

## 4 Memories of Violence: Hama 1982

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As discussed in Chapter 1, violence was an ever present mechanism of government under the rule of Hafez al-Asad. The centrality of violence to the terms of rule continued under his successor and became especially manifest during the 2011 Uprising. The regime's propensity to use violence on a wide scale if challenged or opposed has long been a consideration of Syrian dissidents, activists and ordinary citizens in their thinking about oppositional strategies and politics. Indeed, under the Asads' rule, Syrians lived in a state of anticipation of regime violence. The anticipation of violent acts, and the projection of regime terror as the inevitable response to any questioning of its power practices, arise in Syrians' interpretative horizons in relation to memories of violent events and experiences involving the state. Such memories hearken back, most notably, to the period 1976 to 1982, referred to, variously, as 'the time of the events' (*fatrat al-ahdath*) or 'the events of Hama' (*ahdath hama*). These characterisations euphemistically designate a violent period in Syrian history – a glossing over of massacres and the toll of civilian deaths that resulted (estimated to be at least 10,000).

Just prior to the 2011 Uprising, and during its early days, in conversations with Syrian youth activists, seasoned observers and political dissidents, it was often pressed to me that the regime was ready, willing and capable of killing a large number of people to maintain its rule. For instance, a prominent political dissident, reporting 'insider information', stated, in the course of a meeting I had with him, that a high-ranking figure in the Syrian military had expressed readiness to sacrifice 100,000 people (meeting in Damascus, April 2011). Further, in explaining why Damascene merchants seemed reluctant or cautious to express support for the Uprising, a Damascene merchant in his mid forties asserted to me, with conviction, that he believed that, on his deathbed, Hafez al-Asad convened his sons, Bashar and Maher, and told them that if their rule was ever threatened, they should 'do Hama again' (Damascus, May 2011). 'Doing Hama again' is what many Syrians suspected to be in

store for them should they ever stray from the public script of loyalty to the regime. Hama inaugurated a model of violence and a frame of power relations. Regime brutality in Hama was constructed as a template for the regime's anticipated use of violence to suppress opposition. It was understood as a lesson (*al-dars al-hamazwi*).

In light of this, there is a need to consider the impact of the Hama violence on Syrian politics and society and, more specifically, on how Syrians came to understand themselves as subjects of the regime. I want to approach this question by looking at the social memories of violence and of events during the period, culminating in the Hama massacres in 1982. The apprehensions and anxieties about regime violence and about an impending civil war and sectarian strife, expressed through the invocation of past events of violence, raise the question of the kind of shared understandings that Syrians have had about the past. This is especially so since this period of Syrian history was not only marginalised in public discourse but was a taboo subject. At the time of their occurrence, the events were subject to regime rhetoric which set the terms for referring to and interpreting them: broadly, the Islamist insurrection was the work of the Muslim Brothers – agents of enemy foreign powers – and the regime, the leader and the people rose against this criminal plot until its defeat. Within this narrative frame, official media and regime figures provided corroborating evidence to flesh out the details of the official story.

Following the Hama massacres and the destruction of some of the city's old quarters, the public account receded into the background, attaining narrative closure, in the sense of not being open to revisiting or discussion in the public sphere. For example, 'the events' (*al-ahdath*) were not the subject of any kind of official memorialisation (in the terms sanctioned by the regime). Nor were they integrated into the official history of the country taught in school history books.<sup>1</sup> School and university curricula on modern Syrian political history make no reference to the violent Hama events. Thus, the generation schooled in the aftermath of Hama received virtually no information about it. Yet in school assembly

<sup>1</sup> Syrian history textbooks at the ninth-grade Baccalaureate levels cover Arab World history from the time of Ottoman rule to the post-independence period. The textbooks adopt a chronological approach with key events named and explained. The historical chronology is geared to providing *points de repère* that would symbolise or stand for the story of colonialism and nationalism ultimately crowned by the rise of the national hero and saviour, Hafez al-Asad. In this story, national historical events that do not fit within the narrative are omitted, including the episode of confrontation with the Islamist opposition and 'the Hama events'.

lines, pupils were made to declare oaths to fight against the criminal gang of the Muslim Brothers. Further, in published works of fiction and in commentary by critical and dissident writers, the Hama massacres remained an unspoken subject (see Kahf 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the enforced public silence, social memories of the Hama events (and of the experience of imprisonment and torture) became constitutive of understandings of the regime and its modes of operation. My enquiry into memories of the Hama violence interrogates the place of past violence in understandings of the present, in interpretations of political norms of interaction and in the formation of political subjectivities. This question requires that we examine Syrians' constructions of the past to discern the terms in which it is negotiated, claimed, managed and mobilised in contests in the present. An extension of this examination is to look at how the past is lived in the present. Writing about the Latin American experience of violent military rule, Elizabeth Jelin (2003) notes that the passage of time, when it comes to political contexts of violence, does not lead to closure or forgetting. Rather, settling accounts with the past and making sense of the individual and societal experiences is a continuous endeavour. Memory, in this sense, is not a stored or fixed narrative but a processual undertaking, whereby memories are material for negotiation and understanding, as well as for conflict and resolution (Argenti and Schramm 2010, 7; Trouillot 1995).

With the aim of probing the politically formative role of the Hama violence, the chapter enquires into the ways in which memory practices have managed relations with the past, and have fashioned individual and collective modes of understanding atrocity and living with it. It begins with a tracing of fragments of narratives and accounts, as told by protagonists in the conflict. It then moves into an examination of different practices of remembering that can be discerned in recollections of the events in the narratives of witnesses and survivors and in works of fiction set in the period or hearkening back to it. My investigation of social memories is focused on the forms that recollections of Hama take and on the workings of technologies of remembering understood as embodied practices of memory. The final section widens the optic of the investigation to include the remembrances that take shape and find expression in dialogue with the Hama violence.

<sup>2</sup> A semi-fictional account by Abdallah al-Dahamsha (2009), first published in 1982 outside Syria, titled *Adhra' Hama (Hama Virgin)*, and films such as Mohammad Malas' *al-Layl* (1994), make reference to the city, with allusions to its experience of destruction.

### The Hama Events in Fragments

Dear Brothers and Sons: What these criminals [reference to the Muslim Brotherhood] did in Hama, what these criminals committed in the city of Hama, these paid agents, cannot be rationally believed. They left no act forbidden by God without committing it, they made licit all that is illicit, they enter a home, kill all its inhabitants including its women, children and men to turn this home into a hideout, placing themselves by its windows and doors to fire in all directions. They distribute death on all passers-by, forbidding groups of women and children from leaving the neighbourhood to avoid the danger of bullets and forcing them to enter into their hideout, and if a woman who works as a nurse in Hama objects, this woman is sprayed with bullets. (From a speech by Hafez al-Asad, 7 March 1982)

According to news reports and information received by Amnesty International, shortly after dark on 2 February, regular Syrian soldiers tried to raid a house in the ancient, western part of the city of Hama. Ninety soldiers led by a lieutenant surrounded a house believed to contain a large cache of arms belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. As they started their raid, the troops were ambushed by armed Mujahideen. They were captured and killed and their uniforms removed. The insurgents then posted themselves on the rooves and turrets of the city.

The next morning, the citizens of Hama were apparently informed from the minarets of several mosques that the city had been 'liberated' and that the 'liberation' of the rest of the country will follow. The insurgents occupied government and security forces buildings, ransacked the local armoury and began executing government officials and 'collaborators'. At least 50 people are reported to have been killed by the anti-government demonstrators on this first day of protests.

According to some observers, old parts of the city were bombarded from the air and shelled in order to facilitate the entry of troops and tanks along the narrow streets. The ancient quarter of Hadra [*sic*] was apparently bombarded and raised [*sic*] to the ground by tanks during the first four days of fighting. On 15 February, after several days of heavy bombardments, Major General Mustafa Tlas, the Syrian defence minister, stated that the Uprising in Hama had been suppressed. However, the city remained surrounded and cut off. Two weeks of house-to-house searches and mass arrests followed, with conflicting reports of atrocities and collective killings of unarmed, innocent inhabitants by the security forces. It is difficult to establish for certain what happened, but Amnesty International has heard that there was, among other things, a collective execution of 70 people outside the municipal hospital on 19 February, the Hadra [*sic*] quarter residents were executed by Saraya al-difa' troops the same day; that cyanide gas containers were alleged to have been brought into the city, connected to rubber pipes to the entrance of buildings believed to house insurgents and turned on, killing the building's occupants, that people were assembled at the military airfield, at the sports stadium and at the military barracks and left out in the open for days without food or shelter.

On 22 February, the Syrian authorities broadcast a telegram of support addressed to President Assad from the Hama branch of the Ba'th Party. The message referred to the Muslim Brotherhood fighters killing party activists and their families and leaving their mutilated bodies in the streets. It said the security forces had taken fierce reprisals against the Brotherhood and their sympathisers 'which stopped them breathing forever'.

When order was restored, estimates of the number of dead on all sides ranged from 10,000 to 25,000. (Amnesty International 1983, 36–7)

These extracts, from longer accounts, relate the events of Hama from the perspectives of one of the protagonists and of an outside observer. There are general contours of the events on which these and other accounts agree: the existence of an Islamist insurgency and its crushing by the security and armed forces. Beyond these broad lines, there are contesting claims about the actual events – for example, the number of insurgents, the number of civilian victims who were killed during the military operations, the specific terms of the orders that guided the security operations and the actual conduct of the security forces. Further, accounts of the Muslim Brothers' role in the insurgency remain confined to regime rhetoric and to the defensive narratives given in memoirs of the organisation's leaders. On the whole, the Muslim Brotherhood dissociates itself from the violence of the Combatant Vanguard group (al-Tali'a al-Muqatila) and only acknowledges taking up arms as a tool of resistance after the regime declared war on the organisation. For example, in his published memoirs of the period, Adnan Sa'd al-Din, leader and general guide of one of the Muslim Brother factions at the time, states that followers of Marwan Hadid – a radical Islamist activist spurred on by what he believed to be discriminatory state policies against Sunnis – were pushed to take a confrontational route. He then asserts that the Muslim Brotherhood only later became aware of the militant activities of that period (Sa'd al-Din 2010, 27). In an interview in 2012, Yassin al-Ghadban, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, asserted that the Brotherhood had no connection with the violence of the Tali'a, though he acknowledged that 'Adnan Sa'd al-Din, who operated from Iraq, maintained links with them (interview in Amman, May 2012). The Muslim Brotherhood's official line is that the group was compromised by the Tali'a activities and was dragged into armed resistance in self-defence once the regime started attacking Muslim Brotherhood activists and their families. Memoirs by Tali'a militants, on the other hand, assert that the leadership of the Brotherhood encouraged the armed struggle, but that they reneged on their promises of help (Abd al-Hakim 1991).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the account of a Tali'a activist, coordination with certain leaders within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organisation – specifically with the Aleppo-Hama axis that enjoyed the International Muslim Brotherhood organisation's backing – was initiated by Abd

The Muslim Brotherhood's continued refusal to open its own records of that period for investigation and scrutiny has been pointed to by some civil-society activists as a reason why they should not be part of a national coalition working for transition from the Asad regime (interviews in Damascus, March 2011). For some Hamawis, the demand for Muslim Brotherhood accountability is more focused on the issue of ethical responsibility, in particular, their role in encouraging the turn to violence (interviews in Damascus, March 2011). In the appraisal of some of my Hamawi interviewees, the Muslim Brotherhood betrayed an attitude of ease in sacrificing human life in the name of religiously sanctified goals.

The regime-managed official history of the events and the wide-reaching repression contributed to practices of self-censoring and public silencing that muted alternative accounts. This is especially the case for those who lived the events. Independent media coverage at the time was limited and, hence, what happened in Hama has preserved a murky and uncertain character. Further, without the benefit of archival records or access to oral history sources, critical and sustained historical scholarship has been constrained.<sup>4</sup> An added consideration for current research into this period is whether the events of the 2011 Uprising have altered the optical field from which the past could be viewed. This is particularly relevant as different parties to the conflict reconstruct the past with a view to validating their accounts and interpretations of the present.

For the most part, the events of Hama are recounted in fragments: human rights reports and journalistic reportages and sketches. However, an effort at documenting and recording the circumstances of Hama was undertaken by the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC). In a series of reports, killing, detention and abduction are detailed in a catalogue of destruction and ruination. One of the SHRC reports names localities where violence occurred and records the acts of destruction that occurred there. It also documents the names of individuals and families that perished and the manner in which they were killed. All is

al-Satar al-Za'im, who took up the Tali'a group's leadership upon the death in 1976 of Marwan Hadid in prison (Abd al-Hakim 1991, 93). Letters attributed to 'Adnan 'Uqla, responsible for the group's military training and operations in Aleppo, charge the Brotherhood leadership, which was based outside Syria, with having reneged on promises of financial and military support to the group (Abd al-Hakim 1991, 110–28). For an account of the Brotherhood's role in the armed confrontation with the regime, see Abd-Allah (1983) and Lefèvre (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Seale (1988) discusses the insurgency and the armed confrontation but does not delve into the impact the violence had on the people of Hama and on Syrians in general. Batatu (1982), Lawson (1982) and Michaud (1982) have addressed social, political economy, and systemic dimensions of the conflict. Lefèvre (2013) examines the politics of the Muslim Brotherhood during the insurgency and the period leading up to it.

organised and set out both chronologically – laying out an account of daily massacres – and thematically according to categories of the population that were victims of massacre – women and children, young men, religious figures – or according to the sites of massacres, for example the Porcelain factory.

These SHRC reports are similar in content to the account presented by a group close to the Muslim Brothers in the book titled *Hama: The Tragedy of the Age* (Majmu‘a min al-Bahithin 2003). Indeed, there appears to be much overlap between the two accounts. The SHRC account also draws on reports by international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International. This work of *documenting* the Hama events is concerned with facticity and truth, both of which can be and would be contested through other sources of documentary evidence or evidentiary pieces. Despite the possible challenges to which these documents are subject, they do allow for threading together an account of the events. Even if verified and authenticated as ‘the record’ of events, they do not tell the full story. There are other fragments and other stories that can be told in an open narrative. Importantly, the accounts pursue the ‘factual’ as can be documented by reference to evidentiary information such as the number killed, the site of killing and the instruments used. The affective and cognitive ‘evidence’ of the aftermath, the lived experience and the formative and transformative work of violence are not the object of these documentary works.

There are different and multiple stakes in the work of recollection. My purpose, here, is not to examine contested claims, let alone to adjudicate between them, but to elucidate various relations to the past in the present. Ultimately, I am interested in the afterlife of violence and in the question of how violence folds into everyday life (in the sense articulated by Veena Das (2009)), and into the struggles to create a past that can be inhabited and a memory that can be meaningfully lived (McDougall 2010, 47). Inhabiting the past, as James McDougall (2010, 47) notes, is a distinct endeavour, different from the ‘idealised historiographic, or juridical, procedures of establishing the facts’.

However, in certain accounts, inhabiting the past is presented as a historiographical procedure. This, for instance, is evident in a number of interviews that I conducted in the spring of 2005, with individuals who were once part of the regime, either serving in ministerial positions under Hafez al-Asad or having risen up in the ranks of the Ba‘th Party. My interviewees reiterated the official account of Hama, complemented with personal views and opinions that justified the regime’s assault on the city. One former government minister recalled the explosion of bombs in al-Azbakiyya in central Damascus, not very far from his office, sometime prior to the assault on Hama. He stated that people were being blown to

pieces and asserted that the anti-regime violence was orchestrated from Iraq and that the Iraqi Ba'ath had supplied weapons to the perpetrators. The lines of this narrative were reiterated by another interviewee who was a member of the Damascene political elite. My interlocutors in the higher political echelons also expounded on the particularities and characteristics of Syrian society, asserting that it is composed of a fragile mosaic of ethnicities and religions, which, in turn, necessitates a firm grip and a strong leader like Hafez al-Asad. Such observations displace the details of the violence and forego a closer examination of the human cost of 'political imperatives'.

My interviews with Damascene merchants yielded what can best be termed a historiographical rehearsal aimed at accounting for their position and role during the Hama events. Such narratives identify the protagonists as the regime and the Islamists, with the rest of society being caught in the crossfire. The contours of this historiographical rehearsal in the recollection of one merchant – a member of the Board of Directors of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce – were drawn around a meeting with Hafez al-Asad in 1980 in which the latter made clear his intention to contain the challenge of the Muslim Brothers in Aleppo (interview in Damascus, 20 March 2005). My narrator recalled his attempt to plead on behalf of Aleppo and its people and to sway the president to adopt a softer approach. In his recollections, it appears that he is responding to the charge of betrayal for not joining the general national strike called in 1980 by Aleppo merchants. The Damascene merchants' decision to decline or to withdraw support for the strike is accounted for in the assertion that Damascus was besieged by the troops of Rif'at al-Asad who threatened violence.

In contrast to the self-exonerating recollections of merchants close to the regime, other Damascene merchants charge collusion and manipulation by the Damascus Chamber of Commerce. A number of my interviewees recalled being contacted by Badr al-Din al-Shallah (the then president of the chamber) or by other chamber board members and being warned not to participate in the planned strike. Some stated that they were advised that their shops would be forced open by the security forces and that they may be looted. One merchant recalled having heard that some merchants who supported the call to strike had been murdered.

These recollections are offered not only as supposedly factual or objective accounts of what happened, but they also aim at attributing responsibility, at self-exoneration from charges of complicity and at justifying a particular position and action. For example, in a programme called *al-Sanduaq al-Aswad* (The Black Box) aired by Al Jazeera Satellite



TV (2015), As'ad Mustafa, a former governor of Hama and a high-echelon Ba'th member who defected, reiterated that Rif'at al-Asad was in command of the violence and that two local officers, namely Ayman al-As'ad and Yahya Zidan, were key figures on the ground. As'ad Mustafa, who rose in the ranks and assumed the governorship of Hama in 1985, placed himself outside the circle of actors. However, other testimonials would point to Mr Mustafa's implication in the events, if not necessarily his complicity. In an undated memoir, a high school teacher in Hama in the 1970s, who was an acquaintance of Mr Mustafa, casts a different light on the latter's role, portraying him as being loyal to Hafez al-Asad and having collaborated closely with the party to secure his rise in the ranks (Shantut ND). Memory and narrative are offered as historiography, with an attendant claim to be representing objective history. The competing claims made in these recollections are intended for the historical record. Narratives of what happened, as a mode of remembering, attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the historical record and in available information.

The documentary objective is also pursued in numerous first-hand accounts offered with a view to bearing witness and providing testimonies on the part of the survivors. A number of these testimonials appeared during the 2011 Uprising and aimed primarily to disclose the details of the violence of Hama, to expose the brutality of the culprits and to bear witness to the harms to which the victims were subjected. These accounts are also intended to invalidate denials and misrepresentations in the public record maintained by the regime and to speak with the objective of 'truth-telling'. In the context of the Uprising, the intention was also to establish Hama as a precedent, which would furnish further evidence for the regime's willingness to use violence in suppressing the protests and opposition in 2011 and afterwards.

### **Remembering Hama: Managing and Inhabiting the Past**

As discussed in the Introduction, social memories of political violence develop intersubjectively in relation to events and experiences in the past. If experiences of regime violence are formative of political subjects, so too are social memories of violence. In this regard, the terms in which violent events are remembered, recalled or silenced inform and shape the subject's positioning vis-à-vis political government, the regime and fellow citizens. In this sense, social memories of violence are components of the subject's interpretative horizons: contending with a violent past and finding individual and collective terms of negotiating one's relations

to it has been formative of Syrians as subject-citizens under the Asad regime. In the following discussion, I draw on literary writings and on Syrians' personal recollections about the Hama events to sketch out the practices of memory through which the violence was lived and negotiated. Relatedly, I probe the politically constitutive role of social memories of violence.

The most extensive recollections of the Hama events and their aftermath are offered in the narrative work of Manhal al-Sarraj, a writer from Hama. Al-Sarraj's work stands as a repository of social memory, of how the events folded into the everyday. The imperative of telling arises in al-Sarraj's work as an ethical practice in the sense in which remembering is undertaken with a view to giving account.<sup>5</sup> The ethical imperative of remembering entails a struggle against a forgetting that denies the truth of the subject's experience of violence and her quest for a reckoning and not forcibly for retribution (see Lambek 1996; Ricoeur 2004). Drawing on al-Sarraj's narratives and on recollections and remembrances that I gathered in interviews with Hamawis and other Syrians who lived the events, I highlight different practices of memory at work: analytic retrospections that reconstruct a social history of Hama and deploy social categories for understanding and explanation; spatialised remembering and memorialisation; and embodied practices of memory revealing how the past is lived and inhabited.

*Remembering as a Reconstructed Social History:  
Religion, Class and Piety*

The official version of the events of Hama not only set the terms of framing them but also brought about a forced closure by banishing any reference to them from the public sphere. In this spirit, the regime did not seek to commemorate even its own version of the events. It would appear that, from the perspective of the rulers, the historical record was settled in the form of Hafez al-Asad's speeches during the period and in Syrian media accounts. In this sense, the life experiences of Hama

<sup>5</sup> In al-Sarraj's work, acknowledging the events of violence and understanding the suffering that they caused guide the documentary-like narratives and the memory work of the characters in her novels. In conversation with Manhal al-Sarraj (over the telephone on 22 November 2011), she stressed the importance of recognising the pain and acknowledging it, and of communicating and understanding it (*tafahum al-alam*). She also spoke of many places in Syria that became *hamida* (lifeless or still) after being subjected to disciplining violence.

residents were not allowed voice and remained suppressed. With the 2011 Uprising, there was a rush to produce testimonials and recollections. One notable testimony is that of Khaled al-Khani (2013). Al-Khani's father was a prominent eye doctor who, during the siege of the city, had one eye gouged out before being killed by regime forces. Al-Khani titled his recollections 'I lived to recount to you: the story of my childhood, my father's eye and the Hama Massacre'. The testimony tells of security forces' assaults on homes, summary executions and assaults on young women. Al-Khani's testimony shows a preoccupation with evidentiary and documentary requirements. To some extent, the context of the 2011 Uprising highlights the privileging of the evidentiary and documentary dimensions of testimonials about Hama.

The imposed silencing also drove the impulse to offer factual accounts of events that were either personally witnessed or were socially verified in earlier telling and corroboration by multiple witnesses. In my interviews with Hamawis before and after the 2011 Uprising, the recollections of the events tended to be told in the style of formalised testimonies. Many of the interviewees wove similar tales of what they experienced. This formalised testimonial style is initially puzzling as it appears to correspond to the documentary work done by the Syrian Human Rights Organisation. The stories are reiterative of the same occurrences such as the witnessing of neighbours and family members being lined up against a wall and shot. Another recurrent theme in the recollections is that of soldiers coming into homes, destroying furniture and possessions, looting and threatening to rape the women. In some sense, the personal narratives, disallowed from public discourse and, at best, confined to the most intimate spaces, assimilated the generalised narratives of the human rights organisations. Although personal, the remembrances are permeated by the collective. An important element in understanding the forms of telling and the stakes of memory is the long period of enforced silence and the contests surrounding what actually happened. The similarity in survivors' testimonials of the massacres, as noted by Liisa Malkki (1995), entails a degree of formalisation, a quality that should not diminish the importance of the accounts. Concurring with Malkki, Laleh Khalili (2008) asserts that formalisation conveys the systematisation of the mechanics of violence and, as such, it is a means of attaining coherence within the survivors' sense of the overall order.

Moving beyond stylised or formalised testimonies concerned with facts and validation, an analytic mode of retrospection could be discerned in the work of memory that offers a fleshed-out social history of the city and

its people. In this analytic mode of recollection, Hama is read through the categories of class, social status, piety and the rural–urban divide. Also, in some of the narratives, a historical reading of the nationalist and Ba‘thist eras is developed. The recollections are made through the prism of the polarisation of society and the political lines of division. Modes of retrospection of the events reveal a concern with the dynamics of the struggle and of where one was positioned in relation to it. The personal memories mobilise knowledge and particular understandings of the political context at the time. In vivid recollections, my Hamawi interviewees endeavoured to bring forth their perceptions of the unfolding events as they were lived and experienced. For example, some recalled, in evocative terms, the widely held view that the regime was weakened and that its demise was near. Integrated into the frames of narrating the events, and situating the self and the collective in relation to them, are social and political categories such as sect, party alignment and class. For some, there is an urge to locate where one stood in relation to the conflict and to societal divisions.

An analytic mode of retrospection also runs through the narratives in Manhal al-Sarraj’s works. By virtue of her extensive writing as a narrator, a chronicler and a witness, she has come to occupy an important place with reference to the work of remembering. In her first novel, *Kama Yanbaghi li-Nahr*, al-Sarraj narrates the story of Hama as it sinks into a duel between the regime, in the person of strong man, Abi Shama, and his men, and the Islamists, in the person of Uncle Nazir and his followers. Fatima, the narrator, recounts the events through introspective recollections as well as in exchanges with others around her. She keeps the memories present in her thoughts and her surroundings. Fatima’s account is a kind of bearing witness. In her narratives, the two sides are pitted against each other, though they are unequal: soldiers in uniform against youths in delicate pyjamas. However, the unequal physical power does not occlude the extremism that drives each side – extremism in thought on one side, and absolutism of power, on the other – making the confrontation unavoidable.

Al-Sarraj’s narrative is instructive for what it tells us about where to stand vis-à-vis past violence: To remember or not to remember? To assign responsibility? To hold to account? How? In simple terms, there are victors and losers, but where should one stand? In the work of recollection, the subject is challenged to take sides, to allocate responsibility and identify the guilty party.<sup>6</sup> In a number of interviews with Syrians from

<sup>6</sup> Fatima, as the agent of remembering in the novel, transcends the challenge. Although she explores the reasons behind Abi Shama’s attack on the alleys, and delves into the manipulations of Uncle Nazir, she does not take sides as such. All the same, the extent of violence shocks and angers. It is not the rectitude of one of the opposing parties (i.e. the

Hama, the question of how the entire city was drawn into a deadly duel between the regime and the insurgents figures prominently in attempts to come to terms with the past. For some, the question is about assuming responsibility and, for others, it is about providing explanation, though these are interlinked issues. Interrogation about responsibility is often directed at the Muslim Brothers. There remain unanswered questions about their role in the violence. The official position of the Brotherhood is that the insurgents were members of al-Tali'a al-Muqatila who acted to avenge the death of Marwan Hadid in prison. In this account, the Tali'a members acted on their own and they were misguided about the legitimacy and merits of the use of violence. It is only after the regime's declaration of war on the Brotherhood, that its leadership endorsed the use of violence to defend its members.

The credibility of this account is questioned on various grounds expressing differing political and ethical positions. For example, Tareq, who grew up in Hama in the 1970s, expressed his deep dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood's account. In his thinking, the Brotherhood contributed, through their *da'wa* work (religious teaching akin to proselytisation), to fostering the objective of removing the regime by force. His recollections leave him with the sense that the youths were misled to believe that the MB would provide aid and succour in their confrontation with the regime. Instead, they were abandoned. In addition to demanding both a truthful accounting of events and the Brotherhood's assumption of responsibility, Tareq's questions, derived from his recollections, offer a kind of witnessing. In his questions, it is implicit that he was sympathetic to the insurgency, but now he has feelings of anger and rancour that the young militants were misled and manipulated.

Remembrances of a number of my interviewees bring to light the influence exerted by the Muslim Brothers through religious-teaching circles and other *da'wa* activities. Although religious piety and conservatism characterised the lifestyle of large segments of the population in Hama in the modern period, adherence to the Brotherhood was not wide in its reach until the early 1970s. In the 1950s and 1960s, secular political movements such as the Arab Socialists and the Ba'th had a significant following. These Parties garnered followings among the burgeoning segment of educated youths, many of whom were from

Islamist youths) that motivates the condemnation of Abi Shama and his men, rather it is the brutality of the acts in themselves. The youths in pyjamas are victims of Abi Shama and dupes of Uncle Nazir (the Islamist agitator).

rural areas or from the urban middle classes. Incidents of confrontation occurred between Ba‘thists and religiously oriented groups, notably in 1964 (see al-Hourani’s (2000) memoirs). Then, the 1970s saw a widening of support for the Brotherhood. According to some Hamawis, this development is attributable to the need of Hamawis to lean on some force in the face of a Ba‘thist takeover of all institutions of government and their exclusion from these institutions, whether as a result of deliberate or systemic barriers to entry or access or because many had voluntarily opted out of joining the Ba‘th Party (interview with self-exiled Hamawis in Beirut, May 2012, and London, December 2011).<sup>7</sup>

Social memories of the period that followed the ascendancy of Hafez al-Asad to state power crystallise around recollections of increased religiosity and growing sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood. A number of my interviewees recalled that an atmosphere of religiosity began to set in: religious books were more frequently found in homes, older male siblings joined the Muslim Brothers and female religious preachers became popular. One interviewee observed the shifts in her own surroundings. For example, her mother began wearing a *monteau* (long coat) and attending religious lessons. Further, young girls from her neighbourhood gathered in homes for Quranic and exegesis lessons. Young men went to mosques in various districts of the city to attend lessons by renowned preachers. Tareq, who was one of these young men attending such sermons, recalls the period preceding the assault on Hama:

I used to attend the lessons of Sheikh Adib al-Kilani in zawiyyat al-Kilaniyya. I was still in preparatory school and was attending Quranic memorisation lessons. I was also attending the Friday sermon of Sheikh Ahmad al-Murad in al-Jadid mosque.

In Manhal al-Sarraj’s analytic narrative, piety took an ideological form and became an affirmation of a distinct identity.<sup>8</sup> Further, opposition to the regime was articulated in a nominal identification with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the words of a Hamawi exile: ‘we were all Ikhwan without the Organisation’ (*kuna kuliyatna Ikhwan bidun tanzim*) (interview, December 2011). This statement underscores the prevailing sentiment of opposition to the regime, which was put to me by another interviewee, Tareq, in terms of Hama, the city, being ‘instinctively oppositional’

<sup>7</sup> The use of ‘Hamawi’ refers to city residents, predominately Sunni, but inclusive of long-time Christian residents.

<sup>8</sup> I conducted three extensive interviews with Manhal al-Sarraj, one over the telephone and two in person during meetings in Stockholm where she resides.

(*Hama mu 'arida bil-fitra*) (interview, November 2011). According to Tareq, 'integral to Hama's set up (*manzumat Hama*) was hatred for the Ba'th'. At the same time, many of my interviewees dissociated themselves from the Ikhwan:

those who were killed were Hamawi, they had no relation with the Ikhwan. The armed men were killed in the first couple of days. In al-Mal'ab al-Janubi [a district of Hama City], many people were killed ... ordinary people. The killing was systematic. They [the security men] entered the alleyways. They searched, they stole, they gathered people, stood them against a wall and killed them ... They entered homes like beasts. The girl they like, they take her. (Interview with Manar, Hama survivor, London, December 2011)

At the time, the Muslim Brothers were distributing leaflets about Alawi rule, which resonated with the more generalised anti-regime feelings and with widespread resentment. This resentment of regime and party practices is conveyed in these observations of one of my Hamawi interviewees:

[T]he poor strata had now come to govern us. They took everything from the people of the city. They took the government jobs, and they withdrew all support from the city people. They came from the surrounding villages and took over the high positions in institutions such as the Organisation for Grains. In Hama, the people who assumed positions of responsibility were from poor families. They benefited from the Ba'th. There was the idea that the poor of the city (Sunnis) were not respectable people, they were *mukhabarat*. Everyone knew who the informants in their midst were and avoided them. The powerful (*al-mutanafidhin*) were from the surrounding villages. (Interview with a Hamawi exile, December 2011)

Similarly, Tareq recalls his grandmother saying that 'the outsiders' had invaded the city and would be taking retribution on its people. In these recollections, both class and the rural–urban divisions serve as categories mediating and framing social memories.

Through an analytic mode of retrospection, Hamawis who lived through the events reconstruct the social and political context of the bloody confrontation. They recall how the Muslim Brotherhood came to be perceived as a serious contender to the regime. There was a strong conviction that the MB would win. In her recollections, Manhal al-Sarraj recounts that one of the common rumours during the period leading up to the events was of Hafez al-Asad dead and of his body being placed in the morgue (assertions were being made that he was in the refrigerator '*Hafez bil barad*'). Recalling the certainty of an Islamist victory invites a call for an accounting, not for failure to deliver, but for the role of leaders in misleading the followers and sympathisers about the likely outcome of the confrontation with the regime.

*Practices of Forgetting and Practices of Remembering:  
Ruins and Spatialised Remembrance*

Questions of accountability and responsibility for the 1982 violence have been raised publicly in the period following the 2011 Uprising. Previously, under conditions of enforced silence, recollections were muted. This is captured in al-Sarraj's *Kama Yanbaghi li-Nahr* (discussed above), where Fatima's remembering unsettles society and its practices of forgetting. In the market, the vegetable vendor and the milkman fear her speaking of Abi Shama and Black Friday, though they themselves have marked the day in stories of escape: 'in the memory of the kind of sprint each ran' on that fateful day. Even Fatima's brother, who spent many years in prison, resents her for raking up the past and urges her to stop talking about the events.

The moral dilemma facing the survivors of the violence is that the demands of mundane living require a degree of forgetting and perhaps complicity. Fatima records complicity in the aftermath. As Abi Shama passes in parades, she remarks: 'they cheer him for killing their children, destroying their homes, stealing their trades. They cheer with unparalleled enthusiasm.' The exigencies of life implicate the survivors in the death of their kin.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the practice, of mainly wives and mothers, of registering their missing relatives – usually husbands and sons – as dead, is described by Fatima as 'women who kill their husbands, women who kill their sons to collect compensation'. This complicity becomes formalised in the setting up, in Fatima's neighbourhood, of a syndicate called 'Yes, a Donkey and Without Shame' (*na'am himar wa la 'ar*). Residents of the alleys join the new syndicate to communicate their compliance. Such practices are also practices of forgetting in al-Sarraj's account: 'people forgetting the alleys that were uprooted, the children and the youths who were tortured, and they become preoccupied with crumbs' (al-Sarraj 2007a, 156). Daily living, in itself, becomes an act of forgetting and, in the process, violence is routinised: 'brother eats brother and mothers deform their children to protect them from being taken by the men of Abi Shama' (al-Sarraj 2007a, 157). Thus, the spectre of violence remains in the aftermath of spectacular violence.

*Kama Yanbaghi li-Nahr* underscores the practices of forgetting and the tacit understandings that develop to stifle remembering. Yet other

<sup>9</sup> This depiction of the subjects' implication in their own subjugation carries resonance with Mbembe's (2001) account in his work on the postcolony of ordinary citizens' applause at the public hanging of fellow citizens.



narratives reveal the impossibility of forgetting because the violence has memorialised itself in the wreckage, destruction and ruination that the city suffered. Remembrance of the city before and after the destruction is a structuring theme in narratives of Hama. The stories of places have shaped individual and community histories and served as commemorative practices under conditions of forced silence and in the absence of public memorialisation. Remembrances of the events of Hama conjure old quarters and scenes of their destruction. Narratives of place turn sites of memory into memorials of the events. In some instances, they excavate the heritage and life that lay below the rubble or that was bulldozed and evened out. In others, they transform the sites of erasure that came with the construction of new quarters into monuments of the death and desecration that the city and its people underwent.

Memories of the destruction of the city, as lived by Hamawis, are the subtext of *Ala Sadri* (2007b), another of al-Sarraj's novels. The memory of the city that seeped into the ruins is the burden carried by the main protagonist, Najla, in her continuous journeys through the city of Hama and in her efforts to document its history. Najla works in the Heritage and Preservation Department of the city's municipal office. She is earnestly, and against all odds and doubts, moved by a desire to restore the old places to their glory, to repair and to preserve. In her relations and interactions with others around her, Najla wants to recreate the moments of the past – going up to the citadel, walking slowly and casting a long look over the al-Asi river waterbed. Like *Kama Yanbaghi li-Nahr's* Fatima, she wants to remember, but not the events in particular. Rather, she wants to recall a life before the events, to revive the legends and myths and to summon up the nooks and crannies of the alleyways (110).

Reconnecting with the past and returning Hama to its splendour is the future for which Najla yearns. Indeed, she has restoration plans for all the quarters. She adopts these plans as factual and outlines them to the tourists that she guides through the city. She projects life into the abandoned dwellings. As she glances into the deserted dwellings, she conjures up inhabitants and their lives – imagining a woman listening to a radio, taking a nap, and preparing lunch for her children. She goes on in her city tours to achieve what the director of the Heritage and Preservation Department (the state authority) could not accomplish. She populates homes and alleyways, opens the doors and windows of abandoned homes, fills rooms with inhabitants, fills squares and courtyards with children, rebuilds half-destroyed homes, restores latticed windows and renews entire quarters (186). Najla, the daughter of Hama, weaves the story of the city. She lays out city plans before revival and after revival. Najla's enterprise of restoration is a work of *tahqiq* (186). In

a manner analogous to the Arab-Islamic tradition of *tahqiq* – the authentication, verification and restoration of an old manuscript to its original form – Najla is proceeding with her work, and with her life in Hama (lifework), exerting a great labour to be true to the author's original text (the author, here, being the city and its people).

In some respects, the work of restoration lies in spatialised practices of memory and remembering, in walkabouts and tours wherein the subject names what was there, describes spaces once lived and once invested emotionally. Memories lodge in the walls, in the stones and pavements that once were, and in the gap between what was, then, and what is, now. The ruins and trail of destruction become summonses to the past and testaments to a monumental injustice committed against the city and its people. The city's physical destruction and ruination are structuring themes of recollections of Hamawis who witnessed the assault and who lost relatives, friends and neighbours. In her recollections of the events, Manar, who was eighteen years old at the time, spoke to me, in interview, of the demolition of al-Suq al-Tawil (a market area). She reflected:

why did they destroy it? Because it leads to all of Hama. It is full of alleyways. It branches into Hadir, Suq and Baraziyyah [all old quarters of the city]. They also destroyed Suq al-Shajarah because in its homes you can jump from one roof to the next. They destroyed the features of Hama, like the baths in the suq (*hamammat al-Suq*). Tourists used to come to them. They built a park and a swimming pool over a cemetery. They do not respect the dead. Tanks rolled over the dead. (Interview with Manar, London, December 2011)

Bara' al-Sarraj, who grew up in Hama and who was studying in Damascus at the time of the military and security forces' assault on the city, recalls returning to it with his twin brother in early March immediately after the siege was lifted. In his recollections, he sketches out the streets, the homes and the familiar sites that were destroyed:

We got off at al-Alamayn Street and al-Asi Square. The homes were destroyed, the shops looted. There were unexploded shells everywhere. We walked to al-Suq where our old house was. Its columns were damaged, but the building did not fall. We walked to the mosque at the last incline of al-Dabaggha on Ibn Rushd Street – the mosque was destroyed. We went to a friend's home and it was burned and swollen. I went inside and found the skull of my friend. I touched it and it dissolved in my hands. We walked to al-Hadir. We were thinking of the historical importance of the city. We wanted to make sure the historical part was still standing. Al-Hadir was the most affected area. Al-Kilaniyya at the beginning of al-Hadir was all destroyed, there were no people. In al-Hadir, we went to check my grandmother's house, it was shelled and there was blood on the roof. We walked in Kilaniyya, but we could not recognise the streets. The streets were raised by a meter and a half. The bulldozers had flattened the rubble from the demolished homes. We walked over corpses. There was the smell of fire, a

distinct smell mixed with the corpses and the humidity. It was raining. It smelt like charcoaled flesh. The scene of Kilaniyya rendered us speechless. We said nothing. We could not talk. In the evening, we went back. (Interview with Bara' al-Sarraj, 20 November 2011)

The memory of place – the traces of the past in the old homes, in the alleyways, the cobbled stones – is where the past spills into the present and is lived. In a similar vein to Najla's relations with the city, Hamawi practices of memory present an aesthetic of place formed in recollections of living it, and in the meanings invested in it. In this work of remembering, memory is inscribed in the lived space and the damage it underwent which cuts deep into the lives of the living – the survivors who cannot speak about it, as articulated by Manhal al-Sarraj, Bara' al-Sarraj, Manar, Tareq, Rula and others. My Hamawi interviewees undertook journeys into the past that unfolded as spatialised practices of remembering. In these spatialised recollections, as when recalling walkabouts in the city, the subject's relationship with space develops as a counter-memory practice. In their narratives, they transmit their memory of space – space which has been radically altered or erased. Bara' al-Sarraj, for example, recalled his grandmother's description of al-Kilaniyya and its aristocratic homes that, when she was growing up, were not to be approached by the less well-off. In such stories, Hamawis remind themselves and others of the history of the obliterated spaces. As borne out by witness accounts and documentary reports, al-Kilaniyya was subjected to heavy shelling and many of its homes and streets were bulldozed. Recollections of al-Kilaniyya and of other quarters summon up the city before the events.<sup>10</sup>

Many of my interviewees spoke of the erasure of al-Kilaniyya and the construction of the hotel Afamia and other modern buildings in its place, and they poignantly noted the symbolism of erecting leisure places over a site in which victims of massacres were buried. The old sites and destruction are recalled to conjure up the ruins that are now covered by new buildings. Under Afamia, there lies the rubble of al-Kilaniyya and the bodies of the dead. In a commentary on the relationship that developed between the people of Hama and the spaces of destruction

<sup>10</sup> The 'holding onto' in remembering is a practice against loss. Hama, as place, its history, beauty, legends, sociability and ways of life, is disappearing. Nostalgia emerges as a mode of remembering. Against death and destruction, Hama lives in memory. In *'Ala Sadri*, Hama lives in the ghost of Najla's grandmother Hayat (the noun *hayat* means life and Hayat's apparition also stands for the ghost of life), who appears to Najla in dream-like visions and whom she summons in her imagination. Najla interrogates the temporal relation between past and present: 'How can the past be present if all the events are past once they happen, the past is past, the present is past, and the future is past. Why do the happenings of the story not pass and not end' (101).

and massacres, Manhal al-Sarraj emphasises how practices of recollection superimpose layers of meanings and connections on the space ensuring that the events are not buried in some recesses of memory but are brought to the fore. The coffee shops and restaurants built on the grounds of the destroyed quarter double as memorial sites and spaces of betrayal and abandonment of one's commitment for redress (interview with Manhal al-Sarraj, Stockholm, 3 and 4 December 2011; interviews with Hamawis in Damascus, April 2008; and in London, December 2011). The spaces of the present do not accomplish the regime's intended erasures. Instead, they are rendered memorialising spaces that are intimately tied to remembrances of the once-lived space and its subsequent ruination. The traces of the past are materialised in the places of erasure such as Afamia, the restaurants and coffee shops built on ground beneath which lay the rubble of al-Kilaniyya's razed homes and buildings.

The violence and destruction that befell Hama was not memorialised by the regime in the form of a physical, built memorial structure on or near the sites of the events. As such, there is not a permanent structure linking the regime narration to the actual sites where the events took place. Instead, the regime opted for a politics of erasure by effacing remnants of the historical sites and by implementing urban plans that departed radically from the previous design and style. Thus, Hamawis were denied the ability to reclaim their memories in public. Yet through their journeys of remembrance and their spatialised counter-memory practices, they memorialise the events in the sites of their occurrence, even though the sites have been physically transformed to effect a rupture. Counter-memory practices also connect the narratives of the past – of what was, before the events – with the sites of the events, excavating the layers of history and life that lay beneath the work of erasure.

*Subjects of Violence: Technologies of Memory in the Everyday*

Among the victims, there could be found one merchant who cheats, and one who is honest and who did not cheat. Perhaps he was the kind who preferred sons to daughters. Among the victims, there could be found one who is conservative and who frowns in his home, but is joyful and humorous outside the home, and one who is arrogant and one who is kind, one who is courageous and truthful and one who is a coward and a liar, sometimes. One who is loving and generous and who is at times resentful. Many were planning for the hajj next year, and many were falsifying their taxes and hoarding capital. Among the victims there is one who spent money to show off his hospitality and one who spent in the way of good ... It is said that many issued from good families and that many came from the rabble. Among them were those who did not pay their debts and those

awaiting their dues ... And, among them, there were teenagers who did not have the chance to be fathers, but their sin was great, their enthusiasm was their death, their death was because their parents taught them that hot blood is dignity and that chivalry is dignity and they acted as they were taught, and they were killed and buried ... They were all like other people who live on earth. How many? It was said 30,000 and it was said 40,000. Although the difference between the two numbers is wide, the word thousands is small if compared to the humiliation and oppression that was engraved in the memories of the people and city. (al-Sarraj 2012, 150)

Al-Sarraj's latest novel *'Asi al-Dam*, published after the 2011 Uprising, returns to the period of the Hama events. This time, however, the work of remembering takes the form of a social documentary akin to an ethnography of life before, during and after violence that is life-shattering. *'Asi al-Dam* is a social-memory-making exercise, a narrative as practice of social memory, of living with the past or managing it, as discussed by Elizabeth Jelin (2003). *'Asi al-Dam* does not fall easily into only one genre such as historical novel or social history. For instance, it has elements of realist documentary with reference to actual places, events and real-life figures. Events are named. They are 'the Events' – the Hama Events. However, as a narrative, it is ethnographic in its telling of the everyday life of ordinary people, depicting alley and neighbourhood life, and families' quotidian interactions and relations. Life in the everyday is brought out vividly as different subjects are observed and as they self-reflect on their surroundings and social relations. The trail begins with Fouad's family, comprising Fouad – a merchant in the traditional *suq* – his wife Su'ad – a devout woman – and their eight children: five daughters, Fida', Samar, Bushra, Ghada and Lina, and three sons, Ayman, Mukhlis and Rabi'. The family's life, a social microcosm, allows a view of markets, schools, underground movements, fashionable dissidence and youth aspirations in a conservative religious environment. In a sense, there is life in both its fullness and its fragility. The ordinariness of life is shattered in the spectacular violence visited upon the city and the people. It is ordinariness that characterises the moment the city and its people were struck on 2 February 1982.

The power of the narrative is precisely in telling the history of small things, the horror of violence as it touches these small things and, to use Veena Das' (2009) words, as it folds into the everyday and descends into the ordinary. Al-Sarraj tells of this descent, of how the violence becomes inscribed in the mundane as, for example, when the residents of Hama name a type of bread 'the bread of the events' (*khubz al-ahdath*), because it was the only bread available when the city was assaulted and was put under curfew. Families learned how to store it and keep it for

a long period. The events become a marker of time and space in relation to which individual and collective lives are emplotted (narration of life along a temporality defined by the events: life before and life after). Emblematic discursive frames and references marked everyday speech. For example, women who remained unmarried were described as having lost their possible suitors during the events (*'adalha rah fi al-ahdath*); family histories and kin relations were drawn around connections to members who perished in the events.

The socialisation and the domestication of memories took shape through everyday practices, in multiple ways of living them. In the recollections of an exiled Hamawi:

I did not witness the killing, slaughter and rape, though I am a witness to everything else. Who said that massacres are concluded with the end of killing, slaughter and rape? I witnessed Hama through my mother's daily prayer-bead supplication, 'O merciful One' ... as she spoke of my grandfather's love and kindness and of his death under torture ... I witnessed it in my grandmother's tears as she recalled her son who was killed in front of her eyes ... [I witnessed it] in my mother's avoidance of preparing rice *halwa* (sweet rice) so as not to remind my grandmother of her missing son for whom she had made the *halwa* on the day he departed. (Summayya 2012)

These recollections identify mundane activities as embodied practices of memory: viscerally felt and shared sorrow, prayer-bead supplication and abstaining from making a favoured sweet so as not to invite further sorrow.

In his work on violence in Northern Ireland, Allen Feldman (2003) notes the entanglement of violence with memory. Feldman observes that violence serves as a reminder of power's injunctions. It inscribes itself on the body and mind such that its object can forget neither the violence nor the lessons to be derived from it. The bodily markings and inscriptions of violence are formative of the subject, a form of disciplining and subjectivation. Feldman's informant spoke of beatings and the breaking of knees as practices intended to inscribe on the victims the lesson that should never be forgotten. The social memories of Hama similarly point to a pedagogy of violence. The practices of violence to which Hamawis were subjected belong to a pedagogy of rule wherein bodily inscriptions are used to teach lessons that would not be forgotten. In reflecting on the subjectivities formed through violence, it is important to take note of how bodily inscribed technologies of memories come to inhabit the everyday through mundane practices and affective dispositions as captured in the words of the Hamawi exile quoted above.

*'Asi al-Dam* illuminates for us, through characters such as Mukhlis and Ghada, how embodied memories of humiliation are the key to

understanding the subjectivities formed through practices of violence and debasement. In the case of Mukhlis, he is left shattered and unhinged after personal encounters with the security services. Mukhlis is broken by the pain of humiliation during interrogation. He maintains silence about his experience of torture and about his degradation when, alongside other survivors of the massacre, he is forced to participate in a rally in support of Hafez al-Asad. After he goes into exile, he remains unable to reconstitute himself, ends up in a refugee compound in England and suffers mental breakdown.

In *'Asi al-Dam*, the subjects are transformed and remade by the violence and by their memories and shared experiences of humiliation. For one of the family's younger daughters, Ghada, the transformation culminates in her suicide. She takes her own life after being solicited by the security services to act as an informant. She commits suicide in a sleepwalking fashion as an ending in a cinematic reel of subjugation. The personal defeat and the societal defeat merge: Ghada's failure as a grown-up woman to find ground on which to stand in her search for friends and intimacy, connects with her early childhood defeat in the face of an abusive and authoritarian primary school teacher. Her Ba'athist schooling leaves her alienated and yearning for inclusion. Her inability to find anchor in her social surrounding is tied to her exposure to the workings of power at the micro level and the sense of abjectness that the encounters with regime agents elicit in her. Ghada's emotionality and silent volatility are not an instance of individual pathos intrinsic or unique to her. Rather, they are socially and politically induced by the manner in which violence permeates the mundane and quotidian and, at times, becomes inescapable. Thus, the absence of escape routes in Ghada's lived reality leads her to a final act of evasion. When she is recruited by the security forces to write reports on her university colleagues, she escapes in a journey to death.

In Mukhlis and Ghada, we encounter subjects who hide inside themselves and, in the process, their life comes to a standstill, halting at the traumatic moments, which they can no longer overcome or transcend. It may therefore be argued that Ghada's and Mukhlis' fate should be understood as symptomatic of severe trauma that was not treated and hence not overcome. However, for others who survived the afterlife of violence and seemingly cope with it, feelings of fear and humiliation are structuring their lives. These feelings orient a pact of silence among the city residents, within families, between neighbours and friends. This silence deepens the sense of isolation and marginality. One of my Hamawi interviewees stated that there was no trust in speech, and words and talk could not be trusted anymore: 'You do not talk so that the words

would not come out. No one wanted to speak.' At the same time, there is a 'feeling of humiliation and of being broken, having to accept the power of the security services, to accept that this is fate (*iqrar bi ana hadha huwa al-qadar*)' (interview with a Hamawi in exile, December 2011). This forced resignation to the injustice suffered is experienced as humiliation and, indeed, the performance of this resignation entrenches this feeling. An aspect of this performance entails complicity with the official account of the violence in order to receive material reparation for the destroyed homes. The required display of loyalty through demonstrations and rallies in support of the president deepens the alienation and dissonance between the humiliated subject's public enactments and her silenced self.

Many Hamawis are inhabited by the memory of the beatings, humiliation and torture during detention and interrogation. Humiliation and abjection were aversive emotive terms used by Hamawis to describe how the experiences of violence shaped them. For the contemporaries of the massacres, the violence was a violation of all that is humanly sacred. The idea that the city was rendered an open space of violation (*istibahat al-madinat*) was most often articulated in reflections on the events and was closely linked with a sense of humiliation and abjection felt widely beyond Hama. Impunity for perpetrators during the assault and its aftermath had a profound impact on ordinary citizens throughout the country.

Humiliation and exposure to regime violence, as constitutive of selfhood and social memory, extend beyond Hama. The memory of the violence of the events has, in some sense, become a constitutive element of Syrian subjectivities in vague recollections and in the social imaginary writ large (as in statements such as 'they will do Hama again'). Indeed, during the Uprising, there was a strong feeling that Hama had been nationalised. Homs became Hama, as did Dar'a. Hama became the prototype event. Additionally, while in 1982 Hama experienced the most brutal massacres, other cities and towns were also subject to tremendous violence including massacres of smaller scale, but having deep and long-lasting impact.

At the beginning of the 2011 Uprising, when the city of Dar'a was under siege and the news filtered through of the unspeakable punishment meted out against the protesters, one of my interlocutors, originally from al-Suwayda, recalled an earlier incident of violence in her city. With much sorrow, she recounted a clampdown on a protest in al-Suwayda in 2000 in which twenty people were killed. She underlined how the incident was blotted out from public memory and only a few individuals outside al-Suwayda knew it took place. In her words, such experiences left 'pockets of open wounds' (*bu'ar jarh*) throughout the country. These



wounds, caused by the acts of violence, remain open after the acts as illustrated in the comments made about al-Suwayda and as the narratives of Hama attest. If, in the making of social memory, “‘history” is a register of concurrent claims’ (McDougall 2010, 47), we need to pay attention to the differentiated grounds on which the practices of remembering take place (as noted at the beginning of the chapter). The recollections of those implicated in the violence or closely associated with the agents of violence, unfold in different modalities than the ones expressed by those engaged in remembering to recover a life by combating silence and mutedness.

### **Multiple Syrian Pasts in the Work of Memory**

More than competing claims to legitimacy and truth, social memory opens a horizon of remembrances and recollections in which claims to recognition of different pasts and their interconnections are raised. I illustrate this point by discussing, briefly, the works of memory that narrate other pasts and their events of violence and that also, somehow, attempt to bind together their fragile threads. Other pasts of violence are recalled in narratives of the historical persecution of the Alawi community and of the massacres that are a constitutive element of the Alawi community’s social imaginary. Works of recollection, such as Samar Yazbek’s novel *In Her Mirrors (Laha Marayya)*, show other pasts existing in tension with the present, competing with it, and defying chronological time. Against the backdrop of a love affair between a high-ranking officer and an actress, both Alawi from the Sahel region, Yazbek’s narrative underscores how the past lives in the present. Leila, the actress, believes in the transmigration of souls and recounts stories of previous lives that she lived. One of her earlier lives was during the rule of the Ottoman Sultan, Selim, when a massacre against her community in Aleppo was committed. Leila’s past selves seek a hearing and a presence. *In Her Mirrors* opens the gates of other histories. The multiple lives of Leila convey the synchronicity of historical times – parallel times running together and defying chronological time.

Yazbek’s narration does not offer a history of Alawi persecution as a way of explaining or justifying the abuse of power by Alawi officers in government. The recollections, in some sense, open a dialogue between differing and competing social imaginaries and communities of memories within a national political community. In this respect, Yazbek’s project is not one of competing victimhood unlike other writings on Alawi identity. For instance, Ubay Hassan’s 2009 book offering meditations on his identity can be said to fall within the parameters of victim out-bidding. Yet his work is nonetheless instructive of the lines of contest in

the history-memory dyad. Hassan (2009, 7) treats the persecution of a group or an individual on the basis of religious or ethnic affiliation as a constitutive element of identity. Critical of what he considers as imposed silence about the history of Alawi persecution prior to the Ba'athist take-over in 1963, he stresses the impact of discrimination on the epistemic and psychological constitution of the group and on its identity formation (Hassan 2009, 71). He bemoans Sunni recollections of the Hama massacres and the events of violence while the history of Alawi persecution remains unrecalled (Hassan 2009, 78). For Hassan, Alawi consciousness and imaginary retain discriminatory pronouncements and practices of previous ages, from the *fatwas* of Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century, to massacres committed under Ottoman rule beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to forced conversion to Sunni Islam in the nineteenth century. Hassan's recall of the history of persecution is, in part, undertaken as an outbidding of claims of suffering made in reference to the Hama massacre. He reviews a number of massacres of Alawis before asking why other groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, commemorate their massacres, but the Alawis do not commemorate theirs (Hassan 2009, 87). Hassan then advances the view that this may be the case because the Alawi community has transcended its wounds and that effecting a detachment from the history of violence is required of other groups (Hassan 2009, 87). Yet Hassan sets the violence suffered by the Alawis in the past as an element of community identity that necessitates recognition by others.

Hassan's claims for recognition arise against contestations of Alawi social and historical memory of persecution. Such contestations are undertaken by some Syrians in their denouncement of practices of violence by the regime. A denial of Alawi memories is carried out in the process of delegitimising the regime. The mere mention of or referral to the Alawi experience of discrimination is construed as an attempt to excuse regime violence, as if admitting earlier historical injustice that befell the Alawi community would amount to accepting and justifying the atrocities committed by the regime. This problematic and, ultimately, hurtful judgement or verdict can be discerned in the reaction to writings that deny Alawi persecution. For example, Syrian writer Ibrahim al-Jabin's article entitled *The Myth of the Alawi Holocaust* (2011), refuting claims of Alawi massacres committed under Ottoman rule, was read by a number of my interlocutors as a mocking and belittling of Alawi selfhood.

In the making of community, multiple pasts compete for telling, for recognition and for understanding. In interviews on the memories of Hama, the narratives inevitably were about entangled histories and unsettled accounts of the past. One of the recurrent themes in the

recollections of the Hama events by Hamawis referred to an existing Alawi vendetta against Hama (the city). One of my interviewees from Hama referred to Alawi persecution in various historical periods. He related an eighteenth-century historical episode of Alawi rebellion against the Barazi family landlords who responded by beheading Alawi men (interview with Ghayath, Beirut, 2012). The more recent history of relations between Alawis and Sunnis in Hama was often woven into the recollections. Tareq recalled his grandmother saying that the rural Alawis living in destitute conditions will take revenge on Sunnis in Hama. Yet he questioned any claim to a special history of persecution by the Alawis in reference to the oppression that they suffered at the hands of large landowning Hamawi families. He said that his mother still remembered that most Sunni families did not dare to walk by the homes of the rich families. In other words, they too – Sunni-Hamawis – were subject to oppression. Similarly, in her accounts, Manhal al-Sarraj notes Hamawis' antipathy to the outsiders (*al-barawiyya*). She observes that Hamawis were known to say that during the day Hama was unbearable because it was full of outsiders. 'Outsiders' refers, here, to Alawi villagers who originally came to the city to sell produce and, later, came to work as government employees. Stories of separation and prejudice lay below the tensions and fears. A common anecdote is that of Alawis coming to the city and being mocked for their peasant attire and their dialect. Although the history and memories of Alawi persecution are contested, their experience of social and economic subordination is not denied.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

What do these struggles in social memory, in general, and the memories of violence, in particular, tell us about the structuring of Syrian politics and the fault lines of conflict and negotiation? In his study of communal violence in India at the time of partition, Gyanendra Pandey (2001) concludes that memories of violence enter into the making of community. In the same vein, memories of Hama are constitutive of a community of subjects of humiliation, whose lives were stifled or, in the words of Manhal al-Sarraj, 'became still' (interview, Stockholm, 4 December 2011). The memories, muted as they have been, feed into sentiments of grievance and a deep-rooted sense of discrimination – a sense that a historical wrong remains unrecognised and that no atonement or reparation has been attempted.

<sup>11</sup> See Worren (2007) for an account of how narratives of Alawi history enter into the construction of contemporary Alawi identity.

The memories of the violence of Hama and the history/memory of Alawi persecution are not only memories in this drama of present pasts, living pasts, which are not lived with or 'inhabited comfortably', in McDougall's (2010) terms. I suggest that the tensions of memory practices and memory construction bring into question ideas of the nation and of belonging that were thought to have been settled with the establishment of the nation-state and the drawing of national territorial boundaries. During the Uprising, however, the question of the nation came acutely to the fore again. This is poignantly manifest when, in the face of the current violence, Manhal al-Sarraj asks: 'How is it that some sons of the nation do this to other sons of the nation?' This issue has pre-occupied Syrians prior to the Uprising, and since.