

# Reports

---

## PUBLICATIONS

**Charlotte al-Khalili**, *Waiting for the Revolution to End: Syrian Displacement, Time and Subjectivity* (London: UCL Press, 2023), xix + 235pp., 8 figures, ISBN: 978-1-80008-505-3 (Hbk); ISBN: 978-1-80008-504-6 (Pbk); ISBN: 978-1-80008-503-9 (ePDF); ISBN: 978-1-80008-506-0 (ePub); <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800085039>.

Charlotte al-Khalili's book's most apparent virtue is to offer a profound and comprehensive ethnography of the revolutionary aspirations that have crystallised in Syria in the larger context of the Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> At a time when accounts from Syria and those of the brutal repression by Bashar al-Assad's regime and his Russian and Iranian protectors are more than ever met with suspicion and denial, a trend to which academia has alas not been immune, *Waiting for the Revolution to End: Syrian Displacement, Time and Subjectivity* stands out as a refreshing and potent study of one of the most profound revolutions of recent times.

But the book cannot be reduced to its political merits. By offering lively and rich portrayals of Syrians displaced to Gaziantep, at the Turkish–Syrian border, it helps retrieve the deep-lying aspirations that fuelled the revolutionary sequence between 2011 and 2019. In contrast to common depictions of the Syrian revolution as a 'civil war', a 'never-ending conflict' and a 'humanitarian crisis' (3), Charlotte al-Khalili's interlocutors view the uprising as an existential turning point of both their selves and the community they constitute (see for instance the words of Yassin Al-Haj Saleh quoted on page 57), which transpires in their systematic use of the word *thawra* – revolution – rather than *civil war* or even *events* – the latter being the regime's term. This understanding of the revolution is all the more powerful given the temporality of al-Khalili's inquiry, which is that of loss, displacement, vanished hopes and sometimes profound despair. As such, *Waiting for the Revolution to End* is a precious addition to the sparse anthropological literature on the afterlives of revolutionary and utopian hopes after a political and military defeat of incommensurable magnitude.



The book starts with a vivid description of the revolution's initial and massive events, as well as the rapid military response by the regime, that is itself embedded in a long history of state violence under the Baath party (Chapter 1). Another important virtue of the book is quickly displayed in these preliminary remarks. While the Arab revolutions have often been described as spontaneous and autonomous from classical forms of political thought, al-Khalili manages to shed a powerful light on the rich ideological framework in which the Arab Spring erupted. Through the practice of committed and sensible ethnography, the book's perspective is as close as possible to al-Khalili's interlocutors', which allows in turn for a subtle understanding of their worldviews and ideals. Far from being apolitical or ahistorical, as is often said of social movements following the end of the Cold War, Syrian revolutionaries resorted to old political, moral and religious ideals to define their aspirations and to counter the Baath Party's hegemony.

These affects and ideals are practically experienced, which suggests a strong separation between the revolutionary space – *juwwa* (57) – and the outside (Chapter 2). While this distinction is once again of high political importance, as most of the Syrian revolution's institutional representatives were in fact on the *outside*, al-Khalili accurately deduces from testimonies of Syrians displaced to Gaziantep that the *inside* is – was – a place of deep reformation of selves and revolutionary society. Interestingly enough, while an important 'ethical turn' has taken shape during the last few decades in anthropology (Fassin 2014), al-Khalili equally situates the discussion of revolutionary ethics in an older – and probably more fruitful – debate. Throughout the twentieth century, and even a little before,<sup>2</sup> revolutions were thought of as spaces for the emergence of a new humanity. While there was no 'codified "New Man" initiative' (62) within the Syrian revolution, the reality of liberated areas – both freed from the regime's daily grasp and yet under its constant bombing and siege – led to the foundation of a new moral economy binding together revolutionary selves and revolutionary society, as well as a new gender division enforced by the reality of violence and war. As al-Khalili puts it, for revolutionaries, the heterotopic nature of the liberated areas is aligned with 'ascetic practices, the sacrifice of their present, and the willingness to give up one's own life' (78).

However, as the Syrian regime aided by its Russian and Iranian sponsors progressively regained control over the liberated areas through intense bombing, more and more Syrians came to Turkey – and especially to Gaziantep (Chapter 3). Such forced exile led to a paradoxical economy of hospitality, whereby Gaziantep – and southern Turkey, a region that has not been historically without an Arab presence<sup>3</sup> – are 'Syrianized' – al-Khalili borrows Yassin al-Haj Saleh's word, not without slightly changing its meaning (100) – in the sense of a form of subversion of the guests and hosts' paradigm in which Syrians found themselves trapped.<sup>4</sup> 'By claiming a dignified life, my Syrian interlocutors aspire to be subjects of law rather than religious piety and moral duties', writes al-Khalili (107). Nonetheless, Turkish administrative constraints

on Syrians in Gaziantep are increasingly pervasive, as shown by the detailed testimonies shared by al-Khalili's interlocutors. Surprisingly, the book does not give much importance to the repeated eruption of anti-Syrian violence in the streets of Gaziantep, for instance after the attempted coup of July 2016 against Erdoğan. Is this because such violence was mainly conducted by Turkish mobs – often screaming 'Arap defol', in the sense of 'Arabs be gone' – rather than the state itself?

Or maybe this omission is rather linked to the magnitude of the revolutionary defeat, to which no violence – even racist – can be compared. As such, the loss of revolutionary hopes is not the sole manifestation of the tragedy. Syrians in Gaziantep are maintained in a limbo of waiting – for papers, for news of close ones still in Syria or simply for new possibilities to arise for the future (Chapter 4). As al-Khalili shows, Syrians in Gaziantep 'were stuck between the past and the future but without a present' (116). As the Syrian regime has resorted to mass detention and abductions on an immense scale, this waiting in limbo is only interrupted by the active question of the 'search for the detainees' whereabouts and for solutions to get them out' (121). Perhaps the book's most powerful pages are hence the ones in which al-Khalili discusses temporalities among Syrians in Gaziantep. While migration – and especially forced migration – has often been described through the lenses of nostalgia and the hope for a lost Eden, Syrians reflexively think of what *should have been done* for the revolution not to end the way it did, for counter-revolutionary forces such as Daesh or the Kurdish Workers' Party in alliance with the Baath regime not to overcome the revolutionary popular hopes. Faced with the dystopian present of a burned country (Coquio et al. 2022), the past 'should not be a repetition without difference; in the future the revolution should not end tragically', writes al-Khalili insightfully (131).

These afterlives of revolutionary hopes are not without paradox. While defeat comes to be reinterpreted by displaced Syrians as a step in the long journey to liberation, its legacy is thought of as permanent and effective in the very fabrics of society (Chapter 5). As al-Khalili shows through her interlocutors' testimonies, such a revolutionary subversion of reality is never as manifested as it is in the realm of gender dynamics. Although the author refrains from 'imposing a white Western feminist gaze that universalises a historically bounded situation' (138), Syrian women themselves assert their active participation in the revolution and their resistance towards patriarchal authority, especially after counter-revolutionary and conservative Islamist forces took over many liberated areas. Even in the context of Gaziantep, the tragic vanishing of male relatives led to 'reshaping the *beit*', that is, new gender roles within the daily life of Syrian households in exile, as shown by the tragic and powerful story of Umm Khalid, a woman whose husband and son were martyred, while two other sons fled to Europe (146). More generally, as al-Khalili convincingly argues, the political defeat of the revolution is dissociated by her interlocutors from the irreversible social change it has nevertheless produced within Syrian society (156–157).

It is not rare for social change within Muslim and Arab societies to be immediately understood as a path to secularisation. The Syrian revolution challenges such a reductionist paradigm (Chapter 6). While many counter-revolutionary forces emerged from the Islamist political spectrum (starting with the regime itself, as it went to align itself with the Iranian-sponsored militias), the revolutionary subjects often adopted a religious – and even eschatological (180) – worldview in times of acute destruction, a worldview that is deeply rooted in the moral economy of Syrian society. *Shahada*, which signifies in the Islamic tradition both testimony and martyrdom, comes to link together earthly and divine justice. Destiny turns into a theory of revolutionary action (179) and repression itself is understood by al-Khalili's interlocutors as a divine plan that is to be uncovered on Judgement Day (182). Perhaps this argument could have been strengthened by a more affirmed historicisation of the Arab revolutions and what they meant for the political and religious history of the region. It appears that the careful and sensible dimensions of al-Khalili's ethnography allow for such inquiry with her interlocutors, where religious and political ideas could be reinscribed into a broader historical and ideological consciousness (Laroui 1967).

Nonetheless, al-Khalili's *Waiting for the Revolution to End* is a highly precious addition to the literature on the Syrian revolution, as well as a fascinating anthropological exploration of what remains of revolutionary hopes after defeat has occurred. By showing both rigorous and ambitious engagement with fields of knowledge including anthropology, political theory and philosophy, al-Khalili manages to combine the singularity of her interlocutors' paths with a universalisable inquiry into the contemporary, of which Syria is undoubtedly a major keystone (Al-Haj Saleh 2016).

*Hamza Esmili, KU Leuven*

## Notes

1. Montassir Sakhi's book, *La révolution et le djihad*, is another recent and precious addition to the anthropological literature on the Syrian revolution.
2. For instance, al-Khalili makes a very interesting reference to Nechayev's famous *Revolutionary Catechism*.
3. Paradoxically, the Arab communities of southern Turkey are often opposed to the Syrian revolution, as many of them belong to the same Alawi minority as Bashar al-Assad's regime.
4. As early as 2013, Erdoğan started describing Syrians as 'Muhajirûn' and Turks as 'ansâr', in a transparent reference to prophetic times.  
See <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-calls-on-reyhanli-locals-to-resist-provocations-47526> (consulted on 12/03/2024)

---

## References

- Al-Haj Saleh, Y. (2016), 'La Syrie ne s'est pas démocratisée, c'est le monde qui s'est syrianisé', *Libération*, 9 May, [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/05/09/yassin-al-haj-saleh-la-syrie-ne-s-est-pas-democratisee-c-est-le-monde-qui-s-est-syrianise\\_1451478/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/05/09/yassin-al-haj-saleh-la-syrie-ne-s-est-pas-democratisee-c-est-le-monde-qui-s-est-syrianise_1451478/).
- Coquio, C. et al. (eds) (2022), *Syrie, le pays brûlé (1970–2021): Le livre noir des Assad* (Paris: Le Seuil).
- Fassin, D. (2014), 'The Ethical Turn in Anthropology: Promises and Uncertainties', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1: 429–435, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.025>.
- Laroui, A. (1967), *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* (Paris: Maspero).
- Nechayev, S. [1869] (2020), *Revolutionary Catechism* (n.p. Pattern).
- Sakhi, M. (2023), *La révolution et le djihad* (Paris: La Découverte).