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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Martyrs, Dreams, and Past Lives: Insurgent Immortality and the Expansive Logic of Debt

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Abstract

Stories of fallen Kurdish revolutionaries who return to the living in dreams, and of Druze souls who circulate across securitized borders gesture at forms of vitality and animation that persist beyond biological death. In this article, we have put forward the concept of "insurgent immortality" to make sense of the political potency of revolutionary martyrs and past lives among Kurdish communities from Turkey and Syrian Druze communities in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. By insisting on the immortality of their dead, we argue, these stateless communities articulate a claim to counter-sovereignty. What makes these communities' practices aimed at mastering and transcending death different from the sovereignty claimed by nation-states is that apparitions of dead martyrs and past lives work as expansive, boundary-crossing mechanisms, rather than the territorializing logics of enclosure and containment that mark state sovereignty. The immortality we describe in this article is insurgent because it relies on the recognition and cultivation of long-term exchange relations between the living and the dead, through which debt becomes a modality of generative expansion across both this and otherworldly times and spaces. The resulting sense of generalized indebtedness opens up spaces of liminality in which the dead come alive as both inspiring and unsettling figures. We develop insurgent immortality as a comparative concept that emerges from the specific ethnography of each case yet reaches across their contextual boundedness. In this way, we hope to inspire renewed conversation about shared trajectories of resistance, including its ambivalences, that arise in contexts of statelessness, occupation, and disenfranchisement.

Keywords: martyrdom; reincarnation; immortality; exchange; debt; death; Kurds; Druze; Golan; Syria; Turkey; statelessness

Mirî ranazin | موتى لا ينامون | The dead don't sleep

———Helîm Yûsiv, 1996

Introduction

When Zerya, a university student of political science, was released from prison—where she had been held after participating in a series of student protests—she

arrived at her home in eastern Turkey only to learn that her beloved older brother, a Kurdish militant, had fallen. Zerya, however, did not cry. Thinking she might be in shock, her older sister slapped her in the face. But her brother's death had not taken Zerya by surprise. As it turns out, she had dreamed of him while still in prison—a dream she had understood as announcing his death. While neither Zerya nor her sister possessed much in the way of spiritual affinities, they did not think of this story of oneiric revelation as particularly odd. After all, nightly visits of the dead were a common occurrence.

In the village of Majdal Shams, in the occupied Syrian Golan, Rawad recalled his previous life as a Lebanese Druze soldier felled by enemy fire in an ambush in south Lebanon—a life he had begun to recall when he was only three. In 2000, shortly before Israel ended its occupation of southern Lebanon, Rawad was able to travel and find his family from the previous generation, and now they keep in touch through a WhatsApp group. But Rawad was uneasy with this past life. Others in his family made sense of his close connection with Lebanon by insisting that Druze souls do not die but rather continuously reincarnate into new Druze bodies, "like one changes shirts"—even across the borders of nation states that otherwise separate Druze communities. Rawad, though, is a self-described atheist and therefore tried to find what he called a "rational" explanation: "I guess, I've always wanted to go to Lebanon…."

Stories of fallen Kurdish revolutionaries who return to the living in dreams, and of Druze past lives that emerge across securitized borders gesture at forms of vitality that persist beyond biological death. The dead, such stories suggest, stubbornly make their way into everyday lives, where they foster socialities that upset linear historical imaginaries and transcend this-worldly immanence. In both Kurdish and Jawlani communities, such interferences are at times welcomed and celebrated, and at other times encountered with consternation or disquiet. But how do the dead survive? And how can they become a force animating the social relations of stateless communities? Taking up these questions, in this paper we propose thinking through what we call "insurgent immortality" among Kurdish communities in Turkey and the European diaspora, and Syrian stateless Druze communities who live under Israeli occupation in the Golan Heights (hereafter referred to as Jawlani, from the Arabic *Jawlan* for Golan). Through a comparative ethnography of the revenants of revolutionary martyrs and past lives, we seek to theorize the political potency of narratives, experiences, and practices that assert that ostensibly dead figures like Zerya's brother or the Lebanese Druze soldier may in fact persist beyond their biological passing—or that they are, in other words, immortal.

The immortality that comes to the fore in these stories, we will show, is a way in which stateless communities articulate a claim to counter-sovereignty, insofar as sovereignty may be understood as the power to decide over life and death. Like other forms of resistance against contemporary biopolitical regimes—including hunger strikes and suicide bombings (Asad 2007; Bargu 2016b; Murray 2006)—insurgent immortality seeks to wrest control over the boundaries between life and death from the modern state, whose rule relies precisely on establishing, policing, and maintaining these boundaries (Foucault 2003; Neocleous 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). What makes these communities' practices aimed at mastering and transcending death different from the sovereignty claimed by nation-states is that apparitions of dead martyrs and past lives work as expansive, boundary-crossing mechanisms (Bernstein 2013), rather than through the territorializing logics of

enclosure and containment that mark state sovereignty (Bowman 2015; Daher-Nashif 2021). This is why we call the immortality at stake here insurgent.

In bringing together ethnographic material from two separate field sites we draw on anthropology's strength to foster conceptual innovation by way of comparison. Both Kurdish and Jawlani communities must contend with forms of statelessness and occupation that are rooted in a shared post-Ottoman history of minoritization and disenfranchisement. Both communities were victims of the Middle East's early twentieth-century transformation from an imperial tapestry of semi-autonomous political entities into a strictly divided landscape of ethno-religiously defined nation-states. This turned the Kurds into what is often described as the world's largest nation without a state, as the Kurdish heartlands came to be divided across the newly formed nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Cast as backward and primitive, Kurdish communities have subsequently seen their existence denied, their language suppressed, and their culture assimilated (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008). In Syria, thousands of Kurds were rendered literally stateless when the Ba'ath regime stripped them of their citizenship during an Arabization campaign in 1962. And yet, Kurds have always maintained cross-border relations, trafficking goods, people, and ideas across securitized borders (Bozçalı 2024). Living under Israeli occupation since 1967, most Jawlanis, too, are stateless. Druze communities in the Syrian Golan Heights have resisted Israeli attempts to reduce them to their religious identity and assimilate them into the Israeli state. Most have refused to take on Israeli citizenship and maintain a strong Syrian identity (Fakher Eldin 2019). Like Kurds, Druze communities in the contemporary Middle East live within and across different nation-states, including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. Yet they have wandering immortal souls that, unbound from papers, stamps, and checkpoints, defy the imperatives of territorial nation-states when they become reincarnated across borders, even if some, like Rawad, in his previous life as a Lebanese soldier, have died in the process of defending national state borders.

While we highlight how experiences of statelessness and occupation are common to both Kurdish and Jawlani communities, we do not deny that important differences exist, and that each case is unique in its complexity. For one thing, numerically speaking, Kurds make up a much larger population—anywhere between thirty and forty-five million—while the Jawlani community encompasses not more than twenty-six thousand people, and there are an estimated one to four million Druze worldwide (Fartacek 2021: 9). It is also important to note that Kurdish resistance has been much more organized and formalized via party structures engaged in armed struggle, particularly the Kurdish liberation movement active in Turkey and Syria, which we focus on in this article. Jawlani resistance, by contrast, has no transnational aim. It refers *only* to the resistance to Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights with the aim of achieving reunification with Syria. Embodying the region's long-standing history of difference and co-existence (Makdisi 2019), Druze communities have been able to adroitly navigate both national and religious identities, meaning that they feel at ease belonging to the nation-states they live in while also being part of a larger, transnational faith.

Both Kurdish and Jawlani communities make sense of the losses they have suffered as a result of challenging the states ruling over them by evoking ideas about sacrifice and martyrdom that draw as much on Islamic genealogies

widespread in the region as on traditions of anti-colonial and socialist organizing. Particularly influential in both communities has been the Palestinian resistance movement and the ideas about political martyrdom and popular sovereignty it has fostered (Abufarha 2009; Bishara 2017; Kelly 2006). When we embark on a comparative analysis of how the dead survive and return in both Kurdish and Jawlani communities, then, we do so also to highlight these shared genealogies of anti-colonial resistance. This appears all the more pertinent at a moment when imperial powers in the region have been intent on pitting so-called minorities against each other. By proposing "insurgent immortality" as a comparative concept that emerges from the specific ethnography of each case yet reaches across their contextual boundedness, we hope to inspire renewed conversation about the shared trajectories of resistance, including its ambivalences, that arise in contexts of statelessness, occupation, and disenfranchisement.

Our aim in this paper is to outline ethnographic forms through which insurgent immortality becomes articulated across our two case studies and propose an anthropological theory for how people routinely subjected to necropolitical violence mobilize their dead in the interest of collective survival and social reproduction. We draw on ethnographic material that Marlene collected during fieldwork with Kurdish communities living in Turkey and Western Europe (chiefly Germany, Belgium, and the UK), and which Maria gathered while working with stateless Syrians living in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights and in the European diaspora, and with Druze communities inside Syria and Northern Israel. The material presented here was collected over periods of fieldwork that occurred roughly between 2008 and 2023, including both extended field stays and shorter visits. Both of us draw on long-term engagement with our interlocutors who have become friends, allies, and chosen kin.[1]

From Haunting to Immortality

In their classic work on death and the regeneration of life, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry note that eternal life becomes cross-culturally articulated as a masculinist fantasy of self-contained permanence seeking to do away with otherwise life-sustaining forms of exchange (including the exchange of women) (1982: 27–33). Silicon Valley tech-entrepreneurs who seek to ensure their long-term survival by investing in the deep-freezing of their bodies (Farman 2020) and Russian oligarchs who pursue similar ventures in cryonics (Bernstein 2019) seem to confirm that immortality is primarily a terrain for the rich, the powerful, and all too often the male. But immortality need not be the exclusive reserve of the privileged, nor is it necessarily based on a denial of the relations of obligation and exchange that are essential to reproducing community. Quite to the contrary. In what follows, we put forward a rethinking of immortality from the vantage point of revolutionary, working-class, and stateless people in the contemporary Middle East, who are routinely faced with the violence of occupation, dispossession, and enclosure. We

[1] As our interlocutors are faced with war, displacement, and acute threats of political violence, we treat the ethnographic material we have gathered over the years with utmost care. To reduce risks and vulnerabilities we have anonymized most of the interlocutors mentioned in this article.

explore how immortality can thrive in these contexts of war, displacement, and loss, and how it relies on relations of debt and exchange to secure long-term survival and social reproduction. Immortality is not necessarily hubris; it can also be a form of resistance that draws on the ambiguous powers of regeneration inherent in human mortality.

Anthropologists have long recognized the regenerative potential of death. Across cultures, they have found mortuary rituals to emphasize renewal, rebirth, and fecundity, ensuring that communities may overcome the social crisis that the death of a person constitutes (Bloch and Parry 1982; Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Postmortem rituals achieve this by reordering the relations of exchange and obligation that constitute a social person and in this way allow the deceased to transition from a living member of the community into an ancestor, elder, or spirit (Kaufman and Morgan 2005: 319). Death is therefore both a biological process of bodily decay and a deeply social process of status change. Yet these two processes do not always coincide. Think of social death, where someone is treated as if dead even while biologically alive (Patterson 1982), or of how lifeless bodies can evoke the lingering presence of the deceased person (Lock 2002).

The gap between socially and biologically understood endings marks death as an uncertain and often contested process characterized by ritual liminality (Seremetakis 1991; Turner 2017[1969]; Van Gennep 1960). But precisely that gap also allows for the postmortem survival of certain aspects of the deceased, making possible forms of social—sometimes also called symbolic (Lifton 1983)—immortality. In relation to such survival or persistence, anthropologists have been particularly interested in revenants of the dead that haunt the living. In cases of untimely, violent, or otherwise "bad death," when funerary rituals fail or are aborted, the dead can turn into unnerving ghosts rather than benevolent ancestors. Following Avery Gordon (2008), scholars have analyzed such haunting figures as expressions of alternative historical consciousness that forcefully remind the living of repressed pasts and ongoing injustice. In South Africa, for instance, apparitions of ghosts constitute "traces of past injustices and violence" (Niehaus 2023), while in both Vietnam and China, restless ancestral spirits speak of the wounds inflicted by violent warfare and brutal deprivation (Kwon 2008; Mueggler 2001). In this way, the dead come to act as debt collectors of past injustices. Ewe communities at the West African coast, for instance, fear they will be struck by illness and even death if they do not honor enslaved ancestors in elaborate ceremonies (Vannier and Montgomery 2016), while in Delhi, jinns challenge the post-Partition erasure of Muslim lives from India's urban landscape (Taneja 2013).

That social existence does not just end with the biological death of a person resonates across geographies in the Middle East, where death is widely understood as a transition phase between this life and an afterlife. Islamic eschatologies, in particular, have elaborated human mortality—associated with fear, pain, and suffering—as a subject of theological debate and a site of ethical self-making (Hirschkind 2008). Across the region, mortality is characterized by an intense outpouring of emotion, often intentionally cultivated, ranging from collective lamentations at a more intimate, communal level to the vast, publicly orchestrated commemorations of the Battle of Karbala by Shi'a and adjacent communities (Marei 2020; Tambar 2011). Whether the focus is on passive suffering or active struggle, martyrdom has served as a powerful notion to impart meaning onto violent death by turning mortality into a site of spiritual transcendence and political redemption

(Açıksöz 2020). As such, it has powerfully reverberated across sites as diverse as post-revolutionary Iran (Talebi 2013), Palestine (Khalili 2007; Segal 2016), and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (Edwards 2017), animating both nation-states and resistance movements.

While dead heroes, martyrs, and saints populate the everyday life of various ethno-religious communities across the Middle East, the region is not a terrain of elaborate ancestor worship. Respected as elders and pursued as inspirational models, the dead exert force more through their perpetuation of spiritual, political, and kin legacies than through mystical powers (Kopytoff 1971). Haunting, therefore, may not be the most apt framework to make sense of how the dead we write about here persist as social agents in the present. The anthropological interest in haunting has been immensely helpful to theorize how the dead may acquire agency and conjure politics (Klima 2002; Moffat 2019; Yonucu 2023). As part of a broader interest in the reverberations of painful histories and more-than-human forces (Navaro *et al.* 2021), anthropology's "hauntology" (Derrida 1994) has allowed questioning linear temporalities and anthropocentric biases. Conceiving of the dead's continued presence through a framework of haunting, however, risks casting that presence as frightening, unwanted, or accidental. This runs not only counter to our ethnographic material but can also be conceptually limiting. To highlight how the dead may not only constitute the unruly excess of violence and injustice but might be actively nourished to sustain the labor of socially reproducing communities and even figure as agents of revolutionary change (Lan 1987), we therefore turn to the notion of insurgent immortality.

Insurgent immortality, as we theorize it here, relies on recognizing (sometimes reluctantly) and cultivating relations of debt and exchange between the living and the dead. It involves forms of temporal manipulation to delay the reciprocity of vital gifts and keep debts open, appealing to the logics of long-term transactional orders rather than immediate cycles of return (Parry and Bloch 1986: 25–27). As anthropologists know all too well, the deferral of a return gift creates continued social bonds and expansive relational networks across both space and time (Mauss 1954; Munn 1992). The stateless communities we write about harness this fundamental principle of sociality to mobilize debt as a "strategic stance" (Roitman 2003: 212) through which to keep alive their dead. The temporal interval that debt introduces into relations of exchange allows extending the liminality characterizing the postmortem existence of the dead, widening the gap between biological death and social demise that is key for the making and maintenance of social immortality. This renders the dead not only potent but also ambiguous agents in the lives of the living, soliciting sentiments of appreciation, longing, and esteem as much as disquiet and bewilderment.

Insurgency allows us to underline how immortal figures—precisely on account of their liminal status—easily escape ritual and ideological control (Armbrust 2019; Delaplace 2024). Rather than seeing insurgency as an act of armed rebellion in the more conventional sense, we mobilize the term to highlight the vital powers that inhere in liminal spaces, where boundaries between life and death, this world and the next, are reshaped. Following James Holston (2009: 246), we understand the insurgent as a creative force that disrupts established forms of rule and privilege thanks to the vitalities that it maintains and produces. Yet not all immortals are insurgent. Colonial and nation states, including both Turkey and Israel, cultivate their own immortal martyrs for the sake of territorial containment,

and in stateless communities, too, honoring returning souls or heroic leaders can shore up rather than unsettle hierarchies of gender, age, and ethnicity. Insurgency, then, is a potential that requires nourishing and cultivation but can also be contained and upended.

In fact, as we will show, both Turkey and Israel have sought to contain the insurgent potential of immortality by drawing in their turn on debt relations. Rather than mobilizing debt as a principle of open-ended relationality, these states revert it into a logic of close-circuit repayment that seeks to subdue the insurgent subjects of Kurdish and Jawlani communities through forced ties of moral, emotional, and economic indebtedness. Rather than being a means of expanding social relations, debt is here employed in the interest of containing future possibility (Neocleous 2021: 71; see also Graeber 2014) through logics of both temporal and spatial enclosure that range from fences and walls to economic strangulation and enforced allegiance (Bowman 2015; Peteet 2017).

In this paper we will elucidate the social relations of debt and exchange that allow for the dead to become insurgent immortals. By theorizing immortality through the lens of long-standing anthropological concerns about delayed reciprocity and attendant transactional orders, we hope to offer a conceptual framework that will be useful for understanding how communities "raise their dead" (Holland 2000) beyond the context of the post-Ottoman Middle East alone. We do so at a moment when war, displacement, and dispossession have once more engulfed the regions where we have done long-term fieldwork, shedding renewed light on the question of how death may not only be inflicted but also defied.

Death and Its Overcoming in Kurdistan and the Golan Heights

Experiences of state violence, colonial rule, and marginalization within existing nation-state orders mark the history and presence of both Kurdish and Jawlani communities. To understand how insurgent immortality takes shape under these conditions, in this section we outline how death acquires meaning in our fieldsites, and what cultural and political resources are mobilized in order to transcend it.

In Turkey, forty years of armed guerrilla struggle under the leadership of the socialist Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) has turned Kurdish death into a site of intense conflict. Founded by a group of Marxist university students in 1978, the PKK initially sought the decolonization of Kurdistan via the establishment of an independent Kurdish nation-state (Gunes 2013). But even before the group took up arms against the Turkish state, it already mourned its first martyrs in Lebanon, where Kurdish militants fought alongside Palestinian forces—from whom they also received military training—against Israel's 1982 invasion of the country (Petti 2023). It is in this context, some say, that the Kurdish movement first learned how to harness generative force from deadly losses by commemorating their fallen as immortal martyrs (Akkaya 2015: 61). That the martyrs are immortal (*şehîd namirin*) is a key slogan of the party to this day.

Following the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, the party underwent a process of ideological change, which has seen it reject the state idea and instead embrace a feminist-ecological form of socialism that aspires to self-governance through a bottom-up council democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012; Dirik 2022). This is a vision of radical social transformation that followers of the

Kurdish movement describe as revolutionary, and which continues to demand sacrifices. Thousands have already fallen in defense of what is known as the "Rojava revolution" in northern Syria,[2] where the movement has for the first time been able to implement its social vision on a large scale. It is here that we find immense cemeteries for martyrs, as well as statues commemorating their deeds and buildings named in their honor—all of which have been targeted by Turkish (or Turkey-backed) military forces.

In Turkey itself, the movement's vision of a radically remade Kurdish society remains under severe assault by the state's military and legal apparatus. Mourning for the tens of thousands of Kurdish guerrillas and civilians who have lost their lives over the last forty years is thoroughly politicized (Bargu 2016a; Ozsoy 2010).[3] Turkish security forces have repeatedly disappeared, mutilated, and publicly displayed the bodies of Kurdish guerrilla fighters, or buried them in unidentified mass graves. Funerary ceremonies for fallen fighters are often prohibited or occur under massive military surveillance, and some have been attacked. The Turkish military has bombed guerrilla cemeteries, and the human remains they contain have been found buried in plastic boxes under suburban pavements (Aydın 2018).

The fierce struggle carried out over the dead bodies of Kurdish militants belies the generative force that death harbors in this context. As Hisyar Ozsoy (2010) has argued, the state's targeting of funerary ritual and mourning practices seeks to prevent Kurdish fighters from turning into potent martyr figures by killing not only their biological lives but also their political afterlives. As it intervenes in the process of social transition following biological demise, this necropolitical violence targets precisely those mortuary practices which anthropologists have identified as key elements for the reproduction of social communities (Bargu 2016a; Üstündağ 2015; Zengin 2019: 83). Yet the generative force of the dead has proven hard to eradicate. Fallen guerrilla fighters are—alongside civilian victims of state violence—widely venerated as martyrs (*şehîd*) who have sacrificed their lives for the Kurdish freedom struggle. Through this designation, death is read as sacrifice and thus becomes, as in the Palestinian context, a "life-generating act of agency" (Khalili 2007: 20). Militants and civilians alike have come to see individual death as a mode of collective transcendence, turning loss into a redemptive promise for future liberation (Düzel 2018). While this generative idea of martyrdom owes much to Islamic ideas about dying—and surviving—in the name of faith, in Kurdish contexts martyrdom is imbued more with the magic of this-worldly revolution than with hopes for other-worldly eternity.

As a generative force, martyrdom has reproductive effects. At funerals, the incorporation of ritual elements typical for weddings, including folk dances and ululations, the application of henna on the deceased's hands, or the placing of bridal veils on female martyrs' coffins, dramatize procreative potentialities (Ozsoy 2010: 52–57). Rhetorical and visual registers of organic growth and embodied substance,

[2]The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which include Kurdish, Arabic, and internationalist units, have lost nearly fifteen thousand fighters since 2011. Casualty numbers can be found on the website of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights: https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/ (last accessed 29 Jan. 2025).

[3]Over twenty thousand PKK guerrillas are said to have fallen until 2013 alone (Tezcür, 2016). The International Crisis Group estimates that at least 4,639 PKK militants were killed in clashes with the Turkish military between 2016 and 2023: https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer (last accessed 29 Jan. 2025).

depicting martyrs as seeds, saplings, or flowers, whose blood imbues Kurdish soil with life, similarly emphasize the vital powers inherent in sacrificial death. At the central martyrs' cemetery in Qamishlo, Rojava's capital, jars filled with dried lentils, chickpeas, and rice grains that are placed on the rims of the marble graves of fallen militants give tangible form to these metaphors of vitality.

What is at stake in the celebration of martyrdom is no less than the making of a new ancestry for an embattled body politic. Traditionally, in Kurdish contexts the making of ancestors has been a question of "memory making through male descent lines" (King and Stone 2010: 328), allowing charismatic lineage elders to live on as their deeds are recounted in sung poetry and their names passed on by their descendants. Martyrdom rehearses these reproductive capacities of memory, yet challenges their patrilineal ethos, as it commemorates the young, the female (around 15 percent of Kurdish guerrilla forces are women, see Tezcür 2016: 251), and an increasing number of so-called internationalists (who have flocked to Kurdistan to support the movement's revolutionary vision) as inspirational heroes and moral exemplars. As a result, in many a Kurdish living room reverential displays of grandfathers, religious leaders, and political icons have been replaced or supplemented by photographs depicting women and men in the prime of their youth (Schäfers 2023). And where Kurdish youth in the past would have proudly enumerated the names of their male lineage elders, nowadays many are equally adept at telling the exploits of courageous guerrilla fighters. The resulting martyrial lineages challenge existing hierarchies of gender, age, and bloodline, and map out a body politic animated by a set of new, "revolutionary" social relations.

That death can be productive not only of afterlife but of kinship is a notion that resonates with residents of the occupied Golan. The residents of the five villages in the mountain hills of the Golan predominantly belong to the Druze religion, yet they are stateless. Citizens of no country, they possess Laissez-Passer documents that classify their nationality as "undefined."[4] The largest of these villages is Majdal Shams, which tourist shops, alpine Airbnb's, and a recently built ski resort have transformed into a bustling town. But monuments to anti-colonial heroes placed on public squares, as well as images of martyrs, prisoners, and separated family members in private homes bear witness to the spirit of anti-colonial resistance that permeates this geography. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel ethnically cleansed the Golan's diverse population, displacing 95 percent of its Muslim and Christian inhabitants (Brik 2022; Firro 1999; Gordon and Ram 2016). Violent displacement in the region is not new. Following the 1925 Syrian rebellion led by Druze national hero Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash, Majdal Shams was burned down by the French Mandate army. Many Jawlanis offer the memory of that rebellion, along with the aftermath of the Palestinian Nakba, and the long-standing connection to their land as tree-cultivators, herders, and farmers as an explanation for their decision to stay "rooted" when the Israeli army arrived (Kastrinou, Fakher El-Deen, and Emery 2020). In 1981, when Israel illegally annexed the Golan Heights, Jawlanis mounted a significant resistance through a massive six-month strike, marking a watershed moment in local history and consolidating a "subaltern consciousness" (Tarabieh and Fakher Eldin 2022: 93), which led to the establishment of new cooperative

[4]The stateless Jawlanis have the same status as the 1967 occupied Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank: occupied, they are residents, but not citizens, of Israel, and they do not serve in the Israeli military.

organizations and solidarity alliances with the Palestinian liberation movement (Fakher Eldin 2019).

The securitized border separating Druze communities in the Golan from those in Syria looms large in everyday life as a site of both separation and connection. Kinship relations and marriage across the separation fence are still possible if brokered by the Red Crescent, but those who choose to cross—locally epitomized in the figure of the so-called "Syrian bride"—are unable to ever return, and sacrifice immediate family connections for the regeneration of a broader kinship network. In both life and in death, the Druze are an endogamous community. In Druze theology, souls (*arwah* or *ruh*), much like brides, remain in constant circulation within the community. "We are brave because we are not afraid of death because of *taqammus*!" Maria was often told. Historically related to the Ismaili and Shi'a traditions, *taqammuṣ* refers to the cyclical process by which Druze souls continuously reincarnate in Druze bodies (see Khuri 2004; Kastrinou 2016: 60). In Druze communities, death is viewed as an endless circular transition from one life to the next, rather than a final ending leading to an other-worldly afterlife. The Druze in Upper Galilee say, "You die and a few moments later you are drinking your mother's warm milk" (Armanet 2021: 118). Since every death is always a rebirth—implying that, as Druze put it, "we are born into each other's houses" (Oppenheimer 1980)—the religious community functions as an expanded kinship network (Kastrinou and Layton 2016; also see Fartacek 2021: 10). With contemporary Druze communities living across different Middle Eastern nation-states, reincarnations enable the souls of the dead to circulate across highly securitized border regimes more easily than the living. The way in which souls circulate across borders and are reborn into new bodies is experienced by many (but not all) Jawlanis as intuitive and matter of fact, constituting a theological "common sense" that underwrites daily life (Ibraheem 2024).

Despite the constant return of the soul, individual deaths are intensely mourned, and loss is socially harnessed. Druze mortuary practice takes place in an elaborate week-long ritual known as *al-usbu'a* that transforms individual pain (viewed as dangerous) into social cohesion and solidarity (Kastrinou 2016: 75–85). Given that the bodies of the dead are "shirts" (*qamis*) that temporarily wrap around an immortal soul, their burial is not highly emphasized. Dead bodies are placed in one-room family graves (*madfan* or *kabr*) situated within the large community ossuary called *khoshkhasha* for approximately three years. Thereafter the bones are transferred to another room within the *khoshkhasha*, where they are collectively stored until, Maria was told, they "turn into soil and dust." As is the case in other Druze communities, the cemetery (*maqbara*) in Majdal Shams is not visited by the deceased's family, and only "special" people (*shahsia hassa*)—including community leaders and, more recently, those whom the community deems martyrs (*shaheed*)—are buried in the ground in individual graves.[5]

Martyrs' tombstones closely mirror the aesthetics of Palestinian and pan-Arab resistance to Israeli occupation, connecting the deaths of the Golan's "forgotten occupation" to larger, more publicized struggles. Salman, a Jawlani revolutionary and political prisoner, emphasized the political use of the term *shaheed* when he guided Maria through the cemetery of Majdal Shams, also known as *bayt al-tal*, or the house

[5]Druze mortuary practice is geographically varied. For Israel, see Armanet (2021: 118); for Lebanon and Syria, see Samaha (2021).

of the hill. The martyrs, he said, "died for the principle of resistance (*muqawama*), not for virgins in paradise," indicating the complex relation between political resistance in the Golan, Islamic eschatology, and the Palestinian liberation movement (Allen 2006; Khalili 2007).[6] Among Jawlanis, Salman explained, the term martyr is bestowed on those killed as a direct result of Israeli state violence, those who have sacrificed their life for the cause of resistance by spending time in Israeli prisons, and those who have died due to or during their imprisonment. Beyond political resistance, civilian victims of violent deaths, including victims of land mines planted along the border zones with Syria, are also considered martyrs.

Both in the Golan and in Kurdistan, death and its transcendence are key for the reproduction of community. In both communities, a shared repertoire of martyrdom proclaims certain, violent deaths as a generative sacrifice, imbuing loss with a forward-looking temporality by refusing to accept death as being "in vain." In the Golan, eternally circulating souls join the immortal martyrs to blur the borders between past and present, life and death, insisting on the honoring of social obligations, even where life has been prematurely cut short. But how does immortality arise in these cases, and what does it entail? That is the question we turn to next.

The Dead Carry Debts: Delayed Reciprocity, Waiting, and Debt

Key to the socially and politically efficacious survival of the dead is a temporality of delay, which creates obligations on the basis of indebtedness between the living and the dead. While the immediate return of a gift severs a social relationship or may even lead to hostility, delayed return opens up a space—and time—in which debt fosters continued bonds (Graeber 2014; Mauss 1954). As Paul Anderson (2023: 102) writes, permanent "credit-and-debt relationships" between Aleppo traders and their customers create trust and intimacy as long as they are "never settled." Janet Roitman (2003: 213) argues that this productivity of debt arises from how debt subverts the immediacy of exchange by introducing "intervals of time" that allow for "the multiplication of possibilities." We argue that this shift from short- to long-term transactional orders (Parry and Bloch 1986) is what nourishes immortality because it opens up a liminal space where distinctions between this world and the next, self and other, death and life wear thin and may even be upturned. Below, we identify two distinct modalities through which the dead may acquire efficacious presence in the lives of the living. While martyrdom mobilizes logics of sacrificial indebtedness that hinge on temporal delay and point to outward expansion, reincarnation implies long-term cycles of return. Even though these modes differ in the directionality of the social relations they foster, both crucially rely on the cultivation of specific forms of remembrance and narration in order to become efficacious.

Zelal, a leading member of the Kurdish women's movement in Europe, made this temporality of debt explicit when she explained to Marlene how the immortality of the Kurdish martyrs was created through deliberate acts of delay. She elaborated that

[6]In the Golan people sometimes preferred to use the term *rafiq*, Arabic for comrade, rather than martyr, while in Kurdish contexts some preferred the term *pakrewan* rather than *şehîd*. In both contexts, this choice of terminology signals a wariness of religious connotations attached to the term *shaheed/şehîd*.

traditionally, in tribal contexts, a killing would lead to a revenge killing. "Until you don't kill the other, the issue will not be resolved. But in the PKK, it is not like that. In the PKK, taking revenge for a martyr is about constructing something new. For every comrade who falls in the movement, something new is built after them." Zelal promised to send Marlene an analysis by the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan on this point. Several weeks later, Marlene found several Öcalan quotes in her inbox. They were notes from conversations with the PKK leader in which he recalls the response to the death of Haki Karer, a PKK co-founder who was assassinated in May 1977 by a rival political organization (rumored to have been sponsored by the Turkish secret service, MİT) and is often considered the movement's first martyr. The inclination in the movement at the time, Öcalan explains, was to take revenge (*intikam*) in response to Karer's killing in order "to get done with the issue." But Öcalan took another stance. "No, we won't do anything," he recalls having said. "We will bury our martyr and wait."[7]

Waiting, then, was a crucial temporal operation that allowed turning a potential cycle of revenge killings into a forward-looking economy of martyrial expenditure and return.[8] It transformed the immediate exchange of revenge into a form of delayed reciprocity, where delay establishes indebtedness and expands temporal horizons (Munn 1992). Within the temporal gap opened in this way, the living have been accumulating debts toward not only Karer but also the thousands who have followed him since his death in 1977 and committed their lives to the revolutionary struggle.

"The Kurdish people is indebted to the martyrs," Semira, a feisty woman in her sixties from Wan in eastern Turkey, proclaimed. "It is thanks to them that I can speak freely today," she continued, echoing what Marlene was told many times: that whatever progress on Kurdish rights had been made in Turkey, it was thanks to the martyrs. Yet this was a debt impossible to ever repay. Semira herself had made sacrifices. Her village had been burnt by the Turkish army in the 1990s, she had been forced to flee and make a living working in textile sweatshops in Istanbul, and then took up positions in Wan's local party branch for years, spending most of her free time organizing and attending meetings, rallies, and commemorations. But, she insisted, "this is still too little, it's not enough. We are still indebted."

Ongoing insurgency has created a state of "generalized debt" (Roitman 2003: 230) that has become foundational for Kurdish sociality, with nearly every household having lost family members to the struggle or having made other forms of sacrifice (also known as *bedel*, literally price). Considering oneself as subject to this historic debt has come to define the boundaries of Kurdishness, rendering this, more than anything else, a political community founded upon debt relations (rather than being ethnically or linguistically defined) (Neyzi and Darıcı 2015: 67). This indebtedness implicates subjects in each other's lives and deaths and expands vitality beyond the boundaries of self-contained individuals. In the last consequence, this logic effectively divests the self of its sovereignty. "You have no right to say 'this life (*can*) is mine, I will use it as I please,'" Öcalan thus reminded his party's cadres shortly before his

[7]On how the death of Haki Karer transformed the nascent group around Öcalan into a full-fledged party, see Jongerden and Akkaya (2012).

[8]David Edwards (2017) similarly describes blood feuds and martyrdom as two competing ways of making sense of violent death in Afghanistan.

arrest in 1999. "This life," he went on, "is a thousand times indebted" (*Serxwebûn* 2005: 14–15).

Honoring these debts has been framed as a question of incessant commemoration by the party, firmly grounding the proclaimed immortality of the martyrs in the this-worldly affairs of the living. "Making the martyrs live" (*şehitleri yaşatmak*) requires remembering their deeds and emulating their commitment; an imperative that has given rise to a massive commemorative apparatus. Martyrs are commemorated in extensive written obituaries, bound into martyr albums numbering into thousands of pages; they have been eternalized in songs and videos; they are both mourned and celebrated during regular commemorative gatherings; printed on banners and turned into stencils and murals, their images appear at demonstrations and pervade urban spaces. But forty years of armed guerrilla warfare have also exhausted Kurdish civil society, where a new generation of social actors—including many women—have begun to question martyrdom as the supreme sacrifice. Instead, they insist on the value of what Esin Düzel (2024: 522–25) describes as "mundane sacrifices," such as forfeiting marriage and having children, or simply attending a rally rather than getting a hairdo, as equally worthy contributions to the political struggle. This highlights how debt can work as a binding force only as long as it is remembered (Derrida 1992; Graeber 2014), rendering forgetting—as a party slogan proclaims—tantamount to treason (*unutmak ihanettir*). Where forgetting contracts social networks because it fails to honor the legacy of debt-based social bonds, remembering works to expand them as it implicates the self in the life trajectories of others (Munn 1992: 63–66).

In the Golan, too, relations of debt, insurance, and sacrifice intensify the long-term exchange cycles between the living and the martyrs, rendering remembering crucial and turning forgetting into betrayal. The grave of Hayel Abu Zeid is one of several martyrs' tombs that flanked the large ossuaries at the cemetery in Majdal Shams. As a teenager, Hayel joined an underground resistance group. Caught by the Israeli army in an ambush at the border, he spent twenty years in prison and was released only when he was about to die from cancer. Inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, as is customary for Islamic tombs, the epitaph on his tombstone reads:

> In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful
> If you live, live free or die standing tall like the trees.
> The martyr (*shaheed*) Hayel Hussein Muhammad Abu Zaid
> A captive (*raheen*) of resistance, martyrdom, and hope
> A martyr of the National Movement (*alharakah alwataniah*) in the occupied Syrian Golan
> Born on 1/1/1968 and martyred on 7/7/2005
> A result of his battle with cancer, after a prison sentence lasting over twenty years.

The first line carved onto Hayel's tombstone is the Islamic *basmala*, the second is a verse from a song by Samih Choukeir, a leftist Syrian Druze musician.[9] Notably,

[9]On the actual tombstone, the last phrase is repeated, as it is in the song (*ka liashjar wuqufan, wuqufan ka liashijar*). "The people who wrote the stone wanted to use 'high' language!" Salman explained, pointing out that the repetition was unwarranted. This was not the only mistake: apparently, Hayel's birthdate should have been 1962 rather than 1968.

Hayel is described as both a martyr (*shaheed*) and a captive (*raheen*) of the resistance. How can a martyr also be a captive? In Arabic, *raheen* is a thing (or person) that serves as a security or pawn for an outstanding debt. Salman noted that the word is "very strong," and went on to explain that it describes one who has "gifted their life," or "decided to give himself as a guarantee and as an insurance." It amounts to a "donation of oneself." Martyrdom in the Golan, this makes clear, acted both as a gift to and guarantee for liberated futures, expressed through local notions of resistance (*muqawama*) and homeland (*watan*, *balad*). Like a pledge, it created expectations for return and fostered a "generalised sense of indebtedness" (Anderson 2023: 98).

But precisely how such debts would be honored was a site of contention. A few meters from the cemetery is the *baladiya*, the municipal building, installed by the Israeli occupying forces and manned by local administrators who have accepted Israeli citizenship. Seen as "traitors," they have been ostracized. Immediate and extended families have cut ties, neighbors have stopped visiting, and religious shaykhs refuse to fulfill the necessary mortuary ritual prayers. Excluded from the vital circuits of social, economic, and political exchange, they are, as Maria was told, "more dead than the dead." Indeed, the first Israeli-appointed mayor of the *baladiya* faced economic ruination after the locals stopped visiting his business and his offices were bombed by a local clandestine group in the 1980s. Even the past haunts the *baladiya*, which is built on the grounds of the old village cemetery where the untimely burials of children used to take place.

But the aftermath of the 2011 uprising in Syria has led to changing perceptions of belonging. Some Jawlani residents began to apply for Israeli citizenship, not because they feel less Syrian, but because of everyday considerations concerning work and travel that "make the economics of our everyday lives easier," as Sara, the mother of a young family, noted. Still, many framed this "bureaucratic" normalization as an ultimately selfish response. "The resistance has been paid with blood," Riad emphasized to Maria, as he explained why he had "cut all ties" with his former best friend after he applied for Israeli citizenship in order to get a promotion at the Israeli hospital where he was working. Riad framed this action as betrayal, an "unmanly" break in obligations and annulling of debts "to the dead, to resistance, and to Syria." Riad continued, "Syria even paid for your studies!" He was referring here to the higher education scheme that allowed some students from the Golan to attend the University of Damascus, and which the former friend had used. But even Riad was sensing that the tide might be turning, as he noted that, from his circle of friends, his reaction to "cut all ties" was the most extreme. In framing his friend's actions as betrayal, Riad indicated a broader economy of debt, to which the sacrifice of the martyrs was key. Like in Kurdish communities, failing to remember and honor the sacrifices of the martyrs was seen as a form of betrayal of revolutionary indebtedness. Yet in both communities, the pull of that indebtedness was by no means immune from doubt and contestation, indicating that debt needed to be actively cultivated through remembrance to become a binding—and connective—force.

But in the Golan, remembering was also productive of another sense of indebtedness in relation to the eternal cycle of rebirth of Druze souls into Druze bodies. Most reincarnations are never socially registered. Past lives only come to the forefront of memory when they were violently or prematurely ended, in the case of accidents or killings, for instance. In those cases, children typically begin to "speak"

(*al-nutq*) to reveal memories of their past lives between the ages of three and five. Their remembrance precipitates a labor-intensive process of investigation involving neighbors, friends, and extended kin that can foster new connections between families and generations (*jeel*)—sometimes across national borders—as the journey of a reincarnated soul is retraced and authenticated. Grown-ups will attentively question children who claim to remember a past life and their claims are carefully double checked, involving investigative trips and directive conversations (Bennett 2006; Fartacek 2021; Ibraheem 2024). When confirmed, reincarnation narratives often lead to the establishment of novel relations of obligation and exchange between newly found kin—even if some may reject the weight of these relations. When remembered, previous lives can thus forge tight-knit relations across Druze communities, almost as if to acknowledge the obligations that remain outstanding where a life was prematurely taken.

Logics of debt and questions about its return, then, are central for how both Kurds and Jawlanis make sense of their relations with fallen martyrs and past lives. Waiting and delaying action speak to the labor invested in future-oriented debts accrued through martyrial sacrifices and gifts of resistance—a labor that is easily upturned when forgetting one's obligations to the dead turns into betrayal. Equally labor-intensive is the forging of ties through remembering past lives and retracing paths of reincarnation, reflecting a socially cultivated investment in honoring the obligations that arise where lives are tragically cut short. Where martyrdom frames violent death as a forward-looking sacrifice, reincarnation turns debt into a cyclical logic of return.

The Dead Don't Sleep: Of Liminal Spaces, Dreams, and Previous Lives

The dead, we have argued, may be kept alive through the cultivation of relations of indebtedness. As a temporal operation that refuses to let go of the past, debt opens up a productive space where immortal martyrs and returning souls come to live. But, as we explain in this section, the extended liminality that debt relations cultivate creates figures and intensities that can be excessive, unruly, and hard to tame.

Rawad, who we met in the introduction, experienced the disquieting force of past lives firsthand. Originally from Majdal Shams but now living in Europe, Rawad was home for a holiday when he first met Maria. "Can you see that I have no hair here and here?" he asked her. In his late twenties, Rawad had shoulder-length thick black hair, and he looked cool in his ripped blue jeans. Lifting his hair, he revealed that there was no hair in a small circular area above his right ear. A similar patch existed on the left side. "It is where the bullets came through." As a baby, Rawad's parents took him to medical doctors looking for a diagnosis for the two bald patches. The doctors found no hair cells in this area. Rawad started "talking" about his previous life when he was three years old. During the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon (1982–2000), Lebanese workers moved to the occupied Golan Heights. "It was during this time that I saw a woman and I told my mother to invite her [into our house] … we did not know the woman, but I insisted! It turned out to be the mother of my fiancée from that generation, and then I started remembering more and more people from that generation." Rawad told the story with a matter of fact, humorous tone. He said that he recalled the names of his previous family, secrets such as where he had hidden his gun, and the moment of his death. He was a twenty-seven-year-old soldier in the Lebanese army, his name was Rabiah, and he was from Ain Jerrah. He was riding on

an army bus during an ambush when a sniper shot through the bus window. The bullet passed through his head and he died immediately.

Rawad's "speech," with the embodied stigmata of a past life and his precise recollections astonished his family and the news traveled to Lebanon swiftly. "After one week, my father, from that generation, called my father, from this generation, and told him that he swore on his life that he will never visit Israel. He begged my father to bring me to Lebanon." So, Rawad—a child at the time—and his family traveled to Lebanon a few months before the border closed in 2000. "I showed them my house, told them about the neighbors, went to an old Druze sheikh and told my father to put money under the mattress." This was a gesture Rawad himself did not know the meaning of, but it was customary, he was told, in the Lebanese region of Bayada. "I even found the gun that I had hidden!" It is not unusual for reincarnation memories to reveal secrets and intimate forms of knowledge that only the deceased would know of.

But for Rawad, finding the gun "was the crazy part" because it defied his position as an "atheist." As he tried to find a "scientific" explanation, he reasoned it might just have been a coincidence; after all, "they had a civil war before that and I guess there must have been a lot of guns?!" Although Rawad's reincarnation crossed state borders, he considered his connection to Lebanon and Syria more a result of acculturation than an immortal calling. "I always wanted to go to Lebanon, but I think it is more Feirouz [the Lebanese singer] than this [the previous life]!" Reluctant to be drawn into the expansive world of reincarnated souls, Rawad tried to bracket this "funny story" and "go on with my life." And yet, he continued to have an emotional connection with his family from the past generation: "They call me *habibi* and my mother from that generation cries a lot when she hears me. We talk on WhatsApp."

Reincarnation stories like Rawad's open up the past to the present, allowing new "history-tellings" (Mittermaier 2012) to emerge and creating uneasy emotions for both reincarnated individuals and those around them (Bennett 2006; Malek 2021; Nigst 2019). Embodied reincarnations create a liminal space in which the expected order of things is reversed as children come to have wives, fiancés, or children and turn out to possess intimate cultural knowledge from across state borders. In this space of "anti-structure" (Turner 2017[1969]), kinship norms and social expectations of status and respectability are reversed. But narratives of past lives do not have a ritual closure, which is precisely what makes them unsettling, particularly for less spiritually inclined political activists. Tawfiq, the son of a prominent leftist Jawlani leader, once confessed that his father did not want to hear anything about Tawfiq's sister's reincarnation. "We don't speak about this." For Tawfiq's mother, however, the connection to the child who spoke as her reincarnated daughter was of great comfort. Without the acceptance of her husband, Tawfiq's mother regularly visits her daughter "from the other generation," now reborn in a family in the next village. These contradictory feelings, like Rawad's multifaceted connection across the border, reveal the ambivalence that characterizes the unruly attachments fostered by the returns of past lives.

Among Kurdish revolutionaries, too, the waking dead were liable to cause ambiguous sentiments. While the Kurdish movement was heavily invested in "keeping the martyrs alive" through continuous commemoration that would foster ongoing relations of exchange and indebtedness, once such relations were forged and the dead came to rise from their sleep, they were not always easy to tame.

Mizgin, a veteran Kurdish activist based in Europe, estimated that most people close to the movement will have seen martyrs in their dreams. Dreams, she explained, are a measure of your love (*aşk*) for someone or something. "Something you don't feel strongly for won't enter your dreams." That dreams attest to ongoing bonds of love, care, and appreciation was a widespread sentiment among Marlene's Kurdish interlocutors. Dreams of the dead, in particular, were coveted, because they indicated to the living that the dead had not parted holding a grudge against them and were ready to maintain existing relations. As Semira's niece Berfin explained, such dreams are the consequence of the fact that "actually, nobody ever dies." After death, she elaborated, the spirit (*ruh*) of the deceased separates from the body but remains in this world until Judgment Day. Dreams are the impression that these spirits leave on the subconscious (*bilinçaltı*) of the living during the intermediate period of waiting, she said. As much as Berfin made reference to a psychoanalytic vocabulary of subconsciousness, her description also rehearsed Islamic ideas about the immortality of the soul and its capacity to communicate with the living—ideas which have given rise to a tradition of dream interpretation that significantly departs from Freudian psychoanalysis (Edgar 2011; Edgar and Henig 2010; Mittermaier 2011). The latter tends to understand dreams as a drama that plays out within the bounds of the subject. But Berfin and Mizgin suggested that dreams may be vectors of attachment to departed loved ones. As such, they echoed what Amira Mittermaier has found in her study of dreamscapes in Egypt, where "far from enclosing subjects within their innermost life-world, [dreams] direct them toward the world and embed them in larger webs of reciprocity" (2011: 237).

A corollary of Western tradition's focus on dreams as a site where the self works through repressed memories and subconscious desires is that these traditions tend to approach night dreams primarily as reflections of past events and interactions. In Islamic contexts, by contrast, dreams are often interpreted as prophetic signs capable of indicating the future (Edgar 2011: 18–19). Elif, a student of biological anthropology at a Turkish university whose younger sister had joined the PKK and was killed in a chemical weapons attack, had encountered such a revelatory dream. She was used to treating human remains as scientific evidence and had not much time for other-worldly speculation. So she was quick to note that the much-rehearsed immortality of the martyrs was strictly metaphorical. "The martyrs die," she firmly asserted. And yet she also recounted how she had dreamt of her sister about eight days before her death. In the dream Elif saw her sister, who was unconscious yet speaking, telling her that she had turned into a bird, that she was flying, traveling. In retrospect, everything about this dream made sense to Elif. That her sister had turned into a bird indicated her departing soul, while her unconsciousness predicted the chemical weapons attack. "I have no idea what it was or how it works, but I had this dream, and it was clearly a message," she told Marlene, refusing to discipline it through an explanatory framework. But she also added that she talked about the dream with her therapist, whom she began to see after her sister's death—an attempt, perhaps, at taming the unsettling force of nightly visions.

If dreams could reach across temporal and ontological divides, they had the power to draw those who see them into that nether world they project. While some found this prospect unsettling, others experienced it as an enticing prospect of communion with loved ones lost. A guerrilla fighter writing an obituary for a fallen friend, Mahir, described dreaming of his martyred friends as a blissful if fleeting experience of renewed connection. "Seeing you I wanted to lose myself in your midst. I felt I wanted

to touch, embrace every one of you, to become like every one of you" (*Serxwebûn* 2003: 387–88). Dreams, his account makes clear, could become intimate spaces of encounter, offering "small pockets of resistance" (Despret 2015: 123) in a world permeated by violent loss and the realities of warfare. But the distance that separated dreaming from waking states was a thin one, which allowed dreams to inspire action rather than just rehearse past experience (Mageo 2024). In the early 2000s, Fatoş Sağlamgöz (Sema), a young woman from southeast Turkey who worked as a party cadre in Europe, saw fallen martyrs in her dreams every night. She would tell her comrades of the responsibility the living had toward these martyrs, and of the need to live up to their example (*Serxwebûn* 2003: 498). On 11 November 2003 Sema acted upon the indebtedness she felt toward the martyrs that populated her dreams and immolated herself in Göteborg, Sweden, to protest the imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Today, she is hailed as a martyr herself.

Sema's story makes clear that dreams of dead martyrs are more than the retrieval of faded or repressed memories. These dreams "embroil the dreamer in a web of obligations and exchanges" (Pandolfo 1997: 185) that blurs the boundaries between living and dead, past and present. In the Golan, memories of past lives similarly allowed transcending boundaries, crossing not only temporal divides but also otherwise impermeable national borders. Where the dead come alive, this goes to show, temporal, territorial, and ontological boundaries become unstable, opening up prospects of transcendence that can be at once enticing and unsettling. The immortality that becomes palpable in the liminal spaces of dreams and past lives is in that sense insurgent: brimming with vitality yet hard to tame, it disrupts while refusing stabilization.

The Dead Don't Die: Pacification and Its Limits

The other-worldly debts and obligations that form the basis of insurgent immortalities are in constant competition with forms of indebtedness generated by the states under which stateless Kurds and Jawlanis live. As (settler) colonial states, both Turkey and Israel are based on the political and economic dispossession of some indigenous peoples over which they rule, only to lend back the stolen land, life, and time to their own subjects, often through gestures of paternalistic (and patronizing) charity. Stateless and indigenous populations are thus seen as living on borrowed land and in borrowed time—forever indebted to the state as patron-benefactor.

In Turkey, Kurds have long been suspected of ungratefully exploiting the state's resources and relegated to a status of "so-called" (*sözde*), or pseudo-citizens whose loyalty to the nation is perennially in doubt (Yeğen 2006). Systematically impoverished (Yadirgi 2017), many Kurds rely on state welfare, which, as Cağrı Yoltar (2020: 157) has argued, "operates as a mechanism of debt production" that forcefully binds Kurdish citizens to the state by demanding allegiance in exchange for payments. Turkey's state-owned petroleum company similarly casts Kurdish villagers as perennially indebted to the state that extracts oil from their land (Oguz 2024). Debt, here, serves as a territorializing means of discipline and subjection aimed at subverting the relations of exchange and obligation through which Kurdish communities reproduce themselves—including the relations these communities entertain with their dead. This happens most immediately through the legal mechanism of "compensation recovery cases" (*rücu tazminat davaları*), by which

Turkish authorities charge the families of fallen Kurdish guerrilla fighters to pay the costs for the injuries incurred by military and police personnel in their fight against Kurdish "terrorism" (Biner 2016). Families are left with the choice to disown their child in order to escape the debt—effectively forcing them to cut precisely the relations of moral obligation that animate martyrial afterlives—or to pay the costs so as to redeem themselves from the forced relationship of indebtedness with the state. These debt cases are never closed, and the debt is inheritable through generations, creating, as Özlem Biner has argued, "new compulsory bonds between the state and Kurdish citizens" (ibid.). Here, too, debt is productive, but as a means of enclosure and entrapment that seeks to pacify insurgent subjects by cutting through competing networks of obligation and loyalty.

Fenced within the settler colonial state of Israel, the occupied people of the Golan Heights and Palestine are seen as "invaders" that live on borrowed land and time, whose debt can never be forfeited (Ochs 2011). In November 2023, the longest-serving ex-political prisoner of the Golan Heights, who had spent thirty-two years in Israeli prisons, was briefly re-arrested, his house raided and ransacked, his car confiscated, and his wife's dowry, including the jewelry, stolen by Israeli soldiers, never to be returned. His was just one of several similar cases in the Golan. Many more raids on former political prisoners (eighty at the time of writing) have been reported in occupied Jerusalem, the West Bank, and inside Israel, with increasing frequency since Israel's war on Gaza started in October 2023. Maria was told that Ben-Gvir, the Israeli minister for security, "has blood in his eyes" and "is seeking revenge," implying that the prison sentences served by Jawlanis had not been enough to pay their dues. During these raids, Israeli soldiers destroy property and confiscate money and goods as a collective punishment for receiving allowances from the Palestinian government. Much of this money has effectively been cut by Israel, which is withholding $188 million per month from the Palestinian Authority (Soussi and Al Tahhan 2024). A portion of this money goes to pay stipends for the families of current political prisoners, ex-prisoners, and families of the martyrs, including in the Golan Heights. If these payments acknowledge the ties of obligation that bind insurgent political communities to their dead, then by stopping them, Israel is seeking to annul the debts that keep the dead alive.

Yet vernacular debts to the dead are hard to eradicate. The Palestinian Druze of northern Israel—in Carmel and Galilee—stand apart from their Jawlani brethren. Unlike the stateless Druze of the Golan, these communities hold Israeli citizenship and are conscripted into the Israeli Defense Forces, long hailed by the state as "the only Arabs to be trusted" (Betts 1988: xiii). Within these villages, military service has not only been enforced but embraced as a mark of belonging (Firro 1999: 124). Yet this embrace comes at a cost. In the eyes of the Israeli state, their service becomes a form of repayment—a blood-debt offered to a colonial power in exchange for conditional inclusion, in the form of second-class citizenship within the racist hierarchies of an ethnocratic state (Kanaaneh 2008; Yiftachel 2006). Their loyalty is scripted as a sacrifice, their lives folded into the machinery of occupation.

And still, the dead refuse to fall in line. Across the northern border with Lebanon, stories abound of Druze souls reborn from enemy lands. "They all come from Lebanon," a friend from the town of Yirka once said. These memories, so common that they barely raise an eyebrow, speak of past lives that bleed across frontiers (Fartacek 2021: 60–61; Rasamny 2021), indifferent to the lines drawn by soldiers or states. In these returns lie the quiet insurgence of another kind of expansive

indebtedness. The state may seek to replace this insurgent immortality with the pacified ledger of citizenship and service. But the dead are hard to quell.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that endowing the dead with insurgent immortality relies on the maintenance of expansive and long-term relations of generalized debt and obligation. Indebtedness functions as a way of opening liminal spaces in which the dead can wake up from their sleep, animating the lives of the living. The forms of insurgent immortality we have explored here are animated by collective obligations, communal bonds, and the restlessness of the stateless. They harness debt strategically as a productive force, fostering forms of vitality that directly counter the politics of territorialization, capture, and enclosure through which colonial states operate. While martyrdom hinges on temporal delay to create outward expansion, reincarnation involves long-term cycles of return. Both modalities encourage the cultivation of interpersonal and intergenerational indebtedness, through which stateless communities maintain and renew connections across national borders and temporal divides, in spite of occupation and attempted normalization. If sovereignty can be understood as the power to decide the limits between life and death, then claiming the immortality of revolutionary martyrs and continuously reincarnating souls may be understood as a sovereign gesture. What is at stake here is a form of counter-sovereignty that defies death in order to cross and expand borders —territorial, temporal, or otherwise—rather than solidify or contract them.

Anthropological theory has approached the stubborn return of the dead to the lives of the living primarily through a prism of haunting. This has allowed scholars to show how social injustice, violence, and oppression cannot simply be overcome through the passage of time. The past and its inhabitants are there to haunt us. What such a framework finds harder to grasp, however, is how relationships with the dead may be actively cultivated so as to render them social interlocutors and powerful agents. As a conceptual framework, insurgent immortality brings into view how an insistence on the continued animacy of the dead may allow stateless communities to reproduce and expand, not just through the creation of life, but also through the cultivation of afterlife.

The concept of insurgent immortality extends long-standing anthropological concerns with the dead—articulated by Mauss, Bloch, Munn, Turner, and others —into the realm of statelessness, colonial violence, and resistance. While much of the classic literature has focused on small-scale societies, our intervention reframes exchange, debt, and ties with the dead within contemporary struggles against enclosure and erasure. Stateless communities do not merely remember the dead; they mobilize them as agents of vitality, sovereignty, and expansion across a landscape of checkpoints, barbed wires, and occupation. In this way, we bring foundational anthropological insights into conversation with the political urgencies of the present, showing how relationships with the dead are not just haunting remnants of injustice but carefully cultivated exchanges nourishing evocative dreams, travelling souls, and social reproduction in and despite death.

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