Tunisia. I talked to them about us and what we should do. [...]

I'll go back to June. Members of the state security unit were assassinated in Jisr al-Shugur. We, the civilians, buried the dead. When the army arrived, the city had emptied. The military dug up the bodies to show the grave to the regime's journalists. A way to tell the world, 'Look, this is the work of armed gangs, look

how they kill and destroy!’ In a nutshell, it had given the regime a great excuse to use unprecedented levels of violence. I’m not legitimising anything. There were definitely people who stole things, others that looted buildings, etc. You know, there was a moment of anarchy, and the smugglers were completely out of our control. And when the army came to our village, Bidama [20 km from Jisr al-Shugur], we realized we were going to be executed. We took refuge in the mountains. Obviously, they burnt the village to the ground. We stayed on the mountain for two weeks.

Montassir: *The teachers too?*

S: Everyone. The whole place was deserted. People were scared. The army was going to come and bomb everything. And everyone had been on the demonstrations and was therefore involved – me for example, I was well known, I’d had plenty of contact with the Security Unit. Of course, I would have preferred demonstrations to riots that would have destroyed the school. The school was ours. Why destroy it? But the smugglers destroyed everything, and they didn’t know about that thing called school. Imagine the first thing they did in the demonstration was destroy the town hall! They took down the portrait of Bashar and pissed on it. Obviously we were happy! [Laughter] That’s how it was! You reap what you sow! [...]

On 10 June, when the smugglers attacked the military security unit and killed those police, they left for Bidama. People asked them, ‘What do you want?’ They told us they wanted to take over the police station. Why? ‘For the weapons’. I made an agreement with them that I would give them the weapons and that as a quid pro quo they wouldn’t destroy anything or kill anyone. Among those smugglers were some of my former students, who said, ‘OK, professor!’

I called the police chief and asked him to give up the weapons. ‘What weapons, Saleh, do you want me out of the way? I said to him: ‘Abou Mohamed, you have to give them up otherwise they’re going to destroy everything. You’ll shoot at them, they’ll shoot at you. People will die. Give them your weapons, mate (ya zalami). Nobody has to die!’ And he answered: ‘No. I am going to talk to my superiors, and I’ll keep you in the loop.’ Then he hung up! I went to the police station again to reassure the police, and tell them they were under the protection of me and the villagers. There were twenty-five police, and there could have been a slaughter! When I got there, they told me: ‘What do you mean, give up our weapons, uncle?’⁴⁰ They’re going to destroy your homes and kill all of us.’ I replied that we’d all die in this mess if they didn’t give up the weapons. So the local police

chief called the police commander in Idlib, who said: 'What do you mean surrender your weapons?' The police chief explained the situation and his commanding officer hung up, refusing to give the order to hand over the weapons. The chief tried to call other senior officers, but they didn't answer his call. And he said to me: Ami [uncle], what do I care about all of this? Here you are, take the weapons!

Then I spoke to all the police officers: 'Come out and sleep in our homes tonight, the people from the village will put you up; and tomorrow at dawn take a train or a bus and go home'. [...] I absolutely insisted there would be no bloodshed. I took the weapons and went to where the protestors were gathered. I gave the weapons to the people who would become the Free Army in our region a few months later.

This story records the hesitations as well as the developments from the narrator's point of view: sticking to the law, and being careful to protect the public services that he understands as public goods, with the school foremost in his mind, Saleh consents however, to the total war that is looming. This ambivalence is the expression of a trajectory followed from within a paradigmatic state institution, the school, but also entirely oriented toward service to the community, in the name of a dissident religiosity. He did not commit himself to military combat and opposed the anarchy generated by the smugglers, but he went up into the mountains with them and handed over the weapons confiscated at the police station to them. This disorderly militarisation process is an outline of what would soon become the Free Syrian Army (FSA), originally made up of civilians, sometimes with tribal or local links. Its founding acts were often more strategic than motivated by a desire for vengeance in relation to the excesses of the state and its militias, or out of care to protect the protest movement. Steadily, while responses to state violence became more frequent, officers in the regime's army (Syrian Arab Army) started defecting (*inchiqâq*), usually with their weapons. Abou Kotaïba, a civilian who became a revolutionary commander in Aleppo, tells us about the early links between the revolutionary community and the officers' defections.

Abou Kotaïba: In fact, the civilians began to arm themselves for self-defence, and not at all to attack the opposition, which was made up of Syrians anyway, I mean people like us. It could have been my son or brother in the army. There was also an astonishing lack of information within the army about the nature of the revolution. They were cut off from telecommunications. I'll give you an example.

One of my nephews, in the army, was out of contact for months on end. When I finally got to talk to him, he said he was amazed to hear I was taking part in the demonstrations, and that in Damascus they were convinced it was outside agitators come to destroy Syria, probably in the pay of Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states. For the army, in that period, there was no revolution, only disruptive elements. [...] The soldiers were cut off from the world, and surveilled to the point where they honestly thought we were terrorists.

But that all crumbled when officers turned away from the regime, and set up the Free Army to defend civilians. The regime then increased the repression, both on the ground and from the air, when they no longer controlled an area. Abou Kotaïba told us about the circumstances in which he made his own decision to take up arms.

Abou Kotaïba: In Aleppo, the movement really got going in 2012. On 15 May, sixteen people were killed in a single demonstration. The avenue where that happened was renamed Martyrs Avenue [by the revolutionaries]. For me personally, it was this set of events that led me to take up arms. It was intolerable that women and children died because of demonstrations. There was a very small group of us that collected light weapons that we found. We placed ourselves on the edges of the demonstrations, displaying our weapons to send out the message: if the regime strikes, we will strike back. These actions had consequences in the army, where the officers punished soldiers who refused to fire on 'destroyers' in the name of pseudo-fidelity to the nation. The logical consequence was the increasingly large-scale withdrawal of soldiers from the regime's security forces, the reason why the dozen armed fighters that we were, managed to bring down the forces of the regime in the Salaheddine, Sikari, Mach'had and other Aleppo neighbourhoods.

On 10 June 2011 in Jisr al-Shugur, Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmouch created the first brigade of free officers and engaged the regime's forces in combat after the attack on the police station. This pattern occurred with increasing regularity. Protest turned to armed conflict, and then soldiers and officers from the local area joined the revolution, bringing legitimacy and military hardware. From June 2011, demonstrations across the whole country were protected by armed fighters. However, although the defections were enthusiastically welcomed by the revolutionary community, the Free Army was not controlled by officers,

and the attempts to unify armed brigades and base them increasingly on a single operational structure (*ghorfat al-arkâne*) failed due to the local communities' investment in the war effort. As what was considered revolutionary action overlapped more and more with the act of taking up arms, the domination of ex-state army personnel petered out. The tragic fate of Harmouch exemplifies that of several dissident officers. Seeking refuge in a camp on the Turkish border, he was kidnapped by regime army units, locked up, tortured then executed in the sinister Sednaya prison. The Free Army title was henceforth doomed to become merely a common means of identification, a flag that the revolutionaries ended up adopting at the end of 2011 in the first Free Zones.

Although the fearsome state repression had led to the militarisation of the revolution, the latter did not reestablish the monopoly of violence for itself. The armed brigades that were being formed at the time were only the next step of the revolutionary community, whose multiple forms prevented the formation of any military bureaucracy.

The words of the revolutionary war

A stand-off thus took shape around the right to protest peacefully. The defection of the soldiers caused the discourse on the legitimacy of the state to vacillate, but opened the door to total war borne by the institutions the regime had kept control of, thanks mainly to its allies.^{41, 42} Both collectively and subjectively, the act of taking up arms can be explained by reasons other than law and rights, such as the lack of centralizing organisation in the Free Zones meant that armed involvement in the revolution operated on a basis other than that of becoming a soldier, in other words, without an allegiance to a state-like military structure.

Several reasons for this were posited by people we came across: a way to respond to violence, revenge, the fear of even more intense state violence if the demonstrations resumed and the memory of earlier massacres. However, armed involvement never meant a prescriptive single programme of action: the revolution's sole objective was to bring down the regime 'here and now'. This main antagonism was borne out in the Free Zones: the revolutionaries there engaged in combat with the police and the bureaucracy, against the regime's armed supporters (Lebanese Hezbollah, Iranian militias and the Russian army) and the corrupt state order (the *chabbiha*). In contrast, joining the Free Syrian Army had no

meaning other than that the revolution had taken up arms, most often within a group already in contact with one another, as Tarek, a fighter in the az-Zinki brigade of the FSA confirmed in 2016.

Tarek: The Free Army had no central command group. All the brigades that believed in the revolution, who carried its flag and fought Daesh and the regime, made up the Free Army. The brigade itself said: 'I'm the brigade of whoever, Free Army'. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) had a presence that was more symbolic than anything that really existed in a centralised way on the ground. Later on, of course, we had joint centres of operations, like for Operation 'Conquest of Aleppo', in which all the Free Army brigades participated. We mainly used private chat groups on WhatsApp or Skype. There was affection and appreciation between us. We worked like brothers on the front, and the commanders met all the time. The Free Army was united and by the grace of God remained so. At this moment [summer 2016] there is a planned Northern Army that would unify all the groups. We as brigades are ready for that unification. But the most important thing is that we all carry the same colours, and not 'different colours' [spoken in English].⁴³

The regime's scorched earth policy is thus clarified. Since the structure of the group waging the revolutionary war was difficult to ascertain, the regime took on a fragmented approach: multiple para-state militias (and brigades officially incorporated into the government army) were active on the local frontlines, and sometimes even in the Free Zones. This strategy was represented at its extreme by the regime's abandonment of the Kurdish regions in September 2012 to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PYD in its Syrian acronym) in exchange for the latter's repression of the revolution. However, dividing up the state did not mean it was suspended: the large number of state micro-powers established in the struggle against the Free Zones actually led to the policy of massacres being intensified.

From the outset, in response to this state repression and the delays preventing Arab states and the international community from showing solidarity, taking up arms established a politics of truth that increasingly led towards the 'declaration of jihad' (*i'lân al-jihâd*). We can see this process happening in the changes in the names given to the Friday demonstrations during the first two years of the revolution: Friday 9 September 2011 was called 'International Protection'; 2 March 2012 'Arm the Free

Army'; 16 March 2012 'Immediate Military Intervention'; 30 March 2012 'The Muslims and Arabs have failed us'; 15 June 'Russia is the enemy of the Syrian people'; 22 June 2012 'If the governors are weak, where are the People?'; 13 July 2012 'Bring down Annan, the valet of Assad and Iran'; 5 October 2012 'We need weapons, not statements'; 19 October 2012 'America, is your hostility not yet satisfied with our blood?'; 1 February 2013 'The international community, Assad's partner in massacres'; 13 September 2013; 'The murderer [Assad] is protected by the international community'; 8 November 2013, 'No to the Iranian occupation of Syria'. All these titles show a change of perspective: the rebelling Syrians first believed they would be supported by the international community, a body which then became criminal in their view.

One of my respondents, Abou Ibrahim, embodies this long slide in perspective. I met him in Gaziantep in June 2017, in an orthopaedic surgery where he was being fitted with a prosthetic leg: he had lost his leg stepping on an anti-personnel mine. The interview was strangely cheerful, the man admitting his desire to return to combat as a sniper. Aged around 60, he had previously fought in the 1982 in Lebanon, during the Israeli offensive, with Abou Ammar⁴⁴ and had then joined the Syrian navy. Advocating jihad, Abou Ibrahim saw in that Palestinian leader the ideal of a fight against injustice, which he afforded an existential significance.

Abou Ibrahim: I come from Al-Zabadani, a town in the mountains near Damascus. At the beginning, as a family man, I didn't want to get involved. My children took part in the demonstrations and were opposed to the regime. They had their own voices to express themselves. And then the regime poured its violence on them. The regime chose to answer the demonstrations by killing and imprisoning people. Its choice was to place itself in opposition to the ahâli [people, families].

When the regime kills your brother, your daughter, your son or your father, you rise up. And some young people began to respond with weapons. So it began as the street fighting, and the demonstrations happened less and less often. There were no more words between us and them. Speaking began to make no sense. They went into an area, killed people, raped the women. How can you let it go? What is there to talk about anymore? My opinion was to get involved. I immediately chose the military path ['askari]. I've been fighting the regime for five years. Since 2012.

Montassir: Did you join a particular group of fighters?

A. I.: *I joined Harakat Ahrâr a-Châm.*⁴⁵ [...] *We attacked the regime, and also its civilian disciples. [...] we only had light weapons at the start, not even RPG7 hand-held grenades. But the regime used all its weapons in its war against us. It blew things out of proportion and spread an image across the world that it was in a war against terrorists at the very moment when it and its followers were killing families. Where are the families of Al-Zabadani? Try and find those families, you won't ever find them! They targeted families, destroyed businesses and entire lives. The regime has been waging war against a people, not terrorists or armed gangs. It was the regime that began firing bombs and which pushed us to take up arms to fight back. When people see tanks firing on towns even before soldiers go into them, what do you expect? [...] Anything that endangers humanity was permissible for the regime.*

I swear, I did not take part in any demonstrations! My children went out to demonstrate and my brother carried on political work, arguing and speaking with the regime. So he did pure philosophy, which I don't like being involved in. But when it turned into a massacre, I didn't hesitate for one second. I went to look for a weapon and began to fight. I'm a man of direct action.

The organisations opposed to the regime criticised our choice to take up arms, but several of them were actually allied to the regime and were defending their personal interests, to the people's disadvantage. Currently, the people are being hit from all sides. By the regime, by the neighbouring states ... There is no help to access healthcare. Apart from Türkiye, all the states around us are laying siege to us as much as the regime is. And on the international scene, the powerful ones are now starting to philosophise, boasting that they are against terrorism and close to the nizâm [regime]. The international media has created lies and sustained them. Personally, after witnessing all these realities, I have become a sceptic about any kind of political or social action, and any partisan or tribal alliance. I don't trust them anymore because these actors only lie and act against the Syrians. The Syrian people have experienced genuine injustice.

I'm on my third wound [showing us his mutilated leg]. I've been operated on in difficult conditions, during a battle, with no doctors or medical equipment. We were under siege from the regime. And when negotiations took place, I was allowed out to walk with this prosthetic leg. That's my personal history with the regime ...

The other regimes have known the truth about the Syrian government. They've been lying. The word 'political' means sleight of hand and lie [murâwagha wa kazîb]. They politicise [yûssayissoun] things and make them seem natural, human and social. But basically, they are made up of lies. Let's take the example

of that party of Satan, Hezbollah. I call it that because it's so far from being in the image of Allah that claims to be. What are they doing in our country? They've no ethos, laws or values that are like ours! The Zabadani area has no Shi'a at all, so why come to our country? Why come here and fight against us? We fought that party just as we fought the regime. And of course, they made an alliance against us. It was a political deal, and nothing to do with religion like they claim. They tell their supporters and our people that they came for ussoûl [religious basics], maqamâte [Shi'a sanctuaries], hifz [protection of religion] and other lies of that ilk. Nothing but lies.⁴⁶

Here we see again the pattern referred to in relation to the 'wise men': Abou Ibrahim only joined the revolutionary struggle when it emerged as the only possible way to defend the community threatened by state power. He despises civil peace: 'pure philosophising', it's seen as an abstraction, compared to which the revolution emerged as the only realistic policy. 'Doing politics' therefore does not make sense unless it is an act of truth, even if it is war, in response to the 'old politics of lies'.

Abou Ibrahim: Personally, I've lived a military life full of combat. I've fought alongside Abou Ammar – may Allah accept him. I know what I'm talking about when I speak about the war with the regime in Syria. It used everything it had available when it attacked a city. It struck with tanks, missiles and machine guns. It used planes with their guided missiles as well as their barrels of TNT dropped randomly. The essential thing for the regime was to achieve the goal they'd set. It surrounded its zones with mines in order to secure them. It also used mines to besiege cities and establish regiments posted at a distance from them so they could bombard people trying to sneak into the minefields, which played the role of buffers. It had no qualms about collective massacres. Israel never did as much harm as the regime. Israel for instance laid mines, but they were on the battle-front. The regime, on the other hand, laid mines everywhere. It could spend a night in an area within the innocent civilian population and, in the early hours of the morning, it laid mines as a thank you present. The regime couldn't care less about what happened to ordinary people. [nervous laughter] Do you get it? It had no problem liquidating any creature. Even the animals fled the areas it bombarded. I have seen pets: dogs, cats and birds, fleeing due to the intensity of the bombardments. It's a regime that destroys everything it comes into contact with in order to attain its objective.

This is why the regime's scorched earth policy must be understood in the light of a socio-historical perspective, connecting state violence to the weakness of its governmentality. The exclusively 'sovereignist' Syrian state was, in reality, not very economical in terms of power: most of its territorial control was comprised of numerous security strategies and aggression, in which the constraint ordinarily linked to the legitimate monopoly of physical violence is directly embodied. This is what the interviews with the revolutionaries indicate: by noting the massacres in Hama and Aleppo in 1982, everyone underscored the need to contain the state-focused war as a paradoxical reason for using weapons. Courage and anxiety intertwined to show the military perspective as the sole path that would preserve the community. In parallel, among the revolutionaries in the 2011 generation, the destruction of entire areas of society in 1982 for the sake of the fight 'against the Muslim Brotherhood' fostered a resolute rejection of partisanship or activism tied to a party.

In the chronology of this period, when the community dismissed the illusion of civil peace, the regime immediately responded with naked aggression unmediated by the law, which, as noted, had not prevented massacres from taking place. According to Gramsci's terms, the 'war of position' had become the 'war of manoeuvre' as the symbolic trenches (an empowered political field, bureaucracy, institutions of political representation and law, etc.) began to fade (Gramsci, 2011).⁴⁷

Hyperviolence and pragmatism: the regime's strategies on the Free Zones

Later, when the monopoly of violence had been broken up and some zones declared themselves free, the form of war adopted by the regime took a fresh turn: it revolved around control of territory. It resumed the patterns specific to the foundations of modern nation-states, in which we can identify annexation through total war, acceptance of retreat and the abandonment of enormous areas, the delegation of government powers (as was the case in Northern Syria), the temporary colonisation of certain cities and the negotiation of control over territory and population (hence the removal of people and the endorsement of the UN extracting revolutionaries for example). This diversification in methods of war was marked above all by crimes perpetrated against both civilians and insurgents in the 'Free Zones'. The systemic application of this method

stems from the initial desire encapsulated in the discourse of categorical refusal to allow the protests in the early days. Numerous Syrians we met described this territorial mindset, which consisted of a calculating goal-oriented strategy going as far as to destroy the zones proclaiming themselves free. Strategically, this meant forcing the population to leave the bombed areas. A policy of extermination during wartime does not mean that all political strategies must be abandoned. An essential strategy thus targeted revolutionary practice – which made do with sustaining itself in the free cities instead of prosecuting the war outside them – and making a nest for another strategy of power, aimed at establishing authority over the reconquered inhabitants. With the annihilation of the whole population turning out to be an ineffective policy in the regime's eyes, control was actually the crucial stake of the war, even while the massacres were being perpetrated across the nation.

Thanks to the support of the Russian air force, the war entailed several strategies aimed at establishing governable zones. The removal of a population from one besieged area to another sought to cut the social bonds between people who had lived in Free Zones and were thus likely to engage in the same struggle again. Each 'victory' for the regime in a Free Zone resulted in the massive removal of people and their sparse reallocation across territory controlled by the regime. Numerous times, people accused of having supported the revolution were forced into exile if they were spared execution.

The response of the regime that depicted territory in terms of membership, annexations and nationalist belonging was thus to encircle and destroy Free Zones. Indeed, when neighbourhoods rose up unanimously and managed to force the authorities out, which led to the army retreating, and then in turn, carrying out air raids and large-scale bombardments by tanks positioned outside the town, as Saleh tells us: 'After a year and four months, the city of Bidama overthrew the army. People returned from where they had taken refuge [in the mountains and other towns]. But when they came back, the regime began to bombard them! Missiles, missiles, and still more missiles. and barrels of explosives. The regime and the Russian air force could not allow a Free Zone to exist safely'.⁴⁸ When a zone was freed, systematic destruction of people would follow, even when the neighbourhood had no armed brigade checkpoint. This practice gave rise to revenge and a process of 'brutalisation'⁴⁹ when armed groups affiliated with the revolution replied in the same way by

indiscriminately shelling government-held neighbourhoods where civilian populations were living. The civil war thus broke out when the state wanted to wage war to regain control of the Free Zones. By destroying entire areas, it could host refugees fleeing the bombarded areas in zones it controlled, or press millions of people into forcible displacement, or exile in Türkiye, Lebanon or elsewhere. For the regime, what was at stake was returning control of populations to the government, or else evacuating any zone where state policy had stopped working and been replaced by new political modes of operation.

Another way in which the authorities worked in wartime without use of weapons was to recognise the autonomy of areas with ostensibly homogenous ethnic demographics. This meant making peace with groups allied to the state, while delegating some management power to them. Such was the case of the agreements made with Kurdish organisations claiming to represent the will of the Kurds: as early as 2013, through forms of decentralising managerial powers to Kurdish groups that would later become the ‘Independent Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria’ (also supported by US army units). This new Kurdish administration experimented unhesitatingly with forms of organisation inherited from the Syrian state administration (Haenni and Quesnay, 2020; Haenni 2019). The Kurdish organisations could depend on the Syrian government and its allies to acknowledge their legitimacy and legal autonomy in relation to the delegated management of the Kurdish population. In the rest of the country, groups perceived as Kurdish were also displaced to those regions. That being the case, during my research, I met a lot of Syrian Kurdish refugees who had fled the Kurdish areas in the North and East of the country after Kurdish state forces had taken power there. These forces indeed established compulsory conscription for women too. This is why many families fled their towns and took refuge in Türkiye – despite the oppression that Kurds face there – to spare their daughters from the compulsory military service imposed by the PKK.

With the Russian army’s assistance, the Syrian regime thus adopted an overall strategy of ethnic homogenisation and retaining sovereignty. It continued to pay the wages of civil servants living in Free Zones (as well as those occupied by the Islamic State), who had to go to Damascus at the end of every month to pick up their salary. Similarly, Syrian currency was retained in rebel-held areas. Several symbols of sovereignty did not

crumble in these areas, even though the state exercised practically no managerial or police power in them.

The regime's war was also backed by a *realpolitik* bringing it to the negotiating table with forces it considered hostile. While maintaining its propaganda about 'terrorists', it agreed ceasefires and the evacuation of armed revolutionaries from besieged areas to other Free Zones, via the mediation of the UN or the Arab League. Moreover, it continued permanent negotiations and significant economic dealings with the new forces that controlled territory. Thus, between 2013 and 2016, the provision of electricity to the city of Damascus, a fortress safeguarded by the regime, was provided almost entirely by areas held by the Islamic State. Lorry drivers also told me about their wartime work, saying that commercial exchanges could exist between two markets in zones controlled by different warring forces. From the regime's perspective, keeping tabs on the circulation of merchandise was a guarantee of territory to be reconquered.

Lastly, one more tactic deployed by the regime was the introduction of religious sectarianism into the conflict (Burgat, 2013: 19-32). We heard in the interviews that its alliance with Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian militias was experienced by the revolutionaries as a betrayal, and the proof of an international religious war against Sunni Muslims. In the same way, the pact concluded with the Kurdish organisations enjoying autonomy in the North of Syria was understood as part of a policy of isolating Sunnis – in the demonstrations, it was rare to hear leaders stressing the idea of unity between Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and other minorities in the revolution. Despite this attempt to introduce sectarianism, the centrality of jihad in the armed phase of the revolution ended up outperforming this power tactic, and we will return to this later.

In summary, when the Free Zones were being established, the government was constantly on their periphery, always holding the hotspots that could destroy these zones. The state was defined by a zone of command and control, and by a symbol of national territory (the capital, Damascus) as well as barracks located outside the major cities, airports and checkpoints. The state could also continue to claim its status because it had the support of some of the population, as few as that was. And it managed to combine this slender national recognition with that of a section of the international community in an acceptable, and even dominant vision of global geopolitics, the old category of the bipolar world, finding its second wind in the war in Syria. Next, for civil servants, loyalty towards the

government during the war consisted in still negotiating the movement of merchandise and maintaining the flow of commercial exchanges moving by road, whereas in the case of a city being completely liberated, the government, in contrast, used the siege as a weapon to generate famine, using the sinister slogan ‘*aljou‘ aw ar-rokou*’ (famine or bended knee), as it did in Homs in 2012 (Souayha et al., 2019; Derki, 2013).⁵⁰

***Chabbiha* militia violence and its tipping point**

In this initial period of the war, although the solidarity, unmediated by partisan organisations, was aimed at preserving the community, the regime’s answer to it particularly relied on the use of one distinctive institution: para-state militias, self-proclaimed *lijane cha’biya* (popular committees). In the terminology arising from the revolution, they were abbreviated to the *chabbiha*, a pejorative term associated with cruelty and indifference to all moral norms. Although they represent a paroxysmic form of it, the *chabbiha* were part of a spectrum of regime-defending thugs that emerged in the Arab rebellions in the 2010s – like the *baltaguis* in Egypt, and the *baltadjis* in Morocco (where they were assistants to the ‘*ayâcha*’⁵¹).

Chabbiha is probably derived from the Arabic root ‘*chabah*’ (ghost). In popular Syrian urban culture, the term refers to the black Mercedes S600 with tinted windows that mafia-like groups operating between Lebanon and Syria used in the 1980s. Before 2011, the *chabbiha* were indeed the fraction of the Syrian regime genuinely connected to the criminal underworld: a guard close to the Assad family, it was basically established in the Latakia governorate, whose flourishing port ensured sizeable income streams (contraband, business with tax-free status, drugs, etc.). The expansion of the state bureaucracy steadily marginalised the *chabbiha*: episodically, they came into conflict with the forces of order, until Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, signalling what people thought was definitive end to them.⁵²

Yet in Latakia, the *chabbiha* made their big comeback in 2011: in March, counter-demonstrators dressed as civilians attacked the protestors’ funeral marches, infiltrated demonstrations and provoked violent street fights. Nobody really knew who these men were, but as the country moved closer to war, things became clearer: although the revolutionary groups called all the militia loyal to Assad *chabbiha* – and, more generally, any group supporting the regime – the actual *chabbiha* were first and

foremost the ones who in Free Zones, strove to break the protest movement and earlier still, the revolutionary community, as Abou Ibrahim explains.

Abou Ibrahim: *We attacked the regime, but also its civilian followers. Those people were more dangerous than the regime itself. They belonged to our country, came from our towns and villages, but at the end of the day, they were working for the regime. They cooperated with it by providing information and becoming snipers to kill us, and even placing bombs in the areas under our control. So they had stopped being part of the people, and had become a criminal gang. They worked on the principle that the means justified the end – killing us: they blew up booby-trapped cars in front of mosques, etc. Even Daesh never dared do that. The regime then said it was ‘terrorists’ who carried out those attacks.*

What made the *chabbiha* distinctive however, was less the treachery vis-à-vis the revolutionaries than the exorbitant nature of their atrocities: awful images of executions and torture carried out by the militias circulated on social media, so well that people became increasingly good at identifying the people who had broken so explicitly with the most sacred of collective conventions. The struggle between the revolutionaries and the counter-revolutionary forces is elucidated by the interview with Abou Houdaïfa, a revolutionary military commander who, in June 2012, set up a brigade whose goal was to identify and engage *chabbiha*.

The meeting organised by Rayan, who had been his civilian counterpart, took place in July 2017 in a public park in Ankara, a stone's throw from the city's Syrian district. This man had been the military leader of a brigade called *Dir‘ ach-Chahbâ* (the white shield, Aleppo). This organisation played a role in the liberation of several areas in Aleppo, but its primary task was to hunt down *chabbiha*. Abou Houdaïfa was one of the young graduates from lower middle-class families in Aleppo. The formation of a secret brigade acting on sensitive and dangerous ground – necessitating police investigations and risking irreversible damage if the information was wrong – was based on an idea made explicit in our meeting, with Rayan and Hamza Esmili present.

Abou Houdaïfa: *We were from Aleppo, so we wanted to work in Aleppo. At the start, we wanted to avoid any bloodshed, but very quickly, when you experienced the regime's violence and saw our people being killed, assassinations*

of the members of the security forces began. The pro-regime media attributed them to 'armed terrorist gangs'. But if I was in an 'armed gang', I'd be looking to steal, kidnap or some other lucrative activity. The reality was that we wanted to engage the regime's security forces, period.

This was also the moment when the chabbiha appeared in Aleppo. There were a lot of them, and they were particularly active. They murdered people, committed rape, attacked the friends and families of demonstrators and activists themselves [a friend of Abou Houdaïfa present at this interview offered to give us a list of their names]. There was Abou Ahmed As-Saabi, accused of rape and murder; Al-Bari Mardin, etc. They were Turkish-speaking, but not Turkmen, and were called this because they were originally from Mardin in Türkiye. They were oppressed, but when the revolution came along, the regime made a pact with them to repress the demonstrators. So we targeted them.

Any chabbih known for his atrocities and rapes, whatever ethnicity, we'd go to his home or workplace. We'd watch them for fifteen to twenty days, then kidnap them. Obviously there was no court. Remember, our war was not a state vs. state war – if it had been, it would have been much more comfortable for us. Our war was one where it was the state vs the people. The chabbiha and the intelligence officers who tyrannised us to get promotions within the regime, that's who we targeted. In Aleppo, for eight to ten months, we carried out increasing numbers of assassinations of officers, kidnappings of chabbiha, and we sowed fear in the ranks of the regime.

The regime labelled us 'armed gangs', but at a certain point, we developed a power relationship in Aleppo such that we had the run of the city at night. In the daytime it was the regime's, and we hid, but at night, we drove around with weapons in the cars: the regime's soldiers could no longer establish checkpoints, because they might get killed. Consequently, we managed to reduce the pressure on the demonstrators and civilians, who had the right to freedom of speech. Because while we were at work, the demonstrations did not stop. The regime ended up tolerating them, letting them say what they wanted on condition they did not go into certain areas like Boustane el-Qasr and Sekkari. It relinquished its security grip thanks to the actions of our armed activists.

After ten months, the regime headed up to the countryside with its military forces. They invaded a village called Hamaddan in the Northern region of Aleppo. I'm from Aleppo, but I took part in military operations with people from Hamaddan when the army invaded it, because the countryside was much safer than Aleppo for us armed activists. We only went down to Aleppo for sporadic operations. Going there was dangerous: we only went there at very specific

moments and always with the threat of death hanging over us. We used to prepare things in advance, we'd make agreements with people, often the itinerant merchants selling Araq wood [used in dental hygiene] and cigarettes, who used to give us information about the movements of the armed forces. When one method failed, we'd use another to achieve our objective. For example, it was often university students who told us where the military checkpoints were, so we could avoid them.

Rayan: There was also the 'Checkpoints' space on Skype, that showed where all the checkpoints were.

A. H.: And another thing about Skype is that it enabled us to connect with the demonstrators and civilian activists from our secret hidden locations. For example, brother Hamza, if you knew a chabbih, in your neighbourhood, you could tell me. The young people used to let us know that such and such a person was there, and once we had six, eight or ten witnesses confirming that person was a chabbih, we took steps. If he was armed, we would kill him. Otherwise, we would interrogate them. If it turned out that the person interrogated was released because they were innocent, we would give them 1,500 Syrian pounds' compensation, or even more. We had a prison outside the city, which we reached via secondary and back roads. You should also know that when the security pressure was relaxed, after the demonstrations, we talked about everything, without fear, on the phone: operations, weapons and other things, without it ever having the least repercussion. We found out, thanks to the revolution, that the omnipresence of the regime was a myth. [...]

Once, a funny thing happened to us. Someone told us that at the Bassan el-Omar school [Rayan nods], there was a supervisor acting as an informant for the regime, and because of him, a student had been taken away by the security forces. Several other testimonies backed this up and we came down from the countryside near Aleppo to get him. We took him next to his home, around 25 km from Aleppo, in a little town called Tall Shair. It's a mountainous region, where we drove to. We picked up the supervisor and then interrogated him. He stayed in prison with us for thirty-six days. We found out that a security forces brigade had come to the school asking for a student. He complied with this demand but didn't know it was the regime's security forces. By investigating the incident and with the help of some other witnesses, we realised that he was innocent: it had actually been the school's principal who reported the student to the police. After

thirty-six days, we let him go. At that time, in the early days, the Free Syrian Army was trying to control things as much as possible. [...]

In another area, Salaheddine [a huge working-class district in Aleppo, where Abou Kotaïba also came from], a chabbih had been identified to us, a guy who sold phones. Every time demonstrators were gathering, he warned the police, who quickly intervened: the security forces arrived in plain clothes and occupied this man's premises. Several sources had pointed him out, and after an investigation, we took him away: one evening he was staying late in his shop, smoking shisha with his friends, two of us arrived and dragged him away. He was obviously a chabbih – he was wearing a shirt that had a picture of Bashar al-Assad on it. We threatened him, then let him go. He was a weak man leading a pointless life. We called him a week later and told him we were going to kidnap him if he carried on. Thanks to our investigation, we were sure he was not just a grass but also, he was causing grief to his mother, in whose home he was living. Aged around thirty-three, single, unemployed, he was making his mother's life, a misery, an elderly lady, coming home drunk, etc. He was told he would be made to suffer like he was making his mother suffer, and from now on, he should receive a blessing; we gave him 5,000 Syrian pounds in cash. He was happy, and we asked him to find a job and a flat, or pay the rent with what we had given him. Where did the money come from? From the previous chabbih we'd dealt with! We didn't need money, and we released him ...

There are loads of stories like that, which scared the shit out of the chabbiha. Then they started not moving around on their own, only in threes and fours. After a while, we were in control, and they disappeared. But until then, we hadn't gone down to Aleppo to retake the city from the regime. After eleven months or so, in 2012, we made a plan to go into Aleppo [on 21 July, Rayan stipulates].

Montassir: *The group you've been talking about, were there four of you?*

A. H.: *No. As the kidnappings went along, and we gained more and more experience, the three who'd been with me became leaders themselves. I made people leaders, of groups, cells, operating in Aleppo. I put one cell here, another over there, etc. For instance, once, for an operation, we rented more than ten flats in Aleppo.*

Montassir: *What about funding?*

A. H.: *When I came back to Aleppo, I'd been in Türkiye for eight to ten months, and had built up some relationships. I'd met Rafik, a Syrian – no idea where he was from. He was in contact with mercenaries from outside the country, Syrians and non-Syrians, from Kuwait, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, the US, etc. And it was Abou Kotaïba, whom you met, who put me in touch with him and sent me a satellite phone. That's how contact was established and how I got help, me and others in Aleppo. Rafik was based in Kuwait but was in contact with people in Aleppo who sent me money directly. That's how aid worked, and we bought weapons to increase the size of the group and set up cells. But until then, we hadn't been involved in head-to-head fighting with the army, only targeted assassinations and kidnappings.*

Montassir: *Who did you buy weapons from?*

A. H.: *Smugglers, basically, from the rural areas in Eastern Idlib. [...] The subject of the revolution is vast, an ocean, and everything happened to it by the grace of Allah. We knew nothing, we weren't trained in that. We threw ourselves into the action, and learned from what happened to us: when we made mistakes we learned from them.*

Abou Houdaïfa is positioned on the edge of the revolution and the war. He translates the conflict with the state into the struggle in the social world: tracking down infiltrators – 'grasses', *chabbiha*, 'in plain clothes' – rather than soldiers or police was his explicit priority. Beyond the allegiance to the state, the *tachbih* (the action of the *chabbiha*) seemed more generally linked to a moral behaviour of which betrayal was just the political manifestation; the same goes for the disorganised violence of theft, the abuse of power, violations of cultural norms and social codes. As the revolution did not have a detailed agenda, all policy deemed counter-revolutionary was measured in terms of the collective norms that it was opposed to. From the outset, belonging to revolutionary society was index-linked to a school of thought to which the opposite was the *tachbih*: even before killing pointlessly, people practicing the latter were suspicious, hanging around in the city, at a loose end, and 'making their mothers suffer'. In contrast, the genuinely revolutionary brigade was called on to identify immoral thoughts derived from the state order, and eliminate it from the community, which was arduously breaking with it. The revolutionary way of thinking stemmed from an explicitly police practice:

interrogations, imprisonments, collection of witness statements, etc. It was a question of gaining control, a common expression proven less by the provisional regional government in the Free Zones than by the reconstruction of a moral order at the heart of the revolution.

The war within Syrian society was thus based less on the statist attempt at homogenising the national state than a desire to purify the healthy revolutionary body from its corrupting element. A fascist potential thus emerged in the early days of the wartime revolutionary community. It was as if the society whose existence was threatened by state power was reinventing itself via the other it provided itself with, in this case the *chabbiha*, whose very existence sullied the Free Zones. So the revolution had acquired a properly anthropological dimension: by establishing its community, it instituted an ontologically opposed 'race'. But although the possible fascist future was present in the revolutionary heterogeneity of the early period of the civil war, we will see that the reconstruction of the community in the Free Zones did not follow this path.

In this chapter, we have shone a light on the brief moment when peaceful protest became revolutionary war, but rebuilding order during the years without regime control experienced forms of mediation than other racialisation, which we will catch a glimpse of in the coming chapters. By way of a series of collective institutions and practices, based *inter alia* on a utopian interpretation of jihad, both the return to the state, and Gramsci's war of everyone against everyone else were avoided.

We saw how ordinary people shifted toward armed revolution, in response to levels of repression exceeding the threshold of what could be tolerated. When the regime made murder commonplace, and ran roughshod over the concept of honour, it reached the point of no return, and that includes in the opinions of people who had stayed neutral until that point. Then began a long process of internal fighting between those who joined the armed revolution and those who remained loyal to the regime. This is why the issue of the *chabbiha* became a major concern for the revolution, prioritised over work aimed at developing a strategy of struggle against the regime. The description of the civil war was indeed only possible based on the definition of this internal body, a major challenge threatening the revolution with implosion and possible excesses. In the meantime, the regime maintained its implacable rejection of the revolution by waging a total war in the Free Zones, combined with a plethora of tactics to keep itself in power, combining alliances, the delegation of

managerial powers, managing social space according to religious affiliation, and the opening up of the country to colonisation by foreign powers, Russia and Iran.

CHAPTER 4

The Free Zones: a forgotten utopia (2012-2014)

Abou Kamel: *What the movement actually had to fear from the future was either that the people got tired of working for the revolution, because of the impact it had on household budgets and family life, or that the intensive use of weapons meant that the revolution would gradually become a hostage to the rifle. Consequently, the more the society organised itself as an independent power, due to the concerted effort of the people to follow the rhythm of the revolution, and not the rhythm of the authorities, the better the revolution would have prepared the atmosphere in which it would be victorious. It couldn't have escaped anyone that the last few months have been so fertile with all kinds of initiatives, especially so in the fields of medical aid and prisoner support; now we have to bolster these initiatives in such a way that they cover broader areas of life. The association of everyday life with the revolution is the necessary condition for the revolution to lead to victory, which implies that society is organised flexibly, on the basis of a process that coordinates revolution with people's everyday lives, through the mechanism that we're going to refer to here as the 'local committee' (Kamel, 2013).*

Minimal order enabled by the revolution's modes of organisation

The person speaking here in 2013, Omar Aziz (alias 'Abou Kamel'), is one of the few revolutionaries to have produced a written vision of how to manage the revolutionary order when the revolutionary period began in Syria. It is difficult to know to what extent his words were received in the fragmented space of the revolution. The statements in his book show that in any case, revolutionary thought was neither written down nor programmed. Rather, in the armed groups, demonstrations and Free Zones, where practical thought had fuelled the observable organisational structures in the revolutionary war, are political activities not transcribed into the classic texts of modern politics. The intellectuals of the revolution were the *woujahâ'* (wise men) that I have spoken about above, and the *char'î* (religious clerics) whose function I will describe later. Yet the revolution, the ultimate heterogeneous space, was dismissive of neither left-wing political thought nor classic Islamic politics. On the contrary, in

practice, theorising and words like those of Omar Aziz probably played an important role in the consciousness of the fighters in the Free Zones who tell their stories in this book.

Playing back the ‘words of the people’, this chapter will focus on the social order prevalent in the Free Zones. In contrast to the Hobbesian idea of ‘war of everyone against everyone’ (Hobbes, 2000 [1651]), we see more clearly the boundaries of peace and the struggle at the heart of the Syrian revolutionary process. Although emancipation from the government framework led to a high level of conflict with the regime and its allies, it did not mean, however, that collective conventions were abandoned. Some of the institutions addressed in this chapter, like the Free Police and Unified Justice, illustrate this reality specifically for revolutionary society in the Free Zones. If we want to move past the criminal government’s solitary hollow accusation, it is important to draw lessons from how the areas asserting membership of the revolution and rejecting the institutions of the monopoly of violence functioned. Moreover, to move beyond the jaded comment that the Arab Spring did not provide any recipe for the organisation (or the imagination) of a new political order after ‘clearing out’ the heads of state, we have to look somewhere else, and ask different questions arising in the real life of the revolution: how do the people’s distinctive characteristics help establish a social order after their liberation from the dominant national and administrative framework? How did the armed revolutionary struggle perceive the new political order that it was initiating? What place do the religious and the secular occupy in this renewal of society under the revolution? These questions guided our research into the main bodies of revolutionary order, and the actors in the internal resistance opposed to attempts to create a new form of governmentality.

What I mean by ‘establishing a social order’ is a sociologically observable fact during the revolution, and deriving from the disintegration of the monopoly of violence: it means this transitional civil peace between people in the social space, when the latter liberate themselves from the institutions of representative politics and the monopoly of ‘official truth’ (Bourdieu, 2012); a form of peace at the moment when weapons are no longer controlled within a society that has for several generations experienced a total state monopoly, and where the armed groups engage one another in war. How were these groups able to manage without centralising the control and distribution of weapons, while establishing twin uses

of violence: the jihad against the regime on one side, and on the other, the internal struggle against the temptation offered by a new political institution (the war against the Islamic State)? Behind this question, the existence of periods and spaces of an internal civil war, in the Free Zones, and outside of any peaceful order, cannot be denied. Indeed, the period witnessed the armed conflict being injected with forms of sectarian division, the emergence of an inter-ethnic war, revenge against the former economic and symbolic order assuming violent forms (theft, racketeering, kidnapping). And with the problem of the *chabbiha*, I suggested in the previous chapter some keys to interpreting these forms of embryonic civil war, serving as prompts to be vigilant about internal threats undercutting revolutions when they exhaust forms of modern government.

But here we are confirming the hypothesis that first started this field of research: in the revolution there is a consciousness of internal peace and the regulation of this peace through a sense of revolutionary ethics, embodied in the uses of religion, which is called jihad. This sense of ethics acts simultaneously as a non-institutional structure providing internal peace, and as the legitimisation of the possibility of continued resistance against the institution of a new, repressive government. I call these 'pacifying' structures 'modes of organisation', i.e. bodies providing order which, without being established, provide ethical limits for the action of groups and individuals. In fact, an essential difference can be identified between the statism of the Islamic State as evinced in the experience of the war in Iraq/Syria in the 2000s, and the non-state organisation of the Syrian revolution in the 2010s. Although the social order was configured within the Islamic State by a nationalist constraint imposing government and forms of behaviour on populations (see chapter 6), the Syrian revolution provides an opposite scenario. To understand the social order emerging from the revolutionary period, despite the war waged by surrounding state forces (Syrian regime, the Islamic State, troops of colonial powers – Russia in this case – the Kurdish government forces represented by the PKK), we must return to the organised bodies operating in revolutionary space. Throughout this description, the words of the people, mobilised in the 'organisations' present on the ground in the revolution allow political thought to be identified as it becomes an act characterising revolutionary action.

These ideas are distinctive in the sense that they allow us to glimpse a utopia that does not just make a radical critique of the government,

like other protest movements in the Arab Spring, but which puts forward codes guiding a new social order. First, we should point out that ‘organisation’ was not a word used by revolutionary Syrians, as was true in other historical and political contexts in the Arab world (nationalist independence movements, forms of resistance in Palestine, civil wars in Lebanon, anticolonial struggles in Iraq, etc.). In this case, this word does not mean a body (like the Islamic State or the Kurdish forces) that establishes a cadre of leaders trained to organise and govern society: it has much more flexible characteristics. In the areas freed from state power, the social order was actually developed on the basis of several bodies, each unsuccessfully claiming the monopoly of violence. When it emanates from a relatively organised body within flexible civilian and military institutions, the organisational claim to represent the revolution suddenly becomes ephemeral. And when armed or civilian groups – it is hard to distinguish between armed people and civilians in the revolution – identify as Islamic opponents of the regime or as Free Syrian Army revolutionaries, they are above all aiming to invalidate competing claims within the revolutionary space. This collective and individual stance was expressed by the refusal to abandon weapons to a single group, by the refusal to disarm the Free Zones, and in slogans critiquing *al-hizbiya* (party membership) that had haunted the revolution since it started. This balancing game allowed no-one the right to claim the monopoly of representation, or to tell the truth about the situation and its political future.

We will see in the interviews with the revolutionaries that the revolution’s modes of organisation sought to establish a minimal level of order – no killing, no stealing – but they also eschewed any political form of organisation in the sense of a group that managed society in peacetime, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. These modes, for example, offered spaces for promoting ideas (military training camps, religious circles, general assemblies, etc.), which were not, however, thought of as types of behaviour that the population living under the revolution should have to comply with. This did not mean creating disciples of the revolution with identical behaviour, drawing their existential frameworks from preset texts. From a functionalist perspective, we might say that in response to the threat of a ‘war of everyone against everyone’ lying in wait for the revolutionary community, these modes of organisation enabled peaceful stability to be maintained in a situation marked by the invalidation of the traditional mechanisms of state order (schools, prisons, courts, police,

centralised medias, etc.). In their diversity, these modes also allowed the revolution to address embryonic attempts in the war zones aimed at establishing a new alternative state order. In summary, in these modes of organisation we witness the consolidation of the idea that order henceforth existed without it passing through the institutional constraints that fixed behaviour, and monopolies, or the civil servants and politicians leading political representation.

This reality played a major part in the internationalisation of the Syrian revolution, which attracted Muslim youth from the four corners of the earth, through the shift to armed struggle and the collective pressure exerted so that the revolution became a jihad – and we shall return to this at the end of the chapter. The emigration of the young, foreign jihadis to join the Syrian revolutionary space could not have had such a significant impact without the liberation achieved within it in relation to the political frameworks establishing the borders of the nation and the territory it occupied, in a traditional way. This revolutionary way of thinking ended up persuading young Muslims who were challenging the flaws of representative democracy and aspiring to a different way of doing politics, opting out of the law of men, as embodied in the organised nationalism of the revolutionary bureaucracy of a single political organisation. The mobilisation of religious symbols by the Syrian revolution thus had the effect of opening it up to foreign Muslims sensitive to the appeal to jihad, but also making the revolutionary cause sacred, as the sanctification of the dead gave rise to a process of taking responsibility by those left alive and capable of testifying about it. Several Muslim communities, like those living in the West, were thus made aware of the non-nationalist resistance in Syria they labelled jihad and revolution. This sensitivity toward religious symbols however, should not be understood as the effect of banal cyclical indoctrination, but rather as the expression of a sincerity that shows that roots in the tradition of a millennial religion had been located. It is primarily according to this meaning that the process of welcoming migrants for jihad into the first armed groups in the revolution must be analysed – and we will return to this supremely delicate issue.

Armed groups, deserters and civilians in the revolution

When they were formed in Syria in late 2011, these groups were inspired by the revolutionary objectives articulated in the violently repressed

demonstrations, as we have seen in previous chapters. Some of them would join the Free Syrian Army, from July 2011, which never managed to set up a centralised command structure. Others would create the Nusra Front in January 2012, inspired by Al-Qaida, and fight alongside the *Dawla* group before splitting from them at the end of 2013, on the eve of the Islamic State's declaration of a 'Caliphate'. But in the run up to these changes, the departure point was the defection of soldiers from the Syrian army. These actions, initially occurring on an individual basis, definitively signed off the state's monopoly of violence. A war of 'reterritorialisation' (reconstruction of a modern state order) against 'deterritorialisation' (conscious action to undo this order) then broke out: a war whose contours were to be set based on a process of negotiation and balancing that this research seeks to understand.⁵³

The desertions from the Syrian army indeed enabled the revolution to develop its armed capacity, but it should be remembered that many revolutionaries had already chosen to take up arms prior to the soldiers' sedition. The latter's role was still marginal in triggering the process of armed revolution – even when they were the instigators of several operations attacking symbols of the state (such as barracks, military training colleges and police stations) – which Abou Houdaïfa emphasised when he spoke about the trajectory of the revolution in the previous chapter: 'We had established our army unit in Aleppo when the desertions were only just starting to happen. The first ones were Houssine Harmouch (lieutenant-colonel), Riad el-Assa'ad and Malik el-Kurdi (colonels), Maher Ana'imi (Commander) and Ammar An-Nwawi and Mamoun Kelzi (captains). There were a few people, but at the beginning, none of these officers worked with us. They deserted, but were scared of being hunted by the regime'.⁵⁴

The deserters were not trying to implement a putsch, but they were aligned with the goals set by the revolutionary community throughout the period from 2011. Most of the desertions were by non-commissioned officers responsible for commanding operations that repressed civilians on the outskirts of large cities, while those in the senior levels stayed loyal to the regime, but not through ethnic solidarity, as we have seen. Before the revolution, contrary to what the advocates of the 'religious division' explanation would suggest (Valter, 2012), it was not mainly ethnicity – an Orientalist go-to to describe the homogeneity of institutions in the Arab-Muslim world – which held sway over the recruitment of

senior officers presented as majority Alawites. The non-implosion of the military, despite the pressure of civilian demonstrations and their refusal to yield, can be explained above all by two other determining factors. First, the speed with which the conflict became internationalised, marked initially by the unconditional support of the Russian army, the Iranian government, and Hezbollah for the regime. This was followed by the emigration of thousands of Muslims coming to participate in jihad and the establishment of new states on Syrian territory (the Islamic State and the Kurdish-run regions). This situation encouraged the military structure to close ranks behind the discourse of a defensive war against foreign 'invasion', the justification for all institutions of modern war. Second, the lack of a monopoly of representation in the revolutionary space (such as a revolutionary party) gave no guarantee to a military leadership used to operating on a 'sovereignist' and national basis of power. Within the revolution, the issue of sovereignty remained unclear.

Although desertion was a marginal phenomenon, numerically speaking, the practice well and truly fostered the process of labelling the revolution under the name 'Free Army' (*al-Jaych al-hur*), and then the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This nuance has symbolic significance, because the association of the terms 'army', and 'free' demonstrated the continuity between the demonstrations of 2011, and the armed outcome of the revolt, evidencing the movement to armed struggle by the whole of the community rebelling against the regime. In doing so, it broke neither with the idea of national legitimacy ('Syrian'), nor the early slogans of the demonstrators ('Freedom!'). However, this name did not prevent it from being widely used in the discourses of various Western powers to showcase visions and interests that were very far from the ideas prevalent within the revolution. For example, the title, Free Syrian Army, enabled semantic distinctions to be introduced with no grounding in reality: international powers turned the FSA into a distinguishing point between 'revolutionary' and 'jihadist terrorists', or between 'secular' and 'Islamist' forces. Whereas on the ground, these polarised binaries specific to a form of rationalisation inherited from Western thought (religious/non-religious) did not exist. I mention this because whatever the local experiences and words used to describe the anthropological reality of conflict, the international dimension always encroached at some point during our interviews with the activists. As marginal as it was in their revolutionary experience,

interference by foreign powers was analysed and experienced as a subjugation of the Syrians by international neocolonial politics.

Lastly, the relatively few deserters from the Syrian army fostered the investment of the deserters in the organisation of struggle, popular identification with the armed revolution and a political opening to another possibility that avoided rebuilding a new, power-hungry military regime. This was especially true because the revolution had experienced the emergence of other armed groups challenging the regime, which contributed to establishing a diverse situation, but overall, it remained aligned to the general aims of the first few months of the peaceful revolt.

Subjective motivations for joining armed groups

Field notes, Kilis, 5 July 2017.

Hamza and I reached Kilis, a Turkish town on the border with Syria. Accompanied by Rayan, we met Abou Kotaïba. He left Aleppo a few months ago (December 2016), after the economic capital had finally fallen into the hands of the regime. He was the last leader to have stayed with the men of the resistance in the Salaheddine Free Zone. He met us in the garden of a big house in a relatively plush housing complex located near the main road from Türkiye into Aleppo. He was living there temporarily with his brother and other comrades from the war, all evacuated by Türkiye when Aleppo fell.

During the interview, the army comrades congregated around the microphone. When we assure them that the interview will be anonymised, they all say, 'We have nothing to be ashamed of'. They seem to be living in the nostalgia of what became a collective identity for them: life was the war and collective existence in the Free Zones. In the interview, Abou Kotaïba stresses the fraternity within the group: weapons were nothing, it was trust that prevailed. He had put his brother in charge of the weapons cache. His other brother had been sent for training in an American base in a neighbouring country so he could return with some combat expertise and, certainly, a form of allegiance based on international relationships.

Even before it started, this interview made you feel like you were asking questions about the vocation that held this group together: and this group became, in the order of things, ordained to enjoy an almost automatic solidarity. And life in civilian peace seemed ephemeral to people who had experienced the intensity of life in the Free Zones, face-to-face with the war, and the injunction

that can be reduced to the sentence: 'We must keep order without ever betraying the revolution's goals'. Later, we would find out that all of them returned to the war during summer 2019, in the last bastion of freedom, Idlib.

The Free Zones are distinctive above all because of the absence of the monopoly of physical violence. This means firstly that there was no high command or centralisation of the brigades that fought to free the areas held by the regime. The members of these brigades describe their action as being part of jihad. This belonging to jihad, conceptualised as a revolution against an oppressive state, contributed to erecting a roadblock against the formation of fixed ideologies likely to claim loyalty to one or other group. It also helped put the revolution's 'national' character into perspective and opened it up to the migrants for jihad travelling from various Islamic communities (both in Syria and elsewhere). Indeed, in the first year of the armed revolution, many reasons can explain the *mujahideen* winning over the leaders of the armed groups: bonds of brotherhood, friendship, neighbourhood, tribe – in some areas (particularly Eastern Syria). Moreover, the charisma of several revolutionary leaders emerged as a decisive factor in the fighters' choice of armed group. This is true of the founder of the *Attawhid*⁵⁵ battalion in 2012 Abdelkader as-Saleh, of the dissident military leader Youssef el-Jadir (alias 'Abou Fourat') and also of the symbol and 'custodian of the revolution' Abdelbasset Sarout, in Homs from 2012 to 2014. But commitment to the revolution in these groups was itself part of a general pattern, linked to wartime and the jihad, and grew on the back of subjective motivation that made the rebellion last longer despite its exorbitant cost (the threat of death and the loss of loved ones).

This commitment must be conceptualised first on the basis of the general pattern marked by an intense war waged by the regime on civilians, and an awareness of the need to lean on a religion that made bonds between people sacred and which prioritised resistance within its value system. Starting from there, it is possible to understand the way that brigades and armed groups scattered and propagated: centralising action for them was just a secondary goal, relevant to the revolutionaries only when you had to make alliances during combat and on the decisive fronts against the regime and the other groups established in its image. This is the case for the combination of various brigades during the liberation of many areas in Aleppo in 2012, and also in that city in late 2013, to counter the Islamic State's brigades. In reality, the Free Syrian Army

only refers to a large patchwork of groups linked only by common goals such as the formation of 'Free Zones', that is, self-managing zones, with no sovereign power, and unevenly spread across the country, zones very much in line with the FSA itself.

With the democratic sharing of this jihad value comprising the essence of each group, it gave a lot of freedom to the fighters to choose their brigade, and to frequently change from one armed group to another. These groups differed from one another by the lack of hierarchy and discipline: the young recruits could move easily between them or even belong to several brigades at the same time. Some of them were even invited to work with a particular group for a specific military operation, to carry out stipulated tasks – young people perceived as 'good snipers' were thus able to provide their expertise to whichever brigade had temporary need for battles against the regime or the Islamic State. Pay was variable: from 50 to 200 dollars per month depending on the group and the period. In several groups, the issue of payment never arose: resources were shared and need expressed communally. Engagement was understood as a collective life or death struggle. This organisational and affective mode became more intense during periods when Free Zones were besieged. Similarly, fighters claiming to be in jihad could participate in one group's activities while living in another. For example, when the *Attawhîd* battalion organised training camps and religious study groups from August 2012, it opened its doors to any man involved in the struggle against the regime (both armed and peaceful). When training ended, the *mujahideen* were free to bolster the ranks of *Attawhîd* or go and join another group.

Moreover, without resources or organisational capital in a society dominated by the Baath party and its structures that had reduced pluralism to nothing, it is hard to conceptualise a wartime centralising organisation capable of incorporating numerous revolutionaries and *mujahideen*. Additionally, the huge daily support afforded the revolution in its armed phase revealed its heterogeneous character as a *fait accompli*. Yet this diversity would crumble in the wake of the split between the FSA and the Islamic Front – a set of brigades that would then comprise the Nusra Front, the Islamic State and *Ahrâr a-Châm* among others. However, the state of mind that had generated the armed phase of the revolution had established freedom of movement as a founding principle within the footprint of the revolution (as was the case for movement between the

status of civilian and fighter), a utopian principle of rejecting any centralisation of power.

The armed groups: town and country

Many analyses have stressed the predominance of the rural world in the armed struggle, which allegedly excluded the urban classes from the revolution. Sociologists Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay (2016) for instance, underscore this interpretation, probably based on a bias derived from the site of their fieldwork. Researching into the beginnings of the process of arming the revolution seems to have prompted these scholars to afford extra weight to the role of ‘non-educated’ groups in the adoption of violent methods, especially if the research was carried out in political organisations seeking political representation. This is all the more so because political sociology is used to identifying a deficiency of cultural and other forms of capital as reasons for violent practices. Yet given that politics in peacetime is above all the domain of elites, an analysis of breaking with those practices in favour of violent ones may elicit a bias whereby the extent of such actions is undervalued (and therefore delegitimised). Especially when its protagonists only vaguely outline their programme in the rare documents produced – let us recall that in the beginning, the Syrian revolution had no spokesperson. This is the conclusion of the three authors referred to above:

‘With the end of the peaceful demonstrations, the protesters – students and educated people in general– no longer defined the agenda for the mobilisation. While the regime brutally repressed the urban demonstrations, the uprising in the countryside made rural and poor suburban residents the key actors in the armed struggle. To an extent, the militarisation of the protest movement marginalised urban elites, shifting the insurrection’s centre of gravity toward rural areas’ (Baczko et al., 2016: 127).

However, this reading is dependent on an observation made in the early stages of the revolution and takes account neither of the hesitations of a set of social groups, nor the diversity of peoples’ experiences within the broad footprint of the revolution, as I have indicated: young graduates from Aleppo setting up armed brigades targeting the *chabbiha*, large businesses funding armed action, urban middle classes defending the

choice of armed struggle, desertions by middle-ranking soldiers from the regime, etc. It is not possible to posit a theory of sociological transformation of the revolutionaries after militarisation if, over the long term, you follow the movements of the revolutionaries, the composition of the community councils in the Free Zones, the ongoing demonstrations throughout 2012 and 2013 with armed revolutionaries defending the crowds, the composition of the free armed brigades, etc. On the contrary, fieldwork on the ground would demonstrate much continuity between the early, urban-based demonstrations and the subsequent, armed phase of the revolution. And although the repertoire of activities within the overall mobilisation became more radical after the adoption of armed struggle, it does not mean that the members of the new, armed brigades had not been present during the peaceful protest period.

This observation is supported by the fact that in postcolonial Arab-Muslim societies, the difference between the rural and the urban cannot derive from fixed sociological categories. Observing the militarisation of the revolution therefore does not allow us to distinguish easily between the fighters from urban backgrounds and those from rural ones, because the people who took up arms in the cities retained strong links with their often rural places of origin. As in many countries in the Middle East and the Maghreb, it is common to claim you are from the countryside when you live in big cities. Referring to one's *asl* (root) is consistent with group and individual identities, as the city in its modern form, that is autonomous from the country, and governed by specific public policies, is only a recent construction. Entire neighbourhoods are thus still legacies of a rural exodus from specific identifiable regions of the countryside, or a large tribe that no longer exists concretely but is maintained in the collective memory, and still promotes family ties and forms of solidarity within the community that can be reactivated during crises. Part of the urban fabric is that the residents of these areas are always linked to the rural regions they originally came from, even in the third or fourth generations, who thus readily identify with those places. When the political crisis occurred and the civil war broke out, these connections were bolstered intensely, and the locations in the countryside became backup bases for several revolutionary groups. And when the urban zones were liberated, they initially continued to display the slogans and flags from the early demonstrations, evidencing continuity between peaceful and armed struggles, as well as the positions of people engaged in revolutionary politics.

Beyond this overlap between towns and the rural world, research on the revolution indicates the crucial role that the countryside played – as a physical space – in the organisation of the armed struggle, lying outside the large-scale mechanisms of urban territorialisation articulated around the control of the masses. However, in contrast to what analyses referred to above, which identify the ‘late displacement’ of the revolution from the towns to the countryside, would claim, the countryside actually seems to emerge quickly as a supreme space from which the state’s control of territory could be challenged. From the early days of the demonstrations, groups from the towns used it a great deal as an escape route from police and army oppression. As routes through rural areas were difficult to use, the regime’s security forces found them hard to monitor and control, which enabled the revolutionaries to create spaces to recoup and rebuild a strike capability. This space also meant that the redeployment of the regime’s forces to the country meant they were spread more thinly, and this facilitated the planning of attacks aimed at liberating the cities. Once inside the towns, the same revolutionaries – most of whom come from the urban world but were often perceived as being of rural origin – continued to wage war on the battle fronts and focus on bringing order to the Free Zones. The interviews carried out relating to this period (the shift to revolutionary war from late 2011 to mid-2013 in some areas) clearly indicate the part played by the countryside.

During the siege of Homs’ Old Town, from summer 2012 to May 2014, revolutionary leader Abdelbasset Sarout travelled to the rural area to the North of the city several times to recruit fighters to join him in Homs. Several of his comrades and brothers died in the fighting and the countryside, itself under siege, could not offer the support he was hoping for. When the fighters left that cruel siege in May 2014, *via* the regime’s ‘green buses’⁵⁶ and under the auspices of the UN, Sarout was aware that as long as the regime’s strategy was to cut besieged fighters off from access to the immediate support of the other Free Zones, only a coalition with the organised groups such as the Islamic State and Nusra, would allow the revolution’s goals to be attained. It was not so much the experience of siege, in which Sarout experienced famine and the loss of most of his comrades, that caused him to turn rapidly to a radicalism labelled ‘Salafist’ (see box below), and the whole revolution with him, as the reading of famous Syrian writer and communist activist Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2019) would suggest. It was more the logic of practical thinking by the

revolutionary and military leader that he was. As Sarout himself stated in several interviews, the alliance with those groups that had split from the revolution – like Islamic State – was a temporary allegiance in the context of a war against the principal enemy, the regime (Souahaya et al., 2019).

The various forms of Salafism

In Arabic, Salafism literally means ‘return or reference to the predecessors’. The term was initially used to qualify a stream of thought that states the obligation to return to the tenets and practices of the Prophet, the first four Caliphs of Islam, the companions and founders of the Islamic traditions of jurisprudence in the early generations of Islam – the first three following a hadith of the Prophet himself. In its modern political version, from the eighteenth century, Salafism refers to religious appeals to fight the forms of colonial domination to which Muslims were subjected. This began with the movement of Mohammed ben Abdelwahhab (1703-1792) in Saudi Arabia, which is still a major reference point for the hardline conservative jihadist branch of political Salafism called ‘Wahhabi’. Its political action first consisted of promoting a new state (present-day Saudi Arabia) through an ideology pitted against popular Islam, and prescribing a new religious orthodoxy. There are several branches of Salafism, sharing the same aspiration for independent Islamic political power. These vary by country and colonial situation.

In the nineteenth century, in response to the Napoleonic military campaign in Egypt, British colonisation and Russian pressure exerted in the region, Muslim intellectuals like Djemâl ad-Dîne Al Afghani (1838-1897) and Mohamed Abduh (1849-1905) inaugurated the century of Arab-Muslim ‘awakening’ on the basis of a return to Islamic origins, the only weapon for them capable of reorganising society so that it could rediscover the ‘golden age’ within a set of new nations. Contemporary Salafism means the reformist movement called ‘scientific Salafism’ which, from Morocco to the Far East, is linked to legal formalism and rationalist normativity. This formalism is opposed to colonisation via the reform of tradition deemed too influenced by popular Sufi practices that allegedly hamper progress.

Certain Salafist jihadist movements still proclaim the need to oppose colonial hegemony, but this type of mobilisation harbours major contradictions: certain forms of Salafism, like Wahhabism and Madkhalism, have strong connections to power in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. They advocate a conservative version anchored in subjection to a specific Sunni tradition. Other forms, called 'quietist', distance themselves from the politics of state management to instead focus on dogma, rites and community reform through education.

In addition to the example of the rebellion in Homs and its leader, Sarout, the (provisional) liberation of the large neighbourhoods of Aleppo also showed the complementarity between the countryside and urban areas in the revolutionary period – and this remark is equally valid for Idlib and Al-Zabadani. This liberation was the result of coordinated work between various armed groups, mainly from the countryside to the North of Aleppo. The weakly centralised brigades under the command of the *Attawhîd* battalion, led by Abdelkader as-Saleh, could not avoid violence carried out against civilians in this military crackdown (which was an extortion racket primarily targeting civilian populations) – hence some analyses positing a hatred for the inhabitants of the rural world among those from the cities. Sociologists have also underscored the state of chaos, looting and anarchy existing in Aleppo during this crackdown, attributing it to the rural people (Bishara, 2013: 205). But these analyses neglect the reality in which the connections between town and countryside were to do with continuity and solidarity. This is because the liberation of the larger neighbourhoods of Aleppo was in fact neither planned nor carried out exclusively from bases in the country. In several of these areas, young people had already brought in weapons and formed small battalions that played a decisive role in this liberation process.

Along with other interviewees, Abou Kotaïba, the leader of the *Fa-Istaqîm kama Ûmirt* brigade, based in Aleppo until the fall of the city in 2016, stated that the liberation of the city had begun in the Salaheddine neighbourhood, rather than when the *Attawhîd* battalion entered the Northern suburbs. As a native of Aleppo, Abou Kotaïba identifies with the rural Idlib region, and marshalled family connections to strengthen his brigade –Salaheddine is known historically for absorbing the rural

exodus from the countryside around Idlib. Similarly, the Boustane el-Qasr district of Aleppo rebelled and witnessed the rapid development of armed revolutionary groups before the *Attawhîd* battalion got there. The population of that neighbourhood can be traced to the significant waves of migration from the countryside surrounding Aleppo, Darat Izza and Nahleh in particular. The young fighters from these neighbourhoods logically valued their links with the countryside, based on this belonging to the underground and as a way to move weapons around. It is, therefore, in the divisions within the city where we have to seek the primary causes of the brutality of this operation, rather than the town/country binary, which was even less relevant in Aleppo because – as in many other areas – the tribes no longer ran organisations or held political influence. In fact, in the countryside and villages that witnessed the emergence of the brigades that made up the *Attawhîd* battalion, it was rather the old families with solid lineage connecting them to the city who took part in the fighting to liberate Aleppo.

The interview with Khalid, a fighter in Aleppo in the *Attawhîd* battalion – the most influential armed group in the early stages of the revolution – confirmed the continuities between urban demonstrations and the shift to armed struggle. These allow us to grasp the part played by the countryside in the liberation of the towns, without making much of a difference to the preponderance of the urban classes in the overall revolutionary process. Khalid's trajectory testifies to the ease with which fighters moved between armed groups, as he left the *Attawhîd* battalion for Nusra in November 2013 – at the time when the latter was trying, unsuccessfully, to deflect accusations that the group belonged to Al-Qaida. I met Khalid twice, in June 2016 and July 2017 in Ankara, where he was living secretly with his father. He fought in another Free Syrian Army brigade, while his brother-in-law was a former high-level member of Islamic State. So many disparate allegiances within the same family: just like the Syrian revolution.

Montassir: *What was the situation when the demonstrations took place in 2011?*

Khalid: *I was working in a tailor's shop. When the demonstrations started, I closed the workshop and headed to the main square. Then I secretly made flags and banners with the slogans of the revolution on them, as well as balaclavas for the demonstrators. The police closed down my workshop and the intelligence*

services were looking for me. This was when the demonstrations in Marea and Azaz were getting more intense. I then hid in the countryside near Aleppo. I came back to the town when the FSA entered and was able to liberate some neighbourhoods. I then became a member of the FSA and began to work with them. Several young people like me went out on the demonstrations and had to leave Aleppo, but returned when the FSA took the city.

M.: *Why did you get involved with the demonstrations and the revolution?*

K.: *Because I had always detested the regime. I had altercations with it. For instance, every year I had to pay 5,000 Syrian pounds worth of bribes to maintain my right not to be conscripted into the army. I have this right because I am an only child. But I always had to provide documents to prove it. Once I was two weeks late providing the documents, and when I got to the police station, they sent me to the military courts. There they asked me to bring a medical certificate proving that my mother had no other children. I brought that certificate and they sent me to be investigated. It was humiliating: 'How do we know that your mother did not have other children with men other than your father?' the investigator asked me. This put a spoke in the wheel because I hadn't given 1,500 pounds to the military (at that time I was earning 250 pounds per week). This story went on for eight years: every year I had to prove to the administration that I was an only child. [...] I detest the state. And when the 'hirak' came along I went to Marea [in the countryside near Aleppo] several times to meet activists. I met Hajji Marea [Abdelkader as-Saleh], the commander of the Attawhîd battalion. I attended several meetings, and we planned demonstrations that started in the rural areas and ended in the heart of the city.*

Hamza: *In which neighbourhoods in the city?*

K.: *Especially the Northern neighbourhoods of Aleppo: Cheikh Najjar, al-Massakine, but also Sakhour, Soukkari, Hananou, etc.*

A major sociological fact crystalised in this relationship between town and country: the city is thought of by the revolutionaries as a strategic objective to defend. Yet the meaning of their entry into the cities to chase out the representatives of the regime is ambivalent: on one side, it marks the geographical power of a politics gaining terrain in various social strata; on the other, it was *de facto* restricted to an expensive and

fragile defensive strategy. The strategy of concentration on the cities actually cut off the embryonic revolutionary society from both its means of managing the territory it held, and also the infrastructure located outside the cities yet essential for them to function (roads, checkpoints, industrial sites and electricity power stations, etc.). This entry into the urban areas, therefore, did not enable the revolution to take power, and this is why at the moment when most of the cities were in revolt and stated they were liberated, between 2013 and 2015, the government continued to claim it held power, whereas it no longer had control over the population. Its military and police units sporadically encircled the cities and managed the territory through centralised commissions: domination was located outside the population and maintained permanent pressure.

Yet this focus on the towns did not mean that all forms of internal management had been abandoned within the revolutionary communities, but the distinctiveness of the Syrian revolution was its rejection of the tools of power available to modern states, like the infrastructures through which power changes hands. Unlike the Islamic state, which conceptualised society in terms of power and sovereignty over land despite certain nihilist and utopian tendencies, as we will see. If the revolution escaped from the 'sovereignist' concept of 'territorial continuity', it was because it saw itself as a local form of politics, open onto the world, and indeed its slogans demonstrate the minimal importance that the nationalist question held.

The flaws of the local revolution in the 'Free Zones'

'Free Zone' is the title adopted from January 2012 by the advocates of the fall of the regime involved at that time in the armed struggle, and the civilian support for that objective. It referred to towns, villages and any inhabited area which, after an armed confrontation with the revolutionary forces, witnessed the retreat of the army and the police. These were zones where the institutions of national government were disabled after a challenge and the shift to armed struggle.

Among the institutions closed down were prisons, courts, universities, elected community councils and the parts of regional and local government administration responsible for recording acts of the state. Moreover, government practices that imposed a particular type of order on the whole population were suspended: tax-raising, the control of

mosques and of Friday preaching and prayers by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, etc. Yet deactivating the major instruments of collective constraint did not lead to all state reference points collapsing in all the Free Zones. As we have seen, in the beginning, civil servants continued to be paid from Damascus. As far as the regime was concerned, this practice aimed to maintain a form of legitimacy for the state in the areas no longer under its control, without however, managing to bend the civil servants in the Free Zones to its will, or corrupt them. In the interviews, those workers considered the salaries as rights as long as the state continued 'to exploit the country's resources'. Another example is the use of the Syrian pound as the means of exchange in the Free Zones. Lastly, the hospitals, even when they were bombed, still functioned as long as medical staff volunteered their time.

The first neighbourhoods liberated were in the town of Al-Zabadani (in the governorate of Damascus): from mid-January 2012, armed groups there called for the fall of the regime and declared their neighbourhoods free of the state. Immediately after these districts had been bombarded, armed groups – which were later to form *Ahrâr a-Châm* – attacked regime troops. An agreement was signed stating that the army would cease hostilities. As a quid pro quo, the revolutionaries would refrain from attacking the checkpoints located on the outskirts of the town, as Abou Ibrahim, an *Ahrâr a-Châm* fighter in Al-Zabadani, explained when we interviewed him in Gaziantep in June 2016:

'We were always afraid for the people. When we got involved in battles with the regime and realized they were going to bomb this area [an Al-Zabadani neighbourhood], we withdrew, to protect it and draw the regime away, towards another area with no civilians living in it. If not, we negotiated tactically with the regime to obtain a ceasefire'.

Before describing the social organisation within the Free Zones, we should stress that this revolutionary experiment differed on one major point from that which Daesh would later impose on Syrian territory from Summer 2014: the first Free Zones, from 2012, rarely experienced periods of truce with the regime, whereas the areas later occupied by the Islamic State had long periods of 'peace', following negotiations between the warring parties. Several regulatory bodies of the social order in the revolutionary societies in those initial years were unstable, fledgling agencies,

in contrast with the areas that Daesh would hold. This difference in management emerges as a key narrative thread in the revolutionaries' accounts that were collected in 2016 and 2017.

Abou Kotaïba: There was never any conflict between two revolutionary parties unless one of them was either Nusra or Daesh. You have to understand that the revolutionary zones were never under the yoke of the politicians or political parties. That's why the Syrian National Council (organisation that represented the Syrian opposition within international bodies) was so far from the reality on the ground, and it's also why we refused to recognise it, despite all the aid it could have brought us.

Personally, as commander in Aleppo, I had no relationship with the provisional Government or the Syrian National Council. I wouldn't even be able to tell you a date when there was contact. All we wanted to do was bring down the regime. We weren't looking for control, power or a new government. The only thing we wanted was to free ourselves from that regime. It was the time when the Free Zones, the green zones, made up more than 80% of Syrian territory. Each zone that liberated itself was then considered to be held by the Free Syrian Army, because the FSA was all there was. But obviously in reality there was no actual organisation calling itself the 'Free Army', there was just people. The Free Army was just the name we gave ourselves when we took up arms. But there were no political factions, no political agenda, and no discourse apart from the one about emancipating ourselves from the regime.

When the local councils were set up, after 2014, relations with the military factions were extremely fragile. Above all, the local councils very quickly came under pressure from Nusra, who took control of them almost immediately. It happened like that in Bustan Al-Qaser. They were organized.⁵⁷

The distinction made here by the FSA military leader confirms that the specific nature of the Syrian political struggle was not only to do with the popular uprising in 2011 and the challenge mounted to the state's monopoly of violence. The political timeline that started then was well and truly considered a 'revolution' by its protagonists while they were experimenting in their territory with collective practices that broke definitively with a modern governmental mode for politics. To understand this distinction, we must describe how, in terms of the exercise of power and the maintenance of order, new practices emerged in the reconfigured social spaces of the 'Free Zones'. In spite of the war, and the deployment

of a neocolonial intervention hostile to the revolutionaries, these zones existed, emancipated from the regime and its old, centralized government mechanisms. Looking closely at this will enable us to specify the nature of the social order conceptualized and developed experimentally by revolutionary society. These were the very beginnings and attempts opening towards an undefined range of possibilities that I will present in the rest of this research.

One major factor in the process of setting up the Free Zones was the 'local-ness' of the action for liberation. Right across Syria, emancipation was conceptualised and carried out on a local level, from the very first towns and neighbourhoods liberated: Al-Zabadani and Duma (governorate of Damascus) and Baba Amr in Homs.⁵⁸ By 'local-ness' of revolutionary action, I refer to its static character: the armed groups, in contrast to the Syrian army, were not considered mobile war units that could be mobilized on geographically distant battlefronts. Despite the participation of a few military deserters from faraway regions because of their original place of assignment, the revolutionary movement did not develop an imaginary of strategic expansion, with territory to be annexed. From the first violent interactions with the forces of the regime, the revolution became an issue borne in each region by local groups, with no centralized command appointed by civilian or military institutions. Under such conditions, no group was able to *institutionalise itself* on the basis of claiming control of territory any larger than a local site (village, town), or even a neighbourhood.⁵⁹ None of these groups, moreover, demanded the annexation of an area where it had representatives: each group acted as it wished, while pursuing the objective of liberation from, and struggle against the regime. It is difficult to identify the borders of the freed neighbourhoods retrospectively, but we know from the interviews about this topic that there were no fixed borders: the checkpoints or '*ribâtes*', were just simple roadblocks, used provisionally to fund the armed groups and mark the end point of the regime's authority.

Very early on in this process, the 'Free Zones' first and foremost resulted in radicalising the choice of a revolution with no command centre, allegiance to a capital or a spokesperson, thus marking a break with the practices of nationalist movements that had influenced the region since the struggles for independence. Several analysts have, however, found fault with the Syrian revolution's lack of command centre unifying the FSA, whereas this fragmentation was the result of a grassroots pattern

which the forces of the revolution imposed on themselves. This was their ultimate political act, and it took root in society based on revolutionary subjectivities in the wake of dealing with the regime and internal attempts at governmental and national reconstruction. Because when groups claim power and continuity across space, they thus stop being part of the revolutionary footprint, and line up with the entities formed in the function of governing, like the Islamic State and the Kurdish administration, or even the Syrian regime itself. It is, therefore, this radical practice of neutralising power by liberating local zones that social and political sciences – academic disciplines that habitually use frames drawn from and involving political parties – often neglect to examine further. Such work distinguishes for example, between the Islamic State on one side, and the revolution on the other, by contrasting the ‘values of citizenship, equality and democracy’ (Bishara, 2013: 210; Al-Haj Saleh, 2015) with a theological framework of power. Yet this approach loses sight of the religious dynamics running through the whole revolutionary field, and ignores the principal opposition that the revolutionary act introduces, that is, taking control of space and forming Free Zones, as opposed to taking control of space and re-establishing state powers.

Lastly, what we learn about the ‘localism’ of the Free Zones is a lack of co-ordination between them, hence the equal lack of any revolutionary strategy to do with constituting extended control over territory as a whole. The Syrian revolution may thus be defined as a set of practices developed by actors convinced of the necessity to suspend the traditional ‘national’ strategy that meant organising territory based on connections between the cities. That in turn entails a suspension of systems based on the overall control of territory for managing the powers circulating between these cities, like those between town and country.

The Free Zones as an administrative safety net

From the outset, one question needed answering: with no attempt to bring the liberated spaces together, and with neither a central command unit nor a delegation of centralised power, how was keeping the lives and order of hundreds of thousands of people and maintaining order possible? In reality, societies in the Free Zones experienced forms of rationalisation that enabled both collective life and the ongoing fight against the

regime to keep going. The example of Aleppo is important in this respect for a number of reasons.

After the FSA – particularly the *Attawhid* battalion – entered Aleppo in July 2012, half the city was free. The Free Zones would keep going for at least three years. The regime would unsuccessfully deploy several strategies to claw the city back, but it resisted them. This resistance was not due solely to the fighters on the battlefield: there was an ostensibly quasi-administrative layer of backup that ensured the zones could carry on differently to the ones held by the state, but also allowed the residents to withstand life under siege. Several administrators kept the essential services functioning i.e. healthcare,⁶⁰ food, heating and even formal education in some periods. Self-help and solidarity networks were established, especially in working-class neighbourhoods.

Some women we interviewed told us how they worked hard collecting medications, providing food and stocking up flour, sugar and cooking oil in the basements of buildings, and houses set aside for housing ‘neighbourhood people’, and protecting children. Moreover, some schools reopened in these cellars and a lot of pupils in Baccalaureate classes went into regime-controlled areas – where they were allowed to move around – to take their exams. Some schools also reopened in the Free Zones, as a result of personal initiatives taken by teachers and former school principals involved in the revolution. These places of learning retained both their textbooks – only citizenship education classes were closed down – and their teaching staff (whereas schools had to change programmes and teachers in the Islamic State-held zones).

Similarly, technicians and civil servants from the national electricity company based in the offices in the Free Zones got in touch with their colleagues working in the half of the city occupied by the regime, and helped each other to ensure a working electricity supply across the whole of Aleppo. Because there were truces in the war, and especially, points where the logic of the friend/enemy binary was not applied: technicians on both sides could agree to work together outside the institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms, and deploy personal initiatives to ensure that an essential service worked properly. They used expertise and solidarity networks predating the revolution to keep several services running: hospitals and the transport of medications, street cleaning and waste management, fire and rescue, the provision of drinking water and industrial ovens for baking, etc. Several interviewee statements emphasise

that many services – like street-cleaning and waste management, and the organisation of ovens – even improved relative to their level prior to the revolution, or at least compared to the administrative organisation of the government zones in wartime. This improvement, according to our research, is due to several reasons: the relevant population had shrunk, as people were displaced because of the bombing; the civil servants worked more intensely in response to wartime conditions; and a spirit of bravery and courage reflected an exceptional moment and solidarity developed in order to ‘give the revolution a good image for ones friends and family, and the whole world’.⁶¹

Moreover, the free parts of the city of Aleppo witnessed the creation of local councils and committees in their neighbourhoods. These bodies were initiated by the first demonstrators, students and intellectuals; civilian and military revolutionaries had seats on them. Even though the local council was open to all Aleppo residents, only men – with management skills or former local elected officials – actually had seats. Working via general assemblies, the council allocated tasks concerned with the management of the city’s essential services. But it quickly became ineffective and was supplanted by the *al-Hay’a al-Rouba’iya* (Quadruple Commission) created by the four large brigades in the Free Zones of Aleppo. This commission, composed firstly of the city’s various armed and civilian forces, was soon dominated by the Islamic organisation, Nusra, which became the principal actor in the management of Aleppo’s essential services (especially the baking ovens, the transport of goods, and the provision of water and electricity). Nusra thus monopolised several resources but did not give into the temptation to claim that this was the birth of an autonomous theocratic state. It was in this context that Islamic State in Syria split with Nusra, and joined with the Iraqi branch that declared the birth of the Caliphate in June 2014. Nusra found itself in a position halfway between Daesh and the other organisations. In contrast to the diverse space of the revolution, Nusra openly declared its ideology, but definitively kept its distance from any state-building project – its political ideal was to call for the construction of a pluralist, democratic Syrian state with elections as the key to accessing power.

Lastly, it must be emphasised that this back-up only worked when the regime could not use its air force or army against the Free Zones, because of the lack of available troops and the FSA’s resistance. When the armed revolutionaries were greatly outnumbered – as at the siege of

Homs in Summer 2012 – the Free Zone became a huge open-air prison, and all the resources and functions of the revolution were marshalled to fight the war and withstand the siege.

The unusual experiment of the ‘Free Police’ in free Aleppo

The revolution’s police force is an example of an experiment in the management of a minimum level of ‘service’ devoid of discretionary power. Between 2012 and 2013, young people from the local neighbourhoods, supported by former police officers who had deserted, established the ‘Revolutionary Security Brigades’ (*Saraya Amn A-thawra*) which provided a minimum of order in relation to thefts and petty crimes committed after the state had withdrawn. These police brigades acted independently, with each neighbourhood having its own. Their members were often young people who under the regime had been unemployed and sometimes disliked by the residents. When these districts were liberated, the same young people found their place and responsibility stemming from it. As holding a position of power was not allowed, this police force was instead a symbol of utility for the revolutionary community under construction.

The force brought its suspects to the Unified Court of Justice (*Al-Qada’ Al-Mouwahad*), set up by former lawyers in Aleppo, to the Quadruple Commission or other bodies with relevant jurisdiction set up in the revolution, depending on the political affinities of each armed group. The police in Bustan el-Qasr, dominated by the FSA, therefore took their suspects to the Unified Court of Justice and refused to cooperate with the other courts in the same Free Zones, like the Nusra-dominated Quadruple Commission. So the neighbourhoods maintained a kind of authentic autonomy in the Free Zones, immediately removing from them any form of centralisation based on the law – and with one police force – shared by everyone. These tensions demanded everyone acting in these liberated spaces to recognise the plural balances prohibiting any usurpation of power and any definitive decision-making about how the Free Zone could be divided up in a hierarchical way.

In late 2013, the Revolutionary Security Brigades were expanding in the Free Zones alongside the battalions of the Free Syrian Army that provided guaranteed support for their activities vis-à-vis other police forces, such as the Islamic State’s. However, these brigades retained a form of autonomy from the FSA, as the ‘Free Police’ were taken in hand by senior

figures during the revolution (the wise men), and the *Tansiquiate* (the coordinating groups) in the period of peaceful protest. Their members had been mobilising their networks in activist circles as part of the revolutionary process since 2011. In 2017, Abou Mohannad, a witness to the establishment of this experiment in Aleppo, summarized the role of the police in the Free Zones as follows.

Abou Mohannad: In early 2013, the police began to get some authority and above all, recognition, including from the military revolutionaries in the Free Syrian Army. Even the most arrogant and immoral FSA brigades began to recognise this police force, and they allowed it to investigate people suspected of theft or murder. Indeed, there were Free Zones in Aleppo and outside Aleppo where Saraya Amn A-thawra [the first experimental Revolutionary Security Brigades] were challenged over cases of corruption and torture in the name of the revolution, but when the revolution had gone on for a while, and when the FSA held its own against the Islamic State, the people started to support the members of these brigades, acknowledged for their integrity and the trust they inspired.⁶²

The Revolutionary Security Brigades were funded *a posteriori* by the National Revolutionary Council as part of its attempt to represent a political alternative in Syria, from abroad, although this police force initially resulted from an internal decision in response to tensions between ‘revolutionary fighters’ and ‘civilians’.⁶³ The armed groups thus allocated a monthly minimum sum of 25 dollars to the first police volunteers, who were supposed to regulate the relationship between the fighters and the civilians. Their first job was to return goods that had been taken in shake-downs (mainly vehicles) following the disintegration of security in the neighbourhoods, mostly traceable to certain armed members of the FSA. These police brigades requisitioned warehouses where they stored the items recovered, and invited the aggrieved parties to come and pick them up.

When this policing pilot project began to earn people’s trust in the Free Zones, former police commissioner Adib Challaf (originally from Homs) launched the Free Police initiative in Aleppo, funded from 2014 by international NGOs such as Adam Smith International (UK) and Creative Associates International (US); the monthly salary for police officers then rose to 100 dollars, compared to just 50 dollars for fighters. The objective of these international donors was clearly the ‘fight against religious

fundamentalism'. But in December 2017, after three years, the funding was suspended by the UK government, which accused members of the Free Police of cooperating with 'extremist groups' and working for courts that applied the death penalty, and not 'respecting human rights' (BBC News, 2017; Anders and Edwards, 2017). In practice, the arguments justifying the allocation of Western funding to the Free Police, like those posited for suspending it, were drawn from an interventionist ideology that had little to do with human rights. These arguments actually imply that there was an established state order within the revolution, functioning via the centralisation of policing. The clash of 'civilisations' underpins this approach, which devalues any reference to Islam in revolutionary action, whereas the religious dimension is in fact central to that.

Before the foreign funding had reshaped the new policing structure, the police in the Free Zones had begun to deploy horizontally: those who comprised its ranks like to repeat the slogan 'One *ijtimâ'ia* [social] police, made by the people, for the people'. Those we encountered confirmed that the Free Zones were not subject to any external command that imposed a police force on them. Only the initiative run by residents of these Zones, attentive to the needs articulated by those who lived there, could end up providing a body of police with no set legal functions: 'It was impossible to establish a police unit or station in the Free Zones if there was no demand for it among local people, who ended up establishing them themselves', stated a volunteer in the Free Police in Aleppo.⁶⁴ The 'demand' of local people meant a desire for a society based on volunteering, the rotation of membership of the police and no pay. Moreover, police officers in the early days of the revolution had no social prestige that would confer a monopoly on carrying a weapon: anyone living in the Free Zones had the right to keep one. The functions of a police officer were, in practice, restricted to managing the movement of people in the markets and on the roads, organising the interventions of the 'white helmets' (volunteer firefighters) in bombed areas, building roads in response to a demand from concerned people, providing mediation when two individuals came into conflict, or even intervening in crime, but only if there was a consensus on the immorality of a given action. Lastly, this revocable police force could hand over suspects arrested by people with no mandate to the courts: courts which in turn, held no legal authority underwritten by a legislative institution. This practice echoes that of the police in the Paris Commune described by Karl Marx: 'Instead of continuing to be the agent

of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune' (Marx, 1871).

Indeed, the Syrian National Council initially provided some external funding for the local councils to which the Free Police reported. Moreover, the SNC often referred to the need to 'restructure the units of the Free Police so that they belong to an organised, institutional pattern, rather than being charities or personal bodies'.⁶⁵ However, in reality, there was a very large gap between the desire on the part of the Syrian National Council and its donors to institutionalise the police, and the actual practice of the Free Police set up by the residents of the Free Zones. Indeed, this police force was set apart by its lack of discipline, coordinating bodies and leadership. It functioned in an unusual way, breaking with a long history of institutionalised policing in an authoritarian state like Syria.⁶⁶

The experiment of the Free Police at its foundation in 2012 was rooted in a spirit of volunteering for the community, subject to the popular will and a need to help establish the social order without institutionalising or setting up a dominant administration. The order kept by the police was not framed within legislation specified by an external body. The initial core of the Revolutionary Security Brigades saw itself as a mainstream element of the revolution against the state. This practice was changed when foreign funding entered into play: in Idlib, the Free Police that took over from the Revolutionary Security Brigades from 2013 until 2019 worked according to a clientelist logic. Probably, according to several statements we took, that police force was nothing more than a network distributing salaries, as there was no transparency to recruitment. Despite its 'corrupt' nature, which abandoned the popular approach, based on a collectively felt need, this police network continued to involve itself in various aspects of organisational order without being answerable to any legal or administrative authority. Its role consisted simply of carrying out 'projects' such as 'the refurbishment of destroyed buildings, the electrification of bombed-out neighbourhoods, the reconstruction of the motorway, running the weekly bazaar [market], and awareness-raising campaigns about the correct behaviour to adopt in response to the regime's chemical weapons'.⁶⁷ On the other hand, it was common for the police officers in this body – who carried no weapons and presented themselves as civilians at the revolution's service – were members of both this police force and the FSA's military brigades. These police, depending

on the particular Free Zone, were not immune to the influence of the armed brigades that were often part of their leadership.

The Free Police was conceptualised and understood as a body with no actual power over people's behaviour other than to deactivate the institution of a modern police force and its administration, both responsible for security in the Free Zones (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Memo from the Free Police in Idlib, dated 10 January 2019, announcing the dissolution of the last revolutionary police station open in Idlib.

Lastly, let us observe that, in addition to the Free Police, the revolution engendered the 'Islamic Police'. This was created by Nusra in June 2013. Unlike the Free Police and the Revolutionary Security Brigades, the Islamic Police was attached to a single court: the Forensic Commission (*al-hay'a a-char'ia*). The establishment of this police force was not a response to popular demand, and its members were appointed as a result of their links to the Islamic Front. They were supposed to be believers in an Islamic stream of thought bound to be embodied in a political system based on institutions that would bring stability, security and order. The Islamic Police was formed after the split between Nusra and the Islamic state in 2014, from the core of the *Hisba* (Islamic State police). Several of its members belonged to Islamic State and its 'caliphate', and those who remained in the Free Zones continued to work for Nusra and its court, *al-hay'a a-char'ia*. This police force did not focus its daily duties on managing criminality and keeping people and vehicles moving, but on monitoring people's behaviour, according to the legal principle of '*al amr bil ma'rouf wa an-nahy 'an al-mounkar*' (demand good and prohibit evil). According to my respondents, its work was initially concentrated on dictating a behavioural code before it was definitively formed into an organisation of armed police, both women and men, in the IS-held zones – whereas the Free Police only admitted men.

At first sight, these differences in gender policies may be surprising in view of the various ideological positionings of the collective actors in the revolution and war. The most oppressive police forces, those of Islamic State and the Kurds, were the most concerned with people's behaviour in this period of war, yet they were the ones to incorporate women in the ranks of their repressive administrations. Often, these forces were split into two branches: one to surveil men's behaviour, and the other to monitor women's. The Free Police (and especially the Revolutionary Security Brigades) however, was comprised only of men, but attempted to manage the city rather than people in general. The former approach, managing the behaviour of women in the gendered society, differed from the management of masculine conduct, whereas in the Free Zones, management of public space was certainly controlled by men, following a traditional patriarchy,⁶⁸ yet it did not in any institutionalised way, dictate or enforce a gendered distinction of behaviour. The police in the Free Zones were responsible for running the 'city' and not the people, according to some pre-determined and court-led order.

Courts in the Free Zones

The same difference in approach can be observed in the courts established in the various zones of the revolution, and those set up by Islamic State. In the former, the major functions of justice – arbitration of conflicts between individuals and the maintenance of social order enabling the collective survival of society – were performed by various types of stakeholder, from within and outside the court. No institution exclusively embodied all these functions, such that it would comprise the place for final legitimate appeal. The opposite is the case for the IS, which, like a contemporary secular state, established courts that acted as a final round, delivering rulings on appeals and offences committed.

However, from the moment the Free Zones were created in the large urban areas, particularly in Aleppo, dissident judges and lawyers tried to reconstruct the ‘justice system’ via the revolutionary courts. But these attempts failed, and were replaced by experiments with a ‘courtless’ system. Two founders of the Aleppo Unified Justice court (*al-qada’ al-muwahad*), whom I met, emphasised that in this body’s early days, they were setting up a ‘democratic’ judicial power: an objective far from the reality of what the revolutionary courts were to become.

Before the Islamic groups emerged in the Free Zones (see chapter 2), a variety of political ideas (both those held by the regime and those held by the forces of the revolution) coexisted in social space. Similarly, before the demonstrations began in 2011, various legal and philosophic traditions traversed the court system, although they were administratively unified in the state’s laws and legal codes. Among judges, lawyers and legal experts, this divergence in thought came starkly to light when the monopoly of physical violence in Syria splintered. The dissident lawyers that we met thus unanimously told us about how the previous justice system worked: corruptible and subject to the orders of the police and the Baath party – an observation shared by people who did not support the revolution, like Anwar Fidae, lawyer and founding member of Unified Justice in Aleppo.

Anwar Fidae: [We were experiencing] *a situation of corruption, where the police apparatus could intervene with a judge, at any moment, to influence a ruling. In each phase of the drafting of a ruling, the central power could intervene. The court’s routine working pattern was also intolerably slow. Even the*

*administration, the Registry and the lawyers were often subject to the state security forces. And the leaders of the lawyers' and the judges' unions worked in concert with the police.*⁶⁹

Lawyers played a pioneering role in the early protest movement. In Aleppo, where there were seven hundred lawyers, one hundred and fifty of them split from the lawyers' union in Damascus as early as June 2011. This union went along with the penalties meted out to the demonstrators under the counterterrorist law, on the basis of the accusation of 'plotting against the state'. The dissidents met in the Hananou and Hadayria districts of Aleppo, in late 2011, to establish the Committee of Free Lawyers. They also contributed to the creation of the Free Police and took part in demonstrations.

The need to establish courts began to impose itself in early 2012, when order in the Free Zones in big cities like Aleppo collapsed (due to theft, organised crime, and vendettas, etc.): 'A response to the chaos (still present six months after the liberation of the main areas in Aleppo) had to be found'.⁷⁰ Lawyers like Anwar Fidae then started work on centralising the legal system, to establish a 'Unified Justice' in the city. Faced with the diversity of Muslim legal-philosophical streams each identifying with a different jurisdiction as its legal reference point, the Committee of Free Lawyers adopted the Arab League's legal code, developed by its member states in 1996.⁷¹

'Why did the revolutionaries adopt the Arab League's code, when that organisation had never shown the least support for the revolution?', we asked. The systematic response was that the Arab Criminal Code had not been adopted by any Arab country! In fact, it had been drafted by the Council of Justice Ministers of the postcolonial Arab states with a view to offering it to the states' legal systems in the form of a legislative model that could amend national jurisdictions. For the Syrian revolutionaries confronted with religious legal-philosophical divisions, this text might potentially bring the various threads together because it was basically drawn from the Quran and the Sunnah, while combining the jurisprudential practices of the four pillars of Sunni Islam, which cover all the divisions in that field.

When this code was adopted, lawyers and judges in the Free Zones were split: some viewed this text suspiciously, and felt that it deviated from the spirit of Islamic *sharia*. Other, more secular jurists, criticised

its theocratic basis and called for the legislation of the Syrian state to be adopted instead, while amending a few laws that restricted freedoms. Thus the legal rupture within the Free Zones was inexorable: those professionals who believed in a sharia-based vision of the law joined the court run by Nusra – and some of those would then split a second time to become judges in Islamic state in 2014, whereas those who believed in a secular vision of the law left the Free Zones and went into exile. Lastly, advocates of the Arab League's code founded Unified Justice and supported the FSA in an attempt to participate in running the Free Zones.

Ultimately, this justice system quickly unravelled and ended up far from the traditional functions of the modern court system, in spite of the efforts by lawyers and judges in the Free Zones to maintain it. According to the lawyers we met, rather than ruling legally on cases, the justice system affiliated to the FSA implemented a new practice: it became a body that recorded administrative actions, with a dedicated division ensuring that 'archives of the revolution' were created. This court's rulings had no decision-making power in Free Zone society. First, the lawyers busied themselves witnessing the daily events to do with acts of violence, then it acted for example, to transcribe the names of the dead and cause of death (for each death, a member of Unified Justice had to attend the funeral), note and certify marriages, record births, the buying and selling of goods (especially land and houses, etc.). Moreover, an essential function of this system was acknowledging the desertion of the regime's soldiers. To avoid reprisals against them, they had to get an official letter from the Unified Justice lawyers authenticating their desertion before they could be accepted into the revolutionary forces in the Free Zones or its brigades.

Residents of the Free Zones did not involve the Unified Justice judges in criminal matters or disputes, because they knew that 'this justice system had no weight in criminal cases'.⁷² In the beginning, a registry was set up where people registered complaints and arrest warrants were issued and the Free Police interrogated suspects, but very soon, challenges nullified the work in this justice system and completely disabled its coercive function: armed men intervened against rulings and the model of lawyers arguing cases for clients was challenged. Moreover, concurrent jurisdictions – especially those of the Forensic Commission (*al-hay'a a-char'ia*) acting under Nusra's orders – delegitimised the court's decision-making powers.⁷³ Its staff thus devoted itself to making an archive of the acts that had the potential to be used in peacetime, and by a future state institution;

and as soon as this alternative position was institutionalized, this set of staff were looked after and funded by donor institutions – especially Human Rights Watch and French, Canadian and Turkish organisations.⁷⁴

The lack of power and the inflection of the judicial branch towards archiving were accompanied by attempts to provide alternative forms of justice. The judges and lawyers we met stated that Unified Justice had, for instance, requisitioned a prison, but then emptied it. In response to criminal offences such as murder, they said that the guilty parties were exiled to avoid vendettas or having to apply capital punishment, demanded by the victims' friends and family. A judge told us about the rapid unravelling of judicial authority.

Amjad: In fact, the prison was empty for the first five months when there still was unanimity at Unified Justice. Then there were disagreements because you couldn't rule on crimes under those conditions. The people were in revolt and prison for them was a synonym of the old regime: if it was still there, it meant nothing had changed. When we got cases, and if there was an obvious crime acknowledged by the guilty party, we made that guilty party do work useful for the community: they had to work for us in the office or we had them make something for free for the injured party, or any other type of work they could do.

Montassir: And what if there was a murder for example? Because there is a provision for capital punishment in the Arab League's code ...

A.: Yes. That code was adopted but never implemented. There were two public capital punishment executions, but they were at the beginning, and had the unanimous support of military groups and individuals: they were chabbiha who admitted murder. Those two executions took place for a political crime: those people harmed the revolution by killing activists and fighters against the regime. But generally speaking, when we were dealing with crimes like murder [Translator's note: committed by non-combatants] we ended up secretly exiling the guilty people. We sent people to Türkiye to escape reprisals. We had no other response. If not, there would have been ongoing vendettas, or even execution in the jurisdictions of the Islamic groups.⁷⁵

In practice, Unified Justice came under challenge from various stakeholders in the revolution who did not agree with the monopoly of violence, including those who intended to run a dispute-resolution

institution, while presenting it as neutral. This was a categorical rejection, all the more resounding because the initiative for turning the justice system back into an institution had come from legal experts, lawyers and judges who had held positions in courts under the regime. Moreover, on the ground, the armed revolution generated another function in response to the matter of order: the prevention and arbitration functions carried out by the *charʿi* (religious cleric), a role for which there was no equivalent in Assad's Syria in peacetime.

This chapter has presented a bottom-up approach to the revolution, an ethnography of the main non-governmental bodies that managed order and peace during wartime. The ultimate revolutionary action emerging from this restoration was the experimentation with institutions which, like the police and the court system, were reconfigured without the imperative to reproduce power relations. In the first few months (January to June 2011), the revolution, while anaesthetising the body for political representation within it, also opened the door to universalizable practices, with no religious or national restrictions. In some Free Zones, this practice would then go through a political overhaul, created by people engaging in revolution and based on a superior moral basis, revolutionary jihad, and a religion with no intermediary or commands. And all this sat in opposition to a rival jihad, in the regions of Syria where the Islamic State (Daesh) would soon take provisional control.

The universalisation of the revolution: jihad and the uses of religion

The references to the chronology of the Syrian revolution in the preceding chapters do not adequately answer the questions raised by its internationalisation, particularly how it drew Muslim youth from across the world. Indeed, the logics already outlined, that is, desertion from the regime and the resistance to it, have presented humanist and universal motivators likely to convince foreigners to show solidarity with the Syrian cause. Yet in response to the regime's aggressive and brutalising behaviour, and the challenges set by the deliberate organisation of the Free Zones without a new source of institutionalised power, a growing vision with eschatological characteristics was to end up connecting with Muslims across the globe. Indeed, it is the fact that what was different about the Syrian revolution is that all political discourses – in the sense of ideological traditions and social projects that had been as dominant in the postcolonial Arab-Muslim states as in the West during the twentieth century – were invalidated.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, an unprecedented event, the Syrian revolution revealed both the absolute criminality of a regime that shared authoritarian affinities with other governments, and the uniqueness of an uprising that responds to war in religiosity and a return to pre-modern foundations. In this chapter, we will look at some additional forms assumed by this resistance and fuelled by a religiosity emancipated from the modern Western political frameworks inherited by postcolonial governments. These forms were vehicles for a discourse capable of attracting the attention of people from abroad, but sharing a religious tradition (Islam) undergoing colonial domination (Amer-Meziane, 2021), while being open to various practices and interpretations. Rather than a being a 'radicalisation' of terrorists, the point of the Syrian cause, whatever its outcomes, was thus created out of the experiences that the Syrians communicated to Muslim communities across the world from 18 March 2011.

The *charʿī* (religious clerics) in the revolution

Often, before leaving for Syria, the migrants for jihad knew about the presence of religious clerics in the revolution, in the same way as they knew the history of the regime's repression and the call to jihad formulated by the Syrians even before those launched by the religious bodies in the Arab-Muslim world, and by specific imams based in the West. Later, I will return to this knowledge accrued before departure, but here I will carry on describing a few facets of the role played by experiences that draw on religious knowledge in Syria.

In fact, another body within the revolution, and which contributed to the goal of maintaining social order in the Free Zones was that of the *charʿī* (a term that can be translated as '(religious) cleric', or even 'doctor of faith' or 'legal expert'). This social position, unheard of in Syria prior to the revolution, spread widely once the conflict had entered its armed phase. Etymologically, the term derives from the word *charīʿa* (divine Islamic law) and refers to someone who embodies this concept. The *charʿī* is a position that emerged when the number of brigades began to increase. Each brigade was supposed to have its own *charʿī* when the number of its members rose. When the groups of fighters were small, they shared and consulted one or more *charʿī*. For some groups, the word adopted as a label for this role was 'sheik'. 'We used *charʿī* in the brigade I founded in Aleppo', Abou Houdaïfa explained to me. 'These were trustworthy religious figures known in Aleppo such as Sheik Bassam Hijazi and Ammar 'Anjreini. Those weren't the *charʿī* in my brigade, but several brigades could share these sheiks and consult them about any business'.⁷⁶

The position occupied by the *charʿī* in the revolution, in the FSA, Nusra and *Ahrâr a-Châm* brigades differed from the one held by judges in the Islamic State, who were also called *charʿī*. For the Islamic State, these were intellectuals of Islamic law who had to fulfil a legal role to apply the law. While in the Free Zones, the *charʿī* were primarily communicators of morality for exceptional times, when death hovered above all the fighters, and people were besieged by the regime. This morality was supposed to structure order by regulating relationships between fighters and civilians, and, more generally, by confronting the civil war threatening the revolutionary community. Similarly, the brigades expected the *charʿī* to 'boost' the fighters' morale as they defended their towns and engaged with the regime on the battlefronts. The *charʿī* had two main

activities: the first was oriented toward the cities, where they educated people and the future fighters via 'religious education circles' (*dawarât char'ia*), groups open to all. The second, oriented toward the battlefield, was to motivate the fighters and explain the stakes of the war to them.

Basically, the aim of the *char'î* was to bestow an individual and collective meaning on death, to instil order into the relationship between the dead, God and the living, and even provide an opinion on daily business in order to create synergies between brigades in the Free Zones and the local residents. Abou Hakim, a former Syrian Army deserter and leader of several FSA brigades in the North of the county, gave details during our interview.

Abou Hakim: A char'î is the equivalent to having a court or a judge in each brigade. Since we're all Muslims and mujahideen, we need one char'î per brigade. Within brigades, as between the various brigades, problems arise and that necessitates a court. The char'î is often a counsellor with assistants. He comes into play when there are conflicts between groups of fighters, or between fighters and civilians. But the char'î punishes the fighter, not the civilian, because when the fighter joins up, he undergoes legal-religious training (dawra char'ia).⁷⁷

In another interview, Khalid describes the functions fulfilled by the *char'î* in the *Fajr al-Islam* (Islamic Dawn) brigade set up in Aleppo, and which later merged with Nusra.

Montassir: And what about the char'î? What roles did they perform?

Khalid: There were two char'î in Fajr al-Islam. They stayed with the brigade after we merged with Nusra. The first char'î stayed on the brigade's premises. He ran religious education study groups. The second was mobile, going from one Nusra checkpoint (ribâte) to another, and running the mobile dawarât char'ia as well. He encouraged the fighters at the front, gave lessons on martyrdom (chahada), victory, the licit and the illicit, etc. Both char'î filled in the large gaps in the fighters' knowledge on these issues.

M.: What kinds of questions did the fighters ask?

K.: Most fighters asked the char'î questions like: 'If I die in combat, what are the criteria for my martyrdom to be accepted?' When you're at these checkpoints,

you get obsessed with these types of questions, you think about martyrdom. Or: 'How should I behave in order to deserve this martyrdom I'm thinking about all the time?'

The *char'î* is thus one of these entities shared communally in the war zones by various groups, including the Islamic State, and the Syrian regime – which relied upon the religious clerics made available to its soldiers. Like the jihad, the variants of this entity illustrate the extent to which the use of a shared tradition may differ, even while being drawn from the same religion. The role played by the *char'î* actually differed depending on the trajectory taken by the specific group of fighters: this resource became a place for the 'struggle over meanings' (Hall, 2007) and modes of politics – statist politics versus Free Zone politics. When a conflict broke out between FSA brigades and those who sought to turn the Free Zones into Islamic State territory, the *char'î* found themselves at the cutting edge of the war of interpretation of religious discourse, setting the goals of *sharia* politics. For the *char'î* in Daesh, politics was supposed to manage people under the law of God, whereas for their counterparts in revolutionary brigades, Islam was the 'light that guides people toward good and the rejection of all human authority'.⁷⁸

In the FSA brigades, the clerics were to 'protect' the fighters from the temptation to join the Islamic groups aiming to establish another, 'pure' state. In order to achieve this, they carried out interpretive work on the Quran and the biography of the Prophet, texts they presented as a call for universal struggle against tyranny rather than to establish laws and obey commands. The revolutionary *char'î* were criticised by the official Nusra and Islamic State clerics, who considered them apostates and heretics, and even mystics, since they did not operate within the limits set by the Islamic law separating the licit from the forbidden. In an interview about this concept, Abou Kotaïba, founder of the *Fa-Istaqîm Kama Ûmîrt* brigade in Aleppo, specifies the general role of the *char'î* in his brigade in the Free Zones.

Montassir: *Were there char'î in the Free Army too?*

Abou Kotaïba: *Yes, Of course, because at the end of the day we are all Muslims. When you risk dying at the front, you can't accept one of your own dying without being able to make ablutions. As the boss of this group, I have to teach my*

fighters, using the charʿī, how religion works. We can die as martyrs, but only if we behave as martyrs. To fight, there must be a reason. So you have to make this reason explicit in order that the fighter be prepared to meet God and sacrifice himself, while he's in a clean, pure state, with knowledge of his adoration and of religion. So there are sharia rules that regulated the FSA. There was also a regulation necessary for the army. Moreover, this dirty regime does the same thing with its chaplains. The mufti of the Republic, Hassoun, fulfilled this role. Since the beginning of the revolution, Hassoun has been preaching at the regime's barracks and on the frontlines.

The FSA charʿī were also faced with preaching by Salafists and Takfirists who manipulate words and the Quran in order to attract fighters. That type of recruitment therefore had to be contained, by showing that religion and jihad differ from the discourse of the Islamic State and from Takfirist discourse. Our young people had to be protected against their seductive but dangerous words. The FSA clerics were fighters with religious training, and who gave classes for us or organised debates. For example, we had Sheikh Mohamed al-Kurdi, who was the head charʿī of our brigade. Nusra considered him an apostate, a Sufi and a heretic, whereas he used to give our sharia religious classes. But we didn't really have sermons: his work was limited to in-group activities.

M.: What type of classes, what formats?

A. K: Lectures for the fighters when they were at the training camps, or on the battlefronts. They were mainly consciousness-raising classes. [Mohamed al-Kurdi] didn't deliver speeches for recording or broadcast afterwards. It was more like classes introducing religion, but also targeted against the Salafist-jihadi strain of Islam. [...] He used to emphasise that he was using only the Good Book, and the Sunnah, in contrast to the Salafist-jihadis perverting the Quran with their interpretations. He said there was no intermediary between the Book and the Sunnah on one side, and Muslims on the other. He rejected the sheikhs and interpreters from other Salafist groups. The others especially used Ibn Taymiyya [a traditionalist thirteenth-century theologian] as an interpreter. But our charʿī argued that you had to come back to the Book without going through this type of interpreter who opened the text up to discord. They cherry-picked elements out of the text that suited their cause, just like Abou Yaqzan and Sheikh Abou Ibrahim Cheich, a doctor of theology who preached within Nusra.

Religious education circles: between revolution and the Islamic State

Religious education circles (*dawarâ char'ia*) were another practice common to all the actors in the armed revolution, which was configured differently by the Islamic State. This was a set of religious knowledge dispensed within the brigades by imams and *char'î* with proven religious learning. These circles were usually held by former graduates from university Islamic studies departments, or traditional clerics with a good reputation in the neighbourhoods. Basic knowledge about rites was taught to fighters and anyone wanting to study: prayers and other pillars (*arkâne*) of Islam, knowledge about the history of the revelation, prophetic behaviour and sayings, etc. The teaching was amended to fit the context of the war by searching religious tradition for model behaviour in times of crisis: here you could find the Prophet's discourses on patience, endurance, martyrdom, the compensation for jihad, the brotherhood of *mujahideen*, etc.

In the Free Zones, religious education circles fulfilled an educational mission, whereas in the Islamic State-controlled areas they were perceived as a control mechanism that placed the population in a hierarchy. In the revolution, they did not grant access to organisational prerogatives, while in IS they served to define the level of people's membership, and fixed their position within its social hierarchy. The FSA provided only male fighters with such training, but IS aimed it at both women and men, because the training was conceived as a mechanism for spreading theocratic nationalism and defining the social order. Unlike the education circles run by a Ministry of the IS, the *dawarâ char'ia* in the revolution were not the preserve of brigades alone: they could be organised by the preachers with neither authorisation nor use of uniform methods or teaching manuals provided by an authority. Preaching was focused on normalising death and service in the armed brigades, whereas in IS it was a source of discord and had to be specifically authorised by its central government, the General Commission: 'In all the FSA training camps, there were *dawarât char'ia*. It was the same in the Quadruple Commission and in the *hay'a char'ia*, Nusra established *dawarât char'ia*. Similarly, in *Fajr al-Islam*, preachers (*dou'ât*) were sometimes present, and they ran the *dawarât char'ia*'.⁷⁹

Setting up these training circles in the revolution was conceptualised as an act of initiation, a kind of rite of passage separating the lives of civilians from revolutionary fighters headed for the front. Indeed, the line differentiating these two groups was flexible – fighters could also devote their time to civilian occupations like organizing demonstrations and cyberactivism. But bearing arms and being more exposed to death than civilians necessitated the creation of these teaching circles fulfilling the function of rendering life sacred in the face of war, and making death palatable.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that the *char'i*, in a kind of historical trick, enabled the statist theocratic line of argument to be established within the revolution, gain power and thus divide the revolutionary community. This training was actually a space for the confrontation of ideas which facilitated the emergence of fundamentalist groups like Nusra and the IS. Our interviews allowed the fighters we met to reconstruct the genesis of these experiences that resulted in divisions within the revolution's collective mindset.

Abou Hakim: *The fighter, when he joined up, went on a dawra char'ia. Until he did that, he wasn't allowed to go to the FSA battlefront. And the char'i also gave classes on religion. So they were in a position to influence the ideology of the groups that made up the brigade. And sometimes, the char'i were foreigners. We experienced that and witnessed the constitution of ideologies specific to each big brigade. When these poor Syrians began to go through the dawra char'ia and the training camps, there's no question that Daesh managed to get into their heads'.⁸⁰*

The imperative of linking death with the sacred

We now come to the practices relating to jihad in the revolution before and during the arrival of foreign fighters. In contrast to the arguments of some analysts, who tend to 'secularise' the revolution, the topic of religion was actually at the root of the most important learning moments in the Free Zones. One hypothesis coming out of this research guides this process of reconstruction: although on one side, a text-focused scripture reading of *sharia* was the basis for the modern statism of the Islamic State, the Syrian revolution, on the other hand, was characterised by a practical form of Islamic thought that backed a radical political and social critique of the concept of the state and of modernity in general. A utopian

conception of jihad can be found in several segments of the Syrians' revolutionary struggle, inspiring the outrage against the war imposed by the state upon its own people.

Evidence of this lies in the creative output of the revolution. When it assumed its final, armed form, in 2012, a pledge created by Abdelbasset Sarout, footballer, singer and poet faithful to the spirit of this revolution, who died in combat in 2019, at the age of twenty-seven, was chanted in several Free Zones. This pledge, sung at the end of each demonstration, nicely summarises the use of Islam in the revolution:

Martyrdom or victory!
 We swear in the name of almighty God
 We will never give up this revolution
 We swear in the name of almighty God
 We will never forget the blood of martyrs
 We swear in the name of almighty God
 We will protect our women, our children, our martyrs, our land, our religion
 and our prisoners
 Until the final drop of blood, until the final drop of blood
*We will win or we will lose.*⁸¹

This pledge was written during the peaceful *hirak* when the Syrian regime deployed its military force against the demonstrators. For those facing death, debt became a new driver of revolt: a death implies collective responsibility, demanding from its witnesses a repayment of the debt: a reparation. The latter could be provided through defending the situation that had provoked the deaths of people who henceforth belonged to the community – which had to be close-knit – and that is where the sacralisation of this union comes into play, in which God turns toward a daily collective situation.⁸² Such is the meeting point of the demonstrators, a meeting motivated by the debt embodied in the blood of the martyr, called on to be perpetuated until his wishes (and therefore those of the people gathered with him) are fulfilled: the martyr's death means a mutilation of the entire community, which feels responsible for putting the deceased in the original situation that resulted in their death. And this is where the pledge fits in: 'We swear in the name of the almighty God, we will never give up this revolution, etc'.

Franco-American writer Jonathan Littell's ethnographic observations of Homs, made at the beginning of the armed phase of the revolution (16 January-2 February 2012) candidly express the collective and individual aspects of the religious character of the revolution in response to the tragedy of the bombing of the neighbourhoods of the city in rebellion.

When you witness this noon Friday prayer, you're struck by how much this ritual serves to bring together and unify the community. This is where the collective will is formed and takes shape, focused by the sermon. Unlike Christian prayer in Europe, attended by only a handful of the faithful, here the entire neighbourhood takes part, adults and children – the men in any case, meaning the ones who make the decisions concerning the collectivity. It's truly a mechanism for forming a 'public opinion', in which even those who don't agree, or who don't attend the prayer take part in one way or another. It's thanks to such mechanisms that one can speak of 'collective will'. End of the prayer. As usual a great collective cry – 'La ilaha ilallah' repeated by everyone [...] The demonstration forms' Littell (2012: 172).

Islam therefore stands out as the cardinal reference point in the phase of the peaceful *hirak*, as it did in the armed revolution's early days. Yet this religious statement is often analysed as a 'function' or tactical discourse aimed at attaining pre-established results, a means to another end: one that is hidden and undeclared. For example, to the question they pose – 'Why did Islam become the consensual language of the demonstrations, and then of the insurrection?' – sociologists Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay respond: 'Islam offered the insurgents a universe of meaning, an aesthetic and ultimately, a resource with which to attract external funders' (Baczko et al., 2016: 219). This is overall, a relevant perspective, but it needs to be made precise and nuanced by the comments of the actors in the Syrian revolution themselves – because it is their lives that they are putting in jeopardy, rather more than a funding calculation.

When I introduced myself to members of the FSA, before trust and a research relationship based on subjectivities had been established in their eyes, any questions about Islam were viewed with suspicion. They knew very well that this question was a trap. Because in a political discussion, the use of Islamic terminology often ended by triggering stigmatisation in academic arenas and the dominant political-media spaces, both

in the West as in numerous pioneer states of the Global War on Terror in the Arab-Muslim world. Often the revolutionaries I met insisted from the outset on disidentifying from the most stigmatised groups in international political arenas (particularly Nusra and Daesh), whereas during the revolutionary war, they rubbed shoulders with those groups' members, shared friendships and even intermarried with them.

For example, this is how Abou Hakim, an FSA soldier, who agreed to talk to us when he had returned from battle, in a small Turkish town by the border with Syria, introduces the 'problem' of religiosity at the beginning of our meeting, before presenting a completely different perspective later in the interview.

Abou Hakim: It was the environment that prepared the climate of terrorism. In that environment, people who began to brainwash them and dangle a religion of combat in front of them were everywhere. The majority of the extremist terrorists have a very poor understanding of religion, and knowledge, etc. Most of the people in Daesh only have basic knowledge and have become religious overnight.

After my experience in Syria, I wouldn't wish war on anyone in the world. But let's imagine that a war broke out in France – war is a small word, but it means enormous, inexplicable things: we've lived through it! You have to know that if there was war in France, Catholics much more extremist than Daesh would probably emerge, as well as Orthodox Christians, Muslim extremists, etc. Extremism flourishes in war time, and it ends with the war.⁸³

This research is produced in a context where it is obliged to justify the 'rise in religiosity' by the war. It must refer to France, and to speak, via the researcher, to French people. And it has to imagine 'France' as a land of religions (Christianity in this case) that could only descend into 'extremism' in war time. Abou Hakim's words are based on an experience of a war that presented him with new meanings for religious feeling. When he found out about my involvement in the political opposition in Morocco – my friendship carried over naturally to the Syrian revolution and to the parents of French migrants for jihad killed in Syria – well before the birth of IS – the research relationship gave way to more liberated conversations about the calculations you had to take into account because of the dominant discourses on Islam and the revolution. Later, at my behest, he would help a French family so that their child, the orphan of a French father, and living under IS government – could be brought to

Türkiye. In the war, he encountered another facet of the role of Islam in the revolution, but also the diversity of the conglomeration of deserters, former fighters and activists involved in the Islamic State.

Following this interview, he stressed the links between war and rediscovering practices of Islam forgotten in peace time: in his mind, the ‘problem of Islam’ must be understood with regard to a ‘war where death whistles over the heads of the fighters’. This war would re-ignite an already existing Muslim, but in a way that was buried in peace-time society. Islam is grasped as an existential relationship rather than a political dimension for managing the war and the revolution. It thus marks a radical relationship of men with themselves – with their roots, to use Marx’s definition: ‘To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself’ (Marx, 1843).

In this way of conceptualising things, Islam derives from *relegere* (Latin), meaning to link, following Lactance’s meaning,⁸⁴ or of the *dîne*, an Arabic term for ‘religion’. *Dîne* refers etymologically to the word ‘debt’, a form of economic exchange linking people so that they exist as a group (believers, members of a community – in the Syrian case, the link between *mujahideen* and revolutionaries). In this war, the *dîne* acts as a radical social relationship that enables people to accept (or at least understand) that death is possible when the regime is confronted. Further, this death becomes a ‘debt’ necessitating the ongoing commitment of the deceased vis-à-vis the community. If the reference to Islam has a function, it would probably be this. Reflexively, when he came back from the front, Abou Hakim understood religion in this way, separating it from the theocracy embodied in Daesh, with which he came face-to-face in his involvement with the revolution.

Abou Hakim: *War is an environment that enables extremism and religiosity to expand. For example, before the war, my practice of religion was very limited, but during the war I became an armed fighter. Fighters feel naturally and instinctively that they could die at any moment. So they return to religion. When you have a cause, it’s much simpler for the fighters to encounter religion. People make this happen in various ways: if they have a good knowledge of religion previously, they go into it the right way. If they don’t know much about it before becoming fighters, they might become hate-filled extremists. And that can include hate for oneself.*

Revolution and the 'triumph of religion'

To better understand the significance of the terms 'jihad' and 'religion' in the analysis of the Syrian revolution, it matters, as noted above, to consider what the people involved say about them. Going back over the interviews that reveal people's pathways during wartime helps identify the collective bodies that maintained a new social order that was both outside the government's logic and broke away from 'the war of everyone against everyone else'. The trajectories of those FSA fighters we met stipulated how jihad became the thing that was shared the best in the revolution. Using this word, they translated a sense of attachment to values collectively cherished by a diverse and unorganised community – in the sense of modern party political organisation. The acceptance of this meaning was a counter-definition of jihad, and therefore a counter-hegemony at the very moment when the idea of jihad was associated in the international media directly with terrorism and the 'clash of civilisations'.

Two principal modes of revolutionary pathways explored during the war, and which weld the insurgent community together, result from this study. The first mode is the symbolic work on signs performed to construct a collective religious morality that sustained the revolution when death seemed close: a morality that bound the ranks together, made people faithful to martyrs and the struggle against the temptation of fascist thought (Bataille, 1989: 137-160). The second mechanism made collective religious practice in wartime into a force that neutralised the modern relationship with the law: jihad is interpreted as an attitude enabling escape from the practice of the state order that dominated society before the revolution. Now that loyalty no longer extends to an institution, it extends to a community that identifies as having a direct relationship with God, and the values of justice and equality that this symbolizes in the eyes of the *mujahideen*. The act of revolt sees itself in the supreme mirror of the jihad, that is, an exchange with God: to die for the revolution is rewarded with paradise, a reward dependent on the effort poured into the revolution, which is likely to expose you to death. Yet this exchange is absolutely not set in stone, because the unorganised nature of the revolution complicates relationships with the divine: the effort that the revolutionary has to invest does not comply with any order that imposes a pre-determined form of collective organisation. Similarly, revolutionaries from diverse social spaces are unorganised, rejecting obedience to

any authority or alliance that necessitates collective behaviour. In this sense, the revolutionary utopia is neither liberal nor socialist. The vision underpinning it does not derive from a political agenda that has to be put into practice after the fighter has made a gift of himself. If suffering then dying as a martyr have to produce a 'counter-gift', it would be to remain in the immediate of the revolutionary community: the utopian practice of this community of men is the categorical rejection of all forms of government, the counter-gift of jihad and martyrdom.

This perspective is clearly evoked by the revolutionaries interviewed. They present jihad as a utopia separating government-run society from their community. Let us start with Khalid, who is already quoted above. At the outbreak of the war, he did not distinguish between the various groups comprising the space of the revolution. Of course, he acknowledged the existence of the FSA and the Islamic brigades in it (*katâ'ib islamiya*), but for him they shared the same goal: 'When the revolution became armed, all the demands were focused on the triumph of religion (*nasr ad-dîne*)'. In Khalid's opinion, opposition to the repressive state was just a necessary phase to obtain access to superior values, an engagement that entails two major actions: knowing about religion (*dîne*) and God, and helping religion to triumph. 'Knowledge' is only possible, in his opinion, from the margins of the state, in the period when Free Zones, liberated from state control, emerged in Syria. During the war, religion became the objective of political action for a set of armed groups that had publicly proclaimed secular demands at the time of the peaceful demonstrations. Similarly, when these revolutionaries were urged by the international media to produce a discourse about the future the state, it was this aim that was stated.

Khalid: Making religion triumph, that was also a form of opposition to the regime. Our regime was secular, and it banned us from knowing about our own religion: even the Friday sermons were written by the regime. We committed several heresies, several practical mistakes, and were massively ignorant about our religion. We knew nothing. Not even the way to make ablutions. When the revolution broke out, people began to talk openly about knowledge and began to spread what they knew, and raise awareness about religion. So there was no doubt about these demands. Neither changing the Constitution, nor toppling the regime, the revolution was for the triumph of religion.⁸⁵

How did religion come to assume this role of focal point for the revolution's demands? Why did the act of opposing the regime end up embodied in the defence of religion? But above all, what did it mean for people's freedom and their vision of the world? Was the first wave of blood-soaked martyrdoms the cause of this turnaround, or was it the creation of Free Zones that had enabled the 'triumph of religion' to become the premier objective of almost all the groups and many of our respondents?

For Khalid and other interviewees, it was obvious that the militarisation of the revolution led to the centrality of religion within it. Yet this focal point, far from being explained solely by the fear of death, actually affirms a positive value: a jihad to maintain rebel society against the state and all forms of government planning. In that way, religion must be understood as a condition for the revolution, because it plays the prime role of *relegere*: i.e. binding people together in the costly action of rebellion. The jihad is both the manifestation and tool of a dissident and united society. And if the revolution did have a planned agenda, for those defeating the state and constructing Free Zones, it was the ongoing jihad against the forces that fragmented religion, and which threatened the unity of this *bonded* community.

The special affirmation of the 'forces of the soul'

Without this analysis of the practical meanings of the words, jihad and *dîne*, we would end up a long way from understanding the revolutionary period and its relatively durability despite the violence that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Understanding these two terms included in revolutionary thought entails, as we have seen, contextualising the revolution in the war, at the moment it established a functioning society not only outside the Syrian state, but also outside the 'World System' (Wallerstein, 2006).

The exceptional nature of the armed revolutionary period was explained to me by several people involved in the war: in the armed opposition and in the Free Zones, they were part of an extraordinary moment. And at this time when they talked about politics and the future of their society, these actors did not speak about planned programmes, but of an existence that liquidated all previous statuses instituted by the bureaucratic machinery. It was an existence which dislocated the old society to replace it with another, liberated from any instituted order.

In that revolutionary period, the actors' subjectivity encountered the demand for a society in which government constraints dissipated, and a direct relationship with the law was formed. What this communion was aiming for was a connected being, a group-being. In the revolutionary experience, the terms 'jihad' and 'religion' thus referred to this communion within a collective being, gathered together for the struggle against a regime that prevented society from existing in peace. This is the way we have to understand the statement that 'the regime represses religion'. In the Syrian revolution, religion was neither a political agenda nor a set of institutions responsible for configuring a vision of how worship and society fit together. As it appears in the words of the revolutionaries from the Free Zones, it means a communion existing only in wartime against an entity whose agenda is known to all the fighters if they lose the battle: a state-dominated society.

And this communion ended when the revolutionaries left the Free Zones to go into exile, or when the zones were occupied by the forces of state reterritorialisation. With no deep-seated hard feelings, and without revolutionary religious thought gnawing away at their multiple subjectivities, the fighters were able to go about their lives outside the Free Zones when the revolution ran out of steam, or exile shattered the collective experience. These revolutionaries were not 'supporters' of the revolution in the meaning ascribed to it by German philosopher Carl Schmitt (1972). In fact, their revolutionary utopia ended when the context of this period of religion ended. Their faith was not due to revolutionary organisation, leaving the revolution was also a subjective business, from the moment the debt to the dead was paid off after the collapse of the hope of victory. The period might thus end when the situation of collective communion rooted in the armed alliance against the regime subsided. Impacted by a profound experience with an unpredictable outcome, people could return to living in the 'world system' when the revolutionary situation experienced in the heat of a cruel war came to an end. The revolution would not result in an ideological lexicon that determined its nature. Following Sylvain Lazarus's notion of the 'ideas as a relationship with the real' (1996: 17), I would say that this revolution comes across as a 'relationship with the real', instead of a relationship of people to fixed ideological categories. They acted on reality at the moment when state politics was collapsing under the blows of the revolutionary war.

This revolution was not therefore produced by ideology or institutionalised thought: it articulated practical and situational thought linked to the fact that the ‘forces of the soul’ were emancipated from the great modern state frameworks. This situation recalls the one described by Karl Mannheim regarding the revolutionary millennial movements of the Middle Ages embodied in the prophetic figure of Thomas Münzer (1489-1525), a religious leader in the Protestant Reformation and revolutionary in another tradition, for whom there was also ‘courage and the strength to strive for the impossible’ (Mannheim, 1954: 192). These movements combined religiosity with experiences of struggle: ‘It was not a case of ‘ideas’ leading men from the Peasant Wars to action, to sabotage of their being. It was the depths of the soul,⁸⁶ of more vital and more subterranean roots that triggered the explosion here’ (Mannheim, 1954: 192). Mannheim also states that the millennial thinkers saw: ‘the revolution as a value in itself, not as an unavoidable means to a rationally set end, but as the only creative principle of the immediate present, as the longed-for realization of its aspirations in this world (Mannheim, 1954: 196).

For our interviewees, this confrontation with the real led them to see in jihad and religion practical forms of thought that shattered important state categories based on law, rights and political representation. But this situation was also determined by shift from peaceful demonstrations to armed struggle, when the silent war became a naked war. This form of practical thought, that elevated jihad and religion to the stage of ‘real life’ in the fighters’ community, suspended the rest of the ideas that had inspired the slogans chanted by the peaceful demonstrators, as Khalid, for example, explained to us:

Khalid: In the beginning, at the demos, people chanted ‘Down with the regime!’ But when the regime started to fire on the crowds, to kill women and children in the streets, to bomb people’s neighbourhoods, history turned in a different direction. We went from the fall of the regime and the Constitution to the struggle for the triumph of religion (nasr ad-dine). In other words, the triumph of the oppressed in the slogan ‘There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet’. Then came the sheikhs and mujahideen (migrants for jihad) to support us, and bring about the triumph of religion. It should be understood that these migrants were ‘toullab da’wa’ (demanders of sermons).⁸⁷

This observation of an ‘interior’ religion that functioned as a collective morality unhitched to a written law also emerges from the testimonies that Jonathan Littell (2012) collected in the Free Zones of Homs in 2012, from revolutionaries who did not belong to any politico-religious organisation in the traditional sense of the term: ‘We fought for our religion, for our women, for our land and lastly, to save our skins [...] we did not kill a single human on the basis of religion. ‘He who kills a soul of it not in legitimate self-defence, is as if he kills all humanity’, says the Quran’ (Littell, 2012: 62).

Lastly, the word ‘jihad’ in the call for the triumph of religion here is in opposition to the statist jihad of the IS, as we will see in the next chapter. In the space of the revolution, the FSA brigades – and the same with Nusra, *Ahrâr a-Châm* and other groups fighting the IS – had radically different visions of the place of religion. The vision emphasising the necessity of declaring jihad was that of the first groups into the war against the regime, implying a utopia ‘here and now’. This means that war (and death) had been accepted to raise the cause of Muslims, within a society undergoing war and whose members took an oath to face up to a tragic collective fate. Death became something acceptable insofar as it changes meaning for each person mobilised against the state, on the sole condition that we rise up together.

The ‘demand for jihad’: religion as a superior collective morality

Field notes, Convalescent home in Reyhanlı, on the Turkish-Syrian border, 10 July 2016.

Hamza and I were brought into the convalescent home for Syrians wounded in the war by Marta, a Franco-American journalist who had been won over to the cause of the FSA. Alongside her work, she volunteered to work with wounded Syrians in the humanitarian sector. She was considered by the young residents of the home as one of their own, despite the ostensibly insurmountable objective distance between them (social class, cultural practices, profession, etc.). She helped them make their asylum claims and strove to find funding for their health-care and the upkeep of the home.

The wounded men greeted us very warmly. Around twenty former fighters were in four large bedrooms, Most of them were amputees who’d lost at least one limb. Half a dozen were paralysed and had to undergo emergency operations.

The lack of funding meant that they were forced to wait a long time for care (during our second visit a year later, we found out that two of them had died – the younger of whom had given us a flower, smiles and had thanked us when we visited the first time).

Everyone here is from a poor family. They joined various armed FSA brigades when the revolution started. Some of them fought alongside Nusra (initially close to Al-Qaida) and probably in brigades close to what was going to become the 'Islamic State' in 2014. They don't mention the Islamic State to us, but imply that there were no differences in objectives between the armed brigades at the beginning of the revolution.

The home's young director runs it in a similar way to a hospital: monitoring the administration of medications, putting limits on the times you can come and go, and making moments of collective life (like prayers and meals) compulsory. He also puts on entertainment to stop the former fighters from getting bored, just as he wages a daily struggle against drugs and other clandestine activities getting a grip on these young exiles and foreigners in a Turkish society experiencing a rise in hostility and racism against foreigners in general, and against Syrians in particular. After the first focus group session, the director asks for dinner to be served and the medication to be administered before allowing a party to be organised, in which songs will be sung to celebrate our presence.

Throughout this encounter, the young people discuss matters openly. The stories told during the focus group overlap when they deal with people's initial involvement: most of these young men were not at the first demonstrations in 2011, before people took up arms. To our questions about the reasons for getting involved in the revolution, they stress the right to oppose the violence of a regime that 'killed our children, our families loved ones'. How the groups and brigades comprising the revolutionary space fragmented only takes up a marginal role in their discourse. What matters most to them was the war to be waged on the state that killed in order to keep going. These young men, each with his own story, give us variations on the same type of action: this consists of moving from an 'ordinary life' to the life of a revolutionary fighter. 2011 is presented as the start of a period that opens up possibilities, and one of them is not living like they did before – under the control of Bashar's government or any other government that attempted to replace it without anything changing. The revolution is a conscious tipping point, not radical at all. It is not radical because each fighter suddenly finding himself in armed action against the state can justify this action by mentioning his prior 'ordinary' life. Each of them thus explains the reasons that led

them to go to war: injustices, the arbitrary implementation of the law and the behaviour of its representatives... [...]

After the interviews, the men sing Sufi songs that are part of the region's popular culture. Their words invoke God and eulogise the Prophet. But the space of the revolution is immense. The religious songs are quickly followed by a range of classical lyrical Arab music (Oum Kalthoum, Fayrouz). Lastly, even the political songs of (Pan-Arabic) musicians supportive of the regime are performed, without resentment, by our friends! The seemingly insurmountable distance between the a priori divergent political cultures turns out, in reality, to be ephemeral. When the singing began, one former Islamic State fighter, for example, refused to sing or be filmed. But by mid-session, he is the one asking the young Franco-American woman to sing. In the space of the war, the state's divisions and hierarchies often give way to a subjective revolutionary form of expression, which challenges constraints and the state-generated divisions.

It was during the early days, as the war against the demonstrations and the neighbourhoods that were freed in 2012 became harsher, that the 'announcement of jihad' was made, says Abou Houdaïfa: 'More and more demonstrators were calling for jihad to be proclaimed in Daraa, Homs and Idlib when the first martyrs fell and we carried weapons to defend the demonstrations'.⁸⁸ 'The people want jihad to be called', the demonstrators chanted before the end of the first year of peaceful protest. Jonathan Littell (2012) reports the statement of one of the first army officers to desert and join the FSA in 2012: 'We tried everything and nothing worked. This Friday, we've called it the "Friday before the declaration of jihad". It's two months now that the call for jihad has been postponed, but a majority has voted for it. We are at the command of the people, and we have to follow their lead' (Littell, 2012: 75). Moreover, Littell observes that in Homs in 2012: 'During the demonstration, an officer [*naquib*] who had just deserted is lifted by the shoulders and carried with his *kalach* while people chant: "Long live the FSA!" They were also chanting: "The people want international protection! The people want a *no-fly zone*! The people want jihad to be called' (Littell, 2012: 103).

This demand to 'proclaim jihad' is not addressed to an authority outside the space of the revolution. Of course, several self-proclaimed sheikhs in the Arab-Muslim world addressed the Syrians in 2011 and 2012 – among others, the religious authorities close to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during the Syrian opposition conference in Cairo, organised by

the Arab League and chaired by President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2012. These sheikhs announced jihad there as a duty imposed on every Muslim in Syria capable of fighting. But in Syria itself, the demand for jihad was focused on the revolution: this demand called for all Syrians to respond with weapons and religion to the regime's war, and to commit oneself to a new existential and collective mindset. It outlined a transition that must combine all the collective forces in a special union. This announcement acted as a collective legitimisation of everybody's conversion to a war against the regime. Because who, except the social body joined together as one, regardless of class, ethnic or national origin, can declare jihad and commit themselves to it? The kind of jihad demanded in the revolutionary moment in no way corresponds to that of organisations like Al-Qaida, in contrast to what advocates of Western interventionist ideology and nationalist discourses argue, and which then justify the Arab regimes' anti-terrorist strategies.

For the Syrian revolutionaries, the call to jihad was considered an entry into a space where signs and symbols move around and where the meaning of things like death, life, order and daily business is disrupted. It heralded the end of a socio-historical phase and the start of another, exceptional, political period, that broke with a number of the government's social schedules. In response to the normalisation of murder by the regime, jihad was conceived as a necessity for the existence of a sacrificial community, ready to rise up despite the risk of being wiped out, recognised by itself in this destiny and bound by sacred connections. It was with this meaning in mind that calls to engage in jihad were understood and chanted by the demonstrators.

The call for jihad was therefore not partisan, issued by an organisation, or tied to any agenda. It makes sense in a far broader social context, that of the towns and countryside in rebellion. The call had a popular dimension, as the outbreak of war relegated groups and political elites with homogeneous visions to secondary importance – such as the *rabi'Dimachq* (Damascus Spring) movement, the opposition in exile, the groups left over from the old Muslim Brotherhood opposition, etc. This jihad is understood as being a synonym of revolution, as many interviewees recounted, including Abou Houdaïfa, founder of the first armed brigade in Aleppo focused on the *chabbiha*.

Abou Houdaïfa: *I'm a man who loves his religion, and is proud of it. But then why didn't I study the texts written by the people who set up Islamic State and Nusra when we were confronting the regime together? For the simple reason that I came to the revolution with others to fight the regime and not the whole world. I was confronted with an oppressive regime. I didn't come to take on the world: didn't have the means or the intention to do that. I fought a regime that killed its people in my country. So there was no idea of jihad that had crystallised in me, as was the case for the theorists in Daesh. But I like jihad. It is a jihad and not an idea like it is for them. Moreover, there are different kinds of jihad: the jihad an-nafss (of the spirit), the one that consists of loving and taking care of your mother and others, etc. All that, in our religion, is part of jihad. So, I had no specific idea of claiming to establish a Muslim principality (imâra).*⁸⁹

The jihad called for by the revolutionaries in the Free Zones, as in the early days of the armed struggle, assumed a universalist dimension that brought together all the various specifics. It set out a landscape whose outlines transcended homogeneous partisan engagement. Lastly, this jihad, focused on the liberation struggle, ran parallel to bodies socialising people into eschatological values, patterns of life that suspended the political moment advocated by the Baath party government. This point is illustrated by the *Attawhîd* battalion, one of the most important armed groups to arise during the early phase of militarisation. It provided an excellent example of the nature of the Syrians' struggle and jihad. This battalion was composed of people like our respondents, Khalid and Suleiman, who had not studied Islamic scriptural thought. In the camps organised by this battalion, the acts of socialisation aimed to establish a new revolutionary set of moral values, supplanting the values of the challenged government. In the Free Zones, the first volunteer fighters' camps in the revolution were not envisaged as simple places of military training, but as places of life and socialisation into a religious tradition which, after the events to come, would come to structure daily life. The Prophet's statement, 'There is no other God but Allah,' is included in this mystical relationship between the revolutionaries and the invisible force responsible for leading the liberation from national sovereignty.

Suleiman: *In the training camp (mou'askar), the day was split into two parts: theoretical and practical training. Abdelkader as-Saleh [military leader of Liwa'Attawhîd, then the FSA] used four experts on Islam, who had given us*

classes in the Quran, and led our prayers. People were only supposed to spend twenty days in the camp, but several ended up staying for up to two months. Those camps were really good. What was important about them was learning about religion. But even this camp was hit by the regime and forced to close. Of those people trained there, some joined the FSA, and others the Islamic Front. [...]

At camp, we were woken up for morning prayer (soubh), we began reading the Quran, they taught us things about religion, for example what the phrase 'There is no other God but Allah' meant, and what it meant to make this your most important value. The morning was the most important period: training lasted between two and two and a half hours. Next, we had combat classes. That lasted one to one and a half hours: we went down to sandy areas and learned fighting techniques. An Afghan sheikh taught us how to assemble and dismantle a weapon, and how to fire it, etc. Then it was time for prayer, which we did as a group. And after each prayer, there was a study class on a religious topic, and then reading the Quran. That was daily life: from morning prayer to evening prayer ('icha).⁹⁰

In the places where the government's grand strategies for maintaining order were crumbling, the revolution found a power on which to construct peaceful relationships between people, in non-institutional religious practice. These strategies were maintained in spaces where social hierarchies and discourses of truth formerly anchored in law and bureaucracy were suspended. The social relations established in these contexts indeed departed from the traditional legal and disciplinary patterns. The threat of death, collective commitment to a historical course of high-risk action and the collapse of the monopoly of violence enabled a large number of people to bear arms, and the assignment of a new revolutionary vocabulary fuelled a new set of ideas, establishing peace between people. This idea, however, was only possible because of the partial collapse of former social hierarchies. Although such distinctions existed in the revolution: between rich and poor, intellectuals and pupils in the camps, *anssâr* and *mouhâjirîne* (local Muslims and migrants for jihad), urban-dwellers and rural residents, Muslims and Christians,⁹¹ men and women, etc., these categories and hierarchies were ineffective in terms of 'social truth'. They were not based on an external institution that legitimised them, but were negotiated within the revolutionary jihad community. These categories did not work in terms of power, as the community 'communed' in a religion which on one side, turned to the war

against the state (led by the principle of change ‘here and now’, and with death hanging over everyone) and on the other side, educated them in a form of mysticism that fuelled a rapturous spirituality (with prayers and sessions spent reading the Quran providing the fighters with a rhythm to their lives).

Suleiman: *In the camps, there was no debate over the thinkers [the various streams of political Islamic thought]. At the start, we read the Quran, had our group prayers, advice on the need to follow the true religion rather than heresy, etc. But there were no specific thinkers providing a framework for the knowledge generated in these classes. Of course, we felt Bashar al-Assad was an unbeliever, but this was because he killed children, women and Muslims. There was no question of excommunicating Muslims.⁹² It was the same thing in Nusra and the Fajr al-Islam brigade. We never described Bashar al-Assad as a Shi’a or an Alawite: he was an apostate because he killed people.⁹³*

Closing ranks: the temptation of the institution

Field notes, Gaziantep, 15 July 2016.⁹⁴

In the evening, our group might have looked like an ordinary picnic if the bodies of the young people with us did not bear the marks of war. For a week, between six and eight of us went over the story of a war that kept on grinding away, only a hundred kilometres or so from us. That evening there were eight of us, with: a young revolutionary who lost his leg in the fighting in Aleppo; a schoolboy with a mutilated arm from having been hit by a blast from one of the barrels of TNT that the army drop in the Free Zones; a woman who had buried her husband and son, both revolutionaries, in Syria before going into exile in this border town; a nurse who fled the war with her children to take refuge and work in Türkiye; a young Kurdish woman close to the FSA fighters, and who had fled her region after the PKK took control there; a young Polish-Palestinian woman who had become a writer and been won over to the Syrian cause through loyalty to her father, a former Palestinian refugee. Apart from this writer, it was life in exile that had brought them all together: when they were in Syria, they were far away from one another because the Free Zones were all autonomous. Revolutionary space did not allow the individual Free Zones to join together and form larger ones. It was the opposite of a political field, or even a field of power.

At the beginning of this series of informal meetings, I was worried about managing the debate in a way that would make it as informative as possible about how the events experienced by my respondents in their Free Zones unfolded. But just the fact of getting together had already brought about the erasure of the researcher and the ‘problems’ associated with that role, or more specifically, with his position as ‘collector of testimonies’. I was not the initiator of conversations because in exile, and once people gather, speaking becomes an absolute necessity: the need to finally talk about what happened. To go back over deaths, and then the question ‘Why did they die (what did they die for?)’ became insistent. To look around for the differences between various threads of ideas and viewpoints to check whether ideas alone had become the mechanisms for a downward spiral of deadly inter-communal violence, or whether there were other reasons that led to the revolution deviating towards civil war.

That evening, the debate was particularly fraught. After four hours we had to call it a day and leave, with sadness in our hearts. Two questions raised demonstrate the dividing lines stretched across the revolutionary footprint in Syria, and reaching even into exile. The first is crucial, and simply concerns the very nature of the regime. First it was S. (the nurse) who stressed the legitimacy of the revolution, but that ‘We shouldn’t make Bashar al-Assad into a symbol of absolute evil’. She points out that the situation of Syria was far better than other Arab societies in terms of health and education systems, public services and the economy in general. She states that this did not mean that the revolution should not have responded to the terror practiced by regime. In her opinion, the problem was the overall lack of vision among the revolutionaries about what a post-Assad society would be like: ‘After all, we Syrians don’t have to pay with our lives for the wrongs of the whole world’, she says, before concluding that the revolution was not a deliberate choice for all Syrians. For some of those present, these comments sound like a criticism of what must be held sacred, because ‘the martyrs did not die for nothing’, as Abou Ouday (the young fighter who lost a leg) says. But he acknowledges that in this revolution, Syrians fought on behalf of the whole world, since the criminality of the regime and its Russian allies is equivalent to what exists elsewhere, ‘particularly in Türkiye where we now live, and where the best of Syria is being exploited in the factories, in conditions just like those in the war’, he adds.

The second problem is raised by Abou Ouday in response to the young Kurdish woman for whom, despite the fact that she ‘had left the region controlled by the Kurdish authorities – the Syrian Democratic Forces – who were as authoritarian as those of al-Assad, you have to acknowledge that the Kurds

suffered worse extermination than anyone else in this war'. For Abou Ouday who fought in brigades under the FSA flag, the Kurdish armed forces contributed to 'undermining the revolution and bending its trajectory towards ethnicization,⁹⁵ contrary to the spirit of unity defended by the peaceful demonstrations'. He found it unbearable that Kurdish families had joined the armed forces representing the Kurdish 'separatist' cause equipped with a 'plan established by a political party' in a revolution 'supposed to unify the people'. The chilly response provoked by this argument has become a habit. But very quickly, these heated controversies give way to agreement on several other points, meaning that, on the topic of civil war, the explanation of the conflict could not be reduced to support shown for the regime by one section of the population, or to the existence of other nationalist and religious-based forces.

Investing in discussion wherever and whenever possible is part and parcel of the future life of the revolutionary exile. 'You have to speak to everyone about the *mujihadeen* and the martyrs. You have to tell their stories and talk about the efforts they made, so that perhaps future generations will be able to cultivate a hatred of this regime and remember the *mujihadeen*', the director of the convalescent home told me. However, talking about the past also entailed wanting to extend the utopia into the present, at the moment when the period of revolutionary non-government politics was reaching its end. In December 2016, after many other losses, Aleppo was finally brought back under regime control, thanks in particular to the Russian air force; as a former fighter pointed out to me in 2017, 'the colonisation of the areas freed by the regime' put the finishing touches to that situation. But those whose bodies have been durably impacted by the war harbour a collective memory and feelings that emerged during the revolutionary period. Like many others, Kinda, the mother of a young martyr, and wife and sister to other martyrs, recounts her perspective.

Kinda: When I lost my son, four months ago, I can't lie, I was heartbroken. He was tall, handsome and strong as an ox. He was nineteen. He'd just taken his exams at the University of Gaziantep and had gone back to Syria to fight in Aleppo, his city. So yes, I buried him, yes, I mourned him, but the struggle is ongoing. If my second son told me he wanted to go too, I'd tell him yes, go and defend your people.

And do you know why? Because whatever your International Coalitions, your strategies, your airstrikes and your injustices, we will still fight, because we're fighting for our land, our existence and our ways of life. Hundreds of innocent people die every day and we're sad, we mourn them, but we are the people of the Levant, and we will not give up. We'll carry on fighting.⁹⁶

When the collective morality of jihad oriented toward radical social change 'here and now' underwent a crisis in 2014, the first forms of division and control of the fighters began, a process giving rise to its extreme deployment in the statist jihad of the Islamic State. This crisis, heralding the increasing number of political disagreements threatening the unity of the revolutionary community, occurred in a context of heightened repression by the regime, and the deafening silence of the international community – a situation that finally convinced several of our interviewees to abandon the Free Zones, which had become a nihilist experiment in response to a regime with no qualms about using chemical weapons against civilians. The crisis emerged in the context of the consolidation of Russian colonial intervention, in which its air force was deployed to destroy the Free Zones in Aleppo, Al-Ghuta, Idlib, etc., while Western funding and military attacks were introduced into the fighting under cover of the Global War on Terror.

On the Turkish side, I myself witnessed this situation among the FSA fighters at the frontier in 2016 and 2017. They were allowed to straddle both sides of the border between Syria and Türkiye, even though Turkish troops regularly fired on Syrian families trying to cross the border to escape the war. Living with the Syrians by the border wall stretching over 1,000 km, it was common to be woken by the sound of Turkish military gunfire aimed toward the border, and the number of those killed was kept secret.⁹⁷ These FSA troops were working for the Turkish army as administrators in the Free Zones. As the level of conflict steadily subsided, they became colonial bureaucrats there, split off from the ordinary people. Finally, the crisis manifested itself in the outbreak of Islamic statist discourse whose roots lay in various conflicts imported into Syria by foreign fighters. We will come back to this topic.

The crisis of collective morality in the Free Zones could be seen in practical terms, especially in large cities like Aleppo, with the emergence of authoritarian values (kidnappings, shakedowns, abuses of power among the brigades, forms of collaboration with the regime, etc.) that

dislocated the social order some people were seeking to build outside of sovereignty. Some fighters then committed themselves to a long trajectory of training by groups with rigid ideas about the interpretation of religion. These new interpretations did not intersect with the political nationalist mode of the Islamic State, despite the outbreak of collective temptation to do so. Yet divisions based on ‘the extent and nature of the religious practice’ of each revolutionary group began to form. This is the direction our interviewees were heading when they spoke about Islamic brigades (*katâ’ib islamiya*) on the one hand, referring to the prioritising of religion, and the FSA, on the other, defending the colours of the revolutionary flag, and the ‘Syrian-ness’ of the revolutionary cause.

Despite this collective crisis, the revolution resisted the temptation to mount a coup d’état or establish connected regions controlled by a theocratic government. In several regions, the FSA groups like Nusra and other armed elements continued their opposition to the regime and its allies with the same objective of bringing down the government and founding Free Zones, as long as the regime still controlled Damascus. In 2023, in the last Free Zone in Idlib, these groups reorganised themselves without abandoning the primary function of jihad: a resource for struggle against the government. Only two statist bodies gave up this goal to establish power with territory under its own control: the Islamic State and the Kurdish forces.

CHAPTER 6

Revolutionary jihad versus neo-nationalist jihad: the Daesh era (2014-2017)

About Abdallah, former IS fighter in Kirkuk (Northern Iraq), summer 2017:

I was a fighter. Seeing the whole world talking about us as a dangerous mythical organisation every day was absurd. Sometimes, I found myself with two or three brothers in the middle of the desert, or in a little village, carrying two or three Kalashnikovs, useless against fighter planes and the strength of the world that claimed to want to destroy us. We surfed on the internet and realised that governments across the world, their media and experts were worried about us. It made us laugh. It was ridiculous: how could ordinary people and a handful of badly equipped youngsters set off all these debates across the world? In fact, they were using us to repress their own populations and do what they wanted with them. Our strength was always insignificant, but I think for them, we were a pretext for their politics.

From 2014, the already high level of conflict between revolutionaries and Islamic State fighters (which had hitherto developed within the same Free Zones) was demonstrated by the spatial separation between two opposing political orientations that emerged after the revolution: on one side, the revolutionaries using religion to combat the regime's 'injustice' and cruelty, while remaining loyal to the dead; on the other, a new state founded on a nationalist theology and the use of terror. In this chapter, we will discuss the places and meanings of these two competing political readings of the Islamic tradition, based on interviews with Syrian and Iraqi witnesses of Islamic State action, as well as some of its former fighters.

The context of the Islamic State's emergence in Iraq in 2014

Viewed from a Syrian or Iraqi perspective, Islamic State's genesis is only marginally connected to the arrival of foreigners: it was initially part of the story of political transformations in Iraq in the aftermath of the neocolonial US wars in 1991 and 2003, and the birth of an ambivalent

– because it was both national and international – discourse of jihad as resistance to these interventions.

One approach to this theological-political knot relies on updating the religious tradition through the foundation of the Daesh state apparatus while Iraqi society was subject to its unprecedented neocolonial brutalisation. This research shows that the Caliphate's relationship with religion was based less on the exclusion of populations considered non-Muslim than on an aggressive nationalist policy informed by the religious tradition. It is by using this frame that we should analyse the hyperviolence and terrorism carried out by Daesh in the territory it annexed in the wake of the regime's withdrawal in response to the Syrian uprising, followed by the collapse of anticolonial resistance in Iraq.

To document this historical period that witnessed the construction of the Islamic State, I have used observations and interviews in the Mosul region, immediately after its recapture by Iraqi government troops in October 2017. The testimony of activists and fighters belonging to the Islamic State or those of witnesses to its practice of governance allow us to put slogans, discourses and the building of meanings together into a framework of a social and historical experience. Here, I will try to demonstrate that this experience was firstly represented by the reality of a basically juridical-legal state with modern governmentality (Foucault, 2004). However, the recent and fragile character of the constituted state provoked several theological-political challenges to be elucidated later. The interviews with former IS bureaucrats and residents of areas they governed show how the policies of territorial control functioned, and how politics was organized into 'ministries' within the Caliphate. While going back over the history of how power was instituted under this state, the interviews illustrate government and administrative actions that made religion the template for a politics of terror – in contrast to the Syrian revolution. The rapid emergence of a state order and a homogeneous behavioural code in the areas conquered by the Islamic State occurred via official and legal mechanisms, coupled with a kind of gradualism in the application of new laws that were very unfamiliar to the culture of the society in which they were applied.

Certain objects of study characterise their era: they serve as focal points around which new visions and divisions of the world consolidate, whereas the borders they map out are as much to do with identity – a 'them' against an 'us' – as to do with ontology: 'barbarism' vis-a-vis

‘civilisation’, and the ‘Orient’ versus the ‘West’. The Islamic State (Daesh) is undeniably one of these contemporary focal points, invested in by all the Orientalist or civilisation-clashing narratives that define a world divided between an allegedly peaceful European modernity and its ‘barbarians’ – those known as being absolutely Other. This ontological opposition is thus embodied in practice: in the supposedly millenarian and eschatological jihad with which the holy war is in conflict: a holy war where the categorical imperative to vanquish the Islamic State is anchored in the name of progress and human civilisation. Defined as such, this contradiction overflows its original object: traces can be found in counterterrorist policy, in the strategies of the fight against ‘radicalisation’ (Guibet Lafaye and Rapin, 2017), and of the characterisation of marginal urban spaces as places where the signs of dominant society are reversed (Esmili, 2023). Seeking an interpretation of our research subject devoid of the trappings of a crisis subject to ideological injunctions thus entails rebuilding its historical framework to try to explain the motivations of the various actors and their actions.

The observations made during the interviews I carried out with Iraqis near Mosul and in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017 are thus part of the emergence of the Islamic State in the logical sequence of events. These observations address this phenomenon based on a local framework that has very little to do with what certain Western ‘experts’ in ‘international terrorism’ and ‘Islamist ideology’ may claim.⁹⁸ That is because the Iraqis – unlike the Syrians who experienced the arrival of the IS as a colonisation – situated the Islamic State in the long tradition of US neocolonial invasions of 1991 and 2003. I will not return to the details of that history, which is already documented by studies produced by Iraqis,⁹⁹ but I will introduce various points of view expressed from within Islamic State concerning its mode of government, its ideology and internal discord, from Syrians, Iraqis and the international migrants for jihad.

The conditions in which Islamic State emerged in the Iraqi social space were radically different from those at play in Syria. They were unconnected to the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, or even to the arrival of foreign fighters, as was the case in Syria. In Iraq, the jihad first echoed national and Islamic resistance to the 2003 US invasion. While in the context of the revolution in Syria, IS was an embodiment of state reconstruction, it was constructed in Iraq through the interaction between various types of actors: tribes, armed groups, and the former

Baath party, etc. More generally, Al-Qaida and after that, the Islamic State, were stakeholders in this context of hyper-militarisation of a society for which war had become a reality. The Islamic State in Iraq embodied both the role of a centralising state in competition with the postcolonial Iraqi state, and that of a struggle for the recognition of minority rights – particularly for Sunnis – in the extension of the 2011 Arab Spring. But the dimension to do with recognising rights would be swept away once the power of this state had been established over the land held by Daesh.

After 2003, the Baath party, which had for decades imposed national and moral integration on its population via its nationalist and Pan-Arabic ideology, was replaced in a sectarian war arbitrated by the colonial government: from 2004, Iraq under US occupation was in principle governed by a state whose ongoing domination was rooted in Shia practice, at the federal level, and Kurdish nationalism of Iraqi Kurdistan. The latter was already pretty much autonomous from the Baghdad central administration under Saddam Hussein, and the logics of the ethnicisation and racialisation of political space were broadly triggered. The minority Sunni population – less than 35% of the 34 million Iraqis – were distanced from the system of religious-based political representation. With the collapse of the single-party Baath state bound up with national identity, the Iraqis were obliged to identify with the religious affiliations that had become weapons of war and political self-defence. This way of thinking about religiosity as a new resource for collective identification emerged in the state and in society as early as the first invasion of Iraq in 1991.

From then on, we see a widespread collective identification with Islam replacing Baath ideology. From 2003, this Islamic religiosity became a political expression diverging into two main blocs: the Salafi Sunnism practiced by the IS, and the Arab Shiism practiced by the government in Baghdad. It was divisive because the level of conflict suddenly passed via the struggle around the degree to which religion defines society, rather than via a different line of demarcation such as economic class. It should be recalled that the government supervised by the provisional US administrator Paul Bremer, from May 2003, dissolved the Iraqi Baath party and banned its leadership from access to civil service jobs, with dozens of thousands of people thus affected. Disbanding the army and the police led to a reorganisation based on co-optation of small ethnic/linguistic and religious groups deemed representative by the US administration. The first provisional Government Council was established in July 2003 with

nine members and rotating chairmanship: 'This "Presidential Council" had five Shia, two Sunni and two Kurds' (Goueset, 2011). The ethnicisation of the social order was thus accepted at the highest level of political representation.

In this framework, Shia representative organisations (the *marji'ya*) were to play the dominant role. On his triumphal return from Iran, the Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim set up a revolutionary council coopted by the neocolonial administration, and on 27 June 2003, called for violence against the Western coalition to cease. Two months later, the Ayatollah was killed (along with over 100 people) in a car bomb attack in Najaf, a holy city and a place of Shia pilgrimage. Although Shia leaders took representative power delegated by the forces of occupation, the community was divided: several Shia armed groups – including the Kateb of Iraqi Hezbollah, and especially the Mahdi's Army, created by Moqtada al-Sadr – fought the International Coalition alongside Sunni groups from 2003.

Exit from the civil war was thus conceptualised from a statist perspective by several of those groups, with the Islamic State becoming the name of this organisation representing Sunni populations dismissed by the new authorities in the post-invasion period. The reference to Islam in the 'Islamic State' does not therefore point to a pure religious epoch that allegedly existed centuries prior, and that its followers now sought to reconstitute. For them, the return to the 'Caliphate' was first aimed at rediscovering political glory and sovereignty, a slogan found throughout the literature produced by the Islamic State in Iraq, beginning with its founding work, published online in 2004, *Management of Savagery*, by Egyptian Islamist activist Abu Bakr Naji (1961-2008). Naji, who joined Al-Qaida in 2006, and developed a radical critique of various Islamic movements, stated:

'Managing savagery is the next stage that the Oumma [nation] will pass through, and it will be the most dangerous of all the periods. If we successfully ensure the effective management of this savagery, this period will be, thanks to the grace of God, the passage toward the state of Islam for which we have been waiting for so ardently since the fall of the Caliphate. And if we fail – God forbid – that will not mean the end of things. Such a failure will lead toward more savagery!' (Naji, 2004: 4).

Going back in time is thus defined as a return to the Caliphate in order to find an era in which 'management' distinguished itself from

‘savagery’, with the Caliphate initially defining itself through its opposition to the state of savagery.¹⁰⁰ This jihad discourse calls for the civil war to be rekindled as long as the international states affirm a nationalist racism that prohibits racialised populations from creating their own state, and acknowledging their ethnic distinctiveness: ‘More savagery in the wake of the failure to establish the Islamic State does not mean that the situation will be worse than it is today or before the previous decade [the 1990s and before]. Because the highest degrees of savagery are less bad than stability under a regime of unbelief’ (Naji, 2004: 4).

In this way, Islamic State’s founders benefitted from the Shia government’s stigmatisation of Sunnism, as they had taken advantage of the spread of religiosity as a source of collective identification after the first neocolonial invasion in 1991. In response to the civil war that broke out in the wake of a colonial power’s attempt to control territory by delegating power to a group defined by an exclusive aspect of identity (Shiism), theorists and spokespersons for the persecuted saw in Salafi Sunnism the potential for defence, as well as a sovereigntist ideology capable of demanding the birth of a nation-state. For its part, the US military government in Iraq succeeded in forming an alliance with representatives of Shia communities. In Baghdad in 2008, the Sunni populations were suddenly pushed out and pursued toward the North-East of Iraq and independent Kurdistan.

The Islamic State’s reterritorialisation in Syria

The labels ‘Sunni’ and ‘Shia’ are recent constructions in terms of political identities and warlike discourses. While they did exist before the invasion and the dismantling of the Iraqi Baath state, they were never as effective as instruments of racial division and antagonistic discourse aiming at producing two separate states. Moreover, the Baath party apparatus was not configured on the basis of religious affiliation. Although the *ta’ifiya* (ethnic divisions between Shia/Sunni/and Kurd) existed in the one-party state era, it nevertheless did not have the same function under Saddam Hussein, after 1979: the ethnic divisions did not define the identities that people assumed for the purposes of war, as would be the case after the neocolonial invasion of 2003. This can be explained by the fact that state racism had exceeded its initial phase of a war of identities and reached a phase in which the ‘completed nation’ was based on a plethora

of mechanisms managed by a neutral administration as well as by external war – the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), which consolidated the absolute enemy as lying beyond the borders, thus successfully unifying the nation.

An interpretation that reduces these discourses to a single bloc of identities constructed by the state is therefore an insufficient basis with which to understand the dynamics of ostensibly religious struggles. In both the IS Sunnism, and the Shiism of those resisting American colonisation, we can find utopian threads that challenged the modern government of populations and of colonisation. The battles in the majority Sunni province of Al Anbar (especially in Fallujah and Ramadi), and those waged by the Shia *mujahideen* in Najaf and Basra constantly used religious discourses to defend themselves and challenge the invasion of society by a colonial power. The opinions of people we encountered support the fact that Islam was a contributory factor in inventing a society of 'resistance'. This Islamic society, which did not necessarily aspire to create a state, also captured the subjectivities of people who came from far away, the migrants for jihad. This was already true in 2003, before the appeals launched by IS. At that time, Iraq was already the destination for Sunni and Shia anti-International Coalition fighters, and *mujahideen* from all over the world.

Lastly, it was in the Sunni areas during the war that the Islamic State emerged in Iraq. Sociologically, the genesis of this state reflects the close connection between the profiles of many of its actors. Several were former Baath party members and leaders, or military officers who had held prestigious positions in the old, state-dominated society in pre-colonisation days. They saw the colonisation as a process of dispossessing the state, the prestige and the identity of civil servants in the aftermath of the occupying forces' dismantling of the state administration. This process had rendered managerial expertise and networks of mutual recognition developed over the course of the exercise of power within the toppled state meaningless. Such capitals returned with gusto in the national administration of the Islamic State.

When they joined the Syrian revolution and then found themselves in the ranks of the Islamic State, the migrants for jihad themselves recognised the difference between the political objectives based on the space allowed for the government, in Iraq and Syria: in the latter's case, a colonial-style installation of IS organisation replaced revolutionary jihad.

This state resulted from a national anticolonial struggle to win back the apparatus of government ‘violated’ by the new religious-based sectarian government in Baghdad. This is how a former member of the IS administration whom I met in Iraq described this gap in detail.

Montassir: *In your opinion, were the situations in Syria and Iraq similar?*

Abou Abdallah: *No, there was a big difference. There was already the distinction that in Iraq, the tanzîm (organisation of the Islamic State) had existed for thirteen years, unlike in Syria. In Iraq, people accepted the state and saw its potential much more, whereas in Syria, it was hard for the Islamic State to be accepted. But the IS took advantage of the policy on mandatory religious education circles (dawarât char‘ia) to spread its ideas. Among the adults, the IS was detested much more than among the young. Similarly, it targeted children in order to be accepted in Syria.*

In Iraq, many Sunni had to accept IS, because they were faced with the Shia manipulated by the Americans in their farmed-out war. [...] But a lot of them abandoned the tanzîm as they saw no point in continuing the war. Most of them didn’t know [about the ideas and objectives of] the tanzîm: they were sold it like the goat herd who sold out Che Guevara to the Americans. Do you know the story? The goat herd sold out Che because the American air force bombed the region where he was grazing his goats. The only thing he was worried about was the goats. He didn’t know anything about Che and wasn’t interested in knowing anything’.¹⁰¹

In the Syrian context, the formation of Islamic State is part of a different historical thread, tied mainly to the eroding framework of the nation-state. Within the revolution freeing itself from the modern management of territory, and challenging the concentration of power inherent in the state form, Daesh emerged in Syria as an agent of reterritorialisation. It was to even become the ultimate counter-revolutionary actor – if the revolution is defined as the struggle against the former one-party state that was the basis of the legitimate monopoly of violence – we shall return to this. IS actually re-established the monopoly of physical and symbolic violence in the areas where the civil war had managed to bring the Bashar al-Assad regime to submission. In response to the fragmentation of the zones liberated by the Syrian revolutionaries, the IS deployed an opposing practice and discourse that could be called ‘modern’, as they

promoted the reconstruction of the symbolic order using the bureaucratic mechanisms of sovereignty and discipline. It exerted power that allowed people to live, and condemned people to death (Foucault, 2004), managed populations, negotiated borders and imposed a superior morality onto the social order in order to homogenise the national space.

During the interviews, our Syrian and Iraqi respondents showed that the establishment of the Islamic State in Syria was indeed part and parcel of this process of reterritorialisation. As we have seen, the revolutionary surge had generated two successive processes. The first was the deterritorialisation brought about by the struggle against the structures of the state, and against the attempts to remake governments and a modern form of sovereignty based on the monopoly of physical violence. This war of deterritorialisation had its own agenda that rejected the delegation of power, and enjoyed its own repertoire of practices, and 'Free Zones'. The second process, reterritorialisation, was driven by the powers seeking to reconstruct the modern state order, firstly, aiming to reunify the occupied territories into one. When the civil war broke out in the Syrian revolution, this spectre of governmental restructuring is evident in three important phases: the regime's war against the rebels and 'Free Zones', the coming of the Islamic State, and the foundation of the Kurdish administration in Northern Syria.

Here I will limit myself to an analysis of the period of reterritorialisation by Islamic State. This started in April 2013, the date of the split from Nusra and the establishment of the Syrian branch of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This period, which ended in March 2019 when the 'victory' of the International Coalition and the Russian army operating in Syria was announced, was experienced in the towns of the North, the Centre and the East: Jarablus, Al Bab, Manbij, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Mayadin, Al-Chaddadeh, and Abu Kamal. And beyond the towns, the Islamic State also enjoyed a form of territorial control in the Syrian countryside which resulted in it holding a broad swathe of territory extending into Iraq (Mosul, Tikrit, Ramadi, etc.), in which around 8 million people were living.

A counter-revolution: The Islamic State's government

In the Free Zones where revolutionary practice had dispensed with all forms of government, the Islamic State appeared as the ultimate

counter-revolutionary figure: the organisation sought the monopoly of violence, established borders and reestablished order. A father from Manbij, a town in the governorate of Aleppo, explained this to us.

Salem: When the Islamic State arrived, there was a balance between this organisation and the FSA. There were between ten and fifteen of them when they got to Manbij. They quickly established trust with the residents, better than the other groups: they protected your rights, ended disputes, and acted like judges arbitrating between people. They defended rights until they had become the only force in Manbij. Once they had set themselves up, they banned everyone else from carrying weapons, and also having them in one's home. Daesh took control and began to govern in the name of religion, to the point where they gave themselves the authority to behead a young man, barely seventeen, who stood up to them.¹⁰²

Confrontation with the revolutionary forces then became increasingly violent, until it reached its peak in January 2014 when the coalition of revolutionary brigades pushed the Islamic State out of Aleppo, while the latter purged the huge territory it had taken control of in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq – now combined under a single administrative and political authority – of any opposition. A lorry driver from Aleppo told us this in 2016:

Abou Ahmed: Members of Daesh worked security. As I had a lorry, I earned 2,500 dollars per month under Daesh. Can you imagine what 2,500 dollars meant for a Syrian? I was going from Aleppo to Mosul without being stopped. I worked in all the different regions: the ones held by the FSA in Azzaz, and the regime-controlled one in Damascus, there were ten checkpoints! And at each one you had to pay between 1,000 and 2,500 Syrian pounds to the FSA brigades! They had been taxing the drivers' money shamelessly since the start of the war. And when I worked in the regime-controlled area, Bashar's soldiers pointed a gun at your head and demanded 100 dollars immediately. At each checkpoint in the regime zone, you had to give them 1,000 to 3,000 Syrian pounds too! There was absolutely none of that in the Daesh and Kurdish-run areas. They didn't loot you, and that was the big difference: you just paid the customs levy when you went in and that was that!¹⁰³

The Islamic State thus worked on the pacification of territory by rehabilitating the monopoly of violence against which the revolution had

been directed: disarming or eliminating its rivals, they re-established the police – *al-hisba* and *al-amniya* – and set up Islamic courts at the same time. In parallel, the Islamic State resumed the administration of socio-economic sectors left fallow after the withdrawal of the Syrian and Iraqi states: most of the civil servants remaining in the territory conquered by Daesh were reappointed on condition that they took juridical-religious training (*dawra char'iya*). More generally, the Islamic State imposed a clean break with the uncertainties specific to the revolutionary situation. Contrary to the fragmentation of political-military actors that was part of the reality of local communities, the IS provided a stable and extremely coercive law. The same lorry driver explained it thus:

Abou Ahmed: *Daesh was more reliable than the regime and the FSA. With Daesh, we left our apartments closed, knowing that they would never be burgled. If you came back months later, you realised not even a nail was missing. And even if you left the door wide open nobody sneaked in! If somebody, including one of their members dared steal anything at all, they went before the court and had their hand cut off.*

In Iraq, the city of Mosul (the second largest in the country, with a population of almost 2 million) was known for the Islamic State restoring order there after it took over the city in Summer 2014. Before then, Mosul had been the daily seat of sectarian rivalries and attacks committed by various armed groups. The Islamic State reestablished its state-like authority by entangling an extremely violent and punitive legal system with a bureaucratic operation described as efficient, and which *de facto* affected all aspects of the city's social division of labour (hospitals, electricity, housing, management of the market and the corporations, etc.). Haïdar, an itinerant salesman in the city, told us in September 2017 about his years spent under the Islamic State government in Mosul.

Haïdar: *When Daesh arrived, I began to work as an itinerant salesman. I had a cart from which I sold juices and all types of cold drink, like Pepsi. It allowed me to earn enough to survive with my family. The Daesh agents came to organise all the itinerant salesmen, they banned us from selling in certain spots, and they confined us to particular squares. They also rented shops that belonged to the city and pitches to sell from. If you want to sell clothes or any types of merchandise, you had to pay, depending on the size of the space you were using. They fined*

the itinerant salesmen like us when we went beyond the perimeter they'd set. They also seized our goods and carts if we spread out onto the public roads or if we couldn't pay the fines. Fines were between 2,000 and 6,000 dinars. It was hard though, and we suffered. If you didn't negotiate you might lose your merchandise.

Montassir: *Who dealt with the seizure of goods?*

H.: *The Amniyeh and the Hisba. It was a type of police that carried out monitoring and was responsible for censure. It was part of the Daesh city council, in the Nineveh ward. There was a division of labour. It was mainly the city council that dealt with rule-breaking and managing offences linked to buying and selling. This Hisba was responsible for everything to do with prayers, and punishments linked to cigarettes, not praying, beards, clothes, etc. For the Amniyeh, it was more the serious crimes. Once they got involved, you might wind up dead. They handled people considered traitors (spies or intelligence agents working for other governments), or if they found a phone on you showing calls to foreign numbers, etc. The Amniyeh and the Hisba also drove different vehicles.*

M.: *Did they set up schools?*

H.: *Yes, but I didn't let my son finish the entire cycle. When I made my son leave school, they didn't do anything to me. They didn't follow up even though they considered school obligatory. Former teachers were hired back into schools and there were new volunteers. But when the war came, the schools didn't last long. They were only paying the teachers 60,000 dinars. It was just symbolic and there were more new teachers who paid allegiance (bay'a) to the Caliphate.*

M.: *Did you have to pay for hospital treatment?*

H.: *Yes. If you had money, you could get an operation. Otherwise, you might die. You had to pay. They had a Ministry of Health (Dîwân As-ssiha) responsible for running the hospitals. When my son was born under Daesh, they gave me this birth certificate where it says Dîwân As-ssiha [he shows me the certificate]. You needed to have at least the date of birth of your child. They also had vaccination cards, and they ran lots of vaccination campaigns for children. That was normal, like before.*

M.: *They didn't say the vaccines were illegal?*

H.: (Laughs.) *No, of course not... (Silence.) But they became a state. It was absolutely a state. They governed.*

M.: *Did they have newspapers?*

H.: *Yes, paper ones. They had a radio station. They broadcast news about the war. And their exploits. The papers were free and distributed in cars. However, there was no television station. And they broke my two TV sets. Luckily it wasn't the same team that took my first set.*

M.: *What about new building work?*

H.: *Yes, of course. They built new markets and made new regulations for them. Since 2003, things had been disorganised. When Daesh took power, it reorganised the neighbourhoods and markets. Things were safer and they also became popular. But things changed quickly: they started killing people, banning them from leaving the city when some began to flee, etc.¹⁰⁴*

The bureaucratic administration of space was a central element of Daesh practice. Before carrying out the interviews in Iraq and on the Turkish-Syrian border, this was described to me by the families of French people who joined this government, from within the revolution. These families had received official documentation from the IS administration (see box below): birth certificates (document 1); death certificates (document 2); marriage certificates; identity cards and IS citizenship certificates. In Iraq, other people showed me vaccination record books (document 3), and housing certification, etc. The French families had tried unsuccessfully to use these documents to have the deaths of their children officially recognised by the French authorities.

Assorted Daesh administrative documents

Document 1: birth certificate

The birth certificate is the administrative document equivalent to the French 'livret de famille' within IS. It contains information under the following headings: sex of newborn child; place and district of birth; nature of birth (single, twin or more); date of birth with precise time; first names of both parents, their ages and occupations, length of mother's pregnancy, child's weight at birth, medical professional attending the birth (doctor, certified nurse, midwife, other) with the number of year of their qualification; certification by the head of the registry office: 'I certify that this child was born alive – date, doctor's name, doctor's professional address'.



Document 2: death certificate

It contains the following information: certificate number, date, stamp: 'The District Office of martyrs [...] certifies that brother [...] nicknamed [...] died due to [...]. This certificate is issued on the request of his guardian'.



Document 3: vaccination record

Al 0010005

بطاقة التلقيحية للطفل

(الولد)

دائرة صحة
قطاع الرعاية الصحية الأولية
مركز الرعاية الصحية الأولية
الاسم الثلاثي للطفل
تاريخ الولادة
رقم الطفل في السجل القومي
العنوان :
رقم الهاتف
اسم المختار

ملاحظات طبية هامة

• التلقيح الخماسي = (تلقيح الثلاثية ضد شلل الأطفال، الحصبة، والتفصير)
• التلقيح الرباعي = (تلقيح الثلاثي + لقاح فيروس Hib)
• التلقيح المعزلي (الدوار) = Virus vaccine
• التلقيح للطفل بعد عمر ششيرة أشهر حتى وإن لم يظهر
الشعر ولم تتم الحظيرة بالتلقيح ، ولكنه لا يحل
الفرع المطلوبة .
• في حالة عدم ظهور التندب بعد سبتي شهرين من
مرحلة ششيرة
• لا يعطى لقاح الحصبة من قبل الطفل بعد التلقيح
استلامه جرعة سابقة
• لا تظهر التلقيحات في الأيام الوطنية للتلقيحات
وزارة الصحة / مطبع دائرة الخدمات الطبية التابعة

Law and jihad in the Islamic State

Islamic State was a historical subject before being an object of discourse, and embodies as much the experience of social actors as it does the struggles for meaning that influenced its progress. Using Karl Mannheim's (1954) term, we will call these struggles 'ideological' in the rest of this book. One category (jihad) encompasses the variety of opposition movements, of which the IS is one, that had structured the attempts at governing a bordered territory in Iraq and Syria in the name of Islam, between 2014 and 2017. However, its meaning is distinct from that of 'revolution' due to its theological origin. Moreover, Islamic State practice scarcely corresponds to jihad at all. Counter to the ahistorical reading of the concept

of jihad as a form of civilisational struggle, we should foreground the multiple political practices encompassed by the term, such as the various actors invested in it. On one side, the statist ideology which, combined with a theology of national belonging, defined jihad as a classically Westphalian war waged by a state against enemies of the same order; on the other, a utopian projection deliberately cut off from government based on control of a territory, and seeking to become a reality in the form of an incarnation, in the here and now, of divine justice.

After it took power in Mosul and Raqqa, the Islamic State set out a legal policy (*siyâssa char'iya*), popularised via a dedicated institution, the Islamic State Office of Study and Research, whose all-important text from 2015 can be quoted here:

The state is a set of political entities brought together to achieve sovereignty over specified territory with a population. A governor, a caliph or a prince of believers is the head of the various authorities. This is what the term 'state' embraces for the intellectuals and theorists of judicial politics and government. Consequently, we can affirm that the state rests on three pillars: the house, the flock and power. It is formed out of a set of governments, each with one of the functions of state, all of which act as a unit in order to achieve its overall function, which is to look after the interests of the Muslims down here and in the next world.

The supreme objective, to which end messengers have been dispatched, is the people's subordination to their God. God said: 'I created man only for them to adore (me)'. And thus, adoration is man's exclusive devotion to his God. God, and his emancipation from all God's creation. Such is the truth of 'There is no god but Allah', that it removes man from the causes of indignity and servitude. The conflict between faith and unbelief is actually a conflict around the right of God to be the only one who can ordain: 'He is God in the heavens and God on Earth, he is the wise and the learned'.

It is undeniable that the achievement of man's servitude to God, and the fulfilment of the prophecy of the messengers will only be achieved by completely removing authority from men adorning themselves in sovereignty, and constraining them to render sovereignty unto God and him alone. Because of this, the law ordains the establishment of a state for the accomplishment of this grandiose objective, the latter only achievable via individual behaviour and with the need for an authority that protects its uniqueness and spreads it, while creating borders with strength and authority'.¹⁰⁵

The pacification of the areas conquered by the Islamic State thus combined judicial-legal practice with systematic, terrorist and punitive violence. The penalty incurred for each offence or crime was set in advance, outside of any recognition of collective structures such as tribes, families, corporations, etc. – while the courts publicised the punishment: executions were carried out before the gathered national community to set an example and affirm an ideology of terror. After the ban on smoking, lawbreakers were placed in a cage exposed on a roundabout of a large thoroughfare. The father from Manbij gave us another instance of this type of IS practice.

Salem: The son of one of our neighbours returned from Lebanon to spend Ramadan at his parents' home. He had an iPhone. The first time he left the house, a plane dropped bombs on the town; he took his mobile and started filming. The Hisba arrived and locked him up for six months, then slit his throat before hanging him in front of his parents' front door! Can you imagine that? He had nothing to do with journalism! He just came from Lebanon and took some photos, and they cut his throat and hung him up in front of his home. That was our neighbour's place. Next door to us!¹⁰⁶

In an only too obvious paradox, the extreme terrorist cruelty runs parallel to the judicial pedagogy: the Islamic State acknowledges a form of gradualism (*tadarruj*) in the application of the law, which is based on its power. The governmental structure of the Islamic State is thus founded on an absolute law, functioning through the atomisation of individuals reduced to subjects under law, as with the modern forms of citizenship. Alongside the monopoly of physical violence, the judicial-legal practice contributes to the steady establishment of a collective new order fashioned explicitly from the break with the existing one, which this dissident IS fighter and former administrator interviewed in Kirkuk in Summer 2017, talks about.

Abou Abdallah: At the beginning, we ordered women to wear clothes we deemed legal, but we had to wait a while to implement this order and the punishments that went with it. It was the same for obligatory beards and the ban on cigarettes in the street in Mosul and Raqqa. The same thing for shutting businesses during prayer times in Mosul. Each time, a memo was handed out in the street.

We always needed some time before we started imposing the law. Same thing for the distribution of the new Islamic State identity cards.

In this respect, the category of jihad seems to be the ultimate test of the Islamic State's investment in a nationalist interpretation via the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad, 2017). We have seen that in the Syrian revolution, jihad was primarily a critical source contributing to resisting the war waged by the regime and its allies before becoming a collective moral code ensuring a minimal level of order in the Free Zones. In the case of the IS, the new power establishing itself in Raqqa and Mosul, jihad was conceptualised by the founders of IS as a necessary stage in the establishment of its own government, and of an absolutist law. *Management of Savagery*, the book already quoted, is acknowledged by the official doctrine of the Islamic State as a major reference point, and it sets out *jihad* as a form of violence on which power is based: it extends the field of *tamkîn* – the capacity to wield power over a territory and population. Abu Bakr Naji, the theorist behind Al-Qaida, then the Islamic State, writes: 'But those who have practiced jihad previously know that it means only hardship, closure, terrorism, oppression and warlike power – of course I am talking about jihad and fighting, rather than about Islam. Therefore, the passage from combat to the next stage can only occur if the initial period is ruthless one that consists of oppressing the enemy'.

During the phase of deepening its sovereignty, the Islamic State's jihad was basically carried out against the revolutionaries of the Free Syrian Army: this was an affirmation of the organisation's desire to take power in a situation where there were alternative forms of politics operating in the Free Zones, when these too were claiming to also be a form of jihad.

Up to that point, jihad, had been the sublimation of the revolutionary struggle within the Free Zones, but for Daesh it became a *sui generis* agenda contributing to a future nation-state – wiped out by the revolt in Syria and stolen by the US occupation of Iraq. It was the tool that proved the presence of a new national power, of rational bureaucracy, that aimed to establish the Islamic State. For its leadership, *Hisba*, the *Amniyâtes* and the special forces of intervention were tools for violent pacification of territory. This theological-political acceptance of jihad was thus less eschatological than strategic, as several episodes demonstrate. When the International Coalition's bombing extended into territory held by

the Islamic State, jihad from Daesh's perspective became a war between competing nations. Once more, there was scarcely any millennial, nihilist struggle that could allegedly be identified among Islamic State fighters; moreover, the latter never attacked the borderlands of Türkiye – whose state was deemed unbelieving – and to which the Islamic State was bound by a tacit non-aggression pact. On the contrary, carrying out attacks in Europe and the US was a counter-attack provoked by the International Coalition's bombing raids: this jihad had become theological-geopolitical.

The utopia named jihad

Islamic State had immediately established itself as a government that accrued and controlled territory, but the diversity of its members' trajectories, coupled with the speed of its development as a force were originally a set of internal challenges to the statist perspective. These challenges were systematically eliminated by the political-military core of the organisation – usually Iraqi, and linked to the long civil war that followed the US invasion of 2003, hence the point of identifying the nuances of opposition in the comments of dissidents who fled from the Islamic State. We will look at this in detail in the French and Belgian cases (chapters 7-10), but others (Syrians, Iraqis and Arab migrants for jihad) illustrate the utopian trend by the struggle they waged within the IS. Some of these had roles with ideological responsibility (sheikhs, intellectuals and *char'i*), while others were just fighters who had become aware of the disconnect between their original utopias and the ideological reality of Daesh. Abou Abdallah, who joined the Islamic State from the Maghreb, then took refuge in Kirkuk to flee the dominant faction, told us his story over the long interviews he gave us in Summer 2017.

Abou Abdallah: *I came to join 'the State': Islamic State. I spent about two years in its territories. We witnessed so many things, mistakes and un-Islamic practices: several practices by emirs, executions not based on any law [...]. Things unconnected with the Islamic path, that don't exist in Allah's commandments. We tried to reform it, but you can't change much. If you try and make reforms, you're risking death, prison or torture.*

Montassir: *Was there in-fighting? Or opposition?*

Abdallah: *The opponents from within the IS who called for a change in the State's direction (al-Minhâj) were accused of religious extremism (al-ghulow). They were then excommunicated, tried for unbelief and executed. The State killed those accused of extremist Takfirism. In fact, IS waged war on anyone it considered an agent that narrowed its popular base. Because these people said that during war-time, the State had to allow unbelievers the right to leave its territory. While for IS, you should never say that unbelievers wouldn't have to comply with laws and had to be allowed to leave. The people seen as extremists (ghulât) by IS actually bore out the idea that the sermon (da'wa) had only just begun: for them, the State should not keep people under its control if they wanted to leave the territory. You first had to teach them about religion and then ask them to choose whether to stay or leave. However, for the IS leadership, the State was already there, in the midst of the Muslims that the IS was governing. It's in that context that IS began to try and execute people opposed to its vision.*

The Islamic State's leadership therefore opposed a paradoxical form of moderation in response to the attitude of those who were in their terms extremists (*ghulât*), which sought to banish civilian populations suspected of harbouring hostility to their ideas. This theological misunderstanding led to a purge carried out by the Islamic State command of several hundreds of religious clerics opposed to an official point of doctrine, the excuse of ignorance (*al-'odr bil jahl*). The debate can be summarised as follows: as a form of judicial government, the Islamic State viewed its subjects as Muslims due to the allegiance they bore – 'For the governors of the Islamic State', explained Abdallah, 'the State was already there, in the midst of the Muslims it was governing'. So, within the Islamic State, 'being Muslim' was a legal form of citizenship and rights. It is significant that Yazidi women were hardly ever subject to the obligation to wear 'legally recognised dress' (*al-libâss a-char'î*). As non-Muslims who had been reduced to the status of slaves, they were not considered subject to law or responsibilities.

Conversely, the *ghulât* were understood as loosening the correct religious practice required to formally belong to the Islamic State, and were aiming to achieve a lived utopia in the here and now. Consequently, they intended to evacuate civilian populations from Islamic State territory – at that time subject to relentless bombing raids by the International Coalition – so that the remaining residents were exclusively those who shared the same way of life and accepted the possibility of imminent

death. The objective of these ‘extremists’, of whom Abdallah was one, was to exfiltrate the residents and thus ‘save’ them. Abdallah repeated this throughout the interview: ‘All our fight [‘our’ meaning the *ghulât*] was to tell the IS General Commission that only believers should be exposed to the war against the coalition’. This is the context for the ‘banishment’ planned by the ‘extremists’ in relation to the civilian populations, and it was for strategic reasons that the IS General Commission refused it, at the price of worse violence later.

Abou Abdallah: *The aim of this massacre was to keep the State going and underline its persistence.¹⁰⁷ The State could only keep going if people left. IS forced them to stay, especially when the bombing was getting more intense. If the State was planning to get rid of people it considered ghulât, it was because the latter were pushing the idea that many of the civilian population wanted to leave the territory. As for the ghulât, what did they want? They wanted everyone to assume their responsibilities: they said there must be a call addressed to Muslims all over the world. A call that told Muslims that if they believed in the possible existence of a real Islamic state, they should come here! It was then that we would find out whether people believed in an Islamic state or not. But the reality was that although calls went out for people to come and join Islamic State, the pilgrimage was modest. Few people came: there weren’t as many mujihideen (migrants) as we were expecting. That’s something that had to be taken into consideration.*

At the heart of the utopian strain enduring within the Islamic State, the characterisation of the form of jihad I am qualifying as ‘utopian’ became autonomous from both the territorial administration and the war between competing nations. For its supporters, this jihad was neither a stage in the process of becoming a future state, nor the founding violence of a new society, as the famous Egyptian Islamist activist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) wrote in 1965. Jihad constitutes ‘an ongoing quest and a permanent struggle waged exclusively with the goal of establishing a just reality’ (Qutb, 1965: 5). At the core of an increasingly violent war, this quest emerged as the utopia that defines a form of life in which you partake – or not – when you are facing the strong probability of death. The man from Kirkuk continued his story:

Abou Abdallah: *The jihad, for me, is not about fighting. It's to do with 'aqida [a transcendent credo and obligation]. I'm convinced of a number of ideas and if a group of people forms, sharing the principles of faith, I might join it again, but I'll take my time and think it through carefully first. I came [to the Islamic State] for the idea of a land of Islam and fraternity. I came to live out a dream: you must know what it means to leave your country to go elsewhere. At the start, I had a positive image. I was happy when I reached Syria: it was a promised land, the land of the Caliphate. For me, it was the fulfilment of a promise. After several testing experiences, and having lived with the members of the Islamic State, I realised that it was basically just a huge lie.*

I am a free man and I am against any court set up by men. Because I feel there is no judgement (hukm) apart from Allah's. [...] That's really what 'being a free man' means: attahâkoum [asking for judgement, taking a case before a court] is what you do in an associationist religion, but there is no religion except Allah, who sent us a prophet, and judgements valid in all places at all times. [...] Mohammed was sent to bring people out of religions where they were worshipping someone else. The law however, that is what makes you adore people instead of Allah. That is how discord between you and your religion begins.

The reality of the Islamic State is far from the image communicated to young Muslims. It is absolutely not the law of Allah that reigns in the IS: it's the passions of the people running it. They usually recruit young people like me who want to live in a land of Islam, because we face repression in our own countries. But the Islamic State is more like a physical extermination zone for this type of person, which also leads to them abandoning these attitudes and ideas.

Like many others, this testimony shows the statist perspective that the radical leaders of Daesh brought to Raqqa and Mosul. Against the supporters of a lived utopia without a government, the power held by the Islamic State over chunks of territory well and truly forced civilian populations to stay inside the bombed cities until they were finally defeated. The extremely high human cost of this decision was considered negligible compared to the imperative of retaining the permanence of government power.

Although jihad thus seems to have become a topic in and of itself in the Western media – to the point where the media frequently went on to discuss 'jihadism' – this anthropological research on the ground in Syria and Iraq demonstrates the variety of the actors' investments in such a concept. This observation is valid, no less for the Syrian revolutionaries

as it is for the European migrants for jihad, to whom the following chapters are dedicated, even if their multiple journeys also highlight specific questions.

Departure for jihad and welcome into the revolution

The revolution's footprint is large, and its timeline dense. When the major earthquake struck, in February 2023, years after the research that had first brought me to the Syrian border in 2016 and 2017, I picked up the discussion with revolutionary actors holed up in North-Eastern Syria (Sakhi and Rayan, 2023). I unsuccessfully tried to focus the discussions on the earthquake and the humanitarian disaster it had caused, but it was the revolution and the shockwaves of its repression that were still the frame of analysis for the collective life of these Syrians. When I asked what they thought of some recent writing about the pioneering role of certain armed political groups in the revolution, Rayan, a highly significant actor in revolutionary activity in the Aleppo Free Zones, replied directly, for example.

Rayan: When revolutions begin, everyone says what they are supposed to say based on their position. I didn't see any political parties organising the revolution. At our level in Aleppo, we planned the demonstrations on Facebook between us, and later, armed operations were coordinated between groups of actors on social media. To be clearer, outside my own neighbourhood, I might be missing some information when I come to put back together the events of the past: the revolution was huge. People who want to tell you the history of revolution based on their own groups or political parties aren't worth listening to. Of course, there are some young intellectuals who like to sit around and argue about this, but in any case, they're not in a position to represent what happened. Especially in exile: they speak about what happens inside the country, but they didn't put anything into the country. I was in cities like Raqqa in 2012, and there were political groups arguing, but when the revolution came, that dynamic disappeared.¹⁰⁸

I present this section of the interview that took place after the earthquake to stress the challenge mounted by such actors, when approached according to their specific capital, to the academic and political discourses assessing the revolution from within the traditional frameworks: the Leninist category of political organisation. The depth of the revolution

and its continuity in forcing the regime's order to wobble indeed depend on the new element described by the actors in the previous chapters, namely a decentred politics, rooted in a broader footprint within a religious community – in the sense of *relegere* (to discuss things as a group).

The welcome extended to migrants for jihad from across the world was part of this understudied revolutionary orientation. However, it was a central feature starting from the militarisation of the revolution in June 2011. This bracket, beginning with the demand for revolutionary jihad, would close definitively in 2014, when the Islamic State was set up, despite the fact that some dissenting foreign fighters were a minority of the membership of Nusra and other FSA groups.

The suspension of the category 'national': Syrians speak about welcoming foreigners

Abou Obaïda: *As Muslims, we had the idea that it was a jihad on the pathway of Allah since the start [of the war]. But our jihad was limited to our own balad [country], and against tyranny. Often, in the interviews, I used to say how amazed I was that an American, and Brit or a Frenchman would fight alongside me, but at the same time, if one day a revolution broke out in their country, I'd be ready to go and fight with them. There is such a thing as injustice, whatever your religion, ethnicity, etc. The French Revolution, when it broke out, there was no such thing as jihad, but for me, that was a type of jihad. For we Muslims, we were actually heading into combat against a tyrant with the intention of dying on the pathway of Allah.*¹⁰⁹

This speaker also accompanied us in the work of piecing together the initial armed confrontations with the regime. Similarly to several other Syrians we met, Abou Obaïda perceived the foreigners during the 2011–2014 period as members of a sacrificial community, displaying absolute solidarity. When they saw a foreigner arriving via the more or less porous Turkish border during the early years of the revolution, members of the armed groups would shout the *takbîr* ('Allah Akbar!') and express their astonishment at this commitment that necessitated leaving your family far away and sacrificing oneself for the Syrians at war. What effect did this unusual form of immigration have on the revolution?

First, the terminology quickly adopted in this place refers to the original founders of the Muslim community in Medina: people from all over

the world were called *muhajireen*, while those who hosted them called themselves *ansâr*;¹¹⁰ the revolutionaries located their action in a history of the founding political community as broad and diverse as the category, ‘Muslims’. Next, this terminology muddies the idea, pushed particularly by Gilles Kepel, of an international jihadi community allegedly transferable to lands beyond the revolution in Syria (Kepel, 2015). Actually, a society in revolt itself adopted these migrants considered committed to a common cause, at least for the first few years of the revolution.

This is all the more the case because unlike the much smaller number of people who went to other theatres of jihad – Iraq, Palestine, Mali, Yemen, Bosnia, etc. – the Syrian migrants for jihad did not arrive via a single recruitment agency between 2011 and 2014, something that the French and Belgian actors interviewed confirm. Here are the stories of three of them – two French and one Belgian – recorded together in January 2023 in Verviers (Belgium), where they described how they were received in 2013, on the eve of the large-scale divisions that would result in the emergence of the Islamic State (see chapter 9).

Mimoun (France): *Because, listen Montassir, the problem isn’t the people that left. The problem is the leaders [of the groups in Syria]. For us there was the idea of going jihad fi sabili Allah [on the pathway of Allah]. So it’s as if you come from Paris or Brussels, me from Nancy, etc. But we have a single objective at the start: which is? It’s to help the Syrians. But when we turn up, there are groups there that take us in and are completely different from one another: for example, for you it could be Ahrâr a-Châm that takes you, and for me it’s Nusra, and for someone else it’s the IS, and someone else could be the FSA. As for me, when I arrived in 2013, I didn’t care about these divisions. The problem is that as far as they are concerned, these divisions were so important that they’d go to war with each other about them.*

Montassir: *When you arrived, were you in the FSA?*

Mimoun: *Yes. That lasted one night. It was just the madafa [reception area] when you arrived. But after that, we [the group of twelve Frenchmen who left in 2013], you could join any group, we didn’t care which one. We weren’t bothered about the politics. And that’s what we told the courts here, but they don’t believe us: ‘We don’t give a toss about politics, us’. And the courts know that, they just don’t want to believe it’.*

Rafik (France): *Within the FSA, each brigade had its own char‘ī [see chapter 5], even though there were some Sufis who did a lot of damage. So, when we got to Atma, it was the FSA that took us. And with them there was a sheikh in the madafa where they put us up and greeted us. Macha’ Allah, he was nice. He cried when he saw us arrive. He saw twelve people arrive from France, and he started to cry: ‘How come you’ve come here for us?’ He was in shock. We said, ‘We’ve come to help our brothers and sisters, for the sharia, Alhamdulillah’. It was just before the big split. He said: ‘What group do you want to join?’ And we said, ‘The man we’re supposed to look for is with a group called Dawlat al-Islam [Dawla]’. To be honest, we didn’t really know much about dawla [the future Daesh]. And personally, I knew most about Nusra. The dawla group was very vague for me. Then, the sheikh kindly asked us why we wanted to join this group. He wanted to know whether we knew what its ideology was, but we didn’t know that much. All we knew was that it was a group that wanted to apply sharia, and they were Muslims, like other groups in Syria. Then we said: ‘If our mate was with Nusra, then we’d go to Nusra, but if he was with you, we’d stay with you’. And it was in those groups that there were big arguments and splits starting up, but they didn’t know anything about what was going to happen.*

In fact, as regards Syria, you have to know the dates well, otherwise you can’t keep up. Because in the beginning I was with people who were dissenters from Bashar’s army. They left the regime’s army to join the FSA, then they left the FSA to go to Ahrār a-Châm, then they left that group and joined up with us in Dawla and vice versa. Since they’d left Bashar, they’d been in groups where everything was still fluid, where everything was still homogeneous. People fought together: for the prison in Aleppo, they fought together, etc. But gradually, you could see differences’.¹¹¹

Malek (Belgium): *I arrived in Syria via Antakya, and then Atma.*

Montassir: *Which group was there to meet you? The FSA?*

Malek: *In fact, still to this day I’m not sure. It was [in principle] Al-Qaida. My friends down there brought me in, because you got in by tazkiya [recommendation]. It was Al-Qaida but as the days passed and they changed emirs (leaders), all that changed: they told us it was Al-Qaida and then another emir told us it was dawla [IS] instead, and that ‘the Al-Qaida lot were in the bâtil [the wrong]’. Actually, they didn’t know where they were at that time.*

Montassir: *So this was in 2013, when the internal conflicts were taking place?*

Malek: *Yes. In August 2013 to be precise. Just after Ramadan. Moreover, for the entire month of Ramadan, all I did was dou'ae [prayers]. Lots of dou'ae, and then I left. It was the start of the split when I got there. But I wasn't that bothered just then. I told myself that as long as I had niya [good intentions], so that the word of attawhîd [uniqueness] was the loudest, it would be the same in the end. So the split didn't bother me at first. When I arrived, someone came to find me, and sent me to the mo'askar [training camp].*

Montassir: *The dawla camp?*

Malek: *Like I said, it depended what day it was. Later, the Belgians I was with said they were in dawla. But one day an emir said it was Al-Qaida, and another day someone else said it was dawla. And nobody was hurling insults like they did later, and nowadays. It was hard to accept the split between all the factions. They told us: 'Yes, Jabhat Nusra are our brothers; Al-Jaych al-Hur [FSA], even if we don't agree with them, they are our allies'. There was no big quagmire like what happened later.*

Then we went to Rif Homs, that's the one on the edge of Homs, which was besieged by the regime, who stopped anything going in or out of the city. People were reduced to eating cats because of the blockade and the famine. The strategies of the FSA, Nusra, Dawla and all the other groups was to put a lot of people in that area, by populating the training camps: like that you could attack and enter Homs. In that period, it was Bashar who was laying siege: everyone was together against the regime. In the mo'askar, everyone came: Al-Jaych Al-Hur, Ahrâr a-Châm, Liwae Attawhîd [FSA], the al-Fârouq brigades [FSA], dawla, Nusra, etc. We talked, we lived together. There was no tension, on the contrary, it was normal to be together during that time'.¹¹²

These three extracts of the interviews with migrants for jihad whose trajectories will be picked up again later, situate their departures in a period of joint struggle against the regime. However, there are problematic words, such as Rafik's statement – 'We've come (...) for the sharia, alhamdulillah', and Mimoun's 'We didn't give a toss about the politics'. The following chapters will respect this line of argument: indeed, emigration for the jihad in Syria cannot be reduced to just a struggle against a repressive regime, but it is subject to a demand for, and intensification

of, collective meaning. and of an idea. The uses of concepts like *sharia* and the 'non-political' must be understood in the wake of this search for meaning that cannot be reduced to pure violence, despair or a sectarian terrorist ideology. In these extracts, it was first and foremost the experience of the type of welcome offered to migrants that structures the relationship of the Europeans to the space and values of the revolution.

This new phenomenon of emigrating to an *a priori* diverse space resonated with the universality of the revolutionary cause in the Arab Spring: the revolution, even if it were specific to Syria, cannot be confined to a fixed national identity. The community of jihad that formed in this period was open to a form of internationalisation by the path to a limited struggle for reform and the recognition of rights.¹¹³

Therefore, between 2011 and early 2014, it was thus toward a diverse jihad that our respondents emigrated, many of whom quickly returned to Europe once their illusions had been shattered by the reality of a new totalitarian state and the tensions in revolutionary circles. The latter, despite the universalism of the first few years and the openness toward migrants and support from outside, ended up conceding the option of the 'nation' to which many movements for violence and war were attached. This is true of the Syrian Kurdish forces that went as far as allying with the regime in order to guarantee that their management of North-Eastern Syria would remain autonomous, of the Islamic State, and of the forces with nationalist objectives involved in the international management of the conflict, etc.

In spite of this process of steady closure, as we have seen, the story of the Islamic State itself is comprised of resistance and violent in-fighting during its time in Syria, due to the type of jihad adopted by many migrants in a period when the borders were stabilising, and there was a totalitarian police force run by the IS (see chapter 6). Syrians and migrants made up the critical basis of Daesh's bordered state.

Different motivations among the migrants for jihad

This observation does not mean that the presence of groups of 'professional' jihadi migrants is excluded from the story. These fighters had been tried and tested in theatres of war elsewhere than Syria. Neither does it exclude the potential for counter-violence and even resentment and a desire to take power present in a millenarian discourse, but which must be

analysed in accordance with the way things happened in Syria and Iraq. It is allegedly easy, from this perspective, to distinguish between ‘classes’ of fighter, using three ideal-types: 1) young and inexperienced, discovering Muslim solidarity in the Arab Spring period; 2) hardened fighters from other jihad theatres such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, etc.; 3) supporters of the idea of *tawhîd* (oneness), who found a way to make a state and especially an imaginary Islamic society out of the armed struggle. Several observations reported in our research demonstrate situations in which these three ideal types are merged.

Yet this typology is still imprecise for at least three reasons. First, the majority of the Syrians we talked to did not perceive the arrival of the foreigners as being caused by the revolution itself. On the contrary, they believed in the reasons of solidarity put forward by the migrants, and I will return to this. When the crisis occurred, the formation of the Islamic State crystallised the trend toward a statist jihad separate from the revolutionary one, a significant part of the revolutionary fabric represented by the FSA – as well as Nusra and other Islamic components – wanted to stop this developing trend by distinguishing between the foreigners who supported the revolution, and those who had, for various reasons, ended up under the control of the Islamic State (see chapter 9). Rayan spoke about this.

Rayan: At the start we were very pleased to see the foreigners arriving. It was indescribably great to see these people from all over the world, dying in your country to defend our honour. I'll remember one group from Libya for the rest of my life: their leader, Abou Nasser, died in front of me in Aleppo. He'd been in the war against Gadhaifi and had brought his group and all their weapons to Syria after the fall of the Libyan dictator. We hosted them and they became family to us. But later, things changed. Some of us even began to hate the foreigners after what happened with the Islamic State. But you can never generalise. The people from abroad came for us and fell as martyrs for us. As for me, I feel like the changes started when the Iraqis arrived with their rules. They were like the Baath party. Hardliners.¹¹⁴

Next, the theory that the emigration to *jihad* was homogenous, which is already far from reality and also from what the Syrians and migrants actually said, is not tenable when very simple questions are asked: how can we explain the absence of a centralised reception system for these

migrants and the relatively random switches they made from one group to another during the first few years, when the vast majority of the migration to Syria took place? For whom and why did hundreds of migrants die between 2011 and 2014, before the fratricidal in-fighting between the battalions that made up the revolutionary body, and prior to the declaration of the Islamic State? Actually, the reception space for migrants was characterized by organisational fragmentation, whereas in Iraq there was already a basis for nationalist-statist jihad, or even an international jihad aimed at building an Islamic State against the Western ‘enemy’. And for a part of the period of emigration, in the revolution’s early years, the diversity of the emigrants’ political and religious incentives prevented any targeting of objectives other than the revolutionary ones.

The issue of intermarriage between groups, *inter alia*, may illustrate this point. Let us take the case of Abou Hassan, a former FSA fighter we met in Gaziantep in 2017, as an example. In 2013, his daughter, Yasmin, married Laurent, a young French Muslim convert who had come to make jihad in the Nusra Front, and then IS. During the interview, Abou Hassan stressed that: ‘I married off my daughter to this Frenchman and they had a child together. It’s true, we were part of two different groups, but there were no differences in the jihad against the regime and within the religion. We’re all Muslims, Praise be to God’.¹¹⁵ The timeline plays an important part in this story. The marriage took place in 2013, when Nusra and Daesh fell out with one another. This is the period before people got so attached to the definitive distinction between areas held by the revolutionaries, and those controlled by the Islamic State, which inherited the *dawla* organisation. Later, in France, I would meet Laurent’s mother, Mathilde. He was a young man from a working-class family impacted by unemployment and exclusion. He spent ten years in prison in France for offences in which his mother pointed to racism in the police and court system – he did his first stretch in a young offenders’ institution for minors from age sixteen, for stealing a wallet at school. With the number of setbacks and spells in prison increasing, he told his mother that his conversion to Islam was his ‘crutch to make it through prison’. He died in Syria in 2014, his wife pregnant with their son.

Mathilde: When my son went down there in 2012, he communicated with me using Skype. At some point someone suggested that he get married and he ended up finding a girl with whom he really had a love story. I’m convinced. He chose

her. And it was the parents of this girl that chose Laurent as a husband. When I saw them on Skype together, I was certain that they loved each other.

At the beginning of her pregnancy, I saw her sitting on a chair and behind her there was a couch. As I don't speak Arabic, she stood up so I could see she was expecting a baby. My son, next to her, began to speak to me: 'Now you have to tell me what to do. Her legs and stomach ache, etc.' I told him: 'Behind you is a couch, put her to lie on it and lift her legs up'. My webcam was on, and I could see he was looking after her. They really loved each other and when my son died, she cried a lot. And for a long time. Nobody told me that, I could see it. And I saw and felt her sadness. Part of me said at least my son had this beautiful love story in his life, even though that was too short. And together they had this child.

I realised that at a given point, he'd had enough [of Syria]. He wrote to me, in a conversation, that he wanted to be absolutely independent from his wife. Independent from whom? From what? He said he needed money – his wife was a hairdresser, and she ran a salon out of their flat – while he, he'd made friends with a Kurdish guy who he worked with in a café, and they wanted to go halves on buying a machine to make crêpes. The word 'independent' can mean a lot of things.

Montassir: *Did he want to come back to France?*

Mathilde: *No. It wasn't possible. I think he'd left France for good. It was a country that had destroyed him, after all. The justice system in his country destroyed him. It destroyed us as a family and had deeply hurt him. Humiliated him. He wasn't going to come back, that's for sure. He wasn't going to come back even if he had to die out there. And he didn't come back. Later... somewhere, I understand. He could certainly have gone somewhere else, to a country where he could have practiced a type of Islam he was more comfortable with'.*

The words of the closest people to the migrants, their families and the Syrian revolutionaries who had hosted them thus demonstrate the diversity of a stream of emigration that cannot be reduced to an organised movement with aims other than those of the revolutionary community. It was only after a while that the differences between them established themselves clearly, due to the civil war, the withdrawal of the FSA groups and the Islamic State's management of the reaction.

Lastly, one of the roles of non-European foreign fighters who had already experienced war in other conflict zones was to train the

revolutionaries in the military camps created in the Free Zones to take on the regime. This training focused on two types of knowledge: military expertise and religious knowledge, whose uses and functions have already been analysed. The military training was to play a vital part in the war against the regime and in sustaining the conflict. This role was accepted and sought after by the various factions of the revolutionary army. Khalid, whose journey we have heard about (chapters 4 and 5), described to us the input of the war-hardened jihadi migrants he engaged with in the military camp where he trained, near Aleppo, in 2013.

Khalid: When the fighting got more intense, I started going up to the front and carrying weapons. In the beginning, I didn't know how to hold a rifle. I had to enrol in a camp for a 25-day dawra 'askaria (military training). That was with the Attawhîd battalion (FSA), in the Darat Izza Free Zone. I learned to use a rifle. We were told how to run a ribât (checkpoint), etc. Next, we were transferred to the front for combat. [...] It was muhajireen [jihadi migrants] who delivered the training at the camp. Half the people in charge of the training and classes were Afghans, Pakistanis and other migrants. When I took the training, twenty-five muhajireen joined us at once. They had come to fight in Syria and stayed at the camp for a while. And then each of them joined a group, either the Attawhîd battalion (FSA), the Jabha Islamiya (Ahrâr a-Châm) or Nusra.

In the beginning, there were no differences. But when each of them went their own way, the mujahideen mostly chose the Islamic brigades, then Nusra and lastly, they went to the Islamic State. But when the FSA had organised itself into a group around a common objective, which was the triumph of religion, the migrants for jihad all came and joined it. Moreover, at the start, there was only the Attawhîd battalion (FSA) in Aleppo. It was the FSA that liberated the city'.¹¹⁶

I found the same diverse set of motivations among the young Frenchmen in a group from a French city who went to Syria, several of whose members were tried and sentenced in 2016.

Mourad and Mimoun: the French jihad as preestablished solidarity

Mourad and Mimoun left for Aleppo in 2013, with their friends from the neighbourhood – twelve men, all in their early twenties.^{117, 118} Two of this group, Salim and Réda, were killed a few days after arriving in Syria, at the start of the fratricidal war that led to the establishment of the Islamic

State. Nine returned to France and would be released after serving prison sentences of between six and ten years. The last one returned to France in 2015, to take part in the 13 November suicide attacks in Paris that took the lives of thirty-eight people.

The dynamic of leaving as a group ‘in an organised gang’ cannot, by itself, explain the choice of each member to emigrate. I conducted these interviews with five of them after they had been released from prison in 2022, thanks to links I had maintained with their parents since 2015. This is how two of them, Mourad and Mimoun, explain the moment they left:

Mourad: At that time, and during the whole of 2013, me, Djibril, Salim and Réda, were friends and we hung out together. It was like a little gang. Fadil was in another gang, with Mimoun, Rafik and Ibrahim. Salim from the first gang was friends with Rafik, from the second. He was the bridge between the two teams. There were often seven or eight of us in the shisha café where we'd go to meet. Like the café was set out, there was a table here, another there, we all talked and had a laugh together. [...] We started to become interested in Syria. We used to say that this was a government that really 'haggar' its people.¹¹⁹ So if Muslims went there to do jihad, you have to be on their side. We were told now that we knew, either you let it happen and you're in a state of sin if you continue living in France, or you come and help us, because you are obliged to since you can see what's happening. It was really making us feel guilty. Guilty because our brothers were suffering while we were at home eating ice cream. It wasn't fair! We said to ourselves that we couldn't carry on living like this as long as that was still going on in Syria. We couldn't go on like that.

Montassir: Did you and your friends have an idea in mind of the type of society that should work in a particular way in Syria?

Mourad: More or less, but it wasn't really what we were expecting. We wanted to help the fight against the regime.

Montassir: With the idea of staying in Syria after the liberation?

Mourad: If we managed to liberate it, and everything went well and quietened down, I was planning to come back. We would have done our duty, if we died, well we died, and if we successfully liberated the country and destroyed Bashar

al-Assad, like when Gadhafi fell, and when Ben Ali fell, that would be a day to celebrate and then we'd go home'.¹²⁰

Mimoun: *Lots of people I know and who came back from Syria, it wasn't because of the IS, but because they didn't agree with what happened [the fratricidal 2013 war between armed groups]. And that's it! And these people bear no hatred for France, or for Europe, or for the Islamic State. Basically, there were some who didn't even go to establish sharia. Our group – and if you like, I'm speaking for myself – didn't go to impose anything on anyone at all. We didn't claim to want to impose anything. I went to help against Bashar.*

Montassir: *And were you planning to return to France afterwards? Once the Assad regime had fallen?*

Mimoun: *No. We planned to go to die. Why? Because the chances of getting through a war alive against Bashar's army were minimal. Of course, we didn't say we were going to die because God alone knows when each person's time is up. But when you see the resources that al-Assad's army had, the chances of survival were actually low.*

Montassir: *Exactly how did you manage that issue psychologically when you thought of your family, about your mum?*

Mimoun: *In fact, we never told our families what was going on at the start. I told my parents I was going to Doha for work. I often said prayers, and I followed current affairs. I often dreamed of going to Palestine and, if needs be, to die to defend Muslims who were being massacred. But I was never able to go there.*

My finances were in great condition. I had everything I needed in terms of money. I was a top professional sportsman and was earning a good salary. But I used to say to myself, one day everyone will die. And I always thought about the children being massacred and what they were going to say to God about me: where was Mimoun when such and such a regime was massacring us? I couldn't bear the thought that one day these children would give evidence against me. And I'm talking about children from the whole world here.

Before I left, the last two or three days when my mother and my wife were cooking, they said, 'It's going to be nice in Doha!' I smiled, saying to myself, 'If you knew it was the last time we were going to see each other'. That was hard to manage emotionally. [...] For me, those moments were like a farewell.

But also, when we were about to leave, there was a woman who tipped me over the edge. Because before we left, all twelve of us met up: if one of us said he wasn't going, then we wouldn't go. And one day I was at home, watching a video with Rafik. It was a lady who made me cry and made me say straight away: 'OK, let's go. We have to go to Syria'. Because before, we spoke a lot, we made a big fuss, like the others. Lots of young people were saying a lot at that time, without doing anything. And we were like them. But anyway, personally, when I saw this lady, my decision was made. Because before, we were making comments about what was happening down there, but we were like hypocrites – criticising the people who are there without doing anything about it, that's hypocrisy. The woman in the video said: 'Oh community of Muslims, if you are not brave enough to come and help us with weapons, just send contraceptive pills to protect us after Bashar's soldiers rape us'. When she said that, you could be my mother, my brother, my wife, and I couldn't do anything. I swear: it wasn't a sermon, or an imam, or that recruiter from Lyon people have been talking about, or radicalisation, or indoctrination. In the name of Allah, it was that woman who made me go. People said we followed someone or other. For me, it was that woman, that sentence that tipped me over the edge.'¹²¹

Mourad and Mimoun's reflexive journeys over their decisions to leave contrast with those of the other group members that I spoke to. They situated this collective departure in a personal strategy related to 'guilt'. Mourad's low level of religious knowledge passed after knowledge about the community of 'brothers', which translated the sentence: 'Because you are obliged to since you can see what's happening' into reality for him. In this case, religious knowledge, as tenuous as it was, showed the pathway to 'follow' in an exceptional moment. The man could not make do with 'eating ice cream beneath the roof of his house' in France while he was aware that a community to which he belonged was at war. The Muslims who 'didn't know' are in this sense excused, because the massacred community only testify against those who 'know and can see'.

In Mimoun's case, it was less the snippets of religious knowledge than bravery in the face of the humiliation encountered during his upbringing in the Muslim community that determined his decision to go. The outcome of the 'hypocritical' discussions and the 'fuss' about Syria – Mimoun said that this environment, among the young people in his neighbourhood, characterised the period in 2011 – resulted from viewing the testimony about rape and the picture painted by a Syrian woman of 'contraceptive

pills'. But this woman was addressing the 'community of Muslims', which, in addition to the feeling of absolute solidarity in response to the violence described, required a decision to belong to this highly transnational community. In both these cases, guilt and the feeling of solidarity with a society that was distant in terms of nationalism and close in terms of community loyalty lie at the heart of the decisions.

The context of the Arab Spring led to defensive action: to help the people being massacred. This defensive perspective permeated some of the interviews, contrasting with the 'positive' perspective of the Arab Spring, the mobilisations and the political counter-attack. The latter, as we have seen, was demonstrated in the Syrians' bravery when they confronted the regime. In the circles of jihadi migration, this positive perspective was also present when the decision to go was made on the basis of a utopia critiquing not just modern government – in the Assad regime's fascist form – but also in the terrorist, totalitarian format of Islamic State. We will see in other people's stories how this positive framing was embodied in a hitherto understudied idea.

The varied frames of incentives for leaving for the revolution and war in Syria oscillate between these two end points: leaving in the name of a utopia that might be shared in the revolutionary space provided by Syria; or committing oneself to respond to the political and military emergency imposed by the brutalisation of the insurgent society. It was on the spectrum between these two options that the sociological study of the migrants for jihad and their ideas can be located.

Each scenario must therefore be identified taking into account the relationships of these migrants to the political timing of the events in 2011. Another condition emerged while the research was under way: understanding their motivations entails taking seriously their bonds of loyalty to the values of religious solidarity learned in the family, fuelled by belief in a God worthy of adoration in the lands of postcolonial immigration in Europe. In the cases of Mourad and Mimoun, it was more the second option that prevailed, a commitment under the pressure of the emergency stemming from the repression in Syria, and loyalty to the values of Muslim families. Belief in God made possible a transnational solidarity and loyalty that extended as far as accepting death, provided that the enemy were clearly identifiable. We will see that this loyalty was to stop when the civil war broke out, and it became more difficult to distinguish the enemy, which resulted in people returning home.

These departures were thus rooted in learning about a solidarity intrinsic to families. In the case of Muslim communities that witnessed their children leaving, the point is not about creating political controversy over the supposed role of French and Belgian politics in the exclusion of their families, but just to observe the extent to which Syria and Islam – and also Palestine, as Mimoun states – offer a unique meaning for young people in the second generation of immigration. During the Arab Spring, the words ‘Muslim fraternity’ and ‘guilt’ in the face of inaction, a feeling of ‘hypocrisy’, etc., form the core of Mourad’s and Mimoun’s commitments, as well as those of other interviewees who went to Syria. However, for many of them, like Mourad, ‘home’ was still France – and the Belgians interviewed say the same. They built a political dialectic based on their religious and existential loyalty, but the critique of ‘home’ is also a reason for leaving – and returning – as Mourad says.

Montassir: *On that topic, hadn’t people had enough of home?*

Mourad: *Of France?... Well, that was part of the process of leaving. Not having had enough, but it was more like we felt guilty. [...]*

Montassir: *Feeling bored...*

Mourad: *No. In hindsight, I say no. But when we were in it, at the time, we said: ‘France is done. Fuck France’. Today, in hindsight, no.*

In the case of these two respondents, the repression in Syria had stimulated solidarities and values transmitted within the family, as well as those already experienced from living on estates with bad reputations in distant suburbs. However, the solidarity with, and loyalty to the values of brotherhood, plus a feeling of duty brought on by guilt were specific neither to areas of urban decline nor to Muslim spaces of immigration from former colonies. A sociological profile using economics as its basis could never account for the intensity of commitment of the French and Belgians who went to Syria, nor for the criminal futures of a tiny minority of them. Mourad’s mother, Selma, likes to reiterate what other mothers keep saying in the meetings of families organised in the context of this research, in Paris and Brussels.

Selma: *Unlike what a minister has said, our sons are not delinquents, they all had bac + 3 or bac + 5 (qualifications = years of study after age 16), they had jobs, flats, fiancées, they were leading their lives, they went out, they were going to get married, etc. They weren't delinquents and none of them had criminal records. No criminal records! Where is the delinquency in that? There isn't any!*¹²²

A utopia cannot be reduced to acts of departure and bearing arms to defend people considered to be your own. Of course, facing death – accepting it as Mourad and Mimoun say in the extracts of their interviews above, and making the fate of a ‘distant people’ into your own fate – are acts of a form of radicality that this analysis must address. This radicality teaches us about a politics that is exceptional in European countries that present themselves as peaceful, especially when young people know the cost of such an enterprise and are aware of the dominant opinion that equates them going to Syria with treason, and when they know what happens next: the implementation of counterterrorist laws that criminalise and punish all those who left for Syria from 2014.¹²³

The fraternal solidarity of the converts and their families

In order to illustrate the depth of a phenomenon exceeding all the organisational logic of a ‘jihadist’ Islam, we can point to the issue of converts communicating other forms of loyalty, not truly embedded in Muslim tradition, through their involvement. In the group of families set up in France, I consulted with around sixty parents for a long time. Over half of them were non-Muslims who had accepted and supported the conversion of their children, who then went to Syria. In Belgium, there were far fewer than this proportion, and the converts made up a minority of those leaving for Syria.¹²⁴

Among the interviews that particularly mark this research include those with mothers talking about the lives of their sons who died in Syria, especially the mothers of converts. They reveal this network of fraternal and solidarity-based politics woven around Syria and the ‘Muslim cause’, undergirded by values drawn from other traditions. I do not know whether the following dialogue, with Catherine, will have the same effect on the reader as it did me. Catherine is a fifty-five year-old woman, from the urban middle-classes of a large city on the Côte-d’Azur talking about exchanges she had with her son, Émile. The latter, a brilliant student

heading for a career in the upper classes, went to Syria, where he died in an International Coalition bombing raid in late 2014.

Our respondent talked about the past that inhabited her, entailing a feeling of proximity to Algeria, which she had encountered because of her father's involvement in the war there. She then told us about the exchanges with her son when he was in Syria: the seriousness of the adventure is evidenced by the tears, the emotions, the doubts and the convictions articulated during the war. A story that was probably to be a resource in the decision to show solidarity with Syria.

Catherine: I had a really strong connection to Algeria. It's very strange, but I feel like it's kind of my country. I don't know why, but rightly, my parents got married when they returned from Algeria and I was conceived in that atmosphere. Because my father was doing military service in France when the Algerian War broke out. Then he was deployed down there. He hadn't retained any connection with that country, either friends or work. But I'm the one who feels that I have a stronger link with Algeria. How could I have picked that up as a small baby? I have no idea, but anyway, I feel very close to Algeria.

Montassir: Have you been there?

C.: No, I've never been to Algeria. My father did as well as my mother. When they came back from Algeria, my parents got married. My mother was pregnant with me. And it's true that while I was a child, I heard them linking my birth to Algeria, all the time. I wasn't really paying attention, but it's natural now because I used to hear that. There were photos of my father when he was in Algeria with a little Kabyle girl on his knee, etc. I don't know but I picked up a lot of things about Algeria, and it feels really close. When I hear French people or Algerians talking about their experiences of the war, something resonates with me. [...] My father was part of the generation that experienced hardships. The Algerian War was a difficult event for that generation. People still refuse to call it a 'war'. There was something in the relationship between France and Algeria that is to do with denial, with the unspoken. There are lots of things that aren't acknowledged. It's serious though. I think for that generation that was sent there when the young people were often only eighteen ... I think a lot of them came back traumatised. [...]

M.: Did Émile know all that?

C.: Yes, we spoke about it. [...]

M.: Tell me about when he left ...

C.: He left a few days before the planned date. He'd told me he was going to, of course, ... Algeria, to practice his new religion. He was supposed to leave on 1 October, but he left on 25 September, not for Algeria, but for Syria. And we didn't know that.

M.: So he said nothing about Syria?

C.: No, nothing. The Syria thing came completely out of the blue. I didn't see it coming at all, at all. I was sure he was going to Algeria.

M.: Did you have contact with him once he'd arrived in Syria?

C.: Yes, yes. He left at the end of September 2012, and he called me in December. He didn't tell me where he was straight away, but because of the country code, I realised he was in Türkiye. After three months, at the end of 2012, he finally told me where he was.

M.: What did he say about his life out there?

C.: It changed over the two years he spent in Syria. At the beginning he was highly emotional when we spoke. It was very moving for him. He cried and we cried together. It was very hard. He had an enthusiasm that came back to him: 'I'm here for Allah; Allah wants me to be here', he used to say. I think things were really tough for him. It was war, right? And at the same time, he was convinced and more and more determined about his fate in all that.

M.: Did he tell you anything about the group he was involved with?

C.: In the beginning, he told me he was at the Turkish-Syrian border and was being put up in a mosque. In that mosque he met a man who was in the FSA. And that's how he entered Syria.

M.: With the FSA?

C.: Yes. [...] Later, I know when he was in Aleppo, he was fighting and injured his finger. I think he was at the front, that's what I understood. He didn't tell me anything specific, and I had to guess a lot. He spoke about Hezbollah, which was there fighting against his group when he was in Aleppo in 2013. Then, in March 2014, he sent me a message saying he was leaving for Eastern Syria. [...] I didn't realise immediately. Iraq is to the East. It was Deir ez-Zur.

M.: *With the Islamic State?*

C.: He never told me that. Never said the words. I am pretty sure he was with the Nusra Front at the start. That was the group in Aleppo. Afterwards, when he went to Deir ez-Zur, I don't know what group he was with.

M.: *Did he call you then?*

C.: Yes, yes. He spoke to me about the fighting. He told me they were fighting the PKK in Deir ez-Zur. But he didn't talk about his own group. [...]

M.: *How did you find out he had died?*

C.: [Silence.] I got a call from one of his friends, from Deir ez-Zur. A man who was about thirty, I guess. He called me the day after Émile passed. We spoke a little bit. [Silence.] Presumably they were in a house ... and a bomb exploded, and it was an internal haemorrhage. [...]

M.: *Have you written anything about this?*

C.: Too much right now. I've written a lot. If peace returns to Syria, I'd like to go there too. [Silence, tears.] On the one hand, I understand, and on the other, I tell myself that the young people who went there didn't realise what a mess they were going into. [Tears.] How can I live without him? What can we do to live without them? There's no answer to that. Nobody can answer that. And it's not just in France that we have to look for answers to this tragedy. When I think about the Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi mothers who are in the same boat as me... I think about them. As a Western woman, I know there aren't many people here that are going through what I am, and what Dominique Bons and other mothers are experiencing.¹²⁵ So I'm a product of this world, but not completely part of it. You have

to take a step back from the Western way of life. What's happening, apparently, is not relevant to many people.

M.: Did Émile get involved with other causes apart from Syria? Segregation in the suburbs, social deprivation?

C.: Behind his faith, there were other political issues. Social justice, obviously. I also have that consciousness and we shared it. Moreover, in our phone conversations when he was out there, he clearly said: 'But mum, you know your values are my values'. When I read and get interested in the world, I tell myself I should stop. It's unbelievable that people are still suffering like that, being beaten and bombed, and that they find themselves in these situations, caught between others' interests. At some point, that's enough. It can't go on, this Western denial where everyone is looking to you as the model for the free world. A free world but at what price? The price other people pay. How long can that last?

M.: Did he share that political perspective on the situation here?

C.: Of course, of course. We agreed about that. On Palestine too. When you're twenty and have a sensitive heart, how can you not be disgusted by oppression? Obviously. Similarly, my own culture is the ideal of the 1970s. I'm the child of these ideals of peace and non-violence. That's for sure. That was the Left. But Socialists now, I've moved away from them completely. I can't look at them anymore. A bunch of phonies, they make me sick. And all these statements and 'Je suis Charlie's', I'm not buying it at all. Even my parents, who were on the Gaullist right... a few days ago, my mum said, when we were talking about the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, without in any way excusing murder, 'At that moment, I am not Charlie. No. You can't just make a joke and talk about anything you want'.¹²⁶

The choice to bring her mother's voice back into a conversation focused on people returning from Syria is justified by the fact that she expresses a number of political positions you find among the families as well as the migrants for jihad. She speaks in the name of someone who has passed and can no longer speak. She recalls the intimacy of the mother-son dialogue in war time that a researcher can't access, however inwardly-focused the study may be. Lastly, the subject of these extracts is the transmission of values at a level above organisations and ideologies. Catherine demonstrates these forms of fraternity based on non-Muslim

traditions, marking a whole generation of converts who find in Islam a path of reaffiliation to tried and tested values within the family, and to the utopian ideas and critiques of Western tradition. The connection with Syria is based, from this perspective, on the values of the 'Left'. Émile, in the thick of combat, says to his mother, claiming the heritage of 1968: 'But mum, you know your values are my values'. Highlighting the deafening silence of Western governments – which have historically been responsible for sustaining regimes as criminal as the Syrian Baath Party – the actors interviewed and their families counterattack by pointing out the 'moral responsibility' of the international community.

Mourad: In some ways we went to do the UN's work, right? Do you think I would have gone if the United Nations had mobilised to stop the massacre in Syria? All these people would never have left, even though a lot of them believed in setting up a sharia society. But in terms of sharia, the jihad concept has always been there, it didn't start with Syria. What's new on the other hand, was the regime massacring people, and the chance to do something new instead. But we have to admit, with Daesh, all that's now dead in the water'.¹²⁷

The migrants for jihad we spoke to took ownership of the political nature of their emigration. However, this politics entailed a set of ideas and strategies rarely explored and often denied in the discourse on radicalisation. By framing their journeys within a solidarity proposed in a time of political exception,¹²⁸ my respondents indicated the political reasons for, and the nature of the utopia that had led them to unpredictable places. The following chapter looks at the unique characteristics of, and the political stakes underpinning this solidarity when they emigrated.

CHAPTER 8

The political wellsprings of millennialist and religious commitments

‘The very idea of the dawn of a millennial kingdom on earth always contained a revolutionizing tendency, and the Church made every effort to paralyse this situationally transcendent idea with all the means at its command [...] Longings which up to that time had been either unattached to a specific goal or concentrated upon other-worldly objectives suddenly took on a mundane complexion. They were now felt to be realizable—here and now—and infused social conduct with a singular zeal’.

Karl Mannheim (*Ideology and Utopia*, 1954: 190-191).

Mannheim’s note highlighted above concerns the ‘millennialist’ utopia of Jesus Christ on Earth’s one-thousand-year reign (‘millennium’) promoted as we have seen, in the early sixteenth century by the Anabaptist movement, led by German pastor, Thomas Münzer. This experience has long fascinated socialist intellectuals faced with reactionary ideology and the flaws of the communist promise. In the twentieth century, questions of culture and liberation theology were thus reinvigorated by ideas that aspired to resolve the contradictions within the notions of progress (Canguilhem, 1987), representative democracy and bureaucratic organisation. In the West, it was particularly Michel Foucault who developed this critical project – initiated by Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Marx in the nineteenth century, and later by thinkers such as Gramsci and Benjamin. In a genealogical study, Foucault (2004) uses the term ‘counter-conduct movements’ for those forces that theology placed in resistance to the ‘process of modern governmentalisation’.

The history of these movements goes back to Europe in the Middle Ages, the period when the great instruments of governmentality and subjugation were forged. In Foucault’s work, Christian millennialism, like mystique and the appeal for a return to holy texts, is a modality of inflection and resistance to a government power that dictates men’s conduct (Hadji, 2021; Lorenzi, 2017). Parallel to the growth of a governmentality that controlled people’s behaviour in the late Middle Ages, a unique critique was formulated: in Foucault’s eyes, in response to the process of the

new powers unleashed, ‘something seems to have been created in Europe at that time, a kind of general cultural form, both a moral and political attitude, a way of thinking, etc., and which I would call simply the art of not being governed, or the art of not being governed in that way and at that price. So I would suggest, like any embryonic definition of a critique, this general characterisation: the art of not really being governed’ (Foucault, 2015: 37). Lastly, Foucault sees a parallel to be made between a governmentality created by the Church, guiding not only the collective, but also the soul of each individual – that secular law subsequently only amplified – and a critique that also leveraged writing to challenge behaviour, and attack the powers stemming from it¹²⁹ (Martijn de Koning, Carmen Becker and Ineke Roex: 2020).

Millennialism and Qutbism

This Foucauldian perspective, coupled with Mannheim’s work on sixteenth-century millennialist utopia help us assemble the ideas of the European migrants for jihad, intrinsic as they are to Muslim culture. As we have begun to note already, these ideas oscillated between two end points depending on the situations and periods in question: on the one hand, a positive utopian critique formulated in relation to secular modern government, and on the other, a macabre collapse into a negative utopia carried out in a terrorist state that also claimed legitimacy from a sacred text. Both these options were abandoned in response to the impact of security-focused laws and practices sacrificing fundamental rights and poisoning a confrontational situation with complicated roots. And the dominant political discourses attributed these diverse and contingent migrant journeys to the deterministic outcome of a terrorist project. These discourses dislodged the fragments of a generation of ‘migrant for jihad’ thought from the ‘positive utopian critique’ by linking it irrevocably to terrorism, and unconditionally vindicating counterterrorist laws, going so far as to normalise the stripping of nationality. In response to a politics of homogenisation that prevents us from understanding the phenomenon, we have to explore the pathways of an alternative knowledge of the violence it caused. This chapter and the next will show these contingencies, and make these sets of ideas explicit, with simultaneously modern and millennialist foundations, the result of the history and social space on which these migrant journeys and returns were based.

Even if they do not claim to identify with the concept of jihad, and present their involvement as solely an effect of the contingency of the Arab Spring and the imperative to defend the Syrians, most of the migrants to Syria were aware of the spectre haunting the period from 2011, namely the very issue of jihad and the utopia of new society resulting from Muslim immigration: the Caliphate. Indeed, this spectre was not a prerequisite for emigration, but emigration was often considered a phase in the collective experience of 'being Muslim'. A 'being' that, in an old political tradition like Islam, refers to the concept of *tawhîd*. This term, which literally means 'divine uniqueness', and expresses the monotheism of Islam, was reinterpreted in an Islamic tradition confronted with colonisation through ideas organised in resistance to the colonial structuring of the 'Muslim world'. This restructuring aimed to overthrow modern colonial domination and the systems of political representation that become established in this practice of domination.

The *tawhîd*, which we find across all the threads and schools of Islamic thought, was actually reconstructed when Islam was confronted with colonisation based on an interpretation seeking to rediscover the glory of a society imagined as a system, with its own values and modes of organisation. The most radical formulation of a project initiated by the first Arab Salafist movements (Laroui, 1967; Luizard, 2006)¹³⁰ can be found in the theoretical reflections referred to above by the Egyptian activist and thinker Sayyid Qutb¹³¹ and his intellectual mentor, the Pakistani, Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoudi (1903-1979) (Al-Mawdoudi, 1978; Nasr, 1996). According to the way these two authors conceptualise it, *tawhîd* – and therefore political Islam – only exists when linked to *hakimiyya* (God's judgement and sovereignty). In this way, Qutb shows that the path of the *tawhîd* consists in man freeing himself from the judgement of administrations and modern governments, because 'the statement that there is no God but God, means only one thing: that supreme government and sovereignty belong only to God. God alone governs people's lives. He alone governs the order of the universe and people, by His judgement and His destiny. He alone governs people's lives, by His method and by His law' (Qutb, 2011: 1255). Lastly, in order for *hakimiyya* to see the light of day, Qutb shows the path that must be followed. It can be summarised as the challenge to two principles of modern government, namely, *jahiliyya* (ignorance) and domination by a *taghout* (tyrant). The former is manifested in the 'government of men by men' (Qutb, 2011: 557), the 'absolute

of rational laws' and the new 'nationalisms that invade the entire world'. The latter refers both to the political leaders representing Muslims, and their strategies of sovereignty and government (constitutions, parliaments, police, courts, etc.).

This summary of Qutb's ideas does not exist in the 'head' of migrants for jihad as it is set out here, but it informs a majority pattern each time its supporters refer to the political order to which they are opposed, whether that be when they emigrate, or when they return to Europe. When they use some of Qutb's concepts that they deploy in each political comment, we should hear a double critique.

The first reflects an idea about the experience of the Muslim tradition facing colonisation: for my respondents, this refers to the issue of origins, the particularity of a culture perceived as oppressed, and to the international war practiced by the Western powers, etc. The second results from the rejected experience of a modernity that has produced institutions such as government, school, justice, administration, police, political representatives, etc.

The emigration based on this double critique must be understood in the sense of an aspiration to the Millenium (i.e. millennialism) examined by Mannheim. It is not simply the desire to do battle with the world, or to pursue a criminal project that *ab initio* drives some rare cases of terrorist trajectories. Moreover, unlike the mystic who lives 'in memories or nurses a nostalgia for ecstasy' (Mannheim, 1954: 193), the millennialist focuses on the present with a conviction that he can transform it, regardless of the historical conditions that prevent the implementation of the living word from the holy text. The life of the millennialist accepts this word in its immediacy, as a superior value. However, this 'life' is unexpectedly transformable since it is tormented by the present; it thus seeks the truth in the text and, in that sense, it is afraid of errors, or 'false' interpretations, more than the political constraints that lay siege to it. But above all, it claims the legitimacy of a collective superior to the veracity of the laws. And it is indeed this collective, which we call community, family or group of brothers, that directs action. We will see this in some of the accounts by returnees from Syria, as in the doubt that goes hand in hand with emigration to, and staying in the place 'where the world is transformed' that is revolutionary Syria.

We therefore understand that the idea of the Millenium as Mannheim defined it does not correspond to what the Islamic State practiced. We

have seen that the Caliphate's state order established here by a generation of men – especially Iraqis dealing with the ‘theft’ of their state in the wake of the Western invasion – was purely violent and security-focused, guided exclusively by a narrow and static interpretation of holy texts (chapter 6). If we have to keep the word ‘millennium’ at any price to describe this statist organisation, it would then be a ‘literalist millennium’, which means a negative utopia. As for the ‘spiritualist millennium’ – a term I adopt to describe the goal of emigration to make jihad – this would be associated with the positive utopia that can be grasped from the testimonies of migrants for jihad and their insiders’ critiques. These critiques were formulated by the Syrian revolution, several Iraqi communities engaged in action against the IS, and a lot of Arab and European migrants disillusioned by their experience of the statist enterprise of the so-called Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. In the following section of this book, the terms ‘millennium’ and ‘millennialism’ thus refer to this second, positive, form of utopia, part of the spirit of the Arab Spring and the traditions established by postcolonial Islamic communities in the West.

The Arab Springs and the Islamic project in the here and now

In chapter 6, I introduced Abou Abdallah, a Tunisian migrant encountered in Kirkuk in 2017 after fleeing the Islamic State, for which he had been an administrator. His concept of jihad reflected complex ideas that led him to become aware of the various abuses by Daesh and to flee it, contrasting this state to the utopian jihad that he advocated with other migrants. In the interviews with the European migrants who identified with the idea of jihad, the motivations for ‘desertion’ in their departures can be found. When they were released from prison in France and Belgium, the protagonists in this chapter still claimed adherence to the same definition of ‘departure’, but revisited it in the light of their experiences in Syria and incarceration, while rejecting the overlap between their strategy and the terrorist vision, produced by the counterterrorist laws and the courts’ treatment of radicalisation.

In the cases of my respondents who were passionate defenders of the utopia advocated by Qutb, emigration was considered a passage to the experience of a religion practiced *here and now* in all its social dimensions, rather than lived in the ecstasy of a Sufist facing the past, or in the autarchic opposition of the Salafist.¹³² It is a religion that asks questions

and refuses to exist under the law and its institutions, a religion that devotes respect to descent, hence the ‘white’ lie for the mother preceding each departure, and the imminent return to her, and lastly, a religion that seeks to change the world while rejecting its exploitation as ‘cannon fodder’ by those who want to create a new state order based on the same principles as the old world, while instrumentalising Islam. This perspective can be heard in Abou Abdallah’s interview (see chapter 6). ‘Islam here and now’ thus means a counter-project to the Islamic State’s. For my respondents, this entailed a radical critique of the formation of a state based on war, security considerations and the intrusion of texts into the intimate worlds of the believers, in the name of the ‘law’.

In the words of the French and the Belgians, I find this type of discourse to be both millennialist and lucid responses to the realities of the modern world. They remind me of the utopian enterprise combining a political critique of the institutions of their home societies with an insurgent power resisting the totalitarian politics created by the statist jihad in Syria as represented by the Islamic State. The interviewees’ stories show the foundations of the critique that primed their departures, as well as the doubts accompanying their commitment.

This is true of Abderrahmane, a young Belgian who left in 2014 to join his brother, convinced he would change the world by showing his solidarity with the Syrian people. This solidarity was not thought of as an opportunity to achieve other concealed objectives of jihad. It saw the events of 2011 and the fight against the al-Assad regime as being part of a millennialist appeal launched by Muslims. Just like Mimoun, Abderrahmane was a professional athlete and earned a good living before emigrating. He left for Syria in 2013 and returned the same year. Arrested in his hometown, Mons, several months after his return, he was sentenced to a 5-year term and incarcerated. This ardent opponent of the IS had joined Nusra and he made explicit the meaning that he accorded to the term ‘jihad’ as much in Syria as he did after he returned, based on his experience of Islam from within the Moroccan immigrant community in Belgium and on his interpretation of Qutbist tradition.

He locates his departure at the confluence of three separate streams: first, a millennialist vision from within a long Muslim tradition; next, an informed contemporary analysis of the Syrian situation when the possibilities opened up in 2011; and lastly, identification with the values of Muslim morality and brotherhood learned in immigrant Muslim

communities. These three areas also underpin his critique of the Islamic State, which he briefly encountered in Syria.

Abderrahmane: *Here [in Belgium], they try as hard as possible to give a stereotypical image of people who left. They don't understand that what happened in Syria is a cause that exceeds their imagination. There's an al-akhira [beyond] in it. In other words, this element that the West doesn't get. Why did people leave? Of course, several were not religious before they left, but they did know that God can forgive everything overnight. Repentance is not a minor thing for these people. In Ibn Taymiyya's well-known phrase: 'The shortcut to heaven is jihad'.*

Montassir: *When you left, there was the Syria issue going on...*

A: *When we talk about the Syrian revolution, for us – for me anyway, and for many Muslims – it's not just any old revolution, and it's not just something historical in our century, but something historically significant, even since the prophet Adam, 'alayhi salam [peace be upon him]. And that, I say that as a Muslim. Because since the Prophet Mohammed ("may God's prayers and peace be with him") was sent, and after him the sahaba [companions], and then the kingdoms considered Caliphates, the Muslims had their own civilisation and their own history. And what we are living through is just a rough time for us. It's an exceptional century where we've lost – with the Ottoman Empire – Islamic courts, sharia and this Muslim union and these representatives who might prevent certain people who'd like to harm Muslims from the borders of the Muslim world. As the well-known French preacher who was arrested not long ago, Hassan Iquissen used to say, [...] 'since we lost the Ottoman Empire, Islam has become a body without a head'. It's a phrase that I haven't forgotten. We've been like orphans.*

So there was the Syrian revolution and of course the Tunisian one too; but Syria, the Sham,¹³³ it's the land of the prophets. At the time, I told people around me: 'God is great, we're living through something historical'. Because, if God wishes it, according to the hadith, the return of the Khilāfa 'alā minhāj annoubou'a [the Caliphate on the path of the prophecy] would exist. Of course, we don't know how long this would take, but we're experiencing a transition between the tyrants falling and the return of al 'adl [justice], the return of Islam to the path of the prophesy.

And so for me, this revolution, even though it is spoken about less nowadays in the media, I tell myself that it's unstoppable. As a Muslim, what has happened will only stop when the 'alāmât al koub râ [the great signs of the resurrection]

come. That is why for me, this revolution is not some small thing. There are many hadith on the superiority [fadl] of Sham: the Prophet who said three times 'I advise you, the Sham', 'when there are fitan [troubles], belief will find itself in the Sham', etc. People here don't understand this love of Syria, why people from all over the world come to Syria. It's because the Sham occupies a symbolically privileged place for Muslims. And it was incredible how easy it was to get there.

Personally, I experienced how easy it was: at the Turkish-Syrian border where I crossed, there was a river, and the Turkish army with its tanks, and the Syrians on the other side. They were back to back, and as soon as the Turkish army turned its back people crossed in both directions. Pedestrians who were waiting, and cars ready to cross. Those who wanted to leave Syria, and those who wanted to get into Syria were waiting. I saw the Turkish soldiers do their shift as a formality. As soon as they left, I saw a boy who came out of nowhere, and who jumped into the river and took out a big pot and some rope. He pulled on the rope, and I got into the pot, and was pulled across to the other bank of the river. There were women and children fleeing Syria, and us on the other side. That's how I got into Syria.

M.: *Was the word 'Caliphate' (khilāfa) important for you from the outset?*

A.: *That word gave me so much pleasure when I heard it. I think Westerners wanted to erase it from our memories. One day I heard a journalist on Arte saying: 'For Muslims, it is just a small page of history that will be turned: they have had fourteen centuries of Caliphate'. When I heard that I said to myself, finally there's someone talking sense.*

For me, and for my brothers, al-Baghdadi [Head of the Islamic State from 2014 to 2019] was not the Caliph of the Muslims: he was the boss of his own group. Dawla was just a group like any other. Because, of course, wanting to become chief of everyone in Syria was a massive mistake. Yet the word Caliphate pleased me, if only for the fact that it reminded Westerners that our history is different from theirs. I will tell you about how I have nothing to do with Daesh and its so-called Caliphate. Moreover, neither me nor my brother were in Daesh: we were in Nusra'.¹³⁴

In our five interviews, Abderrahmane always drew my attention to 'something' he cared about, namely the 'rou'ya' (dreams) he had every day since his childhood. After returning from Syria, dreams would play a crucial role, he confided: 'Reminding him of, and bringing back his brother,

who died in Syria, and whose body was buried near Aleppo'. Beyond his millennialist religiosity, whose roots lie in his family upbringing, in the scriptures and in the condition of his community in a country where he feels he is treated 'in a racist way, like a pariah', it was this brother whom he went to accompany in jihad alongside the Syrians. This matter of dreams indeed turned out to be vital in several pathways: several interviewees were keen to tell me long and detailed 'visions' that had accompanied their plans to leave and to return.

These dreams and visions were also regularly referred to in their critiques of the IS. We saw how these two visions met, antagonistically, in the IS: one violent and nationalist, the other – finally defeated – seeing the Caliphate as a society liberated from the dictates of its leaders and its normative laws, and rejecting vengeful attacks on and massacres of civilians (see chapter 6). Abderrahmane's appeal to an exit from the world into the Caliphate is therefore connected to an anti-scriptural millennialism among the jihadi migrants within the IS. This appeal was characterised by the condemnation of the IS, which is seen as having incorrectly altered the meaning of the Caliphate, and by claiming affiliation with a spirituality in action, as a safeguard against extremism, and the literal application of the holy texts. In this positive millennialist approach, the texts were supposed to 'be one with each of the actors' instead of embodying a law outside the collective and individual existence (as in the case of Daesh). This need for a spirituality to accompany the idea of *tawhîd* was continually revisited by Abderrahmane and other interviewees. He thus quickly utilised the references to an anti-disciplinary tradition based on a collective everyday morality.

Abderrahmane: I was shocked by the people who had reduced jihad to the fight against the regime. There was also behaviour, prayers, speaking about dīne and reading the Quran. When I arrived in Syria and was waiting for my brother to come and get me in the countryside where I was with the FSA, the first thing I did was read the Quran to people. And they were thirsty. They gathered round me quickly and we read together. When I wanted to leave, people told me they missed having darss [religious classes]. [...] And it's also upbringing: we're brought up to respect our superiors, not to look them in their face or raise our voices to them, etc. And Sufism is not an absolute evil, on the contrary, it's part of our traditions. Sure, you shouldn't make do with Sufism alone, but Sufism is necessary for us, like preaching, like the effort our brothers put in for da'wa [preaching].¹³⁵

What differentiates the abstract idea of radicalisation from religion education and various forms of solidarity is indeed this plural anchoring in collective life that channels a religion and its translation, and then a politics that couples spirituality with action. Action which does not use religion as a means to an end other than religion itself, the manifestation of God in everyone, and in the group. Religion is perceived as a value in itself, destined to make the prophetic promise reign *here and now* in the very body of the follower.

Political opposition and the quest for recognition: the legacy of the colonial wound

The encounter with young people returning from Syria revealed the importance of a dimension rarely accounted for, and which complements the issue of millennialism, that is, a body of oppositional political thought incorporating a nationalist dynamic, dislodging conflict into the religious sphere. It opens up to national history and follows current affairs while subjecting them to critique drawn from several religious and secular traditions. Lastly, the beating heart of this set of ideas is a quest for recognition,¹³⁶ rooted in a dissenting urban culture and a history of decolonial, antiracist social movements.

As we have noted, in positive millennialist politics, one's involvement is in opposition to a total system, via the rejection of large-scale institutions (laws, administrations, nationality, borders, injustices, etc.). The millennialist activist bases their critique less on reactions to acts by the national government than on a counterattack against a global system viewed as responsible for repression in which the al-Assad regime is merely a bit player. The Muslim millennialist adds a specific rider to this general repression, identifying where it affects 'religion and Muslims'. Yet this inevitably overlaps with opposition to the national government, and that challenge is a basis for arguments in the religious critique levelled by one segment of the migrants for jihad, who often utilise controversies and critical authors in this way. References to those controversies use arguments from public debates requiring a traditional rational, secular thesis/antithesis type of argument, often depending on a critical configuration of the media. The political authors and public figures mobilised like this are not part of the left-right or Muslim-Secular binaries: they are utilised to judge the inner workings of the democratic system and show the flaws

of an electoral regime deemed to be to blame for the problems of a generation separated from political representation, and which is searching for a distant sense of its own codes of political representation. These stakes were prominent in the thoughts of the migrants for jihad. After returning to France, Rafik for example, told us about the ongoing debates in the ‘quartiers d’évaluation de la radicalisation’ (Radicalisation Assessment Neighbourhoods) (QERs).¹³⁷

Rafik: *In the QER, you’ve got the SPIP (services pénitentiaires d’insertion et de probation/ Integrational and Probation Correctional Services) that come and talk to us in a one-on-one interview at the beginning. But there was one at the start that was weird. I think it was someone from the Intelligence service. Usually, the SPIP can’t even find Syria on a map, but this guy knew all the dates and what was happening on the ground over there. [...] It was when the Yellow Vests were operating, so I spoke to the SPIP about the Yellow Vests. And I meant it when I told them: ‘Look at the media and the politicians. They use the same discourse to say they are radicals, as soon as things don’t go how they want them to. It’s always the same jargon: radical, moderate, extremist, rebel, etc.’ When you control the news, you can make the comparison with us: they treated the Yellow Vests like they treated us.*

And as I didn’t have much to do in prison, I started reading philosophy books. So I talked to my SPIP about Rousseau and the ‘Social Contract’, about ‘Thus Spake Zarathustra’ by Nietzsche, Plato’s ‘Republic’. Those were the only types of book I read in prison. And it was really interesting. It enabled me to speak to them about democracy starting from Rousseau. I used to tell them: ‘It’s Rousseau who said that’. He’s actually one of the founding fathers who said that democracy is a utopian system that only suits the Gods, implying ‘beings superior to the norm’. While he showed that democracy can bring out bad things in us, because it stokes our passions so much. I also made comparisons about the impossibility of democracy working properly. It worked in Greece because it was only for a limited number of men. Around 12,000. That isn’t possible nowadays.

Montassir: *Are all those things debated in the QER?*

R.: *Yeah. It’s all individual, in an interview.*

M.: *And how did you end up choosing those books?*

R.: *Because I already had books on religion where there were footnotes referring to those other books. There were books that deconstruct democracy from A to Z using thinkers on democracy as sources. I remember reading a book by Maurice Bucaille [1920-1998], 'The Bible, the Quran and Science'. In this book, I found other books that intrigued me, noted them down and began to read because the library in that prison was well stocked.*

It's really useful because it allows you to understand the arguments made in their own books. Because you can't tell them that 'Islam says...', or 'the Quran says ...', because when you start talking about arguments drawn from the Quran, they reject the whole of Islam. People like to say that democracy is the best system, but that's not what its masterminds say about it. And it's also a system that flows directly from Christianity and the Church. This reading also enabled me to get a better understanding of French history, that I only knew about through isolated dates. I began to understand the Jacobins and their extremists, that's the Hébertists who cut people's heads off. I read about the Vendée massacres, the history of religion in France, etc.

So all that is very helpful for when you argue with them. They at least find out that you've thought about it properly and didn't end up at sharia overnight. And even when I was in prison, I told them that for me, the reading only reinforced the idea that sharia is a better path, that the law of Allah is a better system. And I heard the civil servants who work for the prison saying: 'They are going to come out of prison and do the same thing again', But it makes no sense to say that, they don't know what they're talking about.

When it comes to discourses on political Islam, or opposition to national politics, the critique articulated by migrants for jihad and the young people prosecuted for terrorism takes various themes traditionally found in the space of urban riots and tolerated protest movements.¹³⁸ But two other specific questions recur quite frequently in this research: the first is people's feelings about postcolonial racism and social inequalities, and the second is their positioning in the field of discourses on Islam, the problem of the 'suburbs', and the population descended from postcolonial immigration.

First, the politics of 'recognition' of rights crosses the spectrum of the initial criticism formulated by the young people we met, and refers to the feeling of inferiority springing from colonial history. Several interviewees thus raise the question of 'Algeria' or 'Palestine', before placing Islam as a dividing line between two antagonistic worlds. These themes

are added to the recurring problem in the treatment of people's origins and the condition of parents who were part of the generation of working-class immigration. From this awareness, a geopolitical reading of the conflict is produced, involving a self-distancing from the 'nation' and a sometimes-unconditional solidarity with Muslims in the period of colonial invasions. The discourse mobilising Islam in the West, as articulated by the descendants of postcolonial immigration, needs to be attached to people living in regions from which Islam emanated. This is a situation reminiscent of the young middle-class activists pursuing Marxist ideals in the West Germany of the 1960s and 1970s, and their need to attach themselves to a proletariat from which they were socially and materially separated.¹³⁹

Hence a critical stance that places culture and identity at the heart of its opposition to government politics. This critique engages with the state's story of itself to condemn racism, social inequalities and institutional forms of violence. This how we should understand the need that Rafik and others express, to make use of the 'authors of republican democracy': to equip themselves to argue over the field of national politics, such is the undertaking that drives this desire to know the history of one's country better than the 'genuine nationals'. Starting with basic theoretical knowledge, the people interviewed reveal their perceptions of the community's collective condition by confronting it with values claiming to be universal but functioning as simple ideologies.

The issues of racism and colonisation thus deeply cleave people's perceptions and afford an ultimate meaning to the political discourse of the 'migrants for jihad'. Generally speaking, the young Muslims deploy knowledge about the community (their parents' migratory experiences, the conditions in their neighbourhoods, experience of school, the courts and the police) to condemn national politics and justify forms of radical solidarity with distant causes. This is how a meaning can be constructed on the basis of a colonial wound, deprived of state recognition and aggravated by particular public policies. When the converts address national politics, a base of guilt about postcolonial racism and rebellion over social inequalities affords a pattern to their criticisms.

Rémy (Belgium): *I was born and lived until the age of twenty in Charleroi, a city that was fairly mixed at the beginning. I saw how in Belgium the neighbourhoods filled by mining and industrial immigration were gradually deserted by us – the*

original populations – to then become areas completely populated by Moroccans. That all changed in no time. When the Whites left, they began to say bad things about the people who stayed. These were violent acts because there was a lot of racism and accusations made about young Moroccans, who suddenly never felt Belgian even though they were living there. I stayed with the people who saved my life when my father threw me out on the street. My family saw me as a delinquent because I hung out with Arabs. In prison, it was also my brothers who saved my life a second time, because that was hard to deal with.

Mourad (France): *And you can't lie to yourself, society points us to that. I think if you're Arab or Black you're five to eight times as likely to be stopped by the police. Society sends us these signals saying that you're not French. When we undergo those kinds of things, we start to wonder why the French treat us like that. We want to know, and we're also humans. So there are significant factors that explain why young people can seek to take back Islam whereas their parents jettisoned it.*¹⁴⁰

Abderrahmane (Belgium): *I told the legal assistants and several other people during and after I was locked up the following thing about racism: when I was little, I went to Morocco on holiday and I used to cry and say to my parents: 'When are we going home?' Because I was born in Belgium. For me, Belgium was my country. My life is here, my family was born here. But now that's over. I've not a drop of Belgian left in me, and I don't feel Belgian at all. For the Moroccans I was a foreigner, amazigh, not speaking darija [a Moroccan dialect of Arabic]. I couldn't even buy bread properly. I was 100% Belgian. I began telling these people, to make them look themselves in the eye: 'You've shown us what Belgium is – we were born here, but actually this isn't our home at all [...]'*

*My brother also went to Syria. He died as a martyr, may Allah accept him. Killed in fighting against the Assad regime. But my brother had left once and for all. After he left, the police carried out searches of all the homes of my family in Belgium. When they came to my place, I told them: 'Do you think my brother's coming back? He's sick of your country! He never wants to come back here!' When they went to my cousin's, he said to them: 'I want to leave too. Do you want to force us to stay here? We don't like you. If that's why you're here, you should know that I want to leave too'. My little sister said: 'I want to go and look for my brother. It's because of you that he left'. During my trial, I arrived with a negative image of everything to do with the police and judges. But after that experience I was more shocked than before. They maltreated us'.*¹⁴¹

Political opposition and revolt in response to media coverage of the ‘problems of Islam’

‘They mistreat us’: this pithy phrase directly expresses the second political motivation of the migrants for jihad, which is to do with the dominant Western discourse on Islam. We have heard this in the interview excerpts: far from the usual acceptance that reduces these migrants’ reasons for involvement to apolitical ideas and an ahistorical religious ideology, they show the complexity of their thinking about religion and their attachment to community by bloodlines and guilt. These complex ideas are expressed particularly in their reactions to the controversies sustained by the dominant discourses on the politics of Islam as a minority religion in Western Europe.

Prior to leaving for Syria, many French and Belgian interviewees constructed their opposition to public figures that punctuated current affairs with their virulent critiques of the ‘problems of Islam’. They openly expressed their opposition to media personalities such as Caroline Fourest, Gilles Kepel, David Thomson, Hugo Micheron, Mohamed Sifaoui, etc. Let us see an illustration of this argument in the interview with Salim, a young man from Liège who went to Syria in 2013 after finishing his master’s in philosophy at a large university in Brussels. Before he emigrated, he joined up with an activist group that combined Islam and left-wing ideas. In these interview extracts, he is talking about his trajectory related to ideas opposed to the dominant discourses about Islam. Once again, we notice the centrality of the Arab Spring and the promise of a ‘new’ world for a transnational generation.

Salim: *I’m Belgian-Tunisian, around thirty, from a Maghrebi immigrant background. But it’s a bit different from the traditional immigration situation because my father had come to work as an imam at a mosque. He went back to Tunisia to study, and get a degree and a master’s in Islamic sharia from Ez-Zitouna University in Tunis. So, since I was little, I had bathed in books. And that’s why, in the sociological profiles they have for people who went to Syria, one Belgian researcher put me in the ‘Che Guevara’ category’ (El Ghabri and Gharbaoui, 2014). (Laughs). It’s a typology.*

I did a little bit of activism with Michel Collon, even though I was brought up Orthodox, Sunni, etc. When I got to university, I already loved reading. I read Chomsky, Bourdieu, etc. I had one foot at home, in the family, the mosque, and the

other in the circles of people talking about Palestine, the Left, antiracism, etc. I organised meetings at the university, but when we boycotted a lecture by Caroline Fourest who came to a university in Brussels in February 2012, I realised that we had been humiliated even while we were working with the dominant system's political categories. For us, we were taking action against the far right, but we were always seen as Arabs and therefore as Islamists. On the evening of that lecture, people called us 'Taliban'.

So I decided to leave this university activist world, and I set up a not-for-profit Muslim group with friends, to try and do something where we'd feel unconstrained. That was our response to the establishment of a movement in France that had inspired us in Belgium: it was 'Ana Muslim' (I am Muslim). This also coincided with the publication of Aïssam Aït-Yahya's book, 'De l'idéologie islamique française. Éloge d'une insoumission à la modernité (Nawa, 2011) [On French Islamic Ideology: An Elegy of Insubordination against Modernity]. For the first time, you could read a book about Islam written uninhibitedly, with some quite original reflections on the French Revolution'.

In 2013, my father died, may Allah grant him mercy. This raised big existential questions for me. I talked about it a bit with my mother. Then, in September, with blessing of my mother, my brothers and my sisters, I left for Syria alongside two friends who finished their masters' at university in Belgium. One of them died in Syria, peace be upon his soul, and the other came back with me. So I went to Syria, but I only stayed three months in 2013. [...]

Before all that, there was the Arab Spring. You have to know about this period when they talk about us and Syria. When that happened, I was watching Al Jazeera all day with my father. When the Arab Spring broke out, in 2011, I even stopped attending university. I didn't take my exams. I was completely absorbed in the information being shared on Facebook about what was happening. It felt like everything was new! That everything was finally going to change. There was Tunisia, Egypt, people chanting 'Get lost, Mubarak!', 'Irhal!' [Clear off!], 'Get lost, Ghadafl!', it was extraordinary. And amongst ourselves, we were debating a lot as well: I remember in the Muslim collective we'd set up in Belgium, some people were saying that they didn't support the rebels because they were in favour of democracy, etc. We had a more nuanced interpretation. It was to say that you can't ask Arab people who live in a secular dictatorship run by the Baath party, or Ben Ali and Bourguiba to get out of that immediately and say: 'We want al-watan al Islami' [An Islamic Fatherland]. And then there was Osama Bin Laden's last speech: he even supported the Arab Spring. His speech led to the first split, because there were people who said: 'How can you support that? It's

democracy, etc.’ So one basic layer of support came from Osama. Anyway, when that turned into armed resistance in Syria, there weren’t groups like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State at the beginning. It was really the Free Syrian Army. In any case, international jihad banners were not yet flying in Syria. But everyone supported them.

Me and my friends, we were all behind everything in the Arab Spring and the armed resistance against al-Assad. Before leaving, I continued my involvement in Belgium. In 2012 for example, there were local elections, and we went around Wallonia to visit the big mosques (and call for a boycott). We were contacted for interviews in the Belgian media, but we turned them down. At that time, in the field of critical perspectives on democracy, there was Sharia for Belgium, with badly written pamphlets, and when our group arrived, we were often a bit too intellectual for them. We ran lectures given by critical academics. We didn’t do things like Sharia for Belgium, which went into mosques doing separate takbîr and prayer, and got into conflict with Muslims. The young people in Sharia for Belgium were fuelled by the feeling that they were a group with strong views. At the time, I felt like there was a problem, not only in activist circles but also in traditional preaching: it was that when you look at the Quran, the Sunna and way groups preach, you can see it doesn’t hang together properly. Maybe we were being too fiery, but I still feel there is something that’s not quite right. [...]

Over there, in Syria, I wasn’t interested in the fighting as such. I was affected by the atrocities. I had the feeling that we could make a difference over there, and there was a society to be built. I went to get a look. We were naive in those days, and we really thought there was a society being created. But there was nothing. Nothing at all.¹⁴²

This comment, like Salim’s journey, shows the extent to which the shadow of emigration for jihad reached into a minority community. The person who returned in the ‘Che Guevara’ category, according to the typology suggested by a researcher belonged instead to a fraction of a European generation of children of immigrants who had been through school and experienced some upward social mobility, but who faced politics that placed them at a disadvantage relative to the ‘long-established’ social groups. When faced with what reveals itself to them as a misleading ideology when they analyse the reality of their marginalised community, the slogans ‘democracy’ and ‘brotherhood’ lose any authenticity. And we can add the feeling of humiliation inherited from colonised ancestors, and parents who preferred to ‘stay on the fringes’. So this was the hunt

for a new political momentum at work in a number of directions, including Syria which, during the Arab Spring, opened up an experience where two options co-existed: a positive utopia, and a negative one.

Salim thus took me back to the long discussions I had participated in during the research I did in Molenbeek with four Belgians back from Syria, and released from prison – two from immigrant backgrounds and two converts. Using dozens of Islamic and Western references, they covered political current affairs expressing their rejection of the political symbols of Western democracies. Religious messianism and the debate on the end of the world and the next coming of the Messiah took shape like a curtain hiding the consistency of their merciless political critique. This is consonant with the critiques expressed by quite broad spheres of a young generation of Belgians seeking meaning from outside the dominant system, while themselves struggling to find a place in their communities within a society incapable of managing the consequences of the colonial period. This consistency was manifest in the interminable conversations about defiance regarding government discourses, the rejection of political representation, the systematic identification of the Left's election promises as 'lies', the permanent reference to social inequalities, condemnation of the wars among colonial powers embodied by 'Europe, the USA and Russia'.

In these types of discussions, lines between Belgian converts and others from Muslim families are erased: both groups condemn governments from a West deemed 'hypocritical' and an Orient viewed, often through the disenchantment of the Syrian experience, as a space of 'decadence, corruption, tyranny and allegiance to colonial forces'. The imaginary past of a 'Muslim world' is always dangled as an antidote to the sombre future of Europe. But after the failure of the migration experiment and the return to Europe, this reference is obviously a nostalgic dream that they know has no chance of becoming reality. Moreover, in a time of political uncertainty, the sole criticism shared by a much broader sphere than this generation is, namely, the rejection of representatives of national politics.

On the French side, we can add the point of honour of condemning the alarmist discourses that reduce Islam to its potential for violence, its desire for power and its rejection of integration to the comment already illustrated in Salim's interview. Rafik, for example, testifies to his deep knowledge of such discourses and the actors fuelling hostility, about whom he makes scattergun, and even excessive judgements.

Montassir: *Beyond the one-to-one interviews, were there French history classes in the quartiers d'évaluation de la radicalisation (QER)?*

Rafik: *No, because that would be seen as really grotesque. They gave these classes in prison, but not in the QER. And actually, they were aimed at the 'terro' (terrorist) prisoners. People came to the prison to speak to us about 'Republican values'. For example, there were lectures by Gilles Kepel. I liked going to them because it enabled you to engage directly with the ideas. One of Gilles Kepel's lectures was good because there were people contradicting him, well-educated brothers able to contradict his discourse. He wasn't like he was on telly, with nobody contradicting him. He made his speech at the beginning, and he wouldn't let people ask questions or make comments while he was speaking. He said: 'After my lecture, raise your hands one by one and ask questions'. So he wanted to run the debate because he didn't have any experience of talking to people who knew his subject better than he did.*

Before starting, when he arrived at the prison, he asked to meet two brothers sentenced with me for terrorism, to figure out who he was dealing with. Then he started talking to us about Iraqi history, Zarqaoui [1966-2006, Al-Qaida in Iraq] and Abou Hamza al-Mouhajir [1968-2010, the Islamic State in Iraq]. But he made a lot of mistakes, and the brothers picked him up on them. Afterwards, he spoke about sects in the history of Islam, like the khawarij [one of the factions of Islam that emerged in the seventh century]. Basically, his knowledge was for television studios and a general audience, to whom he could say what he wanted. But in front of an informed audience, you can't give inaccurate information. These brothers weren't pro-Daesh, but they knew the topic very well, and they took him down a notch. For example, one brother asked him: 'What were the basic beliefs of the khawarij?' He replied: 'They were opposed to the governor'. But that answer didn't tell you anything: who was the governor? What was he like? How do you know if he was fair or unfair? Was it a Muslim government or a taghout [pagan tyrant]? In fact, the khawarij were against Muslim government. Another basic belief was that opposition to the government was to advantage the qudra, the capacity to remove its power. They asked him to name another basic khawarij belief and he said they excluded people that did not want to go as far as associationism from Islam. In other words, they considered those who committed adultery and drank alcohol for example, as non-Muslims. Okay, but did the Islamic State lot do that [takfir, excommunication]? So why link the Islamic State to that? Someone asked him that question, but he didn't answer. He just sweated in his shirt and showed that these questions had rattled him. And this is

someone who speaks Arabic, who quotes verses from the Quran and likes to talk about 'Abou Mousaab as-Souri, etc. But the brothers had a lot more knowledge than him on these matters.

The prison management and professional staff were there: they were all impressed by the brothers' level of knowledge. The governor came to talk to me afterwards, and she hadn't realised that people knew so much. I gave her a big smile and said, 'But did you think we're just weirdos or something?' That was an event you had to see, a tight debate. The brothers were serious. They took out their notebooks and pencils to take notes and ask questions. [...]

After Kepel, it was the turn of his pupil, Hugo Micheron, who came a few weeks later. After his lecture, he went red in the face. Then he came and said to us: would you mind if I came to see you in the visiting room to do one-on-one interviews?' [...] He had just written his arrogant book about us.¹⁴³ To do interviews in prison, he [ran] after us, saying: 'You have a lot of knowledge, and I want you to explain to me some things that I don't know'. It was to get closer to us so that we'd accept him. Afterwards, on the television, he behaved arrogantly and insulted us. And when you see what he wrote in his book, he described us as if we were halfwits and vicious people. [...]

Then it was David Thomson who came to do business in prison.¹⁴⁴ I had seen him on tv and heard the way he spoke about us. I remember when he came to see us in prison, he brazenly asked us: 'How's the 'aqida (credo)? Can you imagine the arrogance of the question he dropped on us like that, in front of everyone, to each of us? [...] When you read David Thomson's book (Thomson, 2016) it's [...] really just a bundle of stereotypes. In prison, he had carte blanche with the management. When he came. He spent more time with the youngest one of us, a young man who unfortunately was lost. He knew that already when he was on trial: a convert who had virtually lost his sense and practiced takfir on everybody.

But whose fault is it? It's the fault of people who talk to those writers and people like them, given permission to go into prison. There was Soulaïman, for instance, a 'terrorist' inmate like me, and I said to him: 'Why did you speak to him?' He said: 'To let them have a different image of us'. But Soulaïman didn't get it at all. What image is that guy going to give of us? Some people struggle to see the animosity these people have. Later, when Soulaïman saw what that journalist was saying on tv, he regretted talking to him, and stopped speaking to him. So I asked him to tell everyone he knew to stop talking to that journalist. Later, the journalist wrote in his book what the young man with mental health issues had told him: 'In prison, I let the taps run and leave the lights on so it costs

the unbelievers money', or something like that. Can you imagine what image Thomson wanted to communicate? What value does he add by writing these things? Why present this caricature?

The fact remains that the political nature of the jihad introduced an often-ignored radical critique and a dialectic of contemporary power in the West. This level of awareness, commonly held by the actors does not go without its own critique, based on experience and action. The events of 2013 in Syria nicely illustrate this challenge brought on by jihad such as it unfolded, under the pressure of unforeseen factors.

Jihad vs revolution, the decisive ‘split’ of 2013

The history of the Syrian revolution, as we have seen, is comprised of brutally interrupted phases: peaceful demonstrations, armed revolution, transnational Muslim solidarity, etc. Of these periods, one of the most decisive – and one whose significance is still little understood – is the one starting in 2013 that witnessed the implosion of the alliance between the brigades that opposed the regime and identified more or less with political Islam, but in quite different ways. The most spectacular of these splits was that between Nusra and the Islamic State (Daesh). To understand this period, you have to grasp the long-term histories of these two groups, beginning with the US invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003, and the popular Syrian uprising against an absolutist regime in 2011.

The consequences of this implosion would be major, on three levels. It would first, enable the deployment of a counter-revolutionary enterprise aiming to implement a new theocratic state. Next, it introduced a fundamental cleavage into the transnational Muslim solidarity movement marked by the emigration of young people coming for jihad. Lastly, by triggering a civil war between the armed opposition groups identifying with Islam, it facilitated the spread of violence and caused the very meanings of the terms ‘jihad’ and ‘revolution’ to fragment.

A dangerous fusion of two ‘revolutions’

Internationally, this split facilitated the ‘Iraqisation’ of the Syrian problem by importing the effects of Iraq’s colonial brutalisation. In Iraq, the Sunni population turned into a minority and subjugated to the postcolonial sectarian governance of the Baghdad government, gave support to Iraqi and Arab groups fighting to rebuild an independent nation-State. Yet this struggle to recover the state ‘stolen’ by the American forces and the new sectarian Iraqi regime was to introduce a strategy foreign to the revolution in Syria. The arrival of young Europeans in this context was thus grafted onto the old issue of colonisation that went back at least to 2003, and even the Gulf War of 1990-1991, with these migrants for jihad unexpectedly finding themselves facing colonial intervention in the

region. The carrying out of the International Coalition's operations after the Nusra-Daesh split would go on to foster the 'shift' among a minority of these migrants, to international terrorist-type violence, which would be wrought to devastating effect in the West, in the form of suicide attacks (see chapter 10).

But before explaining how this reconfiguration of forces upset the solidarities of the migrants for jihad and their primary goal of revolutionary struggle against the Syrian regime, we need to return to the origins of the initial 'merger' between the revolutionary groups, which ended with the establishment of the Islamic State in June 2014. The year 2013 was decisive in this respect, as demonstrated by our research with both young Arabs (Moroccans and Tunisians interviewed in Morocco and Iraq), and Europeans (Belgians and French), who had returned to their countries after the splits.

At the beginning was the utopian forces in Syria in their two configurations merged: the negative one heralded the fascism of a theocratic state, and the positive one, support for the revolutionary cause. It was an alliance between two forms of revolution. The first, older, long preceded the Arab Spring: that was the Iraqi insurrection from 2003 against the colonial forces and the government of US administrator, Paul Bremer (often labelled 'Proconsul' by his opponents). From 2006, this alliance was established principally in the North-West of Iraq, and waged a guerilla campaign against the new, Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad. It relied upon a Sunni Islamic counter-discourse, and even though Al-Qaida was part of this alliance, the groups involved called it a 'revolution'.¹⁴⁵ Before becoming the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 (then Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, in April 2013), people and tribes considered these fighters' networks (especially in the 2003-2006 period) as embodying resistance against a government practicing total racism against the Sunni areas in the North.

The second revolutionary form was that assumed by the Syrian revolution of 2011. The merger of these two movements is therefore part of a story that began in 2003, with the second US invasion and the destruction of Iraq's state elite. At that time, the borderlands of Syria were not spared the impacts of an invasion experienced as a civilisational colonisation by entire strata of society: the statements collected indicate, as early as 2003, the emergence of a discourse on armed jihad involving many Syrians in Iraq, and forming the basis of what would become Jabhat Nusra in

January 2012 (and which would join Al-Qaida in 2013) as the revolution became increasingly militarised (see chapter 3).

In his previously cited work, *Syria, le chemin de la douleur vers la liberté* ('Syria: the painful path to freedom'), Azmi Bishara states that in 2003, students in Departments of Islamic Studies at Syrian universities were the first to take an interest in the invasion of Iraq. At that time they would not have to face the force of the Syrian regime for several reasons: the regime's tolerance for their activism consisting of taking part in the war against the Americans based on a purely religious interpretation of politics; the regime facilitated sending Salafi fighters from Syria to Iraq like the *Soqour al-qa'qâ'* brigade and support for Arab fighters transiting via Syria to fight in Iraq (Bishara, 2013: 348). This wait-and-see policy lasted until 2007 – the year when Syrian counterterrorist measures became more stringent, following the agreements made with the US administration in Iraq – in a general climate in Damascus characterised by a fear of replicating the situation in Iraq. The latter, based on bombings and kamikaze operations, prepared the ground for the adoption of the modus operandi consisting of suicide attacks as a radical response to the regime's war against its population.

In fact, even before it went over to the side of the revolutionary forces organised into brigades and battalions in Summer 2012, Nusra carried out suicide bombings in Syria.¹⁴⁶ And despite the reluctance of many activists to support violence that killed civilians, as well as Nusra's sentencing and public executions of the regime's soldiers and members of its paramilitary forces (Bishara, 2013: 350), the revolution – resting on quite a broad, popular base – excluded neither Nusra nor other brigades adopting its mode of violence. That can be explained by several reasons: the choice of armed struggle as the only outcome in response to the terrible bombings of civilian neighbourhoods by the regime's army; the refusal by Nusra's leadership to establish a separate Islamic State in Syria; the regime's involvement in the introduction of sectarianism into the war, with the participation of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran; and the adoption of a discourse accusing the armed resistance of 'terrorism'. Hence the growing acceptance of the idea of a Sunni Islamic jihad against a power located in a kind of Shia coalition.

This development gave rise to three political configurations during the war, an understanding of which is indispensable for us to elucidate the issue of foreign jihadis and of revolutionary Islam in Syria and Iraq. First,

from the end of 2011, a coalition between Nusra and several brigades was formed to wage deadly combat against the forces of the regime, especially in Northern Syria, and around Aleppo. Second, between 2013 and 2014, a split occurred in Nusra in Syria, which was actually a split in ISIS, as Nusra had initially, in 2011, been just a branch of ISIS founded in Iraq and deployed in Syria. Out of that split emerged, on one side an organisation, the Islamic State, which pursued the goals first set in Iraq, namely to rebuild an Iraqi Sunni religious state in spite of the presence within it of new foreign influencers, mainly Arabs, attracted by the war against the Americans, and aspiring to a jihad with an eschatological outline. A large proportion of these foreigners was however considered extremist (*ghûlat*) even within the IS, and thus dismissed from the organisation. On the other side, the section emerging from this split that was maintained as the Nusra Front attempted to join in with the Syrian revolution's objectives and policy of controlling swathes of territory, even though its political action was still basically structured by a religious interpretation.

Third, and lastly, European and Arabic foreigners committed to jihad came into play in this configuration. Some of them, above all those from Arab countries, knew about the situation in Iraq: during the interviews, they stated that they had been following those events at least since 2003. But others, especially the Europeans, had no knowledge about Iraq: they did not know about the changes in the organisations engaged in jihad in Iraq, or the role of Al-Qaida. This reality lay at the heart of the misunderstanding between the European nations' police and courts, and their migrants for jihad. Essentially, the European governments conflated very different timelines of events, whose impacts would only be combined later, because of the revolution in Syria, in both Syria and Iraq, in the aftermath of the collapse of the monopoly of the violence. In their discourses and rulings, European political leaders and judges conceptualised jihad as emanating from a continuity between organisations symbolised by Al-Qaida and the IS, without taking account of what the Syrian revolution of 2011 represented for a fraction of Muslim youth raised in the Western postcolonial experience. This misunderstanding, determined by a colonial situation linked to the US invasion, was erased in Europe by the adoption of counterterrorist laws against 'jihadists' returning from Syria.

European activists' 'fear' of being in the 'wrong' jihad

Let's return to what our European interviewees said about this turning point year, 2013, in Syria. They showed that their commitment to the jihad, first when they emigrated, then on the ground, had not resulted from decisions with just a single motivation. Above all, they reflected on the doubts they entertained prior to emigrating, then on their reactions to the events occurring on the Syrian political scene, in particular the disagreements between armed groups identifying with Islam.

Indeed, the themes of 'doubt' and the 'fear of making a mistake' dominated the interviews I carried out, while they are absent from the academic literature on the radicalisation supposed to explain such departures, without questioning the relationship between individuals and their faith, and with the community hosting them. This relationship was widely determined by the fear of 'making a mistake' vis-à-vis jihad, its timing and its locations. During the interviews, my respondents often went back over these moments of doubt about 'good practice', which was much less about the literal compliance with the commandments of religious texts than fear of misinterpreting the Syrian context: this 'fear of God' did not aim to justify the action itself – in most cases people did not regret the decision to migrate – but to distinguish the right paths to follow in the Syrian context, to respond to the divine, spiritual message that had inspired their departures.

When they chose to emigrate, the people I met allayed their fears by intense prayer, while taking comfort in the *niya* (good intentions) behind their choice to leave. And once they reached Syria, this precept worked as a defence mechanism enabling the migrants to reassure themselves as to their radical choice to join the fighting. It shows that whatever the actors' calculations in Syria, and the development of the conflict, the choice made 'before God' was to respond to a religious duty revealed in Muslim scriptures and education.

The journey experienced by Malek, who travelled from Belgium, bears out the depth of this relationship to the community and the fear that could take over a millennialist migrant when they made the decision to leave and then join an armed group. We already saw the conditions in which he left Belgium, after intensive prayer during Ramadan had soothed his remaining doubts (chapter 7). In the following extract, he reflects on the path of ideas about jihad rooted in how he learned about

religion in the community; a religion that afforded the individual values and visions of the world, a complete spiritual package from where the individual emerges as a subject, while still being immersed in Islam.

In Malek's case, entry into the practice of *dīne* (religion) began in quite a mundane way, with existential questions about death, within a Muslim community, a fragmented ethnic minority group, which could not establish an organisation that respond to the needs of its children. He is particularly critical of the system of mosques, which he feels cannot satisfy community needs. After a supplementary apprenticeship on social networks, where he engaged with other young people about colonial and civilisational issues inherited from their parents (East-West binaries, wars and American interventions, etc.), he saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to exit a passive, wait-and-see religious practice. Yet the tension was permanent on the long pathway to religiosity, in which emigration to Syria was just one step. This is how he then revealed the reasons that made him drop back into a fear of being on the 'wrong' side when the civil war between Muslims opposing the regime broke out in 2013.

Malek: I began to develop a religious [fixation] in my life around the age of sixteen, because one of my uncles died. It was about 2010. Before that I'd never been a hooligan, or someone who stayed out all night, or anything like that. So I began to ask myself questions about death: now he had died, where did his soul go? [...] Since then, I got into the habit of going to mosque all the time. But there was a problem with mosques in Belgium. It's like a business: you turn up, you pray and you go home again. There are no darss [religious classes]. The imams can't speak French, they're mostly over sixty. And when there were Saturday darss after 'assr, they were only in Arabic. But we – the young people – couldn't speak Arabic. We're born here, and went to French-speaking or Flemish-speaking schools. And they used to say to us: 'If you're given darss in French, you'll never learn Arabic' [...]

So what got me to engage with religion was death. And when I wanted to expand my intellect or my religious science, they shut me out of the mosque because they didn't want to talk to me in French and didn't want to do anything for young people. The mosques were run like shops: on Fridays it was the sadaqa-sa'dou l masjīd [alms, help the mosque] and then they shared everything. They didn't want to do anything. I started looking on the internet.

At that time, people were discussing current affairs, especially the war in Afghanistan. I shared the vision people have here, the classic one pushed by the

Western media: it was in the 1980s that the Taliban were acclaimed as heroes because they fought off the Soviet invaders. According to that vision, the Taliban believe in the Quran, have a Muslim ideal in mind, and they want to build a country based on the laws of the Quran, and the USSR came to destroy it. They are presented as heroes protecting their land, their faith, etc. They even made Rambo 3 with the Taliban [laughs], a Rambo 3 who says 'Inchallah', and who helps the Taliban.¹⁴⁷ They won the war in 1995, and ten years later they are being portrayed as the biggest terrorists on earth. Why? Because they are no longer enemies of the Soviets, but of the Americans! The weapons opposed to the Afghans are still the same, but they have changed enemies. I used to say: 'No, it's unbelievable. Western hypocrisy disgusts me'. I was young and I experienced that like... unlike those people we saw this evening,¹⁴⁸ I was in an elite school in Verviers, in a nice neighbourhood in the centre. The school that the burgermeister went to. We were in the minority. I'm not saying that it's like that in Belgium, it's rare, but I was with the Belgians. And I prefer that to being in a school where there's only Arabs. Otherwise, I wouldn't know what 'foreign mentality' meant. I say 'foreign' and I'm Belgian, but I've been put in this position and as my parents are Moroccan, you don't understand all the codes when you talk to people of Belgian origin. [...]

When Bin Laden died [in May 2011], I put his photo on my Facebook profile. [Laughs.] I was young, and it was the era when you weren't afraid of anything much happening, because it was later, when people started leaving for Syria that the problems started. When I put up his photo, it sparked off debates at school. I was defending Bin Laden, and people said: 'But Bin Laden killed people on 11 September, etc.' I said even the US acknowledged that around 3,000 died on 11 September – so ok, we don't know that it was Bin Laden that did it. And even if he did, I'm against it. But the idea of making the Quran the basis of law and politics in Muslim countries leads to war, and in any war, there will be victims. I am – and have always been – against killing civilians, because this is not part of the vision of Islam, but I used to say that the Americans have acknowledged killing 15,000 civilians in Iraq in a few years. Not soldiers, but civilians. And when the journalist asked: 'Isn't that enough?', the soldier in front of him said: 'Proportionate to the firepower we used, it's not enough'. So Ben Laden killed 3,000 people on September 11 and you admit to killing five times as many and you say that's fine! Because they're Arabs nobody cares!¹⁴⁹

As we have seen, Malek's path was scaffolded by both his development within Belgium's Muslim community and his interest in geopolitics, structured by an analysis of postcolonial violence and his approval

of the violent reprisals of a simultaneously real and idealised community in Iraq. But after leaving for Syria, doubts came to the fore in 2013. These related to the very nature of this Muslim community at war, which did not completely fulfil the expectations built up before leaving. The motivation for the solidarity with the Syrian people remained but their revolution seemed to have been sacrificed and instrumentalised by a plethora of groups in Syria, first and foremost, the Islamic State. The questions about this Muslim community then flowed: is it anticolonialist? Is it for a universal Islam dominated by the West, or does it arise exclusively from the local nationalist, sectarian and political splits in Syria and Iraq?

Little-known impacts of the splits and conflicts between armed Islamist groups

Malek: I began to question myself in Syria around two trigger points. The first, was when I asked the emirs: 'Why does no-one call on the groups to merge into one single group, whether it's Al-Qaida or dawla or al-hur [FSA]?' An emir said: 'You see all these groups, the ones that aren't dawla or Nusra, right now, they are tolerated, but after Bashar, they're next!' I began to say to myself: 'What's that about? We're together, eat together, and perhaps a month or a year from now, when the regime falls, are we going to kill each other? That's not why people came here'. One of us, a Frenchman, went rogue, and I went with him to see a different emir. [...] He said to him: 'We're not going to get rid of one taghout [tyrant] to replace him with another'. We were all together, we trained and ate side by side, the guys from Nusra and the FSA showed me how to do things, I lived with them, but when Bashar falls they're going to be my enemies? It was unacceptable, inconceivable for me.

M. S.: And what was the second trigger point?

Malek: It was after this discussion with the emirs. We were staying at this school that we used as a base and whose classrooms had become our bedrooms – each bedroom had its own emir. One of these leaders brought his computer. He showed us a video that was being played in Iraq. It was of a stop at a checkpoint, where a fighter made a lorry driver get out of the vehicle. He asked him: 'Are you Muslim?' And he answers: 'Yes', The fighter says: 'How many prayers per day?' The driver doesn't answer. The fighter says: 'Are you Shia? He says: 'Yes'. So

he makes the whole family get out of the vehicle, makes them kneel and kills them one by one.

The man who showed us this video was joking while it was on: 'Did you see? Did you see?' And we looked at each other amazed and hurt. The guy realised and started saying: 'But they were Shia [...] And that's when it clicked. In my room, there were two French, two Syrians and two Sudanese. All nice guys, not mou-qallid [literalists]. We realised it was useless to debate with the leader who had shown us the video. We just said 'ok', so that he'd go away.

M. S.: *Was he a foreigner?*

Malek: *No, a Syrian. When he left we started a discussion: 'What was that? They're killing civilians!' You know Montassir, in wartime you have this awareness more than now: we said to each other that from one minute to another you could close your eyes and open them either in heaven or hell. Death is always there, even at this moment in this restaurant where we're doing this interview. But out there it was even worse. Before leaving I had never thought of myself as a mujahideen. But after the hijra [emigration], whether I liked it or not, I held the status of mujahideen. So I told myself if I wasted one minute on bad behaviour, injustice or transgression and died at that moment, it was over for me. You saw yourself more than other Muslims as neither चाहिद [martyr], nor one of the just. It's a specific status because Allah 'aza wa jal [the glorified one, the venerable one] is said in the Quran to favour mujahideen: 'Allah has exalted in rank those who strive with their possessions and their lives over those who sit at home; and though to each Allah has promised some good reward, He has preferred those who strive (in the way of Allah) over those who sit at home for a mighty reward'.¹⁵⁰ It's not for nothing that Allah favours the mujahideen.*

This is why people are afraid of doing the wrong thing. Watching that video and seeing how the divisions between Muslims were starting to show, we said this isn't right. We can't be with people who kill the innocent. We have a goal: and it was al-khilafa, because we sincerely believed that it would lead to peace on Earth, precisely because there would no longer be bloodshed. So we weren't doing this so that we can watch ourselves or people among us spill blood unjustly.

From that bedroom, some went back to their countries of origin, and others joined different groups instead. As for me, from that moment when I watched the video, I planned to go home. First, I went up North. I had just one idea in my mind then, to get back to Belgium. I felt like I had made a mistake, because those weren't the videos we watched in Belgium, with the great Afghan mujahideen

they had in Syria. [...] Killing people because they were Shia, that's unacceptable: we weren't going to remove one taghout to replace him with another. We have scores to be settled on the day of the resurrection: it's not a game. And also, when I was over there, I was only interested in Syria. Iraq didn't interest me.

M. S.: *In Syria, did you follow the lives of the other revolutionary groups, like the FSA? Did you think that the Syrians wanted a revolution while the foreigners had come in order to do something else, like khilâfa?*

Malek: *At that time the only thing on my mind was the prospect of khilâfa. I was trapped because before leaving and when I arrived, there was one main objective for me: fight Bashar al-Assad, with one eye on the future. I already knew about dawla and I told myself that they weren't really wrong to call for khilâfa, because in Syria, people and the FSA didn't want that, and preferred to take subsidies from Europe and the West. Once the regime had fallen, they'd want an Islamic democracy like Türkiye. And that is absolutely not what the people who came to Syria from Europe wanted. But that's one thing. Going so far as to make war against people who had been our allies, like the FSA, was a trap. I felt trapped. At the same time, I didn't know what to do once I'd left Syria: keep my ideas about the necessity of khilâfa, or look at religion in another way.*

In Malek's account, he makes no concession on the idea of *khilâfa* (Caliphate) when he talks about his disengagement in Syria. Later he would tell me how the 'appeasement' of this tension between the fantasy of an Islam in a Caliphate and his religious practice that had become 'ordinary' took place after he got back and had been released from prison. It was due to a meeting with an imam that he found a new religious path.

The interviewees did not outline any ploy of hiding the truth, although in the courtrooms, Malek and others had attempted to say 'as little as possible' during their trials, to 'claw back a few months from their sentences' as they said. During my research, the stakes for my respondents turned out to be something else entirely: reviewing their motivations for emigrating, and the politics of jihad. Mistakes and doing the 'wrong' thing, and fear were not mentioned as justifications for their practices, but as a context for a political reflection in a postcolonial period and a European space marked by the minority history of Muslim communities. These types of questions, missing from the courtrooms, recurred frequently in the statements they made to me. They show the disarray of migrants for

jihād faced with the reality of Syria that presented unexpected ambiguities, including the Iraqi issue.

Salim (Belgium): *On the ground in Syria, I arrived when the fitan [sedition] started up. You could feel, especially with Daesh, that they wanted to stir up trouble against the other groups rather than focus on the front against al-Assad. So when I felt there was a bad atmosphere, and it got so that from one checkpoint to another, you couldn't tell what might happen, I decided to go home. That was in December 2013.*

Mimoun (France): *Before we got there, even geopolitically, on an international level, things were going well. But from January 2013, when we arrived, I don't know what happened: the political world in the Sham moved on. You mustn't forget that two of our brothers who came from France with us were killed at a checkpoint by fighters who weren't in Bashar's army. [...] It was 9 January 2014 at 6 in the morning. They stayed at that checkpoint for three hours. They were some of the first to die in that period in Aleppo, in the confrontations between people who had been together at grassroots level.*

M. S.: *Was it a faction of the FSA?*

Mimoun: *Some people told us that it was Jaysh al-hur [FSA], others that it was Ahrâr a-Châm, and others Jabhat Nusra. We weren't interested in the divisions. [...] Beyond that, there was in-fighting. After two months, both of us, Ibrahim and me, were on a checkpoint. On the walkie-talkie we could hear the guys from the various factions speaking: you could pick up anything within 5 km. People started talking to each other, and religiously, when the factions were at war, we had to give a reminder and warn people before starting a fight. When the brothers began to remind one another, what did we realise? What we were all Muslim: 'Salam alaikum, you are Muslim, so am I'. So why are we killing each other? What is actually going on? It was the leaders who had problems with one another.*

And where did that start up? From Baghdadi and Jawlani. When Baghdadi sent Jawlani [to Syria in August 2011], he told him: 'Go and make war down there, I'll send you people and money'.¹⁵¹ After a while, Jawlani wanted to create his own group, Nusra, separate from ISIS. For Baghdadi, Jawlani thus performed the act of an unbeliever. He decided not to fight it, but gradually the disagreement intensified.¹⁵² The people who'd come for jihād were not at all aware of all that.

When I was in Raqqa with Rafik, I saw how the debates on ‘unbelief and its acts’ began. And there, not only the migrants for jihad, but also the big legal experts from Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere started to tell the leadership: ‘What the hell is this? We didn’t come to kill Muslims. There can’t be war between Muslims’. So we fell into a war based on fitna [sedition] and pride.

Crisis of conscience and disengagement: the significant case of Rafik

The interview with Rafik also illustrates this crisis of conscience for a European migrant for jihad dealing with the civil war. The following extracts make his reflexivity in a time of action explicit, with his disengagement coming only after the intervention by a crucial figure in men’s religious reaffiliation, the mother. Rafik is speaking solely on a personal basis, but his comments reflect a collective crisis in a time of dissension. It is an internal monologue sifting through the various elements of the situation triggered in Syria without concluding in an exit from this war. He wished to get to a different area, Iraq under sectarian government, where the conflict would be more transparent, he thought, so he was making a run for it in order not to lose what remained of a tragic utopia, and to transcend the failure of his action in Syria. This was the doubt he harboured, tied to the feeling that a split was building up based on a religious concept, ‘excommunication’, which means the civil war, entailed in moving to the ‘friend-enemy’ frame and the transformation of this binary into something allegedly sacred. But by 2013, only doubts were being expressed in response to this perspective. In this condition as a soldier fighting a war in Islamic lands and dreaming of a Caliphate revolution in the dusk of a civil war – which pinpointed only his primary kinship, his mother – Rafik became convinced to go back to France. His mother would be the last resort to allay his doubts about a collective situation that had become too ‘ambiguous’.

Montassir: *What made you leave Syria?*

Rafik: *Let’s say it wasn’t what I wanted. [Laughter, then silence.] It was to do with what happened to me with my mother. She came to Southern Türkiye, when I left. She made some quite difficult scenes.*

M.: *Was it personal?*

R.: Yes. A little personal. But I'll tell you about it anyway. We're not on trial or with the police. [Laughter.] I didn't really want to come back [to France], despite the ambiguous situation that had become hard to deal with. I just wanted to get out to see my parents and then go to Iraq. Because in Iraq there were no splits in that period, 2013-2014. Out there, you knew who your enemies were, the Iraqi army and the Shia groups that were attacking the Sunni Muslims. There wasn't an inter-group war like there was in Syria. But that isn't how it went down.

I didn't agree at all with what was happening in Syria, but something closer to my ambitions was that [going to Iraq]. If someone fights Bashar or the Iraqi army that oppresses Muslims, I'll take jump on board and join them in this struggle. In any case, in the period where I was, Dawla did not practice excommunication of the groups, [which would have justified] me leaving – when I say Dawla, that's ISIS, because I never joined Islamic State. I didn't leave Syria because of a disagreement with their political line at the time. When people say they were excommunicating everyone in 2013, it's not true. That happened later. [...]

And when they were losing, they didn't organise a retreat for people in their zones, they shut everybody in, and banned people from leaving. Whereas previously, when they wanted to, they were able to organise entry and departure. For example, the departure from Aleppo to Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa was well organised: they took women and children and dropped them off in Türkiye, to travel round to Tal Abyad, avoiding the problem areas until they got to the place they wanted. They did it in steps. Then they moved the men. I was one of them, travelling at night in cars with their headlights off, in small groups so that the planes wouldn't be able to destroy them. I liked that way of doing things. I remember they hadn't warned everyone, it was at the last minute: I got back from a checkpoint and they told me they'd packed my things and I just had to run and catch up with them. They were organised like that.

And then you had well-organised groups that weren't completely dependent on Dawla's organisation: for example [they couldn't] tell the Kazakhs, Libyans and Chechens to stay or go, [or] decide [the fate of] their women and children for them. So they never gave them orders: of course the Kazakhs, Libyans and Chechens had sworn their allegiance, but they were seen as separate; they moved their own gear and organised themselves.

So yes, I started to have doubts, but I knew what I wanted, because I had niya [good intentions]. By 2016, that would have been flagrant because they were starting to practice takfir [excommunication], I would have dropped them immediately. But in 2013, it wasn't yet very clear. Later, you have to know the context: for years between 2011 and late 2013, a lot of people were arriving for

jihad. So there was more quantity than quality. And when the leaders began to die, you could see leadership was getting increasingly mediocre. Ibn Taymiyya said: 'Allah affords victory to people that are unbelieving but just, over Muslims who are unjust'. People couldn't see their own injustices, they thought they were untouchable. There was a lot of kibr [arrogance and megalomania] among the emirs. Several spoke to people unkindly. That changed, it was no longer how it was at the start, when there were people with a lot of hanana [grace]. Then you had people who turned up and became emirs overnight: it was unbelievable to see that kind of thing! You had Tunisians with no religious knowledge who became emirs. [...]

I remember that a lot of us didn't take a stance [on that] and [just] stopped working with Dawla. I went to see the charṭ who didn't want to even give their opinions in public because of the divisions. Dawla left experienced and very religious people along the way. I remember an Algerian charṭ who'd lost his country's dialect after having been in the war zones since he was eighteen. He was thirty-six. He was wise and experienced because he had been in several jihad campaigns in different places. I asked him what he thought about the mess that Dawla and Nusra had got into. He recognised us for the naive little Frenchmen that we were, and told us: 'Don't get involved'. When someone you have great respect for tells you something like that, you feel like it puts pressure directly on you. Because who are we to say what's right in this disagreement or take sides? When he said that to us, I got myself assigned to a checkpoint, because I knew they wouldn't prioritise looking for the people on checkpoints. I told the emir and others: 'If we're up against the Shia militia who kill Syrians, or the Kurds, you can call for me, but if it's Nusra or the FSA, don't call me, I don't fancy it'.

Later, there were people who weren't sure what to do. And in my opinion, those who don't want to understand people who are hesitant are ghulât [extremists]. They look down on them and consider them cowards. They say: 'They don't want to go to the front!' But that's got nothing to do with going to the front or not. If you told me it was to fight some Kurds who are attacking us, I could see why you'd be surprised. But when it's people we send to fight Muslims and when there are choubouhat [ambiguities], it's normal to think twice. So either you fit the mould, in other words you disengage your brain and do what you're told, or you try to be a bit cunning while you clear your mind. [Silence.]

This is why you should always get back to your niya [good intention]. You tell yourself: 'I came here for this reason and I'm not going to die for another'. That's where chaïtân [Satan] comes in, and people start telling you things like: 'It's the jihad nafs [the effort to control oneself] that matters'. OK, but the jihad

nafs is not this, it's out there [beyond the war zones]. It looks like two separate things. Jihad nafs is for your whole life, not at a given moment. Jihad is for a given moment, and the jihad nafs is even harder while you're doing jihad. Because that's where the choubouhat [ambiguities] crop up: 'Are you going to die as a chahid [martyr]? Are you on al-haq [the right path]? IS what you're doing good? What must you do now so that people leave and you stay?' And when you get to Syria, your family calls you and says you're doing nonsense. To stick to your guns when all that's happening, you have to fight hard. You're constantly questioning yourself. That's why I told myself: 'You know what? Put me on a ribat [checkpoint]'. And I waited to see my parents because we were at the border. After seeing my parents, I wanted to go straight to Iraq. Because in Iraq there were no choubouhat: I know who's who, and why [we're fighting].

M.: Because of the Western coalition supporting the Iraqi regime?

R.: Exactly. [Silence.] So, yes, all that was going on. [...] Lots of people were saying: 'I didn't come here for this'; 'I'd prefer to distance myself from what's going on' [the strife]; and 'I don't understand what's going on'. For me, the people who left Syria and went home aren't cowards. There were certainly some cowards with me out there, people who didn't come from their home countries with a specific baggage, [but only because they had watched] videos like 'The Messiah or Isa are coming, it's the end times, etc.' Those people are what I call 'No 'aqida' [No beliefs]. We didn't all go [to Syria] with a lot of knowledge about dīn [religion], but I'm talking about people for whom the smallest piece of information stopped them in their tracks.

People aren't cowards if they're still determined to do what brought them, and they change their minds about staying or leaving because they say to themselves, 'No, for me this is ambiguous, and I don't want to kill someone based on ambiguity, and I don't want to get killed in this difficult time'. That's something else, because they're still determined, and they know what the plan is, namely the khilafa and religion. Cowardice is questioning one's dīn [religion]. That's the difference. The people with me from France were obviously questioning the ambiguity and said: 'I don't want to say, because I don't want to be part of this ambiguity'. But you have to go when the situation is clear, and they went. So that doesn't change what steps you have to take: you know that's it and you know you've done that. I'm against people who tell lies to justify why they went home. People who say they've seen something or other which didn't actually happen. It's better to say they were afraid.

M.: *Lies like what?*

R.: *I don't want to give names but you about the S. case. And I've seen two others, in the trials and via people who were with me in prison, I know they've lied: people who say they saw others stealing houses out there, and humiliating Syrians, etc. But the people who say that, we were together out there and saw the same things. Why are they lying? Or in that case, let them bring some evidence. By the way, the judge said to me: 'You're not saying the same thing'. I replied that anyone can say what they want.*

M.: *What happened afterwards? With your mother, I mean?*

R.: *She came. I met up with my parents in Antakya. When she got there, my mother said: 'Tomorrow we're going to the French consulate'. I asked her: 'Why the consulate?' She said: 'It's fine, were going home'. So I said: 'That's not what I said'. She told me: 'Did you mention Iraq to me because there are people there who were listening to you on the phone in Syria?' And I said: 'No. Nobody was listening to me. They aren't spying on everyone'. And she went on: 'What are you going to do down there? Everyone has come home. Everyone is getting into trouble'. And I said: 'I really don't care'. So then she said she'd throw herself out of a window if I went back to the war.*

I left Syria full of doubts, but I told myself I'd go back after I'd seen my mother. She had come all this way to a country where she knew nobody. She wasn't used to travelling, apart from when she went back to Algeria. But I still wanted to be honest with her, more than I was when I'd left France. So I told her I intended to go to Iraq. When she heard that, she climbed onto the window in the hotel room where she was staying, and told me she was going to throw herself out of it if I went back to Syria or onto Iraq. Then she went, and left me alone with my conscience. The next day, I returned to France.

When he was hurled into a situation of civil war, Rafik's doubts thus deterred him from continuing to participate in the war in its fratricidal form. His doubts were connected to him finding out about the practice of *tawhîd*, in a strategy that, as we have seen, was initially part of his loyalty to Islam. A loyalty maintained in communities of postcolonial immigrant origin and marginalised in a France incapable of envisaging a fraternal relationship with the populations it incorporated (which is also true of Belgium). In its trajectory of reaffiliation, the family consequently

played a crucial role, preventing lasting disintegration. This situation is very common among people who returned from jihad. In Rafik's case, his incentive for exiting the French nation, however, was deep, since he planned to go on to Iraq, where the nature of the conflict seemed more clear-cut to him than it did in Syria.

Yet for him, this 'exit' from France did not mean that he absolutely hated the excluding nation, and it was not translated into suicide attacks or intimate violence, for several reasons. First, as the war unfolded, as Rafik was aware, the International Coalition had not launched its operations in Syria until 2013. It had not yet established the logic of Westphalian war and the cycle of vendetta. Next, counterterrorist laws had not yet elevated the migrants for jihad to the level of public enemy number one. Moreover, at that time, Rafik and his friends in Syria had not experienced the state demanding their loyalty against the invasion by a coalition, and responding to massacres by other massacres, combined with an eschatological and nihilist discourse. Lastly, returning to France thus signified stepping away from the situation in Syria that was becoming increasingly ambiguous for those attached to Muslim loyalty and the idea of *tawhīd*.

This concrete 'opportunity' to reintegrate into their home societies despite (belated) incarceration and stigmatisation (being labelled a 'terrorist') was not open to everyone. It was a long way from the experience of those caught in the trap of geopolitical interests being deployed on Syrian soil. In Rafik's group, for instance, one man did not return home in 2013 and thus would not have this 'opportunity'. Having experienced something very different between 2013 and late 2015, he would return only to participate in the attack on the Bataclan as a suicide bomber in the dreadful and absurd 'revenge attacks' on Paris on 13 November 2015.¹⁵³ In two years, he had developed a markedly different relationship with his home nation, whereas he belonged to the same group and shared its fraternal bonds – his brother was one of the peaceful returnees in 2013. We will now see how the tragic option of retaliating against colonial crimes by committing other crimes against innocent civilians could be consolidated in the transformations brought about by the war, and their effects on the organisations identifying with a particular version of political Islam.

Suicide bombings: violence and terrorist futures

Violence, both widespread and coded, was omnipresent in the periods referred to in the previous chapters, where we saw how the war tore Syrian society, and more broadly the societies of other Middle Eastern countries apart. This happened to the extent that terrible, deadly outgrowths of the war were projected as far as Europe, where in the 2010s, increasing numbers of terrorist attacks were perpetrated by jihadists sent by certain armed Islamist groups involved on the Middle-Eastern political stage. We know how far the scope of these attacks appalled Western public opinion, legitimately shocked by the death and wounding of so many innocent victims. And how these shocking events elicited counterterrorist policies from the governments concerned, with sometimes very counter-productive outcomes. Hence, in this final chapter, the importance of directly addressing the problem of terrorism that struck Europe, in order to try to gain a better understanding of its origins. The goal here is not to offer a new general theory of violence under the revolution, or discuss the alternative nuances of what is currently designated as ‘terrorism’ (armed revolt, war, war crimes/crimes against humanity, etc.)

Violence: at the heart of engagement in the Syrian revolution

Before analysing the major issue of terrorist attacks, we have to reflect on the very concept of violence that runs across the periods on which this research focuses. They witnessed several forms of political engagement in which violence defined itself sometimes as a means of attack, and sometimes as part of defensive strategies. We saw how, for people involved in the Syrian revolution, the use of weapons rested on a discourse of legitimisation borrowing the terminology of ‘self-defence’ or the defence ‘of honour, land, women and children’. In theological terms, this is *jihad ad-daf*^{*} (jihad of resistance), directed against an oppressor attacking a community of Muslims. We saw how the call for revolutionary jihad in Syria thus came in opposition to the modern nation-state as a political-religious exception. This utopian and millennialist stance (chapter 8)

stood out clearly from the practice of attacks even if it were based on similar justifications – in both cases, those who engaged in it noted the ‘blood of Muslims spilled easily and with impunity’.¹⁵⁴ The fact remains that violence was indeed present, in three main forms, at the heart of the period when people were leaving for Syria.

The first category of violence was ‘fighters’ serving at the front against the regime. Most French and Belgians arriving in Syria fall into this category. Both at the time they left Europe and when they arrived in Syria, the migrant men – the experiences of women, who were not primarily involved at the front, is different – knew that death was a likely outcome. Our interviews and observations confirm this, and people sending their wills to their parents support it: this commitment entails accepting ‘death on the pathway of Allah’. This death was initially imagined from the perspective of defending the Syrians against the regime, and secondly, probably from despair with the international war and the loss of all their affiliations – including with their Muslim community in Europe. Here, it is the figure of the modern warrior that asserts itself in response to the question: ‘Why die for a cause?’¹⁵⁵ In Syria, this figure had two faces. One, turned toward a defensive battle alongside the Syrians in the ‘Free Zones’, draws its power from the values of solidarity and religiosity expressed in the interviews (chapters 8 and 9). The other was absolute brutality, amalgamating defence with atrocities to support an authentically Islamic state. When asked about their decision to return to their country of origin (France or Belgium), many interviewees, used the image of young European and Arab jihadi migrants supporting extreme violence and complying with a disciplinary submission that broke with the spiritual millennialism referred to above. They used this image in order to distinguish themselves from it. When they describe these commitments, these respondents talk of the ‘ignorance’ and ‘lack of religious knowledge’ of these ‘faithless young people’. Abou Abdallah, the Tunisian who had been in the IS, and whom I met in Kirkuk in 2017, recounts this tension.

Abou Abdallah: After a week [in the IS in 2015], I began to find life in the camp unbearable, with the megalomaniac teachers who forced you to adapt to the lack of food and imposed fasting on you, which is not a thing in Islam. I had a French teacher of Tunisian origin. He was power-hungry and genuinely ignorant about religion. He spoke with a level of vulgarity I found unbelievable for someone who

called himself a multazim.¹⁵⁶ He made you fold your sheet in what he called 'the right way'. It was also then that I noticed his indifference to the brothers who had died at the front: if someone died, they died and that was it; or they told you that he'd reached paradise. That was their only response, devoid of any brotherhood. Lies were prioritised over everything else, and power was all there was. Suddenly, you found yourself in the position of being a slave experiencing oppression again.

Some of our group started to hate their own existence. Some escaped, others must have wounded themselves with their own weapon to be exonerated from combat. Several killed each other. That meant a catastrophic situation within the IS-run zones. They could kill large numbers of people without anyone questioning it. And lastly, they executed fifty migrants on the basis of groundless accusations. Above all, there were thousands of women who had emigrated to the tanzim¹⁵⁷ but who now wanted to leave. Women lived in awful situations. The majority did not even have decent housing and were dumped in madafate¹⁵⁸ in war zones. A few days ago, a madafa was bombed. The reality of these madafate was disastrous, they looked and sounded like prisons. They put emigrant women there in a group, while they wait for a husband, and especially women who had lost their husbands in the war, which was pretty much all the women. They were monitored, and couldn't leave without permission that was hard to get. The same thing for children forced to fight and the prisons where they were torturing people ... What, in all that, is anything to do with the path of God? I came to follow the path of God and ended up leaving to find the path of God.¹⁵⁹

The second category of violence is suicide bombings in the wars in Iraq and then Syria. Some migrants for jihad indeed acknowledged that among the Islamic groups on the Syrian battlefields between 2011 and 2014, Nusra (still allied with ISIS) carried out suicide bombings against regime targets, via *inghimassi* (literally, 'diver' or 'infiltration') operations. Inherited from the war against the US occupation of Iraq and the ensuing civil war (2003-2011), this type of operation often led to civilian deaths, when executed in the zones held by the regime in 2011. From 2012, with the rise in the power of Free Zones, this military option was transposed from urban guerilla warfare into action on the frontlines, to drive deep into the regime's military positions. With no aerial cover allowing ground forces to advance against the regime's units, the *inghi-massi* volunteered to drive 'lorry bombs' set to cross the front and penetrate checkpoints, in preparation for the ground forces.

When they joined groups such as Nusra and later, Daesh, the migrants for jihad were thus supposed to tick one of the three boxes on the organisation's forms: *mouqatil* (fighter), *inghimassi* (kamikaze infiltrator) or *istichhadi* (martyr, destined to carry out a suicide bombing). Rafik, who had returned to France from Syria in Spring 2014, talks about this topic, pinpointing the centrality of the relationship to the International Coalition.

Montassir: Weren't you arrested at the airport when you got back from Syria? The police allowed you to go free for a while ...

Rafik: It was to see if I was planning something or not. Several of us came back at that time, and they left us alone deliberately to see what we did next. Me and Mourad for example, we got to France via Belgium. The Belgian police kept us for an hour. And when I came back to France, the policeman asked me: 'What were you doing in Belgium?' I realised that the Belgians let us through after informing the police in France. [...] It was after us that they started to automatically put people in prison, direct from the airport. They got more scared in my opinion. The fear that someone would commit some crime, even under surveillance. Because you have to know that we got back before the International Coalition began in Syria. We got home in May 2014, and the Coalition started in July or August 2014. And it was after that date that the number of calls to attack France began to increase. From that point on, they didn't take any more risks. Anyone who came back from that date on went straight to prison. And then there were also people who died after, even though they had come back well before us, there were some who managed to slip through the net. That's when you don't have telephone and you don't speak to your family. [...]

There were some names unknown to the intelligence services but who got caught when their names came out in the 'Daesh leaks'.¹⁶⁰ And I'm also on that list. It's because when I came back from Syria, we were filling out forms, with our kouniya [nickname], town of origin, occupation, age, etc. It came out in 2016 because apparently an undercover agent in dawla sold a USB with all the data on it. And when the 'Daesh leaks' came out, there were loads of us who went down [in prison] (Thomasset, 2017), because that's how they found out we'd gone to Syria. The intelligence services here then did investigations, cross-referencing the info about the towns, the occupation, and the kouniya. As there weren't any surnames or first names. For example, my information came out: Abou Salman ar-Rifi, occupation (engineer), my age and my parents' first names. I couldn't

believe my eyes when I saw the information on my screen while I was in prison. It was in March 2016. I got the info via Twitter because a journalist published it.

This file was dangerous, because it also contained information on the choice of three boxes we ticked when we got there in a group: mouqatil, istichhadi, inghimassi. And imagine if one of us returnees stated in a trial that they were just a 'fighter' and it turned out that they were actually an istichhadi or inghimassi, that means that they'd go and look for him in prison because the file shows he had made his mind up. God be praised, in the group I was in, we all stated at trial that we were fighters, and indeed in the file we were coded as being 'fighters'. So this file worked to our advantage because we hadn't lied to the police here or to the judge about what we were going to do in Syria. The journalist I spoke about contacted me I confirmed that they were real files, because I knew the people and their nicknames.

Lastly, the third category of violence in this period of war emerged only within Daesh: suicide bombing, by *istichhadi*, against the countries in the International Coalition, from August 2014 onwards.

In all three cases, violence must be understood based on the meaning afforded to the ideas of oppression, death and the war, by the migrants for jihad. Of course, all the people we met well and truly bore arms in the training camps and most of them joined up convinced that death was one possible outcome. But for most of them, the nature of the violence deemed necessary was contingent on that of the conflict, seen as a traditionally binary war (friends-enemies), even without national statist authority: they understood it as being part of the utopian struggle to defend a transnational religious community. This is why they waged war in Syria as long as, in their eyes, the values that motivated their departure were sustained. When this criterion was challenged, due to the appearance of new actors who manipulated violence in order to 'make a state' (Daesh), or when the conflict assumed an international scale and the armed gendarmes of the world appeared, the migrants for jihad we met after they had returned home decided to go back to their countries of origin – at least as long as the borders stayed open. Even in its most eschatological formulation, their idea of jihad thus maintained a reasoned relationship with reality, as they judged it irresponsible to fight a war against the international armies. This is why the policy of 'deradicalisation', such as it was promoted by several European governments (particularly France), is based on a nonsensical proposition: it glosses over the fact that it was

precisely because of their religious commitment that the *returnees*, to use the official term for them, had already acknowledged the failure of their quest and the gulf between the goal they initially had, and their lived experience. Salim, the Belgian activist already quoted in chapter 8, for example talks about this:

Salim: *In any case, the red line for me was political violence. We have to stay in the realm of ideas. [...] We committed an entire section of our mental universe to something. And either people came home because they were caught and extradited, or because it went badly down there, or they got wounded. It was a failure. So it wasn't the moment to add to things. [...] Yes, I think there was [psychological counselling] to do. Already, in order to leave, there had to be something in your life where, even so, you tell yourself that it's worth dropping everything. So yeah – there's a problem. And even if you went out there for other reasons, you're going to have problems there. It's hard. It's hard with the planes bombing you and everything. Gradually, that gets stuck in your head. As for me, when I came back, for six or seven months, when I heard a plane, I was like this [he holds his head in his hands].¹⁶¹*

In the opposite scenario, the suicidal martyr *istichhadi* frees themselves from historical reality: through pathological despair and according to a discourse of re-establishing the state based on religious tradition, he extends the brutality of the colonial intervention with an opposing brutality. He thus constructs his identity in the Schmittian category of 'friend-enemy' (Schmitt, 1972) within the nation's borders – in this way the *istichhadi* finds the national borders in order to carry out the attack. It is only based on this perspective, by situating the violence in the period of the Syrian revolution, that an attempt can be made to rationally analyse the motivations of those who put on explosive belts.

2015-2017: the terrorist response in Europe to the colonial domination of the Middle East

The Islamic State's press release, published in Arabic and French during the Paris terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015, is fearfully clear about the vengeance it claims. Framing the attacks within a strategy of counterattack, it seems to have been written in Arabic, then translated into French by Daesh. The original text explains clearly again the reasons for

the choice of terrorist methods focused on the international war waged by the coalition in Syria and Iraq:

'Let France and those that follow its path know that they are at the top of the list of Islamic State targets and that the smell of death will be in their noses while they spearhead the crusade [of the International Coalition]. They will be our targets as long as they dare insult our Prophet, let the peace of Allah and his blessings be upon him, and while they glorify in the war on Islam in France. They will be our targets as long as they strike against Muslims in the land of the Caliphate with their planes that will not defend them in the stinking streets of Paris. This ghazwa [raid] is only the first rainfall in a warning for those who want to reflect on it'.¹⁶²

After each attack, a similar press release would follow. But in Europe, the political and media commentaries generally concealed the connection established by Daesh between the International Coalition's war and the use of terrorism. They concentrated on public counterterrorism policy, targeting 'radicalisation' and radical Islam. The relationship between the attacks and the international war was removed, thus preventing the families of the victims of terrorism getting any satisfactory answer. The discourse of the 'nation-to-nation' war adopted by the IS was considered just *ad hoc* propaganda to justify massacres that were actually motivated by a millenarian hatred of the West. But why would the terrorists hide behind this discourse to legitimise such acts committed against civilians in their eyes and to the whole world? Why would people identifying with religious purity not pick up on the idea of a clash of civilisations, but seen from an Islamic, rather than a Western perspective? These questions cannot be addressed without asking another: why do counterterrorist discourses on radicalisation not take the statements on the International Coalition's war seriously? To shed light on this opposition, let's turn briefly for support to the remarks of some of the communicators of the discourses seeking to legitimise the suicide bombings.

The two Brussels attacks of 22 March 2016, which killed thirty-two and injured three hundred, were carried out by four Belgians of North African origin, who had proven links to the Paris terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015. Two of the four terrorists did not travel to Syria, but encountered the Daesh discourse and a network of people identifying

with it in prison. In relation to those attacks, the IS press release again emphasised the international war waged by Belgium within the coalition:¹⁶³

*‘This Tuesday, IS fighters carried out a series of attacks using explosive belts and bombs, targeting an airport and main train station in the city centre of Brussels, the capital of Belgium. The latter has been part of the International Coalition against the Islamic State, and is constantly waging war on Islam and Muslims’.*¹⁶⁴

In the same vein, spokesmen from Al-Qaida, now split from the IS, ‘celebrated’ the Brussels attacks and explained their support in the following way:

*‘We are not the only ones in this world who must be killed. Our families are not the only ones who must submit to the fate of terror and fear. Peace must be a common fate. They have to be killed in the same way that we are killed. They must be wounded as much as we are’.*¹⁶⁵

In the trials of the terrorists who did not activate their explosive belts in Paris and Brussels, the legitimisation of terrorism by international intervention was a leitmotiv of their evidence, to which were added problems of social segregation, the clash of civilisations, and the statist interpretation of religion based on the ‘friends-enemies’ binary. Salah Abdeslam, sole survivor of the terrorist hit squad of 13 November 2015, thus stated unabashedly at his trial in Paris: ‘The attacks, they were military operations whose aim was to make the coalition bombings stop’. And coldly reiterated: ‘[the attacks’ perpetrators] responded to the aggression of France and the West. And if they killed civilians, it was to make a statement’ (Jabkhiro, 2022). Similarly, Mohamed Abrini, the surviving member of the terrorist hit squad at Zaventem Airport (Brussels) on 22 March 2016, described the social conditions of his life during the trial in Brussels in April 2023 before explaining why he did not go through with the attack (he decided not to detonate his bomb at the last minute).

Mohamed Abrini: *I played football from the age of five or six until I was around twenty, and then I failed at school, failed at sport, and in the end, checkmate. [...] a week from the end of my sentence, I found out that my little brother had been killed in Syria. When I was released from prison nothing mattered anymore, and the only thing I wanted was to go to Syria. [...] I had no plans to integrate myself*

back into society. You can't imagine the atmosphere in the neighbourhoods, all the houses had satellite dishes permanently tuned into news about the war far away. That's all you could see all the time, the war. People were bathing in it all the time (RTL Info, 2023).

He then resorted to suicide bombing based on the binary of the state-on-state war, recognising the future soldier within a state entity: 'This business is bigger than all of us. How can you judge a business where heads of state have decided something, including the leaders of Islamic State, and we're in the middle. [...] That's why I told you yesterday that you're not capable of passing judgement in such a situation' (RTL Info, 2023). And in conclusion, according to the media at the trial: 'The people at the airport that day were double victims, both of the foreign policy of the West against the East, and of the terrorist organisation Islamic State' (RTL Info, 2023).

This discursive pattern was to be repeated in relation to other fatal attacks. The one carried out in Nice on 14 July 2016 by a Tunisian immigrant with no links to the IS, and which killed twenty-six people – a third of whom were Muslims (Bastié, 2016) – and injured four hundred and fifty-eight was thus claimed in these terms: 'The perpetrator of the operation is a soldier of Islamic State. He carried it out in response to our call to target the populations of states in the International Coalition fighting Islamic State. [...] Let these Crusader states know that they will never be spared from the strikes by *mujahideen*, whatever security measures they implement'.¹⁶⁶

The suicide bombings in Catalonia on 17 and 18 August 2017 (which killed sixteen (not including the terrorists), and wounded one hundred and thirty-six) led to the same type of claim. The IS press release was proclaimed from Syria by Abou Layth al-Qortoubi and Abou Soulayman al-Andaloussi, pseudonyms of two Spaniards whose ancestors were post-colonial immigrants:

'We ask Allah to accept our brothers who executed the raid on Barcelona. Our war with you, O Crusaders, will continue for the rest of time. [...] There will be no blood spared with the Crusaders who engage us in military attacks. So [addressing Spain] leave the war, pull out of the Christian coalition, otherwise we will never allow you to dream of security and safety, *inch Allah*. [...] Don't forget, O Crusaders, the blood of the Muslims spilled in Andalusia at the

time of the Inquisition, don't forget the crimes you commit today against the Muslims in the Islamic State. We will avenge our martyrs. With Allah's permission, Andalusia will again become what it was, home of Islam and land of Caliphate'.¹⁶⁷

Thus, there were many cases when, after each attack, the Islamic State emphasised the international intervention, analysed via the traditional frame of state-on-state war. For those who commissioned and carried out the attacks, an eschatological reading of reality and the Islam-Christianity opposition – which the word 'Crusaders' and the use of fantasies like that of medieval Andalusia demonstrate – add a layer of extra holiness to the partisan war, in both their own eyes and those of the desperate men who give their lives while killing others.

This initial evidence regarding the Daesh attacks thus follows the traditional criticism of outside interference, but this time it is levelled by an organisation intent on terrorism as its riposte to colonial domination. The terrorist act thus asserts itself in the face of the stubbornness of governments comprising a coalition that also kills civilians far from its borders, without regard for its victims and their families. The cycle of violence cannot be grasped without recalling the responsibility of the international armies in the vicious circle sustaining the terrorist response.

The Role of colonial legacy and the closure of borders in Europe's downward terrorist spiral

Everyone implicitly acknowledges that the narrative of state-on-state warfare is insufficient. While suicide bombings were carried out by migrants with warlike motivations, in other attacks, Frenchmen also killed other French people and Belgians other Belgians. The International Coalition and the Westphalian mode of government wars probably reawakened motivations from further away. Hence the point of using research to try to answer simple but seldom-posed questions. What led these young people, born in a peaceful society, less inegalitarian than that of their parents in economic terms, and affording better access to education, to fall into terrorist violence? Why did these children of emigrants – whose parents had not used such attacks in their anticolonial struggles – end up involved in attacks on civilians justified by a discourse about national

and international war? And why did these newly arrived immigrants carry out attacks in their host countries?

The answers to these questions require us to recall twin observations. First, the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam increased in the West after the International Coalition's entrance into the war in Syria and Iraq in 2014, particularly in the countries comprising this coalition, a war with devastating impacts.¹⁶⁸ These are indicated in the first official toll of this intervention, as early as June 2015, quoted by the second most senior US diplomat, Antony Blinken: more than 10,000 IS fighters killed in nine months (La Presse, 2015). And by February 2019, the official Coalition figures were reporting at least 1,257 civilians killed in air strikes – prior to the terribly lethal strikes on Baghouz (the last bastion of the IS in Syria) that preceded the final fall of the Caliphate in 2019 – whereas the NGO, Airwars, reported in the same year that 7,595 to 12,561 civilians had been killed by the Coalition (Forestier, 2019).

Next, these attacks were primarily, and even almost exclusively, perpetrated by young European people with postcolonial migrant backgrounds, as well as migrants from formerly colonised societies. Thanks to the available data, for the two years following the creation of the International Coalition, we can accurately count the terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam in the three countries comprising it (France, Belgium and Germany), counting only the attacks claimed by the Islamic State and those committed in its name.¹⁶⁹ The following table indicates the respective percentage of nationals from postcolonial immigrant backgrounds, foreigners and converted nationals among those responsible for these attacks.

Table 1 can be completed with the list of attacks that took place between 2017 and 2019 (when Daesh was removed from Syria) in these three countries and others that took part in the Coalition (the UK, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria which were presented as being allied to Germany in Islamic State propaganda). The results show that the attacks carried out in Europe in the name of Islam reached a peak – and a corresponding peak in the number of civilians killed – during the foreign military intervention.¹⁷⁰ Their frequency then drops when foreign troops are withdrawn, and the theatre of war moves elsewhere. Moreover, the mobilising utopia of a state for Islam lost its attraction due to disillusion with the IS project.

Table 1: People responsible for attacks committed in the name of the Islamic State in France, Belgium and Germany (December 2014-December 2016)

Coalition country	Number of attacks	People directly involved	Of whom are nationals with postcolonial immigrant background	Of whom are foreigners with various visas, or seeking asylum	Of whom stayed in (or tried to get to) Syria during the conflict	Of whom are Muslim Converts
France	16	30	17	10	17	3
Belgium	4	6	5	1	3	0
Germany	6	6	1	5	3	0

The question of newly arrived immigrants who carried out attacks in Europe during this period of the war follows an analogous logic. In political and media commentaries on this issue, the use of terms ‘illegal migrant’ and ‘undocumented migrant’ help to conceal the administrative violence with which the latter groups are faced, from the refusal of a visa to being held in a detention centre, or banned from entering the country. Some of them found a window of opportunity in the war and amid the new discourse of inverting the violence, to procure their suicidal end. Finally, we can add the significant fact that 80% of the 5,000 European men and women who emigrated to Syria in this period came from five countries with complex postcolonial relationships and migration policies: France, Belgium, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands (Capone et al., 2023).

Yet the realities of the war and ‘borderisation’¹⁷¹ standing before the immigrants (for the jihadis as much as those from former colonies seeking freedom of movement) are not the only factors determining the history of these attacks. And the ideological motivation of the suicide migrants back from jihad cannot be reduced to a response to emergency counterterrorist strategies adopted by Western countries to thwart the Islamic State.¹⁷² This is clear, for example, in the first attack perpetrated by a European returnee from Syria, Mehdi Nemmouche, from Roubaix

(Northern France), on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, in which four people died, on 24 May 2014, *before* the International Coalition began its air strikes. This attack was not claimed by the IS and the spokesperson of the Brussels Public Prosecutor's office suggested the theory of an individual act with a *spontaneous* antisemitic motivation, a theory not clearly proven during the trial.^{173, 174} However, the nature of the specific violence aimed at Jews as such, often very generically highlighted by the media, is a reality important to understand better in this context.

Antisemitic motivations behind certain attacks

Addressing the specifics of antisemitism seems all the more necessary when it is mixed in with a form of religious politicisation linked to post-colonial immigration and European ideological patterns that endorse the assailants. An historical interpretation enables this contact, that took shape in the 2000s, especially around the French comedian Dieudonné and the essayist Alain Soral, who made antisemitic theories and Holocaust denial the flavour of the month in Europe. What the young people like Mohammed Merah and Jérémie Louis-Sydney carrying out terrorist attacks in 2012, and Amedy Coulibaly, in 2015, had in common, was not going to Syria, but being linked to this conspiracist sphere, through which Soral and Dieudonné conveyed discourses tolerated and widely disseminated both on the political right and left in both France and Belgium. Drawing on support from a public debate favourable to them, and the relative indifference – and even the support of some political leaders –¹⁷⁵ these actors significantly increased the volume of the 'background music' continuously playing in European antisemitism (Karsenti, 2018a).

This twin dynamic of religious politicisation and updated modern antisemitism was thus deployed in Europe. It helps explain that in this period, the attacks targeted on Jews as a community of believers and in the name of Islamism differ in their motivations from those claimed in the name of the war between competing nations and those carried out by migrants crossing forbidden postcolonial borders. In contrast, the antisemitic attacks, even when perpetrated in the name of Islam and by the children of postcolonial immigrants, are, by their justification, still fixed in a European space.¹⁷⁶ In an internal antisemitic logic, when these perpetrators, in Europe, identify with the struggle against the persecution of the Palestinians by the State of Israel, it is to continue to make the

Jewish minority, perceived as an international structure, take the blame and assume the weight of the political evils and tragedies perpetrated by the dominant groups and through the politics of domination here and elsewhere.¹⁷⁷

This deadly violence against Jews raises the questions as to whether the relationship between Europe and antisemitism is a form of European political modernity (Milner, 2003), and what is the meaning of the resumption of this violence by the children of immigrants: on the one hand, antisemitism has been insufficiently addressed in public debate – beyond it clearly being exclusively, lazily and above all, erroneously, juxtaposed with children of postcolonial immigration – and on the other, the confused resentment felt among the children of immigration toward another minority wrongly seen as protected and favoured.

A third point might be added to this tragic picture of antisemitism dusted off by the descendants of postcolonial immigration: the disorganisation of politics to do with Palestine. Because the permanence of the European antisemitic tradition again encounters political discourses fuelled by both the crimes of the State of Israel in Palestine, and the Pan-Arab antisemitic discourse propagated on a large scale. This situation: the silence of the West in response to the illegal practices of the Israeli state exacerbates the anti-Zionist, and also antisemitic reaction in the circles where Palestine symbolises more than just a cause: family values. Moreover, we should not understand the support offered to Israel by the Western political elites as in any way contradicting European antisemitism: it is strategic support for a state that explicitly sought to copy Europe in its nationalist and secular dynamic.¹⁷⁸

In some of the politicised networks of postcolonial immigration, the exacerbation of European antisemitism is due to the fact that defending the Palestinian cause against the violence of the Israeli occupation is now undergoing a crisis in its political and intellectual organisation. It manifests itself in the slow collapse of organisations that had advocated for the anticolonial cause by fighting all forms of racism, including antisemitism. You can identify a kind of inversion of the anticolonial struggle in this collapse, with a new antisemitic discourse re-using the millennialist stories available intermittently in popular cultures, forms of nationalism, and some holy texts in former colonies. Hence an easy merger between old European antisemitism and new antisemitic expressions among the

young descendants of postcolonial immigration, which would contribute to people taking the step to perpetrating antisemitic crimes and attacks.

Certain blinkered European elites also feed into this disastrous spiral by condemning antisemitism but restricting its pertinence to particular historical periods (e.g. the Dreyfus Affair, Nazism, Vichy, etc.), without querying the distant origins and contemporary continuums of this form of racism. In doing so, their discourses hide the fact that the same mechanisms are at work in other forms of contemporary racism, such as Islamophobia and antiblack racism, and those discourses turn out to be ineffective in countering the resurgence in antisemitism. They are superficial and conventional, sounding the alarm without clearly identifying the major causes of the upsurge in persecution of Jews via terrorism in Europe.¹⁷⁹ This inefficiency equates to an incapacity to take account of two factors irreducible to the emergence of violent Islamism. First, the spirit of antisemitism is still background noise in many institutions of the nation-state in Western Europe. Next, the postcolonial foreign policies of the Western powers (borderisation, foreign wars, support for totalitarian or racist regimes, etc.) have produced ongoing impacts within their societies.

The fact remains that counterterrorist policies here disregard the role played by the matters of war, anti-democratic migration policies, and European antisemitism in the attacks. The fight against the antisemitism at the root of attacks, committed by men who had never been to Syria, quickly gave way to the war exclusively against Islamic radicalisation.

The Islamisation of nihilism in terrorist activities

As we have already noted, in order to put to bed this issue of Islam's particular role in specific terrorist pathways, we cannot avoid engaging with the history of colonial wars and migration policies associated with Western superiority. We should take terrorists seriously when they say they are acting in the name of Islam, when they highlight feelings of injustice provoked by this history to legitimise their massacres and tragic exits from the national community. The terrorist return of jihad thus contains an intimate dimension, in the sense that its protagonist returns to the soil of the 'nation', using violence to satisfy an unacknowledged feeling of injustice. The attack of the recently arrived migrant, on the other hand, is still relatively external since it is a nihilistic response to the ever-increasing

violence of the borders. The war of attacks follows this complex front line, largely forgotten in the discourses of counterterrorism.

Posing the ‘problem of Islam’ probably has a place in this schema, but then we must take account of the factors that amplify this religion’s possible potential for violence, such as international military interventions in Muslim countries and closing the borders. The fact remains that suicide bombings do not date back just to the International Coalition joining the war in Syria. Since then, although the intervention played an exacerbating role, does it not relate to a pre-existing political-religious phenomenon? And why does the practice of suicide bombing emerge as a response to international military interventions, rather than a different policy demanding the withdrawal of Western troops and the abandonment of borderisation policies? Similarly, what leads migrants who seek to go to Europe, and who are rejected in the draconian system of visa applications and holding centres to perpetrate attacks on civilian populations invoking a religious discourse when they do so?

There is no doubt that the leadership of Daesh, the main group authorising these attacks, instrumentalised the anti-Western hatred of specific migrants for jihad in order to avenge their dead killed in the battle to establish a national territory, by creating a tactic to assert their state-building project.¹⁸⁰ But the foremost responsibility for political terrorism is held by the agents of these attacks, who cannot be considered puppets in the hands of the actors in a geopolitical war motivated by the undeniable crimes of colonial governments and Western borderisation policies. Terrorist violence and the tragic nihilism of killing or getting yourself incarcerated for life function by following other more winding roads.

To properly get to grips with why people engage in terrorism, we first have to understand this hatred, developed out of disillusionment and bitter experiences of a swathe of young people with postcolonial immigrant backgrounds. Olivier Roy’s (2016) work, *Le Djihad et la Mort* (Jihad and Death) correctly emphasises the duality between ‘youth’ and ‘nihilism’ which he argues is in play in what he calls, borrowing Alain Bertho’s (2015) term, the ‘Islamisation of radicality’. For Roy, ‘those who perpetrate the attacks in Europe are not the residents of the Gaza Strip, or Libyans, or Afghans. They are not necessarily the poorest, the most humiliated or the least integrated, because their fantasy is also political. The fact that 25% of jihadists are converts shows that the link between

the radicals and their “people” is also part of their fantasy, or at least – this is my hypothesis – it is built like a fantasy. [...] Because fantasy is also political. Only mechanistic Marxism and rational choice theory believe that choices are “objective” (Roy, 2016: 19-20). Later, Roy adds, ‘we cannot understand the political unless we also work on the construction of fantasies. Highlighting suffering as the explanation for radicalisation is precisely to reintroduce the fantasy factor: the rebel suffers the suffering of others’ (Roy, 2016: 121).

This hypothesis, like that of Norbert Elias on terrorism in West Germany in the 1960s and 70s, opens a new way to understand the politics at stake in the attacks. It encourages us to take the actors’ words seriously, as well as their social and discursive spaces, rather than the reconstructions of them enacted by security policies aimed at fighting terrorism and ‘radicalisation’. Considering fantasies boils down to identifying the feelings expressed by young people from a generation that sees itself as victims of suffering drawn from the source of twin hatreds: self-hatred and hatred of others, to the point where they agree to belong to an imaginary sacrificial community and engage in mass-murdering rampages.

Lastly, in peaceful societies, young people adopting a warrior code that intersects with terrorism has been facilitated by upbringings in marginal urban spaces where murder and violence have been normalised by policies of abandonment and segregation.¹⁸¹ In relation to the migrants to Syria, this tropism can be observed among young people who had participated in war, learned how to use weapons, and who had set themselves the mission of killing their enemies. This apprenticeship reached extreme levels of brutality with public executions in the towns subject to the terror of the new state order constructed by the fascist organisation, the IS. According to its propaganda videos, the three members of the terrorist raid on the Bataclan had allegedly each decapitated enemy soldiers. The atrocities of the war and the bombings probably played a part in this process of ‘barbarisation’, without even taking into account the impacts of the counterterrorist laws that *a priori* convicted people who went to Syria, and stopped people returning, as well as the state’s passivity in response to the requests for help made by the families of the migrants for jihad. So many factors can explain why some of these migrants chose the path of the future soldier of the Islamic State. In a long interview, Warda, the mother of one of these three perpetrators of the attack on the

Bataclan, told me what in her view had marked her son's tipping point into terrorism.

Warda: Since he left, I had always cooperated with the police, and kept asking them for help. Even before he left, while he was still in Türkiye, I asked the police to bring him back. They lied to me because they told me they were going to help me. I gave them my tablet, my phone and my access codes. They had all the information (which in the end helped them build a case for the trial), but they didn't do anything to get our kids back or prevent what happened next. In 2014, I wanted to go and look for him, bring him back, but the police told me: 'If you set foot in Syria, you'll go to prison when you get back'. [...]

Over there, his change of tack, to IS, was based on two events, I think. First, it was when his friends came back without him. He was punished by an IS group and then one of the IS police chiefs took him away. [She shows me videos.] Here he's playing with that police chief's children. He was staying at his place for a while, because the other group had taken his house and all his things: they suspected him of helping his friends desert. [...] Later, he told me about an International Coalition bombing raid [in September 2014]. He told me he couldn't believe he had survived it. He was in a bakery and suddenly he found himself underneath a load of debris.¹⁸² When he stood up, he said he was surrounded by corpses of Syrians, torn to shreds. He told me about children's arms and a friend he lost in the bombing. I think he was already an IS soldier at that point, but after the bombing he joined a more hardcore branch of Daesh. He told me at least fifty people died in that bombing incident, especially children. He showed me videos of Scuds before they fell, and told me: 'You don't run anymore because you can work out from the sound where they are going to fall'. [...]

I'll never understand what happened, and I'll never forgive him. But on the other hand, I also lost a son and I'm suffering. It's also thanks to these meetings with the families of the victims that I didn't sink, from the moment when a mother who had lost her daughter in the [Bataclan] attack said she was sorry for my loss. I continue to live like those families who have been so badly affected, when they considered me as being as distressed as they were. Like them, I want to understand what happened and why my son did what he did.

Learning about violence in a war driven by a religious discourse aspiring to be a future-state certainly facilitated taking the step to this tragic action. And when the trajectory of an individual separates them from the considered collective conscience of the crimes committed by the

postcolonial interventionist project, and the migration policies that lead to death, their terrorist impulses easily find a motivation. In the societies where these policies take root, there are indeed always individuals on the brink of disaffiliation, who will translate their reaction to the collective sufferings of their community into a radical quest for meaning that involves violence. They therefore bear full responsibility, which in no way absolves political leaders who remain passive in response to the marginalised, and to mistreated colonies.

CONCLUSION

The ever-present hopes of the Syrian revolution

In conclusion to this study of the Syrian revolution and jihad, it seems important to raise three issues that lie at the heart of the problems the research raises. First is the false opposition between the victims of the attacks and people prosecuted for terrorism, in this case, because of their time in Syria. Next, the stakes of the reintegration of those incarcerated for terrorist offences into society, and the role of their families in relation to counterterrorism strategies. Last and not least, the necessity, underscored by the Syrian revolution, of rethinking postcolonial relationships to find a policy that leads to peace.

The dead end of ‘deradicalisation’ policies

As I write this conclusion, in Spring 2023, I am still working, meeting French and Belgians released from prison after serving 5-10-year sentences. In terms of politics and media, the issue of the reintegration of people incarcerated for terrorist offences into society is being broached while European citizens – among them several children – are still surviving in awful conditions in the camps and prisons of Syria and Iraq.¹⁸³ In response to the fear formulated by some representatives of a public opinion profoundly shaken by the attacks on Europe, both the justice system and the administrative services responsible for the cases of the ‘returnees’ dealt with the matter under political pressure, and adopted new rules of exception.

The emergence of the public policy issue of ‘radicalisation’ has produced changes in the work routines of civil service units such as prisons, educators in charge of reporting, child safety institutions responsible for the placement of repatriated children, etc. (Puaud, 2018). Because managing the ‘returnees’ was assigned to the same civil service sections that manage prison sentences, reintegration and surveillance – even though, at the peak of the media frenzy over radicalisation, there were attempts to establish institutions to take responsibility for a policy that broke with the rule of law.¹⁸⁴ It was indeed within these ordinary institutions that

‘screws were tightened’ on people returning from Syria, who had been charged convicted, charged or reported for terrorism and radicalisation. This study is not the place to explore the effects of counterterrorism policies on their initial targets and society, but to show how their logics, as they become stricter, have continued to neglect the multiple aspects of the issue. These logics have thus produced outcomes opposite to the main principles of reintegration and safeguarding. However, the advocates of such logics would have more to learn from the experience of the communities and families when it came to reintegration.

Indeed, the release of people who had returned from Syria depended on several control and surveillance procedures, often with no connection to the objective of preventing attacks. ‘I don’t understand why they’re making our lives difficult. Do they think that’s how they’ll prevent attacks?’, my respondents exclaim when I raise the topic of reintegration and surveillance. Actually, instead of taking the brakes off the reintegration process and helping to ‘turn the page’, the legal and bureaucratic procedures drag out the sentence after prison. The most symptomatic aspect of this vindictive policy is probably the increasingly widespread practice of stripping nationality from those with dual citizenship and naturalised citizens returning from Syria, even though they left before the proclamation of the Islamic State, including people born French or Belgian, but whose parents are naturalised citizens.¹⁸⁵ Additionally, the periods when legal and administrative ‘conditions’ apply run from two to ten years, and are characterised by a particularly intense surveillance: police checks, travel bans, names placed on several national and international blacklists,¹⁸⁶ bans on working in the civil service, the suspension of some civil rights (such as the right to vote), frozen assets, bans on opening bank accounts,¹⁸⁷ and an obligation to undergo psychological and social monitoring, etc. These restrictions probably impact the trajectories of the people concerned for the rest of their lives, as Younes for example, like many others, explained in April 2023. He is a Frenchman imprisoned for nine years for going to Syria in 2012 and returning a year later.

*Younes: I just want to forget it and move on. My life can’t be reduced just to going to Syria in 2012 and having nothing to do with terrorist groups. I came back before Daesh was proclaimed. But everyday they’re there with their conditions, and police who violate my privacy, to remind you that you’re a terrorist, and will always be one.*¹⁸⁸

The consequences of counterterrorist policies, often experienced by families and Muslim communities in working-class neighbourhoods, can be added to the problems mentioned by Younes. So, hundreds of families were charged with ‘funding terrorism’ because they supported their children during the time they spent in Syria or helped them financially to get out of war zones. This policy rigidly applies the laws under which parents are charged with having sent money to Syria, regardless of their purely humanitarian motivations (support for grandchildren living under military siege during a conflict; help to extract families abandoned after the revolution turned into civil war and terrorism, etc.). This policy of exception goes as far as denying the most basic rights, with children and their parents being abandoned in refugee camps in Northern Syria in extreme conditions, exposing many of them to the risk of death and illness. Appeals mounted by families and European civil society groups were only partially taken on board, and even that was a long time after the UN had criticised the States in question for abandoning children, deprioritising the fate of women and especially men – in legal limbo.

Moreover, this right of exception signalled an uncompromising withdrawal of rights in relation to terrorist offences, making the returnees’ process of social reintegration even more fragile. The policy of separating mothers from children also lies at the heart of the sentencing: during this research I witnessed the tragic separations of young children from their mothers, imprisoned as soon as they arrived back in Paris or Brussels. Many repatriated children only had the right to see their mothers in prison after several months of separation based on an excessive law and procedures. Separation also manifests itself in the notorious accusation of ‘funding terrorism’ that seeks to cut parents off from young people who went to Syria, whereas as we know, this parental bond plays an essential role in reintegration, and, as we have seen, in disengagement and the decision to return. Lastly, beyond the people who went to Syria and their families, entire communities and neighbourhoods were targeted by policies of counterterrorist profiling of young people who had been part of the circles close to migrants for jihad, thus bringing such policies into the vast footprint of Islamophobia (Fadil et al., 2022).

In conclusion, by stressing the issue of the return from Syria, I am not ignoring the malicious reactions that this could provoke from some people, like that of comparing the suffering of victims of terrorism (lost lives, the tragic deaths of loved ones, mass killings, and the consequences of

serious injury) to the misfortune of former terrorist prisoners, and their families (abandonment in camps and prisons after the war, nationality stripping, dislocation of family relationships, and police surveillance). Yet this comparison only exists at the far end of nationalist discourse, which envisages the law as a machine to serve the war, and conceals the diversity of the actors in this tragic war within the social body. That discourse decries any desire to understand the tragic outcome in both the West (theatre of reactionary attacks) and in the East (site of a destructive neocolonial war). Because if there is one crucial observation to draw from the later chapters of this book, it is probably this incapacity to understand, whose source is a nationalist and legal policy in the West, on the Syrian issue, the departures, the returns and, generally, in relation to those followers of Islam who followed the path of jihad to fight the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad.

The diverse journeys taken by the protagonists, and their varied political standpoints that were the source of their radical responses were erased and homogenised by representations based on the war, and in the Islamophobia out of which the counterterrorist policies were created. These authoritarian and repressive policies comprised significant opposition to religious quests for new modes of struggle, and for salvation in the postcolonial world, both in the West and the East. Closing down the era of the Arab Spring and the Syrian revolution was promoted through a policy of war and counterterrorism that paradoxically ended up contributing to the extremely tragic attacks on civilians in its margins. Moreover, this closure left untouched the very reasons that led a young generation to venture into dangerous corners of a utopian politics that ended in tragedy: the revolution, the cross-border and transnational solidarities, immigration to make jihad and lastly, a reactionary and nihilist response. Far from forecasting terrorism and promoting a policy of peace toward the large groups of people excluded from Western society, counterterrorist policies too often merely fuelled the war, in the West and beyond.

Civil peace was also threatened by serious abuses of the law. In the fight against terrorism, the law of exception took precedence over the liberal law already weakened by the normative power that suspends class inequalities (Foucault, 2015). Indeed, what is at play in the legal and administrative decisions such as stripping nationality, keeping citizens in camps and prisons in inhumane conditions or subject to extrajudicial

executions, is the strengthening of the policies of domination feeding off the war and its redeployment within and beyond the nation's borders.¹⁸⁹

In contrast, a genuine policy of preventing terrorism would challenge the purely security-driven counterterrorist policy, the international war and the closure of the border to migration. These three aspects identify governments as responsible for intensifying violence. In terms of counterterrorism policy, the radical transformation of sentences and post-incarceration conditions is imperative in order to guarantee the reintegration of people charged and prosecuted for terrorist offences. First, the accusation must be redefined: starting from the field of study, it is astonishing to see entire families charged with terrorism because they managed to pay to get their children out of Syria for example. It is just as amazing to observe the homogenisation of sentences meted out to, and collective treatment of, people who took very different subjective paths because of their motivations for going to Syria. Beyond the punishments, it is the extension after the prison term is served that challenges the peace policy of the French and Belgian governments. In this context, stripping someone's nationality is the ultimate, major warlike counterterrorist statement. It reminds us that this is a racist form of justice which has no shame indulging in the practice of double punishments for dual nationals. And this has devastating effects on migrants' identities, those of their children and the various generations of immigrants with colonial and postcolonial backgrounds. This two-tier split in the law – as in the case of keeping Europeans in insalubrious prisons and camps – not only bears out the victors' desire for revenge, but also more widely, means a policy of double standards regarding an entire section of society.

A prevention of terrorism policy should also be open to challenge over its connection with international wars, with a hard look at both their origins and consequences. Responsibility toward the victims of terrorism imposes a duty of frankness, to reclassify its responsibilities regarding this period of war, and abuses against civilians beyond national borders. French participation in international colonial wars has, as we have seen, produced violent responses and reactions following the same terrorist patterns that target civilians. Whatever the nature of police vigilance and the funding allocated to it, revenge murders cannot be prevented as long as neocolonial war neglects certain collective identities. In this way, terrorism is not part of urban crime and delinquency, the traditional objects of police intervention, but is actually a form of war that cuts across social

groups, in the absence of various beliefs and sensitivities being taken into consideration within national space.

Lastly, the terrorist reaction feeds off another type of war that is increasingly normalised in postcolonial nations, namely the closure of borders. As we have seen, the violence of borders closed by aggressive strategies such as visas, border police, migrant detention camps and the forcible removal of migrants may amplify the shift from 'desiring the West' to a destructive hatred of it, leading all the way to suicide bombings. This closure, experienced as a deep wound caused by migration policies based on selection, racialisation, hierarchisation and the separation of different population groups, probably has much greater impacts than we realise on the relationships between former colonies and Western metropolises. In the 2010s, it would have been advantageous to allow an opening, however partial, in the authorisation of travel from formerly colonised countries in North Africa and Africa in general, as was the case in several Latin American, Asian and Eastern European countries. This would have softened relations and eased the prevention of extreme violence committed by people coming from the violent and belittled postcolonial world. It is all the more necessary to include it in the public national agenda when closure means the deaths of migrants labelled illegal, and the responses that, as we have seen, take the form of terrorist attacks.

Families: pillars of reintegration, despite stigmatisation

Amel, a mother charged with 'funding terrorism' (her French son, aged twenty, died in Syria):

Despite all the misery the courts and the police have caused us, we, the parents, we didn't come here to cry, or say we're victims. We aren't going to take the place of the victims of terrorism, and we're not looking for victim status. We just want people to understand that when our children went over there, when they die or do something,¹⁹⁰ that we don't throw a party at home, with mint tea and makrout [a typical pastry from the Maghreb]. We're unhappy. Very unhappy. Our life has changed. When that happens, we can no longer live. Now it's just a matter of survival. Our other children are having a tough time at school, and in the neighbourhood, and while this is going on, the teachers and everyone else have washed their hands of it. My daughter is still suffering from the death of her brother, and all accusations of terrorism she hears' .¹⁹¹

Sarah, a mother charged with ‘funding terrorism’ (her two sons were declared dead in Syria):

I sent money to smugglers, who stole it all, and I also sent money to my two sons so they could be find a smuggler, and lastly, when the Belgian police stopped me doing that, I ended up having money sent to Jordan and Türkiye via friends of the family without telling them why – otherwise they would never have helped. I’m not ashamed to say it: I did everything I could to bring them back to Belgium. Now, I’m charged with ‘funding terrorism’, and the so-called justice system has finally charged those former friends, who knew nothing about the situation. I had my reasons, because I wanted to save my children, at any cost, but what’s the motivation for the justice system? To cut me off from my whole family, to cut me off from my children, and leave them to perish. This is the only justification for these judges. When I told them during the trial to put themselves in my shoes, to tell me how this judge would have behaved if it were her children who’d gone, she looked at me insolently and said nothing. A silence of shame. In the end, she gave me four years in prison with a suspended sentence. The people judging us and trying us are unfair, incompetent and worse than that’.¹⁹²

The Syrian returnees we spoke to all stated that they wanted to ‘find a place’ in society ‘like everyone else’. With their families, they emphasised their willingness to ‘move on’. But they also indicated how difficult it was, with the post-release conditions attached that prevented them from reintegrating. I witnessed how this sentence categorically excluded the person prosecuted for terrorism based on legal decisions that – like stripping nationality, refusal to repatriate and profiling – permanently prevent reintegration.

Despite the vengeful aspect of this policy contained in the spirit of the law of exception, we must underline the crucial role played by the families in the struggle for reintegration. An initial shared observation is that the state strategies deployed did not bring about reintegration. It was instead the families, the mothers in these cases, who played the vital role in making this happen, from the fight to get their children and grandchildren back from Syria and Iraq, all the way through to welcoming them back and supporting them through the years of prison and after their release.

This involvement by the families is punctuated by security interventions that place limits on it, and even prohibit it. In order to keep their connections going and ensure that their children returned and integrated, the parents ran the risk of criminalisation, and exposed themselves to various dangers. The families’ struggles resulted from the solidarity of bloodlines and a flawless loyalty (Esmili, 2021), that extended,

as we have seen, beyond their children's departure for Syria. The families I met showed that the path to reintegration, starting from them urging their children to return, was based on work that mobilised memory and emotions. This economy of feelings entails a conscious reflexivity about how families are split when they experience the migrant condition, how this contributes to fragmenting bonds, and they grasp the new social norms in the host country (France, Belgium). It also entails a reflection on the solidarity displayed by the families of converts, as they too are aware of the crisis of their connection within the life journeys of children littered with painful experiences with public authorities, and others that end up in the utopian quest for meaning beyond national territory.

'Leading by feelings' and sustaining their bond by words that seek to ignore the militarisation of this period were the challenges encountered by the families in their relationships with their children who went to Syria. This parental solidarity is far from naïve and biased. On the contrary, it looks like a well-thought through act in response to a justice system that revokes rights, generates forms of exclusion that deny any chance of reintegration, and which may also rekindle the circle of resentment and hate in the whole social body.

Despite being snuffed out, the Syrian revolution was a breaking point with implications for the future

In the turmoil of the counterterrorism policies applied after the International Coalition's war against the Islamic State and attacks in Europe, many observers have lost sight of the initial scope of the Syrian revolution, and with it, the political proposition that emerged during the Arab Spring. Hence this book's attempts to describe the Syrian revolution by reminding us of the utopian ideas that unfurled within it. After addressing this utopian and emancipatory dimension, my study pinpointed the outbreak of a reactionary power within the revolution: the Islamic State, and the games played by the interventionist colonial powers (Russia and the International Coalition) that stoked the chaos and expanded the logics of hate to their tragic consequences, as much for the Syrians and Iraqis as for the Europeans killed and wounded during terrorist attacks.

Instead of supporting the populations that rose up against a regime that was reviled, but legitimate in the international arena, the international powers' choices were those of a war of interests. When the International Coalition was established, its members clearly refused to acknowledge the uniqueness of the revolution in Syria, preferring to

prop up a dictatorship that was based on a sovereignty of terror combined with a war on the whole of society. The powerful Western states, almost silent about the crimes of the regime, including chemical weapons attacks, simultaneously allowed a fascist force (Daesh) to be strengthened, and with it the illusion of reactionary form of salvation among a fraction of a disappointed generation, in Iraq, Syria, then to a much lesser degree, in Europe.

In fact, my respondents in Iraq and Syria were always amazed by how moderate the West's reaction was to the Syrian regime's violence, whereas the goal of destroying Daesh was a unanimous decision for the world powers. Similarly, those of them that had joined Daesh interpreted its appearance as a function of the international powers' desire to keep the Syrian regime in power and sustain the colonisation of Iraq. 'The Islamic State's terrorism deceived us', they told me, often before providing me with details of this illusion: the proposal of an Islamic state became a reality in the context of, firstly, the US war, then the massacres committed by representatives of the ethnic groups favoured by the post-colonial state in Iraq, and finally, in response to the war prosecuted with impunity by the Syrian regime against a radical revolution. Moreover, its millennialist ideology concealed its fascist-oriented character, and particularly won over some young, under-educated Europeans searching for an ideal opposite to the neocolonial policies of internal exclusion and the closure of external borders.

This was the development favoured by Russian colonial logic, which simultaneously provided the same tragic response to the Syrian crisis as the Western powers. This consisted of remaining silent about the regime's excesses before deploying an airborne war machine against the Islamic State, an organisation with a weak hold over its territory and little technological power, massacring civilians who lived alongside a minority of ardent followers of its ideology: a choice of policy that contributed to stifling a unique revolution.

In its utopian conception of jihad, its spontaneity and flexible mode of organisation open to the solidarities of the world, the spirit of this revolution is still a challenge to the mechanisms of repressive power in a region that had long been considered categorically submissive. Produced by people with no agenda or organisation, the Syrian revolution had no goal other than stopping the regime's massacres: 'I fought a regime that killed its people', the first revolutionary we engaged with as part of this

research project told us. To the question ‘why the revolution?’, he and his comrades did not give definitive answers about the future, aside from firstly putting the brakes on, and keeping the existing system. Like Walter Benjamin conceptualising revolution as ‘urgent braking’ (Löwy, 2019), the Syrian revolution paints a picture of an ambitious action carried out by representatives of the people against a machine generated by our modernity: that of a State with ambitions of omniscience, and which achieves its goals by subjugating its people.

Lastly, through the power of its own unfurling, which blew up the former categories of political thought, the Syrian revolution unexpectedly kicked off a period that concluded some sterile debates that had long constrained critical thought in the Arab-Muslim world. The chance to think through the major stakes opened up, testifying to new uses of a utopian religion freed from its dogmatic framing by movements that attached it to a rigid modernity and which had been overcome by a statist and nationalist state of mind, i.e. the oppositional postcolonial political Islam asserted in the Arab world since the 1970s. In this sense, the Syrian revolution marks a point of rupture with the century of ‘political Islam’ that had faded before the absolutist nationalism of authoritarian regimes and the reactionary uses of religion, from neoliberal Islamic governments to absolutist theocracies like Daesh. In response to these abuses, the Syrian revolution offered a new way to think about politics and religion open to younger generations of people of Muslims backgrounds, in both the Global South and the North.

EPILOGUE

The Revolution vs. the State

On 8 December 2024, in the midst of the genocidal nightmare wrought by Israel on Gaza, the world woke to the sound of hope emanating from Damascus: Bashar al-Assad had fallen, ending the hereditary dynasty's fifty-four-year reign. This collapse occurred in a decisive international context, where the regime's weakened allies steadily withdrew, leaving behind a President devoid of popular support. Russia was bogged down in the Ukrainian quagmire, the Israeli army was carrying out destructive bombing strikes on Hezbollah, while Iran prepared to deal with both American attacks and the prospect of a full-on war with Israel. It was in this void, experienced by the regime only in Autumn 2024, that a coalition of revolutionary groups, based in Idlib and led by Ahmed Charaa, the former head of Nusra, launched a triumphant attack on Damascus. This offensive, driven by a new momentum, both internal and diasporic, was based on decisive and well-organised expertise in the liberated areas of North-Western Syria: the locally-manufactured *Shaheen* drones. When the regime fell, the world rediscovered what the Syrians had been shouting about for decades, namely the regime's utter criminality. Saydnaya prison was merely the tip of the iceberg that was the regime's deadly nationwide system.

In this epilogue to the 2026 English-language edition, I hope to articulate two observations about the historical breaking point of December 2024, in a dialogue with the anthropological study of the Revolution that runs throughout this book.

The state picks up where the revolutionary era left off

This book retraces and describes a period that certainly differs from the one that began in 2024. It offers the reader an immersion into revolutionary politics distinct from that of movements that have previously embodied the term, 'revolution'. You might even be surprised to see this word used, as the Marxist-Leninist tradition had previously brought it to life in relation to Socialists and Communists, via non-aligned Tricontinentalists (Faligot, 2013) such as Ben Barka, Lumumba, Guevara and Allende. This

book, however, describes a history that follows a different agenda, reinventing the politics of the Global South. It is a history comparable to that of the German peasants led by Thomas Müntzer, the French Revolution, or the mystical communities rejecting the promise of modernity throughout the eighteenth century (Foucault, 2004). This is a utopian politics carried to its highest level of existence in the 2011-2016 period, when a marginalised group of Syrians – among them migrants who had come to fight in the name of religious solidarity – was faced with the very idea of modern, repressive politics, and offered the alternative of a radical transformation of the world.

However, the link with decoloniality is obvious here: it was not embodied in partisan traditions or a structured international solidarity, but functioned via a politics of ordinary people, aware of the failure of both the postcolonial state and the humanist lie of democratic states in the West that had left a machine programmed for massacre running in Syria. It was this awareness that drove the Syrians, in their war against a genocidal regime, to experiment with a politics aimed at transforming individuals and communities. A politics that called on the whole of society to leave the world-system.

This was evidence, if it were needed, that the ‘end of history’ exists only at the very limit of neoliberal propaganda, and that another world is still possible, thanks to the desire of people subjugated by neocolonial regimes, but who are still capable of imagining political alternatives.

This negotiation over a ‘new world’ came at a mind-boggling cost: more than 528,500 people killed in fourteen years of war (Agence France Presse, 2025). On top of the violence of the massacres came the violence of borders: a Europe proud of having ‘taken in’ a million Syrians, while simultaneously participating in the militarisation of its own peripheries. In the later interviews with revolutionaries, many spoke about how the discovery of European borders came as a more destabilising shock than the war itself: the prospect of their definitive closure often precipitated the abandonment of the last bastions of utopia. Indeed, the laws of exile and the negotiations around the status of ‘Syrian refugee’ meant that the revolution was basically being blackmailed by the states of the Global North.

In 2017, friends of the revolution were already saying to me: ‘We don’t have to accept responsibility for the whole world’. Changing political paradigms had always been imaginable in the revolution, without

regrets or bitterness, from the moment when politics began to respect dignity, the community and the desire that propelled the struggle against the regime. As I already demonstrated, the Syrian revolutionaries were neither partisans nor followers of an ideology. Like the aims of the revolution, times changed in 2024, as a new cycle was inaugurated, in which politics shifted toward the state-building that would comprise a reterritorialisation conscious of the challenges posed by the Baathist past and the Syrians' struggle for emancipation. The objectives of the offensive that brought about the fall of al-Assad were of a different character than those of the revolutionary decade, without this invalidating the revolutionary spirit. Moreover, apart from the thousands of revolutionaries constrained in exile, the actors were the same, with Ahmed Charaa at their head.

In the immediate aftermath of him taking power, there was still disorder in a state incapable of neutralising the logics of vengeance and of keeping the lid on any fresh massacres – such as the attacks targeting Alawite or Druze communities, and some Arab tribes in the south, as well as the aggressive engagements of Israel and the de facto autonomous government in the Kurdish areas and the North East in general. Despite this situation, the Syrians acknowledged the scope of the task before a new state that tells itself every day to remain faithful to the spirit of the revolution: the *sine qua non* of its political legitimacy and survival. It is specifically this attachment to the revolutionary heritage that now generates the consensus behind the leadership of the new phase, embodied by a leader whose legitimacy rests upon his undeniable participation – and the participation of Islamic groups in general – in the revolutionary period (Lundimatin, 2024).

Today, it is indeed a question of *government*. The revolutionaries seem to be in agreement with what Charaa summarises as follows:

'The revolutionary spirit was good for toppling a regime, but it is unsuited to making a new one. The revolution is henceforth part of our proud history, but going forward, we need a state-building spirit.'

'We have to have a strategic vision and short, medium and long-term plans, for all the sectors – economy, education, health, communications – in order to catch up with the rest of the world in a few years' (Syria TV, 2025).

Whatever the semantic reversals of revolutionary thought since 2011, the connection with African and Arab nationalist movements

in the immediate post-independence period is woven here again: with state-building as the ultimate goal of sovereignty regained. It is still not known whether this trajectory will satisfy the expectations of dignity that had driven the Syrian uprising, as it broke away from the course set by the region's Pan-Arab movements and states.

Whatever the outcomes may be, a new balance seems to have already been achieved: the green light given to Charaa in the popular plebiscite is contingent on an ongoing monitoring of the work from a revolutionary perspective, based on the moral debt owed to the martyrs.

The Twilight of nationalisms and promises of a government that does not govern

The massacres perpetrated by the al-Assad regime between 2011 and its fall in 2024 mark the end of a cycle of politics for the postcolonial states in the region.

They were the full stop at the end of a historical period begun in the 1960s, when parties and national governments emerged, their legitimacy drawn from struggles for independence. As the first chapter shows, Baathism descended steadily into fascism. No ideology, when it is faced with the exercise of power, is immune from such abuse. European history, including that of the democracies, provides more than enough examples.

In the Arab-Muslim world, the death of these ideologies – which had long contained heroic images of gaining independence – has been a slow process, whose last throes generated chaos and massacres.

Such is the fate of another regional ideology henceforth at death's door: Zionism, despite the obscene support of states against the solidarity expressed by their people. Zionism's political survival is now embodied in the perpetration of a colonial genocide in Gaza. Netanyahu now seems to be the mirror image of al-Assad – both representatives of the same technology of power based on the massacre of civilians and *domicide*. One is based on Baathism, the other on Zionism; one justifies genocide in the name of the struggle against a global conspiracy and Islamic terrorism, the other in the name of the defence of its people against antisemitic conspiracy and the same Islamic bogeyman.

A hypothesis can be formulated as a wish based on the observation of the hope birthed by the current revolutionary period in Syria, and the international solidarity with the Palestinians. This hypothesis revolves

around the idea that the wars waged by these two regimes against the Syrians and the Palestinians constitute bloody manifestations of the shared dying days of the Zionism that gave birth to Israel, and the already recorded end of Baathist nationalism in Syria.

It is indeed the feeling of exhaustion with the founding nationalisms – of which Zionism is just one variation – that offers regimes still identifying with these ideologies the chance to produce the worst. Instead of initiating a process of overhaul, this ideological decline actually results in the barbarisation of states invested in the old forms of nationalism that have become obsolete: the dehumanisation of Aleppo in 2016, and that of Gaza in 2024 are the two most terrifying faces of this downward spiral. In the absence of renewed political thought, these tired discourses still mobilise citizen-soldiers fashioned from resentment, fear and the logic of extreme Othering – as we witness today in Israeli society (Warschavski, 2003; Haas, 2025).

However, in Syria, a new consciousness is awakening. In response to the last throes of nationalist ideologies and the deadly persistence of their state apparatuses, the Syrian revolution opened up a space for political thought and experimentation whose shadow still falls over the current period. It taught a lesson that the period starting in 2024 already seems to be taking into account, and is reflected in the stance of the new Head of State: a government that does not govern. A government aware of the tragedy of the revolutionary war that he constantly evokes in his speeches. Will he be capable of remembering these lessons? That the centralisation of power can only be envisaged at the limit of the agrarian and industrial sectors of economic sovereignty – which the region has been missing since the early decolonial experiences. This sovereignty, however, can only be imagined because of the liberation of the 2011 revolution. Freedom is not a moral supplement. It is henceforth the beating heart of all possible sovereignty if the state wants to claim that it embodies a genuine alternative to the moribund and destructive ideologies of the contemporary Arab world.

If the Syrian revolution passed down to our societies anything that has resulted from the colonial experience, it may be this enormous but fragile idea: a peaceful power, comfortable with the ethnic and religious diversity of its citizens, capable of honouring the moral debt to its martyrs and careful to respond to the challenges of industrialisation without relapsing into the temptation of repression, the mimicry of a West

that destroys the living, or a new absolutism. The real stakes of the future years – for both Syria and Israel, and the rest of the Arab world – will be to find out if this revolutionary consciousness becomes an effective practice of government.

NOTES

- i. Political Scientist, Professor at the European University Institute in Florence.
 - ii. Djamel Beghal was convicted in 2005 of terrorist offences, that is, planning to carry out attacks in France. He served a prison sentence in France and was deported to Algeria in 2018. The Kouachi Brothers, Chérif and Saïd, carried out the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris. Chérif was mentored in prison by Beghal. The brothers were killed in a shootout with French police two days after the attack. Lastly, Salah Abdeslam, a Belgian, is the only surviving member of the squad that carried out the Paris attacks in November 2015. He is currently serving a life sentence in prison—Trans.
 - iii. I have chosen to translate Sakhi's original 'migrants du djihad' as 'migrants for jihad' throughout, precisely because the meanings of jihad cannot be monolithic, which is what we discover from carefully reading the text—Trans.
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1. "Statement by Éric Dupond-Moretti, Keeper of the Seals, Minister of Justice, on the French jihadis who went to Syria, at the Senate on 5 October 2022", *Vie-publique.fr*, 5 October 2022, <<https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/286713-eric-dupond-moretti-05102022-djihadistes-francais>>.
 2. For a review of the figures given from 2017 to 2022, see Pawella (2022).
 3. For detailed figures on women and the children of European fighters, see Cook and Vale (2019), 30–45.
 4. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) proclaimed itself to be a sovereign state on 29 June 2014, on the border between Syria and Iraq, and then changed its name to 'Islamic State' (IS). Its detractors in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab-Muslim world call it 'Daesh', the Arabic acronym for the former ISIL (*Dawla Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa a-Châm*) which, in etymological terms, carries a pejorative connotation – IS prohibited populations under its control from using this term. The followers and entourage in the jihadi circles in Syria, the 'migrants for jihad', the IS and al-Nusra Front fighters (see below) first used the term "Dawla" (state) to refer to IS. This distinction was not merely academic for the groups involved in the war. It, in fact, indicated the existence of two conflicting factions: one that wanted to found a Caliphate and the other that saw itself as waging a war of liberation against the regime and which had no agenda for overhauling the state.
 5. The literal meaning of the Arabic word 'Baath' is 'resurrection', and it refers to the renaissance of the Arab-Muslim region called for when it emerged from colonial domination to build an era of unity and political glory. This party, established in Damascus in 1947 by Michel Aflak and Salah Eddine Bitar, held power in Iraq from 1968 to 2003, and had been in power in Syria since 1963 (see chapter 1 for a brief presentation of Baath ideology); on the party's origins, see Devlin (1976).
 6. For an official presentation of the French intervention, see Ministère des Armées (Ministry of Defence), 'Opération Chammal', 8 February 2023, <<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/proche-moyen-orient/operations-militaires-au-proche-moyen-orient/operation-chammal>>.
 7. Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood adopted the idea of Islamic, rather than Egyptian, nationalism, which enabled it to establish itself in the political elites of several Arab-Muslim countries and Muslim immigrant communities in the West. First involved in the

- anticolonial struggle, the movement called for the adoption of Islam as a means of government capable of addressing all the elements at stake in postcolonial societies. Its relationship to institutions of sovereign power fluctuated depending on the period and the ideological transformations and changes in objective, with the largest of its factions open to participation in government and elected institutions. On the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological transformations in the Arab world, see Burgat (1995, 2005); On its history and organisation, see Al-Anani (2016).
8. On 26 April 2013, Didier Reynders spoke of the 'genuine terrorist risk' of seeing people who had fought for the regime or for the jihadists' return to Belgium: 'The latter should be sent before the International Criminal Court'. He distinguished between them and 'these young people who, perhaps idealistically are going to work in humanitarian roles or fight alongside the Syrian Liberation Army; might have a monument built to them as heroes of a revolution' (quoted by Belga News, 'Didier Reynders veut "suivre à la trace" les Belges revenus de Syrie', Rtb.be, 26 April 2013, <<https://www.rtb.be/article/didier-reynders-veut-suivre-a-la-trace-les-belges-revenus-de-syrie-7981642>>).
 9. Chambre des représentants de Belgique, 'Compte rendu analytique', CRABV 53 138, Séance plénière, 18 April 2013, <<https://www.diekammer.be/doc/PCRA/pdf/53/ap138.pdf>>.
 10. The terminology adopted from the outset of the militarisation process dipped into a long-standing eschatological tradition. Nusra derives etymologically from *Nusrat ad-dīn*, meaning 'triumph of religion'. In the history of Islam, it refers to the support for the preaching of the Prophet and his disciples among the migrants of Mecca in Medina. This terminology located the Syrian conflict in an inter-Muslim dimension and acted as an invitation to immigration in order to 'support the religion'. Nusra broke off its relationship with the Islamic State in November 2013. It split from Al-Qaida in July 2016 to become the Fatah al-Cham Front before its disintegration in 2017.
 11. See the transcription of the speech by Laurent Fabius and subsequent QAA: "Conférence de presse de M. Laurent Fabius, Ministre des affaires étrangères, sur l'opposition syrienne, à Marrakech (Maroc) le 12 décembre 2012", <<https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/186636-conference-de-presse-de-m-laurent-fabius-ministre-des-affaires-etrange>>.
 12. But there was also a spectrum of post-incarceration punishments, such as being stripped of one's nationality. This practice became increasingly part of the punitive lexicon, hitting Syrian returnees even if they had no other nationality than that of their country of birth, Belgium or France. From 2022, France joined Belgium in applying this punishment to people sentenced for the sole reason that they had returned from Syria (interviews with relevant people and their families, March 2023).
 13. English translation, 'historic bloc'. This concept is drawn from Italian communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. The concept can be found translated and brought into the 1970s by the Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri (1935-2010), when he intersected with Arab nationalism in the l'Union socialiste des forces populaire (USFP, Socialist Union of Popular Forces) in Morocco.
 14. Interview with Abou Kotaïba, Kilis, July 2017.
 15. Rayan's contact details were given to me by an Italian activist involved in the political struggle for the unification of Mediterranean countries. He had met Rayan in Syria when he went to Aleppo to follow the trail of an Italian priest who had been kidnapped and probably killed by groups linked to the Islamic State. Rayan, an important figure in revolutionary circles in Aleppo, arrived in France in 2015. As someone who travelled a lot with others to places where

the revolution had spread, several ideas put forward here have been elucidated by his detailed and practical knowledge of the struggles throughout the rebel zones.

16. On the situation of the organised political parties of opposition prior to the revolution, see Al-Haj Saleh (2003). On the context of the 'Damascus Spring', see Tayyara (2003).
17. I also found Tarek via Rayan. He was the first person I met in Gaziantep (Türkiye), in June 2016. Tarek, who lived on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border, was still active in the armed struggle when we met.
18. Interview in Gaziantep, June 2016. (The author translated the interview from Syrian Arabic into French. The translator, in turn, rendered it into English).
19. The names of the Fridays are discussed on Facebook pages on the mobilisation in which so many Syrians within the country and others in exile and in the diaspora took part. The choice of name happened by a vote or by consensus after discussion.
20. The Alawites, who make up a branch of Shi'a Islam, account for 13% of the Syrian population.
21. This scene was filmed and broadcast on social media: "*tamziq wa rakl sourat hâfiz al-Assad*" (in Arabic), *YouTube*, 25 March 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrnTRv3BoGI>>.
22. On the concept of alienation, see the work of Jaeggi (2009).
23. On 'official truth' and the monopoly of symbolic violence, see Bourdieu (2012).
24. Interview with Mohamed, Gaziantep region, May 2016.
25. Interview with Abou Youssef, Antakya, June 2016.
26. For a comparison with another regional *hirak*, see Esmili (2018); Sakhi and Esmili (2017).
27. For an interpretation of the first few months of the Iranian revolution as 'counter-conduct', see Michel Foucault's reporting in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in 1978, published in several articles: Michel Foucault, 'L'armée. Quand la terre tremble' (28 September), 'Le Shah a cent ans de retard' (1 October), 'Téhéran: la foi contre le chah' (8 October), "Retour au prophète" (22 October), "Une révolte aux mains nues" (5 November), "Défi à l'opposition" (7 November) (republished in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, volume 2, 1976-1988. Paris: Gallimard, 'Quarto' series, 2001).
28. See, for example, Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune as a form of state transformation, Marx (1871); and Engels (1884), chapter 9, 'Barbarism and Civilisation'. See also the first chapter of Lenin (1917) *The State and Revolution*, 'Class society and the State'.
29. Interview, 21 July 2016, in a business premises, with someone who had been wounded in the revolution, Abou Oday, and a Palestinian-Polish writer investigating the trajectories of revolutionary Syrians.
30. Without party political organisations, some families basically ensured people's trust and confirmed the 'Syrianness' of the revolution to the community, across the whole country and not just in the country and small towns, I have anonymised the surnames.
31. "Majzarat as-sâ'a", *YouTube*, 20 April 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cv8WJa28K2U>>.
32. Our friend Rayan for example, was a longstanding opponent of the use of weapons.
33. "La politique est la guerre continuée par d'autres moyens" (Politics is the continuance of war by other means). See Michel Foucault. 1997, *Il faut défendre la société, Cours au Collège de France 1975-1976*, Paris: Gallimard-Seuil.
34. Abou Ward, Antakya, May 2017.
35. Interview with Soulaf, a former teacher from Deraa, now with refugee status in France, October 2019.

36. This reading is echoed by that of historians who have analysed the civil wars in ancient Greek cities. A text by Giorgio Agamben (2015) draws conclusions from the work of Nicole Loraux and Christian Meier in this direction. The departure point may be this reading of Plato, who thought that the war between Athenians was like a civil war waged 'to find oneself more readily in the joy of a family holiday', and underscored that '*stasis*' or civil war was 'the paradigm of reconciliation among the Greeks who fought one another as if they were destined to be reconciled' (Plato, *Republic*, 471a). Therefore, the powers of fragmentation in Greek society constituted the very strength of its unity. But what was more important in this anthropology of the Greek cities was this politicisation by civil war that dissolved the boundaries between family home and city, condemning all citizens to take part in the war, as Aristotle emphasises: 'He who, when the city finds itself in a civil war, fails to take up arms for one of the two sides will be tainted with infamy and excluded from politics' (Agamben, 2015: 24). And Agamben goes on to stipulate: 'This obviously does not mean that the Greeks considered civil war as a public good, but *stasis* functioned like a reagent that reveals the political element of exceptional situations, like a threshold of politicisation determining by itself the politic or impolitic nature of a given person' (Agamben, 2015: 24).
37. These figures were provided by the Syrian human rights network, which recorded and assessed the circumstances of this initial wave of massacres (photos, dates, places and circumstances of death) prior to the outbreak of civil war.
38. Anas, Kilis, July 2017.
39. During a previous demonstration on 4 June, thirty-five civilians had been killed by the security forces.
40. '*ami*, a familiar and respectful way to address an elder.
41. On the destructive war waged by the regime, see Coquoio et al. (2022).
42. A similar situation, albeit less conflict-generating, can be found in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011: the demonstrations gained legitimacy when some members of the army refused to fire on the demonstrators.
43. Interview with Tarek, June 2016.
44. He showed us a photo of he and Abou Ammar together, Kalashnikovs slung over their backs. Abou Ammar was a pseudonym used by Yasser Arafat, leader of the Fatah Party and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.
45. *Ahrâr a-Châm* (The Free People of the Levant) is a coalition set up in November 2011 by four brigades identifying publicly as both Islamic and belonging to the Syrian revolution. This coalition was led by Hassan Aboud, a former political prisoner in the famous Sednaya prison, because of his appeals for jihad against Bashar al-Assad. He had been released a few months after the revolution started. *Ahrâr a-Châm*, had a presence mainly in Hama, Idlib and Aleppo, and carried out joint operations with the FSA and Nusra. Like the latter, it came into conflict with the Islamic State from 2014. *Ahrâr a-Châm*'s slogan was: 'A global Islamic movement, working for the liberation of the land and the people, and the construction of an Islamic and civilised society in Syria, based on institutions'. During this research, I came into contact with several of its members. In the revolutionary circles of the FSA, it was seen as influenced by the political values of the former Muslim Brotherhood of Syria. On this organisation's goals, see its official website in Arabic and English, <ahraralsham.net>.
46. Interview with Abou Ibrahim, Reyhanli, June 2017.
47. See, in particular, notebooks 6 and 7, on the concepts of the war of position and the war of manoeuvre.

48. Interview with Saleh, Kilis, June 2016.
49. American historian George Mosse (1918-1999) developed this concept in relation to the psychology of former German soldiers in the aftermath of World War I, with their *habitus* marked by the banality of a brutalising war and the ongoing humiliation at the hands of other national powers, they threw themselves into nationalist wars that led to World War II (Mosse, 1999).
50. On the siege of Homs, see Souayha et al. (2019) and Derki's film (2013).
51. From the verb '*âcha*, which means 'to live'. The term refers to pro-regime Moroccan groups that chanted 'Long live the King!', a slogan turned on its head by the demonstrators into 'Long live the people!'.
52. Interview with Abou Youssef, Antakya, June 2016.
53. The author uses the terms 'reterritorialisation' and 'deterritorialisation' as stand-alone concepts, and they are particularly important in the analysis contained in the following chapter. However, it is also clear they are, to some extent, relational, hence their contribution to explaining the struggle between anti-Assad forces. In French, 'déterritorialization' can be traced to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and a critique of the concept can be found in Foucault (2004)—Trans.
54. Interview with Abou Houdaïfa, Ankara, July 2017.
55. The Attawhid battalion (*Liwa'Attawhid*) was a coalition of around thirty brigades active mainly in Aleppo and Northern Syria. 'Attawhid' means 'uniqueness' in Islam, in reference to the first pillar of the religion: 'There is no other God but Allah'. On the reference to uniqueness and the demand for the triumph of religion, see the video of an interview with Abdelkader as-Saleh: 'Commander of the Attawhid battalion: "The Syrian regime has fallen and we are fighting the occupiers. We are the brothers of the minority groups' (in Arabic), *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_xXU9YaRLc>. In the battalion leader's texts and statements, we can identify a terminology drawn from deep in popular Islamic culture in Syria, calling for a non-sectarian Islamic government that accepts all the country's ethnic groups and religions. In military terms, this battalion fought alongside the Nusra while proclaiming their opposition to Nusra's political viewpoints. The battalion ran military training camps open to all fighters fighting against the regime. These camps, as we shall see, were comprised of a basic religious training, a prerequisite for bringing together the fighters and the Syrian armed revolution in general
56. On the history of these 'green buses', which became a real tool in the displacement and ethnification of the Syrian population, see El-Abdallah (2021).
57. Interview with Abou Kotaïba, Kilis, July 2017.
58. On the first few days of the armed struggle in Homs, see the ethnographic testimony of Littell (2012).
59. Here I use the idea of an 'institution' with the meaning of 'foundation of a governmental power comprised of laws and impersonal bureaucracy', or, to follow Max Weber's typology, of 'legal and rational domination' (Weber, 2019).
60. The documentary *For Sama* by Syrian journalist Waad al-Kateab provides an excellent insider ethnography showing this resistance by doctors and voluntary groups in order to maintain life in a Free Zone like Aleppo based on the revolution's defence of hospitals. Released in October 2019, the film was nominated for the 2020 Oscars. Similarly, Feras Fayyad's 2017 film *Les Derniers Hommes d'Aleppo* (The Last Men in Aleppo) presents an ethnography on the work of the 'White Helmets': groups of young people committed to the revolution who volunteered

to work in the Free Zones of Aleppo to help the people under military attack from the regime and its allies.

61. Interview with S. A., a Syrian nurse who had lived in the Free Zones of Aleppo between 2013 and 2015, Gaziantep, June 2016.
62. Interview with Abou Mohannad, Kilis, July 2017.
63. Terms used by the revolutionaries to distinguish (within the opposition to the regime) between armed fighters and civilians who refused to carry weapons but still supported the armed groups.
64. See the documentary *Au service du peuple, un film sur la police libre à Aleppo* ('Serving the People: A Film About the Free Police in Aleppo'), *YouTube*, <s.42l.fr/nzHPZ9F>, 20 September 2014. See also the Al Jazeera report on the functions of this internal body: *'jihâz achurta alhurra fî souriya'* [Free police service in Syria], *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpYRXcupGLM>, 18 December 2017.
65. See the case files created by a newspaper close to the FSA: 'La Police libre en Syrie: des hommes sans sirens' ('The Free Police in Syria: Men Without Sirens'), *Ennab Baladi*, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/120072/>, 18 December 2016.
66. For a study of the military and policing institutions in Syria immediately after the revolution, see Talaa (2020).
67. Interviews with Rayan, Paris, October 2019. See also 'La Police libre en Syrie: des hommes sans sirens', *Ennab Baladi*, <s.42l.fr/bYyiBxrM>, 18 December 2016.
68. On this type of patriarchy located outside of political modernity, see Bourdieu (1990).
69. Interview with Anwar Fidaa, Antakya, June 2017.
70. Interview with Anwar Fidaa, Antakya, June 2017.
71. *Al Qânoun al Jaza'i al-'arabi al-mouwahhad* [The Unified Arab Criminal Code], <https://da3m-syria2.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/unified-arabic-criminal-law.pdf>.
72. Interview with Amir, former judge and member of Unified Justice Aleppo, Paris, January 2019.
73. On the other experiences of Islamic court systems during the revolution, see '*al-qaddâ' fî Idlib: al-fassâ'iliya wa ta'adoud al marji'iyât*' [Justice in Idlib: Divisions the Diversity of Legal References], *Aljumhuriya.net*, 20 September 2018.
74. A lawyer's monthly salary for the work of creating an archive was set at 350 dollars.
75. Interview with Amjad, Paris, January 2019.
76. Interview with Abou Houdaïfa, Ankara, July 2017.
77. Interview with Abou Hakim, Gaziantep, June 2016.
78. Interview with Saleh, Kilis, June 2016.
79. Interview with K., August 2017.
80. Interview with Abou Hakim, Gaziantep, June 2016.
81. The pledge is pronounced in literary Arabic rather than Syrian Arabic (translation of original Arabic into French by Montassir Sakhi and from French into English by Steve Garner).
82. Max Weber, in his sociology of religion, stresses the 'earthly' dimension of adoration: 'The most elementary forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented toward *this* world (original emphasis) (...) That it may go well with you . . . And that you may prolong your days upon the earth' expresses the reasons for the performance of actions enjoined by religion or magic' (Weber, 1963: 1).
83. Interview with Abou Hakim, Gaziantep, Summer 2016.
84. Lactance is a third-century Christian rhetorician (Willaime, 2003: 244)
85. Interview with Khalid, Ankara, August 2017.

86. Münzer spoke of an 'abyss of the spirit', which only appeared when the forces of the soul were bared (Mannheim, 1954: 192).
87. Interview with Khalid, Ankara, August 2017.
88. Interview with Abou Houdaïfa, Ankara, Summer 2017.
89. Interview with Abou Houdaïfa, Ankara, July 2017.
90. Interview with Suleiman, Gaziantep, June 2017.
91. For an in-depth study of the lives of Christians in Syria during the revolution and under the Islamic State between 2012 and 2017, see Abdallah and Al-Hallaq (2017). Several Christians actively participated in the revolution, going so far as to express intimate rituals of community life within it. On these anthropological aspects, see (Poujeau, 2015).
92. For the Islamic State/Daesh, the practice of 'excommunication' meant declaring other Muslims 'apostates' or 'infidels' (*takfir* in Arabic), which then makes them legitimate targets for killing. This is particularly important when the various anti-Assad groups split in 2013 (Chapter 9), as it justifies war against the FSA and Nusra, for example—Trans.
93. Interview with Suleiman, Gaziantep, June 2017.
94. This was the very day when an aborted coup happened in Türkiye: the proximity to this event marked by millions of Turkish protesters coming out onto the streets legitimised the words of the Syrian revolutionaries we met, who had become analysts of the reality they had been thrown into.
95. Ethnicization is the process whereby ethnic distinctions come to play a role in collective power relations and the allocation of resources—Trans.
Author's note: The term 'ethnicity' recurs in the (emic) interviews in the form 'al-ithniya'. The phrase 'ethnie/ethnic group' is used in a broad sense. It refers to the revolutionaries' rejection of sectarianism/ division by religious affiliation, and the division of political representation in society by language, tribe or religion. It is used most often to critique the use of Alawite community by the old regime for the recruitment of elites within the army and in the management of relations between the state and the Druze and Kurdish communities.
96. Focus group with Hamza Esmili, Gaziantep, July 2016.
97. Some Arabic news channels and the Syrian Human Rights Observatory mentioned a total of 470 Syrians killed by Turkish border guards as of October 2020; see also (Human Rights Watch, 2016).
98. See for example Kepel and Jardin (2015).
99. See the all-important ethnographic study of the Islamic State by the Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abdul Jabbar (2017) and Luizard (2015).
100. This slogan ('The state or savagery'), which runs through the literature of IS jihad, recalls the golden age of theories of the social contract in what was to become the Europe of the nations. And when this discourse threatens to maintain 'savagery' as long as the Islamic State does not exist, it is strangely reminiscent of the discourses of French historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, defending the interests of their own 'nations'.
101. Interview with Abou Abdallah, Kirkuk, Summer 2017.
102. Interview with Salem, Gaziantep, May 2016.
103. Interview with Abou Ahmed, Kilis, May 2016.
104. Interview with Haïdar, Camp al Khazir (30 km East of Mosul), September 2017.
105. Bureau des études et des recherches islamiques. 2015. (Address to the Flock about Judicial and Inspired Politics).
106. Interview with Salem, Gaziantep, May 2016.

107. A traditional chant among the supporters of the Islamic State was: 'It's still here, and getting bigger' (*bâqia wa tatamaddad*).
108. Interview with Rayan, Paris, February 2023. On the research relationship developed with this companion in the field, see chapters 2 and 3.
109. Interview with Abou Obaïda, Ankara, July 2017.
110. Literally 'the supporters' or 'helpers'. In the prophetic gesture, the term refers to the inhabitants of Medina who greeted the first Muslims persecuted by the elites in Mecca, and then leant military strength to their aid. The group Jabhat Nosra, a branch of Al-Qaida in Syria adopted this name.
111. Interview with Rafik, Toulouse, October 2022.
112. Interview with Malek, Verviers, January 2023.
113. In Syria, unlike other movements in the Arab Spring, the revolution did not make do with communicating the demands of the first few days of the demonstrations focused on economic and political reforms. The dual critiques of the nature of power and of the democratic sharing of power in the radical sense of the term became prioritised over the political struggle heralded by the 'Damascus Spring' in 2000 (when Bashar al-Assad came to power).
114. Interview with Rayan, Paris, February 2023.
115. Interview with Abou Hassan, Gaziantep, July 2017.
116. Interview with Khalid, Ankara, August 2017.
117. The names, places and other identifying information have been changed or anonymised, but the facts are the same.
118. On the strength of the bonds developed in these groups of young people, see Mohammed (2011).
119. The 'hogra', from *ihitiqâr* in Arabic, means humiliation, scorn and repression by the state power. The term is of great historical significance in the context of the Arab revolutions, particularly in the Maghreb, where it was used to refer to everything the movement was opposed to. It was also taken and Gallicised in the period of postcolonial immigration in a verbal form that does not exist in the Maghreb, as in the way Mourad uses it here.
120. Interview with Mourad, Nancy, 12 July 2022.
121. Interview with Mimoun, Nantes, September 2022.
122. Family workshop, Maison des sciences de l'homme Paris-Nord, 15 May 2016. A series of workshops was run at the premises of MSH-Paris-Nord for families facing children leaving for Syria and families that were victims of terrorism, as part of the 'Départs (Departures)' project, funded by the RMSH and headed by anthropologist Alain Bertho. Another founding experience that our analysis refers to was the Parents' workshops organised at the Catholic University of Louvain, funded by the REGUIDE project and led by anthropologist Nadia Fadil (<<https://reguide.be>>).
123. On the implementation of the administrative justice of exception in France, see Codaccioni (2016).
124. The reasons for this gap are not clear. It could just be noted that Belgium is a society with a tradition of distinct communities in which descendants of colonial immigration experience an even more acute form of exclusion than in France, on the symbolic level, among others. We will hear about this in the interviews. The feeling of abandonment by, and distancing from the 'established' Belgians is widely shared, and it deserves to be studied further.
125. I am not anonymising the name Dominique Bons because she has become a publicly recognisable figure for her work committed to the families affected by people leaving for Syria.

Dominique lost a son and her half-brother. Then she set up a charity in Toulouse aimed at raising consciousness and prevention, 'Syrien ne bouge, agissons'. She opened her doors and together we carried out interviews and organised meetings with the families. We are greatly appreciative and grateful for her work.

The name of the organisation is a pun in French. Literally, it means 'Nothing's moving in Syria, let's act'. However, if you stress the first syllable, as in 'Si rien ne bouge ...', it means 'If nothing's moving, let's act'—Trans.

126. Interview with Catherine, Marseille, February 2018.
127. Interview with Mourad, Nancy, 12 July 2022.
128. For one of the few pieces of work to explore this dimension in comparison with another context of jihad, see Li (2019, 2021), on Bosnia.
129. Foucault refers to this art of not being governed as the concept of 'counter-conduct'. Martijn de Koning, Carmen Becker and Ineke Roex re-examine and analyse it in the context of contemporary political Islam in Europe (Martijn de Koning, Carmen Becker and Ineke Roex : 2020).
130. On the relationships between the forms of Salafism in the Arab renaissance of the nineteenth century and the various ideologies under colonisation and in the wake of independence, see Laroui (1967) and Luizard (2006).
131. For an introduction to Sayyid Quth, see Carré (1984).
132. 'Autarchy' here means the relationship that the various streams of Salafism hold with the founding moments of the religion, when they intend to determine the multiple aspects of modern existence by a legal, normative formalism resulting from a narrow reading of the acts and texts of the first generations of Islam.
133. Bilad-al-Sham (popularly, 'the Sham') is a term referring to the Levant, i.e. ancient Syria under the Uyyamad, Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates in the Medieval period (from the ninth to the eleventh century). This territory covers what is now Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and most of contemporary Syria, and the term is used to evoke an era perceived as a heyday of Islamic civilisation.
134. Interview with Abderrahmane, Molenbeek, 14 January 2023.
135. A reference to the preaching movement, Tabligh. For an ethnography of this movement in France, see Benlaala (2015).
136. On the 'politics of recognition', see Fraser and Honneth (2003).
137. On the QER, see Chantrane and Scheer (2022).
138. On riots in France and across the world, see the work of anthropologist Alain Bertho (2016).
139. See Elias (2017), in particular the Appendices to chapter 5: Le terrorisme en République fédérale: expression d'un conflit générationnel', pp. 309-395.
140. Interview with Mourad, Nancy, 12 July 2022.
141. Interview with Abderrahmane, Molenbeek, 14 January 2023.
142. Interview with Salim, Liège, 21 November 2022.
143. Micheron (2020). See the rigorous critique of this book by Agnès Villechaise (2020). Her conclusion is merciless: 'By stifling the researcher's process under the settling of scores between two allegedly ideologically opposed academic 'camps', Hugo Micheron folds science beneath the purportedly academically-argued expression of a nothing more than a conviction. In doing so, he twists reality and damages our disciplines', p. 4.
144. This abrupt and blunt assessment obviously belongs only to its author. However, as things turned out, some of the experts commissioned by the prison management to hold meetings and 'workshops' with prisoners brought with them interviews that were used in analyses

- of radicalisation often convicting them without further contextualisation. Journalist David Thomson for example, stated in 2018: 'In the closed space of the prison, jihadists tend to further embed themselves in their ideology and terrorist intentions, whether in prison or outside. [...] It's estimated that more than 50% of terrorist inmates already sentenced are supposed to be released from prison between now and 2020. In the short term, the intensity of the terrorist threat is therefore lower in France, but I fear that will not be true in the long term. [...] In my opinion, a terrorist prisoner is not like other prisoners. It is impossible to guarantee the sincerity of a jihadist's repentance; (quoted by Alexandre Devecchio, 'David Thomson: "Il est impossible de s'assurer de la sincérité du repentir d'un jihadiste"', *FigaroVox*, 25 January 2018, <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2018/01/25/31003-20180125ARTFIG00264-il-est-impossible-de-s-assurer-de-la-sincerite-du-repentir-d-un-djihadiste.php>>.
145. On this choice of terms, see Atran (2016), particularly the chapter 'Notes de terrain: la bataille de Kudilah'.
 146. Based on a review of the international press, Bishara (2013: 349) identifies a dozen suicide bombings and car bombings against regime institutions from late 2011 to early 2012, killing several hundred people.
 147. 'Rambo 3 (1988) – Final Scene', *YouTube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57717aAlnTg>>.
 148. During the focus group referred to in chapter 7, with former prisoners who'd suffered from adverse social conditions.
 149. Interview with Malek, Verviers, Belgium, January 2023.
 150. Malek is quoting Surat An-Nisa', ayah 95—Trans.
 151. Abu Mohammed Al-Jawlani returned to Iraq in 2003 from his country of origin, Syria, for jihad against the US forces when they invaded. There he rubbed shoulders with the leaders of Al-Qaida (2003-2006) then the Islamic State of Iraq (2006-2012). Arrested and incarcerated by the Americans in the famous Bucca prison (2005-2010), he rose through the ranks and set up a network of fighters. In August 2011, he joined the revolutionaries in Syria, where Baghdadi appointed him emir (head) of Nusra in January 2012. That organisation was then considered as a branch of ISIS. In April 2013, when Baghdadi announced the merger of Nusra and ISIS into the IS, Al-Jawlani defected, announced his allegiance to Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the emir of Al-Qaida. In early 2023, Al-Jawlani was leading *Hay'at Tahrir ach-Châm* (HTS), an alliance of revolutionary and jihadist organisations governing the enclave of Idlib in North-Western Syria.
 152. This version of the facts was widely disseminated in revolutionary and jihadi circles in Syria and Iraq. Baghdadi's speeches make similar points, as does the work of Arab sociologists such as Faleh Abdel Jabbar and Azmi Bishara.
 153. See the account given by his mother at the end of the following chapter.
 154. As Malek (Belgium) for example, confirms, this comment often recurred in the interviews with people who had returned from Syria. It can be found in the discourse of jihad in general, including the Syrian revolutionaries' references to the regime's impunity.
 155. On the figure of the warrior in modern wars, see Bloch (2006).
 156. Literally, the 'follower' or 'devotee'. People who adhere to what is known as 'Salafi' Islam, characterised by a legal formalism specific to this contemporary school of thought, refer to themselves as such.
 157. Literally, 'The Organisation', referring to the Islamic State (IS).
 158. Group homes for single women awaiting independent housing when they were married.
 159. Interview with Abou Abdallah, Kirkuk, 18 August 2017.

160. The *Daesh Leaks* refers to 22,000 documents handed over in March 2016 by a former member of the FSA, who had later been in IS, to the British news channel, Sky News. They were principally administrative forms from IS containing sociological information on 4,119 foreign volunteer-fighters who had joined the organisation between 2013 and 2014, mainly in Syria (see L'Obs (2016); Hasday (2016). For an analysis of some of the forms in the *Daesh Leaks*, see Milton et al., (2019). A research project on the *Daesh Leaks* was launched in 2018 by George Washington University, <<https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/>>.
161. Interview with Salim, Liège, 21 November 2022.
162. '*Tanzīm a-Dawla yatabannā hajamât bârîz wa yatawa'ad bil mazîd*' [The Islamic State claims responsibility for the attacks on Paris and promises more], *Arabi 21*, 14 November 2015, <s.42l.fr/lm72-DCW>. Montassir Sakhi's translation into English.
163. On Belgium's decision to participate, see Montay (2014) and Lagneau (2014).
164. '*Bi bayân mansoub, Daesh yatabannâ taffirat Brussels*' [Islamic State claims responsibility for Brussels attacks], *Arabic CNN*, 22 March 2016, <<https://arabic.cnn.com/world/2016/03/22/belgium-attack-isis-claim-responsibility-urgent-1>>. (Montassir Sakhi's translation into French.)
165. '*Tanzīm al-Qaïda yahtafil bi taffirât Brussels*' [Al-Qaïda celebrates the Brussels attacks], *El Hiwar*, 22 March 2016, <<https://elhiwar.dz/international/44117/>>. (Ma traduction.)
166. '*Tanzīm ad-dawla al islamiya yatabannâ i'tidâ'Nice janoub char' farança*' [L'organisation État islamique revendique l'attack de Nice, [Islamic State claims the Nice attack], *France 24*, 16 July 2016, <s.42l.fr/QMGGaYHm>. (Ma traduction.)
167. '*Da'ichî maghribi yohadîd espagna bi hammâm dimâ'. wa al hadaf istirjâ' al andalous*' [A Moroccan IS terrorist threatens Spain with a bloodbath], *Hespress*, 25 August 2017, <s.42l.fr/xXZxbSZp>. Montassir Sakhi's translation into French.)
168. On the links between attacks and military interventions, see Delori et al. (2021) and Delori (2021).
169. Several databases have counted contemporary foreign interventions, such as Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), <<https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory>>. Other databases count terrorist attacks across the world, like the Global Terrorism Database of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) based at the University of Maryland, <<https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/GTD>>.
170. On this topic, see the very relevant collective editorial column by Delori et al (2020).
171. This concept was developed in Border Studies. Based on the critical work produced in this field, I mean by 'borderisation' the emergence of a new postcolonial policy establishing borders that are increasingly difficult to cross, in the North. It is manifested in the establishment of visas including those for short stays and the ancestors and descendants of naturalised or established immigrants in the West, and by the increasing stringency in the criteria to access the right to stay. This policy of hardened physical borders produces devastating symbolic effects on the identifications and collective perceptions of otherness between the coveted former metropolitan centre and the former colonies. For an introduction to this paradigm, see Garnaoui, 2022.
172. See the introduction to chapter 2 of Capone et al.'s 2023 report.
173. 'Musée juif de Brussels: un expert justifie l'absence de revendication par l'État islamique', AFP, 6 February 2019, <<https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Musee-juif-de-Bruxelles-un-expert-justifie-l-absence-de-revendication-par-l-Etat-islamique-1603766>>; Robert-Jan Bartunek, 'Police hunt Brussels Jewish Museum gunman, France tightens security', *Reuters*, 25 May 2014, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belgium-shooting-idUSBREA4N09Z20140525/>>; 'How

- ISIS built the machinery of terror under Europe's gaze', *The New York Times*, 29 March 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html>>.
174. However, shortly after Mehdi Nemmouche's arrest, he was formally acknowledged as one of the particularly cruel jailers (using the pseudonym 'Abou Omar'), of four French journalists kidnapped by Daesh in Aleppo and Raqqa in June 2013 and held until they were freed in April 2014.
 175. See Trom (2007) on this topic.
 176. On this problematic, see the excellent article by Esmili and Giry (2023).
 177. Mohammed Merah, perpetrator of the 2012 attack on the Jewish Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse, thus said before the security forces' assault in which he was killed: 'And don't you find it legitimate that I'm attacking here, on French soil, I attacked them on French soil because I am French. [...] I didn't attack civilians, even though Allah authorised me to. I had a message to convey, and it was to fight. *Alhamdulillah*, they won't be able to say I fought innocent people or anything, I killed Jews like those same Jews who kill my little brothers and sisters in Palestine. I killed soldiers and those soldiers kill, kill in Afghanistan' ('Transcription des conversations entre Mohammed Merah et les négociateurs', *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/stream/transcriptionmerahFR/transcrip._djvu.txt>).
 178. See the epilogue for an updated discussion of this relationship, given the 2023-25 war and genocide.
 179. On this issue, Bruno Karsenti (2018b), in the process of 'de-theologisation' and breaking with the Spinozian concept of the modern state, attempts to find a source of revival of the cycle of the persecution of believers – in this case, Jewish communities – in today's Western Europe. See also, Dominique Schnapper (2022), who situates the rise in antisemitism in a process of 'decline in democratic convictions' in France.
 180. A deadly tactic reinforced by the fact that the IS succeeded in negotiating borders and a cease-fire with the Syrian and Turkish governments beforehand.
 181. See, in particular, the work of anthropologist and practitioner Amar Henni (2019).
 182. This bombing, which occurred a few days before the official creation of the International Coalition against the Islamic State, was documented by the *Mediapart* journalist Matthieu Suc (2018): '[F] is waiting for a friend in a bakery in Raqqa. It is 8 September 2014. A missile hits the bakery. [F] emerges from the rubble. Unhurt. The building that the bakery had been part of has gone. [He] brushes off the debris. Amid fifty-five corpses is his friend. Safe and sound. One missile. Again. On the pick-up truck. The blast effect brings the jihadists back to earth with a bump. [F] stands up, squeezes himself to see if he's wounded. He has scorch marks on his elbows. But that's all. Two missiles, a few minutes apart, struck the business premises where he was and the car he was heading towards'.
 183. As of May 2023, there were still, on the Belgian side, at least seventeen children and ten women in the camps in North-Eastern Syria, and three women in the regime's prison; as well as thirteen men in the Kurdish-Syrian prisons and two who died in those prisons because of inhumane conditions. On the French side, despite the State being criticised by the UN Committee Against Torture, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and in spite of the sixty-seven children repatriated (after the third repatriation in January 2023), at least one hundred and twenty minors and fifty women were still living in camps in North-Eastern Syria, as well as a dozen children in Al-Hasakah prison, since at least June 2019.
 184. This was true of France, with the aborted attempt to create a Centre for 'deradicalisation' (Alber et al., 2020)

185. During 2021 alone, at least thirty Belgians were stripped of their nationality. In France, according to the Interior Ministry figures, nineteen people saw their nationality taken due to terrorist activity between 2019 and early 2023 ('Terrorism: un Franco-Marocain et une Franco-Turque déçus de leur nationalité française', *20 minutes*, 23 February 2023). The majority of those I interviewed in France were subject to the nationality stripping procedure.
186. As many of these lists – like national lists of frozen assets in France and Belgium, Europol or Interpol – are open, several obstacles to reintegration flow from their consultation by various private and public-sector actors (employers, estate agents, banks, etc.). Moreover, after their period under post-sentence legal conditions had expired, people prosecuted for terrorist offences are not systematically scrubbed from these lists.
187. This measure is common in Belgium, whereas in France, as part of the fight against the use of funds for terrorist activities, the Banque de France intervenes for the former prisoners to guarantee this right.
188. Interview with Younes, Toulouse, 15 April 2023.
189. On the topic of modern-day war, see the excellent work by Hass (2019, 2021)
190. Very often, the families we met could not bring themselves to speak directly about the terrorist acts committed by their children.
191. Interview with Amel, Nice, January 2019.
192. Interview with Sarah, Vilvorde, February 2023.

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