

**‘BECOMING A TRUE MUSLIM’:  
SYRIAN WOMEN’S JOURNEY TO DEVOUTNESS**

by  
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## Abstract

This study examines why some Muslim women in Syria are turning towards an Islamist faith practice and devoutness in the context of the Syrian *da'wa* movement. Based on interviews and participant observation from 2006 – 2011 it demonstrates that the quest for the power to live authentic religious lives as devout Muslims lies at the heart of the phenomenon. It argues that the individual development as illustrated by the in-depth profiles of five women, is facilitated by the new access to religious education for women in mosques and private lessons through female preachers that was advocated by the male religious elite. In previous research the compliance of women with restrictive Islamist practices such as veiling has often been explained as empowering women through aiming at mobility and the participation in public space. This thesis argues that the extent to which the participants went in adapting their lives to the Islamist ideal cannot be sufficiently explained this hypothesis. Rather, it points at their religious motivations to gain a meaningful, emotionally satisfying and correct religious practice in the hope of divine reward. In addition, this thesis analyses the ambiguity of the question of female empowerment as experienced by women in the social and political sense and as religious leaders on one hand and on the other the participants' own concept of empowerment as divine enablement to submission. Thus it contributes to a fuller understanding of devout Islamist women according to their values and self-perception, and offers insights into the unique Syrian context.

*To my parents,  
who were the first to teach me about the love of God.*

*And to Leila, Hanadi, Farida, Aisha, Rawan and Razan,  
who taught me to love Muslim women.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;  
I will sing praises to you among the nations.  
For your steadfast love is great among the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.  
Psalm 57:9-10*

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# **‘BECOMING A TRUE MUSLIM’:**

## **SYRIAN WOMEN’S JOURNEY TO DEVOUTNESS**

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**A note on transliteration and translation:**

For the transliteration of Arabic terms I have used the system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. For terms that are common in English I have used the familiar writing, e.g. hijab instead of *ḥijāb*, sharia instead of *sharī'a*.

Qur'anic quotations in English translation are taken from: Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. *The Qur'an: A new translation*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010

Other translations from Arabic are my own unless otherwise specified.

## 1 INTRODUCTION:

### RESEARCHING SYRIAN MUSLIM WOMEN'S JOURNEY TO DEVOUTNESS

In the autumn of 2006 during my field research in Damascus my friend Dunya<sup>1</sup> accompanied me on my search to buy a new pair of shoes. Growing tired of the streets and shops, I suggested that we enter one of the new and fashionable 'Western style' food places and have a doughnut. Soon we were seated at a small table, two plates in front of us, each with a freshly baked doughnut, generously sprinkled with powdered sugar. It was only then that it crossed my mind how on earth Dunya was going to eat her doughnut since she had only recently decided to wear *niqāb*, a black face veil that covered all but her eyes. After a moment's hesitation, Dunya lifted her *niqāb* ever so slightly, eating the sweet underneath it without compromising her veiling. After a couple of bites the black cloth was covered in white powdered sugar and we burst out laughing.

My interest in Syrian Islamist women has a personal background. Four years before this incident I had moved to Damascus to study Arabic. Living in the student dormitories of the University, I got to know Dunya, a woman in her mid-twenties, who soon became one of my best friends. She helped me with my studies, taught me to cook delicious Arabic food and discussed Islam with me. Dunya was a modern, confident woman. She had fought hard to overcome the limitations of her traditional working class background, going to evening classes to gain access to higher education. She even broke off her traditional engagement enabling her to leave her coastal home town and fulfil her dreams of studying in

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<sup>1</sup> All names of my research participants have been changed unless they were public figures who agreed to be identified.

Damascus. Therefore my astonishment was great when I witnessed how she turned more and more to a religiosity that seemed to contradict the freedoms she had struggled for over the next few years: From wearing trousers – ‘because they are so much more practical than skirts’ - and a white headscarf she turned to wearing long, loose coats with a headscarf, and finally to a black *abāya* with black gloves and the *niqāb*. She stopped smoking and started to spend most of her spare time reading the Qur’an, practicing for her private *tajwīd* classes, and petitioning God. Finally she changed her major to sharia law at the biggest Islamic Institute in Damascus, the Abu al-Nur Centre (ANC). On her journey Dunya broke a number of traditional concepts of proper female behaviour: She constantly fought with her parents about their everyday activities such as watching TV; she also left her family and travelled across the border to Jordan to live with a small community of ‘true believers’. Yet when she got there she succumbed to her teacher who prohibited her from traveling anywhere beyond 80 km without a *maḥram*, a man too closely related to her to marry her.

Dunya surely did not fit any of the different categories of Muslim women that I had thus far perceived: Her choices could neither be explained as merely traditional, nor as an attempt to simply gain mobility, or even respectability as many of her peers would judge her as ‘backward’ and ‘uneducated’ just by the clothes she wore.

What had motivated such a change? Why was she choosing to comply with such a limiting and suppressive way of life? In the following years I observed other Syrian women who seemed to undergo a continuous development towards more and more radical forms of Islamic practices and convictions. My desire to understand their choices triggered my research interest.

## 1.1 'Becoming a true Muslim'

In my research on Syrian Muslim women's journeys to devoutness I want to show how and why many Muslim Sunni women in Syria move from a nominal or traditional religious upbringing to a deeper religious perception, expression and faith practice while rejecting their past religiosity and projecting a religious ideal of uncompromising, literal adherence of what they call 'true Islam', and what is often called Islamism by Western observers. My focus is on women who made a conscious choice to follow practices that other women follow without choice or even against their choice. I hope that through this I will gain insight into the attractions of the Islamist movement in Syria for women.

When I began this research I was wondering whether the transformation that I had observed in Dunya and other women could be understood in the terms of religious conversion in the sense of a personal turning towards faith, changing from a more or less nominal membership to personal religious conviction.<sup>2</sup> My perception was founded on conversations with women who described their experiences as 'becoming a real Muslim', 'becoming alive' or even 'being born again'.<sup>3</sup> This terminology sounded very much like the Christian vocabulary for personal conversion experiences which emphasizes the discontinuity between the old and the new identity. In addition, other Syrian women used the term *jāhiliya* for attitudes and practices that fell short of their understanding of 'true

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<sup>2</sup> Comp. the Oxford dictionary: [www.askoxford.com/consise\\_oed/convert?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/consise_oed/convert?view=uk)

<sup>3</sup> comp. as well the choice of words used by some of *al-fananāt al-tā'ibāt*, in the famous cases of Egyptian artists who publicly turned towards Islam rejecting their careers: Bärbel Reuter, *Gelebte Religion: Religiöse Praxis junger Islamistinnen in Kairo* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 1998). 70-75. a similar case is that of the German-Turkish singer Hülya Kandemir, comp. Hülya Kandemir, *Himmelstochter: Mein Weg vom Popstart zu Allah* (Munich: Pendo, 2005).

Islam', a term which normally describes the 'pre-Islamic' time of ignorance. Yet my early perception was challenged when I started to ask more questions to understand how this terminology was understood within the Islamic framework. Nearly every woman I interviewed started the narrative of her own change with the affirmation that she had 'always been a Muslim'. As I will argue in this research, the phenomenon of the Islamic revival among women in Syria should be understood as a change that leads to an intensification of their religious identity rather than a total or about-turn change, and as a consequence, the appeal of the change consists largely in the hope to realise the maximum potential of who they already perceive themselves to be. In this sense, my title 'becoming a true Muslim' describes both the continuity and the discontinuity in the process of realising their religious identity that Syrian Muslim women have described to me. The concept that every human being is a Muslim from birth is a prevalent idea among my research participants, not only in the context of Muslims who become religious but even concerning persons of different or no religious affiliation. Accordingly, in the popular media some Muslim writers prefer the term 'reversion' instead of 'conversion' when they discuss the turn from another religion to Islam, defining a turning towards Islam as a *re*-turn to one's original religion instead of moving into something new.<sup>4</sup> The term plays a role especially in the polemic context of conversions from another religion to Islam.

Neither 'conversion' nor 're-version' was the term used by my participants. Rather, they would ask me: *aslamtī?* ('Did you submit yourself [to God]?') when they wanted to know whether I had become a Muslim. Sometimes the same verb was used in the context of becoming devout, to emphasise that they saw their own development as the basic Muslim response to God's will, though it was not the primary terminology. Instead they

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<sup>4</sup> For example Na'ima B. Robert uses this term in her book on conversion to Islam: Na'ima B. Robert, *From my sisters' lips* (London: Bantam Books, 2006).

distinguished between a nominal Muslim, *muslim bi-l-ism bas*, and a Muslim in the full sense: *muslim haqīqī*. The process of changing from the former to the latter was mainly called ‘becoming religious’, *tadayyun*, and a woman who was seen as devout *mutadayyina*.

Often they also used the word *iltizām* to refer to their new way of life. *Iltizām* in this context means the strict observance of the prescribed religious rules, yet in my conversations women often qualified ‘true’ *iltizām* as observant practice in connection with the right inner attitude. The inner state of the heart was seen as the mark of distinction between a woman who practiced an outward observance motivated by social pressures or mere conservatism, and one who was pious, *muttaqiyya*. My participants repeatedly discussed questions concerning this distinction among themselves, as well as making sure that I understood their goal of becoming a ‘pious Muslim woman’.

According to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, *taqwa*, translated as ‘devoutness’, ‘piety’, or ‘pious fear of God’, is ‘one of the most frequently mentioned religious concepts in the Qur’an’, referring to a ‘faith animated by works, and works quickened by a genuine experience of faith’.<sup>5</sup> I use the words ‘devoutness’ and ‘piety’ as synonym translations of *taqwa*. Notwithstanding the long and diverse discourse on the meaning of *taqwa* in the Islamic tradition,<sup>6</sup> my research participants use this word to describe their ideal of a devout life in which the outer and inner reality correlate with each other. The ideal pious woman is *multazima*, ‘observant’, in her actions and in her thoughts and emotions, constantly fearing, loving and trusting God.

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<sup>5</sup> L. Lewisohn, "Takwa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Comp. *Ibid.*, for example al-Ghazali’s discussion of *taqwa* in the *iḥya’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*.

While this terminology shows how inseparably the question of religious behaviour is connected to the question of religious conviction and inner attitudes in the minds of my participants, it also shows the unintentional subjectivity of this understanding of ‘piety’, because depending on the individual’s convictions, a woman may call herself *multazima* but may not be considered as *multazima* from another’s point of view. While the meaning of piety was not greatly contested in my observation, the question of which practices constituted *iltizām* was constantly questioned. For example, while the majority accepted that it was part of *iltizām* to wear hijab, what kind of hijab was obligatory (*farḍ*) was open to interpretation. A woman who called herself *multazima* would usually wear a headscarf and a long, loose black dress or a coat, the *manteau*. However, for some, the head covering was only correct if it covered not only the throat, but also the jaw up to the tip of the chin completely. Another discussion centered around the question whether *niqāb* or even *khimār*, a total face veil, should be worn, accompanied by black gloves, or whether it is only an additional, voluntary good deed. While the question of Islamic dress does take up a lot of space in Islamist discourse about women as well as in the Western perception of Islam, it is important to note the spiritual questions that motivated my participants. Their questions included how to lead a life acceptable to God, experience inner peace, come close to God and gain an optimistic outlook on the hereafter. A teacher of sharia at the Fatih Institute told me:

There are three kinds of women: Those that wear ‘hijab’, [- here she pointed at her own clothes, indicating that the *manteau* and the *niqāb* were part of it -] and have real faith in their hearts, those that wear hijab but have no faith, and those that don’t

wear hijab but have faith. Only the first kind, whose inner and outward lives agree, are truly *multazimāt*.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Syrians with a less strict understanding of religious observance would call this practice *tashaddud*, strictness, or even accuse them of *taṭarruf*, extremism.

With the general movement towards Islam in Syria, there are many women who just follow this trend. Meanwhile, my research focuses on those women who experienced a personal change of direction towards devoutness because their accounts of their experiences and their reflections about their choices offer a deeper understanding of what is going on in the centre of the Islamist movement in Syria.

#### 1.1.1 ‘Become a true Muslim’: Women calling other women to devoutness

Furthermore, the title of my research also expresses the appeal of how a woman who is already ‘religious’ calls other women to follow her example and to become as religious as she is: I will show in this research that the development of the role and the model of the female preacher within the Islamic revival movement in Syria has led to the integration of modern influences on the understanding of female roles with a literalist, puritan understanding of Islam. The combination of these two factors opened the doors for an unprecedented, wide involvement of Syrian women in public religious activism.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Amal in my home in Damascus, 27.06.2007.

My research participants were not isolated individuals but the change I observed happened in the context of wide spread religious activism, which I call the *da'wa* movement, following Saba Mahmood's terminology (2005).<sup>8</sup> *Da'wa*, literally 'invitation', is used as a technical term for the propagation of Islam. In Chapter 4 I will argue that one of the great changes in Syrian society since the 1980s is the emergence of the women's *da'wa* movement. With the term 'women's *da'wa* movement' I describe the mobilisation of large numbers of women to engage in a variety of activities for the sake of *da'wa*, ranging from charity work to public preaching and teaching, to every day interaction and conversations between people. The female preacher is called *dā'iya*.

The organisational structures within the women's *da'wa* movement in Syria vary. At one end of the spectrum there are organisations like the very hierarchically-structured and officially recognised organisation of the Qubaisiyat<sup>9</sup>. At the other end there are women who partake in *da'wa* at a private level amongst their personal acquaintances.

All the women I interviewed for my case studies were in one way or another connected to the women's *da'wa* movement: Some were activists and private or public preachers, others were committed attendees of lessons. In addition, I interviewed women at the periphery of the movement, who had started the process of making some changes in their lives and often discussed their desire for more.

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<sup>8</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 3.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the Qubaisiyat comp. 4.2.2, page 105-108.

### 1.1.2 Devoutness and Islamism

The women whose lives I researched desire to follow Islam as uncompromisingly as possible, while following an Islamic interpretation that can be described as 'Islamist'. 'Devout' and 'Islamist' is an unusual combination of words. However, it describes the focus of this research appropriately, as I will argue that turning attention to the devoutness of my participants will give a more complete portrait of the Islamist movement. They want to model their personal lives, as well as society, according to their religious beliefs; not through holding on to traditions, but through going back to the Qur'an and the Sunna, even if this means criticising traditional ways of life and common interpretations of sharia. I use the label 'Islamist' not without hesitation. In the popular media 'Islamism' is too often equated with violence and terrorism or understood mainly as 'political Islam', aiming at an Islamic state. Yet my participants at the time of my research from autumn 2006 to winter 2011 were not aiming at political change. They were focusing on the change of the individual and - through the individual - the society. Nevertheless I use the term 'Islamism' because of their understanding of Islam as a 'total way of life',<sup>10</sup> and the differentiation of Muslims into those who belong to 'true Islam' and those who are part of the *jāhiliya* or are nominal Muslims. The *da'wa* movement, though aiming at the devoutness of the individual, is not apolitical because of its intentional impact on society through the individual.

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<sup>10</sup> William Shepard, "The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Towards a Typology," in *Islamic Thought in the twentieth century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 63.

However, I am focusing my research on women's journeys to devoutness and not to Islamism because I am interested in understanding their religiosity. Obviously, devoutness, as a quality of the believer, can be observed in all the different segments of Islam and other religions. Yet the understanding of devoutness that is prevalent in my research focus group, is devoutness as a quality of the adherent to 'true Islam' in the Islamist sense.

This focus on devoutness has challenged the way I perceive Islamist women. When I started out, my bias was towards researching women who displayed, to my understanding, radical ideas and practices. Getting to know the people behind the appearances made me more interested in 'normal' women with an Islamist persuasion.

This characterisation is coherent with Shepard's typology of Islamic tendencies (2004) and his description of 'radical Islamism' as a movement that is totalitarian in the way that religion is seen as encompassing all aspects of life, social and personal. Therefore it calls for an Islamic state as part of following the sharia and the elimination of all un-Islamic practices. Yet, as Shepard points out, not all Islamists are directly concerned with working towards an Islamic state nor even politics in general, be it that they co-operate with the existing political system or retreat into the private sphere under state pressure.<sup>11</sup> For Islamists, what is 'Islamic' is defined by the Qur'an and the practices of Muhammad and the first three generations during the 'golden age'. *Ijtihād*, independent reasoning, is practiced in the way that the sources, especially the example of Muhammad, are used to criticise traditional customs and sharia interpretations. According to Shepard, Islamism is a modern movement in so far as it uses not only modern technology and modern political

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 77 and 79-80.

and social organisations and structures, but it may also adapt to some degree to modern thoughts and values through claiming them for Islam. Progress is seen as the true realisation of Islam. Within the movement, Shepard distinguishes between Islamists that want to reach their goal gradually, through personal and political reform without violence, or those that pursue change through a revolution, accepting violence.<sup>12</sup> My participants belong to the first group.

Since Bayat's research on Iranian Islamism in the late 1980s,<sup>13</sup> the term 'post-Islamism' has entered the academic debate, promoted especially by Olivier Roy (1994; 2004).<sup>14</sup> According to his distinction, post-Islamist revivalism targets the individual instead of aiming for an Islamic state: 'Post-Islamism means the privatization of re-Islamisation'.<sup>15</sup> However, this terminology has been challenged. Sherif (2006) has argued that the transformation observed in Islamist parties and movements was a change in strategy rather than in content, and that Islamists had merely adjusted to political reality.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this debate, the recent upheavals in the Arab World raised the question whether the focus on individual reformation was only a tactical manoeuvre, since Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt have come to power, and Islamist militant groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra are

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<sup>12</sup> William Shepard, "Islam and Ideology: Towards a typology," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19(1987): 314f. Shepard lists other characteristics as well, as being less apologetic towards the West and less critical towards the pre-modern Muslim society than Modernists, a tendency to simplify symbols and to be less knowledgeable concerning sharia and traditions than traditionalists.

<sup>13</sup> Comp. Asef Bayat, "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies* 9(1996); Asef Bayat, "What is post-Islamism," *ISIM Review* 16(2005).

<sup>14</sup> Comp. Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1994); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The search for a new ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Roy, *Globalized Islam: The search for a new ummah*: 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ashraf El Sherif, "Democratic Islamic Yuppies: Post-Islamism or another Islamism?," in *AMSS 35th Annual Conference "Muslim Identities: Shifting Boundaries and Dialogues"* (Hartford2006).

taking part in the civil war in Syria.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Syria, the involvement of militant Islamist groups on a larger scale was a comparatively late development. It seems yet unclear how much of the militant Islamist propaganda is due to opportunism, foreign influences, or other non-religious factors, rather than an indigenous political Islamist movement that has finally surfaced after decades of government suppression. In light of this lack of clarity concerning ‘post-Islamism’, I prefer to use the term ‘Islamist’.

While I am using Shepard’s typology I am aware of the diversity between Islamists and that a clear demarcation line between ‘neo-traditionalists’, ‘modern Islamists’ and ‘radical Islamists’ does not exist in ‘real life’. ‘Islamist’ women don’t call themselves ‘Islamists’; like those in the other categories they call themselves ‘true Muslims,’ which shows simultaneously both the problems of any categorisation and yet the need for it. There seem to be two areas in which the differences with other trends are less distinct: Firstly, the use and reception of tradition: My focus group read traditional literature. Even though they verbally distinguished themselves from those who follow the *taqālīd*, a term often used for human traditions, which they saw as deviations from Islam, the question remains as to how far their Islamic ideal is nevertheless influenced or derived from traditions rather than from original sources. In addition, they were very practically oriented, something which they had in common with ‘neo-traditionalists’. Secondly, apologetic issues such as the discrimination of women or scientific questions were addressed in ways that can have a lot in common with modernist thinking. For example, an Islamist student at the Sharia College of Damascus University explained to me the egalitarian view of men and women in Islam.

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<sup>17</sup> Comp. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Jihad in Syria," Accessed 25.06.2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/jihad-in-syria-by-aymenn-jawad-al-tamimi/>.

To prove this in the case of polygamy she used Muhammad Abduh's (1849-1905) argument, saying:

The Qur'an allows the man to marry more than one woman only on the condition that he treats both totally equally. No man can do that, so the Qur'an practically forbids marrying more than one wife.<sup>18</sup>

Yet this argument did not hold her back from expressing other more conservative Islamist views, during the same conversation:

The Qur'an provides for the situation when [polygamy] is necessary because of the nature of men, e.g. when the first wife cannot have children, or when she gets older and doesn't want to sleep with her husband as often as he wishes.<sup>19</sup>

This example shows how women in my research focus group tried to make sense of their religion in the context of modern ideas, sometimes through harmonising, sometimes through apologetics. These observations coincide with Reuter's (1998) research among Islamist women in Cairo, who detected a tendency towards a new emphasis on gender equality while at the same time neglecting the issue of discrimination of women under sharia law.<sup>20</sup> However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, the rejection of *taqālīd* and the hope of finding 'true Islam' through the correct interpretation, and a radical, purist adherence to its practices, play such an important role in their developments that the term 'Islamist' seems more suitable than 'neo-traditionalist'.

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<sup>18</sup> Comp. Sura 4:3 and 4:129; concerning Abduh comp. Wiebke Walther, "Die Situation von Frauen in islamischen Ländern," in *Der Islam in der Gegenwart*, ed. Werner Ende and Udo Steinbach (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), 640.

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Nasrin, Damascus, 12.06.2007.

<sup>20</sup> Comp. Reuter, *Gelebte Religion: Religiöse Praxis junger Islamistinnen in Kairo*: 59 and 83.

My understanding of my participants as ‘Islamist’ was questioned when I realised that many of the devout Muslim women I had met were in some way connected with Sufism. Generally Islamism is seen as condemning Sufi thought and waging war against Sufi practices.<sup>21</sup> However, Commins (1990) and Weisman (2001; 2007a) have argued that historically Islamist and Salafi movements have been less antagonistic to Sufism in Syria than in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, or even in some cases, like in the propagation of Sa’id Hawwa (1935-1989), identical. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Damascene scholars like Abd al-Bitar al-Razzaq (1837-1917) propagated salafi thought in combination with a reformed Sufism, practicing those Sufi elements which he saw as coherent with orthodox Islam and rejecting others.<sup>22</sup> Hawwa was a leading ideologist of the Islamic revival, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama and a Sufi sheikh. He propagated what he called *salafi tasawwuf*.<sup>23</sup> He criticised Wahhabi Islam for rejecting Sufism in general, arguing that knowledge without Sufi devoutness and practice remained without the power to change a person to truly submit to God.<sup>24</sup> According to Commins and Weismann, the tendency for the last 200 years has been towards greater commitment to ‘orthodoxy’ especially of the Naqshibandi and Shadhili Sufi orders, the most widely spread orders in Syria.

Additionally, in the past, members of Sufi orders have shared the Islamist goal of

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A short introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2000). 29; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and anti-Sufis: The defense, rethinking and reflection of Sufism in the modern world* (London: Curzon Press, 1999); Valerie J Hoffman, *Sufism, mystics, and saints in modern Egypt* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995). 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Itzhak Weismann, "al-Bitar, Abd al-Razzaq," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*. Accessed 02.07.2013, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-bitar-abd-al-razzaq-COM\\_23479](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-bitar-abd-al-razzaq-COM_23479).

<sup>23</sup> ‘Salafi Sufism’; comp. Itzhak Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba'athist Syria," *Studia Islamica* 85(1997): 140.

<sup>24</sup> Paulo G. Pinto, "Dangerous Liaisons: Sufism and the State in Syria," in *Crossing Boundaries: From Syria to Slovakia*, ed. S. Jakelic and J. Varsoke (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellow's Conferences, 2003).

Islamising society and government in Syria, mainly through the reform of the individual, but in some cases also through violence.<sup>25</sup> This agrees with the practices and beliefs of the Syrian women with Sufi connections that I have met. They emphasised orthodoxy and the observance of the sharia as well as elements of Sufi religiosity, arguing for the latter on the basis of the Qur'an and *aḥadīth* (sing.: *ḥadīth*), the traditions. On this basis, they would also criticise other traditional practices as un-Islamic and see the traditional Muslim religiosity of their society as a corrupted form of the ideal Muslim community. Yet they combined a focus on orthodox faith and sharia conform practice, with a focus on devoutness and the desire to shape their inner beings and emotionality through Sufi practices like *dhikr* (meditation).

Sufism was influential in the women's *da'wa* movement because historically, Sufism has been more inclusive of women as religious authorities. Even though they were usually not the formal leaders of Sufi orders, many were sought as spiritual guides and teachers like the legendary Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d.801).<sup>26</sup>

Generally, the affiliation of my participants with Sufism fluctuated. Some were formal members of orders, others had left formal membership behind but kept some Sufi practices, still others would sometimes take part in such practices. Dunya, for example, became a disciple of the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya, and later changed her affiliation to the Shadhiliyya. She also took part in *dhikr* sessions of other Sufi orders. Sufi *dhikr*, the

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<sup>25</sup> Itzhak Weismann, "Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel - a Contemporary Overview," Accessed 30.06.2007, <http://www.ou.edu/mideast/Additional%20pages%20-%20non-catagory/Sufism%20in%20Syriawebpage.htm>; Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba'athist Syria," 132.

<sup>26</sup> Hoffman discusses this aspect in: Hoffman, *Sufism, mystics, and saints in modern Egypt*. 228-30 and 32-33.

meditative worship, and the mentor relationship between teacher and disciple as practiced among Sufis significantly impacted my participants' journeys towards devoutness. I will argue in this research that often, this combination of Sufi elements with Islamism specifically attracted them and shaped their journey.

## 1.2 The importance of researching the role of devout Muslim women in Syria

Part of today's growing polarisation between the West and the Muslim East is the Western image of Muslim women, who are often seen as victims of both traditional Islam and Islamism. As Leila Ahmed (1992) has shown, this categorical judgment goes back to a long history of using Muslim women as boundary markers.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Islamic feminism, which has gained some interest in the West, is relevant only to a minority of intellectuals, while according to my observations the masses of Muslim women in Syria are either oblivious to the discussions or reject many of their conclusions as un-Islamic.<sup>28</sup> Both the Orientalist and the feminist perception ignore that many Muslim women claim to live a certain expression of Islam because of their own religious convictions. This has led to the marginalisation of Islamist women's devoutness in Western research.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). 150-55.

<sup>28</sup> For representative examples of many conversations with Syrian women on this subject see 5.4.3, page 190-195, and 6.3.1, page 254-258.

<sup>29</sup> I discuss this in 1.3, page 21-29.

Yet, in Syria, in the years between the defeat of the Muslim Brothers in 1983 and the beginning of the uprising in 2011, large parts of the Muslim population turned towards Islam, parallel to the developments in other Arab countries. After a short period of apparent secularism during the 1970s and 1980s when Islamic dress had more or less disappeared from the streets of Damascus and men shaved off their beards in fear of being seen as Islamists, religious symbols had a huge comeback: Hijabs, face veils and black gloves had become a normal sight in the main shopping areas in the city centre, Islamic flags and banners were hung during religious holidays, and religious book stores and private Islamic schools increased. This revival happened at all levels of society: the popular level, the Islamist, and, at least rhetorically, the governmental-official level.<sup>30</sup>

The renewed vigour of Islamic religiosity and apparent conservatism alienated parts of the more secular and non-Muslim population and seemed to justify their fears of Islamist tendencies.<sup>31</sup> Wahhabi tendencies were noticeable, especially amongst some of those Syrians who returned home from periods of working in Saudi Arabia. However, Islamism generally seemed to be of a more tolerant kind, at least on the surface, which may partly have been due to the political situation in the country; even though Islamists were explicit and public about the goal of a changed society, it was only related to questions of morality

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<sup>30</sup> I discuss this in detail in Chapter 3.2, page 75-82. Similarly comp. Anders Strindberg, "Letter from Damascus: Syria under pressure," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 4 (2004). Joshua M. Landis, "Islamic education in Syria: Undoing secularism'," Accessed 29.09.2005, [http://www.WatsonInstitute.org/events\\_detail.cfm?id=329](http://www.WatsonInstitute.org/events_detail.cfm?id=329); Roula Khalaf, "Bashar al-Assad is making unfamiliar displays of piety to defuse Islamist discontent with his rule," *Financial Times*, 11.05. 2006.

<sup>31</sup> I am discussing this more in-depth in 3.2.1, page 82-87, and 3.3, 87-94. Concerning the implications for the *da'wa* movement see 6.1, page 219-236.

and piety. Islamists that were perceived as a possible political opposition to the government were imprisoned.<sup>32</sup>

The outward appearance of Islamist women had become a symbol of the influence of Islamism in society. The ban of the *niqāb* in schools and universities in June 2010, which was lifted in April 2011 illustrates this.<sup>33</sup> The discourse within the *da'wa* movement focuses constantly on women's behaviour and clothing: subjects like proper Islamic dress, how to lead your daughter towards accepting the hijab, or the dangers of the immodestly dressed woman take up a lot of space in classes, TV shows and books, while remaining silent on the issue of men's clothes, or only mentioning in an Appendix that they, also, should dress modestly. During my year as a auditing student at the Sharia College of Damascus University in 2005/2006, students would challenge me to become *mutahajjaba*, a woman wearing a headscarf, or even *munaqqaba*, a woman wearing a *niqāb*, just as much as they would challenge me to accept Muslim doctrine. It is difficult to say whether this focus is mainly a reaction to Western stereotyping.<sup>34</sup> Reuter (1998) suggests that the Muslim woman is not only a central symbol of Islamism, but also the link to the one area

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<sup>32</sup> e.g. in June 2007 Abdel Jabbar Allawi was sentenced to death, but had his punishment commuted to 12 years' imprisonment, for membership of the Muslim Brotherhood: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=20961>; see as well PuriNaresh Puri, "UK man tells of 'kidnap' in Syria," Accessed 01.07.2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/6651793.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6651793.stm).

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Landis, "The niqab and Syria's private girls schools," Accessed 23.09.2010, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=6910>.

<sup>34</sup> This is indirectly how Ustaz Muhammad, a teacher at the ANC who asked to remain anonymous, explained to me why the Islamic discourse focuses on women:

Women issues take up a large part of our thinking because of the obligation that is put on the men to protect and provide for them. The Muslim East and the West agree on all other subjects of conduct. But concerning the ethics of gender relations and women the West is changing towards secularist extremism while Islam has remained moderate. This causes a lot of debate among the Muslims.

Interview in the ANC, Damascus, 03.07.2007.

in real life that Islamism has a hold on, the private sphere, because no society can claim to have realised the Islamist ideals of an Islamic state.<sup>35</sup> Trying to change society through changing the individual, families are the basic cells in which Islamism is lived and passed on. Women as mothers play the central role in this.

Serving as the symbol of Muslim identity shows the importance that women play in the Islamist movements. The fact that the image of the extremely veiled woman has been used to push the Islamist agenda in the political and social sphere has monopolised the focus of research, and yet the religious questions and answers that many of these women seek and offer have been neglected. Seemingly unengaged with the public sphere, these women are easily judged as conservative conformists and legalists. Such judgements hinder understanding and dialogue. Rather, by engaging in *da'wa*, many Islamist women rise up to the challenges of secularism, materialism, and other alternative worldviews that have become accessible in radically new ways.

Women are not only a symbol in the discourse between East and West, they are an important key for the general understanding of Islamist movements, as a measure of its extent as well as its means of perpetuation. To understand this development, it is important to hear what they themselves say about their motivations, experiences and apprehensions because it is through the individual that the movement first begins to impact society.

Recently, I have been questioned as to whether it is legitimate to focus research on Islamist women at a time when Islamist parties and militias are trying, and often succeeding, to

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<sup>35</sup> Reuter, *Gelebte Religion: Religiöse Praxis junger Islamistinnen in Kairo*: 83.

dominate the political and social sphere in many Arab countries. For example, since the Arab Spring in 2011, the parties of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists have manoeuvred themselves into power in Egypt and Tunisia respectively. Reports from Syria mention atrocities committed by Islamist militias in the name of Islam.<sup>36</sup> Is it justifiable to try to understand the motivations, aims and practices of Islamist women and to paint a picture of their lives as a credible interpretation of Islam? Writing this research I do not aim to give undue space to Islamism or marginalise the secular voices among Syrian Muslim women. However, whether or not I sympathise with my participants' zeal or dislike the oppressive reality of some Islamist groups, according to my observations the women's *da'wa* movement was the most prevalent trend among women in pre-Arab Spring Syria. Understanding Islamist women is necessary to understand the transformations that have happened since then.

However, I am aware that my focus will show only certain sides of the picture. Ingersoll (2002) argues that the recent trend in research on women in conservative religious groups and the attempt to respect their interpretations leads to silencing the feminist voice and supporting the status quo, because the theory that conservative religions empower women is true for some, but excludes the fact that many women struggle with it.<sup>37</sup> This is certainly

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<sup>36</sup> Such as Matthew Barber, "The Raqqa Story: Rebel structure, planning, and possible war crimes," Accessed 25.06.2013, [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-raqqa-story-rebel-structure-planning-and-possible-war-crimes/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A%20Syriacomment%20%28Syria%20Comment%29](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-raqqa-story-rebel-structure-planning-and-possible-war-crimes/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A%20Syriacomment%20%28Syria%20Comment%29); Matthew Barber, "Oil Wars - Nusra's Expanding reach - Syrian Taliban," Accessed 25.06.2013, [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/oil-wars-nusras-expanding-reach-syrian-taliban/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/oil-wars-nusras-expanding-reach-syrian-taliban/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29).

<sup>37</sup> Julie Ingersoll, "Against univocality: Re-reading ethnographies of conservative protestant women," in *Personal knowledge and beyond: Reshaping the ethnography of*

true for Muslim women, but in the Western academic perception the feminist voice is widely heard, and the voice that speaks about empowerment and the ‘new mobility’ that Islamism offers is gaining ground, but the religious values and interpretations that many women offer themselves are too often overlooked. Thus my research adds another voice to the ‘multivocality’ that Ingersoll demands to gain a more truthful picture.

### 1.3 Women and the Islamic revival in prior research

The Islamic revival and its attraction for women was little mentioned in literature on Muslim women a couple of decades ago because of the prevailing view that Muslim women were more involved in ‘folk religion’ and superstition than in ‘orthodox’ Islam.<sup>38</sup> Many books dealing with the Islamist movement in general still barely address the role that women play in it,<sup>39</sup> yet from the 1990s onwards, researchers have taken a growing interest in this subject because of the growing visibility of female participation in the Islamist movement e.g. in the Iranian revolution and the Algerian civil war. This is reflected in the inclusion of two texts related to women and the Islamic revival in the second edition of

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*religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 163f.

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim world* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Jane I. Smith, ed. *Women in contemporary Muslim societies* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> Such as John L Esposito, *The Islamic threat: Myth or reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Khaled Abou El-Fadl, *The great theft: wresting Islam from the extremists* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

*Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* in 2002,<sup>40</sup> which the first edition in 1993 did not contain. Many publications focus on the reasons why Muslim women are starting to wear the veil.<sup>41</sup> The one-sided emphasis on this phenomenon in Western research means that other elements of women's roles in Islamism have been overlooked. My research therefore focuses on the religious self-perception and sentiment in relation to religious practices in the context of personal biographies to aim at a more complete understanding of Islamist women.

Most of these studies are concerned with the question of whether Muslim practices, and more specifically Islamism, are oppressive or liberating for women, along with the political, economic and social implications of the new veiling.<sup>42</sup> The compliance of Muslim women with apparently gender-discriminating practices has been explained mainly in two ways: either through Post-colonial theory, which understands the phenomenon in the context of resistance and protest to the political, economic and cultural domination of the West, or through the theory that Islamism empowers women, granting greater mobility and participation in the public sphere. In this vein, Kamla (n.d.) discusses practical

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<sup>40</sup> Annabelle Böttcher, "Islamic teaching among sunni women in Syria," in *Everyday life in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A Early (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "The veiled revolution," in *Everyday life in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A Early (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> E.g. Wilhelmina Jansen, "Contested identities: Women and religion in Algeria and Jordan," in *Women and Islamization*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Soraya Duval, "New veils and new voices: Islamist women's groups in Egypt," in *Women and Islamization*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Karin Werner, *Between Westernization and the Veil: Contemporary Lifestyles of Women in Cairo* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Sondra Hale, "Ideology and Identity: Islamism, Gender, and the State in Sudan," in *Mixed Blessings: Gender and religious Fundamentalism cross culturally*, ed. Judy Brink and Joan Mencher (New York: Routledge, 1997); A. E. Macleod, *Accommodating protest: working women and the new veiling and change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

advantages of veiling for Syrian women, such as freedom from consumerism and increased chances of employment or marriage.<sup>43</sup> While aspects such as political resistance and the advantages of cultural and social empowerment are present in the lives of my participants, the question of personal power, compliance and choice is much more ambiguous than suggestions that see the root of the phenomenon in practical compromises, because the lengths to which these devout women go cannot be sufficiently explained through the above theories. The research focus on these theories has side-lined the religious dimensions of their choices. For example, in *Muslim women's choices: Religious belief and reality* El-Solh and Mabro (1995) argue that the West has overemphasised the role that Islam has played in shaping cultures that are to a certain degree oppressive to women.<sup>44</sup> Their volume contains articles with a wide geographical and cultural scope. The two chapters that deal with the Islamic revival in Nigeria and the Philippines interpret women's involvement in terms of social and political empowerment.<sup>45</sup> The editors' evaluation of the diversity of situations of Muslim women is a necessary reminder of how their lives are influenced by a multitude of aspects and not just by Islam, yet the volume omits the religious dimensions of Muslim societies. A record of Islamist women is missing in this book.

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<sup>43</sup> Rania Kamla, "Syrian women accountants' attitudes and experiences of the hijab in the context of globalisation," Accessed 05.05.2012,

[http://www.organizzazione.unina.it/cms7/proceedings/proceedings\\_stream\\_33/Kamla.pdf](http://www.organizzazione.unina.it/cms7/proceedings/proceedings_stream_33/Kamla.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Camilia Fawzi El-Solh and Judi Mabro, "Introduction: Islam and Muslim women," in *Muslim women's choices: Religious belief and social reality*, ed. Camilia Fawzi El-Solh and Judi Mabro (Oxford, Providence, RI: Berg, 1995), 19-20.

<sup>45</sup> Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali, "Islam and gender: The Nigerian case," in *Muslim women's choices: Religious belief and social reality*, ed. Camilia Fawzi El-Solh and Judi Mabro (Oxford, Providence, RI: Berg, 1995); Jacqueline Siapno, "Gender relations and Islamic Resurgence in Mindanao, Southern Philippines," in *Muslim women's choices: Religious belief and social reality*, ed. Camilia Fawzi El-Solh and Judi Mabro (Oxford, Providence, RI: Berg, 1995).

Egyptian Islamist women have been the subject of a number of publications. Reuter (1998), for example, argues that Egyptian Islamist women gain a positive self-perception and theoretical power through the highly idealistic responsibilities for the welfare of the Muslim community that Islamist teaching ascribes to them.<sup>46</sup>

The literature on Syrian Islamist women is very limited. Annabel Böttcher has written a number of texts in which she explores, among other questions, Islamic tendencies among Syrian women. In *Islamic teaching among Sunni women in Syria* (2002) she describes how Islamic education of women in Syria and their access to religious knowledge is changing the society.<sup>47</sup> In *Portraits of Kurdish women in contemporary Sufism* (2001)<sup>48</sup> and *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad* (1998)<sup>49</sup> Böttcher describes the women's activities at the ANC. Her research focus is on the relationship between the religious leadership and the Syrian government under Hafez al-Asad. Böttcher analyses mainly political factors that caused women to turn towards devout Islam, as the government tried to channel the religious interest it could not quench through promoting Islam in pro-government institutes and mosques, while Islamists targeted women because in a traditional Sunni society women's religious activities are less accessible to the government. Focusing on the political dimensions of Syrian religious life, Böttcher offers many insights into the organisation of one of the most prominent groups of the non-militant Islamist movement in Syria and its relations to the government. Yet the religious motivations that drive women to join the

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<sup>46</sup> Reuter, *Gelebte Religion: Religiöse Praxis junger Islamistinnen in Kairo*.

<sup>47</sup> Böttcher, "Islamic teaching among sunni women in Syria."

<sup>48</sup> Annabelle Böttcher, "Portraits of Kurdish women in contemporary Sufism," in *Women of a non-state nation: The Kurds*, ed. S Mojab (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Annabelle Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad* (Freiburg i. Br.: Arnold Bergstrasser Institut, 1998).

Islamist movement are not the focus of her research. In contrast, in this thesis I will explore their motivations in depth.

Similarly, a few articles on devout Syrian women have been published recently. Kamla (n.d.) returned to the question of why women are choosing the hijab and understands it as a tool to negotiate space and mobility in a patriarchal society.<sup>50</sup> Kalmbach (2008) discusses the limited female religious leadership<sup>51</sup> and describes the trans-national character of the Islamic women's network of the Qubaisiyat.<sup>52</sup> While I am building on these different research projects, none of them gives an in-depth answer to the question why many Syrian women are becoming devout.

Islamist women's devoutness has been the research subject of two recent publications. Most prominently, Saba Mahmood (2005) wrote about the women's mosque movement in Egypt in *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*.<sup>53</sup> In her book, Mahmood aims to answer the question why Egyptian Muslim women apparently choose to accept the limitations of Islamist interpretations, rather than supporting the re-interpretations of their religious sources by Muslim feminists. Based on her field research on women's *da'wa* and religious lessons in mosques in Cairo in 1995-1997, she concludes that the women belonging to the women's mosque movement have chosen to model their

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<sup>50</sup> Kamla, "Syrian women accountants' attitudes and experiences of the hijab in the context of globalisation".

<sup>51</sup> Hilary Kalmbach, "Social and religious change in Damascus: One case of female Islamic religious authority," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Islam, "The Qubaisiyat: The Growth of an international Muslim Women's Revivalist movement from Syria (1960 - 2008) " in *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (Leiden, Bosten: Brill, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*.

lives on their perception of authentic piety. Accordingly, she argues that female agency cannot be understood exclusively in terms of feminist theory as resistance and liberation, but that her research participants' choices of moral practices with the goal of shaping the inner pious self, demonstrate an alternative female agency in their particular cultural and historical context.

With a similar purpose of questioning the Western view of Islamist women, Lara Deeb studied the notions of piety and modernity among Shi'ite women in Beirut. In *An enchanted modern: Gender and public piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (2006) she argues that the 'Western' notion of 'being modern', which sees modernity and secularism as inseparable, is only one possible understanding. In comparison, her research focus group's notion of modernity was based on material, as well as spiritual, progress.<sup>54</sup> According to Deeb, the Islamist search to establish 'true Islam' is a modern process to 'authenticate' Islam. Her research focus group understood spiritual progress as the process to establish the true meaning and character of Islam, which happened through the acquisition of textual religious knowledge and everyday conversations in which her participants exchanged information and ideas, shaping each others' views. At the same time, the authenticity of personal piety became visible through public displays of piety with religious and social activism going hand in hand. Deeb pays special attention to the social community work that her participants undertake as a vehicle of female resistance against economic and political oppression.

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<sup>54</sup> Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: Gender and public piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Mahmood's and Deeb's research show some parallels between devout Muslim women in Lebanon and Egypt and my Syrian participants, which validate my observations and analysis. Yet the different religious, social, cultural, economic and political contexts necessarily lead to distinct pictures and analysis of Muslim women's piety. This is especially obvious in the areas of social activism and Sufi influences: Deeb showed in her research that Shi'ite women in Beirut gained a new visibility mainly through social activism. The Syrian women participating in my research have also moved into the public sphere yet this mostly happened through religious activism using both visibility and hiddenness as I will discuss in Chapter 6.1. Looking at Mahmood's study, Sufism and its strong focus on divine love apparently plays no role in the Egyptian mosque movement among women, in contrast to my participants' lives, as I will deliberate in 7.2.2 and 7.4.3.

These differences demonstrate the diversity among Islamist Muslim women and the need to research and understand them in their particular contexts. In addition, while I share with Mahmood and Deeb the goal of challenging the monolithic view of pious Muslim women as either oppressed and passive or utilizing religion to gain power, their research answers different questions to my research. Deeb's main argument is, that for her participants, modernity and piety are not incompatible, but necessary mutually influencing aspects of their worldview, which she describes as both 'enchanted,' (as opposed to materialistic), and modern. This focus in Deeb's research highlights a difference between the Lebanese and the Syrian context, because claiming 'modernity' did not play an important role in my participants' discourse. Their claims of not being 'backward' (*mutakhallifin*) in apologetic contexts, is often linked with the claim of not being 'terrorists', showing their awareness of

Western stereotyping.<sup>55</sup> However, this question was rarely discussed among themselves, nor did it feature in lessons.

Mahmood uses a philosophical approach to understand the women's mosque movement in terms of the Aristotelian concept of *habitus*. In her fascinating discussion of her participants' religious lives, she shows how the performance of pious acts is used to train and create the permanent pious character that her participants desire. However, her research triggers the question as to where this desire for piety comes from in the first place. Mahmood refers to the underlying social and cultural discourse in Egyptian society, yet this does not explain why some Egyptian women desire to become pious and others do not, nor how women make the transition to become agents of their own piety. It is this gap that I am aiming to bridge with my research. Therefore, I am looking at the development of particular women to understand their desire to change in the context of their personal past, present and future. The wider *da'wa* movement is the context in which my participants experienced this change. Looking at the construct of 'true Islam' in the Syrian context, I focus on how religious activism among my participants succeeds because of the desire for authenticity in the context of self-perception before God.

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Deeb also introduces the claim of modernity versus backwardness in the context of Western – Muslim relations, comp. *Ibid.*, 3.

#### 1.4 My research and the Syrian uprising since March 2011

I finished my field research in Syria in June 2011. Since then, from what I hear and read Syrian society has changed immensely as the country has slipped into a brutal civil war and groups of Islamists have surfaced, monopolising the news about the ongoing uprising in Syria today. This poses the question whether the evidence of militant Islamism invalidates my research conclusions about the central importance of devoutness in the Islamist movement among women. Unfortunately I cannot include these recent developments in my research as information that comes out of Syria is contradictory and confusing. I also have lost contact with nearly all my participants as phone lines and internet connections have become unreliable, and the very rare conversations remain vague and superficial. However, the following observations support that the current violence in the name of Islam should not be understood a consistent continuation of the Islamist trend before the uprising.

During the first five months of the uprising, militant Islamism played no important role even though the government labelled the protestors as Islamist terrorists from the very beginning. Demonstrators in all major cities picked up slogans that denounced political Islam and sectarianism. It was, and is, impossible to say how strong different elements within the protest movement were exactly, because of the absence of any systematic data collection and the fragmentary nature of all evidence. To my knowledge, until June 2011 no religious demands were made nor were religious concepts used to mobilize people. That does not mean that the protests were free from religious language or symbols. However, they were used in general or even explicitly inclusive ways. With the rising numbers of

killed protesters more religious slogans were used, e.g. the popular *al-janna rayhīn*, *shuhadā' bi-l-malayīn*: 'To heaven we go, millions of martyrs.' However, I observed the expressed hope of divine justice in the face of death rather than religious militancy.

So long as the authoritarian government in Syria successfully suppressed all expression of political opposition in the country, the invisibility of a political Islamist movement led to all kinds of speculations about the secret strength of under-cover Islamist groups and the influence of the exiled Muslim Brotherhood. The protests opened up a new opportunity for political activism, which the Islamist groups did not take during the early months. At this stage my research participants were split about 50-50 when it came to the support of the protests.<sup>56</sup>

It seems from all these observations, that the growing phenomenon of militant Islamism from summer 2011 onwards originated from the radicalisation of parts of the protest movement in response to the failure to succeed and the violence of the government, not from an intrinsic bias among Islamists. The failure to distinguish between militant Islamists and Islamists aiming at devoutness, bred fear between different groups of the population and, according to many conversations during the early months, an acceptance of the abuse of political power among those Syrians who supported the government.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Acc. to conversations and interviews March 2011 – June 2011; e.g. Zaynab supported the government (Interview, Damascus, 18.06.2011) while Farida supported the uprising (Interview, Damascus, 16.06.2011).

<sup>57</sup> Comp. for similar observations "Syria in Fragments: Divided minds, divided lives," Accessed 08.07.2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syria-in-fragments-divided-minds-divided-lives-by-an-american-in-syria/>.

These thoughts reinforce the relevancy of my research focus to grasp the appeal of the religious dimensions of Islamism for women. Even though it is yet unclear whether militant Islamism is going to be a permanent strong influence in Syria, a better appreciation of the women's *da'wa* movement during the last 30 years will promote greater understanding of recent developments once more data is accessible.

## 1.5 Structure of this thesis

In the following chapter I will discuss the different methods I used to collect and analyse my data, and reflect on the challenges of researching and understanding Muslim women's devoutness from the bias of a Christian and Western academic.

I will show in Chapter 3 how the Islamic revival in Syria has been particularly influenced by the confrontation between Islamist groups and the Baath government during the 1970s and 1980s, because in its wake, the strong trend towards secularisation turned towards a renewed religiosity. The ensuing acceptance or rejection of religious choices as well as the government's attempts to control the Islamic milieu, shaped my participants' journeys through support and opposition.

In Chapter 4, looking at the history of the development of the women's *da'wa* movement in Syria as one manifestation of the Islamic revival, I will discuss the major changes in secular and religious education as well as the changes concerning female morality and

roles that facilitated it. Finally, I will explore the educational activities of the *da'wa* movement and the way it recruits. Looking at the *da'wa* movement will shed light on the external factors that initiated and permitted my participants to move beyond traditional Islamic practice and sentiment.

Chapter 4 contains my case studies of the religious developments of five women, three *dā'iyāt* and two women on the margins of the *da'wa* movement. Based on in-depth interviews, I will explore their family backgrounds, developments, their current religious commitments and the way they understand themselves as women who are reaching out for devoutness, portraying their individual personalities and histories as well as delineating the parallels between their stories. Emphasising my participants' own interpretations of their journeys, each particular case will add unique facets to the understanding of the attractiveness of Islamism to some Muslim women.

In the last two chapters I will look at the differences and similarities between my participants and analyse the different aspects that promoted the turn towards devoutness in their lives. As a framework for my analysis I discuss the question of whether Islamism has been empowering for my participants or not, and how 'becoming a true Muslim' has helped them to gain greater satisfaction in their lives. In Chapter 5, I will argue that the social empowerment of Syrian women through the *da'wa* movement cannot explain the phenomenon sufficiently. Therefore, I will analyse the meaning that my participants assigned to the question of empowerment as a religious category in Chapter 6.

Throughout my analysis I will demonstrate that, while the cultural, social and political developments facilitated my participants' journeys, their desires to gain a meaningful, emotionally satisfying and correct religious practice and love of God in the hope of divine reward in the hereafter were their major motivations. Thus I hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of devout Islamist women according to their values and self-perception in the Syrian context.

## 2 METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In my research, I follow an ethnographic approach to come to a presentation and an understanding of the research participants' point of view. At the outset of my research I planned to focus mainly on interviews and use participant observation of my informants' lives to deepen my understanding of the interviews. However, eventually I used a number of tools. Religious questions were part of many everyday conversations and I had already started to take notes of information and opinions that shed some light on how my Syrian friends and acquaintances related to these questions. In my writing I have therefore identified the source of such data as conversations, as distinguished from the intentional, planned interviews that I have listed in Appendix 9.2. Opportunities for interviews developed out of these conversations, either directly with my acquaintance or I was passed on to someone else that my acquaintance deemed helpful for my research. However, the difficulties to find enough women who were willing to participate in in-depth interviews about their personal lives, that I discuss in Section 2.3., led me to try different approaches. When I met two *da'iyāt*, Sawda, who invited me to partake in her private lesson, and a few months later Zaynab, who introduced me to Rajab Deeb's public lesson at ANC, I initially followed their invitation to widen my research network and find more interview partners. As the list in 9.2. shows, I had already attended some religious events before joining these two lessons regularly. Yet the frequent attendance of these and further lessons proved to be an invaluable source of learning more about the *da'wa* practice and discourse, the religious concepts that played a role in attracting women to the movement, and how the women within the movement related to each other, though only two of my case studies, that of

Sawda and of Zaynab, resulted from my attendance. The other three case studies ensued from my personal network independent of mosque lessons.

Another tool I used was a small survey of women's dress in three shopping locations in the city centre of Damascus. The need for this kind of data collection arose from the fact that some of my interview partners offered observations concerning extreme forms of Islamic dress, which contradicted my own estimations that a significant portion of extremely veiled women had become part of the modern public business areas of Damascus. I decided to verify either observation as well as the common claims of how many women veil through a quantitative survey of the dress of 1882 women in total and discuss this survey in 6.1.1.

While in my case studies I focus on individual women's narratives of their religious journeys according to one to three interviews of varying lengths for each case study, using these different methods of data collection has enabled me to situate my case studies in the context of an exploration of the women's *da'wa* movement and to examine the validity of my analysis of the interviews against this backdrop. This was of particular importance because as a non-Muslim, studying the religious experiences, ideals and lives of Muslim women I faced a number of methodological challenges that needed to be dealt with so that my research project would result in valid, reliable knowledge. In the following, I reflect on the theory of how to study a subject that is related to claims of metaphysical truths and experiences through ethnographic research methods. Then I discuss my identity as an 'outsider' in relationship with my research. And finally I discuss my research practice. These reflections will help to disclose how my identity and bias have affected this research as part of the process of validating it.

## 2.1 Reflections on the theory of ‘methodological atheism’ in the study of Religion

As I have discussed in 1.2 and 1.3 the devoutness of Islamist women has not received adequate attention in Western research. This is due partly to the difficulty of evaluating faith-related notions from a secular point of view. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of the phenomenological school, argued that sociological research should only be concerned with what can be proven and demonstrated, and that therefore other dimensions should be ‘bracketed out’. In the case of the study of religion, this means that research should only be concerned with the social dimensions of religion. Religion as a cultural and social structure is separated from the question of metaphysical truth.<sup>58</sup> In its extreme form, this approach leads to ‘methodological atheism,’<sup>59</sup> the *a priori* judgement that the studied religion is a human projection. This is seen as a guarantee for the neutrality of the researcher. On the contrary, Hufford (1995) argues that an atheistic epistemological approach is not ‘more scientific,’ but just a different kind of bias: Rather, facing the bias of ‘faith,’ scholarly scepticism should ideally lead to the ‘suspension of judgement in the process of gaining certainty’.<sup>60</sup>

If the possibility of metaphysical realities is excluded from the research *a priori* the consequences are huge. From this perspective, research looks at religious acts and sentiments, claiming to describe them with neutrality and disinterested objectivity. The

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<sup>58</sup> acc. to Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). 4-6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 26, note 5.

<sup>60</sup> David J Hufford, "The scholarly voice and the personal voice: Reflexivity in belief studies," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 68-69.

problem is, however, that the descriptions and consequently the interpretations are *a priori* in contradiction of the descriptions and interpretations of the research participants. The specifically religious significance that the participants ascribe to their religious lives is either ignored or judged from the beginning as the projection of something else. Thus, the religious significance is discarded as inferior and invalid; contrary to the evaluations of the 'believers'. This can hardly be called 'neutral' and 'objective'. The claim that neutrality about questions of belief is possible and that this neutrality leads to objectivity is in itself a contradiction to the claims of the 'believers'.

If, for example, a woman tells me that at the beginning of her turning towards greater piety she had a divinely inspired vision of Muhammad, there is scientifically no method to decide whether this happened or not: To assume *a priori* that she had nothing else but a dream and that her evaluation of the dream was an emotional overreaction is not more scholarly than to assume that possibly Muhammad really came and visited her. Both are positions of belief.

The choice of methodological atheism also affects how the participants react towards the researcher. Informants who feel that their beliefs are seen as irrelevant to the understanding of the research subject may rightly feel patronised. Or if they realise that part of what they believe is unacceptable to the researcher, they may exclude those aspects and meanings when talking, because they do not want to be seen as backward or superstitious. The incomplete collected data will lead at best to imbalanced, at worst to incorrect, explanations as the interpretation is reduced to theories that fit into an agnostic world view.

Instead the researcher should be aware of the reductionist tendencies of his own beliefs and make them known, aiming at differentiating between scholarly knowledge on one hand, and the participants' beliefs and the personal beliefs of the researcher on the other. Therefore, how the personal bias and the identity of the researcher influences the research process has to be part of the written account.

In addition, our own worldview acts as a filter to what questions researchers ask, what areas or remarks they think important or not to take note of, or to explain what they see. If they use only secular paradigms to understand religion, they may only find the traits of religion that equal secular life. As Goldstein (1995) has argued, because belief has mostly been treated as 'essentially external to the scope of research,' in the ethnographic research of religion the study of religious meaning has been neglected.<sup>61</sup>

The literature on Muslim women and Islamism gives a good illustration of this problem. Instead of looking at Islamism as a complex religious phenomenon in which a variety of dimensions interact with each other, the prevalence of the question of women's emancipation has led to a focus on the social, economic and political reasons that make women turn towards Islamism. Other dimensions like the ritual, the narrative, or the doctrinal dimension, have consequently been neglected.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Diane E Goldstein, "The secularization of religious ethnography and narrative competence in a discourse of faith," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 23-24.

<sup>62</sup> Comp. Chapter 1.3, page 21-29.

## 2.2 Worldview bias and the power of interpretation

The problems of the impossibility of the neutrality and objectivity of the researcher are further aggravated in research about Muslims. One of the challenges encountered is the various conflicting interests concerning knowledge and interpretation, because the ability to define reality is a question of power. With the current polarisation of the public view and discussions about Muslims and Islam, my research subject is highly emotional, whether it is judged for its apologetic or polemic possibilities. Whenever I explain my research purpose of gaining a better understanding of devout Islamist women, reactions differ according to the worldview, but they are always emotional and often action-oriented. For example, one Syrian student of sharia in her early twenties commented: ‘Great! When you have come to a real understanding you can become a preacher for Islam in your country.’ A British friend said: ‘My first thought is: this must be really interesting for governments who want to stop Muslim women from becoming more extremist.’ A middle-aged man, making small talk after a church service in Germany, asked me: ‘Why are you advocating Islam?’ These reactions show that even the goal of gaining ‘understanding’ is not neutral but depends on the real or assumed intention of the person who seeks it.

In addition to the question of power in the current geopolitical context, the power of interpreting religion is uniquely related to one’s personal worldview because it is impossible to be disinterested in the essential questions that religions claim to answer, like the meaning of life, or the question of whether there is an afterlife or not: Everyone is either a believer or not, and one’s view of life is questioned by the other side, including the secularist perspective. In my research I am constantly confronted with the following

interests: the interest of different Islamic groups to have their particular interpretation of Islam accepted as the correct one; the interest of most Muslims to have Islam in general regarded as the final truth for all humankind; the interest of those sympathetic to Islam to see it depicted as a tolerant religion; the opposite interest of those who see Islam involved in a battle with the West; the vested interest of the women participating in my research to have their faith and practices portrayed as credible; and my personal interest as a Christian to see my own religion respected and recognised as credible by the women I encounter, especially if they question my beliefs.

In concrete terms this is not only a question of simply ‘Muslim’ versus ‘non-Muslim’, ‘atheist’ versus ‘theist’. As a German woman with a conservative protestant upbringing, an education in the context of a Western materialistic worldview and a personal commitment to the Lutheran church I see myself as someone who shares some convictions with both sides of the spectrum. As a believer in a monotheistic faith I have many convictions in common with my participants, but as a believer in critical thinking my approach to knowledge including religious knowledge is shaped in many ways by scepticism and the ideal of critical distance to the subject.

In the face of these challenges it seems unrealistic to claim that objectivity can be reached through disinterestedness. Instead my responsibility as a researcher is to reflect on my emotions and convictions, to be aware of the ways they are affecting my data collection and interpretation, and to identify the different conflicting interests. As a person with my own convictions I do make judgements about questions of metaphysical truth according to

my own worldview. However, through attempting as much transparency as possible I will avoid assigning them the character of research results.

The question of the identity of the researcher is of course not only one of religious convictions and scientific objectivity. Each person has ‘multiple identities’ which also affect the researcher’s relationship to the participants. Whether they see me as an ‘outsider’ or ‘insider’, influences the way they represent themselves to me, and in what ways they see my presence as inviting or threatening. It goes without saying that being a woman is a precondition to this research in a community that practices strict gender segregation. My age and my family status are always of high interest for my informants: Differences, commonalities and cultural hierarchies are usually established as part of the ‘small talk’ during first encounters. For example, to be unmarried and in my thirties puts me at odds with the cultural norm, and as such opens up possibilities to relate to Syrian women who are in the same situation. For these women my identity as an ‘outsider’ to the Syrian cultural norm is attractive because I am seen as being outside the system that judges the value of a woman by her marriage status and motherhood. This is especially relevant for my research because I have encountered a number of female religious activists that are single and have to deal with the additional stigma that their singleness is an expression of religious extremism: Their ‘unnatural’ status is discussed in articles and internet chat rooms,<sup>63</sup> and it is hardly an accident that in the recent Syrian soap opera *Mā malakat*

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<sup>63</sup> comp. e.g. Bisan Al-Sheykh, ""Al-sahariyyat" fi beyrut mu'minat nashitat wa fi madarisihunna munhazat dadda al-sibyan," Accessed 13.5.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/134980>; Nabil Fayad, "Al-khalfiyya al-jinsiyya lil-qubaisiyyāt," *online*. Accessed 09.02.2007, <http://www.annaqed.com>.

'*aymānukum*'<sup>64</sup> the character of an extremist female preacher is portrayed as a middle-aged unmarried woman.<sup>65</sup>

This example demonstrates that there is no simple answer as to whether it serves the research better if the researcher is an 'insider' or an 'outsider'. On the one hand, the 'insider' may have a better general access to informants, and a deeper, long-term knowledge of the history and context of the research group. On the other hand, the closeness can be a handicap because of the emotional connection with which the 'insider' relates to the research subject and participants and which stretches not only into the past but also into the future: Her research will affect her ongoing position and role within the research group. Looking at my religious identity, a Muslim researcher would probably have to deal with her emotional reactions to the claims of 'true Islam' in a much more personal way.<sup>66</sup>

I do not aim at judging any of the claims to be a 'true Muslim' versus 'corrupted' versions of Islam. A meaningful discussion on such a topic, if at all, has to come from within a religion because only Muslims share the same norms in deciding this question on the authority of their sources.<sup>67</sup> Obviously, there are beliefs and norms that are a consensus among the majority of Muslims. However, the problem is that if I label something that my participants see as part of their religious lives as 'un-Islamic' behaviour, thought or

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<sup>64</sup> 'What your right hand possesses'

<sup>65</sup> This series was broadcasted in Syria during Ramadan 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Some Muslims I encountered who distance themselves from Islamism have been the strongest critics concerning the legitimacy of my research.

<sup>67</sup> Contrary to Düzgün, e.g., I do not think that a fruitful theological approach can be based on a common norm of the religious experience of the numinous. Comp. Saban Ali Düzgün, "Contextualizing the term 'religious experience' in theological discourse," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 4 (2004).

interpretation, it has to be explained through external factors and the meaning it has for its adherents may be overlooked.

In the following, I want to look at some of my multiple identities as a researcher and their potential as barriers and bridges towards my research participants:

I observed a great awareness among Syrian Muslim women of the Western research interest in Muslim women in a general way. However this awareness is associated with the sense that the interest of those ‘outside’ of Islam is necessarily directed against Islam and Muslims. Many Muslim women feel that Western researchers have greatly misrepresented them, maybe even ‘twisting’ their words to convey a ‘different meaning’. I was confronted with this again and again as I tried to explain my research goals to Muslims in Syria. As Leila, a student in the *da‘wa* program at the ANC, explained to me:

There is a lot of fear among us [Muslim women] to talk to researchers because Westerners explain Islam in a way that makes us look suppressed even though [our religious practices] are our own choice. We all feel attacked and have to be very careful. It is better not to talk to orientalists. The only way for you as a Christian to get any information is to find a friend who knows that she can trust you.<sup>68</sup>

This quotation addresses four of my multiple identities in my relationship to the research participants. While Leila identifies herself and possible research participants simply as ‘Muslim women’, she labels me as a ‘researcher/orientalist’, a ‘Westerner’, a ‘Christian’ and possibly a ‘friend’. The first three labels describe me as an ‘outsider’ in the cultural,

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Leila, Damascus, 23.06.2007.

religious and functional sense. They have negative implications, such as someone who is untruthful and aggressive: Someone who has a hidden political agenda of domination. To withhold information and not to take part in my research seems the only sensible reaction. However, Leila also pointed to the identity of ‘a friend’ that could possibly bridge the gap, as I proved myself trustworthy nonetheless.

When I started my research in 2006 I expected that my religious and cultural identity would be the highest barrier for my data collection. By that time I had lived for two years in Damascus, first as a language student and then as a listening student at the Sharia Department of Damascus University. Many Syrians were very open to encounters with foreigners. In my experience even strangers on the street or in parks would be interested in exchanging opinions on current affairs with a ‘Westerner’ that was willing to listen to their views. However, higher barriers existed to meeting religious Sunni women, partly due to issues of segregation and lesser mobility. The women of my landlord’s family, for example, who counted themselves among the ‘devout’, rarely went outside the house except for specific errands, covering their faces with a *niqāb*, and the men checked that they returned home promptly. Nevertheless, they truly welcomed me in the context of neighbourly relations. On the other hand, the notion that anyone who does not follow strict gender segregation herself is a bad influence and should be avoided is also not uncommon among conservative Damascenes.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Comp. e.g. the opinions quoted in: Mayar Mnini and Jennifer Mackenzie, "Traditional marriage under the microscope," *Forward Magazine*, no. 43 (2010). In some lessons the listeners were warned against friendships with non-Muslims and the bad influence they would have.

However, when there was a natural platform no barriers seemed to exist: During my time as a listening student, students often had spare hours between classes and many fellow students, no matter how conservative or Islamist, were interested in talking to me, in starting friendships and in telling me about their religious views and experiences. Through my appearance I was easily recognized as a foreigner, whereas my religion was not visible as I was wearing the obligatory hijab. Once the women knew about my religious identity, my being a ‘Christian’ - contrary to my expectations - helped me to form friendships with religious students who as acquaintances explored whether I was a serious believer in a monotheistic faith, and the discovery of similar moral values opened up opportunities for deeper relationships. As to the ‘insider – outsider’ discussion, my religious identity as an outsider considering religious membership and certain doctrinal questions, identified me at the same time as an ‘insider’ to the wider circle of monotheistic believers. This gave me credibility and supported my claims of integrity as a person in a society where someone who can be trusted is often described as *‘khāyif min allah’*, someone who fears God.

When I started my research project I expected that building trust and recognising common ground would also help me to find participants for my research and to gain acceptance of my function as a researcher among my focus group. This proved to be much more difficult than dealing with my cultural and religious identity. Many times during the process of data collection I encountered women who became willing to talk to me when they found out about my research interest or would withhold information in other ways. For example, when I first met Manar, a woman in her thirties who was working on her PhD in *ḥadīth* science at a private Islamic University in Damascus while also pursuing a secular career, she told me about her ‘wild teenage years’, when she had rebelled against her traditional

upbringing and been fascinated by Western culture. However, when I did a formal interview with her about her life story, she refused to talk about this period. In another instance, a friend tried to connect me to her religious teacher who was known for her radical transformation experience. My friend was sure that her teacher, whom she described as a very well educated, open-minded and easily accessible person, would help me. Yet the teacher not only refused to receive me, she also told this friend not to talk to me. Rabi'a, one of the participants of my research, told me when we met for the first formal interview that her two daughters, through whom I had initially met her, warned her not to give me an interview because of the incorrect picture that my research would propagate.

These incidents, and many more like them, show that my identity as a researcher was a much greater handicap for my data collection than being a 'Westerner' or a Christian. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, there were religious, epistemological objections: While as a Christian I could connect with them as someone who was also interested in the question of spiritual truth, my ethnographic research approach ascribes value to the subjectivity of Muslim women's lives. Although all my participants agreed that obviously Muslims live out their religion in different ways, they did not recognise any value in this other than being closer or farther away from living in the one correct Muslim way. From their perspective, nothing could be gained from looking at 'imperfect' human beings. If I was interested in truth, I should study 'true Islam', which meant the original Islamic sources. Looking at people instead was suspicious because if I were not interested in 'true Islam' my agenda would probably be the denigration of Islam.

Secondly, this threat was exacerbated through the public character of research. This concerned not only the loss of control over the information and the question of whether the research would present a distorted picture, but also a general uneasiness of having women's private lives dragged out into the open. Publicity contradicts the cultural value of female seclusion which is seen not necessarily in the sense that women should stay at home, but as the value of not directing attention to women.<sup>70</sup>

Thirdly, there was the question of the political threat and how the research could be used to gain power over my participants. These included the possibility of repercussions from the government or the objections from their own Muslim community who might disagree with the information that they gave me or see a lack of loyalty in their having participated at all; and, again, a denigrated picture of Islam would be used against Muslims in the conflicts between 'Muslims' and 'the West'. For all these reasons my identity as a researcher was perceived as threatening.

Despite these handicaps, some women were still attracted to talk to me as a researcher. While, for example, the cultural value of female seclusion worked against the participation of some women, others took the opportunity to talk about themselves and be listened to. They tried to make sure that I understood what they were talking about, writing down important quotations for me, or encouraging me to use a voice recorder. When I interviewed a private study group of women what they would want to communicate to people in 'the West', their answers showed their emotional interest in having an

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<sup>70</sup> I will discuss this more in depth in Chapter 6.1.1, page 220-228.

opportunity to correct the Western picture of Islam: ‘That we are not terrorists!’ ‘It is the [Muslim] non-believers that are dominating the picture of Islam in the West.’<sup>71</sup>

Another reason for women to seek contact with me was their interest in converting me to Islam. For this group, my identity as a researcher was more promising because of my religious identity: Even though I was an ‘outsider’ they saw me as someone close on the faith spectrum once they had established that I was a person with spiritual interests. Consequently, my interest in Islamic studies was seen as an indicator that I was already on my way to converting, so for some women I became a target of their attempts. The results are a disproportionate number of *dā‘iyat* among the participants as well as a huge amount of *da‘wa* discourse in the data that I collected. This leads to the next area of this chapter, the area of my research practice, where I discuss the reasons and the implications of this.

### 2.3 My research practice and the delineation of my research focus group

As is obvious from the above, the greatest challenge for my research was to find women willing to participate in my research and talk about their religious experiences in a personal way, beyond the standards of their Islamic ideal. This raised the question of how I should introduce myself. For the sake of presenting myself as a morally trustworthy person I decided to adapt my life style to a certain degree to the standards of my research participants: For example I limited my interaction with men and usually did not receive

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<sup>71</sup> Group interview during Sawda’s private lesson, Damascus, 29.11.2008.

male visitors in my home. I changed my wardrobe to long sleeves and mainly long, loose skirts to meet the specific demands of modesty. I did not, though, don the hijab unless asked to, e.g. when attending lessons at mosques, because I decided that this would give me the appearance of a Muslim which would contradict the ethical standards of this research.<sup>72</sup> When I met women through my personal network the reason for my presence in Syria was naturally part of my conversations with Syrians. I introduced myself as a student, doing PhD work in Islamic studies. At the beginning of my research I then described my research project as researching the change towards a religious life of Muslim women. I tried different Arabic terms, such as *tahāwul ʾilā -l-ḥayāt al-dīniya wa -l-ʾiltizām*<sup>73</sup> or *tadayyun al-marʾa al-muslima fī Surīya*<sup>74</sup> or *al-taghyīr ʾilā -l-dīn wa -l-ʾiltizām bayn al-muslimāt*.<sup>75</sup> I soon realised to what degree the objections and emotional barriers I have described in 2.2 affected people in how they saw my research project, no matter in what way I phrased my research interest in Arabic. Then I tried to communicate my personal interest through telling the story of how I came to desire an understanding of very religious Muslim women through Dunya's story.<sup>76</sup> The response to this approach was usually much more sympathetic and opened up opportunities for women to share similar experiences.

In my original research design I had identified two groups that I wanted to focus my research on: students at the Fatih-Institute's program for women, and the Qubaisiyat, a hierarchically-organised movement of women for the propagation of Islam. I had hoped that through researching women's lives in these two groups, I would gain a framework for

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<sup>72</sup> Comp. 2.4, page 57-58.

<sup>73</sup> 'Changing towards a religious life and observance'

<sup>74</sup> 'The growing religiosity among Muslim women in Syria'

<sup>75</sup> 'The change towards religion and observance among Muslim women'

<sup>76</sup> Comp. 1, page 1.

my interpretation through comparing how the different settings and age groups influenced the process of turning to Islamist religiosity.

The possibility of doing research at the Fatih-Institute closed down after meetings with one of the teachers, Amal, a relative of one of the leaders, who told me about the policy of the institute that no non-Muslim was allowed to be involved in the institute or to take part in any of their activities. Even though she was very friendly towards me and helpful in other ways, she said there was no way around this policy.<sup>77</sup> During the following months I focused my energy on gaining access to the Qubaisiyat. I was able to meet a number of their members due to the wide extent of the movement at social functions and visits to homes of acquaintances or via a passed-on contact through one of my Syrian friends. However, none of these contacts led to a second meeting no matter how amiable the first one had been. For example, during the holiday after Ramadan 2008 I went to visit a friend to congratulate her according to the custom in Damascus where relatives, friends and neighbours spend the holidays visiting each other. Usually these are short visits where the guest drinks a cup of coffee and eats some sweets and then moves on to the next visit. Shortly after I had arrived, my friend's aunt came. She was wearing a navy blue *manteau* and the typical blue hijab that marked her as a member of Qubaisiyat. At first she seemed intimidating as she started to rebuke my friend for wearing trousers, and I was glad that I was wearing a long skirt. Soon enough, though, she took an interest in my studies and the visit extended beyond the usual time as we chatted about the importance of mutual understanding between her society and mine. At the end we exchanged phone numbers and she invited me several times to come and visit her. After that, I rang her up a couple of

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Amal, Damascus, 27.06.2007.

times, but she was always busy and could not meet with me. Other women simply did not answer my phone calls. There were a number of instances like this, but never one that turned out differently. In one event another follower of the movement was inviting a friend of mine with very persuasive words to come with her to attend her teacher's lessons in a mosque. I asked if I could join them as well, and she called her teacher for permission. The teacher denied this, and I was never again able to contact this woman. My conclusion from this and many similar experiences is that even if individual members of the Qubaisiyat were potentially be open to start an acquaintance, which could lead to an involvement with my research, it was possibly the leaders who stopped them. This was confirmed in an interview with Jamal Barout, a Syrian academic in social sciences, who said that the government had granted the Qubaisiyat legal status under the condition that they would reject research into their movement.<sup>78</sup> For this practical reason I had to give up my plan to research women within this movement even though the influence of the Qubaisiyat on the religious milieu in Syria has still to be taken into account as part of the context of other women's religious activism.

Even outside these two groups it proved much more difficult to find research participants than I had expected, for the reasons I described under 2.2 Therefore I broadened my approach. To make this research at all possible the group of cases in this study is defined through two characteristics: The first concerned Syrian Sunni women who had turned from nominal membership with little religious observance, or merely traditional practice, to a devoutness that goes beyond the basic demands of religious observance. The second characteristic is that they were willing to participate in my research. To identify these

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009.

women I adopted the method of ‘snowballing’, meeting women through the personal network that I had built over the years in Damascus as well as via the networks of Syrian friends who wanted to help me and who knew about women who had experienced a radical religious change.

Beyond these two common denominators it turned out that nearly all of the research participants had a connection to the ANC. In some cases this connection was indirect; for example one interviewee was recruited through a teacher who went to lessons at ANC, while the interviewee herself had never been there. In other cases the connection was much stronger. For example the private study group that I attended for a year was formally connected to ANC: The teacher who also gave public lessons at ANC, was a disciple of its founder, Ahmad Kuftaro (1915-2004), and her students saw themselves as standing in the line of these sheikhs through their teacher. Together they regularly attended the Friday lessons at ANC. Other participants I met through going to public lessons at the centre. Still, I decided not to limit my case studies to women connected to ANC for the reason that even though there was greater openness to research there, I could still find only a small number of women who fit my focus group and were willing to be interviewed at length.

Looking at the women who were willing to participate in my research raises the question of why they were interested in it and whether there were other common denominators. The most obvious factor is the disproportionate number of *dā‘iyāt*, female preachers. There are a number of reasons for this: The *dā‘iyāt* are more confident and articulate to talk about religious questions to others. In addition, in this milieu, to be active in Islamic *da‘wa* is seen as one of the essential characteristics of the ‘true Muslim’, which explains why there

are many *dā'iyāt* among the devout Muslim women. The most influential reason, however, according to my observations, was the desire of the *dā'iya* to convert me to Islam as a motivation to relate to me. This was enforced by my religious identity because of the prevalent thought among these women that anybody sincerely seeking God will necessarily become a Muslim if they are taught well and come to an understanding of Islam. I communicated that the purpose of my research was a deeper understanding of Islam, even though I was aware of the different meaning this had for me and my participants: from a religious studies approach Islam encompasses, among other dimensions, diverse cultural realities, whereas for my participants, Islam is an objective, unchanging, monolithic and ideal entity. Although I tried to communicate from the beginning that I did not want to participate in religious activities with the goal to convert, many seemed to believe that I was close and only needed some teaching and encouragement.

My research practice has been greatly affected by this because it was necessary to establish my sincerity through showing an interest in 'understanding Islam' but this was not without ambiguities. Over time I changed my interview practice from a list of questions that was only aiming at querying the interviewee's religious development and subjective religious experience to include questions about Islamic teaching to prove the sincerity of my interest. The benefits were that I learned more about the Islamic interpretation of my participants. The downside was that it was sometimes difficult to move on from these questions to conversations about the personal experience of my interviewee.

Another effect was that I shifted largely from conversations and interviews with individuals to mainly participant observation during religious group activities such as

lessons, *mawlid* celebrations (celebrations of saint days, especially Muhammad's birthday), and group *dhikr*, because my research participants were interested in motivating me to take as much part in such activities as possible. In two cases I felt I had been 'lured' to attend lessons under false pretences: I met Sawda for the first time while visiting someone sick at her cousin's. I did not know that she was a preacher when I talked to her about my research. After initial objections to my approach and my attempts to explain why I thought it was valuable, as well as telling Dunya's story, she finally said that there were many women who answered to the description of my focus group in a lesson that was taking place weekly in her home. She invited me to come and see if there would be an opportunity to talk to some of the girls who attended the lesson. It was only when I accepted her invitation that I realised that she herself was the teacher. I attended this group for a year, even though none of the students actually were possible participants for my case studies. In a second case, I was invited in a similar way to attend lessons to be introduced to possible participants, which also never happened.

When I prepared to do this research I decided that I would not talk about my own religion with my research participants except to establish common ground, for the sake of collecting as much unadulterated data as possible. This turned out to be unrealistic. Apart from the fact that my very presence was so much part of the whole process of data collection, in practice the participants did ask many questions about my faith, and to refuse an answer would have been patronising and disrespectful towards them. Looking back on these experiences, rather than aiming at an illusory ideal as if reactivity in this specific research project could be avoided, the awareness that all conversations and interviews always took place in the space between individuals, whose religious convictions, explicitly

or implicitly, questioned each other, was necessarily part of the data collection and analysis.

This leads to the question of how much my own reactivity towards being the receiver of this kind of *da'wa* has influenced my research practice. My emotional responses depended a lot on how this happened and whether I felt respected as a person or de-personified as an 'object' to be converted. There was one instance during a small, public lesson at the ANC where Sawda attacked my beliefs in an extremely aggressive and ridiculing way.<sup>79</sup> I was wondering whether she included this attack especially for my benefit, or whether she thought that after a couple of months my presence as an obstinate 'unbeliever' was unsettling to her followers. In any case, it left me feeling sad and disrespected. Many other times the welcome that I received as a participant in religious activities made me feel included, but it also brought up the issue of where the limits of my participation lay. For example, at the first *mawlid* that I attended with Sawda's followers early on with this group, the women made me get up and dance with them while they were singing religious songs.<sup>80</sup> My feelings were very ambivalent. I enjoyed being included, but afterwards I felt uncomfortable and decided not to do it again. Throughout my research I tried to reflect on my emotional reactions and to pinpoint any tendencies towards women who made me feel attacked or respected, - which could possibly have led to either an estranging or a harmonising picture, and then to analyse how much this bias influenced my observations.

My research findings have also been greatly affected by the interest to convert me: I moved more towards the question of how women were involved in the Islamic *da'wa* and

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<sup>79</sup> Public lesson in the ANC, Damascus, 08.04.2009.

<sup>80</sup> *Mawlid* in Sawda's home, Damacus, 26.07.2008

how *da'wa* affected their lives. Though the participant observation did not give me any direct answers to my original research questions about individual women's religious biographies, it actually opened up the possibility of a framework for understanding the data I collected during conversations and interviews. It gave me the opportunity to observe first-hand how *da'wa* was practiced and made me question whether my original plan to focus my data collection mainly on individual interviews was based on my own cultural assumption that religious choices were experienced predominantly as individual processes. Through these observations I started focusing more on what role the community dimension plays in the process of 'becoming devout'.

Another question that needed in-depth consideration was how much and in what ways the data that I collected from the *dā'iyāt* had been influenced by their motivation to present to me an attractive picture, or to what degree interviews and conversations moved beyond this. My own experiences of the methods of *da'wa* in how my research participants aimed their activism towards me became part of my data.

The exploratory character and the sensitivity of the subject of this research demanded a very flexible research design that needed on-going reassessment. The definition and the delimitation of my research group, while disclosing the practical difficulties of researching women in the Syrian religious milieu, had the benefit that it worked against the 'outsider's' bias towards sensational cases. Especially considering the political emotionality of my research project, to study women who were not part of a pre-defined group helped to reduce problematic labelling and generalisations.

## 2.4 Ethical issues

The hesitation of many Syrian women to take part in my research was also founded in the fear of possible repercussions from the Syrian government. Under the political circumstances at the time, which I will discuss further in Chapter 3, it was of major importance to my participants that I would protect their privacy and conceal their identities. During the years of my field research I was questioned by security personnel four times. Among other questions I was asked for the names of my contacts. For that reason I often got to know women by their first names or honorary titles only. In addition, the participants remain anonymous in my writing. Names and details which could lead to their identification have been altered with the exception of public persons who agreed to be named.

To gain the consent of the people I wanted to research I was open about what I was doing and the true nature and purpose of my research. As I have described in 2.3 the process of finding participants, explanations and proving myself as trustworthy, took time. While I felt frustrated at my slow progress, the general negative attitude towards my research meant that those women who decided to take part had the opportunity to think well about their decision and only participated if they really wanted to.

I did not use a signed consent form. To 'sign up' for something and give written consent would have created even more distrust and fear. Rather, it was important that my participants knew that they were free to withdraw from the research process at any time,

and that they gained a clear understanding of what the research was about, as part of the so called ‘fully informed consent’.<sup>81</sup>

The questions of consent were more complicated in the area of participant observation that often included larger groups of women during mosque lessons. In these cases the consent took the form of the female preacher’s invitation to attend for the sake of my research. In a few cases an attendee took me along and introduced me as a researcher to the teacher. Often the teacher then introduced me to her class. When I went to large public lessons taught by male preachers the preacher was less accessible to me. However, these lessons, very public in nature, often were recorded and distributed afterwards anyway.

Yet even with the full consent to my research, the awareness of my function as a ‘researcher’ decreased over time and many observations and conversations that influenced my interpretation may not have been conscientiously given to me, such as tensions and conflicts among the attendees. Another area was the personal details of women’s lives that were usually not made public in cross gender settings. For example one of my interviewees discussed at length her history of falling in love with different men. However, there were precedents of situations in which it seemed acceptable for such details to be discussed in public if anonymity was guaranteed, such as seeking advice from male preachers through written questions which women would throw from the balustrades separating the women’s space from the men’s hall in mosques. Another example was the radio broadcasts in which a Muslim scholar would discuss such questions with listeners who called in during the programme. According to these examples, public discussions of otherwise embarrassing

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<sup>81</sup> Comp. Colin Robson, *Real world research*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002). 67.

subjects seemed acceptable if anonymity was granted. My goal in my writing is to respect their narratives and abstain from descriptions and interpretations that could be seen in any way as belittling, no matter how ‘bizarre’ their narratives might look from the bias of my own worldview.

I kept the data I collected as accessible as possible to the participants. After putting my interviews in writing I revised what I had written with my participants. In a couple of cases this was not possible. In some cases the participant was too busy or relied on the correctness of the recording if she permitted me to record the interview. Another participant had left her family and apparently went into hiding. After the uprising started in March 2011 it became increasingly difficult to meet. In one case a participant asked me not to use part of an interview concerning third parties. While I accommodated her demand, the information she had given me did shape my insight into the workings of the *da'wa* movement among women. Another problem was the issue of language. Most interviews and participant observation were conducted in Arabic but the research thesis is written in English. This will diminish the accessibility of the research to the participants.

I am aware that my participants will not agree with everything I have written due to the different angles of my critical distance and their faith. Yet I am aiming at a portrayal and analysis of their understanding, choices, and experiences that is not only truthful to the data that I collected but also pays credit to my participants’ desire to be presented as credible Muslim women.

## **PART ONE: CONTEXT**

## 2 ISLAMISM IN SYRIA 1963 - 2011

During the year 2005/2006 I was attending classes as a listening student at the Sharia Department of Damascus University. I was allowed to choose freely which lectures to attend, which resulted in me attending different lectures in all four years of the undergraduate programme. Wearing a headscarf and loose, long clothing was obligatory for female students, but what really struck me was that from year to year the colours of the students' clothes became increasingly dull and the number of girls wearing black and with partial to complete face coverings increased from just a few in the first year to far more than half in the final. On the last day of class, one of the girls asked the lecturer in an anonymous note: 'I want to wear *niqāb* but no one in my family encourages me. What shall I do?' The lecturer answered: 'We encourage you. Don't we?' The whole hall, overcrowded with more than 300 male and female students, shouted in unison: 'We encourage you!' 'That should be enough encouragement,' the lecturer said to close the issue.<sup>82</sup>

While this incident illustrates both the current support as well as the opposition to the display of extreme religious symbols, only two decades ago, during the 1980s, such public endorsement of the *niqāb* in a government institution would have been impossible. In the 1980s and 1990s the government prohibited the hijab in government institutions including

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<sup>82</sup> Lecture at Damascus University, 14.05.2006.

schools.<sup>83</sup> The social climate among well-educated Syrians was largely against even moderate Islamic dress. The example of my friend Jihan's family illustrates this further:

My grandfather was modern and progress-oriented and not religious at all. He didn't want any of his daughters to wear hijab. They were wearing relatively short dresses and short sleeves. Everybody was.<sup>84</sup>

Today, for these women and their daughters, the hijab has become the normative dress for a Muslim woman, albeit other Syrians still associate any form of Islamic clothing as backward, like one of my neighbours, a woman in her late 40s, who told me: 'Only the last remnant of traditional Syrians is still wearing hijab, but not the educated women.'<sup>85</sup>

Like other choices, the changes that the women of my research have gone through cannot be appreciated without reference to its historical, political, social and economic context. During the second half of the 20th century, Syrian society has undergone a process of great transitions. The secularisation, which was part of the Baath party programme, and the Islamist struggle until the 1980s, gave way to a contemporary 'new religiosity'.<sup>86</sup> These

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<sup>83</sup> Comp. Kamla, "Syrian women accountants' attitudes and experiences of the hijab in the context of globalisation" 6.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Jihan in her home, Damascus, 28.03.2011.

<sup>85</sup> Conversation with Um Majid, Damascus, 02.11.2008.

<sup>86</sup> Comp. e.g. Paulo G. Pinto, "Embodied morality and social practice in Syria," *ISIM Review* 17(2006); Kim Ghattas, "Syria witnesses Islamist revival," Accessed 24.02.2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/4735240.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4735240.stm); IRIN, "Syria: Secular Syria allows Islam to flourish," UN Office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Accessed 14.02.2008, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=26933>. Hugh Naylor, "Secular Syria faces up to growing Islamic power: Damascus reaching out to moderates to head off conflict," San Francisco Chronicle, Accessed 14.02.2008, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/16/MNG9TR15OT1.DTL&hw=Lebanon&sn=081&sc=131..> Sami Moubayed, "Preserving secularism in Syria," Accessed 08.04.2013, <http://www.mideastviews.com/articleview.php?art=135>.

three major aspects have to be taken into account to understand the ‘macro-context’<sup>87</sup> of Syrian Islamist women. In this chapter I will first look at the historical conflict and the contemporary religious trend in Syria.<sup>88</sup>

### 3.1 The confrontation between the Baath party and the Islamists 1963-1982

After reaching independence in 1946, Syria was caught up in political instability. Between 1946 and 1963, there transpired five general elections, seven military coups, three constitutions and the union with Egypt during the years 1958 – 1961, embraced at first by many Syrians with enormous enthusiasm but ending in great disillusionment.<sup>89</sup>

The Baath Party was one of the various political groups that were based on the new nationalist sentiment that had started under the late Ottoman rule but gained strength under the French mandate 1920 - 1946. Officially founded in 1947 by a Christian: Michel Aflaq

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<sup>87</sup> Comp. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Converting: stages of religious change," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M Darrol Bryant (London: Cassell, 1999), 38.

<sup>88</sup> For in-depth discussion of the Islamist uprising in Syria 1963 - 1983 see e.g. Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983); Hanna Batatu, *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*; Abdallah Sami Ibrahim Dallal, al-, *Al-islāmiyūn wa al-dīmūqrāṭiya fi sūrīya: ḥaṣīd wa ṣarīm* (Cairo: Madbouly, 2007); Nikolaos Dam, van, *The struggle for power in Syria*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996); Ulrike Freitag, "In search of 'historical correctness': The Ba'th Party in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (1999); Hans Günther Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien* (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1995); Patrick Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Thomas Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," *Orient* 24, no. 4 (1983).

<sup>89</sup> Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 88-92.

(1910-1989), an Alawite: Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899-1968), and a Sunni: Salah al-Din al-Bitar (1912-1980),<sup>90</sup> it was part of the Baath programme to overcome sectarianism to forge a new national identity based on the principle of *'urūba*, 'Arabism'. However, early on the Baath party had strong connections with the military and a failed coup in 1956.<sup>91</sup> The military started to have a disproportionate number of members from the religious minorities in their higher ranks and developed into the real political power in Syria.<sup>92</sup>

In March 1963, a group of young Baath officers staged a coup together with Nasserist and independent officers. They issued a declaration handing over the power to the Baath party. However, this government was only a façade behind which the officers governed the country through the new and secret National Council for the Revolutionary Command.<sup>93</sup> The next seven years were characterised by external and internal struggles. Externally, the government's reforms were met with strong riots in all the major cities of Syria as private companies and parts of the trade were nationalised in 1965<sup>94</sup> and a land reform redistributed the land in favour of poorer rural population, all of which enraged the middle class.<sup>95</sup> In 1967, both Muslim and Christian private schools were taken over by the government although religious instruction remained part of the curriculum and until 1970

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<sup>90</sup> According to Lobmeyer, the date for the official founding of the Baath party differs between 1947 and 1952. This seems to be due to the genesis of the party: In 1947 al-Arsuzi's *nādi al-'urūba* merged with Aflaq's and al-Bitar's *shabāb al-iḥyā' al-'arabi*, while later in 1952 with al-Hawrani's *ḥizb al-'arabi al-ishtirāki* another major group was added, comp. *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-79. The opening of the military academy in Homs offered the possibility of a career to educated members of the lower classes like the rural population, which consisted of relatively higher percentage of religious minorities than the Sunni dominated cities.

<sup>93</sup> For a more detailed description of the coup and the military influence on the Syrian government see: *ibid.*, 101-10; Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East*: 74-80.

<sup>94</sup> Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East*: 97.

<sup>95</sup> Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 156-59.

religious property had been centralised under the new *awqāf*- ministry.<sup>96</sup> The emergency state allowed for censorship of the press and general repression of any kind of opposition. Internally, the struggles within the party led to the marginalization of Christians and Sunnis and brought Hafez al-Asad (1930-2000) into power in 1970.<sup>97</sup>

The roots of the Islamic revival in Syria go back to the 19th century. Part of the '*ulamā*' such as 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Bitar and Tahir al-Jaza'iri (1852 – 1920) started to assess traditions critically and to uphold the first three generations of the pious forefathers, *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, as the normative ideal.<sup>98</sup> Early Islamist organisations such as the *shabāb Muhammad* in Homs in 1934 and the *dār al-arqām* in Aleppo in 1936 formed during the 1930s.<sup>99</sup> Between 1942 and 1946 these organisations merged together to become the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>100</sup> Although they understood themselves as part of the Egyptian Brotherhood, their genesis from various Syrian groups as well as their later development was quite independent of the latter: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was less zealous and revolutionary. It took part in parliamentary elections in 1947, 1949 and 1961<sup>101</sup> and propagated the Islamisation of society through sermons, classes, and social activities.

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<sup>96</sup> Suzanne Stiver Lie and Kari Vogt, "Islamization in Syria: Gender, Education and Ideology," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): 27.

<sup>97</sup> Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 593. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above* (London: Routledge, 2001). 47-48.

<sup>98</sup> For a detailed discussion of the revival in Syria compare: Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

<sup>99</sup> Lobbmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 37.

<sup>100</sup> Ruth Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (2006): 860. The exact date differs from 1942 to 1946.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 861-63; Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 590-91.

Between 1961 and 1963 the Brotherhood was on the summit of its parliamentary influence having won 8.7% of the votes in 1961.<sup>102</sup>

After the Baath party outlawed all opposition parties and the door for legal political activism was closed in 1963, the Brotherhood underwent a radicalisation in search of other channels of influence. The younger generation was more willing to follow radical leaders like Marwan Hadid, Sa'id Hawwa, and 'Abd al-Fatah Abu Ghudda (1917-1997), who took over 'Issam al-'Attar's (b.1927) leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1970. Terrorist acts against the government committed by the Islamists from 1976 to 1982 involved a number of different groups, whose organisational connection and cooperation with the Brotherhood had become so close in the process of its radicalisation that a clear distinction seems impossible. Those active in the revolt called themselves *mujāhidūn*, 'Islamic fighters'.<sup>103</sup>

The Baath party secured its power through suppression of any kind of opposition and the years 1963 – 1982 witnessed cycles of growing violence and counter violence: In April 1964 and January 1965, demonstrations and riots broke out in Syria's major cities.

Islamists, Nasserists and merchants joined forces but were defeated by the military.

Mosque infrastructure played an important role from the beginning and the government

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<sup>102</sup> Thomas Pierret, "Syria: Old-Timers and Newcomers," in *The Islamists are coming: Who they really are*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 72.

<sup>103</sup> For example Marwan Hadid, the leader of the radical *ṭalīʿa al-muqātila li-ḥizb allah*, had many followers among the Muslim Brothers. Some of them went with him to Jordan where they got military training in one of the camps of the Palestinian Fatah organization. Abu Ghudda was a Muslim Brother and the leader of the militant *ḥizb al-taḥrīr al-islāmi*. Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 174.

felt threatened enough to declare the 'abuse' of religious buildings for political agitation a capital offence.<sup>104</sup>

Even though the conflict had economic, social and political roots, religious grievances played a role from the very beginning: In October 1963 'Isam al-Attar, the leader of the Muslim Brothers, accused the government of atheism and was imprisoned and finally exiled. Four years later, an article in the Syrian army magazine *jaysh al-sha'b* stated, 'God, religion ...are mummies in the museum of history'.<sup>105</sup> The article was taken and widely publicised, enlivening mass demonstrations in all major cities as both Muslims and Christians protested against this 'blasphemy' and the responsible government. In Damascus alone about 20,000 people took part. The imprisonment of Muslim and Christian religious leaders enraged the people even more. The riots ended only when the Six-Day War with Israel started on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

Due to internal discord, the Muslim Brotherhood did not play a prominent role in any of the riots until 1973. By then, a new sectarianism was symptomatic of the radicalisation of the Brotherhood as the accusations against the government shifted from socialism to accusing it of being Alawite. The Brotherhood's radical, militant wing had prevailed against the more cautious voices.<sup>106</sup>

At the beginning of his rule in 1970, Asad was welcomed by many Syrians. The country had undergone seven years of unrest and violence, economic isolation, and the war with Israel in 1967, whereas Asad promised economic liberalisation, stability and reconciliation

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>105</sup> As quoted in: *ibid.*, 177.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-77 and 99-201.

and declared an amnesty for a number of political opponents. In 1971 and 1972 he offered limited political participation to opposition parties.<sup>107</sup> Food prices were cut by 15 %. The economy started to grow. However, behind this façade of democracy, the regime started to persecute its opponents with great brutality. The secret police services were extended as a tool to control the population through terror as individuals were imprisoned and interrogated arbitrarily.<sup>108</sup>

Asad was aware of the problems that could arise from opposition against an Alawite president. According to a fatwa from Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328), 'Nuṣairis' (the old name for the Alawites) are not Muslims but heretics that should be fought.<sup>109</sup> The name Nuṣairiya goes back to the extreme shi'ite Ibn Nuṣair (9th century), as Alawites claim.<sup>110</sup> The necessity to prove their orthodoxy led them to adopt the name 'Alawites' at the beginning of the 20th century to integrate themselves into 'Islam' as a Shi'ite sect, with limited success.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, when Asad came to power in 1970 he set up the Sunni Ahmad al-Khatib (1933-1971) as 'head of the state' for the first few months, but then took the presidency for himself. In the constitution of 1973, the article that the president had to

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 185-86.

<sup>108</sup> An example of the arbitrariness of the secret services is the story of my friend's uncle: his brother stayed over at his house with a friend for a night. The next day after the guests had left, the secret police took the uncle and for years his family did not know where he was or what had happened to him. Only during the 1990s he was granted amnesty, and the family got to know that the secret police had taken him in place of the brother's friend who was accused of being a member of a secret communist cell. (Conversation with Najma, Sahnaya, 20.04.2005)

<sup>109</sup> H. Halm, "Nuṣayriyya," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

<sup>110</sup> Comp. Kais M. Firro, "The Alawis in modern Syria: From Nusayriya to Islam via 'Alawiya," *Der Islam* 82(2005): 3-9; Halm, "Nuṣayriyya."

<sup>111</sup> Firro, "The Alawis in modern Syria: From Nusayriya to Islam via 'Alawiya," 12-13. Later Muslim Brothers quoted Ibn Taymiya to justify the murder of Alawites, comp. Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 8.

be a Muslim was omitted. After protests, the clause was added and Asad tried to legitimise his presidency through a fatwa by the Lebanese Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr (1928-1978), that Alawites are 'Muslims'. To win over the '*ulamā*', religious scholars, Asad raised the salary of imams and preachers.<sup>112</sup> He performed the '*umra*' (minor pilgrimage) in 1974, but could not convince the Islamists who doubted his sincerity.<sup>113</sup>

Yet, besides religious reasons, the revolt against Asad had many causes: The loss of influence of the old ruling class, urban versus rural animosities and confessional grievances. The Syrian intervention in Lebanon in support of the 'Christians' in 1976 functioned as a catalyst for the violence. Islamists, the leftist opposition, Palestinians and other groups committed acts of terror and assassinations; the government retaliated with brutality.<sup>114</sup>

The conflict between the government and the militant religious opposition escalated between 1976 and 1981. The death of Hadid in July 1976, in prison under dubious circumstances,<sup>115</sup> seems to have provoked a first wave of assassinations through the Islamists, who at first killed mainly politicians, members of the military and government officials.<sup>116</sup> Later, Muslim clergy who condemned the violence such as Muhammad al-

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<sup>112</sup> Batatu, *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*: 260.

<sup>113</sup> Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 593. The idea and practice of *tāqiyya* among the Alawites had discredited their efforts through the centuries.

<sup>114</sup> See for example the protests of the four guilds of the lawyers, the doctors, the engineers and the pharmacists: Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 294-302.

<sup>115</sup> According to Seale he died in June because he would not end his hunger strike, compare Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East*: 324.

<sup>116</sup> Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 262-63.

Shami were murdered,<sup>117</sup> as were hundreds of civilians just because they were Alawites, and their ‘executions’ were announced in *al-nāḍir*, the Brotherhood’s magazine.<sup>118</sup> The government’s response was imprisonment, torture and executions. The secret police indiscriminately searched homes in the traditional Muslim quarters of the towns, taking Islamists as well as uninvolved neighbours or family members.<sup>119</sup>

In March 1980, demonstrations, riots and strikes spread from Aleppo to Hama, Homs, Idlib, Hasaka, Deir al-Zur and Jisr al-Shughur. In response, Asad mobilised new paramilitary units and Defence Battalions, leaving hundreds detained, or killed the inhabitants of whole neighbourhoods.<sup>120</sup>

On June 26<sup>th</sup>, an attempt to kill Asad failed, but his brother Rif’at took revenge and ordered his Defence Companies to massacre between 300 and 800 political prisoners, most of them Islamists, in Tadmor. On July 8<sup>th</sup>, membership of the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a capital offense.<sup>121</sup>

In August, September and October a number of bombs exploded close to government buildings, the last one in response to a more symbolic but highly emotional act of violence

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<sup>117</sup> Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East*: 325.

<sup>118</sup> As quoted in: Lobjmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 263.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 291-92.

<sup>120</sup> Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 604. Batatu, *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*: 273.

<sup>121</sup> For discussion of the different numbers see Lobjmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 306; Seale, *Asad: The struggle for the Middle East*: 329.

of the regime: On September 29<sup>th</sup>, members of Rif'at's revolutionary youth federation tore off the hijabs of a number of women in the centre of Damascus.<sup>122</sup>

Towards the end of 1981, the opposition had gained power over substantial parts of Hama and Aleppo. When a coup failed in January, the government reacted in sending troops to besiege Hama. At the beginning of February, the city was cut off from the rest of the Syrian infrastructure. The '*ulamā*' declared jihad from the minarets and hundreds of Islamist fighters started to attack. Not only the security forces, but also officials and members of the Baath party, and communists and their families, were killed. On February 10<sup>th</sup>, the Muslim Brotherhood declared the 'liberation of Hama,' but the military, by now about 12,000 soldiers, started to shell the city with heavy artillery and to bomb it from the air. The fighting continued till February 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The extent of the loss of life in Hama was beyond anything that had happened in Syria before. The numbers vary between 5000 and 40 000 dead among the civilians alone, in addition to about 5000 army soldiers and 500 Islamist fighters.<sup>123</sup> At the end, tanks rolled into the city and demolished most of the old city centre, burying uncounted people under the rubble.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> After this, the veil started to become a symbol of defiance of the regime. Comp. Mervat F Hatem, "Toward the development of post-Islamist and post-nationalist feminist discourses in the Middle East," in *Arab women: Old boundaries, new frontiers*, ed. Judith Tucker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>123</sup> Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 325-26.

<sup>124</sup> Batatu, *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*: 273-74. quotes an Amnesty International report, estimating the number of dead civilians of 10,000 to 25,000.

### 3.1.1 The ideological foundation of the conflict

After independence most new political parties subscribed to secularism because of the heterogeneous population in Syria,<sup>125</sup> the majority being Sunni Muslim. The main minorities were different Christian denominations, Shi'a sects, (among which the largest group were the Alawites), Druze and Ismaelis.<sup>126</sup> The religious identity was, and is, felt very strongly. Secularism seemed to be the best option to unite the new nation, rather than separation along confessional lines or the domination of one religious group over the others.

Nevertheless the Baath ideology was not 'atheistic.' Its interpretation of secularism meant that a particular religion was seen to have a limited significance according to historical and cultural circumstances. Religion as a factor of sectarianism was rejected. The claim of Islam – or any other religion – to be universally valid, was given up for the sake of an understanding of Islam as the means to forge the Arabic nation through an Arabic religion, message, and values. In this sense, even the Christian Aflaq could describe Islam as the

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<sup>125</sup> Comp. Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," 857-59. The two main secularist parties besides the Baath were the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP), and the Syrian Communist Party. According to Roded the SSNP was the first party who wanted to overcome sectarianism and the marginalisation of the minorities with secularism.

<sup>126</sup> In 2007 74% of the just over 19 million Syrians were Sunni, 10% were Christian, 16% belonged to other Muslim sects. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Sunnis were a smaller majority, as differing in birth rates and emigration changed the set up of the population. CIA, "The World Factbook: Syria," Accessed 10.02.2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html#People>.

most sublime expression of the Arab nation, and Muhammad as the ‘incarnation of the true and noble Arabic spirit’.<sup>127</sup>

‘Unity, freedom, socialism’ was the motto of the Baath Party. The goal of unity of the Arab nation and its freedom from imperialistic determination were the most prominent demands. Aflaq defined ‘nation’ similar to Fichte, as a cultural unity, constituted through a common language and history. Therefore, the value of Islam lies in its role of forming Arab history and culture, but it was not essentially part of the principle of *‘urūba*. Accordingly, it was not necessarily relevant for the formation of the new political and social system; rather, with the development of different sects, it had become a disintegrating factor.

The aim of the Muslim Brotherhood was to oppose the growing influence of secularism in Syria. It was based on al-Banna’s (1906-1949) writings, although modified by al-Siba’i (1915-1964) and Hawwa to suit the Syrian situation, but generally included the usual features of the Islamist discourse: Religious diversity was seen as the main threat. For example, Hawwa argues for the necessity of jihad because the Islamic community has to be saved from ‘unbelievers’ who are trying to turn Muslims away from their faith.<sup>128</sup> Al-Siba’i agreed concerning the problem of diversity, even although he rejected violence, demanding that diversity should be overcome through *da‘wa*.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> As quoted in: Andreas Christmann, "Syrien," in *Der Islam in der Gegenwart*, ed. Werner Ende and Udo Steinbach (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), 513.

<sup>128</sup> Comp. Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 594.

<sup>129</sup> For a discussion of al-Siba’i’s reluctance to use violence see Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," 865.

For the Brotherhood, 'true Islam', the divine revelation and its interpretation through the first three generations, was the solution for every dilemma. Hawwa envisioned the realisation of the rule of Islam in five steps: The Islamisation of the individual, the Islamisation of the government, i.e. the Islamic state, the union of the Islamic states, the reinstatement of the caliphate, and last but not least, universal Islamic rule in one universal Islamic state. According to this concept, the monotheistic religious minorities would have the status of the *ahl al-dhimma*, protected communities, but not citizens with the same rights and obligations. Because for Hawwa, Islam is the highest principle, the unity of the *umma*, the universal community of Muslims, is the unity that should be aimed for.<sup>130</sup>

However, the details of the varying demands of Hawwa and al-Siba'i show that 'true Islam' is an ideal that needs interpretation. Instances from history need to be made relevant. An example of this is the Islamists' call for the unity of *dīn wa dawla*: The claim that the Islamic State would conform values, practices, and beliefs to the seventh century ideal sounds anti-modern, yet the Brotherhood's writings about how the state should function show their dependency on the 20th century nation state with a constitution and a parliament, though the legislation has to be according to sharia law. This same contemporary influence is obvious in their pro-socialist thinking about economic and social questions.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> On Hawwa's concept of the *umma* see Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba'athist Syria," 150.

<sup>131</sup> Comp. Jeremy Salt, "An Islamic scholar-activist: Mustafa al-Siba'i and the Islamic movement in Syria 1945-1954," *Journal of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 109; Ulrike Freitag, "Politische Religion im Nahen Osten: nationalistische und islamistische Modelle," in *Zwischen Politik und Religion. Studien zur Entstehung, Existenz und Wirkung des Totalitarismus*, ed. Klaus Hildebrand (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003), 142-43. Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 48-56.

Consequently, in the eyes of the Islamists, the Baathist primacy of Arabism over Islam and the nation over the *umma*, and the sovereignty of people in the place of God must have looked like blasphemy. For the Muslim Brotherhood, Sunni Islam was the principle that constituted identity and community: Integration into the community could only happen through conversion, and the attempt of the secular parties to subordinate religion was therefore a threat to their very identity. Though the concept of secular Arabism was very attractive to many Syrians, especially the minorities, it did not fulfil the hope that it would unite people. On the contrary, so long as the Sunni majority did not embrace it, it became one of the main divisive factors. Nevertheless, the high appreciation of Islam's historical and cultural function kept the door open for the Baath party to reassign Islam a more important role.

### 3.2. The development of Syrian 'Official Islam'

Hama was in many ways a turning point in Syrian history: The Islamists had lost their battle. It was practically the end of political religious opposition. Hama was also the turning point for the general trend to change from moving towards a more secular society to a slow but constant social Islamisation.<sup>132</sup> The younger generation especially, started to rediscover Islamic values and norms for their daily life, a phenomenon resembling in some ways the turn to Islam after September 11: The negative image of Islam as presented by much of the Western media, and the rising anti-Muslim sentiment, gave many Muslims a

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<sup>132</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 147.

sense of the need to defend their religion. It reinforced their emotional identification with Islam. In a similar way, the trauma of the brutal suppression of the Islamist's revolt resulted in the return of many Syrian Muslims to root their identity more deeply in Islam.

Hama was also a turning point for the government to develop a different approach to Islam. Already, during the height of Islamist's uprising in 1979, the government changed their tactics. Earlier on, it had denied the existence of a religious opposition and any sectarian issues. That was no longer possible after the massacre of about 80 Alawite cadets in Aleppo in June 1979.<sup>133</sup> Following Böttcher's (1998) terminology I am calling the government's new approach 'Official Islam',<sup>134</sup> which describes an expression of Islamic religious practices, institutions and teaching that supports and legitimises the Baath government. It offered the possibility to form an Islamic movement that would absorb those searching for religious guidance before getting involved in radical Islam. After the disintegration of Syria's old ally, the Soviet Union, in 1991, this new strategy gained even more prominence.<sup>135</sup>

As part of the new strategy, Asad started using his propaganda machine to claim 'true Islam' for the government:

We understand religion and Islam as love, but they as hatred. We understand it as patriotism, they as agency for foreign powers. We understand it as generosity and faithfulness, they as betrayal and murder ...<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Mayer, "The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," 589 and 95.

<sup>134</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 109.

<sup>135</sup> Christmann, "Syrien," 513.

<sup>136</sup> Asad's speech at the regional congress of the party in December 1979, as quoted in: Lobmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*: 280.

While the government failed in setting up an Islamic ‘dummy’ party to give the rising religious sentiment a political outlet,<sup>137</sup> it interfered successfully in all public religious matters via the *awqāf*-ministry, the ministry for religious affairs, and surveillance through the secret police. The main targets of control were the clergy, the mosques and Islamic education. The state controlled media played its role in disseminating ‘Official Islam’. Government publications incorporated ever-increasing religious language.<sup>138</sup>

Important functions were staffed with regime-friendly officials from the beginning of the Baath rule. A prominent example is Ahmad Kuftaro, who became Grandmufti in 1964 against the majority of the ‘*ulamā*’<sup>139</sup> and remained in this office until his death in 2004. He was a friend of Hafez al-Asad and bore witness to the president’s orthodoxy on many occasions. He also lacked the support of the ‘*ulamā*’ and the old families, that was necessary to strengthen his position beyond the limited function that the government wanted him to fill.<sup>140</sup> At the lower levels, the appointment of preachers, imams and mosque teachers became dependent on the government. In 1979 and 1980, and later in 1986, the government sacked a huge number of mosque staff. Prospective preachers were interviewed by the secret police about their political loyalties and asked to be informants.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> In 1990 Asad tried to set up an ‘Islamic Party’ to legitimise the government through the party’s participation in the National Progressive Front, comp. *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>138</sup> E.g. on 1.3.1995 the eulogy of Muhammad, common after mentioning his name, appeared for the first time in the newspaper *Al-thawra*, comp. Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 148.

<sup>139</sup> Christmann, "Syrien," 512.

<sup>140</sup> For more details about his political involvement compare Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 56-62.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

As the recent events in the Syrian uprising in 2011 have shown, mosques play a major role in the mobilisation of Muslims. They are the place where the religious community is formed and experienced in common prayer five times a day and through teaching. Therefore they became a focus for the intervention of the government under Hafez al-Asad, encouraging religious activities at mosques and under strict government surveillance. The *awqāf*-ministry very actively built new mosques. Though the finances often came from private or foreign sources, the ministry had to give permission, and supervise the building process. After a mosque was finished, it becomes the property of the ministry. According to Poidomani (2006), between the early 1980s and 2006, 6000 new mosques were built, with 600 annexed sharia secondary schools.<sup>142</sup>

The Friday sermons, often transmitted via loudspeakers onto the streets for the benefit of the whole neighbourhood, became a tool to propagate 'Official Islam': Since the beginning of the 1980s, preachers received monthly guidelines on the subjects of the sermons with their paychecks. Usually the sermon's first part taught Islamic knowledge from the Qur'an and the hadith. The second part dealt with social and political questions such as Syria's international relations, the government's vaccination programs and the battle against illiteracy.<sup>143</sup> According to Böttcher (1998), in 1989 the ministry even distributed complete sermons in some areas. Secret police informants would guarantee that the sermons would stay within the guidelines and preachers acting too independently were interrogated, detained or suspended.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Simona Poidomani, "Syria: Islamic women's movement gains a foothold," Accessed 16.01.2006, [http://www.adnki.com/index\\_2Level.php?cat=Trends&luid=8.0.244196250&par=0](http://www.adnki.com/index_2Level.php?cat=Trends&luid=8.0.244196250&par=0).

<sup>143</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 99-100.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-01.

In 1980, all Qur'anic schools were renamed into *ma'āhid al-Asad li-tahfīz al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, Asad Institutes of Qur'an memorisation, propagating Asad's image as protector and supporter of Islam. Between 1986 and 2006, about 120 new institutes were built.<sup>145</sup> In these institutes, groups for men, women and children met weekly to memorise the Qur'an under the guidance of a government employed teacher. They also offered classes in *tajwīd*, the art of reciting the Qur'an. Since 1981 the government was organising international Qur'an memorisation competitions.<sup>146</sup>

The Islamic holidays offered another opportunity for the government to display its 'piety'. Especially in 2006, after the Danish cartoon affair and the attack on the Danish and the Norwegian embassies in Damascus, which arguably could not have happened without official 'passivity' at least, the government had the whole of Damascus decorated with colourful flags and lights for the *mawlid al-nabi*, though in previous years the festivities had been much more sober.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, the celebration of Ramadan experienced a revival at this time.<sup>148</sup>

One of the major successes in promoting the Syrian 'Official Islam' has been the popular ANC. Founded by Ahmad Kuftaro in 1972 and led by his son Salah al-Din Kuftaro since his father's death in 2004, the huge structure on the edge of the traditional Muhyi al-Din

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<sup>145</sup> Comp. Poidomani, "Syria: Islamic women's movement gains a foothold".

<sup>146</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 117-19.

<sup>147</sup> Comp. Landis, "Islamic education in Syria: Undoing secularism"; Khalaf, "Bashar al-Assad is making unfamiliar displays of piety to defuse Islamist discontent with his rule."; Strindberg, "Letter from Damascus: Syria under pressure."

<sup>148</sup> Christmann offers a detailed discussion of the depiction of Ramadan in the state controlled Syrian media: Andreas Christmann, "An Invented Piety? Subduing Ramadan in Syrian State Media," in *Muslim traditions and modern techniques of power*, ed. Armando Salvatore, *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* (Münster: LIT, 2001).

quarter in Damascus extends over seven floors. It houses two elementary schools, one for boys and one for girls, middle and secondary schools, a language institute to teach Arabic to foreigners, dormitories for male and female students, and four sharia colleges. In 2004, there were 5000 students studying at the ANC, 500 of them foreigners.<sup>149</sup> In addition to the formal study programme, regular lessons open to the public took place throughout the week. The main mosque hall, catering up to 15,000 men and women,<sup>150</sup> was regularly overcrowded during my attendance of Rajab Deeb's Thursday evening classes. In the summer, the centre offered courses for mosque teachers and preachers. The centre was the largest of its kind in Syria, and very well known among the population in Syria: Most Sunnis that I talked with about my studies recommend the centre as the place to learn about 'true Islam'. During the lessons that I attended, motivational sermons with detailed information on correct Islamic practices were the main message preached. In parallel with the educational institutions, the ANC was also intertwined with the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya. While the syllabus taught at ANC was not specifically Sufi, students were encouraged to enter into a 'mentor relationship' with a teacher, who belonged to the hierarchical organisation of the Sufi order.

Ahmad Kuftaro's interpretation of Islam illustrates the combination of religiosity and morality with anti-sectarianism and government support, both of which characterise 'Official Islam'. On the one hand, it shares much of the Islamist diagnosis of the state of society: 'Man ... has deteriorated and fallen back into a dark state of ignorance and

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<sup>149</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, "Fi surīya al-'ilmānīya, Kuftāro yudāfi' 'an "al-wasatiyya li-qat' al-tarīq 'ala al-tatarruf al-islāmīy'," Accessed 13.05.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/44640>.

<sup>150</sup> Ahmad Kuftaro, *The Way of Truth*, 3rd ed. (Damascus: World Quran School, 2004). 244. Böttcher writes that about 7000 attend the Friday lessons, Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 117.

barbarism'.<sup>151</sup> Materialism has led to a 'lack of God-consciousness'<sup>152</sup> and atheism, an 'irreligious extremism' resulting in family breakdowns, prostitution, pornography, drug abuse and general immorality in the West and in Muslim countries.<sup>153</sup> The solution is the return to the 'rational spirituality' of early Islam.<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, Kufaro distanced himself from radical Islamic ideology concerning the question of denominations and politics. It is interesting that in his writings he talks about a 'Muslim society' rather than an 'Islamic state'.<sup>155</sup> The '*ulamā*' should work together with their government to re-establish Islamic morals and to safeguard the society against Islamic extremism. He depicts Asad as a model of faith, quoting him on religious matters, and assuring: 'Our president is a believer and he prays.'<sup>156</sup> *Al-ra'īs al-mu'min* is one of the common epithets with which Kufaro described Asad.<sup>157</sup>

However, the relationship between the government and the '*ulamā*' was not always so clear-cut. As Pierret (2009) has argued, there were at the same time a number of influential Islamic leaders who only partially cooperated with the regime.<sup>158</sup> Yet, notwithstanding the limitations of the government's approach, the development of 'Official Islam' signals a major shift in ideology as the regime changed from secular Arabism to Sunni Islam as the integrated principle. It offers religious satisfaction while supporting and legitimising the

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<sup>151</sup> Kufaro, *The Way of Truth*: 72.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>155</sup> Comp. e.g.: *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>156</sup> As quoted in: Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 202.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>158</sup> Thomas Pierret, "Sunny clergy politics in the cities of Ba'thi Syria," in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred H. Lawson (London, Beirut: Saqi, 2009), 74f.

government and funnels the desires for activism to focus on public morals. Above all 'Official Islam' is a tool to control the Islamisation process.

At the same time, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a strange tension prevailed as the 'old' symbols of the Baath party co-existed side by side with 'new' Islamic symbols. Huge statues and pictures of Hafez and Bashar al-Asad still dominated the streets and buildings everywhere; slogans such as 'with spirit, with blood, we serve you, oh Bashar!' or 'God, Syria, Bashar only!' were shouted at every rally. This cult of the president was offensive to many Muslims.

### 3.2.1 The Islamic revival under Bashar al-Asad's government

Notwithstanding the governments' efforts to create a controlled, 'moderate Islamism,' the general trend towards Islamic religiosity led to diversity within the Islamic revival. On the one hand, clerics like Kuftaro and his disciples cooperated with the government. On the other, many others, though not necessarily extremist in their interpretation, strove for greater independence.<sup>159</sup> In addition, there were some growing radical Islamist trends in Syria even before the uprising of 2011.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> For examples see Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of 'authoritarian upgrading' in Syria: Welfare organizations, Islamic charities and the rise of the Zayd movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41(2009).

<sup>160</sup> Comp. Ibrahim Hamidi, "Al-tayarāt al-islāmiyya tataqaddam fi surīya wa al-sultāt tashunna "amaliyāt istibāqiyya" didd bu'r takfiriyya," Accessed 13.05.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/98421>.

Not all Sunnis accepted the religious legitimacy of the Alawite president, nor believed his public demonstrations of piety. While the relationship between the government and the pro-government religious milieu strengthened the government's legitimation and the open propagation of Islam, non-conformist '*ulamā*' faced repression.<sup>161</sup> According to my observations, even moderate Islamists often expressed their fear of government repression.<sup>162</sup> Leila explained the sense of being under attack among religious Muslims: 'Our government may imprison us.'<sup>163</sup> The fear of disclosure of religious activities indicates the impact of mistrust towards the government's display of religiosity. Dunya, for example, went to private *tajwīd* lessons. When one day she called to cancel and mentioned the lesson in her telephone conversation – telephone calls being potentially under secret police surveillance - the teacher got so upset that she stopped teaching her because Dunya had been careless about security. Another woman told me about a group of Salafist students that her brother belonged to, and whose leaders had been imprisoned in 2006, even though the group's main goal had been the moral reformation of students on campus.<sup>164</sup>

During most of my field research, discussions about any internal political issues were extremely cautious. None of my informants would debate political alternatives like an Islamic state with me, though they did subscribe to the idea that a Muslim cannot accept the domination of a non-Muslim in general discussions. At the same time, in talking about international affairs, some openly voiced their expectations of a future universal Islamic state. This only changed partly during the first few months of the Syrian uprising in 2011,

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<sup>161</sup> Pierret, "Sunny clergy politics in the cities of Ba'thi Syria," 79-80.

<sup>162</sup> Christmann supports my observations, writing about secret Islamist groups. Comp. Christmann, "Syrien," 514.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Leila in her home, Damascus, 23.06.2007.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Aisha, Afrin, 22.10.2006

when some of my participants accused the government of being hypocritical in its stance towards Islam, while others defended the government as 'Muslim'. Interestingly, both sides, though politically opposed to each other, propagated a similar Islamist ideal of piety.

However, due to the traditional religious milieu and the growing strength of the Islamic revival, the government had to compromise on secular policies, e.g. the discrimination of women concerning divorce and inheritance.<sup>165</sup> Another area in which the influence of an idealistic, monolithic notion of Islam prevailed against a more moderate interpretation is the religious education in Syrian schools.

Islamic education played a major role in the recent Islamisation of Syria. During the 1960s and 1970s, while the government 'Baathised' the administration, many Islamists entered the educational system. Regime friendly teachers joined the administration and with a growing number of students there was a shortage of instructors.<sup>166</sup> Of special significance is the religious education in schools, which is obligatory for all students. While Christians have their own religious studies, all other religious groups join in Muslim religious education. Landis (2003) has shown how the textbooks used for this subject in 2002/2003 teach a traditional, Sunni and conformist picture of Islam and an Islamic society, in which God is the sovereign and the Muslim leader guides his people based on the principles of sharia law and in consultation with the '*ulamā*'. Christians and Jews are mentioned as *dhimma*, protected communities, whereas pagans and atheists have no right of co-

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<sup>165</sup> On the legal situation of women in Syria see Leila Djabari, "The Syrian woman: Reality and aspirations," in *Women and empowerment*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London: Mc Millan, 1998); Suha Sabbagh, "An Interview with Syria's Kamar Keilani," in *Arab women: Between defiance and restraint*, ed. Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996).

<sup>166</sup> Hans Günther Lobmeyer, *Islamismus und sozialer Konflikt in Syrien* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch 1990). 19 and 24.

existence. There is no mention of the 16 % of Syria's non-Sunni Muslims, nor the possibility of a pluralism of Islamic interpretations in the textbooks.<sup>167</sup>

According to Landis, one of the effects of this education was that many Alawites were trying hard to get accepted as proper Muslims by assimilating to Sunni Islam.<sup>168</sup> According to my own observations, there were similar trends among the Druze youth, even though the older generation held on to the traditional separation from the Sunnis. For instance, two Druze students that I lived with started to fast and sometimes perform the ritual prayer; one during her secondary school years, the other in her first year at university. One of them even wanted to wear hijab but didn't because of her parents' opposition. As her major influence she quoted her Sunni religion teacher.<sup>169</sup> Quite a few of their Druze friends showed similar acceptance of Sunni practices that are not accepted among the Druze. For example, they defended polygamy with the same arguments I have otherwise heard from Sunni women, so long as the context of the discussion was religious and not practical.

Not only students from a minority background, but in many cases my Sunni participants, mentioned their religious teachers as important influences in their desire to become more pious. The religious education they received in school reinforced their religious identity without questioning which Islamic interpretation they were adhering to, and which was often later continued in religious lessons in the context of the *da'wa* movement, as I will discuss in 6.2 and 7.4.1.

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<sup>167</sup> Landis, "Islamic education in Syria: Undoing secularism" 28.

<sup>168</sup> For example, some women are starting to cover, mosques have been built, Alawites have started to go on Hajj and to fast during Ramadan. Ibid., 32.

<sup>169</sup> Conversation with Joumana, Sweyda, 11.10.2006.

Government support of religious institutions and religious education flourished at a time when the international trend in many Muslim societies moved towards greater religiosity after the disillusionment with secularism and nationalism resulted in an observably more religious Syrian society. As Hamidi (2006) describes this change, well known bookshops that used to sell Marxist literature are today specialising in religious media, many restaurants in the Barada Valley stopped serving alcohol and decorated their walls with photographs of religious leaders, with omnipresent religious slogans.<sup>170</sup> My language tutor Bushra noticed how this change affected the relationships between members of the different sects:

When I grew up no one spoke about sects, we didn't even know who was Sunni, who was Shi'ite. Today, the first thing people do when they meet is to find out to which sect the other person belongs.<sup>171</sup>

I will now look at how the cultural, political and religious developments during the twentieth century affected Syrian women.

### 3.3. Syrian women between secularism and Islamism

During the conflict between the government and the Islamists in the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of women had been a particular bone of contention. For the Baath party, women's

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<sup>170</sup> Hamidi, "Al-tayarāt al-islāmiyya tataqaddam fī surīya wa al-sultāt tashunna "'amaliyāt istibāqiyya" didd bu'r takfīriyya".

<sup>171</sup> Conversation with Bushra, Damascus, 19.12.2009.

emancipation was connected to the fight against backwardness. Women were encouraged to enter higher education and the work force. Women in Western dress and without hijab became a symbol of the country's progress by demonstrating gender equality. For the Muslim Brotherhood, they were not only undermining the morals of Syrian society, but also giving in to the imperialists' accusation that Islamic practices were oppressing women.<sup>172</sup>

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seclusion of women was generally practiced in Syria and only slowly gave way to greater public participation. The ideal of seclusion aimed at an extreme form of gender segregation, by means of keeping women in their homes or fully veiled whenever they went out. Seclusion was not only about visibility but included audibility. Women's voices were kept out of men's reach even to the degree that women would not speak if there was a knock on their doors but would knock back so that the person on the other side could identify herself to avoid a man hearing her voice.<sup>173</sup>

Seclusion also demanded that women were not objects of conversation with members of the opposite sex outside the family. It was mainly based on the cultural understanding of gender boundaries,<sup>174</sup> the general value behind it being the thought that the accessibility of women in mixed gender public contexts was seen as shameful, *'ayb*. The opinion of religious scholars, especially of the Shafi'i and Hanbali *madhāhib* that the whole female body was *'awra* legitimised the practice.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> See al-Siba'i's argumentation according to Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," 864.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni and Zuhair Salim, London, 16.03.2010.

<sup>174</sup> Mona Siddiqui, "Veil," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006).

<sup>175</sup> A popular *ḥadīth* that supports this view is *al-mar'a kulluha 'awra* (All of a woman is to be covered), which I could not verify but the following article attributes it to Sahih

Even before independence, a number of events pointed towards the end of generally practised seclusion: In 1928, Nazira Zeyn al-Din (b. 1905) wrote a book against the veil, arguing for female authority to re-interpret the Qur'an, and during the 1920s and 1930s the first Syrian women started to publicly unveil.<sup>176</sup> While the unveiling among women in the upper classes provoked opposition from the majority conservative milieu in Damascus, more significantly, women played a public part in the nationalist battle against French colonial powers: About 70 Muslim women, many of them from traditional backgrounds and wearing face veils, demonstrated against the arrest of nationalist leader Abd al-Rahman Shahbender (1880-1940) in 1922. In 1933, Damascene women besieged the parliament protesting against the attempt to impose an anti-nationalist treaty.<sup>177</sup> In the following decades, the discussion about women's morals and place in society shifted from the alternatives of private roles versus public roles to the question of what kind of public roles women should play and how.

Equality is granted to women in Article 45 of the Syrian constitution of 1973, yet, in fact, it is superseded by the discrimination that they undergo according to the regulations of the civil code in questions of marriage, divorce, inheritance and the custody of children.<sup>178</sup>

Any attempt to change this in the past has been met with the argument that '... we are a

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Ibn Hibban, 12:412-413 G. F. Haddad, "The veil in Islam," Accessed 11.07.2013, <http://sunnah.org/msaec/articles/veil.htm>.

comp. as well Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. 106-07; Siddiqui, "Veil."

<sup>176</sup> Bouthaina Shaaban, "The muted voices of women interpreters," in *Faith and Freedom*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (London: Tauris, 1995), 64; Sami Moubayed, "Men should unveil in Syria," Accessed 08.04.2013, <http://www.mideastviews.com/articleview.php?art=86>.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009.

<sup>178</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the legal situation of women in Syria see Djabari, "The Syrian woman: Reality and aspirations."; Bärbel Meyer, "Frauenpolitik und Frauenalltag in Syrien," *Orient* 29, no. 3 (1988): 468.

religious society and we cannot anger the fundamentalists of both religions [Muslim and Christian]’, writes Shaaban (1996).<sup>179</sup> Besides the legal issues, the traditional forces within the families and neighbourhoods are a strong factor in hindering women’s emancipation. For example, Shaaban writes about the difficulties of many Syrian women to choose their own husband, something she personally experienced during the 1980s.<sup>180</sup> According to my observations, the situation has only changed for a minority of women.

Despite the fact that the Baath government did not obliterate the discrimination against Syrian women in the personal status laws, it promoted female education and employment. The area of education, especially, improved greatly for Syrian women. School education for the first six years became obligatory for all children,<sup>181</sup> which gradually impacted the numbers of girls enrolled in school: According to the World Bank, the ratio of girls to boys in primary education rose from only 0.62:1 in 1970 close to gender parity in 2003. Considering secondary education, the ratio improved from 0.39:1 in 1970 to 0.93:1 in 2003.<sup>182</sup> Likewise, the percentage of illiterate women was more than halved between 1980 and 2003.<sup>183</sup>

Today, women work as teachers, doctors, and lawyers as well as in many other professions. Interestingly, however, the number of women who joined the work force has

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<sup>179</sup> Bouthaina Shaaban, "The status of women in Syria," in *Arab women: Between defiance and restraint*, ed. Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), 61.

<sup>180</sup> Comp. *Ibid.*, 54. And Bouthaina Shaaban, *Both right and left handed: Arab women talk about their lives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). 16.

<sup>181</sup> Shaaban, "The status of women in Syria," 56.

<sup>182</sup> The World Bank, *The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and Africa*, MENA Development Report (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2008). 29-30.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

only increased marginally since the 1970s.<sup>184</sup> Especially in cities like Damascus, it is not unusual to find highly educated women with university degrees who are not employed and never were. Many women who started to work in the new industries during the 60s and 70s did so out of economic necessities. The reasons for unemployment differ from case to case: On the one hand, conservative family values mean that many women marry as soon as they finish their education and start to have children, and the conviction that it is the husband's duty to provide for his family is still very deeply rooted in society. In addition, work that implies contact with unrestricted numbers of men, such as working as a shop assistant, is often still seen as detrimental for a woman's reputation. On the other hand, unemployment is generally high in Syria,<sup>185</sup> and especially well-educated women often cannot find work that corresponds with their qualifications. For instance, a number of my unmarried acquaintances with degrees in English or Arabic literature work as typists for very low wages of about 100 USD a month. For married women, employment often implicates a double workload. Syrian author Kamar Kailani voices the frustration of many when she says: '[...] it is questionable to what extent working outside the home is in fact the process of self-realisation that it is supposed to be.'<sup>186</sup>

For the Muslim Brotherhood, the emancipation of women was connected to the deterioration of public morals. Though the education of women was not an issue,<sup>187</sup> the gender-mixed youth organizations and work places led to the supposition of growing promiscuity. However, a new understanding of the role of women was also discussed

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 212-13.

<sup>186</sup> As quoted in: Sabbagh, "An Interview with Syria's Kamar Keilani," 248.

<sup>187</sup> Education is an area that has traditionally been acceptable for women to work in, and is still one of the major work fields where women are employed. Comp. Shaaban, "The status of women in Syria," 56.

among religious scholars. According to al-Siba'i and Hawwa, the role for women was to work towards the Islamisation of their families through the religious education of their children and the promotion of Islam in their extended families. With these ideas, they prepared the way for today's engagement of women in the Islamist movement.

Furthermore, al-Siba'i called for women to take up the public role of the *dā'iya*: Only then the masses would be reached.<sup>188</sup> Accordingly, from the late 1950s onwards, individual women played an active role as preachers and in the Islamist uprising.<sup>189</sup> Even though the Islamist discourse argues for the existential difference in nature between men and women,<sup>190</sup> the new roles for women in the Islamic revival show a parallel development to the secularist discourse as religious education and public agency within the *da'wa* movement started to be propagated.

Both the secular and the religious trend are based on the end of female seclusion. The Syrian political analyst Mohamed Jamal Barout and Muhammad Habash, Member of Parliament, independently identified the end of the seclusion and the widely accepted participation of women in the public sphere as the most significant changes for women in Syrian society during the last 50 years, caused by the economic necessity for female employment and the influence of global media through satellite TV and the Internet that

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<sup>188</sup> For al-Siba'i comp. Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," 864.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni and Zuhair Salim. London, 16.03.2010; according to Hatem, "Toward the development of post-Islamist and post-nationalist feminist discourses in the Middle East," 41. large numbers of middle class women were active in the Muslim Brotherhood, but she does not give any examples or sources for this claim.

<sup>190</sup> I will discuss this more in 6.1.1 and 6.3.

led to a more pluralistic society.<sup>191</sup> In particular, the image of veiled women changed under the assessment of both the government and the religious milieu.

The Baath regime's push toward secularism and rejection of the hijab as a symbol of backwardness resulted in the marginalisation of conservative and religious Muslim women in Syrian society during the 1970s and 1980s and prolonged the practice of seclusion in the conservative milieu. The change was caused mainly by economic reasons and the growing acceptance of female education and employment by religious leaders. Habash argues that the exposure to various interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence in the wake of globalisation led to a change of mind among many '*ulamā*' and their subsequent support of female participation in the public space.<sup>192</sup> The ideal of seclusion lost its religious legitimisation and instead, new demarcations of gender segregation were defined.<sup>193</sup> At the same time, the difficult economic situation resulted in a wider acceptance of female employment among conservative Sunni families so that today both women with and without hijab are working outside their homes albeit the professions that are seen as acceptable for women are limited. The government stance towards women in hijab has also changed, viewing the *mutahajjaba* as a possible embodiment of a modern woman, since many started serving their society in various functions, from typists in the private sector to members of parliament.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Interview with Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009; Interview with Muhammad Habash, Damascus, 19.06.2011.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> For a discussion of gender segregation among my participants see 6.1.1.

<sup>194</sup> Comp. 3.1.1 and 3.3.

While this development led some women to reject veiling and to socialise more freely across gender boundaries, other women left seclusion behind, yet went on to uphold conservative religious values, i.e. they found new ways to practice modesty and redefine the boundaries of acceptable interactive participation with men in public. For other women, the veil has become a fashion statement, wound around the head in stylish folds, worn with heavy make-up and skin-tight clothes. Concerning clothing, a strong polarisation was taking place during the years I lived in Syria with growing minorities on both ends of the spectrum: More women followed contemporary Western fashion. Towards the end of my field research in 2011 in the richer parts of Damascus such as Abu Roumani, sleeveless tops and even a rare belly button could be seen, something unheard of when I first came to Syria in 2002. At the same time, more women started to wear extreme forms of veiling. During the late 1980s, Dunya was beaten by her father to stop her from wearing a headscarf, because he felt ashamed of his daughter's public 'confession'. Today a woman in *niqāb* and black gloves is nothing out of the ordinary in the streets of Damascus. The majority are opting for moderate forms of veiling. Constant discussions among all my female acquaintances revolved around the subjects of modesty, sexual attraction, and divine commandments on clothing. A couple of times I was even approached by strangers in the streets with a *tithajjabi nafsik!* – 'Wear hijab!'

Gender boundaries are not only set through clothing but through a diversity of behaviours. My research participants signalled modesty by actions such as refusing to shake a man's hand or avoiding being alone with a man in a closed space even for a short time like taking an elevator. The same is true of devout men. After one of the classes I visited at the Sharia Department of Damascus University I went to ask the male lecturer a few questions.

Another student accompanied me and the door to his office was left open. During our conversation the lecturer spoke consequently facing away from me at about a 45-degree angle. This felt very strange to me but my fellow student praised his modest behaviour afterwards. Yet with the failure of the political struggle, Islamist discourse has focused more than ever on women and their behaviour.

This goes hand in hand with the shift from violence to changing the society via institutions and personal *da'wa*.<sup>195</sup> The government-supported Islamisation has helped Islamist women in living out some of their convictions under the cover of the general religious trend and allowed for the development of the women's *da'wa* movement, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

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<sup>195</sup> Compare Freitag, "Politische Religion im Nahen Osten: nationalistische und islamistische Modelle," 142-43.

## 4 WOMEN AND THE *DA'WA* MOVEMENT IN SYRIA

1970 – 2011

The simultaneous trend of greater secularism and plurality in parts of Syrian society in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century generated the growing need for *da'wa* among Islamists. The development of the women's *da'wa* movement was a response to the loss of religious and moral dominance in society. In my experience, Islamist women were driven by a strong missionary zeal, working towards the Islamisation of their society on different levels: even while working at the level of the individual, they were influencing the change of the consensus of what is morally acceptable, and a general public adherence to morals. In the following, I discuss the historical roots of the women's *da'wa* movement and how it relates to the general *da'wa* movement before I look at the role that education, family and mosque space play in this phenomenon.

### 4.1 The development of the *da'wa* movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The concept of *da'wa* is based on Qur'anic verses that commanded Muhammad and his followers to engage with unbelievers in conversations about Islam. The verse that my participants quoted most often when asked why they engaged in *da'wa* was: *id'u ilā sabīli*

*rabbika bi-l-ḥikma wa al-maw‘iza al-ḥasana wa jadilahum bi-llatī hiya aḥsan.*<sup>196</sup> Over the centuries Muslims have always engaged with preaching to and teaching of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet the use of the term *da‘wa* with the emphasis to call to religious observance and piety to Muslims, underwent a revival only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Muslim societies were challenged by the military and technical dominance of the colonial powers and even more so during the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the struggle for decolonisation triggered a search for a new Muslim/Arab modernity.<sup>197</sup>

The *da‘wa* movement in Syria is an educational movement. Historically, in the Ottoman Empire, basic Islamic knowledge and devout practice were passed on in the context of the family and Qur’an schools, more in-depth knowledge in study circles (*ḥalaqāt*) in homes or mosques and in the madrasas as institutes of religious and secular learning. Under the influence of Western colonial powers, religious education was marginalised due to the preference of Western-style secular education.<sup>198</sup> Christian missionary activities aggravated this trend.<sup>199</sup> The preference of Western education and the sentiment that associated Islam with backwardness, led many in the upper classes to adopt secularist lifestyles while triggering apologetic responses from Islamic thinkers such as Syed Ahmad Khan (1817 – 1898), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and

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<sup>196</sup> ‘[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way’ Sura 16:125.

<sup>197</sup> For a discussion of the historical development of the Islamic discourse on *da‘wa* compare Henning Wrogemann, *Missionarischer Islam und gesellschaftlicher Dialog: Eine Studie zur Begründung und Praxis des Aufrufs zum Islam* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 2006).

<sup>198</sup> Masooda Bano, "Co-producing with FBOs: Lessons from state-madrassa engagement in the Middle East and South Asia," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 7 (2011): 1278. Thomas Pierret, *Religion and state in Syria: The Sunni ulama from coup to revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 33.

<sup>199</sup> Salt, "An Islamic scholar-activist: Mustafa al-Siba'i and the Islamic movement in Syria 1945-1954," 107.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877 – 1938), who called for a turning back to the original sources of Islam in rejection of the ‘backward’ *taqālīd* of the ‘*ulamā*’ to solve the marginalisation of religion in their societies.<sup>200</sup> The first practical steps were taken to promote a reformed Islam, for example Rida founded the first institute to train *du‘āt*, the Dar al-Da‘wa wa-l-‘Irshad, in Cairo in 1911.<sup>201</sup>

During the nationalist struggle, *da‘wa* became one of the tools to revive the identity of the new nations as Islamic nations, against the backdrop of anti-Western sentiment on the one hand and secular nationalist movements on the other. While Islamic parties and militant groups were trying to gain influence at the political level, the ideological battle for the influence over people’s minds and morals was fought through *da‘wa*. Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) was one of the first to articulate the modern concept of *da‘wa* as the answer to what he saw as the moral decay of Egyptian Muslim society through the influences of Western secularism and materialism.<sup>202</sup> He aimed his organisation, in addition to political and social activism, at the religious education of the people. Accordingly, he understood *da‘wa* as a call to the individual first of all, yet aiming at the step-by-step development of Islamic families, an Islamic society and an Islamic state. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood trained *du‘āt*, built mosques and created other educational institutes, in addition to publishing religious books and pamphlets to disseminate the ‘true’ interpretation of the Qur’an and the call to ‘correct’ practices.

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<sup>200</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices*, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2001). 185-86.

<sup>201</sup> Werner Ende, "Rashid Rida," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 95-97. Wrogemann, 2006 #274

<sup>202</sup> For a more in-depth discussion comp. W. Wenner and Abd al-Monein Said Aly, "Modern Islamic reform movements: The Muslim Brotherhood in contemporary Egypt," *The Middle East Journal* 36, no. 3 (1982).

The phenomenon of the Muslim brotherhood is not a unique case of a *da'wa* oriented organisation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1920s, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) founded the Tablighi Jama'at movement on the Indian subcontinent in response to Hindu and Christian missionary activities. His *da'wa* was directed at educating the rural Muslim population in particular, and correcting their basic beliefs and practices to ensure monotheism, the ritual prayer and *dhikr*.<sup>203</sup> In contrast with the Muslim Brotherhood, they disclaimed political engagement. Today, the movement counts as one of the most successful international Islamic movements.

In Syria, the period in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is sometimes called the 'awakening of the sheikhs,' as a new generation of religious leaders from the middle class started to react to the secularisation of the educated milieu.<sup>204</sup> At the time, there was no institute of higher Islamic education in Syria, and many Syrian students of sharia studied at Al-Azhar in Cairo. During the 1940s and 1950s, students like al-Siba'i<sup>205</sup> and Abu Ghudda<sup>206</sup> were influenced by al-Banna while in Cairo, and returned with the goal to reform Syrian society through *da'wa*.

The following years saw the foundation of a number of Islamic networks and organisations with the goal of *da'wa* and Islamic education at different levels. For example, al-Siba'i and other Muslim Brothers founded the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Damascus in

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<sup>203</sup> Wrogemann, *Missionarischer Islam und gesellschaftlicher Dialog: Eine Studie zur Begründung und Praxis des Aufrufs zum Islam*: 132-33.

<sup>204</sup> Comp. Pierret, "Sunny clergy politics in the cities of Ba'thi Syria," 72.

<sup>205</sup> Comp. 3.1, page 61-72.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

1954.<sup>207</sup> Salih al-Farfour (1901-1986) established al-Fatih Institute in Damascus' conservative quarter of Midan in 1956.<sup>208</sup> At the same time, the traditional method of private studies with a sheikh and gaining a number of *ijāzāt* remained in practice. Each *ijāza* is the permission to teach a specific subject or book. Ahmad Kuftaro had a growing following for his lessons at the Abu al-Nur Mosque, the predecessor of ANC, and started a sharia elementary school for boys and girls each during the 1950s.<sup>209</sup> The Islamic scholar Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i (1901 – 1973) started the Zayd network of '*ulamā*' and laypersons. Centered at the Zayd bin Thabit Mosque in Damascus, his followers met in study circles in mosques around the city. These movements provided Islamic education at different levels, offering study opportunities to bigger numbers of Syrians at the institutes of basic and higher education, while at the same time maintaining the relationship-based approach of learning with a sheikh, and facilitating Islamic education to wider circles of laypersons through mosque lessons and many smaller *halaqāt*. While only the certificate from the Sharia Faculty was acknowledged by the government, the system of attaining *ijāza* provided the basic principle that facilitated the *da'wa* movement to become a grassroots movement as numerous individuals were coached to teach what they had learned.<sup>210</sup>

While these different groups and clerics shared the goal of re-Islamising Syrian society, the diversity within the *da'wa* movement in Syria becomes obvious with the various approaches to politics. In particular, during the power struggles between the Baath government and the Islamists, different '*ulamā*' and organisations have taken dissimilar

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<sup>207</sup> Pierret, *Religion and state in Syria: The Sunni ulama from coup to revolution*: 36.

<sup>208</sup> For more information see "al-Fatih Institute webpage," Accessed 06.06.2007, <http://alfatihonline.com/en/main.htm>.

<sup>209</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 151-52 and 56.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Sheikh Rajab Deeb, Jdeida, 10.03.2009.

stances concerning the government. The Muslim Brotherhood as political opposition was targeted from 1963 onwards, even though it was divided over the use of violence. Even before the 1979-1981 uprising, many of its leading sheikhs were imprisoned or exiled, such as Abu Ghuda and Issam al-‘Attar. Al-Rifa’i’s sons, who had taken over the leadership of the Zayd movement after their father’s death, were exiled, too, notwithstanding their attempts to remain neutral in the conflict. They returned in the 1990s and there seems to have been a short period of rapprochement between the government and the Zayd network, yet tellingly, in March and April 2011 during the uprising, the Zayd bin Thabit Mosque became one of the major centres of opposition in Damascus. On the other hand, Kuftaro and al-Farfour supported the government and could engage their movements in *da‘wa* under its patronage. In addition to the leading sheikhs, less important ‘*ulamā*’ within the *da‘wa* movement were to varying degrees dependent or independent of the government’s ‘Official Islam’.<sup>211</sup>

The sheikhs who initiated the *da‘wa* movement among men also started the women’s *da‘wa* movement. Understanding the relationship between the male religious elite and the women involved in *da‘wa*, supports my argument that I will develop in depth in Chapter 5.3, that the movement among women has no emancipatory objective because of the dependency and support that the *dā‘iyāt* receive from the male sheikhs. I will portray this relationship in the following section.

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<sup>211</sup> For an in-depth discussion see Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*; Pierret, "Sunny clergy politics in the cities of Ba’thi Syria."; Pierret, *Religion and state in Syria: The Sunni ulama from coup to revolution*.

#### 4.2 The development of the role of the *dā'iya*

Throughout the history of Islam, there are some examples of female religious authority, starting with Aisha and the other wives of Muhammad, who played an important role in the transmission of the *aḥadīth* in particular.<sup>212</sup> In Syria, early examples include Um Dardat, who taught mixed gender classes in the Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>213</sup> An example from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is Fatima, the daughter of Sheikh Khalid Naqshbani (1776-1826), who received training in Islamic sciences and was a well-known teacher in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiya order.<sup>214</sup> However, higher religious learning, preaching and teaching were mainly male domains. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most girls learned basic religious practices like prayer and fasting within the family context and practised them at home.<sup>215</sup> Even during my field research the question of whether mosques were for men and women should only pray at home was discussed, and one of the *aḥadīth* I have heard quoted many times was: 'A woman's prayer in her house is better than in her courtyard, and her prayer in her own room is better than her prayer in the rest of the house.'<sup>216</sup> Yet other *aḥadīth* such as: 'Do not forbid the mosques of Allah to the women of Allah'<sup>217</sup> could be used to legitimise women's participation in

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<sup>212</sup> Comp. Shaaban, "The muted voices of women interpreters," 61-63; Kalmbach, "Social and religious change in Damascus: One case of female Islamic religious authority," 38 and 46-47. On the question of religious authority of Muhammad's wives comp. Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*: 72-75. On religious education of women see *ibid*.

<sup>213</sup> Kalmbach, "Social and religious change in Damascus: One case of female Islamic religious authority," 46-47.

<sup>214</sup> Sean Foley, "The Naqshbaniyya-Khalidiyya, Islamic sainthood, and religion in modern times.," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 4 (2008): 533.

<sup>215</sup> Interviews with Shirine Dakouri, Damascus, 12.12.2009, and Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009.

<sup>216</sup> Abu Dawud, 570.

<sup>217</sup> Sahih Bukhari, vol. 13, *bāb* 23.

public religious activities. Notwithstanding the question as to whether these *aḥadīth* are authentic, the fact that they are part of the religious discourse and often unquestioned gives them influence over the way male and female religious space are understood.

The *da'wa* movement tended towards including women early on. In Egypt, Zaynab al-Ghazali (1918-2005) founded the Muslim Women's Association for religious education and charity in 1936. She met Hassan al-Banna in 1939, and swore allegiance to him in 1949. In the 1950s she gave weekly lectures in the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo, which was attended by 3-5000 women. Her goal was to convince women of 'true Islam' in the hope that they would bring up the new generation as 'true Muslims'.<sup>218</sup> Similarly, the Tablighi Jama'at started to include women in their religious activism under the protection and leadership of male preachers. The men focused on *da'wa* in the mosques, while the women reached out to women in private homes.<sup>219</sup> However, in order for the women's *da'wa* movement, including large numbers of female religious activists, to develop in Syria, the areas of religious education, role and space for women needed to change.

#### 4.2.1 Providing religious education for women

During the 1950s, as a professor at the Sharia Faculty at Damascus University, al-Siba'i advocated that women should follow the example of Muhammad's wives who had not

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<sup>218</sup> On Zaynab al-Ghazali see Valerie J Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali," in *Women and the family in the Middle East: New voices of change*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

<sup>219</sup> I discuss the effect of female activities in homes in Syria in 6.1.3.

been passive but active members of the early Muslim community and propagated Islam within their families and beyond, and argued for the importance of religious education for women.<sup>220</sup> Yet public lessons, accessible to large numbers of women, remained an exception. For example, during the 1960s, Sheikh Abdu al-Qadir ‘Isa (d. 1991) taught lessons which were attended by women in Aleppo,<sup>221</sup> and women also listened to Ahmad Kuftaro’s lessons in the yard of the Abu Nur Mosque, hidden behind a curtain.<sup>222</sup> Alternatively, a female relative of the imam, most often his wife, taught women in private lessons. However, these two approaches to reach women were quite limited: On the one hand, women who listened to male preachers had only inadequate interaction with the teacher, while the majority of women were still affected by seclusion and would therefore not attend a men’s lesson at a mosque. On the other, the few women who gave lessons were not trained in *da‘wa* or religious knowledge, as Huda Habash, herself a *dā‘iya* and supervisor for the ministry of *awqāf*, pointed out to me: This older generation of female religious teachers often only taught some limited Qur’an memorisation or read from a religious book.<sup>223</sup> Therefore one of the important factors for the successful development of the women’s *da‘wa* movement was the creation of opportunities for higher religious education for women. During the 1960s and 1970s the first steps were taken to provide this. The al-Fatih Institute opened its women’s branch on a separate women’s campus in 1965.<sup>224</sup> ANC opened a girl’s sharia secondary school in 1975, its faculty of *da‘wa* studies

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<sup>220</sup> Comp. Roded, "Lessons by a Syrian Islamist from the life of the Prophet Muhammad," 863-64.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 09.12.2009.

<sup>222</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 152.

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009. On Huda Habash see Kalmbach, "Social and religious change in Damascus: One case of female Islamic religious authority."

<sup>224</sup> "al-Fatih Institute webpage".

having opened in 1974.<sup>225</sup> To my knowledge, women were admitted to the Sharia Faculty at Damascus University from its foundation in 1954, but the numbers of female students were small. In 1967/68, for example, out of a total of 1254 students only 197 were women.<sup>226</sup>

When the ANC, which was still a small institute with only two storeys, opened its sharia school for girls in 1975, the male teachers used their influence to recruit and encourage families to send their daughters to receive an Islamic education.<sup>227</sup> There were 23 girls who started together in the first year, Huda Habash being one of them. She remembered how she first got drawn to become a preacher during the 1970s:

When we studied with Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro he emphasised that we would be *du'āt*. He told us that we were now studying sharia in order to become *du'āt*. We were not studying sharia only for our own good but for the sake of the people, to save them from sin, injustice and evil to good, light and righteousness.<sup>228</sup>

For the generation of *dā'iyāt* who grew up in the 1980s or later, the situation has changed in many ways. With the general rise of the percentage of men and women with higher education<sup>229</sup> there is also a rising demand to study sharia. According to the government, in 2006 there were 7603 students enrolled at the four-year course of the Sharia Faculty of Damascus University, 3337 of them women.<sup>230</sup> That means that more than 15 % of all

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<sup>225</sup> Comp. Böttcher, "Islamic teaching among sunni women in Syria," 154-64.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>228</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009.

<sup>229</sup> Comp. 2.3, page 85-92.

<sup>230</sup> as quoted in Ibrahim Hamidi, "Alāf al-masājid tuqadim 400 alf dars usbu'ī ... al-aryaf al-surīyya tughadhhi al-mudun b-il-mutashaddidīn ... wa al-ihtilāl al-'irāq yulhim

students at the University that year studied sharia.<sup>231</sup> This high number is partly due to the *numerus clausus* for sharia studies, which is comparatively low. In addition, especially for girls from conservative families, sharia studies are a more acceptable choice than for example Arabic literature, because female students of the Arts have a worse moral reputation according to my observations. This is supported by Hamidi's (2006) record that there were an additional 6000 students enrolled in the private institutes that offer sharia studies on a university level in 2004, such as the ANC and the al-Fatih Institute.<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.2.2 The Qubaisiyat: An example of a successful religious women's network

Recently, some international publicity has focused on the Syrian *dā'iya* Munira Qubaisi and her network, the Qubaisiyat.<sup>233</sup> Munira Qubaisi has been ranked among the 50 most

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thamaniya alāf," Accessed 13.05.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/127160>. The female – male ratio of 0.87 to 1 is lower than average.

<sup>231</sup> According to Hamidi there are 48, 000 students enrolled in the University, *ibid*.

<sup>232</sup> Hamidi, "Fi surīya al-'ilmānīya, Kuftāro yudāfi' 'an "al-wasatiyya li-qat' al-tarīq 'ala al-tatarruf al-islāmiy'".

<sup>233</sup> Such as: Rhonda Roumani, "Into the open," Accessed 13.09.2008, <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080912/REVIEW/725899346/-1/SPORT>; Ibrahim Hamidi, "Yurtadīna al-hijāb al-kuhlī wa yamlikna shabaka tadrīs wa nufūdh wāsi'a ... "al-anisāt al-qubaisiyāt" yubāshirna fī surīyya inkhīrāt al-nisā'i fī "al-da'wa al-islāmiyya"," Accessed 13.05.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/132991>; Mona Sarkis, "Religious women's societies in Syria: Angry but tame?," Accessed 07.02.2007, [http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-651/\\_nr-15/i.html](http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-651/_nr-15/i.html).

influential Muslims and described as 'arguably the most influential Muslim woman in the world' today.<sup>234</sup>

Qubaisi was born in 1933 as one of 12 children. She was the only girl in her family to receive a university education, studying sciences. Her family was connected to the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya, and during the 1950s she started to study Islam with Kuftaro.<sup>235</sup> She started her work as a *dā'iya* in the 1960s when she was suspended from her employment as a schoolteacher for mathematics because she used the classroom for the call to Islam.<sup>236</sup> As an alternative, she pursued her religious education at ANC and the Sharia College of Damascus University. Later, she left ANC and started to build an independent women's network in the 1970s, encouraging her disciples to reach the highest levels of religious scholarship.<sup>237</sup> The Qubaisiyat are organised hierarchically like the Kuftariyya order and share the Sufi elements such as *dhikr* and spiritual guidance of each member through a teacher.

The success of the network was partly due to the strategy of secret study circles in private homes during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>238</sup> In 2006, the government granted a licence to teach

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<sup>234</sup> S. Abdallah Schleifer, ed. *The world's 500 most Influential Muslims: 2012* (Amman: The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, 2011), 79.

<sup>235</sup> Islam, "The Qubaysiyyat: The Growth of an international Muslim Women's Revivalist movement from Syria (1960 - 2008) " 5.

<sup>236</sup> According to Hassan Kuftaro, son of Sheikh Ahmad Kuftrao, as quoted in Hamidi, "Yurtadīna al-ḥijāb al-kuhlī wa yamlikna shabaka tadrīs wa nufūdh wāsi'a ... "al-anisāt al-qubaisiyāt" yubāshirna fī surīyya inkhirāt al-nisā'i fī "al-da'wa al-islāmiyya" ..

<sup>237</sup> Schleifer, *The world's 500 most Influential Muslims: 2012*, 78-79.

<sup>238</sup> Hamidi, "Yurtadīna al-ḥijāb al-kuhlī wa yamlikna shabaka tadrīs wa nufūdh wāsi'a ... "al-anisāt al-qubaisiyāt" yubāshirna fī surīyya inkhirāt al-nisā'i fī "al-da'wa al-islāmiyya" ..

to the Qubaisiyat on the condition that they would teach publicly in mosques.<sup>239</sup> Today, the number of her followers is said to be approximately 75, 000 in Damascus and its surroundings alone, with activities spreading to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, a number of European countries and the United States.<sup>240</sup> According to Muhammad Habash, the Islamic Member of Parliament in Damascus, the enormous growth of her movement was due partly to her neutrality during the conflict between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood. Munira Qubaisi neither alienated the religious political opposition and their followers nor the pro-government circles through taking the other side. The network is well connected to the most important religious groups in Damascus, such as the ANC, al-Fatih, the Zayd network, and supported by Ramadan Buti.<sup>241</sup>

There are a number of Islamic private schools in which *dā'iyāt* are using their influence to Islamise the young generation. The Qubaisiyat own 80 schools in Damascus alone.<sup>242</sup> In all private schools, the official syllabus of the government has to be taught, but the Islamic schools offer additional religious classes, activities and competitions for children. These schools are in high demand among middle class families as an affordable alternative to the government schools, with huge classes of often over 60 students per class and underpaid, insufficiently trained teachers.<sup>243</sup> While other private schools often demand ten times more

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<sup>239</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, "Shaqīqat Ahmad Jibrīl fī halaqāt "al-ānisa" Munīra al-Qubaisi ... Dimashq tasmah l-"il-qubaisiyāt" bi-nashat 'alanī," Accessed 13.05.2009, <http://www.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/107802>.

<sup>240</sup> Hamidi, "Alāf al-masājīd tuqadīm 400 alf dars usbu'ī ... al-aryaf al-surīyya tughadhdhi al-mudun b-il-mutashaddidīn ... wa al-ihtilāl al-'irāq yulhim thamaniya alāf".

<sup>241</sup> Hamidi, "Yurtadīna al-ḥijāb al-kuhlī wa yamlikna shabaka tadrīs wa nufūdh wāsi'a ... "al-anisāt al-qubaisiyāt" yubāshirna fī surīyya inkhirāt al-nisā'i fī "al-da'wa al-islāmiyya"".

<sup>242</sup> Schleifer, *The world's 500 most Influential Muslims: 2012*, 78-79.

<sup>243</sup> According to conversations with public school teachers in Syria about the situation in their schools. E.g. Joumana waited for two years for employment as a teacher after graduating with a degree in English literature; when she got employed, she taught 60 - 70

in fees than those of the Qubaisiyat,<sup>244</sup> their schools are also known for their well-educated teachers and the emphasis on morals and good behaviour.<sup>245</sup> Once a student finishes school, the network offers on-going religious education and attachment in their study circles.

Notwithstanding their success, some women find it difficult to deal with the strict hierarchical structure of the Qubaisiyat, which even finds its outward expression in the different coloured hijabs, signalling a member's position within the network. Leila used to be a Qubaisiya but she left because she thinks that 'they are like soldiers.'<sup>246</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Women's *da'wa*, employment, and family

A qualification in religious studies offers special opportunities to women with regards to their work after graduation. According to the World Bank, the rate of female employment is less than 30 % in Syria.<sup>247</sup> After they graduate from university, many young women work in low-income jobs that have nothing to do with their education or with their personal interests until they get married. After that, they are housewives and mothers. However,

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students per class while she earned the equivalent of less than \$200. She never was trained in teaching methods and mainly taught through school book memorization.

<sup>244</sup> According to my Arabic teacher, Bushra, whose nieces were attending a secular private school, conversation, 14.12.2009.

<sup>245</sup> Compare as well Al-Sheykh, "'Al-sahariyyat" fi beyrut mu'minat nashitat wa fi madarisihunna munhazat dadda al-sibyan".

<sup>246</sup> Interview with Leila, Damascus, 23.06.2007.

<sup>247</sup> The World Bank, *The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and Africa*: 64-65.

according to my observation, young women with degrees in sharia studies are much more likely to remain engaged with their area of specialisation: religion. Safiya, whom I met during my studies at the Sharia Faculty in 2005, is one example. Even before she finished her studies, she was involved in teaching girls at her local mosque in a village outside of Damascus. She got married within weeks of graduating, but kept on teaching. In 2009, I visited her after she had given birth to her first child. She had stopped teaching, but with the firm resolve to get involved again as soon as her son or possibly other children would be old enough for her to have some time to spare. A number of women from the mosque who had joined us for the visit encouraged her to return, saying that they missed her and asking her when she would come back.<sup>248</sup> Like many female *dā'iyāt*, her engagement at the mosque did not give her an income. However, it is of high idealistic value to her, providing her with a purpose and a position among the women of her village. By comparison, young women without such an opportunity who cannot find work may continue their studies rather than being unemployed, but that is open to only a small minority even among women with a university degree. The majority sit at home and struggle with boredom.<sup>249</sup> During my field research, graduates eligible for employment in the public sector such as teachers had to wait one or two years after graduation to start their work with the government. For female graduates, this situation was often aggravated by cultural expectations to move back to live with their families, losing their relative independence, and by the pressure to get married 'before it is too late.'

Like Safiya, the *dā'iyāt* that I have met were well educated and highly committed to their calling. Some worked in secular employment as teachers, architects or doctors and still

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<sup>248</sup> Conversation with Safiya, Damascus countryside, 04.03.2009.

<sup>249</sup> Interview with the author Shirine Dakouri, Damascus, 12.12.2009.

made time to spend their evenings and Fridays at the mosques or with visiting women they hoped to draw into the movement.

This is especially true of *dā'iyāt* that are not married. The subject of the unmarried *dā'iya* has triggered the imagination of some people, especially the Qubaisiyat have been accused of heresy by rejecting marriage and promoting anti-male sexism.<sup>250</sup> It is noticeable that there seem to be an above average number of unmarried women in their 30s among the *dā'iyāt*.<sup>251</sup> It's a topic that comes up regularly in my conversations and interviews as I am in the same situation. Each one that I talked to wanted to get married but they are not desperate enough to marry anybody because there is nothing else to fill their lives. Their situation enables them to stand up against social pressures and to reject suitors if they are not to their liking.

#### 4.3 Mosques as spaces for women's *da'wa* religious activism

Another important factor in the development of the women's *da'wa* movement was the new accessibility of mosques for women's activities because religious lessons were the main organised activity *dā'iyāt* engage in. Mosques provided the space to reach larger

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<sup>250</sup> See e.g. Fayad, "Al-khalfiyya al-jinsiyya lil-qubaisiyyāt"; Al-Sheykh, ""Al-sahariyyat" fi beyrut mu'minat nashitat wa fi madarisihunna munhazat dadda al-sibyan".

<sup>251</sup> On the expectation among students for women to get married in their early twenties see Bilal Orabi, "Syria's youth perspectives and orientations: Towards issues of social change," Accessed 07.02.2012 [http://www.fafu.no/ais/middeast/syria/syrianuniversityyouth/B%20Orabi\\_Syria's%20Youth%20Perspectives%20and%20Orientations%20Towards%20Issues%20of%20Social%20Change\\_English.pdf](http://www.fafu.no/ais/middeast/syria/syrianuniversityyouth/B%20Orabi_Syria's%20Youth%20Perspectives%20and%20Orientations%20Towards%20Issues%20of%20Social%20Change_English.pdf). Less educated women tend to marry earlier.

numbers of women than is possible in private lessons and for *dā'iyāt* to build up a sizeable followership.

One of the conditions for this change from homes to mosques was the development of segregated space for women. While the earliest mosque buildings, e.g. in Mecca, Medina or Damascus, had no separate space for women and women used to pray behind the men, the earliest evidence of segregated space comes from the 9<sup>th</sup> century when a part of the mosque in Mecca was roped off.<sup>252</sup> I observed a similar development at the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus, which had no separation when I first lived there in 2002. During the later years of my field research the back of the prayer hall was roped off for women. According to Huda Habash, segregated spaces for women started to be built under the reign of the Ottomans.<sup>253</sup> However, these were usually balustrades that were open to the main hall so that women could hear and see but not be seen. This arrangement also meant that women had to be quiet if they did not want to be heard. Some modern mosques in Damascus provide a different arrangement. They are built with space for women, not just visually separated but also audibly. Women enter through a separate entrance. For example, at ANC, the women's hall is connected to the main mosque via tinted windowpanes and loudspeakers. At the Iman Mosque in Mazra'a, Damascus, the women's hall is in the basement and connected to the main hall via video screens.<sup>254</sup> The new kind of segregated space provides women with a meeting place for their own programme of lessons and even social events as Huda Habash explains:

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<sup>252</sup> J. Pedersen et al., "Masdjid," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

<sup>253</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009.

<sup>254</sup> Comp. e.g. the mosque in ANC, the Iman Mosque, and the Zahra' Mosque, in Damascus.

We have more continuing activities, conversations among the women, they can laugh and sing together ... it is simply more comfortable. But if [the space] is shared with the men, we only listen to a lecture, and go home.<sup>255</sup>

Nevertheless, mosques are still perceived to be men's space, first of all. For example, during Friday prayers, the women's part of the Zahra and other mosques is left to accommodate the larger numbers of men while women stay at home. The only mosques that I know of in Syria where women attend the Friday prayer are the ANC and the Umayyad mosque. During different activities that I observed, men would call the *dā'iya* on her mobile phone and complain that they could hear the women. At a *mawlid* I attended at the big Kuwaiti Mosque in Mazra'a the women used the main prayer hall, which the male caretaker at first would not let them enter and then was grumbling and rebuking the women unceasingly.<sup>256</sup>

According to Huda Habash, the change from homes to mosques was pushed by the government to make it possible to guarantee the qualifications of the preacher and the quality of what was taught.<sup>257</sup> As a supervisor, Huda Habash visits mosque lessons to get acquainted with the *dā'iya* and her education, as well as making sure that the teaching is not opposed to the law, e.g. in promoting religious violence.<sup>258</sup>

Moving lessons to the mosques has made attendance at lessons more socially acceptable for women: Public lessons make it much easier to bring others along, or to find out if they

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<sup>255</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009.

<sup>256</sup> Observation at a *mawlid* celebration at the Kuwaiti Mosque, Damascus, 15.02.2011

<sup>257</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

would like to join a lesson or not, while private lessons are only accessible via invitation and are of limited size.<sup>259</sup> In addition, for a woman to visit a home of a not-related family is seen by some sectors of society as risky, because of possible dangers to her reputation and safety.

#### 4.3.1 The Zahra Mosque as an example of a successful women's mosque programme

Huda Habash was one of the first women who started to teach regular classes at a mosque in Damascus.<sup>260</sup> Her programme is one of the most successful today. She developed a desire to spread religion very early on in her life and started as a teenager to gather the children in her building and her family to teach them stories of the prophets and other simple subjects that she had learned at ANC. At the beginning of the 1980s when she was seventeen, she began to teach girls in a mosque in Ayn Khadra, at that time an hour and a half from Damascus on public transport. She had by then studied sharia for five years and was able to teach the girls how to memorise the Qur'an, about Qur'anic interpretation, and the biography of Muhammad, prayer and 'Islamic clothing': What was to be covered and in front of whom. Two years later in 1983, while the country was still in shock about what

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<sup>259</sup> This is not always the case. I tried to join two women's lessons in two mosques after I had heard that they were connected to the Qubaisiyat. My informant said that she had to call the teacher first to ask if she could pass on the details to me. Later I was told indirectly that I was not welcome.

<sup>260</sup> This section is based on my interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009. For a further discussion of Habash's *da'wa* comp. Kalmbach, "Social and religious change in Damascus: One case of female Islamic religious authority."

happened in Hama, she began lessons for women in the Zahra Mosque in the middle-class neighbourhood of Mezze where her brother Muhammad Habash was the imam. At that time, the Zahra Mosque was the only one after ANC to offer regular lessons for women.<sup>261</sup> Because the women who came to the lessons had very different levels of education, some illiterate and some university students, she split them into different groups. Yet she had to do all the teaching herself because she was the only teacher. From the second year onwards she involved the women who had learned from her in the teaching process. Today, there are a number of well-educated female teachers with degrees in sharia studies working at the Zahra Mosque. Huda Habash herself completed her education at the Sharia Faculty of Damascus University. Over the years, the number of women taking part in different lessons each week has grown to about 700.<sup>262</sup>

The Islamic interpretation that is taught at the Zahra Mosque is moderate. The women's programme includes weekly general lessons for women in different age groups and introductory courses for university students who want to gain more in-depth knowledge of sharia on top of their secular studies. These girls commit to coming to specially set-up classes each Friday for four years. They are taught Qur'an memorisation and recitation, Islamic doctrine, Hadith science, Muhammad's biography and jurisprudence in groups of 70 to 80 students. Still, according to Huda Habash, the girls have not gained enough knowledge to become teachers after they have finished the four-year course. 'It's about being educated in their own religion (...) If she wants to be *multazima* she needs to know something about *fiqh* and doctrine and so on. But it would be too early for her to teach

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

after only these courses.’<sup>263</sup> Hesitation to let students start their own *da‘wa* too soon sets Huda Habash apart from other *dā‘iyāt* who rely on the spreading of *da‘wa* on the grassroots level.

#### 4.4 The women’s *da‘wa* as a grassroots movement

Huda Habash’s stance on the necessary qualifications for a teacher are high by comparison. More often, I encountered the opinion that any religious knowledge comes with the responsibility to pass it on. As in Huda Habash’s own history, young teenage girls are often starting out on their first *da‘wa* experiences. Even my eight-year-old neighbour’s daughter would sometimes walk down the street with me and exhort me on the benefits of becoming a Muslim in terms that reflected the preaching in mosques. This approach is widely encouraged by many *dā‘iyāt*. It facilitates the *da‘wa* movement as a grassroots movement because *da‘wa* is seen not primarily as the duty of a few experts but of every believer, so that it will permeate the whole of society.

However, behind the rhetoric of *da‘wa* as every Muslim’s duty is the fact that the propagation from one woman to another results from the motivational preaching of trained *dā‘iyāt* and the confidence that comes with the perception of having gained valued knowledge.

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

According to this approach a person just needs to be one step ahead to be competent in *da'wa*. Hiyam, one of the *dā'iyāt* at ANC, explained to me that *da'wa* is not about being something and then changing into something else, but it is a matter of degrees of being farther away from God or closer. [...] One woman e.g. is at stage 6 or 5, another one at stage 1. We all want to be or should be at stage 1. So one believer who is further on 'calls' the other believer to a degree up in closeness, that means in piety.<sup>264</sup>

Thorough knowledge, though it is also viewed as important, plays a secondary role. On this level of lay women, *da'wa* becomes a simple way of living in a society that is not obediently Muslim, an expression of one's piety in the face of opposition:

The prophet Nuh is an example of how to live *da'wa*. *Da'wa* means to call all creation to obedience. Nuh shows how one person can bear with [the sin of] a whole *umma* and even bring revival to it and change it. This is the situation in which God places every Muslim [...] He did not study, or go to school but he studied through life and living in his society, learning how to bear it. [...] [Nuh's] message was very simple. He had no other message than calling people to say *istaghfir allah*,<sup>265</sup> *subhāna -llah*,<sup>266</sup> and *al-ḥamdu li-llah*.<sup>267</sup> After one month he added: *la ilaha illa -llah*.<sup>268</sup> His society was so far from God, he started with very small steps.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Interview with Hiyam, Damascus, 09.04.2009..

<sup>265</sup> 'May God forgive.'

<sup>266</sup> 'Praise be to God.'

<sup>267</sup> 'Praise be to God.'

<sup>268</sup> 'There is no god but God.'

<sup>269</sup> Lesson by Rajab Deeb at ANC, Damascus, 05.03.2009.

In this quote Nuh (Noah) is used to show that *da'wa* is achievable for everyone, because there is no necessity for higher studies or training to pass on the simple call to worship the one god. In the parts of the *da'wa* movement that follow these ideas, motivational preaching aims at engaging as many women as possible in basic *da'wa* to guarantee that the movement spreads quickly. That the message often remains on a simple level is not seen as a problem, because it is just the first step to draw the recipients into the movement where they will then receive teaching from more qualified *dā'iyāt*.

One-to-one *da'wa* moves along the channels of social relationships. The family is the first place where women are engaged in working towards the Islamisation of society, not just in bringing up their children but also in their relationships with their peers and parents' generation. In lessons, women constantly receive advice on how to ensure that their children will grow up as pious Muslims:

Bring your child a small gift and say: this is from Muhammad. Every time you give them something, a hairclip, a pen, say that it's from Muhammad. Or when he says *ṣalla –llahu 'aleyhi wa-sallam*<sup>270</sup> reward him.<sup>271</sup>

Accordingly, Huda Habash recalls how as a teenager she spent her pocket money on gifts for the children she taught, even though she very much longed to treat herself, because she was driven by the need to reward the children 'for the sake of their prayers'.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> 'May God bless him and grant him peace.'

<sup>271</sup> Lesson by Sheikh Rajab Deeb, 31.05.2009.

<sup>272</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009.

Prayer, religious formulas and short supplications are the first thing to plant in the heart of a child. Sometimes mothers are not only called to reward but also to punish their children:

When a child is seven years old, he is told how to pray. When he is ten, the parents command prayer and hit the child if he doesn't pray. The goal is to have the child get used to praying even though it is not yet an obligation (*fard*) for the child to pray, but it is *fard* for the parents to teach him. When the child is fourteen, he starts puberty. From that time on the son or daughter is responsible to pray.<sup>273</sup>

In closely-knit extended families, women encourage Islamic practice as sisters, cousins and wives, waking up their family members for the prayer of *fajr*, introducing them to mosque lessons and generally trying to convince them to become religiously observant. One woman told me how religious women lead lax husbands to a more observant lifestyle:

The man knows about Islam anyway. It is a question of living according what he knows he should do. So if the woman is wise, she will slowly push him towards religion, reminding him of his religious duties. And she can always point out to him that she wants to follow him and that she needs his leadership for example in prayer and in decisions about the children. The man will be happy that she will put him in this place and he will mostly start to take his religion more seriously.<sup>274</sup>

Through attending lessons and gaining religious knowledge, women see themselves enabled to promote piety even as a daughter. Um Kulthum, a participant in a private study

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<sup>273</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009; this was an often repeated subject in her lessons.

<sup>274</sup> Conversation Jihan, Damascus, November 2011.

circle for young girls and students, told me about how the teaching helped her deal with her father:

The Qur'an tells us not to be angry, and to know about God's command is the first step to acting accordingly. [...] My father is someone who gets angry really easily. Now if he does I quote Qur'anic verses to him and he stops.<sup>275</sup>

Outside the family, friends at school and teachers in particular also play an important role in the lives of girls and younger women. Friends invite each other to join them in lessons and debate each other about wearing the hijab. Officially, it is not acceptable that teachers use their authority to propagate Islam outside the religious education at schools or teach anything other than the syllabus,<sup>276</sup> but I have heard many stories of girls who were more or less pressured by their teachers to wear hijab and conform in other ways to an Islamic lifestyle. For example, Miriam told me how she grew up under the influence of her father who had rejected religion during the 1990s. However, in elementary school she had a teacher who was openly religious and whom she loved very much. One day when Miriam went to school proud of some new clothes that had short sleeves, her teacher told her: 'If you wear this again I cannot love you anymore!' Ashamed she never put on these clothes again.<sup>277</sup>

Beyond the family and school, women with a high level of commitment to *da'wa* see their responsibility towards the whole of society and try to engage with anyone. Huda Habash remembered her zeal during her first years of *da'wa*, when she was still a young girl, how

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<sup>275</sup> Group interview during Sawdas private lesson, Damascus, 22.11.2008.

<sup>276</sup> comp. Shirine Dakouri, "dawr al-mar'a fi ta'sis al-wa'i al-dini," Accessed 14.12.2009, [http://www.sommermagazine.com/?page=show\\_det&select\\_page=9&id=161](http://www.sommermagazine.com/?page=show_det&select_page=9&id=161).

<sup>277</sup> Conversation with Miriam, Damascus, 17.07.2007.

she used to approach total strangers who were sitting with her on the bus, asking them about their religious practices, trying to persuade them of the beauty of prayer and inviting them to join the lessons at a certain time and day. Hiba, another student, explained to me that she likes to walk up to girls her age and ask them why they were not wearing hijab, because she believes that they may be seeking and just need someone to encourage them.<sup>278</sup>

While religious education facilitated the women's *da'wa* movement, today female religious activism happens in many different ways and in all levels of society. The role of relatively untrained women is to raise basic awareness of religious correct practices and to recruit other women to come and join the lessons of the religious experts.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The participation of large numbers of women in religious activities at mosques is probably the second most visible change in social religiosity in Syria after the reappearance of the hijab. Women are involved in spreading religious practices and sentiments, in growing numbers of qualified experts on religion as well as lay persons, who are motivated to recruit large numbers of Syrian children, women and men. After the uprising in 1981, the women's *da'wa* movement gained new importance caused by the break in the public religious activities of Muslim men. Through their involvement, the Islamic revival grew

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<sup>278</sup> Group interview during Sawda's private lesson, Damascus, 29.11.2009.

even at a time when male *da'wa* was very restricted. In many ways the *da'wa* movement has opened new doors to Muslim women in Syria: It offers them religious education on many different levels as never before. With the argument of segregation, some women have become leaders of other women, from teaching small groups of peers to prominent positions as government-paid supervisors. As traditional as these women look, they have gained a new confidence and purpose in the Islamisation of their society.

Many liberal Syrians had a hard time dealing with the change in their society. Some were denying it altogether, others downplayed it. I often heard that Islamism is 'only a reaction to the bad economic situation', as though rationalising the phenomenon helped to limit it. However, others have internalised the government's argument against democratisation based on fear of the Islamists and the possibility that they might gain power: 'We cannot have a real choice in elections because the Islamists would take over the government', explained Joumana about the presidential elections in 2007.<sup>279</sup> Others were campaigning against the Islamist trend among women, like journalist Nabil Fayad (2005), who writes about the Qubaisiyat:

They are dangerous without comparison for the peace of society and the unity of the nation, because [their sectarian influence] sneaks into homes via the wives of influential men, demanding preventive action from the government.<sup>280</sup>

Mernissi (1996) argued that knowledge, and the power that comes with it, would strengthen the feminist cause against the Islamists.<sup>281</sup> However, knowledge is a 'neutral'

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<sup>279</sup> Conversation with Joumana in our home in spring 2007 when Bashar al-Asad was re-elected president for another seven years without an alternative candidate.

<sup>280</sup> Fayad, "Al-khalfiyya al-jinsiyya lil-qubaisiyyāt".

power that opens up different alternatives and can be used to support different worldviews. In Syria at the turn of the millennium, religious knowledge was often taught without a real engagement with the diversity of Islamic interpretations but with a simple dichotomy of 'true Islam' versus 'ignorance', as Afaf, a student at the Sharia College of Damascus University, put it:

When I was younger, I didn't know anything about Islam. Now I am learning about the Qur'an, the prophet and about the pious forefathers. It is only natural that I want to live like them because then the religion was still pure. Most Muslims don't live according to the true Islam because they are ignorant.<sup>282</sup>

In Part Two and Three of this thesis I will argue that for many Syrian women, the study of the Qur'an and the *hadith* does lead to a radicalisation of their faith practice and ideal of piety in the Islamist sense. Part Two looks at the experiences of five Syrian women who talk about their personal journeys to become devout Muslims. While each case is the particular story of one woman's life, these case studies provide exemplary insights into how each participant has made experiences and choices that led her to a particular interpretation and expression of Islam. Looking at each case individually first, exploring the context of family background and upbringing, events that shaped each woman, and her own interpretation of her journey, will give a more complete portrait and lead to a more realistic understanding of their developments. A more in-depth analysis of common themes will be given in Part Three.

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<sup>281</sup> Fatima Mernissi, "Muslim women and Fundamentalism," in *Arab women: Between defiance and restraint*, ed. Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), 165.

<sup>282</sup> Conversation with Afaf, Damascus, 01.11.2005

## **PART TWO CASE STUDIES**

## 5 MAKING DEVOUT MUSLIM WOMEN'S VOICES HEARD

'Conversion testimonies' that interpret religious changes as a break with the past are not part of the usual discourse among devout Muslim women in Syria. Accordingly, there is normally no ritual ceremony involved. Poidomani (2006) gives the account of a party on the occasion of a girl taking the hijab.<sup>283</sup> However, those instances seem to be a limited upper or upper-middle class phenomenon.<sup>284</sup> Rather, continuity is emphasised and the change that has happened is seen as the consequent development and realisation of the self as a Muslim. Typically, it is a process that may encompass many years, though it could also happen suddenly, especially when a traumatic or 'supernatural' experience triggers a change. None of my participants would describe herself as a woman who had already reached the ideal of being 'pious' but each one saw herself as progressing toward this goal, step by step adjusting their lives to greater religious observance and cultivating pious emotions and attitudes. Whereas for some women, the decision to take the hijab was a major milestone on their journey, others apparently never questioned wearing it or not. Yet their search for the meaning of religious practices that were part of their traditional culture led them to go beyond traditional religiosity. However, irrespective of whether I was talking to a woman for whom the hijab was a decisive step or not, the way that they would inform other women about my research would be: 'Elisabeth is researching why Muslim

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<sup>283</sup> Poidomani, "Syria: Islamic women's movement gains a foothold".

<sup>284</sup> Only one of my participants recalls that in her circle of friends there were celebrations when someone took the hijab in the context of the wealthy Syrian expatriate community in Saudi Arabia (Interview with Rabi'a, Damascus, 27.07.2010). These celebrations seem to be a new development where they happen and a reaction to the fact that wearing the hijab is no longer an unquestioned practice among parts of the population, especially among richer Syrians.

women take the hijab.’ This seems to me to be first of all an expression of what they think is the missing link in the understanding between ‘the West’ and ‘the Muslim community’: the rejection of the hijab in ‘the West’. Numerous times, when women saw me in hijab at mosques they expressed their satisfaction that, if I had no difficulty wearing hijab, I was surely on my way to becoming a Muslim.<sup>285</sup> Independent of my participants development and of my questions, the starting point for exploring Muslim female devoutness in my field research more often than not was the veil. Many participants struggled with it because of the visibility of this step. The only Islamic practice that was given comparative space in conversations, interviews and lessons was the ritual prayer because of the constant high commitment it demands. However, the practice of prayer is much less obvious and I would often only hear about the personal struggle with it after many conversations. Islamic clothing, on the other hand, is the first thing to notice when meeting a devout Muslim woman outside her home. Female clothing – whether it is an Islamic covering or a ‘Western’ display of the female body - has become a highly emotional symbol of the polarisation between Islamic and secular worldviews.

In this chapter, I describe various case studies so that the women’s voices can be heard as they interpret their own lives. I also use their narratives to demonstrate some of the factors that moved them towards devoutness. In the next chapter, I will build on these factors for my overall analysis. In three cases, their stories show not only the process of becoming religious as those who have changed themselves but also as those who have become agents of change to others. The first two cases portray *dā‘iyāt* who are connected to the ANC,

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<sup>285</sup> There are indeed examples of women who strated to be attracted to the modesty of the hijab first and who entered Islam as a second step, such as Amina Wadud and Na’ima Roberts. Comp. Robert, *From my sisters' lips*; Amina Wadud, *Inside the gender jihad* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

although I met them independently of each other.<sup>286</sup> The third *dā'iyā* never talked about her association with a specific group although she recommended the lessons at the Zayd Ibn Thabit Mosque to me, the centre of the Zayd network. I further describe two cases of women on the margins of the *da'wa* movement, showing the effects of the Islamic revival in wider Syrian society.

The order of these case studies is chronological, according to the age of the participants starting with the oldest, because together these cases also give a glimpse of general changes that have happened in Syria, especially concerning education and the expectations of female roles in society. The cases inevitably vary in length and depth according to, first of all, the willingness of each participant to talk about the different factors and experiences in her development. In the cases of the *dā'iyāt* I used data collected in interviews as well as participant observation over a time span of two to six years with varying degrees of intensity, while the other cases are based mainly on one or two interviews. The detail of the data also depends on whether I was allowed to record the interview or not.

The first case illustrates the role of religious knowledge. It portrays Sawda, who became one of the first girls to receive a religious education at the ANC and who later became a preacher connected to this institute.

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<sup>286</sup> For ANC see 3.2.

## 5.1 Sawda: Finding and teaching religious knowledge

Sawda described the main change that happened in her life as a shift from tradition as the ignorant imitation of religious customs to a life shaped by informed religious practice: ‘I was a traditional Muslim. Then I became a knowledgeable Muslim.’<sup>287</sup> Driven by her own experience, she dedicated her life to winning others to the same path.

In the July 2008, when I went to visit a sick neighbour I was introduced to one of her relatives, a woman in her fifties, dressed in a floor length black skirt and a dark coloured blouse with long sleeves and a black headscarf. My neighbour addressed her as Anisa Sawda. ‘Anisa’, literally ‘Miss’, is the usual title for a female *dā‘iya*. When Sawda heard about my research project, she said that there was a group of girls meeting in her home on Saturdays and if I wanted, I could come and interview them. As someone used to Christian ‘home groups’ I was intrigued to learn about what happened during these private religious meetings in my neighbourhood. For the next year, until June 2009, I participated regularly in this group.

### 5.1.1 Sawda’s *da‘wa*: Change through knowledge and *dhikr*

When I arrived in Sawda’s flat, fifteen women were crowded in the small living room. Most of them were in their early twenties and were sitting in three rows on the floor facing

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<sup>287</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

Sawda, who sat with three other women in their forties or fifties on two benches, which stood against two of the walls. The lights were turned off, leaving the windowless room in semidarkness; everyone was quiet and I quickly slipped into the place that I was directed to. The room was furnished in a very simple way, with the two wooden, upholstered benches as the main furniture, two cross-stitched gold on black Qur'anic verses on the walls and a number of pictures of Ahmad Kuftaro next to a calendar, showing the exact prayer times for each day. Nearly all of the younger women were dressed in the same way, wearing floor length navy blue or black pleated skirts and white shirts. The older women wore black skirts and black blouses except for Sawda who was dressed in a simple light coloured house dress and prayer headscarf: A wide, cone shaped piece of clothing with an opening at the top for the face, covering the whole upper body and is often quickly slipped over other clothes for prayer or quickly covering up to open the front door.

I arrived in the middle of the groups' worship time. After about half an hour of silent *dhikr*, Sawda started to lead the group in spoken *dhikr*: short phrases from the Qur'an, like *la ilaha illa –llah*,<sup>288</sup> and *astaghfir allah al- 'azim wa atubu ileyh*,<sup>289</sup> and shorter invocation like *ya allah*<sup>290</sup> or *ya latif*,<sup>291</sup> were chanted again and again, each one a specific number of times. Sawda intonated each new phrase, the other participants joining her. The only movements in the room were the prayer beads that many of the women ran through their fingers, and a few of the younger women slightly rocking backwards and forwards in rhythm with the meditation. The last phrase addressed Muhammad: *al-ṣalātu wa salāmu*

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<sup>288</sup> 'There is no God but God.'

<sup>289</sup> 'I ask God for forgiveness and repent.'

<sup>290</sup> 'Oh God!'

<sup>291</sup> 'Oh gentle One!'

*'aleyka ya sayidi ya rasūl allah,*<sup>292</sup> then Sawda directed: *'Al-Fātiḥa'* and the participants recited the first surah under their breath. Following that, Sawda recited firstly a long list of blessings of the successive sheikhs of the Naqshbandi order starting with Muhammad and ending with Ahmad Kuftaro, and a litany of blessings of the whole Muslim community. Then one young woman recited a section from the Qur'an, followed by three religious songs and a repetition of the *fātiḥa*, the first Sura of the Qur'an. The atmosphere during the spoken *dhikr*, which took about an hour, was very quiet. Some women kept their eyes closed, some started weeping silently. Afterwards the lights were switched on, the women took notebooks and pens from their bags, and the lesson started.

Sawda involved two more teachers beside herself in these lessons. Khulud, a widow in her fifties, taught *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, and Hiyam, an unmarried woman at the beginning of her thirties, taught Hadith science. Sawda herself taught about Muhammad's biography and *tafsīr*. Each Saturday, two of the four subjects were taught in turns, each one for about one hour. The participants were expected to read textbooks at home and familiarise themselves with the subject beforehand. The lessons demanded a commitment to attend regularly, to study at home and to sit exams in all areas, which happened twice during my attendance. Participants who skipped lessons or were badly prepared were publicly admonished whereas those who knew the material were praised.

Considering this commitment, only women with comparatively free management of their time attended the lessons, especially unmarried and widowed women. The majority of the participants were university students. However, there was also one girl of fourteen still in

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<sup>292</sup> 'May blessing and peace be upon you, oh my Lord, messenger of God!'

middle school and three girls studying for their secondary school certificates. Two women were working as teachers but they were not married yet. Two newly married women dropped out when they when they gave birth soon after I joined. Two of the older women were widows with grown-up children and one was Sawda's older sister, who never married and therefore lived with Sawda and her husband.

Not all of Sawda's lessons demanded the same level of commitment as her Saturday study group. She taught two public lessons in mosques, one in a suburb and one at ANC. These two lessons were open for anyone to come, and the participants were women of all ages and levels of education. The main purpose of the public lessons was to teach women moral practices, as Sawda explained: 'There are quite a few uneducated women attending. So I simplify things and talk more about the practical life of a Muslim woman.'<sup>293</sup>

In contrast Sawda's explicit expectation for her Saturday lessons was that the attendees would not only benefit for their own religious knowledge and practices but follow in her footsteps and become *dā'iyāt* themselves. They could attend only by personal invitation. The relationship between Sawda and these women could be described as mentoring for *da'wa*. Their training included the theoretical lessons, spiritual exercises like the weekly *dhikr* and spending as much time with their teacher as possible, helping with the chores at Sawda's home or joining her when she went to visit for the sake of her *da'wa*. They were expected to keep up private *dhikr* and start small study groups among their acquaintances. Not every participant fulfilled the expectations. Yet Sawda often took some time at the end of the lessons to ask how their groups were going and encourage each girl individually.

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<sup>293</sup> Interview with Sawda, 19.05.2009

The group also went together to visit study circles that one of them had started. On two occasions I joined them for such visits. There was some time to socialise as we were fed rich breakfasts, followed by a short lesson by Sawda and more extended singing of religious songs.

As a *dā'iya* Sawda devoted her life to teaching. She saw religious knowledge as the vehicle of *da'wa* because of the faculty of reason with which God has gifted human beings specifically to recognise spiritual truths: 'Our reason is a gift from God so that we can receive guidance from him.'<sup>294</sup> According to this view, human reason was created to understand religious knowledge, and recognise the truth of the Islamic dogma as well as the life supporting qualities of the Islamic norms of behaviour. Sawda often discussed her view of the rationality of Islam in her lessons. This view of the rationality of Islam led to a one-dimensional, idealised understanding of knowledge and reason as her teaching during one of her public lessons, in which Sawda argued at length for the truth of Islam versus Christianity, shows:

From the very beginning of our relationship Sawda was very open about her expectation to see me converted to Islam through my studies. Starting from the Qur'anic statement that Jesus announced a future prophet called Ahmad, Sawda argued that it was only reasonable to follow the newest revelation as much as one would use the newest development in other areas. To cling to an abrogated religion made no sense: 'If you have an old and frumpy coat and you buy a new one, which one will you wear? Would anyone with a rational mind

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<sup>294</sup> Lesson taught by Sawda at ANC, 23.03.2009.

still wear the old one?'<sup>295</sup> However, her main argument was the irrationality of the Christological dogma:

The Christians say, Jesus is the Son of God. If that were true, God logically would have a wife: God forbid! [...] They say, God is one, then they say: There are three, father, son and Holy Spirit. Is that rational? Is that acceptable? They say that Jesus crucified himself. So he committed suicide. Why? This absolutely makes no sense. For what reason would he do that? Would anyone in his right mind love to suffer?<sup>296</sup>

Despite the fact that Sawda claimed a rejection of Christianity on rational grounds the reactions of her listeners were strongly emotional. They became restless, tut-tutting and exclaiming 'God forbid!' to express their rejection. The experience was also extremely emotional for myself feeling personally attacked as the only Christian present, by arguments that depicted my beliefs as incoherent and irrational.

Conversations with other participants show that it was a common perception that conversion could be expected after contrasting Islam with Christianity, and that my adherence to Christianity must be due to ignorance of the facts. For example, at one point Sawda sent me to meet her sheikh, Ramadan Deeb. After being introduced as a student of Islamic studies he claimed, that I was on my way to becoming a Muslim. Even after I confirmed my Christian identity, he reassured me that through my studies I would definitely 'find a better conviction' in Islam so long as I persisted.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Lesson taught by Sawda at ANC, 06.04.2009.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Conversation with Sheikh Ramadan Deeb, ANC, Damascus, 23.03.2009.

This example illustrates Sawda's 'optimistic' view of the role that religious knowledge plays as the driving factor for religious change. However, knowledge alone without the engagement of the emotions was ineffective. Therefore she included *dhikr* in her *da'wa* practice.

As described at the beginning of this section, all Sawda's lessons, like all other lessons in mosques and private homes I attended, began with *dhikr*. She also encouraged her disciples to do private *dhikr* in their homes. Sometimes she would give her disciples 'homework' to do a certain *dhikr* for special occasions, e.g. in a lesson after Mothers' Day<sup>298</sup> she distributed the different parts of the Qur'an for recitation 'for the sake of the mothers' among the women, making sure that the group would together recite the whole Qur'an twice during the next week, though each woman only recited a certain part on her own. In addition she demanded that they should recite 200 times *lā ilāha illa -llah*<sup>299</sup> and *lā ilāha illa -llah waḥdahu, lā sharīka lahu, lahu -l-mulk wa-lahu -l-ḥamd wa-hu 'ala kulli shay'in qadīr*<sup>300</sup> 200 times. According to Sawda, the recitation would bring blessing to mothers and to the whole home.

Sawda encouraged her disciples to practice *dhikr* because the concentration on God would bring them closer to God, purify their hearts, and give them the ability to live according to the Islamic ideal that she preached.

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<sup>298</sup> Lesson at ANC, 06.04.2009.

<sup>299</sup> See page 116 for the meaning.

<sup>300</sup> 'There is no God but God alone, without partner, the dominion and praise are his, and he is able to do all things.'

The strength or lack of strength needed to live up to their religious ideal was an issue that came up again and again among my research participants. Whether it was the question of putting on the hijab, especially for unmarried women who feared that they would reduce their marriage options through a headscarf, or getting up before dawn for prayer: They expressed that it needed special strength to live authentic religious lives. Sawda addressed this issue by encouraging the practice of *dhikr* among her followers. Her lessons were interspersed with stories of the enabling power of *dhikr*:

When the angels were told to carry the throne of God they said: We cannot do it!

Then they were told: say: *la ḥawla wa-la quwata illa bi-llahi al-‘alī al-‘aẓīm*<sup>301</sup> and up went the throne!

Sawda’s hand flew up in demonstration of the instant ease with which the angels carried the throne of God.<sup>302</sup>

Sawda saw herself as an example of the transformative power of knowledge and *dhikr*: ‘I became a *dā‘iya* through knowledge and *dhikr*.’<sup>303</sup> However, when she told me the story of her own life, her focus was mainly on knowledge.

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<sup>301</sup> ‘There is no power and strength except in God, the High and Great.’

<sup>302</sup> Lesson at ANC, 23.03.2009.

<sup>303</sup> Conversation with Sawda, Damascus, 23.06.2011.

### 5.1.2 Sawda's story of her own change

I met Sawda for an interview about her personal religious development in her home on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2009. Her older sister sat with us during the whole time though she took no active part in our conversation most of the time. As Sawda did not want me to record the interview I took notes while we talked and wrote the interview down from memory with the help of my notes once I got home. Shortly after the interview Sawda asked me to stop coming to her private lessons and did not respond positively to my attempts to meet again until June 2011. When we met and I re-translated my interview notes into Arabic and Sawda checked the correctness of my data as well as elaborated on a number of topics. During this occasion, Sawda also told me that two years ago she had decided that I should no longer attend her home lessons because of a tightening of government policies concerning private religious lessons. She said that she had to decrease the number of girls attending her home. Obviously, in addition to the numerical problem a foreigner like me was much more visible in her neighbourhood and would draw more attention to her gatherings.<sup>304</sup> In the following I describe Sawda's religious journey according to both interviews with her.

Sawda was born in 1958 as one out of five children in the Salihiya neighbourhood of Damascus, close to Abu Nur Mosque in Ruqn al-Din. The family lived in a traditional Arab house built from mud plaster with an inner yard like most Damascene houses at the time. Her mother came from a family of potters and had received no school education.

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<sup>304</sup> In a similar case, the government prohibited foreigners from attending the women's lessons at the Zahra Mosque on Mezze, according to a conversation with Moyra Dale in January 2010, which was confirmed when I overheard a conversation between two of the *dā'iyāt* when I went to the Zahra Mosque in June 2011.

However, like many girls in Damascus at the time, she was trained through apprenticeship as a tailor. Tailoring was seen as a respectable opportunity for working class girls to work either from home or in an all-female work environment and so add to the income of the family.<sup>305</sup> In my first interview with her, Sawda described her mother as a devout Muslim because she kept to practises like gender segregation: *kānat min ahl-al-ṣalāh wa -l-taqwa: Mā kān fi ikhṭilāt.*<sup>306</sup> In the second interview she commented on this sentence that her mother was not really ‘pious’ because her family had no religious knowledge though they were traditionally Muslim. Religious knowledge was also practically inaccessible for the majority of her mother’s generation, Sawda explained, because there were no lessons for women in the mosques in Damascus, and opportunities to study at home were rare. There were extremely few *dā’iyāt* who could teach women in the homes.<sup>307</sup> Sawda’s mother knew only very few Qur’anic verses which she had picked up and a little maths, which she needed for her trade.

Sawda explained that only in her generation was access to religious knowledge more widely available for Syrian women. At the beginning, though, nothing seemed to indicate that her life would be much different from her mother’s. When Sawda was ten years old, her mother died, and shortly after that she left school with only six years of elementary school education. The decision was made by her maternal grandparents with whom she lived after her mother’s death. She then also started to be trained as a tailor. Following the custom of her milieu she started to wear a headscarf in public when she was 14. Sawda

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<sup>305</sup> Three mothers of participants, who were aged 35 – 50, were tailors: Sawda’s, Bushra’s, and Zaynab’s mother. Tailoring was the only employment of women of this generation that my participants mentioned at all.

<sup>306</sup> ‘She was one of the righteous and pious people: There was no cross gender mixing.’ Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>307</sup> Comp. page 112-113.

said that Islam was an unquestioned part of her identity though neither during the interviews nor during her lessons did she recall any special memories of what that meant to her then or how it was realised in everyday life except in the question of segregation and hijab. From her perspective today, her identity was Muslim but her life was not:

I always was a Muslim; [the change] was only a question of knowledge and of what happened inside and outside [the home]: Inside I didn't wear hijab but outside I did.

From her current perspective her behaviour as a young girl was not Islamic because the 'true hijab' was not a matter of public or private space, but to whom she was permitted to show her hair to. According to her understanding, to uncover her head in front of any marriageable person like a male cousin made her hijab incomplete. Hence her early youth was shaped by social norms of religious behaviour rather than the religious norms she adhered to later on.

Sawda's father was absent from her narrative until I asked her about the role he had played in her life. She said that he accepted any decision that was made by her grandparents and later herself. Probably he married again which would explain why Sawda grew up with her maternal grandparents. According to my observations, widowed men often re-marry quickly, sometimes leaving their children with the mother's family.<sup>308</sup>

The influence that would change Sawda's life and cause her to go back to school was Ramadan Deeb, a disciple of Ahmad Kuftaro and one of the religious guides at ANC.

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<sup>308</sup> Accordingly, this Damascene saying expresses the child's loss of both parents in the case of the mother's death and the assumed remarriage of the father: *māt 'abūk 'ala -l-marātib hattūk. mātat ummak 'ala al-marābil kabbūk*. 'If your father dies, you are put on the shelf [as the place of attention], if your mother dies, you'll be thrown in the trash.'

According to Böttcher (1998), Sheikh Ramadan, who belonged to the inner circle of the leadership of the Naqshbandiya-Kaftariya order, received special responsibility for *da'wa* among women from Ahmad Kuftaro in the early 1950s.<sup>309</sup> Sawda's brother worked in the garage where Deeb had his car repaired and became one of his disciples in 1973 or 1974. Ahmad Kuftaro opened the girl's middle school at ANC in 1975.<sup>310</sup> The area around the ANC is one of the most conservative areas of Damascus even today, and during the 1970s there was still resistance among the conservative parts of the population against school education of girls, many of whom married soon after they left elementary school.<sup>311</sup> According to Sawda's memories, Sheikh Ramadan actively pursued the recruiting of his disciple's female family members, asking her brother whether he had any sisters, who might be interested. Sawda said that at first she rejected the idea of returning to school. By this time she had just turned 17, she had been out of school for five years, so she had no desire for more theoretical knowledge. She also did not like the idea of going back to class with girls much younger than she was. At her age she would not have been able to return to middle school under normal circumstances, but for the sake of having enough students to open the school, ANC accepted older students in their opening class. Apparently the question of the implications that an education at ANC could have concerning her religious life was not part of her decision-making process. Meanwhile, Sheikh Ramadan persevered and invited her via her brother to visit him on his farm outside of Damascus. Sawda refused to go until her brother told her of the fruit trees that would just be in full bloom at

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<sup>309</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 183.

<sup>310</sup> Comp. 4.2.1, page 102-105.

<sup>311</sup> A girl would have been about 12 years old when she finished her elementary education. I have met many women of Sawda's generation and class in Damascus who were married when they were fourteen or fifteen. Today it is more usual for girls to finish at least middle school. Of course this observation is only true for some very conservative communities of the working class and lower middle class.

the time because he knew that she loved all kinds of flowers. So finally she gave in and went to see Sheikh Ramadan together with her older sister. During this visit she agreed to register for middle school at ANC.

Sawda describes that at that time ANC was a small building with primarily containing the mosque and a one-storey building housing the boys' school. Ahmad Kuftaro built a second storey specifically so that he could start a school for girls. Co-education was not only unacceptable for the conservative families around ANC, it was generally not practised in Damascus after elementary school.<sup>312</sup> Notwithstanding the efforts made to recruit students, the first girls' class was small with only 23 students.

Sawda remembered that it was difficult for her to go back to school. Her motivation was low. She barely read at all and struggled a lot to study at the beginning. It was mainly Ahmad Kuftaro who encouraged her to go on.

It was very, very hard for me to return to study. But Sheikh Ahmad encouraged me. He said: You must learn! You have to have knowledge for the sake of your children and the whole of society, your neighbours, your friends, so you can help them and teach them, for everybody's benefit.<sup>313</sup>

Apparently Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro played an important role not only in pushing institutional religious education for girls and, later, women, in Syria, but also in motivating the girls to study. He demonstrated the great importance that he gave to the religious education of these girls through taking part in teaching them himself, even though he was

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<sup>312</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

the Grand Mufti of Syria. Thus he envisioned an important role for them as the future women of Syria, and the shaping of their society enthused Sawda and her classmates.<sup>314</sup>

Sawda also remembered how Kuftaro always had a book in his hands, sometimes on religious issues, sometimes on secular issues, and how she started to model herself accordingly and began to read. Despite her struggles, she finished her middle school and went on to study at the ANC secondary school when she was 20. By the time she finished her baccalaureate exam, she had overcome her reluctance and had developed a desire for knowledge. Therefore, in 1981, she entered Damascus University and studied for four years for a certificate in sharia studies.<sup>315</sup>

Through the education she received at ANC Sawda experienced a change in her outlook on life that affected her in different ways: The girl who had not even wanted to pick up her education again became excited about learning and knowledge in general, as Sawda explains: ‘First of all, my attitude to learning that changed. Then I started to understand. I felt I wanted to change. Actions only change if the soul changes first.’<sup>316</sup> Thus on top of her religious studies she also registered for a degree in nursing and education. Two accidents and a prolonged period of recuperation forced her to drop out of this degree. Nevertheless Sawda kept a high appreciation for all rationally acquired knowledge, which would eventually point to and confirm Islamic doctrine and thus support her *da‘wa*. After her university certificate in sharia studies she returned to the ANC and studied another four years for a certificate in Arabic literature and sharia at the *da‘wa* college. She successfully finished this degree in 1989, at the age of 31.

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<sup>314</sup> Comp. Huda Habash’s memories in 4.2.1 page 104.

<sup>315</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

### 5.1.3 Becoming a *dā'īya*

Ahmad Kuftaro had told the female students that their future role would be to spread religious knowledge in their society.<sup>317</sup> Early on, Sawda followed his direction. When she was 18 years old she started to gather a small number of friends and relatives to meet in her home and taught them what she had learned. At that time she had just studied for about one year at ANC middle school. Nevertheless, this initial year proved successful to convince and motivate her to pass on what she had learned. It did not matter to her that her knowledge was still very limited because she was aware that by comparison with most girls and women around her, she knew something, and that had to be passed on.

Apparently, the girls who came, felt that they benefited and the group developed into a regular study circle. Over the years and with Sawda's growing knowledge and experience in teaching, her disciples brought their friends and relatives along. Once the group became too big, Sawda started another. During the second half of her twenties, she regularly taught six lessons every week, parallel to her studies. She was also working in the administration of ANC to earn her living, having finished her sharia certificate. When she got married at 31, she combined her lessons to have more time for her new obligations as a wife and since then taught three weekly lessons. She also started to organise the lessons according to commitment and her intention to mentor younger students for *da'wa*.

Although Sawda was not one of the 'star' *dā'iyāt* and except for her circle of disciples she was not mentioned to me by other women as other, better-known *dā'iyāt* were, Sawda had been able to build a committed circle of about a hundred women who attended her lessons

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<sup>317</sup> Comp. 4.2.1 page 104.

and were her disciples. Today, many of her disciples are the daughters and even granddaughters of the girls that she first taught.

The education she received at ANC totally changed Sawda's course in life from a tailor and probably an early marriage to a preacher with a higher education and a comparatively late marriage. Her commitment to *da'wa* seemed as strong when I met her as when she first started to teach. 'I do *da'wa* because it is good to obey God. He said: *ida'u ila -l-sabīli rabbika*. So we do it.'<sup>318</sup> Looking back at her personal history she felt a sense of being chosen by God through the opportunities that had opened up without her seeking them, giving her a purpose for her life.<sup>319</sup> This conviction strengthened her sense of her responsibility to pass her knowledge on to others, or she would be held accountable before God for holding it back. During her lessons, Sawda used to quote a number of recurring *aḥadīth* on this subject to motivate her disciples to do the same:

A *ḥadīth* says: Said the messenger of God: Whoever gains knowledge and keeps it secret from the people, will be reined in with a bridle of fire on the day of the resurrection.<sup>320</sup>

Sawda's journey to devoutness also affected her choices concerning everyday life. In the interviews she especially mentioned the changes she made concerning her dress, and the way she managed her time as well as how it affected her marriage.

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<sup>318</sup> '[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord.' (Sura 16:125) Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>319</sup> Conversation with Sawda, Damascus, 23.06.2011.

<sup>320</sup> Ibn Maha, vol 1,265. This and similar *aḥadīth* recurred during lessons; Sawda dictated this one to me during our interview, 08.06.2011.

#### 5.1.4 Practical changes in her life: hijab, time management and marriage

From Sawda's perspective, her change towards religiosity was primarily about ordinary life as a Muslim rather than about religious activism or her career as a *dā'iya*, which she sees as only one consequence among others:

All the information that I learned and that changed my life were about what is *ḥarām* and what is *ḥalāl* because it was all about how to live as a Muslim, what to do. Islam is a way of life.<sup>321</sup>

The changes she implemented brought some conflict with her traditional community. She remembered that people used to call her an 'extremist' because of her uncompromising practice. She started wearing a certain Damascene variation of the *niqāb*: Even in her home when she wore a casual housedress and I have never seen her without hijab, a white cotton headscarf that completely covered her hair. Yet whenever she went out, she would wear a second, black piece of cloth, the *mandīl*, that covered her head and was then pinned from both sides of the face under the nose, covering chin, mouth and cheeks. In addition she wore dark sunglasses to cover her eyes, so that basically most of her face was covered. Her body was dressed in a loose, floor-length black coat. Nevertheless, in her lessons Sawda taught that only the hijab was obligatory as were long, loose, non-see-through clothes. At the same time she would argue that in many cases it was better – *aḥsan* – to wear the *niqāb*:

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

*Fi ḥasan wa fi aḥsan.*<sup>322</sup> In Islam a woman will cover her face if she is very beautiful. For example, if the men on the street turn around to look at her it is better if she covers her face.<sup>323</sup>

This is the interpretation that was taught generally at ANC and supported by a many of my participants.<sup>324</sup> Interestingly, a large number of women who attend the lessons there wear *niqāb*: The argument that it is better and related to female beauty seems to be attractive to them.

One of the changes in Sawda's life was that she focussed her activities on her religious goals. For this reason she stopped watching television, aimless chatting and other activities that the women around her filled their free time with. She explained that the reason was not that these activities as such were forbidden but that she had learned from Ahmad Kuftaro the importance of making good use of her time. With her studies and *da'wa* she simply had no time to spare for useless amusements. 'Some people called me *mutashaddida*, but I was only setting priorities.'<sup>325</sup> Sawda explained that the responsible use of time was one of the practical issues that they were teaching women about at ANC generally. Rather than wasting time with gossip and other unimportant occupations, women should use whatever spare time they had to study and practise *dhikr*. Sawda especially expressed her satisfaction that she had even learned to use the time spent on necessary worldly occupations to do *dhikr*, for example while she was busy with her housework.

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<sup>322</sup> 'There is good and there is better.'

<sup>323</sup> Interview with Sawda, 19.05.2009.

<sup>324</sup> For example by Ruba, 5.4.2, and Zaynab, 5.2.1.

<sup>325</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

Another major area which was influenced by Sawda's turn towards devoutness was the question of her marriage. The suitability of potential husbands had become a religious question for her. Many women of her generation married when they were still teenagers. Sawda not only finished her school education instead during these years, but she also changed her ideas concerning the criteria of a potential husband. While questions of economic suitability and the similarity of family background are the usual major factors when marriages are arranged in Syria even today, Sawda decided that she was only going to marry a religious Muslim who practiced Islam. She rejected a number of suitors on religious grounds, arguing that they were drinking alcohol and did not pray. Her rejection weighed especially heavily, as some of them were her relatives. In the traditional sectors of Syrian society, marriage with a relative, often a first cousin, is seen as preferable to marrying a relatively unknown person. For Sawda, her religious criteria meant that she had to go against her family's wishes. She remained unmarried throughout her twenties notwithstanding the social pressure on women to marry. However, rather than yielding to the pressure, she said that during these years she prayed that God would give her a husband that suited her and understood her goals.

In addition to finding a husband who shared moral and religious ground with her, Sawda had also gained a new sense of self-worth through her studies. 'I wanted a husband who [...] valued my achievements, my studies and my desire for *da'wa*.'<sup>326</sup> She was aware that her future as a *dā'iya* depended on her husband's support. Many of her first disciples had to stop even attending lessons because their husbands did not have any sympathy for their religious activities. According to her assessment, this situation has not changed much for

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<sup>326</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 08.06.2011.

the new generation of young women that she was teaching, telling them: 'Use your time now to study as much as you can! Soon you will be married and they will lock you up.'<sup>327</sup> Sawda wanted a different kind of marriage. When finally a preacher from ANC asked for her hand in marriage, she came to an agreement with him before her marriage that he would support her religious activism as long as she did not neglect her duties as a wife. As it turned out, the couple were not able to have children.<sup>328</sup>

In practical terms this meant to coordinate her activism with her husband's: During the morning until three in the afternoon she was free for *da'wa*. Her husband left their home during these hours for his own preaching. This shows another aspect of the practical solutions they had to find for Sawda to continue her activism because Sawda's sister was living with her: On account of the strict gender segregation they followed, the husband would not enter the flat as long as Sawda was not at home, in case Sawda's sister was there on her own. Sawda was committed to being home at three from her lessons and visits. The second part of the day she spent on her housework and duties as a wife.

People called Sawda an extremist because of her choices of lifestyle: Her clothing, the way she spent her time, and her uncompromising engagement in *da'wa*. It is interesting that the questions of conflict seem to have been areas that would be seen as lifestyle choices. On the other hand, there were areas in Sawda's teaching that would be called 'extremist' or 'radical' in a European context that apparently did not generate such a reaction from the people around her, e.g., during one of the Saturday lessons she taught that any Muslim who

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<sup>327</sup> Sawda during a private lesson, Damascus, 28.02.2009.

<sup>328</sup> Similarly, Zaynab al-Ghazali legitimised her active role in *da'wa* by her lack of children. Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*: 182.

decided to leave Islam had to be killed, according to the hadith: ‘*man baddala dīnahu fa-qtul-hu.*’<sup>329</sup> She argued for a literalist interpretation with no room for compromise in this matter because the hadith was sound and its content a clear command from Muhammad. Nobody among her disciples asked any questions as they did in other instances when they were aware of different opinions. While this may be seen as a sure indication of religious ‘extremism’ from a perspective that holds that the choice of religion is a universal human right,<sup>330</sup> the death penalty for apostasy has been demanded in the four major law schools<sup>331</sup> even though there are also voices among Islamic scholars like the Sudanese scholar Hassan al-Turabi who reject this. Egyptian scholar Salim al-Awa, e.g., argues that while apostasy is a crime according to sharia law, capital punishment is only permitted according to this hadith, not commanded, because both the Qur’an and the example of Muhammad’s reactions to apostates do not back up the obligation to kill apostates.<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, according to my observations, the traditional view that apostasy demands capital punishment is dominant in Syrian society, at least in theory, even among those who are not very religious in their practice, and not seen as an extreme point of view. This example shows that, in some ways, the categories of extremism and radicalism are quite unsatisfactory because they depend so much on each person’s standpoint.

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<sup>329</sup> ‘Whoever changes his religion: Kill him!’ al-Bukhari, 149, 2

<sup>330</sup> Comp. art. 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

<sup>331</sup> Comp. for a discussion of the development of the concept of apostasy and its punishments as well as the distinctions between the law schools: Frank Griffel, "Apostasy," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*. Brill, Accessed 18.03.2012, [http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/uid=1358/entry?entry=ei3\\_SIM-0044](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/uid=1358/entry?entry=ei3_SIM-0044).

<sup>332</sup> Muhammad Salim Al-Awa, "Discretionary or prescribed punishment," Accessed 18.03.2012 <http://www.onislam.net/english/shariah/contemporary-issues/islamic-themes/417705-discretionary-or-prescribed-punishment.html>.

Sawda's initial turn towards Islamism was less of an intentional search than the result of recruitment to join studies at ANC. However, she accepted the teaching she received and made her own decisions to accomplish the goal of *da'wa*. Her religious development had the result of providing her with new options of how to live her life: She changed her criteria as to who was a good husband, her education and purpose enabling her to go against her family's wishes. When she got married, she successfully negotiated her double role as wife and *dā'iya*. Sawda's focus on *dhikr* and her expressed desire for closeness to God shows her as a woman whose activism was integrated in her quest for devoutness. The new accessibility of religious knowledge became her driving force towards it.

## 5.2 Zaynab: Finding divine love

The importance of religious knowledge holds true in all the following cases to varying degrees. It played a major role in Zaynab's life. Born in a small town in the countryside of Damascus in 1975, she had much better access to secular education than Sawda's generation, but religious knowledge was something she only discovered in the late 1980s as the society started to move towards greater religiosity.<sup>333</sup> Like Sawda, Zaynab was influenced by the ANC, where she was still a student during the time of my field research, in addition to her work as *dā'iya*. Yet at the centre of change in Zaynab's interpretation of her life story lies not knowledge, but the experience of divine love.

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<sup>333</sup> Comp. 3.2, page, 75.

Zaynab could pinpoint the moment of the spiritual and emotional experience that changed her life. She had gone to listen to Rajab Deeb, the successor of Ahmad Kuftaro as the leader of the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya, at the ANC:

The mosque was so full there was no space to sit anywhere, so I spent the time standing at the door until I saw the sheikh. [Then I felt] like a child who sees his mother or father after a long absence! Maybe I feel closer to him than to my father or my mother, I even feel that he is more important to me than the whole of creation, anyone I know. [...] When he talks about the prophets I feel as if I am turned upside down. He starts planting a new meaning in your spirit, in your heart. Your love for the prophet becomes different. When he talks to you about a prophet, you feel as if he has become physically present before you. This happens in the spirit. Just like that I started to have different emotions ...<sup>334</sup>

In March 2009 my friend Safiya introduced me to her relative Zaynab to ‘talk about religion’. Both were involved in teaching women at the mosque of their small town, 30 minutes outside of Damascus. Zaynab seemed to be a very active woman, who talked about her work as an Arabic teacher in a boys’ secondary school, her volunteering at the local mosque, working on her master’s dissertation in Hadith science at ANC and attending public lessons of Rajab Deeb and other religious scholars. Her clothes, a dark navy blue coat and similarly coloured hijab, that covered not only her hair and throat but also her forehead and her chin up to her mouth, distinguished her from the usual attire of Muslim women. Our conversation soon turned to the subject of modesty, and she told the story of a married man who fell in love with another woman for two years just because he

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<sup>334</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

saw her smile once. This story with its strong legitimisation of the *niqāb* struck me as odd because Zaynab herself did not wear it. She concluded:

What power is in the beauty of a woman! Of course, the *niqāb* is not *fard*, but I would love to cover my face. Only, as a teacher I can't. And if I have to show my face in the classroom it would make no sense to cover it on the street.<sup>335</sup>

Obviously, in Zaynab's opinion, the discussion about modesty should not aim at the question of how to minimise the limitations for women but at maximising the protection in cross gender settings, even if she acknowledged that other practical issues had to be taken into account, too.

Over the next two and a half years, we visited each other privately four more times both in her town and in my home, and I joined her regularly for the Thursday lessons of Rajab Deeb at ANC for one year. We also talked on the phone, which was easier than making an appointment due to her very busy schedule. Sometimes she would call me and invite me to join her for a special lesson or occasion she wanted to attend, for example the monthly lesson for women only by Sheikh Rajab. Zaynab attended the Thursday lessons surrounded by 20 to 30 women of all ages from her small town. They always sat in the same spot in the women's gallery. She usually spent a couple of hours in the women's hall before the Thursday lesson. Though meeting there with a group of other master students to study together, she was regularly called away by one of her disciples to discuss personal questions. Others just came to greet her with special respect, some trying to kiss her hand,

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<sup>335</sup> Conversation with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 04.03.2009

which she would prevent by getting up and greeting them with the common embrace and kisses on the cheek.

Like Sawda, Zaynab openly pursued my conversion to Islam. She engaged me in conversations about the lessons and would sometimes call me afterwards to hear what I thought about it and review the lesson for me again. Even during the lessons she would stop her own painstaking taking of notes and copy Arabic *ahādīth* and verses into my notebook that she thought were important for me and that I could not write down quickly enough. She also made sure that I sat at the window of the women's galleries for the lessons so that, as she told me, I would after a while come to experience the spiritual connection with Sheikh Rajab as she had. This space was a constant issue of contention between the women because only the first row was able to see Sheikh Rajab downstairs in the main prayer hall.

As early as our first meeting, Zaynab told me that she had not always been devout, but that her life had been 'turned upside down' through listening to Rajab Deeb. In July 2009 we met for an in-depth, recorded interview and in June 2011 for a follow-up interview, which was not recorded, to talk about her journey towards devoutness, on which the following portray is based.

### 5.2.1 'Traditional Islam': Zaynab interprets her religious background

Zaynab described her family during her childhood as 'normal' and 'traditional':

As a society, we are following Islam; that was simply the context in which I lived. Naturally (*fiṭriyan*) we were Muslims, just fasting during Ramadan and performing religious rites.<sup>336</sup>

We lived as Muslims through imitation only.<sup>337</sup>

Born in the 1970s, Zaynab grew up as the second of eight children. She described her father as a progress-oriented, open-minded man who, in her memory, was absent from home most of the time. The economic situation of the growing family demanded that he worked in two different employments. Her mother was also busy, not only with her children, but also working as a seamstress from home. The only religious presence in Zaynab's family during her childhood was her maternal grandmother. Zaynab remembered that she used prayer beads and was known in her town to have the special gift of helping women with breastfeeding problems through reading the Qur'an for them. Yet her practice did not challenge Zaynab or her family to follow her example. Religion apparently did not play any specific role at home other than as part of the traditional way of life in her town and was in Zaynab's memory characterised by absence of communication, which went back to a lack of communication between her grandparent and her parents' generation:

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<sup>336</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

<sup>337</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus, 18.06.2011.

‘The generation of my parents usually were cut off from religious knowledge, except for the practice of the obligatory [*farḍ*], maybe.’<sup>338</sup>

Zaynab characterised the way in which her family spent their time through the lack of religious interest. It was determined by what was seen as ‘normal’ and ‘customary’ in her community:

When we were socialising we would switch on the television and watch movies that were kind of frivolous. Still, we would watch them: It was normal. Maybe there was even a negative influence on our lives. But, it was normal. That’s the way it was, the way we grew up, that was the atmosphere at home: Normal movies, normal music, everything was normal. There was nothing religious that we really adhered to (*mutamassikīn fi*).<sup>339</sup>

The social life of her family was centred on visits among the extended family and neighbours, still the normal social practice in Syria. Looking back, Zaynab noticed disapprovingly that even when there started to be some irregular meetings at the local mosque in the 1990s when religious teachers came from Damascus, her family were not involved, preferring to spend their leisure time visiting or watching TV. Even though Zaynab did not see these activities as sinful, her verdict of ‘normal’ had become for her a category that was opposed to devoutness, mainly because it was lacking religious purposefulness. Yet, Islam was not absent from her upbringing. Rather, as the next section will explore, the problem with the religious elements was that they were meaningless for her.

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

The traditional conservative milieu in which Zaynab grew up, constituted the framework for the religious practices and sentiment of her family and her own life. She remembers religious practices as an unquestioned but also unimportant part of life. The obligatory acts of worship especially were accepted in theory but not necessarily practiced: Her parents seem to have been uncommitted and neither brought their children up to observe the five prayers nor to value them:

[...] We were a little lax with prayer and my family didn't care a lot to make sure that we prayed. They prayed but I never felt that there was any necessity or obligation to pray. [...] To be honest, my parents sometimes prayed and then stopped for longer periods of time. [...] At that point [prayer] had very little meaning in our lives.<sup>340</sup>

Similarly, her family fasted during Ramadan because everybody around them did. They had an old copy of the Qur'an in their home but she only remembers her father reading it sometimes during Ramadan. Other practices were more present in everyday life, but they had little importance to Zaynab as she did not understand their meaning:

I did not understand why my grandmother was holding prayer beads in her hands, or what prayer beads were. Or, we knew the saying 'peace be upon the prophet', but what did it mean?<sup>341</sup>

Her grandmother was also the only one in her family who sometimes attended *mawālīd* in the mosque. There were no regular activities for women or children and Zaynab says that it never even crossed her mind that she could have anything to do with the mosque.

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

While the Qur'an was not used much in Zaynab's family, the person of Muhammad seems to have played a more important role in her upbringing. She recalls that her family used to tell stories from his life to the children, which was the general custom. These stories played an important part to strengthen her religious identity making her feel proud and glad to be a Muslim:

They told me he brought us from darkness to light, or that without Muhammad we would still be worshipping stones. Without him we would not enter paradise on the day of resurrection, we would not know the Qur'an but worship fire or a stone or a human being like us, as in other religions.<sup>342</sup>

The feeling to belong to Muhammad consolidated Zaynab's consciousness of being a Muslim, yet interestingly, the purpose of emulating Muhammad seems to have been absent from these stories. Her religious upbringing taught her basic Islamic monotheism without concrete practical implications.

Another illustration of Zaynab's understanding that religion consisted in mere imitation was an instance when, as a child in the third grade, she put on the hijab for the first time, together with her friend. They put it on and off for a few days, 'trying it out [...] just for fun'<sup>343</sup>. The main memory that she connected with this event today, was how they both went out in their hijabs and when they saw one of the religious leaders in town they tried to get his attention, calling out greetings to him and enjoying the thought that he would see them as 'religious' (*ṣāhib al-dīn*). Her family told her she was too young to wear the hijab yet. After a few days they both took the hijab off for another number of years.

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> Conversation with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 04.03.2009.

For Zaynab, to put on the hijab was not a religious decision but a customary part of life. It was part of being a grown up woman. Her experiment had the character of a child's role-play, even though, in line with her surroundings, the role she played was that of a respected Muslim woman. Even in her attempt to catch the attention of a religious leader she was looking for status – the questions of segregation and obedience to God were not yet a subject to think about.

Although Zaynab described her upbringing in contrast to meaningful religiosity, she had nevertheless memories of religious experiences that read like a parallel story. To Zaynab they were 'a different story' because she attributed the origin of these experiences to neither her family nor her community, but to God's influence on her life leading her to become who she is today.

### 5.2.2 Zaynab's growing religious interest

Zaynab remembered that when she was upset or sad, she used to look for solitude and turn to supplication to find consolation.

I had these moments when I was alone with myself, and I would say to [God]: my Lord, you are my support, and I knew you before I knew my father and my mother, before I knew any other human being. When I was small I had this [experience].

When I was frustrated with someone or someone made me sad, I would sense God (*ahsās bi-llah*). I don't know where that came from.<sup>344</sup>

In her narrative, Zaynab focused on the lack of meaning and intentionality in the religion that she saw modelled as a child. Yet on the other hand, it is exactly this lack of intentionality that she understands as evidence of divine agency in her story: One theme that appears repeatedly when she talks about these early experiences and her later 'conversion experience' is that she could not identify its origin. Nothing in her memory pointed to her family as the source for her behaviour or emotions. Her only possible explanation was therefore that she did so because of her *fiṭra*:

These emotions of faith are founded in *fiṭra* Every human being feels them at birth and even before birth because the spirit was in the world of atoms (*'ālam al-dhirr*). There is a reference in Surat al-A'raf.<sup>345</sup>

In Zaynab's memories, these experiences were associated with feeling isolated from her family, and her prayers offered her a possibility to overcome her isolation and feel that God existed and was with her.<sup>346</sup> Zaynab interpreted these experiences on the one hand as significant, as the first beginnings of her devoutness. On the other hand, they were not significant enough to give meaning to the religious activities and formula that she saw during her childhood. Rather, these experiences were interpreted as unconnected with the traditional religiosity that she otherwise described, because she did not remember a model for her behaviour. In her narrative, they are invested with a special immediateness.

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<sup>344</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

<sup>345</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus, 18.06.2011; the quotation she is alluding to is Surah 7:172; for a more detailed discussion of *fiṭra* comp. Chapter 5.4.1, page 290.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

Interestingly, they were experienced in ignorance and disconnection from normative religious behaviour, in contrast to her later appreciation of knowledge and religious observation. This interpretation is facilitated by the idea that children are innocent and not yet religiously responsible.

In her community, Zaynab experienced the religious atmosphere during the early 1980s as dominated by fear in being associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. She remembered that it was significant enough to stop people from taking part in mosque activities or showing religious symbols publicly. Families stopped young men, in particular, from going to the mosque so that they would not be denounced as Muslim Brothers. One of her neighbouring families had a big picture of the Ka'aba on their wall. Zaynab noticed this as something strange at the time.

The first weak influence of religious knowledge came with religion classes at middle school. Zaynab said that her female religious studies teachers were her favourite teachers because of their friendliness. Sometimes she played 'religion teacher' with her younger siblings and cousins, making them sit down in front of her and teaching them to memorise the *fātiḥa* and other Qur'anic verses she had learned. Zaynab recalled that she only learned how to pray correctly at school. The religion teachers used the methods of *tarḥīb* (inducing fear) and *targhīb* (inducing desire), but with little success, as the knowledge did not change Zaynab's life, because it did not 'touch [her] heart' and her love for Muhammad stayed 'abstract'<sup>347</sup>. With hindsight Zaynab saw her religious school education as of limited importance because it did not make her love, pray, or observe any other religious

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

obligation. Her interest in religious activities was limited throughout her early teenage years. When a cousin invited her to join her for private lessons to memorise the Qur'an when she was 13, she went once out of curiosity but dropped out afterwards.

Zaynab started to wear the hijab during these years, a development that left no special mark on her memory. It was simply part of growing up as a girl in her town. She did not know the religious norms concerning the hijab and only wore a headscarf when she went into public space. As a 'traditional' hijab wearer, she did not mind showing some stray hair or even quickly exiting her home without hijab to go to a close neighbour's house.<sup>348</sup> In contrast, at the time of our acquaintance, she made sure that she covered herself correctly according to her understanding of the sharia whenever a possibly marriageable man might see her, this included male family members such as cousins or brothers-in-law.

Zaynab's teenage years were still primarily under the secular influences that were part of the new opportunities of secular education of her generation. Schooling, as well as the open-minded atmosphere at home, gave her a general desire for more education and knowledge. She read everything that she could lay her hands on. Looking back, she regrets that she read books indiscriminately, some of which painted a picture of religious tenets that she rejects today. A version of the *qisas al-anbiā'*, portraying the prophets as sinful in contradiction to the common Islamic teaching, especially stuck out in her mind. Zaynab explained to me at length that this lack of discrimination showed that no matter what teaching she received in school, she still had no real understanding of the prophets during her teenage years. When I interviewed her, Zaynab seemingly felt a strong need to

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<sup>348</sup> Conversation with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 04.03.09.

apologise for her former enjoyment of books that were distasteful to her today. The prophets have become a very emotional subject for her since:

Any prophet is exempt from sin and never ever thinks sinful thoughts. As you would never ever think about eating a piece of cotton, so a prophet never ever even turns his eyes or his heart towards what is sinful. God forbid!<sup>349</sup>

The general atmosphere in her community changed towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

When I got to be about 18 years old, there started to be many more opportunities. My generation had more opportunities to learn generally. [...] My friends and I moved slowly [towards religion], and so did my family. Not a lot, we didn't become [religious] 100 %, or at once. But during Ramadan we started to read the Qur'an, or to attend prayers, my sisters and me. Prayer started to become important.<sup>350</sup>

This general trend coincided with the growing influence that her school friend Mai started to have on Zaynab's religious life. Mai's father was a religion teacher and Zaynab noticed that her whole family lived Islam in a different way than what she was used to at home. They prayed regularly, and they were reading the Qur'an. Zaynab started to question the way her family was living. During her last two years at school she orientated herself more and more towards the religious practice of her friend's family and tried to change her life accordingly. Mai's influence seems to have grown stronger when her family became

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<sup>349</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus, 27.07.2009; Rajab Deeb also used this illustration in his lessons, showing how ridiculous the idea is that the prophets sinned. Zaynab has made his argument her own.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

connected to ANC. First Mai's brother started to go there for lessons through his friends and became a disciple of Rajab Deeb. He brought cassettes back with him and hung a picture of Sheikh Rajab on wall of the family home.

Zaynab experienced a growing desire to improve religiously. Under the leadership of her friend, who was herself inspired by the media her brother brought home from ANC, they started to set themselves goals for religious activities and set up a system of accountability between themselves. These activities included memorisation of Qur'anic passages, prayer, extra days of fasting and *dhikr*:

We agreed to worship together, for example saying *subhān allah*,<sup>351</sup> *al-ḥamdu l-illah*<sup>352</sup> and *lā ilāha illa-llah*<sup>353</sup>, and we would agree to say this 1000 times, or 100 times. [...] Or we would agree to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, during the summer, when it was hot: 52 degrees maybe, - but no matter what, we wanted to fast. [...] There are *aḥadīth* that, if someone says *al-ḥamdu l-illah subhānahu* 100 times his sins are forgiven, even if they were like the foam of the sea. [...] Why did we do this? Because of the feelings of the heart, this is the way you have to satisfy the Lord of the universe. Why? If we sin we want to ask for forgiveness, we are sad because of our sins. That is why we did these things.<sup>354</sup>

This quotation shows Zaynab's new dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between her lax religious practice and the religious ideal she had started to admire. She said that she struggled to keep these commitments and that she often underwent little punishments,

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<sup>351</sup> 'Glory be to God.'

<sup>352</sup> 'Praise be to God.'

<sup>353</sup> 'There is no God but God.'

<sup>354</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

which would be even more fasting, more *dhikr* or paying 25 Lira, which would have been the cost of five bus rides at the time. Nevertheless she dedicated herself to be a better Muslim. Now, some of the more fear-inducing material she had learned during religion classes in school became personal, and she felt distressed whenever she had not fulfilled her religious obligations. A new sense that she needed forgiveness and a transformation of her life became prominent in her mind: 'For me personally I thought of the fasting and so on as a way of punishment (*'aqūba*) and an exercise (*mujāhada*) to repent from my sins.'<sup>355</sup>

As the above illustrates, there were a number of factors that coincided with Zaynab's experience: The general trend in society and her family's move towards religiosity; her own psychological development during puberty to be more critical of her up-bringing and the growing importance of peer influence through her friend Mai.

### 5.2.3 Finding divine love

It was during this time of new religious endeavours that Zaynab had her experience of Rajab Deeb, described at the beginning of the case study. Mai and her siblings became Zaynab's initial connection with him, bringing her religious cassettes, books and news from lessons they attended. According to Zaynab, her growing desire for devoutness and her frustration with her failures culminated in her encounter with Rajab Deeb in a way that

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<sup>355</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus, 18.06.2011.

can be called a ‘conversion experience’. She said that she was already deeply affected by him first the time she saw the picture of Sheikh Rajab in her friend’s home, and even more so when listening to cassettes with his teaching. When at last she was able to go and attend one of his lessons, Zaynab formed a strong emotional attachment albeit never personally meeting Sheikh Rajab until 2009.

Pictures of the better known sheikhs are a common sight in Syria. Pictures of Rajab Deeb usually show an old man with a thick white beard, a white cap, a white robe or the brown coat of the ‘*ulamā*’, thick-rimmed glasses and a friendly smile. Some show the ANC in the background or show him together with Ahmad Kuftaro. According to Böttcher (1998), these pictures are used as visual aids to keep the special spiritual connection (*rābiṭa*) between the sheikh and his disciples.<sup>356</sup>

Zaynab described that she experienced an immediate emotional reaction when she saw Sheikh Rajab’s picture:

If someone talks to you about someone else, first you are not sure whether you are convinced [of what they say] or not. But in my case, love for him entered my heart immediately. It’s possible my friend and those who talked to me about him didn’t love him like I did. [...] The first time I saw the picture I was astonished. I felt as if I knew him. And again when I listened to his cassette.<sup>357</sup>

Zaynab described the final event of her ‘conversion’ as her experience of listening to Sheikh Rajab in person during a Thursday lesson, although this happened some time after her media encounter. At that time, it was difficult for her to get to Damascus for his lessons

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<sup>356</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 169-71.

<sup>357</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

in the evening. Then she discovered a notebook from her brother and realised that he had started to attend Sheikh Rajab's lessons without telling his family. Only because she could persuade her brother to take her along was she able to go herself. Zaynab describes the experience to be able to attend this lesson as a deep sense of coming home and meeting her soul mate:

When I heard him talking, again I felt that he was not a stranger. I felt he was not new to me, as if I had known him for a long time.<sup>358</sup>

I knew that there was something more than [the natural meeting of two people]. There is a spiritual affinity between Sheikh Rajab and me. This is something that happens if God permits it and guides the spirit to it. The basis for this affinity is that our spirits knew each other from the time of creation, before the creation of the bodies.<sup>359</sup>

The sudden attachment that Zaynab felt was so strong and unexpected that she could only explain it as a divine re-union of her spirit with Sheikh Rajab's spirit because of a 'pre-existent' connection between them.

As in her childhood experiences of God's closeness, her un-intentionality was one of the major themes of Zaynab's interpretation concerning her connection with Sheikh Rajab. This sense of wonder was emphasised when she pondered how she had become much more attached to him than Mai and her family, finally resulting in a change of roles as years later she became their religious teacher.

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus, 18.06.2011.

To explain what happened to her, Zaynab drew a parallel between her ‘conversion’ and her experiences of romantic love. The first time she fell in love she was 16, and this episode lasted only for a couple of days because the strength of her emotions dismayed her. She decided to ask God to free her from this love, and her feelings passed. A year or two later she had a more lasting experience. Looking back she thought that there had been an emotional vacuum in her life before her encounter with Rajab Deeb and therefore she made the conscious decision to fall in love with a neighbour. He was well educated and worked as an engineer, which she associated with progress and rationality. Zaynab recognised this incident as a key experience in her life that helped her to understand her emotionality and what it means to love: To remember one’s beloved always and to be shaped by thoughts and emotions that are directed towards him and thus to fill an existing emotional vacuum. In Zaynab’s view, love establishes a spiritual connection between the lover and the beloved, even if there is no acknowledgement between them. However, while these two experiences taught Zaynab about love, she said that she only found ‘true love’ when she encountered Rajab Deeb shortly afterwards. For Zaynab, love became the motivation to change her life and engage in a more satisfying religious practice. Her instant ‘conversion experience’ was followed by a process of gradual change as her thoughts were filled with him and his teaching. Eventually the encounter led to her regular attendance of his lessons and formal studies at ANC.

However, Zaynab emphasised that the love for her sheikh was only important because it mediated love for God through opening her heart to the greatness of God through his teaching, sharing his own spiritual connection with the prophets with her, and practically

through teaching her *dhikr*. Reflecting on those 14 years of his influence, she explained how her love for God had been influenced.

Love is so important because without love there is no faith. In a *hadīth* Muhammad said three times: without love there is no faith. To love the sheikh is a way to love God, because if you love, you also love what your beloved loves.<sup>360</sup>

Zaynab illustrated through the example of *dhikr* how much her inner attitude had changed. The unsatisfactory attempts at *dhikr* with Mai made her aware of her weakness and sinfulness. At ANC she was taught the Qur’anic basis of *dhikr* and received structured training on how to practice it, with an emphasis on step-by-step daily practice and personal discipline. Again, her initial motivation to learn *dhikr* ‘correctly’ came from her love for Sheikh Rajab. Over the years, through the daily practice of *dhikr* her love for God and her desire for emotional connectedness became part of her everyday life as she reached a new stage of ‘God-mindedness’:

I told you I am not living up to the highest standards of *dhikr*, but praise God, now, after nearly 14 years with the sheikh, if I walk on my own, sometimes I feel my heart saying on its own account, *allah, allah*, and I feel such delight. Today, when I was going to the mosque and was standing at the bus stop, and I wasn't aware of my heart, I noticed that my heart on its own accord was saying: *Allah, allah, allah*. I was overcome with joy in my heart! Praise God!<sup>361</sup>

Encountering Rajab Deeb, and the emotional connection that she felt, enabled Zaynab to change her religious life. Over the next two years, however, she was not able to

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

accompany her brother to his lessons except once or twice. Zaynab was never initiated as a disciple of Sheikh Rajab or any other sheikh at ANC. She never used the word Sufi with me, yet her narrative shows the strong influence of Sufi religiosity. The emotional connection she felt became the thrust of a number of practical decisions she made afterwards, leading her into religious activism.

#### 5.2.4 Higher religious education and *da'wa*

A major influence on Zaynab's life was the decision to study sharia at the ANC. Initially, she enrolled on a two-year course at an institute for Arabic teachers rather than a four-year course at university. This decision was made on the economic basis that her family needed her income as soon as possible. Yet after she started teaching Arabic at school, she registered to study in parallel with her work for a university degree in biology. This course would have taken four additional years but as a teacher with a university degree her income would have doubled. However, when she heard about a course for female students in sharia studies at the College of Islamic *Da'wa* at the ANC she cancelled her registration to start sharia studies instead. This choice had a number of down sides: It was a five-year programme, the subject was much less prestigious, and her income would not improve if she worked as a religion teacher with a degree from ANC.<sup>362</sup> For Zaynab, all these aspects could not deter her from pursuing an education at ANC because this brought her into Rajab Deeb's sphere of influence. This was her main motivation for the change. Apparently, she had not considered studying sharia at Damascus University for four years and the prospect

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<sup>362</sup> Interview with Ibtisam, 11.06.2011; Ibtisam, another *dā'iya* who had studied at ANC, explained to me that teachers who studied at ANC were paid the salary of teachers who had studied at teacher institutes, even though according to her the degrees from ANC were in duration and accreditation equal to the degrees in sharia from Damascus University.

of a doubled income. Nor was she planning to become a *dā'iya* at this point, which also shows that her decision was centred on Rajab Deeb and her personal desire for religious fulfilment rather than a motivation for religious activism.

The course at ANC was taught in the afternoon<sup>363</sup> so that Zaynab continued teaching in the mornings. After she graduated from this course she started to study for a master's degree in hadith studies at ANC.

With her growing religious knowledge, Zaynab started to make more changes to live according to the sharia interpretation taught at ANC. The areas she mentioned specifically were her dress and her commitment to prayer, which now included the *sunna* prayers, but over time her whole worldview was more and more permeated by the religious standards that held up the ideal of living in total imitation of the *sunna* of Muhammad. Zaynab rejected the unenlightened imitation of religious behaviour as mere *taqālīd*, replacing it with an imitation based on the knowledge and literalistic interpretation of the *aḥadīth*. One affected area was the question of adherence to cultural norms.

Retrospectively, Zaynab contrasted the traditional values that she was taught as a child with the religious norms she learned as a grown-up at ANC.

Our family [...] made sure we knew what was shameful (*'ayb*) rather than what was forbidden (*harām*). The moral values were that if you do this it is acceptable – if you do that it is shameful.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Comp. Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 159.

<sup>364</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

The Arabic word for shameful, *'ayb*, was one of the first words that I learned when I moved to the Middle East. It is ubiquitous in child rearing and this concept of shame is used in front of people as a motivation for proper behaviour. *Ḥarām* is actually often used together with *'ayb* in these situations. However, for religious Muslims *ḥarām* has the precise religious connotation of being sinful and forbidden by God. Therefore they assert that an act perceived as socially *'ayb* but is not unlawful should not be called *ḥarām*.

The example Zaynab used to illustrate this are the cultural limitations of women's mobility that she grew up with, specifically the expectation that women should be at home by the time it gets dark. This traditional norm would clash with her desire to attend the lessons of Rajab Deeb which started after the *maghrib* prayer and ended with the *'ishā'* prayer. Travelling back to her town afterwards made her come home hours after the respectable time.

I suffered a lot just for the sake of going to the lessons, and my family opposed me a lot, especially my mother. [...] The society in a small town like mine doesn't tolerate a woman or a girl spending evenings away from home a lot. It just isn't done! At the latest you have to be home at sunset, but I had started going out and coming back late.<sup>365</sup>

While the example of coming home late may seem of comparatively little consequence, Zaynab illustrated with it a far-reaching difference between two opposing systems in evaluating behaviour: Traditional moral behaviour is motivated by a society's expectations with the resulting evaluation of shame or respect. By contrast, religious practice avoids

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

what is wrong because of God's eternal judgment and motivates one to do what is good through thankfulness. In some instances *'ayb* and *ḥarām* may be congruent, in other instances they are opposed. Zaynab's growing religious interest and knowledge of sharia law led to a diverging shift in her values: On the one hand it gave her freedom from the moral judgments of her neighbours, on the other it meant submission to the sharia. This distinction is, of course, partly idealistic. As a member of her community Zaynab needed to weigh the consequences of going against traditional norms.

Even if the recent changes in Syrian society made it possible for Zaynab to break some of the traditional moral rules of her community, this came at a cost for her. From a cultural perspective, a girl who does not come back home until midnight is suspicious of sexual looseness, and as such is putting shame on her family. Zaynab knew that her neighbours were gossiping about her staying out late. They complained to her mother and demanded that she curb Zaynab's commitment to the lessons.

It is important to see that *de facto* both values, sharia and social judgement, are taken into account when making choices, because it explains why religious Muslim women often have such an appearance of being simply traditional and conservative when actually the newly gained knowledge of the distinction between traditional and religious norms has given them a different tool for making their choices. Sometimes women adhere to conservative customs out of practical reasons rather than the complex distinctions between the different rulings in Islamic jurisprudence, *al-aḥkam al-khamsa*, which offer the possibility to assess situations in a differentiating way. As the example of Zaynab's choice not to wear *niqāb* shows, cultural pressures can also work for compliance with less

restrictive norms as choices are often handled in a flexible manner according to practicality.

The general shift in society towards religiosity has made religious life style choices more acceptable in other instances. Consequently leading a life of greater sharia conformity also earned Zaynab respect.

Zaynab's motivation for *da'wa* came from her love for Rajab Deeb and Muhammad, the prophet. Therefore it came easily and naturally to her once she had found this love. She recalls how her friends started teasing her about her constant talking about religion. Her father, annoyed by her attempts to correct her family, complained that she talked about nothing else but 'the prophet said this, the prophet said that.'<sup>366</sup> However, from her own point of view at this early stage she had not consciously chosen to propagate Islam, her *da'wa* simply flowed out of her love: 'Whatever the sheikh said was printed on my heart and I passed it on straight away, without objective.'<sup>367</sup>

If Zaynab's first steps in *da'wa* were informal and relatively unintentional, in the second stage of her *da'wa* she started to become formally involved in the women's activities at the local mosque through her sister, younger by six years, who had followed her example and studied at ANC straight after school. Zaynab's sister was approached with the question of whether she was willing to be responsible for a women's institute for the memorisation of the Qur'an in her town, which the ANC was planning to open in the local mosque. The

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

institute proved a success and with growing numbers of women and girls coming for classes, Zaynab started to teach there, too, one day each week.

Zaynab felt that her *da'wa* had recently reached a third stage, leaving behind the formal framework of the mosque. She had begun to widen her circle of influence, reaching out to students and teachers at the school where she worked and other strangers. She did not stop teaching at the mosque but changed her perspective, stating she was also called to reach those not coming to the mosque and who seemed less interested in religious matters.

Recently, wherever I am I feel that I have to talk and spread my love, I spread it at school with the teachers and my students, with my neighbours, my relatives, any place I can talk. [...] There are bigger numbers in the mosque, but that is not everything. Not everybody I know comes to the mosque, there are different communities, some I meet at the school, some are my students, others teachers, all of these you have to talk with.<sup>368</sup>

Zaynab's case illustrates the personal change towards devoutness in the context of the general shift in Syrian society: While she experienced her development through her particular story and very personal events, the number of circumstances that time and again pushed her towards religiosity, connect her life story to that of many other Syrian women: From the strong cultural value, yet lack of meaning and practical importance of Islam during her childhood, to the awakened religious interest among her friends and family, to the growing influence of ANC and its interpretation of Islam, firstly in her life, then through programmes in the public life of her community. Yet Zaynab's case also showed a

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

very specific personality, formed by her emotional character and longings, which worked together with the Sufi currents at ANC. For her, the most important aspect of her journey was the divine agency that she recognises in her involuntary emotional reactions to the experiences that shaped her religious development and gave meaning to religious practices.

Zaynab's story also illustrates that female empowerment is not the key to understanding her choices, because even though she eventually emerged as a religious leader in her community, her growing devoutness initially caused her to turn away from opportunities that would have given her more economic gain and social status.

The first two case studies have provided examples of women who became devout under the direct and indirect influences of the ANC. The third case study will show that the trend towards devoutness has also reached the Syrian villages.

### **5.3 Aisha: Becoming devout in a Syrian village**

Even though the women's *da'wa* movement in Syria is centered on the cities and in many ways dependent on the accessibility of the urban religious infrastructure, with its mosque lessons and wide acceptance female *da'wa*, the Syrian countryside is also affected by it - notwithstanding to a lesser degree. Aisha's turn towards growing devoutness illustrates this phenomenon.

I met Aisha three times in 2005 and 2006 when I was visiting her cousin Hanan in one of the Kurdish villages in Northern Syria. The rural Kurdish communities in Northern Syria have kept a more distinct identity from the Arab majority than the Kurdish population in the cities that have been urbanised for a longer period. Kurdish language, music and holidays show the vitality of their ethnic culture. There are also differences concerning religious practice, as many Syrian Kurds adhere less to Islamic practice. According to my observations<sup>369</sup> there is more openness towards communist thought, and the feeling that they have been discriminated against on ethnic grounds seems to have led many to cynicism concerning Sunni Islam.

### 5.3.1 Religious change between a village community and urban influences

When I met Aisha, nothing seemed to distinguish her from other village women in her area at first sight. A woman in her late twenties, with only an elementary school education, she spent her life looking after her four young daughters, her home, and working on the family land. When I saw her for the third time, she had come to visit her cousin Hanan in an attempt to heal a breach in the extended family because the latter had broken off an unofficial engagement with Aisha's younger brother. During this visit we chatted about my research and she told me that she, too, had changed to

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<sup>369</sup> I have visited Hanan as well as different families in a number of Kurdish villages continually over the period spring 2005 to spring 2011.

become more religious.<sup>370</sup> My first reaction was surprise, as Aisha, unlike the religious Muslim women I had encountered in Damascus, had not talked about Islam or devotion to me, yet. She also lacked the common visible signs of religiosity: Her dress was not different from other women in her area. She wore a colourful headscarf in black printed with bright red roses and green leaves. Her dress was made from a thin and flowing patterned material with long loose sleeves and a long, loose skirt with lots of little pleats, showing off the tailored waist. This kind of dress is traditionally worn by rural women. It revealed her figure much more than the *manteau* or *abāya* usually worn by the more religious women I had met so far.

Despite her outward conformity with the rural community she lived in, Aisha said that she started to wear *al-hijab al-ḥaḥiqi*, the 'true hijab', only four years ago. Before that time she would wear the headscarf merely for practical reasons, which is common in the Syrian countryside, as a protection against the sun during her work in the fields for example, but she was not bothered with religious norms or ideas of modesty. 'Taking the hijab' meant she had started to adhere strictly to regulations of the religious hijab. Since then, she also started praying more regularly, reading the Qur'an and being more exact in observing Ramadan, even though she was aware that she was still falling short of full religious observance. Yet she understood herself to be in the middle of a process of change and expressed her desire to stop compromising her religious practice and to live up to her ideal of religious observance: 'I am not done with changing my life yet, but am trying to make it little by little more conformed to religion.'<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Interview with Aisha, Afrin, 22.10.2006; I was not able to record this conversation but took notes and wrote down the full conversation from memory afterwards.

<sup>371</sup> Interview with Aisha, Afrin, 22.10.2006.

While Aisha described the changes in her life mainly in terms of practice, she repeatedly emphasised that a personal conviction had to be at the centre of religious life: ‘It is important that the change does not come from others, but from personal conviction (*qinā‘a*).’<sup>372</sup> Her desire to change was mainly founded on the growing conviction that she was falling short of God’s commands. This was not an entirely new thought but it gained a new urgency in her mind. Consequently she started to fear for her fate in the hereafter: ‘I was thinking about how I would be judged by God.’

These thoughts were triggered through the example of her brother, who turned towards religiosity two years before Aisha started wearing the hijab. According to Aisha’s account, her parent’s family had moved to Aleppo, leaving only her with her husband in the village. Originally, her brother had led a secular lifestyle unconcerned with religious norms. Aisha mentioned that he had been promiscuous and drank alcohol. However, in 2000 while he was studying medicine at university in his third year he became friends with two students who propagated Salafi Islam on campus. Through their influence he changed his life and became a Salafi himself. Usually Syrians use the term Salafi with a negative connotation for Muslims who are seen as overly strict and extreme to the degree of militancy. In Aisha’s understanding, though Salafi stood for a person who truly followed Muhammad:

To be a Salafi means to live like the prophet Muhammad and his companions and to lead a pure life. Many students are becoming Salafis but they face problems so they remain secret.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

Aisha said that both friends of her brother, one a law student, the other a student of English literature, had disappeared, and though nobody knew where they were, she was sure that the government had imprisoned them. In her opinion, Syrian society was becoming more religious because of the influence that the Islamic *da'wa* had on people's lives. As in her own life, people needed to hear religious teaching to move from indifference to commitment.

### 5.3.2 Becoming religious: an aspect of conservatism or progress?

The case of Aisha's development is another illustration that the relationship between the categories of 'conservative' and 'progressive' are not as clear cut as the appearance of veiling and other claims of adherence to ancient Islamic practices may suggest. A comparison between Aisha and her sister shows this: When Aisha's brother became religious he started talking to both sisters about the Islamic obligations, especially pressuring them to wear the headscarf. While Aisha apparently was open to his influence and started to think about God's claim on her life, his younger sister, who was still unmarried and living at home, resisted his influence for a number of years. She had lived her teenage years in Aleppo and had experienced a more modern lifestyle than Aisha in the first place, being a fashionable young woman used to wearing trousers, make up and perfectly coiffed hair.<sup>374</sup> She fought with her brother saying that she was free to wear whatever she wanted rather than giving in. At the time I talked

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<sup>374</sup> Acc. to my observations when I visited her family together with Hanan a couple of times during the years 2005-2006.

with Aisha, her sister was 24 years old, and suddenly stated that she was going to don not only a headscarf, but a floor length dark *manteau*, a dark headscarf and a *niqāb*. Aisha was surprised by her sister's decision, but she was also pleased. Her sister said that as she had decided to cover herself, she was not going to make any compromises. However, she had not yet put her announcement into practice because she was 'gathering strength'<sup>375</sup> to go through with it.

Aisha seemed also jealous that her younger, unmarried sister had the freedom to make her own decision and was going to overtake her in her religious practice while she was struggling with the opposition of her husband: 'My husband is against my growing more religious but I want to do it anyway.' When I asked her why her husband was against her development, she only said that he did not want her to change any of her practices. They had been married for eight years and Aisha complained that in other areas as well her husband tried to pressure her to do what he wanted. One area of conflict was her husband's desire for a son. Aisha said that she had not wanted another child after giving birth to three daughters, but had given in. The fourth child had also been a girl and her husband kept pressuring her for another pregnancy even though she said that his demand was unreasonable, considering that all four births had been caesarians. In addition to the health issue Aisha argued that her husband's insistence showed a lack of trust in God: 'It is God who creates a human being male or female. Both are gifts from him.'<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Interview with Aisha, Afrin, 22.10.2006.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

After my conversation with Aisha in 2006, the rift between her family and her cousin Hanan widened and I was not able to get into contact with her again. However, Hanan told me two years later in October 2008 that Aisha had left her husband and had gone to live with her family in Aleppo. Aisha's sister had started to wear the dark manteau, hijab and *niqāb* some time before that. Once Aisha was free from the pressures of her husband she had done the same.<sup>377</sup>

The case of Aisha shows a woman for whom her turn towards religiosity was connected with her desire for progress and self-determination while struggling to find a liveable compromise between her rural community and her new ideal of a religious woman. In the end she decided to let go of the community she lived in and find opportunity for her own development in the city. It is interesting that her new religious practice, which was in many ways more restrictive, nevertheless meant for Aisha to get rid of the traditional conservatism of her rural community even to the degree of leaving her husband.

At the beginning of her development, Aisha had to find a way to adhere to what she thought of as obligatory Islamic dress without going against the village consensus. While on the one hand it seems that she accepted her brother's demands of the hijab more easily than her younger sister because it was less of a change from local village custom than from Syrian secular fashion, the modern Islamic clothing that is worn by many religious women in Syrian cities was more difficult for her to wear because she would have stuck out. A *manteau*, for example, would also have proven very impractical in everyday village life with the demands of manual labour. Only later, through the example of her sister and her

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<sup>377</sup> Conversation with Hanan, Afrin, 5.10.2008.

claim of 'no compromise' did the *manteau* and modern hijab become part of the progress she desired in her religious life as well as part of urban lifestyle choices.

Yet at the time of my interview, Aisha also remained critical of some of the developments in the religious milieu in the cities. Specifically, she opposed women engaging in the *da'wa* movement: 'In the cities even women are doing [*da'wa*] nowadays, but I don't like that.'<sup>378</sup> In her opinion, women should be able to make their private religious choices but not take up public roles. Interestingly, in rural Syria women played a more public role anyway because they have traditionally been part of the agricultural labour force.

Aisha's turn to religion seems to have helped her to assert herself against her husband and his demands in areas that went beyond the argument that she had to obey God. In fact, most *dā'iyāt* in my experience would judge that her duties as a wife took priority over a more overt religious life style as long as she fulfilled her obligations. Yet Aisha decided to make her decisions about her religious practices a higher priority than her husband's wishes and rather re-attached herself to her family of origin.

In Aisha's case growing devoutness and female empowerment developed in parallel ways. Her brother obviously played an important role and influenced her way of thinking. Yet as a married woman, geographically separated from her brother, she may just as well not have followed him if he had not managed to convince her. Her growing independence enabled her to follow her desires for a more observant religious practice. With all the outer factors

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<sup>378</sup> Interview with Aisha, Afrin, 22.10.2006.

that played a role in her development, Aisha's own assessment remains, that her major motivation for her choices was the thought of God's judgement.

Thoughts of God's judgement also played an important role in the next study, the story of Ruba's journey towards devoutness. However, the circumstances of her life, growing up in Damascus, receiving higher education and looking forward to comparatively good employment opportunities, were very different from Aisha's. This demonstrates that the notion of divine judgement as a motivator for change is not limited to lesser educated, 'backward' women but, as I will explore further in 6.4.3, an integral part of my participants' identity as devout Muslims.

#### **5.4 Ruba: A journey towards chastity**

About a month after the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, I went to interview Ruba at a friend's house. I arrived in one of the poor, illegally constructed neighbourhoods, with large families living in shoebox-like concrete structures, one on top of the other, in unpaved streets full of rubbish, close to the conservative middle-class area of Midan. Ruba had walked over from her family home in Midan. The three of us sat down on a couple of mattresses on the floor, which were the main seating, for a cup of coffee, and the conversation turned to the demonstrations of the day before. In the evening, the announcer on the state TV channel had said that the rumours about demonstrations in Midan after the

Friday prayers were false. Rather, according to the broadcaster, the men who exited the al-Hassan Mosque had chanted *al-ḥamdu li-llah* because it was raining. Ruba was outraged:

They have no respect for their own people! Do they think we are stupid? The window from our flat shows the street in front of the mosque, and I saw the men and heard what they were shouting.<sup>379</sup>

Ruba's case is the story of a young woman on the margins of the *da'wa* movement. She did not strike me as being very interested in devoutness when I first met her. She talked about going to a mosque lesson once and not returning because of the harshness of the teacher, and chatted with my Druze friend and I about her desire to work as an engineer, complaining about the opposition to women's education in the 'backward community in Midan.' The usual religious propaganda was missing from her conversation. She was dressed in a light brown *manteau* and beige hijab, and my friend had suggested her to me as a 'guinea pig' to try out a questionnaire on Muslim women because she saw Ruba as very 'open-minded.' Only during the interview did I realise that she had a strong desire for stricter religious practices and seemed to be a woman on her way to a more radical devoutness, so I asked her if she was willing to talk about her own experiences. We met again a week later for a second interview. Both interviews were recorded.

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<sup>379</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

#### 5.4.1 'Religion' as compulsion and compliance to cultural norms

Ruba was born in 1985. Growing up in the context of an extended paternal and maternal family in Midan, Ruba's childhood associations with religion were mixed. While she remembers her mother teaching her how to pray as a child, she interpreted the behavioural norms in her family as driven by social acceptance rather than obedience to God's commands, which Ruba, like Zaynab,<sup>380</sup> describes with the term 'normal'. However, that did not mean that their lives were void of religion, but rather that religious and cultural demands were intertwined and often not differentiated. Ruba's criticism demonstrated that this led to some correct practices but without correct intentions while correct intentions could be paired with incorrect practices:

[The girls in my family] wouldn't talk with a guy because it is Islamically unlawful, but because that was the way society was, and that is how they would act. That's what I mean by 'normal'. [...] Even my mother and father were not knowledgeable about religion. Their daily life was ordinary, so that they didn't pray much. Yes, and their praying was not always correct.<sup>381</sup>

Summing up the religious sentiment in her family at the time, she said it was 'without spiritual feelings.'<sup>382</sup>

Similarly, to wear the hijab was the normal cultural expectation of women in her community. Nevertheless, when her parents asked her to put it on she did not want to. She

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<sup>380</sup> Comp. 4.2.1, page 150-151.

<sup>381</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

remembers her childhood as a time of freedom from norms of clothing and other ‘female, modest’ behaviour, of running around and playing outside in the streets. When she was in seventh grade, her mother bought her a hijab and asked her to wear it, but she refused. Every morning her mother would take the hijab to the front door as she said good-bye, nagging her: ‘When will you start wearing it?’ Ruba was not alone in her rejection. She was part of a group of ten school friends who all struggled with the same demands and comforted each other when they got upset about their parents’ pressure. Many tears flowed. Looking back, Ruba thinks that they blew their dislike of the hijab out of proportion and that it became an issue of teenage rebellion to her and her friends not to wear it while they knew that sooner or later they had to comply because women without hijab were not accepted in her community. After about a year, the group of friends decided that they would give in and together come to school in hijab. As Ruba put it: ‘[Our] families shamed [us], and so we agreed in the end that we would wear the hijab.’

Later, donning the *manteau* was a step to find a compromise between Ruba’s desire to wear what she liked and her on-going family pressure concerning religiously acceptable clothes:

Then the families began with the next stage: ‘Tight trousers are *ḥarām*, short tops are *ḥarām*, *ḥarām*, *ḥarām*.’ So we were wearing baggy trousers, and skirts - we had no choice, though we didn’t like the skirts. [...] In ninth grade I began to wear a *manteau* and wear tight trousers and short-sleeved tops and so on underneath it until I didn’t have any baggy clothes. I said that I could buy whatever clothes I

wanted and wear them and the *manteau* would cover it all. And that is how I continued.<sup>383</sup>

Ruba was not the only one in her family that had difficulties with pressure related to religious practices. Her father's generation had turned from Islamic convictions and practices other than what were culturally necessary, because of the inability of her grandparents' generation to fill them with meaning. Her paternal grandfather especially was harsh, and tried to force his sons to pray and attend the mosque, yet could not explain why they should do so. He even beat them into compliance when they were young. As a result, all his sons rejected religious practices when they grew up. Ruba calls them 'sinful Muslims' who had 'broken their religion,' mentioning particularly that they never prayed, nor had any desire to know more about the Qur'an or Muhammad because they did not love them.

Ruba did not remember any attractive models of religiosity during her childhood or early teenage years. On the one hand she saw the lack of religious learning which resulted in mere imitation and cultural pressure. On the other hand she was repelled by the few people around her who became part of the Islamic revival because their behaviour seemed too extreme: Her father's oldest brother returned to the kind of harsh religiosity that he had seen in his father. He started to go to mosque lessons at the Daqaq Mosque in Midan and to read religious books. Soon after that, he began to propagate 'true Islam' in his family. Yet from Ruba's point of view he was too strict, as demonstrated particularly in his views on

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

women: He started to demand that the women in his family not leave the home and opposed higher education for his daughters.

Another example was the family of one of Ruba's classmates in elementary school. The mother had recently become religious through attending lessons at a mosque and equally engaged in *da'wa*, and her daughter received some religious education, learning how to recite and memorise the Qur'an. In retrospect Ruba envied these opportunities. Yet her reaction at the time was repulsion because the girl had started to wear the hijab when she was still in elementary school, which seemed terrible to Ruba when she was a child.

On looking back, Ruba identified social pressures and cultural norms as the main motivations behind adherence to or rejection of religious practices during her childhood and teenage years; however, religious questions remained in her mind. In particular, religion classes during middle school showed her the connection between unloved practices and Islam, legitimising the local morals as divine commands and paving the way for Ruba to change her attitude. Today, her view of the hijab, for example, has changed to the degree that she even prefers the *niqāb*. She sees her former rejection only as rebellion against the way that the hijab was pushed on her:

If they bring you some chocolate and force you to eat it, you hate it. You feel it is not good because they want you to eat it. It was the same thing with the hijab for us girls.

#### 5.4.2 Discovering chastity as the goal of religious observance

At the beginning of our interview, Ruba estimated that a large percentage of women turned towards religion due to the experience of a shock which made them realise that their secular lifestyle had let them down: ‘They feel that there is no-one in the world who can help them except God. So they hold on a lot more to religion and take refuge in it.’<sup>384</sup>

When I asked her about her own experiences, Ruba obviously found it difficult to talk about it. She mentioned a traumatic incident but couldn’t remember what it was. Only later she explained that it had to do with a romantic relationship. The subject seemed shame-related for her as she did not share much detail of what happened: When she was about 15 or 16 years old she started to meet secretly with a boy from her school. The relationship lasted for five years. After the initial years her boyfriend asked her family for her hand in marriage and they got officially engaged, but the relationship became more difficult when Ruba went to university and her boyfriend did not pursue further education. According to her, it was she who started to have reservations about the connection as she developed her thinking through her studies, feeling dissatisfied with her fiancé’s lack of common interests while he seemed totally infatuated with her. However, when her fiancé unexpectedly broke the engagement, it unsettled her and triggered her search for God:

It was a huge shock to me. He left me. I was devastated and [felt] this great emotional emptiness ..., and I had lots of free time that needed filling. [...]

So I began to fill my time. After the shock, I felt that I should return to God, read the Qur'an and pray, so that God would help me. I started to go to the mosque and

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

memorise the Qur'an and I began to love going deeper in religion.<sup>385</sup>

Ruba repeatedly described how her experience had shattered her. Broken engagements are comparatively common in Syria. In a culture where arranged marriages are still the norm, couples often do not know each other very well before they get engaged. While these break ups are also painful as the hope of married life and happiness is disappointed, in most cases I have observed that the experience is not devastating or life-changing, and the search for a marriage partner may be continued relatively quickly afterwards. In Ruba's case, understandably, the five-year-old relationship left a huge vacuum in her life. Yet this is not the only reason why she turned towards religion to fill the gap. The unexplained and sudden end seems to have affected her feeling of helplessness; hence, she emphasised helplessness as the main reason to seek God when she talked about this phenomenon in the general context.

However, as Ruba had already started to feel dissatisfied with the relationship beforehand, the question is why she did not feel some relief to ease the pain even if she did not go so far as to initiate the break-up herself. The following quote sheds some light on this:

In the beginning I was talking to Ali without my family's knowledge. So after I fell and tasted the loss I began to say that I wished I had not spoken to him. It left a black spot in my heart, it was a bad experience, and as always, after we have made a mistake remember that God told us not to do that, that it is wrong.<sup>386</sup>

Apparently Ruba felt that the way they had conducted the relationship during the earlier

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

stages was sinful and that it had somehow left her morally marred. Regretting ‘speaking to Ali’ may represent more explicit sexual behaviour or merely the sexual attraction involved in their secret relationship. In the context of the cultural construct of female chastity and male objectification of women, it is possible to understand her emotional reaction and feelings of guilt as a credible response to either. Clearly the experience made her accept one of the prevalent the cultural notions that men relate to women mainly as sexual objects:

Maybe [Ali] gave me this picture, that for a man, a woman is just a body. She is just a female, not an intellect. Compared to others he had a really good character but now I have this impression that troubles me. There are things that you cannot describe but when they happen in front of you, you feel something ugly.<sup>387</sup>

The acceptance of this idea made Ruba ready to accept the restricting religious prescriptions that she had rejected earlier as the solution to cross gender issues. Now the view of the different natures of men and women and their different obligations for the protection of the community from sin as it is propagated within the *da'wa* movement offered an explanation of her turmoil and orientation for the future. The cultural norms on gender and some of the teaching on gender roles she had learned in school were her starting point to search for orientation. She started to visit mosque lessons and to listen to TV preachers whose teaching strengthened her emotional reaction that her devastation was based in her disobedience to divine commands. Ruba's attitude towards Islamic clothing suddenly changed from rebellion to acceptance because of the idea that it offered protection from sexual immorality:

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

So that is the story of how I started to like the *niqāb*, because I found religion to be right. Also, the notion that speaking to Ali was unlawful - to speak to a guy and love him if there is no lawful connection between us or my family doesn't know - [was proved to be right].<sup>388</sup>

#### 5.4.3 Religious observance and the longing for independence

The feeling of sexual guilt and regret was the motivation for Ruba to start on her journey towards religious observance. At the time of my research, she had moved on beyond gender issues. She had started to pray regularly, engage in personal *dhikr* and memorise the Qur'an. In contrast to other case studies, Ruba was not recruited into the *da'wa* movement by another person, which explains why she has remained on the margins of the movement rather than committing to a religious teacher or institution. Her earlier dislike for pressure and the thoughtless following of rules turned her away from the mosque lessons that she visited, although she said that she would prefer to attend lessons if she found a *dā'iya* whose personality she liked. Instead, she regularly listened to TV preachers as a way to learn as much as possible about Islam, trying to avoid what she saw as the uneducated, minimalist approach to Islam that she had grown up with.

Ruba was convinced that her experience had proven Islam as trustworthy and her own subjective tendencies as false. Yet her approach to devoutness also showed the tension

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

between this conviction and her own desire for independence. This became clear when we talked about women's equality and the possibility of modernist Qur'anic interpretations.

On the one hand, Ruba held on to a literalist Qur'anic and sharia interpretation that was very similar to the views taught by *dā'iyāt* like Sawda or Zaynab, defending discriminatory laws concerning polygamy and female inheritance and witness. She argued that the distinctions made between men and women were based on the different natures of both genders and that they protected women, for example from having to seek employment because the inheritance laws put the obligation of material provision on the men.

According to her view, any society in which women have to work to provide for their families, failed women. Ruba admitted that in reality, many women do so. Yet rather than adjusting the sharia to this reality, the circumstances should be adjusted to the ideal society according to the provisions of the sharia. She argued that the sharia could not be changed for two different reasons: Firstly because of the divine revelation, which was universally valid, rejecting the idea that the historical context could limit its mandatory validity and influence the development of authentic interpretation. Secondly, she reasoned that the created nature of men and women did not change: Women were emotional and needed the protection that laws, which might look discriminatory from a Western perspective, offered. For example, they needed to be married and therefore polygamy was providing for the surplus of women.

On the other hand, Ruba voiced her personal dislike for many situations that she accepted from a religious point of view. Asked whether it was better for her to be married, too, she answered:

Not better for me. I like to develop my knowledge. [...] I don't have this notion that I would just sit by myself and close the door. [...] But when they say that in Islam women sit at home etc., this is not from the perspective that she has no rights, but that it is more comfortable for her - so that you can raise your children properly, serve your husband, serve your household and obey your Lord.<sup>389</sup>

Similarly, she accepted and rejected polygamy, saying that, notwithstanding the important reasons that might lead to it, in her opinion 'it is *makrūh*. Not just *makrūh*, but very much so, and that is because it has effects that are not good at all.'<sup>390</sup>

This kind of critical voice is usually not present within the *da'wa* movement.

Yet again, concerning gender segregation, Ruba voiced some of the most radical thoughts I have come across. She wished to wear *niqāb* but abstained from it only for practical reasons: She had tried it out a couple of times but realised that with the *niqāb* her interaction with men was much more limited if she was to practice it coherently and avoid all except the absolutely necessary contact with men; this she felt she could not do as a student and later in employment as an engineer. Nonetheless, in Ruba's ideal world, segregation went even much further. She explained to me that women should have their own 'women-only' facilities and institutions, like public transport, workplaces and universities, a concept that is called *ta'anīth*.

Interestingly, in this area Ruba accepted the thought of evolving religious judgements

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

according to the state of society: Far from the argument that the *niqāb* is demanded because the whole body of a woman is *'awra*, Ruba explained that it had been commanded in the Qur'an only after the social situation had become so bad that the women had to wear it as a protection against the harassment from the unbelievers.<sup>391</sup> She saw the situation in her own society as complicated because social interaction in the modern world made the *niqāb* inappropriate in mixed gender work places and educational institutions. On the other hand, Ruba saw the *niqāb* as the divine solution against the harassment of women. Likewise, her support for *ta'anīth* was not an expression of religious extremism but a radical answer to her desire to participate and benefit society without having to deal with sexual issues.

For Ruba, the distinction between fanaticism and devoutness lay in the question of personal choice. The religiosity that she was aiming at was by far not only a question of correct practices, but also of 'spiritual feeling' and love of God, which compulsion could not achieve. The comparison between her description of her own journey and her uncle's, who started to force religious practices on his family, illustrates this:

The problem was that [my uncle] became religious in a somewhat fanatical way. I don't know, maybe to God his religion was correct, but in my view, no, it wasn't. He would come home [from the mosque] and would see that his sister wasn't praying and he would tell her to pray and that it is *ḥarām* not to. [...] But in my view his religiosity was fanatical. He was very fierce in the way he dealt with people.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> This argument is developed based in the Qur'anic verses 4:23 and 33:59.

<sup>392</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011

We did not sense the spirituality of anything. That is, you feel in your heart something good. [...] When you fall into sin then you will say that you now really understand why God said not to do that. You start to want it, and you start to behave correctly and you see the results of that are really good, and so you want more and you say ‘Praise God’ that he taught me how to live.<sup>393</sup>

Ruba’s wavering, compromising and contradicting herself are expressions of the on-going process that she found herself in at the time of our interviews: On the one hand, she was moving towards greater religious practice in her quest to gain a good conscience, moral purity, respect and spiritual satisfaction. On the other, there were obviously areas in which she struggled to practically accept certain restrictions that the Islamic interpretation she agreed with theoretically, put on her. This seems to me to point to a lack of conviction. Other participants shared with me similar struggles, though looking back from a stage of stricter observance they judge their reticence as a lack of strength not conviction. Being influenced though not really part of the *da’wa* movement, Ruba may remain at the critical distance she expressed. Alternatively, her desire for more may move her closer to the centre of the movement and to greater acceptance of its teaching.

The perception of being on a journey and moving continually towards greater devoutness was felt strongly by all of the five women of this chapter. Yet this perception also illustrates how unique each one of them is, as the last case shows. It portrays the youngest of the five, yet the one who went furthest in her religious zeal. Nevertheless, she also desired to reach higher levels of devoutness.

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

## 5.5 Farida: Choosing what is ‘best’

While I was studying at the Sharia Department of Damascus University, one day in 2005 a figure covered from head-to-toe in black, including gloves and *niqāb*, approached me with the story that God had given her the special obligation to convert me to Islam in a dream. At first I felt overwhelmed by her zeal. Nevertheless we developed a friendship over the years, trying to understand each other’s religious commitment. The concept behind her fervour was the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘better’ – *ḥasan wa aḥsan*. It motivated and justified her to go far beyond the obligatory in her religious practice. Her choice of extreme veiling was a result of this concept as she explained:

Hijab is obligatory, *niqāb* is better, and *khimār* is the best. I always want the best and I just can’t be satisfied with anything less. As a teenager I was wearing hijab, now I am wearing *niqāb*, but I am waiting to get my eyes laser operated, so that I won’t need glasses anymore and can wear *khimār*.<sup>394</sup>

Born in 1986, Farida finished her undergraduate sharia studies in 2008 at the age of 22 as one of the top students of her year. She got married and started her postgraduate studies in the autumn of the same year. After her ‘diploma’ she went on to study for her master’s degree in 2009, while at the same time teaching undergraduate students at the newly opened Sharia Faculty of Aleppo University and taking care of her child, who was born in 2009.

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<sup>394</sup> Conversation with Farida, Damascus, 11.03.2007.

Even though we had discussed my research project many times and Farida had helped me to find research participants, it was only in June 2011 that she offered to tell me her own story when I visited her for a last time before leaving Syria. She did not want me to record her, so the following is based on my notes of an informal interview with her and the written up account from memory when I got home as well as former conversations.

#### 5.5.1 Choosing religious practice for her father's sake

Originally from a small village close to the Lebanese border, Farida had spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia, where her father had found employment. Only during the hot summer months, her family returned to Syria each year, spending the school vacations between her village and a second family home in a new middle class suburb of Damascus. Similar to Sawda and Zaynab, she described her early upbringing as 'traditionally Muslim': Religious practices like prayer and the hijab were followed in imitation of customs but not strictly.<sup>395</sup> This changed during her late childhood.

According to Farida, her father played the most important role in the development of her religious consciousness. When she was small, he rarely prayed. It seems that her father and her uncle who were living together with their families in Saudi Arabia became more religious through the influence of Saudi society during the 1990s. The

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<sup>395</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

family was living in a Syrian expatriate community; therefore, the men, primarily, interacted with Saudis and were influenced by Saudi religious teaching. Farida's uncle, although in Saudi for secular employment, later became the imam of the mosque of the Syrian community, and started to be referred to as a 'sheikh' back in Farida's home village in Syria.

Her father's turn towards religion did not seem to have had a huge impact on the everyday life of his family at first. For example, even though Farida and her siblings were aware that her father disliked the modern media with their sexual contents, they watched TV and listened to secular pop music without thinking whether this clashed with Islamic morals or not: 'We were just a normal family with normal media choices.'

<sup>396</sup> Her parents taught their children traditional moral values and basic religious practices like prayer, but they also accepted the influence of the media with different values in their home, which meant for Farida that she grew up with these two diverging influences without questioning any of them. Instead, she and her sister Khadija, who was two years older and very close to her, learned to change their behavior from one set of values to the other, depending on the context they found themselves in. To illustrate this, Farida described how, as a teenager, she would wear the hijab in Saudi Arabia simply because every girl did so in that context, but during the summers when she was in Syria, she would wear no hijab and run around the streets in shorts and short sleeved t-shirts like most of the girls in her Damascene neighbourhood. 'That shows you that I was not at all convinced of the hijab, it was only something I wore because

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

every girl had to in Saudi Arabia.<sup>397</sup> The tension between the two sets of values did not matter to her so long as her social context accepted her behavior.

In another memory of this time, Farida reflected on her and her sister's love for belly dancing:

My sister Khadija is a really good dancer, and I remember one day that she played music and danced in front of the mirror. You know how sexy Eastern dancing is. My father came in and watched without her noticing. When she saw him after a while, she stopped embarrassed, but he said: 'Don't stop, go on and finish your dancing.' So she went on dancing the whole length of the song, but he watched her all the time. She felt so ashamed!<sup>398</sup>

Similarly to Zaynab's reflections that her 'traditional' upbringing used the criteria of 'shameful' rather than religious norms to guide her behaviour,<sup>399</sup> Farida's memory also illustrates the difference between religiously motivated behaviour and the traditional motivation to avoid what is 'ayb. Farida's father did not argue with his daughters about whether belly dancing was *ḥarām* or not - he did not even speak of the question as to whether secular music was *ḥarām*, a conviction that Farida held later – but he tried to take the pleasure out of the dancing by making Khadija feel ashamed.

Nonetheless, religion was also part of Farida's upbringing. In her memory, her parents were split when it came to using the approaches of *tarḥīb* and *targhīb*. She recalls how her mother used fear to make her pray even though she herself did not pray faithfully:

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Compare 5.2.4, page 168-169.

My mother always used to tell me this story about a little boy who saw that his mother each day started to kindle the fire with small sticks first before she used bigger pieces of wood. This boy started to cry and cry, so much so he became sick. When the people asked him what was wrong, he said: ‘God will also start the fire [of hell] with little ones!’ My mother told us this story and said: ‘Start to pray even though it is not yet *fard* for you!’<sup>400</sup>

It seems that this story had little effect on Farida’s practice, though, as she did not really start praying as a child. Possibly the example of her mother, who was lax with her own prayer practice, undermined the message. Interestingly, this early memory of her religious upbringing already conveyed the message that the obligatory was not enough, like the concept of *ḥasan wa aḥsan*.

Her father, on the other hand, tried to encourage his children to pray without pressure. He gave them little presents when they prayed, like a hair clip or a little tract to read. Consequently, Farida said that the rare times when she prayed she only did so because of her love for her father, not to obey God.

Her father also started to read the Qur’an with his children on Fridays, making this reading into a special occasion of time spent with him. Farida told me how much she loved her father and longed to spend time with him, so that when he asked on a Friday who wanted to read the Qur’an with him, she would always do that, even though the Qur’an itself did not mean much to her.

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<sup>400</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

Often me and my siblings would all sit around in a circle on the floor with my father, one of the little ones in his lap, and he would let each one of us read a page. But we only did it because we loved to spend time with him.<sup>401</sup>

### 5.5.2 Religious influences at school

According to Farida, it was the religious teaching at her school in Saudi Arabia that triggered a change in her religious attitudes during her teenage years. She remembered that it was particularly her year in eighth grade when she started to reflect about what she was doing and why. At that time she was 13 to 14 years old.

There were two teachers specifically, who played an important role for her during this time. Apparently, her teacher in religious studies in middle school was a gifted preacher. She used to teach only half of the class time on the subject according to the syllabus. The other half she used to preach. The question of judgement in the hereafter was a common theme and she used the approaches of *tarhīb* and *targhīb* with greater effect than Farida's parents had: 'Often she would talk about heaven and hell until the whole class would start weeping. She really made us desire heaven and fear hell.'<sup>402</sup>

The second teacher was Khadija's teacher in religious studies, who later also taught Farida. However, she had influenced Farida prior to her religious studies lessons.

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

Their school organised special lectures on religious subjects once a week for all the students. Farida remembered one lecture in particular during eighth grade, that affected her greatly. The teacher was talking about the subject that God was always and everywhere with each human being. Her question concerning the students' lack of commitment to religious practice struck home with Farida. The teacher asked them: 'How can you do one thing in one place and a totally different thing in another? God is in both places and he knows everything!'<sup>403</sup> Farida said that both she and her sister felt personally addressed as they realised that that was exactly what they were doing with the hijab: They were wearing it in Saudi Arabia but in Syria they were not. 'I realised that I was acting as if God was only in Saudi Arabia, not in Syria.'<sup>404</sup> This thought challenged her to think about her motivation for wearing the hijab. She decided to wear it in Syria, too.

By the time Farida started her studies at Damascus University, she had moved a step further and had become committed to wearing the *niqāb*. During my interview with her in 2011 she claimed that the teaching she had received in Saudi Arabia had convinced her that the *niqāb* was indeed obligatory, contrary to what she had told me in 2007.<sup>405</sup> This contradiction has its origin in the different interpretations between the four major law schools concerning this matter.<sup>406</sup> That her personal conviction had become stronger in 2011 may have been a response to the *niqāb* ban in Syria in 2010, or she may have tried to soften the question for my sake during the earlier conversation.

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Comp. page 195.

<sup>406</sup> Comp. page 86; see also Siddiqui, "Veil."

Another decision she made when she was in eighth grade was to become committed in prayer. Proud of herself and happy she told her father about it, knowing that it would make him happy, too. However, she soon realised that she found it quite difficult to stick with this decision. ‘I got bored with prayer, and I started to do it more and more irregularly.’<sup>407</sup> With hindsight, Farida saw this as an important experience because it confronted her anew with the question of her motivation. There were two problems that made prayer difficult for her, one was that she still mainly prayed for her father’s sake, and the other, that to do so she tried to get by with the minimum of the obligatory prayers. The prayer as such she did not enjoy. Her school teacher had taught them that it was enough to pray the *farḍ* and that, particularly if they were new to prayer, it would be easier to only pray the short *farḍ* and that they should not worry about praying the *sunna* or *nawāfil*, the added supererogatory prayers. Farida discussed her difficulties with her father. He advised her to pray the *sunna* to solve her problems with her lack of motivation, saying: ‘*Sunna* is like the fence around the *farḍ* and if you take the fence away, the devil will break in and steal the *farḍ*, too.’<sup>408</sup> Farida decided to follow his advice. The result proved her father right because when she started to pray *sunna* in addition to the *farḍ*, prayer became easier. With the years she added other *nawāfil* prayers and learned that prayer gave her happiness.

For Farida, this experience was a turning point in her religious sentiments: She learned that going beyond the obligatory was the way to committed religious observance.

Whereas she had struggled with her commitment so long as she was mainly motivated to pray to impress her father, praying *nawāfil* changed her desire to pray for the sake of

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<sup>407</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

loving God. For her, loving God could not be achieved through the minimal fulfillment of obligations but through this change in her attitude towards prayer and a practice that put emphasis on the desire to be close to God. As Farida explained: 'I learned to love God. Now I talk to him any time, not just during prayer.'<sup>409</sup>

Looking back, Farida felt grateful towards God that these developments happened when she had not yet started to menstruate because her struggles and laxness with prayer all predated the time when she became legally bound to pray and skipping prayer would have become a sin that she would have to be accountable for before God on the Day of Judgment. These thoughts and fears did not trouble her at the time, though. Rather, Farida remembers that she was keen to start her period because the women in her family used to celebrate a party for the girl, and she felt left out from sharing a common experience with her mother and her older sister. Nevertheless, from her later perspective, Farida saw these events as a special grace that God had granted her because her period started comparatively late when she was fifteen years old.

To illustrate her gratefulness, Farida referred to another student from her university course that had not been religiously observant before she started to study sharia. As a result of the teaching at college, she started to pray during her first year. Yet she was troubled about the question of making up for all the prayers she had missed since she started to menstruate and discussed with Farida how many times she should pray in addition to the regular prayers. 'The problem is, that no one knows the answer,' explained Farida. 'I said to her, pray as many times as you need to find peace about it,

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

because we don't know. So for now, it is all about finding peace in your heart.<sup>410</sup>

Interestingly, Farida dealt with the dilemma of not knowing how many make-up prayers would be 'enough' by advising her friend to pray until she would find peace. She introduced a very subjective criterion to a question that gained its importance from the fear of divine judgment for an 'objective' shortcoming, implied in the concept of records taken concerning obligations fulfilled or not. Yet Farida maintained that the subjective feeling of peace was not the ultimate solution, it was only an attempt to find a way to live for 'now', implying that the ultimate answer would be known only on the Day of Judgment.

It is part of the common *da'wa* discourse that religious obligations that were not observed are seen as *dayn*, a debt that has to be paid through make-up exercises. For example, Sawda taught her disciples during lessons after Ramadan how and when exactly to make up for any day they had broken the fast, depending on whether that was due to the commanded abstinence from fasting during their menstruation or laxness. She argued with them to take their debt seriously, and that they had to pay additional *kufāra*, a compensation, if they had not done so until next Ramadan.<sup>411</sup> The difference with the debt of years of missed prayer was that its exact amount was unknown. Discussions among religious women and repeated teaching during religious lessons show that it was an important subject for many women, how to deal with the uncertainty.<sup>412</sup> The presence or absence of peace or fear of judgment potentially opened

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<sup>410</sup> Interview with Farida, 16.06.2011

<sup>411</sup> E.g. Sawda taught this issue during two consecutive private lessons, 22.11.2008 and 29.11.2008;

<sup>412</sup> E.g. in another lesson Sawda answered the question from one of the students what to do if someone only started to fast when she was in her thirties. Similar to Farida, Sawda gave

the door for ongoing religious efforts. This explains the relief Farida felt that God had spared her this uncertainty through her unusually late menarche.

Besides her father and her religion teachers, Farida remembers that religious media started to play an important role in her awakened interest in religiosity such as religious TV programmes (both preaching and historical movies like ‘The Message’), and cassettes she listened to, while simultaneously, the religious teaching at school was having a growing influence. She especially remembered one cassette, with a version of the popular genre of the *qisas al-ambiā*, the stories of the prophets. During eighth grade, she went through a phase of listening to this cassette every day when she came home from school, over and over again. This coincided with the school syllabus. Farida was happy that she already knew the material and was the only student in class who knew all the answers. She loved the lessons. When they had exams she excelled without having studied for it specifically. This experience made her happy and proud of herself and reinforced her religious interest.

During her later teenage years, Farida recalls, media preachers also had a great influence on her, in particular, she listened a lot to the Egyptian preacher Amr Khalid, whose TV programmes target young Muslims, and to Tariq al-Sweydani.

The different teaching that Farida was exposed to, the role model of her religion teachers at school, and the experience that observance was easier if she went beyond it, instilled in her the desire to live up to the highest religious ideals. The following two sections will illustrate this through a number of practical choices that she made.

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no clear answer but advised her to fast as much as she was able to: Private lesson, Damascus, 15.11.2008.

### 5.5.3 Choosing *da'wa* over prestige

Farida described herself as a strong personality with the ambition to excel in her religious commitment. Her personality also influenced non-religious areas of her life. She studied hard during her secondary school years and earned very high results in her high school certificate with 96 out of 100 as her lowest mark. With these results she could have studied medicine, which demands the highest marks in the Syrian educational system.<sup>413</sup>

Yet Farida decided to study sharia for the sake of *da'wa*. This was a surprising choice taking into account that the step down from studying medicine to sharia meant a huge loss of prestige and economic opportunities.<sup>414</sup> I never encountered another student who made such a choice, while I met a number of sharia students who had aimed for other subjects and ended up studying sharia because of the *numerus clausus*.

Farida recalled the pressure that her family put on her to change her choice and that everybody around her said that she was 'crazy' to study sharia. Her aunts and uncles tried to convince her: 'Who on earth would be so stupid and register for sharia when she can study medicine?'<sup>415</sup> Even strangers tried to make her see reason: For her application at Damascus university she had to give multiple choices, and she wrote as her first choice sharia and medicine as her last. When the administrator saw her form,

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<sup>413</sup> Comp. e.g. for the academic year 2011/2012: "Al-hudūd al-duniya - al-farā' al-'alami li-l-'ām al-dirāsi 2011-2012," *Wizāra al-ta'alīm al-'ālī*. Accessed 12.10.2011, [http://mof.sy/first\\_mof/elmi%20final.pdf](http://mof.sy/first_mof/elmi%20final.pdf).

<sup>414</sup> Comp. Orabi, "Syria's youth perspectives and orientations: Towards issues of social change" 11-12.

<sup>415</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

he gave it back to her telling she had made a mistake. Farida had to argue with him to accept her application forms even after she explained that she had intentionally put sharia first and medicine last because she knew that with her grades she would only get an offer for medicine if she put it first or second, but that she really wanted to study sharia.

Farida had developed a strong desire to work in *da'wa* through the influence of her sister who had started university two years earlier. Khadija's exam results allowed her to study economics. Like other Syrian students, she registered for this subject notwithstanding her lack of interest in it, thinking that maybe after a while she would like it. However, she was unhappy and changed her studies to sharia after her first year. As the difference between economics and sharia was not perceived as such a huge step down, her family accepted her choice without further pressure. Yet one day Khadija went with her aunt to see a doctor. While he was examining the aunt, he asked Khadija about her studies and rebuked her, telling her that she had made a stupid choice to change subjects. Khadija defended herself, saying that even by comparison with medicine, sharia would have been a better choice because a doctor only healed the body, which necessarily would become sick again, and at the end die. So nothing would remain of all his effort. However, she had decided to study sharia to heal the spirit because the spirit remained. The doctor apologised to Khadija and acknowledged that he had spoken out of place.<sup>416</sup> Farida recounted this dialogue with pride. She decided to follow Khadija's example:

I was very impressed! I started to think a lot about the value of the different

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

aspects of life, and wanted to fill my life with work that remains. So I decided studying sharia had more value than studying medicine.<sup>417</sup>

Farida threw herself into her studies. She read a lot and loved it. She studied hard and got very good marks so that she finished her undergraduate certificate in four years, which only a few students are able to do, according to my observations. Already during her second year, when I was studying with her at the department, other students referred to her when they had a question.

Farida said that she became very strict (*mutashaddida*) through her studies though in her understanding her 'strictness' was not so much a question of her practice as of her religious thinking. She described that during her undergraduate years, she became so entrenched in her studies that the lecturers became her highest authority. Everything they taught, she accepted without questioning whether there could be a different way of looking at things. This development was supported by the Syrian educational system, which demands rote-learning and memorisation rather than critical thinking of its students.<sup>418</sup> During her post-graduate studies, wider reading and in-depth learning broadened her way of thinking again: 'My studies helped me to become less strict. The more I studied the more I realised that there are different opinions and that helped me to moderate my views.'<sup>419</sup> Yet this development remained limited to her scholarly thinking, helping her to understand the differences in interpretations and practices. In her own practice she still chose to adhere to the stricter interpretations of Islam.

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Even though education has much improved, as discussed in 3.3, page 87-94

<sup>419</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

#### 5.5.4 Family choices

Beside her choice of studies, the area of family choices illustrates Farida's priority in her work in *da'wa*. Farida is one of the few women I have met who are not only married but also mothers and still very active in *da'wa*. When I asked her how she managed to fill the triple role as student, *dā'iyā* and university lecturer, and mother, she laughed: 'By not having more than two children, and not more than one at a time!'<sup>420</sup> Family planning was one of the important subjects for her when she discussed marriage with her future husband. They had met in the traditional way. Her husband was a neighbour, who first went to talk to her father after he had observed Farida on the streets and gathered information about her and her family. He was attracted by her extreme covering and her reputation as a devout student of sharia. Farida also wanted to only marry a man who would share her desire for uncompromising religious practice. During her years as an undergraduate student, she had expected that if both husband and wife agreed that they would live 'according to Islam' there would be no conflict but perfect union of sentiment and practice on all levels of family life. Yet when she met her future husband she discovered that this idea could not stand up to reality. Farida said that her husband had a much more traditional ideal of a Muslim family. He specifically wanted to have a large number of children and subscribed to the traditional role model that expects women to stay at home rather than seek employment. However, in the end, he accepted her position that she had an important role as a *dā'iyā* and that more than two children were not feasible if Farida was to persevere in her calling. Farida said that she would not have married him if he had not supported her in her

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

*da'wa*. 'The good thing is that now my husband really wants me to be active in this. He encourages me and helps me. Otherwise it would be impossible.'<sup>421</sup>

For the sake of her religious activism, Farida has been able to make a number of compromises with the conservative view of a woman's role and found a way to follow her goal of an independent role through depending on her husband and her extended family for support. When her family spent time in her village in Syria, she would often leave her husband in Damascus and join them so that the women of her family could look after her son when she needed to study. Her husband accepted this arrangement. During term time she travelled for two days every week to Aleppo to teach at the Sharia College there. However all her arrangements were filtered through her understanding of Islamic standards. For example, she would not travel and stay in a hotel on her own, but her husband, father or one of her brothers had to travel with her to Aleppo.

#### 5.5.5 Farida's choices: *tashaddud* or *aḥsan*?

Farida's case is another illustration of the limits of the usefulness of the categories, which are often used to describe very devout Muslim women as simply 'conservative' and 'traditional' or 'strict' and 'extremist'. She surely does not fit the category of a suppressed woman, even though her many choices were shaped by her submission to a

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

strict Islamic interpretation. When Farida moved on from the *tashaddud* of her undergraduate years she did not promote a subjectivist way of evaluating religious practice and sentiment but understood *tashaddud* as a narrow-mindedness that is ignorant of the diversity in interpretations within the ‘orthodox’ framework. Yet, while she rejected ‘strictness’ in the sense of an ignorant judgment of possible orthodox answers, she still believed in the possibility of finding and following ‘the best’ practice.

For example, there was no doubt in Farida’s mind that the Islamic sharia would provide the best solution to all issues in society if correctly deducted from the Qur’an and the *sunna* and subsequently followed. This included the commitment to the sharia rulings about personal conduct, morality and worship on the individual level as much as the implementation of sharia on the governmental level, as she claimed: ‘The problem with Syria today is that sharia is only implemented in personal law, and even there, not in all aspects.’<sup>422</sup> Farida deplored it that when it came to other areas like economic law, sharia was not taken into account, but only secular law. She saw this as a relict of the French colonialism that still needed to be dealt with. For this reason, she had decided to do doctoral research in an area of economic law from a sharia point of view once she had finished her masters.

Farida was convinced that a truly Islamic concept of economic law would not only obey God’s will but would prove the best practice empirically:

I know that any system based on sharia will be the best. Not only in a spiritual sense, but it will also function best. I hope that even non-Muslim countries will

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

see the benefits of this system and will introduce it into their economy.<sup>423</sup>

Another example that shows Farida's uncompromising attitude once she had certainty about the goodness of her choice, is her conviction to wear *niqāb*. This stance brought her into conflict with the Syrian authorities when the government banned the *niqāb* and *khimār* from schools and university campuses in July 2010.<sup>424</sup>

Farida saw the ban as an act to marginalise educated religious Syrians during a period when the government felt strong enough to do so. In any case, she argued that no teacher would stand in front of her class wearing a *niqāb* because the *niqāb* would negatively affect the communication between the teacher and student and deprive the students of the right to see the teacher's face. Most of Farida's colleagues who were *munaqqabāt* were teaching in girl's schools or in elementary school and were only teaching children, so they came to school in *niqāb* and took it off when they taught. When it came to university staff, according to the proponents of the *niqāb* a woman would not teach men anyway, because her voice is seen as attractive as her body and therefore part of a woman's *'awra* in extremely religious circles. Farida herself taught only female students, she wore the *niqāb* on campus and took it off only when she was in the classroom.

Farida remembered that when the ban was issued she didn't know what to do. In her opinion, people who were saying that the *niqāb* was not an important question because it was not obligatory were wrong because at least in shafi'i law the *niqāb* is *farḍ*.

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Acc. to Al Arabiya News, 22. July 2010, [22.07.2011]  
<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/07/22/114525.html>

It is my conviction that to take off my *niqāb* would be against God's will. I would never do that! No man has ever seen my face on the street. It was very hard on us *munaqqabāt*, but I have a strong personality. Nearly all of my friends decided to take off their *niqāb* because they did not want to lose their work. I called my husband who was travelling in Saudi Arabia to ask his opinion. He said: 'If they demanded of you to stop praying, would you do it?' I answered: 'Of course not'.<sup>425</sup>

Farida was glad that her husband was supporting her and decided to continue wearing her face veil. She recalled how the next time she entered the Sharia Department, the dean called her into his office. Yet he did not dare to confront her directly or ask her to take off her *niqāb* but just looked at her hidden face angrily. So she remained teaching there even though she did not follow the government's orders. When the ban was lifted Farida felt vindicated that she had defied the government and followed her own conscience. Her friends and colleagues who had stopped wearing the *niqāb* returned to wearing it, but she felt that once they had shown their faces to everybody the *niqāb* had lost its meaning for them: 'They lost their special reward.'<sup>426</sup>

Farida held on to a contested piece of clothing under very difficult circumstances, jeopardising her employment. Though many Syrian Muslims would judge her action as 'extreme' and 'strict' these categories were not adequate evaluations from Farida's point of view. 'Strictness' and 'extremism' were ways of thinking that did not take all opinions into account. Religious practice, on the other hand, was to be judged according to the question

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<sup>425</sup> Interview with Farida, Damascus, 16.06.2011.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

as to what length people would go to for the sake of God, and so long as it was for him and not for someone else's sake, the farther, the better. In Farida's mind, difficulties that needed to be conquered only added to the appeal to give one's best and hope that God would reward the pain suffered for him. In another context, Farida illustrated how hardship stimulated her desire for the best because of her hope of divine reward: 'I am so happy that Ramadan is moving into summer, because the more difficult the fasting, the better! Praise God who will give us more reward!'<sup>427</sup>

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The five cases of Sawda, Zaynab, Aisha, Ruba and Farida do not show any sensational breaks with the past or spectacular ruptures with their original communities. Rather, their journeys to devoutness took place within the framework of known religious expressions, albeit moving towards the extreme end of it, and within the general trend in Syrian society that provided growing acceptance of religious display and activities. Interpreting their own past, these women take an ambiguous stance towards their original communities: On the one hand, they claimed continuity as part of the Muslim *umma* and a society and culture that had been shaped by Islam. Starting their journeys with the self-perception of being Muslim, it seems that none of them ever asked whether a different choice could have been made that could have led her outside of this framework. Therefore, their desire for meaning and fulfillment was connected with the religious elements that surrounded them

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<sup>427</sup> Conversation with Farida, Damascus, 03.10.2007

and were part of their identity. On the other hand, they also claimed discrepancies between their communities and Islam, diagnosing the absence of religious knowledge, meaning and practical commitment that ‘true Islam’ demanded and which they re-discovered for themselves and, as preachers, for their communities. This ambiguity finds its expression in the discursive opposite of ‘normal/traditional’ versus ‘religious/knowledgeable’.<sup>428</sup> In these narratives, the opposite of the religious woman is not the atheist, nor the dramatically sinful person, but the woman who lives a life that is characterised by gradual indifference towards Islam even if she believes in the basic tenets of Islam and follows religious performance as far as they are cultural customs.

To what extent their journeys are part of the developments in society is most obvious in the first three cases: Sawda is the only one whose childhood and teenage years fall into the main period of government-supported secularisation in Syria. It is her generation that experienced the most far-reaching shift toward mass education. The new access to higher education through ANC as a response to the secular trends in society changed her biography from an uneducated seamstress to a religious activist with a university degree. For the next generation, education had become the norm for wide parts of Syrian society, especially in the urban areas. With increasing education, growing mobility and technical progress, the influence of religious teaching at school, at the religious centers and through the media was growing, too. Zaynab’s story demonstrates how the availability of religious information, symbols and values at school and in her circle of friends prepared her to attach herself emotionally to a religious figure when she went through the crisis of

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<sup>428</sup> Comp. the similar findings among Egyptian students by Werner, *Between Westernization and the Veil: Contemporary Lifestyles of Women in Cairo*: 109-17.

adolescent love. This attachment then became the motor of her choices that led her to religious studies and *da'wa*.

Aisha's case has in common with Sawda's that even though she belongs to Zaynab's generation, her original educational and biographical choices were much more limited as the development of her rural community was lagging behind the urban centres. Her access to religious knowledge was only indirect through her brother. In her case, devoutness went hand in hand with her desire for self-determination in her marriage and her struggles with the patriarchal village norms. Ruba's narrative differs from the rest, as her experience of sin led her to the acceptance of a life-style that she had originally rejected as too restricting. Farida chose the most extreme form of devoutness among these women. This is not only due to the influence that Saudi teaching had on her but also symptomatic for the ongoing process towards more extreme forms of religiosity in parts of Syrian society. However, it also concurred with her own experiences that going beyond the obligatory enabled her to be committed in religious practice and gave her personal satisfaction.

Each participant was additionally shaped by her own personality and individual circumstances. However, they all have in common that they see God's call or even intervention as the major reason behind their journeys. This raises the question of how they understand their choices and the question of power. The next chapter will look at this, based on the recurring themes of their narratives.

## **PART THREE: ANALYSIS**

## 6 SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT ON THE JOURNEY TOWARDS DEVOUTNESS

In Part Three I will analyse what makes Islamist devoutness attractive to my research participants based on my case studies and additional data. Looking at the issue of female empowerment and the question of why Islamist women claim some yet deny themselves other areas of power and participation of public space, I will argue in this chapter that solidifying the confines of women's lives to privacy and segregation facilitates the women's *da'wa* movement as much as the new female religious activism. As a secular lifestyle and public participation are seen partly as contradicting piety because of gender issues, religious women are choosing not to take part in this sphere, but to be active in their parallel community of 'sisters'. I will look at how the concepts of empowerment, choice and compliance shape the relationship of religious women to their culture, their families and communities, and the government, as well as the relationships within the *da'wa* movement.

However, this is not the only way in which female empowerment can be understood in the context of the women's *da'wa* movement. Therefore chapter 6 will explore how my participants understand their individual change towards the devoutness for which they are striving as 'empowerment', not on the social but on the individual religious level. I call this 'religious empowerment' in distinction to 'social empowerment', which I will look at in the following sections. With this distinction I aim at giving a complementary account of my participants' journeys and thus come to a more valid understanding.

## 6.1 Empowerment and hiddenness

While women of all different milieus are increasingly visible in the streets of Damascus, and many women with a more moderate or liberal lifestyle are present and vocal in the political, media and other public arenas, the lives and activities of culturally conservative Sunni women remain largely hidden because of their choice to avoid public scrutiny. This is particularly true of women's religious lives even though the behaviour of my research participants is both hidden and on display.<sup>429</sup> This cultural tendency to secrecy plays a role in facilitating the women's *da'wa* movement because it correlates with religious values of modesty and gender segregation within the movement and thus helps to avoid conflicts with conservative parts of society. Yet at the same time the lengths to which very religious women go is often met with opposition and prejudice from other Syrians and therefore seems counter productive in avoiding attention. Silence about women's religious activities therefore also helps avoid contentious public debates about the *da'wa* movement while at the same time the lack of openness breeds fear in many more secular or moderate Syrians.

In the following, I want to show how the lives of my research participants are shaped by the desire to remain hidden in the context of the wider Syrian society in relation to the question of female empowerment.

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<sup>429</sup> See 3.3. for my discussion of the cultural concepts of seclusion and segregation.

### 6.1.1 Veiling as display and concealment

In 3.3, I have discussed how changes in Syrian society from seclusion to female participation resulted in a redefinition of gender boundaries. Even while seclusion was widely practiced, women did not always act in accordance with it, as the mother of my language tutor recalled, describing her childhood and teenage years in a middle class quarter during the 1940s and 1950s:

All Damascene women wore a black face veil; it was simply the fashion. This veil consisted of two parts: a very transparent, see-through black cloth and a thicker, less see-through black cloth. The first actually awakened more desire in the hearts of men, because the thin material hid any blemish or wrinkle and made the face look perfect, accentuating the lines of the face. Before a woman left her house she would put on a lot of make up, very red lipstick and kohl to emphasise the eyes. Underneath the black transparent cloth they looked extremely attractive. When she left her house she would put the thicker veil over her face because of her male family members, but once she left her immediate neighbourhood she would throw it back over her head.<sup>430</sup>

It is interesting that these recollections, whether they are representative for the majority of her contemporaries or not, give an example of women using compliance to cultural norms to gain limited freedom to cross gender boundaries, using the face veil to display their beauty, similar to the fashion hijab of some Syrian women. The picture painted differs hugely from the behaviour of women in the *da'wa* movement today whose extreme forms

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<sup>430</sup> Interview with Bushra and her mother, Damascus, 07.07.2009.

of veiling place them outside the general cultural norm, and who, rather than flaunting their attractiveness secretly, often leave their veil on when neither religion nor culture demand it, e.g. the participants of Sawda's private lessons always wore their headscarves throughout the three to four hours of their stay even though the roof apartment was very hot during the summer months and most visitors in my experience would normally remove their hijab in a secure private setting because of the heat. This raises the question of why they veil and what they communicate through their veiling.

The moderate Islamic scholar Muhammad Habash and the Syrian author Shirin Dakouri both argue that the increased visibility of women in headscarves wrongly led to the conclusion of an increase of *mutahajjabāt* in Western perception. Rather, both agree that the change in attitude towards *mutahajjabāt* and the end of the ideal of seclusion allowed women in headscarves to leave their homes and participate in public space and thus become more visible.<sup>431</sup> It is impossible to validate either opinion as there is no representative data on how many women have started wearing the hijab again during the last three decades. Habash told me that, according to his observation, for each woman who started to wear the hijab another stopped wearing it.<sup>432</sup> My personal observation and the perceptions of other interview partners<sup>433</sup> differ as I met numerous women who talked about their decision making process that led them to wearing the hijab, yet only a few had moved the other way. However, there is no doubt that there are also many women who come from a background in which the hijab is worn traditionally and whose mothers lived

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<sup>431</sup> Interview with Muhammad Habash, Damascus, 19.06.2011; interview with Shirine Dakouri, Damascus, 12.12.2009.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> E.g. Zuhair Salim, spokesman of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood said that when he was a student, 1969-1971 ca. 20% of the girls wore the hijab, while today about 80% of educated women veil in some form. Interview, London, 16.03.2010.

comparatively secluded lives, while their daughters today are students or employed, as illustrated by the cases of Sawda, Zaynab, Ruba and Farida.<sup>434</sup> In any case the re-emergence of veiling became a visible statement of choice because in addition to the public icon of the modern unveiled woman, still present in Syrian society, there is the wide spectrum of shapes that the veil has taken on today: from women in very tight clothes and striking makeup who add a colourful headscarf as a fashion statement, to women in black with face veils and gloves. The veil as clothing as a means to hide has become ambiguous in that it provides visibility and hiddenness in a society where it is optional. The majority of veiled women in Damascus opt for the *manteau* and a white, blue or black headscarf. However, the clothing choices of my focus research group border on extreme veiling; consequently, the more extreme their veiling is, the greater the attention they draw. According to surveys I undertook in three main shopping areas in Damascus, gathering the data on 1882 women in total, there are about 8 % of women in the busy city centres who wear some kind of face veil.<sup>435</sup> Yet their visibility is the visibility of the phenomenon not a personal visibility because their face veil grants them anonymity.

The hijab is often understood as a visible statement of religious identity in protest against the post-colonial rejection of the hijab in the West as well as a tool to publicly claim modesty and respectability in the context of a patriarchal culture.<sup>436</sup> The diversity of the hijab undermines such general explanations. According to my survey, other than the

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<sup>434</sup> Comp. particularly 5.1.2, page 135-139, on Sawda, and 5.5.3, page 206-209, on Farida.

<sup>435</sup> Surveys were conducted in Jisr al-Abyad, 21.12.2009, Sharia al-Hamra, 22.12.2009, and the Suq al-Hamidiya, 22.12.2009, on workdays during the late afternoon hours, with the highest percentage of women in *niqāb* or *khimār* in Jisr al-Abyad (9,5%) and the lowest in Sharia al-Hamra (5%).

<sup>436</sup> Comp. e.g. Kamla, "Syrian women accountants' attitudes and experiences of the hijab in the context of globalisation"; Tabassum F. Ruby, "Listening to the voices of hijab," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, no. 1 (2006).

*munaqqabāt* about 44 % wore the unadorned dark *manteau* and dark or white headscarf that dominates the religious scene, 27 % wore loose, ‘modest’ clothes like dressy trousers or long skirts and hijab, and 4 % wore a colourful hijab combined with very fashionable, tight clothing. 17 % wore no headcovering at all.

According to my research data, the prejudice against outwardly conservative women has shifted from those wearing the headscarf to those wearing face veils.<sup>437</sup> The former have become a broadly respected group in Syria, yet the latter are still judged as the ban of the *niqāb* in 2010 and the subsequent discussions show.<sup>438</sup> Thus the meaning that extreme forms of veiling convey is more ambiguous, as Syrians who are more moderate often expressed to me that women in extreme veiling do so without choice because of family pressures and the backwardness of their communities.<sup>439</sup>

For women who have chosen to wear *niqāb* or *khimār* for religious reasons, their choice, though more visible than the average headscarf due to its rarity, seems to be ignored by many Syrians and therefore any possible statement is not understood in wide parts of their society. Accordingly, women within the *da‘wa* movement, like Zaynab, told me numerous times that even though they would prefer to wear the *niqāb* they did not because of the pressure against the *niqāb* from their families and communities. Therefore extreme veiling is not a means to increase respectability.

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<sup>437</sup> For example Syrian author Shirine Dakouri voiced these prejudices in my interview with her, Damascus, 12.12.2009.

<sup>438</sup> Comp. Sami Moubayed, "The strong brand of Syrian secularism," Accessed 08.04.2013, <http://www.mideastviews.com/articleview.php?art=487>.

<sup>439</sup> Muhammad Habash supported this observation: Interview with Muhammad Habbash, 19.06.2011.

Kamla (n.d.) argues that the choice for the hijab is not so much religiously motivated as socially because of the focus on sexuality that is associated with it. The apparent tension between devoutness and the struggle of women against sexual objectification while seemingly only being trapped in a different kind of objectification as women, who are sexually inaccessible, is for her a reason to dismiss religious motivations.<sup>440</sup> Extreme forms of veiling aim at hiding women in a much more general sense than a headscarf, which aims at covering only those areas of the body that are understood as specifically enticing. However, my participants understood the main meaning of any kind of veil as hiding female beauty for the protection of society from sexual immorality in obedience to God's command. While anti-Western sentiment was not absent from my interviews and conversations with my research participants, devout Syrian women claim that obedience to God was the primary reason for the veiling of their choice. Benefits for the whole of society were understood as consequences to be expected of the divine order of the world and used to rationalise the intrinsic goodness of the divine command. This is true especially for the debate about male and female sexuality. In my participants' worldview, rather than a tension, the way male and female sexuality are perceived integrates into the understanding of the religious question and is seen as yet another example that proves the correctness of their religious convictions. For this reason the aspect of modesty and the need to protect society from sexual immorality, which would inevitably follow the display of female beauty, was discussed often among my research participants in a cultural-religious circular argument. They used cultural notions of what is sexually attractive as proof for the rationality of religious norms, and religious norms to ascribe sexual meaning to certain behaviours, such as wearing red clothes or shaking hands, or the beautiful smile

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<sup>440</sup> Kamla, "Syrian women accountants' attitudes and experiences of the hijab in the context of globalisation" 14.

of a woman as in Zaynab's story.<sup>441</sup> In the same way, they argued for other, less visible religious practices, which were adhered to in obedience to God and explained as the rationally best way to live, because the creator designed the world accordingly. For example, Sawda explained to me that prayer was not only good from the spiritual perspective but also ordained by God as physically healthy exercise.<sup>442</sup>

The question of veiling is only part of the whole concept of gender segregation and the rejection of cross-gender contact other than within the families or according to necessities. The term for cross-gender contact *ikhṭilāt*, literally 'mixing', is usually used within the *da'wa* movement with a negative connotation even though differentiations in how much 'mixing' is necessary and appropriate are made. Avoidance of *ikhṭilāt* is seen as one of the signs of a pious life. Sawda, e.g., described her mother as 'one of the pious people, there was no *ikhṭilāt*.'<sup>443</sup> The example of Ruba and her ideal of *ta'anīth*, the concept of a parallel women's sector shows, that the religious demands were seen as going far beyond cultural values, practices, and necessities, both traditional and new.

This example, like the unattained desires for *niqāb*, show the confusion that seems to be inherent to the subject of *ikhṭilāt* among my research participants: On one hand, the necessity for cross-gender contact is accepted and women are supported and proud of their participation in education and employment in a gender-mixed society. Accordingly among the devout women who participated in my research were an architect, a university lecturer, a medical doctor, an engineering student, and other professional women. At the same time,

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<sup>441</sup> Comp. 5.2., page 144.

<sup>442</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>443</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

in lessons and conversations there was a strong undercurrent that upheld extreme gender segregation even within the extended family as the pious ideal. The same tension shows in the difference between ‘word’ and ‘deed’ at the ANC: while female participation in education and employment is lauded and demanded during lessons because ‘women should benefit the whole of society’, activities among the attendees at ANC are organised to keep the highest standards of gender segregation - female students have separate lectures, entrances, halls, corridors and lifts. Yet during my research, participants repeatedly expressed a desire for more gender segregation. The tension between participation and segregation is seen as a result of the discrepancy between the cultural and social reality of *ikhṭilāt* in Syria, to which they agree to comply, and the religious ideal. Hence their ideal of gender segregation, whether observed or compromised, cannot be understood as a result of compliance to their culture. This is even more obvious in their expressions of dissatisfaction at the necessity to compromise for women like Ruba dream about organising Syrian society in a way that would allow women to study and work in parallel ‘women only’ settings comparable to Saudi Arabia. Similarly Ibtisam, another *dā’iya* at ANC, recommended Saudi segregation as an example of protection for women.<sup>444</sup>

According to Barout *ta’anīth*, this is not a traditional idea but a recent development, which he sees as a result of the participation of very religious women in the Syrian work force.<sup>445</sup>

These examples show that some of my participants see strict gender segregation as empowering because it frees them from the limitations of gender mixed contexts. The creation of ‘women only’ spaces would provide them with the choice to define the distance or proximity to strange men. Similarly, through the choice of veiling, women can partly

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<sup>444</sup> Conversation with Ibtisam, Damascus, 23.11.2010.

<sup>445</sup> Interview with Mohamed Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009.

determine the kind of relationships or contacts they want with the society around them. The face veil especially can be used to create distance. Dunya told me about her experience of starting to wear the *niqāb* for the sake of belonging to a Sufi community in Jordan whose leader demanded it from all the women living in the community: She said that she enjoyed visibly isolating herself as a person, being able to smile or to cry unbeknownst to anyone around her and without having to think about other peoples' reactions. She felt that this gave her a sense of privacy no matter where she was, which she experienced as liberating.

While a parallel women's sector is out of reach for Syria's religious women, in most areas of life extreme forms of veiling provide relative distance and hiddenness. From their perspective, this is only one aspect of their religious practice. They see it as coherent with other forms of religious behaviour that are far less public and noticeable and therefore cannot be sufficiently explained through post-colonial theory or as gaining mobility. Veiling has been researched too much in isolation from the other aspects of female Muslim religiosity.

In a similar way to the display and concealment of women's forms through veiling, female religious activism in Syria is both visible and hidden as I will discuss in the next section.

### 6.1.2 Hiding women's involvement in the *da'wa* movement

On the social level the religious activities of women are both hidden and visible: Large numbers of women entering or leaving mosques for lessons are of course visible. The recruitment of women for the various religious activities in mosques and to a smaller extent in homes is also a visible phenomenon. Yet some activities are organised so as to minimise visibility; especially activities in private homes. There are cultural as well as political and religious reasons for this tendency.

During the year I took part in Sawda's lessons in her home, the girls were told not to come or leave all together but to do so in twos or threes in order to avoid drawing attention. The desire for privacy was also respected by her neighbours: the first time I went to join her private lesson, she had told me to ask her local grocer to point out her house to me, yet the man in the shop declined to tell me. Most of the recruitment I have witnessed was done by mouth propaganda within religious circles. Concerning public activities, preachers may announce the start of new lessons for women so that the men in the mosque tell the women in their families. Yet, at the same time, in my experience it can be quite difficult for an outsider to gain any knowledge of women's activities. In attempts to attend local mosque lessons for women I experienced problems gaining any information from mosque caretakers who refused to tell me when women had lessons. The Muhammadi Mosque in Muhajirin area, which is connected to the Qubaisiyat,<sup>446</sup> for example, was a very active mosque. The men of the neighbourhood and shopkeepers thronged in big numbers to prayers on all days and frequent special events like *mawālīd* for the men were audible from

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<sup>446</sup> Acc. to Bushra, who grew up in the neighbourhood, conversation, Damascus, 15.02.2010.

my flat, three streets away. I had observed that large numbers of women entered the mosque at different times, and went there to ask for information about women's lessons so I could attend. Not only shopkeepers in the vicinity, but also the caretaker of the mosque denied any knowledge of activities for women in the mosque.

This was not a singular experience. Of course the reason for this may have been that they did not want a foreigner involved even though I had dressed in hijab to be able to enter the mosque. Yet I heard of Syrian friends who had similar experiences, e.g. the husband of one of my friends asked a female colleague attending lessons for information for his wife, but was not given any.

If this is true of public lessons in mosques, it is even more so concerning religious activities for women in homes such as lessons, *mawālīd* and other devotional meetings. All activities in homes are much more hidden from scrutiny and only accessible via personal invitation. While activities in the mosques are to a degree under government observation and control, activities in the homes are much less so. All such meetings were actually prohibited under emergency law, which restricted the freedom of assembly and stated that no more than five unrelated people were allowed to gather together.<sup>447</sup> Though these private lessons are happening all over Damascus and at least the neighbours will know when women come regularly in larger numbers and will hear if audible worship like sung *dhikr* takes place, government control is comparatively reduced as the *dā'iya* invites women she considers trustworthy.

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<sup>447</sup> Acc. to a secret service officer who questioned me, Damascus, autumn 2005.

Culturally, to remain in the private sphere and not publicise their activities is part of the image of modest female behaviour and attitude. To comply to this makes women's activities more respectable and will make families more accepting if their female members want to join. The cultural demand of segregation also makes it less acceptable for the government to interfere with these activities.

On the other hand, *da'wa* is necessarily a public activity if women try to propagate Islam widely. Therefore, their activities are not confined to lessons or other specifically 'religious' occasions: 'Everything can be *da'wa*!'<sup>448</sup> Whereas public preaching is one of the main activities for *da'wa*, my participants can interpret every personal interaction in the light of *da'wa*. As women who bear the signs of their religious affiliation visibly with them every time they leave their homes, they try to attract others to Islam through moral uprightness and simple acts like returning the money if a shopkeeper has given them too much change. Hiba, one of the teenagers who attended Sawda's private lessons, told how she likes to approach other girls of her age group on the street:

I ask them: 'Why are you not wearing hijab?' Many girls want to do what is right but they feel they don't have the strength to go through with it. I always hope if I talk to them that there is one like that among them and my speaking to them will encourage her to start wearing the hijab.<sup>449</sup>

Female religious activists are trying to walk a fine line between publicity for the sake of winning more women and concealment for the sake of modesty and segregation. The parallel structures of women's activities facilitate a new platform for social activities

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<sup>448</sup> Dr. Halima, one of the *dā'iyāt* at ANC, interview at ANC, 14.06.2011.

<sup>449</sup> Groupinterview during Sawda's private lesson, Damascus, 29.11.2009.

among women beyond the private sphere of family and neighbourhood, and for female leadership.

In addition, my participants voiced the need to remain under the radar of the government. In the next section I will look at how the hiddenness of female religious activism shapes the relationships in the political arena.

### 6.1.3 Veiling the relationship between the government and religious activists

To remain partly 'hidden' facilitates the women's *da'wa* movement because it prevents appearing threatening to the government. Since the uprising of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government dealt with religious movements in Syria according to whether they were seen as a threat or not. The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, was persecuted because it was reaching for political influence. Scholars and groups who supported the legitimacy of the government were tolerated, such as Ramadan Buti, those close to al-Fatih Institute and Ahmad Kuftaro.<sup>450</sup> However, as Pierret (2009) has argued, the pro-government religious milieu was not simply a number of pawns in the government's hands.<sup>451</sup> They shared the interest of the Islamisation of Syrian society on the level of individual piety and morality with the political Islamist movements, yet they co-operated with those in power. For the government, the support of the religious Sunni groups played

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<sup>450</sup> Islam, "The Qubaysiyyat: The Growth of an international Muslim Women's Revivalist movement from Syria (1960 - 2008) " 175-76.

<sup>451</sup> Pierret, "Sunny clergy politics in the cities of Ba'thi Syria."

such an important role because given the oppression of any kind of political opposition or civil movement, the only non-governmental infrastructure in the country belonged to the religious groups, which the government could not extinguish but needed to control to keep in power.

This relationship has not been without tensions as the government tried to interfere with the non-political Islamist milieu. While on one hand it has tried to be seen as a supporter of Islam, building mosques and institutes of Qur'an memorisation, on the other hand it has tried to curb the rise of Islamic influences in Syrian society even considering moderate Islamic groups. For example in 2004, the government interfered with the private institutes of higher religious education like the ANC and al-Fatih, prohibiting the registration of foreign students to study sharia.<sup>452</sup> On a smaller scale, foreigners have been prohibited from attending the lessons at Zahra Mosque in Mezze even though this was a very moderate mosque under the leadership of Muhammad Habash.<sup>453</sup>

The same tension between co-operation and struggle for control characterises the government's relationship with the women's *da'wa* movement. The ministry of *awqāf*, for example, employs women specifically to control the female preachers. Huda Habash for instance was employed to visit the *dā'iyāt* teaching lessons at mosques to make sure that they were not preaching an extremist Islam interpretation that fuelled violence or anti-sectarian sentiments. *Dā'iyāt* who did not comply to government regulations lost their

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<sup>452</sup> Hamidi, "Fi surīya al-'ilmānīya, Kuftāro yudāfi' 'an "al-wasatiyya li-qat' al-tarīq 'ala al-tatarruf al-islāmiy'".

<sup>453</sup> Interview with Huda Habash at her home, Damascus, 18.06.2011.

licence to teach.<sup>454</sup> However, even though Huda Habash herself co-operated with the government and took a moderate stance in many religious questions, she also had to comply with the government regulations that restricted her lessons to Syrians only.

Individual female preachers were banned from teaching in mosques, like Zaynab, who had to stop teaching in her local mosque after the ministry of *awqāf* withdrew her licence in 2010. Nevertheless, the government had to balance the gains against the losses when it came to controlling women's lives so that it would not estrange large parts of the conservative population.<sup>455</sup> This strengthened the women's *da'wa* movement specifically concerning religious activities that took part in the private sphere because of the resentment at probing into women's private lives. Thus Zaynab, though no longer able to teach publicly, could still teach in home groups and had lost no influence in the private relationships with the women of her home town. However, these relationships and her influence were not necessarily visible to someone who was not part of their group. This example shows that because women's religious activism had never taken place exclusively in mosques and was majorly a grassroots movement, the private networks along which it grew helped to limit the government's control over it. Avoiding publicity helped to maintain this.

The government also seemed to want to keep the degree to which the Islamic revival had permeated society off the public agenda. The official line until the uprising in 2011 was that no religious movement in Syria existed. Extremism was denied to play a factor, even though there have been singular incidents of the government fighting so-called 'terrorist

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<sup>454</sup> Interview with Huda Habash at her home, Damascus. 23.12.2009.

<sup>455</sup> Böttcher, "Portraits of Kurdish women in contemporary Sufism," 196.

cells.' For example, the government stopped an attack against the UN in Mezze, Damascus, in April 2004, and a cell belonging to the terrorist organisation Jund al-Sham was broken up by the security services in Daf al-Shawq, Damascus, in summer 2005.<sup>456</sup> In September 2008, a car bomb killed 17 in Sayyida Zaynab, which was seen as a spillover from the sectarian killings in Iraq.<sup>457</sup> These incidents reinforced the main argument against political opening and real reforms to be the threat of radical Islam. With this argument, the government played into the fears of the secular, moderate and religious minorities. On the other hand this prevented a discussion about the wider piety focussed movement towards more religiosity in Syrian society. In my opinion, the reason behind this is that a public discussion could possibly have opened up doors generally for political and social discussions about the future of Syrian society, which were discouraged because it would potentially have led to a polarisation of society with some pushing towards a stronger Islamisation, others for secularisation. Many more secular, well-educated Syrians held on to the idea that progress would be the end of the old backward religiosity. An open discussion about the moderate Islamist movement would have proven this idea wrong and questioned the secular basis of the Baath government which mustered the support of the secular milieu and religious minorities.

The women in the *da'wa* movement responded in kind and as described in 6.1.2., I have observed many incidences in which women have tried to hide their religious activities. While hiding facilitated them because they remained less government controlled, the aspect of hiddenness at the same time bred fear and suspicion among parts of the

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<sup>456</sup> Comp. Hamidi, "Al-tayarāt al-islāmiyya tataqaddam fī surīya wa al-sultāt tashunna "amaliyāt istibāqiyya" didd bu'r takfīriyya".

<sup>457</sup> Comp. "Syrian car bomb attack kills 17," Accessed 27.09.2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7639137.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7639137.stm).

population. For some women it is more acceptable to go to a mosque than a private lesson, e.g., because it is public and more controlled. Yet in a way, the *da'wa* movement in Syria caters to women who are coming to it from different angles: those who prefer a more open approach can go to mosques while those who are attracted to activities that are hidden or a personal relationship with a *dā'iya* that a private lesson offers may e.g. join the Qubaisiyat or commit to other private groups.

A forceful open movement would probably also have resulted in social repercussions, as many Syrians held onto the ideal of moderation and religious extremism was looked down upon. Even during the recent uprising with its increasing sectarian divide it took months of violence for the government, which labelled it as religious extremism from the very beginning, to succeed in pushing the revolts into stronger sectarian waters. At the beginning, the slogans of many protests were anti-sectarian to prove the government wrong, such as the logo on the Sham News Network website on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, which showed the Muslim crescent and the Christian cross. Protestors used slogans such as: 'We are Syrians, not Salafists.'<sup>458</sup>

A stronger rejection of female religious activism by the wider Syrian public would have been detrimental to the movement because women depended on their families' acceptance for their activities. As long as going to mosque lessons and starting to veil are perceived by the general public as non-threatening and respectable, families will be more tolerant to their female members who want to do so. However, if these activities and practices are

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<sup>458</sup> Al-Jazeera, "Syria live blog April 22," Accessed 22.04.2011, <http://blogs.aljazeera.net/live/middle-east/syria-live-blog-april-22>.Comp. as well Samar Yazbek, *Schrei nach Freiheit* (München: Nagel & Kimche, 2012). 37.

seen as extremist or dangerous because religious women are perceived as part of a movement to Islamise the society, many families would probably try to stop their female member from taking part in it. 'Moderation' in religious matters is seen as a high value, as illustrated by the fact that even those research participants practising a more extreme form of Islam claim moderation to legitimise their choices.

Very devout women in Syria make choices regarding their religious practices that cannot be explained as simple advantages to increase their mobility or participation in public space. Their choices go far beyond cultural respectability, even if general conservatism as well as new religious trends make the gap between the average Sunni Syrian woman and one of my research participants appear smaller from the outsider's perspective than from within Syrian society. Rather they seem to navigate their relationships with Syrian society and the government in ways that allow them to follow their ideal with a minimum of conflict. In the next section I will look at how their relationship with their community affects their choices.

## 6.2 Women's religiosity and their community

While I have discussed the changes in Syrian society in general in chapter 3, I now want to look at the way that the change towards religiosity happened in the particular context of my research participants' 'communities of origin', that is their families, neighbourhoods and colleagues, and whether their turn to devoutness has empowered them in these

relationships. Community plays an important role in the development of becoming religious, both in the community of origin and the new community of believers, centred on a mosque programme or on a religious leader. Religious women address each other as 'sisters' and build an emotional bond within their religious 'sisterhood'. Notwithstanding the egalitarian ring of this terminology, these two are often connected as there are families who used to be relatively indifferent to religion and unknowledgeable about it, but have rediscovered religious practice and its meaning from the 1980s and 90s onwards.

#### 6.2.1 Changes in the community of origin

As the case studies in Chapter 5 have shown, family members, friends and schoolteachers play an important role in the development and decision making of devout Syrian women. Interestingly, in three cases, brothers had a special impact on their sisters: Sawda was recruited to attend ANC's middle school through her brother, Zaynab, though more directly influenced by her friend and indirectly her brother, was supported by her brother when she was looking for a way to attend lessons at ANC, and Aisha's brother actively tried to persuade his sisters to change. In all these cases the brothers were themselves new recruits to religious circles. This observation concurs with a wider number of other women who mentioned to me that their brothers specifically influenced their development. I think the reason for this is that young men are more easily reached by male preachers. Unlike the fathers who are busy providing for their families and are often relatively absent from their families because of work commitments, young men who are not yet married have more

time on their hands. As in Sawda's, Zaynab's and Aisha's cases, the young men were often the first ones in their families to get connected to a *dā'i* while male preachers had no direct access to women.

The five case studies show different examples of how the communities of these five women have changed and at least partially moved together towards greater religiosity. Yet, while the influence of a community on the individual is an important aspect in each woman's life, her choices are not merely a reaction to the communal development. In the first place, the community and family built the emotional connection with Islam that each of my research participants mentioned surrounding them with religious symbols, speech and ideals. The discrepancy between these ideals and the personal lack of practice and meaning could only be bridged in the later development of each participant because it was there in the first place. However, in three cases, my participants later became driving forces in shaping the general trend towards religiosity in their communities. Aisha and Ruba did not show any zeal for converting other women to their convictions. While this may also be due to differences in character and family situation, Aisha was the least educated and remained unattached to any form of private instruction or to an institution of religious learning which was out of her reach during the time of my research. Her unmarried, newly 'converted' brother seems to have remained the strongest influence on her family's religious practice. In Ruba's case, her family history had made her suspicious of religious pressure and appreciative of religious independence.

The example of Sawda shows a woman who started on her journey towards religiosity at a time when the general trend in society was still moving away from it. Though her brother

was instrumental in connecting her with Rajab Deeb, her family was not religiously active or educated and even her brother did not try to win her by religious arguments according to her memories. Neither was her initial reluctance to return to school connected to religious questions in her mind. It is not possible to say from her interviews whether her brother was deeply or more peripherally involved in following Rajab Deeb. The rest of her family seems to have been indifferent at first and later Sawda recalled the critical voices of those who saw her as an extremist as well as conflicts with her sister when her *da'wa* made her break the traditional female role limits. Nevertheless, she also was able to start teaching, beginning with her close family and neighbourhood circles. Three decades later female family members were attending her lessons and apparently had accepted her as their teacher; I encountered at least six of them.

Zaynab described how her whole family moved towards being more religiously observant at the same time with her. For example her mother started praying more regularly, and her cousin began going to private *tajwīd* lessons. So when her friend initiated that they would practise *dhikr* together, Zaynab was open to the idea. Yet eventually she moved beyond her family practice in her desire for a personal connection with Rajab Deeb and consequently her sharia studies. Zaynab's example and zeal then triggered a '*da'wa* chain reaction' in her community as through her personal influence her younger sister and her younger relative Safiya studied sharia and then initiated women's activities at her local mosque. Other women from her small town have followed their example. Today her sisters, her mother and a number of her cousins join Zaynab to listen to Rajab Deeb's lessons, some of them studying sharia at ANC.

Farida and her family differ from the other cases as she grew up outside Syria. Still, her story is similar to that of many other families who moved to Saudi Arabia or the Gulf countries because of economic hardship in Syria and were influenced by Wahhabi Islam, even though they lived in Syrian expatriate communities. Her father affected her emotional link with religious practice, but it was her schoolteachers who impelled her to move towards an individual, personal religious commitment and sentiment. However, Farida, together with her sister, also became a religious initiator in her family as she moved from common religious practice to follow an Islamic interpretation that is close to Wahhabism, rejecting compromise. For example, she admonished her mother about covering her face when I was visiting her.

Farida's correction of her mother's behaviour was not a singular case according to my observations. For instance, Um Kulthum, one of Sawda's followers and an English literature student in her early twenties, said about her father:

The Qur'an tells us not to be angry. My father is someone who gets angry really easily. This is natural, but to remember the Qur'an helps to stop being angry and to forgive. Now if he gets angry I quote Qur'anic verses to him and he stops.<sup>459</sup>

In this example, Um Kulthum expresses that 'now', after having received the knowledge of the Qur'anic verses against anger in Sawda's lessons, she has gained the competence to rebuke her father even at the highly emotional moment of his anger. The involvement of women in the *da'wa* movement as a new phenomenon has brought with it a shift in the way that the generations relate to each other. Traditionally younger women learn from

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<sup>459</sup> Group interview during Sawda's private lesson, Damascus, 22.11.2009.

older women and listen to their advice. In groups, rather than seeking out the attention and approval of their peers, according to my observations, young women often address the conversation to the oldest woman present, asking her advice. For instance, during a religious meeting Dunya turned to an old, white-haired woman she had never met before and asked her whether she could help her with the interpretation of a dream that had unsettled her. To openly contradict and criticise an older person is traditionally seen as rude. During one of her public lessons Sawda grew extremely annoyed with an old woman who audibly finished her sentences for her. When Sawda tackled this, in contrast to confronting younger women directly she did not address the older woman but looked in the opposite direction, and the other attendees were noticeably embarrassed by this conflict.

The new opportunities to gain religious knowledge and the recruitment of younger women into the *da'wa* movement means that now they tell their mothers and fathers how to practise Islam correctly. The fact that young women correct their fathers means that, de facto, they are challenging the patriarchal cultural norms. These challenges are not understood as generational or personal conflicts; rather, my participants agreed with the cultural norms of honouring older people, especially their parents. Yet because of the primary importance that correct Islamic practices and sentiment had for them, they counteracted the traditional hierarchy if necessary. Religious leaders especially, independent of their age, were treated with the respect due to an older generation, for example, when older women tried to greet their teacher by kissing her hand. This inversion of positions was intensified through the fact that, according to my research participants, while many young women were reached through their brothers, their parents are often reached through the children.

In families in which the parents did not follow their children's newly found religiosity this could lead to ongoing conflicts. For example, Dunya discussed with me how difficult it was for her to live at home because she fought constantly with her mother, telling her to stop smoking and to watch religious TV channels instead of soap operas, arguing about how to bring up Dunya's younger brother according to Islam.<sup>460</sup>

The *da'wa* movement has empowered women to re-evaluate traditional values that were generally accepted and taught by their parents' generation because religious judgements and categories like *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* as taught within the movement supersede traditional values. Zaynab reflected on the tensions that she experienced and how her new religious orientation caused her both pain and freedom in the practical question of whether her engagement at ANC justified behaviour that was seen as 'shameful' in her traditional community. Only after years of standing up to her mother, who had to bear the brunt of her neighbours' indirect accusations, did Zaynab finally reach the inner freedom to say that she did not care what people said about her as long as she did nothing sinful. Her later position as a religious leader among the women in the mosque, as well as no longer going on her own but with a group of women, probably helped to alleviate the gossip.<sup>461</sup> Therefore, while her turn towards devoutness resulted in a loss of reputation at the beginning, her religious engagement provided a new community of women who shared her values. Being part of a group made her activities less suspicious. In addition, criticism in her community of origin diminished as her new position of religious leadership further strengthened her

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<sup>460</sup> Jansen describes similar observations, comp. Jansen, "Contested identities: Women and religion in Algeria and Jordan," 84-86.

<sup>461</sup> Comp. page 169-171

reputation. Similarly, Farida's choice of religious studies over other more prestigious and prosperous subjects against her family's will illustrates her power to set her own priorities based on religious versus social gain.<sup>462</sup>

In these instances, higher religious education has led to a reversion of the authority between the generation of young Syrian women and their parent generation: comparing this generation of women, who are now in their twenties and thirties, with their parents who are now in their forties, fifties and sixties shows major differences in women's education generally. As I have discussed in 3.3, the mother generation of the women in my case studies had far less access to education, secular as well as religious, during their childhood and teenage years. When the first opportunities for female religious education started to come up they were busy with their families. Accordingly, an institute like the ANC targeted girls in their high school years in 1975 before they started regular women's lessons that were accessible to the wider public in the 1980s.<sup>463</sup> As a result, in a family like Sawda's, the younger sister got the opportunity for education and a religious career while her elder sister remained comparatively uneducated and led a more traditional life.<sup>464</sup> This does not mean that the older generation of women have been unaffected by the trend toward religiosity, but comparing for example Zaynab and her mother, both started to change their practice towards their Islamic ideal. Zaynab's mother led a traditional life as mother of eight and working as a tailor at home, while Zaynab took the opportunity to gain higher education and an unprecedented role in her community and even took on leadership within the family. In her wake not only her younger female relatives but also her mother

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<sup>462</sup> Comp. chapter 5.5.3, page 206-209

<sup>463</sup> Comp. chapter 4.2.1, page 103-104, and 4.3.1, page 113-114.

<sup>464</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

started to attend public lessons at ANC and at the local mosque. During Zaynab's childhood her mother did not lead a religious life, she rarely prayed, did not bring her children up to pray and did not read the Qur'an. Taking a step further and looking at how her grandmother compares with Zaynab and her mother, according to Zaynab's account, her grandmother apparently was a woman who practised a traditional Sufi influenced Islam, yet it seems that she did not pass the practice on to her daughter or her granddaughter. In a similar case, Ruba delineates the development of religious commitment in her family: Her grandfather practised Islam through prayer and Qur'anic memorisation, yet his children opted for the alternative of a more secular lifestyle when they grew up, drinking alcohol and neglecting prayer even while demanding the female family members to wear hijab for social reasons. Similarly, according to Ruba, her parents' generation made these choices because the older generation had not recognised the changes in society: the traditional way of religious perpetuation through imitation did not work anymore after concepts like secularism, nationalism and communism offered alternatives. It was only when religious leaders started to respond to this challenge through religious education and when religious practices were re-invested with meaning that the trend in Zaynab's or Ruba's family reverted.<sup>465</sup>

Whereas the Islamic revival among men in Syria also started to gain momentum during the 1980s, the situation for women was different because the accessibility of in-depth religious education still needed to be developed and lagged behind the development of secular education. In my research participants' families, the secular education in schools and general optimistic expectations of modernity created a gap during which the questions for

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<sup>465</sup> On Zaynab's family comp. page 153-155, on Ruba's comp. page 183-184.

meaning and reasons of religious sentiments and practices could not be answered in the setting of traditional religious upbringing, and religion seemed to have lost some of its relevance.

The situation for the fathers of this generation was different as mosques and religious teaching were more accessible for them as they grew up, yet the trend especially among educated Syrians was not to be religious. What is even more striking is that aside from two exceptions, none of my research participants ascribed an important role to their fathers concerning religious upbringing. Either they described their father as ‘open-minded’, which is often used as equivalent to an educated secular mind-set, or as traditional but not involved, or they did not mention him at all. The area in which the influence of some fathers played a role is the overlap between religious and cultural norms concerning female sexual moral behaviour, but according to my participants, their involvement was driven by culture and tradition.

Yet even if the father was religious as in the case of Farida and Manar, he did not pass his religious commitment on to his children because he was away from home to provide for his family. The case of Farida illustrates that while she was emotionally open to Islam through her father, the challenge to change her life and conform to the religious norms she had been taught came from women like her teachers and sister.

The re-evaluation of traditional norms and practices within the *da‘wa* movement also becomes visible in the way that female religious activists relate to their husbands and children. If my research participants explain the loss of relevance of Islam in their earlier

lives through a lack of meaning, a strong emphasis is put on the different kinds of religious upbringing of children through religiously educated mothers, to the degree that it was mentioned to me as a 'sign of extreme devoutness' if a woman taught her children the Qur'an.<sup>466</sup> Concerning the relationship between husband and wife the cases of Sawda, Zaynab and Farida show young women who hold on to new criteria concerning the kind of man they want to marry against family pressure. Sawda explained that she wanted a husband who would understand and support her in her religious activism, and who would 'value her for her achievements'.<sup>467</sup> For this reason, she only got married when she was already 30 years old. Zaynab was not yet married, and at the age of 34 refused a suitor who did not measure up to her expectations at the time of my field research. Farida got married young, but demanded of her husband that he would not hinder her religious activism. On the contrary, he accepted a number of far-reaching decisions concerning their family such as Farida's regular absence in order to teach sharia and limiting their potential number of children. Measured against the high cultural pressure to get married and the wide-spread expectations that the husband's needs have priority over a wife's independence - another friend, for example, got threatened with divorce for being late coming home from visiting her parents; when she told me, she agreed that she had been wrong to do so but thought that his reaction was too extreme - the decisions of these women are challenging the patriarchal values of their communities, on the basis of religious priorities and their confidence in the value of their role as *dā'iyāt*, while at the same time all three of them teach a very traditional understanding of the male and female roles in society.<sup>468</sup> A similar discrepancy exists between the teaching on marriage and singleness and the practice.

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<sup>466</sup> Conversation with Lamia, her parents, her sister and her friend, Damascus, 28.11.2006

<sup>467</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009

<sup>468</sup> Similar to Zaynab al-Ghazali, comp. Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali," 236-37.

Singleness is not an ideal nor in itself understood as an alternative to being married. Quite the opposite: The *ḥadīth* 'marriage is half of my religion'<sup>469</sup> is often quoted, and female roles are usually discussed within the limits of being a not-yet-married daughter, a wife or a mother. However, a number of my research participants were single or married unusually late. Ibtisam, for example, explained:

To be a *dā'iyā* you need to be free of obligations. I married late, when I was thirty. Not that I had planned this but God planned it to give me this time to study and think and become able [for *da'wa*]. He gave me this honour.<sup>470</sup>

Their new role as *dā'iyāt* opened up an alternative means to gain respect and status.

A different case is the development of Aisha's marriage and use of religious dissatisfaction to vindicate her detachment from her husband.

These examples show that my participants who have become *dā'iyāt* have gained a voice that is heard in their families and communities, even though their *da'wa* is not necessarily always received positively. As sisters, daughters, aunts or even just neighbours they intervene with the way other people dress, eat, talk, and other practices, even in the smallest details of behaviour. For example, during a lesson Sawda talked about an instance in which she had reprimanded a stranger - a mother of a young child who was eating on the minibus. She used this story to encourage her listeners to do the same whenever questions of Islamic manners were ignored. Zaynab recollected how she reprimanded her mother and sister-in-law about an unresolved conflict and how at the end, she was successful in

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<sup>469</sup> To my knowledge, this tradition is not part of the canonical collections acc. as well "Answered: 'Marriage competes half of your religion'," Accessed 11.07.2013, <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-3406.html>.

<sup>470</sup> Interview with Ibtisam, Damascus, 11.06.2011.

reconciling these two women. Though interference is not a phenomenon that is limited to religious activists alone, I have often observed that their demands triggered an exploration, whether their criticism was religiously well founded or not, because they claim religion as the legitimate basis for their interference. A number of the women whom I have met who started to wear hijab had at first rejected the demand from a *dā'iya* because they did not think that the hijab was necessary. My language tutor Bushra, for example, had started to read religious texts about the hijab in order to prove her neighbour wrong, but in the end came to the conviction instead that she had to wear the headscarf.<sup>471</sup>

The influence of the general trend in Syrian society towards religiosity in the lives of my participants is not a one-way movement. On one hand, the increasing religious practice presented them with the option of a stronger religious identity as well as making changes easier because of the growing acceptance of these behaviours. On the other hand, as my research participants moved from a general moderate practice towards religious activism and more extreme forms of devoutness, they became strong motivators of change in their 'communities of origin'. This aspect is illustrated especially in the new voice that younger women have gained as a result of their religious activism.

In the next part I want to look at how relationships work in the new community of religious women .

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<sup>471</sup> Conversation with Bushra, Damascus, 24.09.2009.

### 6.2.2 The role of the new ‘community of believers’

The degrees of belonging to a new community vary depending on personal history, choices and opportunities. For example, among my participants, Aisha had the weakest connection to other religious women as a result of her geographic location and even rejected women’s involvement in *da‘wa*. At the opposite end of the spectrum Sawda had a defined place in the well-organised hierarchy of the women’s branch of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order at the ANC.<sup>472</sup> The most visible communities are those that form around the women’s programme of a specific mosque like the ANC or the Zahra Mosque. The communities that I have observed are relatively porous and open to women who attend and remain at the fringe of an organisation. Sometimes, as in the case of Zaynab, even women who are very instrumental in recruiting other women may choose to forego a clearly defined ‘membership’, yet may still be part of the religious community on the grounds of their personal commitment and activities. The title ‘sister’ illustrates this as it is used generally for Muslim women or whenever someone wants to express a degree of closeness. For example, Sawda would tell me that I am her sister because I believe in one God. Yet the use within the movement can also express an exclusivity, for example, Rajab Deeb advised the men during one of his Thursday lessons that they should marry women from among ‘the sisters’, not just any girl so that there would be unity in religious matters in the home: in this context ‘sister’ denoted a devout woman who was at least socially part of the networks at ANC. In my experience as a participating observer, outsiders are made to feel welcome and at least superficially become part of the group very quickly. The

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<sup>472</sup> On Aisha, comp. chapter 5.3.2; on Sawda comp. chapter 5.1.1.

permeability of the community makes it easy to join. At the same time, the community can oscillate between openness and more defined belonging.

Becoming part of a religious sisterhood, whether a well defined and organised one like the Qubaisiyat, or the women's branch of the Naqshbandiyya at ANC or the loose, spontaneous sisterhood of women who find themselves attending the same lessons and cherishing a similar lifestyle, is part of the attraction that the *da'wa* movement holds for its followers. Even though the idea of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all Muslims is not new as such, grounding the identity as a member of a 'sisterhood' in the concrete experience of a tangible community centred around a mosque or a teacher, the self perception as the true community of believers is embodied in communal pursuit of a pious character, knowledge and worship as well as networking and help in practical questions. The new community of believers partly provides services normally provided by the community of origin. The above example shows Rajab Deeb's interest that male and female attendees at ANC should marry each other. In other cases young women have told me of wives of sheikhs who have kept a list of eligible men and women and then arranged marriages among their husband's followers.<sup>473</sup> Even though this example is mundane in the context of Syrian culture, it illustrates that the importance of a 'religious husband' that my participants expressed is a wide spread phenomenon among devout women. The advantage of such an arrangement is not only the hope for greater unity but also an expression of trust and belonging to the community, just as traditionally the marriage between cousins used to be preferred because of the greater security for the woman if she and her husband belonged to the same extended family. In addition, the community of believers takes on economic as

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<sup>473</sup> For example in a conversation with Dunya, Amman, November 2006.

well as social roles. For example it provides help in financial matters, with education, employment and in many other practical areas of life.<sup>474</sup> For example, Dunya received financial support from another woman to pursue her sharia studies at ANC. For this reason an institution like ANC offers many opportunities through its sheer size. As Böttcher (2001) concludes: 'The bigger the network gets the more attractive it is to potential disciples.'<sup>475</sup>

The case of Sufi orders like the Naqshbandiyya-Kaftariyya at the ANC provides a closely-knit community. Through their hierarchical structures, new members can quickly find a place somewhere within the structure where they can relate to other women who are learning together with them and to their teacher. While Böttcher focuses on the strict hierarchy of the order,<sup>476</sup> according to my observations the ANC also attracts many women who do not enter into a formal membership. Yet even those women who remain on the fringes like Zaynab still can find their own way of feeling part of the community through the concept of a spiritual connection between sheikh and follower.

According to Böttcher the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya becomes the new spiritual 'family' of the follower as the relationships within the order resemble not only those of siblings but also that of parent and child. Each *dhikr* ends with a reading of the succession of sheikhs starting with Muhammad and ending with Ahmad Kuftaro as the 'spiritual genealogy' of the believer.<sup>477</sup> Similarly, the women in Sawda's lessons often referred to her as *ummuna*

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<sup>474</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 192-93.

<sup>475</sup> Böttcher, "Portraits of Kurdish women in contemporary Sufism," 202.

<sup>476</sup> Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 168ff.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 170 and 72f.

(our mother), tried to kiss her hand, and then touch it to their foreheads, a traditional gesture of love and respect towards parents or grandparents.<sup>478</sup>

While the female teacher is the personal connection to the Sufi order, the sheikh plays the main role as the spiritual source of identity. I observed practices which strengthened the sense of belonging, including the different, specific kind of *wird* (litany) of each sheikh that is prayed by his followers during their public and private *dhikr*. Or, as in Zaynab's case, pictures of the sheikh play an important role in strengthening a connection with him. When Dunya entered the branch of the Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniyya she was given an amulet to wear around her neck which encapsulated one of her sheikh's hairs together with a handwritten blessing. She believed that these objects connected her to Sheikh Nazim of Cyprus.

Yet even if the Sufi communities that I observed were much more closely delineated, they were also partly open, notwithstanding their hierarchical structure: a number of my participants who were members of the Naqshbandiyya-Kuftariyya took part in *dhikr* events at the Shadhiliyya order. And Dunya, who started as a disciple of Sheikh Nazim, studied sharia at ANC, went to private lessons with a teacher who was a member of the Shadhiliyya order and then changed her membership to the Shadhiliyya. My questions about what distinguished one order from the other were not usually answered. Rather, my participants emphasised that all these groups and the different religious institutes in Damascus were united in the common goal of teaching sharia and practising 'true Islam'.

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<sup>478</sup> Comp. as well *ibid.*, 170. though Böttcher only records these habits concerning Ahmad Kuftaro and his daughter as the highest male or female leader.

Among my participants, those with an affiliation with a defined community of ‘sisters’, even if a loose one, were generally more active in *da‘wa* than those who were not, such as Ruba and Aisha. Apparently the group did not only provide them with a sense of belonging and practical provisions but also offered female models of religious activism and opportunities for women to develop leadership skills.

In the following section I will look at the way in which these communities empower women through offering opportunities of female leadership.

### 6.3 Female versus male leadership

The Western question of female empowerment was not usually discussed among my participants. In practice, of course, relationships within the *da‘wa* movement were also shaped by social power questions: Who has the authority to teach and to interpret? What is the relationship between teacher and disciple? A Western perspective seems to assume that women will strive for female authority and will promote it and see it as a positive development. Yet during my research I encountered conflicting responses between one woman and another concerning female leadership. The relationship between Sawda and her sister may illustrate this. During my meetings with Sawda, her sister was present though she did not actively partake in the interviews except telling me that she was eight years older than her sister and that the opportunities opened up to her sister had not been open to her, apparently because of her age. She never married and had stayed on living with Sawda when the latter got married. At this point in the conversation, Sawda turned to

her sister and accused her of having stopped doing any household work when Sawda got married. Sawda said that she had struggled very much doing justice to both her new duties as a wife and her work as a *dā'iya* when her sister suddenly 'went on strike' and told her that the housework was now solely her responsibility.<sup>479</sup> In most Syrian families, all female members share the housework as soon as they are old enough. Yet I had encountered similar cases when a woman stopped working. One of my friends e.g. stopped working at home after her mother succeeded in pushing her to get engaged; another did the same when her husband started to talk about marrying a second wife. It seems that women are 'going on housework strike' as an expression of protest. Sawda's sister apparently tried to push Sawda to take up her responsibilities as a married woman at the cost of her *da'wa*. Her support for traditional gender roles may have been due partly to sibling rivalry, yet this example shows that the question of female empowerment is not simply a question of male versus female interests.

### 6.3.1 Female versus male authority to interpret

The first question I want to discuss is the power to interpret the canonical texts.

My questions on whether women might bring a specific female angle to the understanding of the religious sources which might throw a new light on topics related to women were usually rejected by my research participants. Rather, like Aisha,<sup>480</sup> some of my research participants voiced feelings of reserve towards women in religious leadership. Mostly,

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<sup>479</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 19.05.2009.

<sup>480</sup> Comp. 5.3.2, page 180.

these reservations were founded on the perception of a difference in the nature of men and women, specifically the perceptual and cultural expectation that women are more emotional than men. The emotionality of women is usually not understood as negative *per se* but as enabling and disabling according to different circumstances: it is seen as enabling women for their specifically defined roles as mothers and wives but as disabling whenever something emotionally difficult needs to be done. One example that I heard at different times from different people, both religious and secular, was that a female doctor would not be able to operate on her own child because her emotions would make her hands shake, while a male doctor would be able to dissociate from his feelings for his child in this situation and be able to operate with a steady hand. This claim is then used as an argument against women in stressful responsible positions. ‘Steady’, ‘firm’ and ‘resolute’ were also the words that Ruba used to describe what made a man potentially more suitable as a religious leader than a woman.<sup>481</sup> According to her argument, being less emotional enabled a man to stick with the correct understanding of the Qur’an and the sunna in issues that seem harsh, while a woman’s emotionality might make her less reliable in her interpretation because of her empathy. From this point of view, a woman is less qualified to interpret texts related to women’s issues because of her experiential knowledge of these issues and her subsequent emotional involvement. Interestingly Ruba nevertheless saw an important role for women as preachers even though she did not envision them gaining the authority to interpret: ‘A man has greater influence because he will have greater understanding. A woman has greater influence through her personality.’<sup>482</sup> Judging a woman’s pity and gentleness as a hindrance in questions of interpretation, Ruba considered that those same characteristics allowed people to come close to her and be influenced

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<sup>481</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

<sup>482</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

through her example and advice.

Ruba's point of view of the nature of men and women and the way it affects their suitability for religious leadership is not an exception but, according to my observations and conversations, a shared conviction of many Syrian women. The question of whether women should take leadership roles is not simply declined or accepted. In addition, her emotional nature is seen both a strength and weakness for leadership. The benefits of female leadership are seen in the unique access to women and opportunity to yield a greater influence on women because of the personal and emotional relationship that is possible between a *dā'iya* and her disciple, which is often described as a mother/daughter relationship in which the *dā'iya* not only passes on knowledge and practical guidance, but also provides emotional care and a sense of belonging. Sawda, for example, kept in touch with her followers during the week through phone conversations and visits,<sup>483</sup> and when she invited me to come and listen to the Friday lessons by Rajab Deeb she made sure that I knew where she and her followers were always sitting so that I would not get lost in the huge crowd at ANC but would come and join them. Mutual 'love' plays an important role as the *dā'iya* tries to provide personal care for her disciples with her teaching and interest in their lives. Consequently the disciples are open towards her teaching and eager to follow her example. On the other hand the same emotionality is understood to make a woman potentially unreliable as an interpreter and therefore her authority should be derived from and controlled by male authority.

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<sup>483</sup> Interview with Sawda, 19.05.2009; comp. as well Zaynab's relationship with me as described in 5.2.1, 152.

In my observation, self-perception as emotionally moveable also allows women to react in ‘unorthodox’ ways and express emotional opposition to rulings made according to sharia which they rationally accept as God given. For instance, Dunya defended polygamy as a good institution when we talked about this in a theoretical conversation. Yet when the husband of one of her friends married a second wife she rejected this strongly, grieving with her friend and condemning the husband’s infidelity. This apparent contradiction puzzled me. In contrast to the Islamic feminists who argue through re-interpretation and stand up against polygamy on a textual basis, Dunya’s perception of herself as driven by emotions opened a back door to oppose in real life what she had to submit to in theory, according to her convictions.

Women who agree with the view of the different nature of men and women will not indiscriminately support female authority. Yet the limitations seem to be acceptable to many women because of the positive value that is connected to the image of female emotionality in Syrian culture. The comparison of the role of the *dā’iya* to the role of a mother underlines that the capacity for empathy is seen as vital to the wellbeing of those who depend on her. It is worth noticing that this argument to restrict women’s authority is based on the cultural view of the nature of women, not on doctrine. Therefore a cultural change could lead to a different position of female authority.

### 6.3.2 The legitimation of female leaders

Practically, many *dā'iyāt* are related to a male leader like Huda Habash, who leads the women's activities in her brother's mosque, or Wafa Kuftaro, the daughter of Ahmad Kuftaro, who is one of the women at the top of the female hierarchical pyramid at ANC. In many other cases, the imam's wife heads the women's mosque activities. In these constellations power is derived twofold: while the leading woman gains her authority through her relationship with the male leader, who guarantees the orthodoxy of the teaching, the leading man gains indirect access and control over the women's activities through a female leader with whom he can confer unrestrictedly.<sup>484</sup>

However, there has been a significant change in the role of the female preacher because legitimacy to teach is no longer only derived from a male relative but also via religious education on academic levels. Huda Habash and others described how the wives of male leaders used to teach women without receiving much religious education themselves.<sup>485</sup> Today, women leading the women's activities at mosques are still often related to a male leader but are also religiously educated, many building their legitimacy on academic credentials from well-known institutes like the ANC, the Sharia Department of Damascus University or the attainment of *ijāza*. Although the mosque in which Zaynab's sister started the women's programme<sup>486</sup> is an example how being related to the male leadership

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<sup>484</sup> Interestingly, growing up in a German protestant vicarage I observed a similar model, which was - and sometimes still is - practiced in traditional German protestant circles, where often the wife of the vicar carried the responsibility for the women's activities at church.

<sup>485</sup> Comp. page 103.

<sup>486</sup> Comp. page 172.

is unnecessary, still, Zaynab's sister had the backing of her connection with Rajab Deeb's family.

Generally the question of legitimacy is based on the perceived orthodoxy of a teacher. With the broadening of religious knowledge among the population through religious school education and media there is a general consciousness that the individual Muslim can and should ascertain that the religious teaching he is receiving is 'truly Islamic': if among women in the *da'wa* movement, the legitimacy of female authority depends on the adherence to what the individual perceives as orthodox Islam, the same is true when it comes to the legitimacy of male teachers. As long as the authenticity of Islam is defined by closeness to the original sources – independent of the question of how this authentic Islam is seen - the dependency of authority is not only a gender-related question. For both men and women who attend mosques and private lessons the question of the orthodoxy of the teaching is paramount, and women who judge a teacher, whether male or female, as incorrect in their teaching, will stop attending. For instance, Jihan and Bushra who had not committed to religious lessons, told me of how they tried out different mosques but left because the teaching was not 'truly' Islamic.<sup>487</sup> Accordingly, the religious education of women who have attained degrees in sharia studies has been an important step to legitimise female authority through knowledge, albeit within limitations. At the same time, general religious education has provided women with the ability to compare what is taught, who then personally agree or disagree. The trend to higher religious education can also undermine the character of the *da'wa* movement as a grassroots movement as women demand proof of competence from the *dā'iya*. Um Salim, for example, one of the older

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<sup>487</sup> Conversation with Jihan, Damascus, 20.04.2011; Conversation with Bushra, Damascus, 24.02.2009.

women in Sawda's private lessons, shared her frustrations that all her attempts to start a study circle in her neighbourhood had been in vain: 'My neighbours want a woman who has an *ijāza* or who has permission to teach in a mosque.'<sup>488</sup>

The claim that something is 'Islamic' or 'un-Islamic' is an argument that women on all sides use to legitimise their understanding of their religion. While in this claim the concept of the one 'true Islam' remains unquestioned, de facto each individual makes decisions that potentially lead to a more pluralistic reality also seen among religious Syrian women even if the questions that they differ on are not always so obvious underneath the unifying surface of the visible aspects of their lives like their clothes, the Qur'anic verses with which they intersperse their conversations and their focus on worship. For example Sawda and Zaynab, though both educated at ANC, differed on the question of whether a Christian per se was condemned to hell or had a chance to enter heaven.

Leadership and authority are not only derived from the power structure in a mosque, but also from the willingness of individuals to accept a person as their teacher. Herein lies some power for the individual religious woman. This leads to the question why some women who attend lessons prefer male leadership even if it is not an issue of authenticity as for example the strict hierarchical structure at ANC warrants the correctness of the teaching of the *dā'iyāt*.

The case of Zaynab shows the example of a woman who prefers to be directly connected to the male leader at the top even if it means that her connection is not tangible, nor mutual,

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<sup>488</sup> During Sawda's private lesson, Damascus, 07.02.2009

and she has no direct access to her leader but can only listen to him during public lessons from far, separated even by a window pane. Due to her status as a student at ANC she had the opportunity to meet female leaders and to connect to one of them, which is very much encouraged at ANC. Yet she finds more satisfaction in foregoing such a relationship and choosing a male leader instead, overcoming her lack of a tangible relationship through her feelings of a spiritual connection. The distance from her sheikh also has some advantages as it prevents the leader to be too directly involved in Zaynab's life and decisions as a female *dā'iya* might be. At the same time, Zaynab's claim of affinity and connection with Sheikh Rajab also gives her a special position and strengthens her sense of her calling. Zaynab is not a singular case.<sup>489</sup> Apparently at ANC some women use their claimed special relationship with Sheikh Rajab to defy their female leaders: during a lesson, Rajab Deeb addressed the problem that some women claim to have direct *rābiṭa* to him and legitimise certain behaviours saying that the sheikh had appeared to them in a dream. This shows that the preference of a distant male leader can be a way to circumvent the authority of the female leader.<sup>490</sup>

Other women prefer a female teacher because she is much more accessible to them, and they can seek guidance from her in all kinds of questions, some of which they might be embarrassed to ask a male teacher, for examples when it comes to questions of ritual purity and sexuality. Especially in a huge institution like the ANC the *dā'iyāt* create a sense of belonging as the comparison with the mother/daughter relationship shows. The relationship

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<sup>489</sup> Böttcher describes similar cases in: Böttcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad*: 174-75.

<sup>490</sup> Lesson by Rajab Deeb, ANC, Damascus, 12.03.2009.

with the *dā'īya* provides the disciples with a role model for piety as the following quotation illustrates:

The *dā'īya* calls to God in every movement and part of her conduct, so women can imitate her. [...] When you [as a *dā'īya*] become an example, you are able to become an example in your way of dressing, your speech and your works. People will see you and they will love devoutness and learning. They will love the level you have reached. [Only then] what comes out of your heart will go into their hearts.<sup>491</sup>

Close imitation of the *dā'īya*'s everyday conduct is only possible in same gender relationships. Many different activities further this, such as social outings, visits, care related to childbirth, weddings and death, and religious celebrations. Typically, women who attend the mass lessons on Thursday evenings seek to sit with their *dā'īya* and her circle of disciples.

Within the *da'wa* movement diversity exists when it comes to how female leadership is viewed and practised, differing from woman to woman. A distinction needs to be made specifically between the *dā'īyāt* and the potential disciples: On one hand the women who are taking up the role of the *dā'īya* gain and use authority. On the other, some of the women who attend lessons are not necessarily interested that other women rather than men should gain leadership over them. Instead these women seem to prefer to get as close as possible to the male centers of power. In these cases the lack of relationship because of gender segregation can be outweighed through mystical connection with the leader.

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<sup>491</sup> Interview with Ibtisam, Damascus, 11.06.2011.

The limited female leadership through religiously educated female preachers has facilitated the participation of large numbers of Syrian women in the *da'wa* movement and has offered women power in a variety of ways: a *dā'iya*, who has not only her own circle of disciples but also indirect leadership over study circles started by her disciples, is in a position of power over these women through the knowledge that she passes on and her judgements of what is right or wrong even if her judgements happen within the limits of what is perceived as orthodox. This has very practical implications as women who learn with a *dā'iya* ask her questions concerning matters of doctrine, religious practice as well as advice in important decisions in family, economic or career matters.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the question of whether Islamism is empowering to women or not has to be understood in the context of the complex relationships that each woman (individually as well as the movement collectively) has with other individuals, groups and institutions on the different levels of society such as family, close community, the government and the *da'wa* movement. As I have shown in this chapter, the answers are too ambiguous to make the hypothesis of female empowerment the main key to understand Islamist women's choices. Notwithstanding the empowerment that happens in the way women in the *da'wa* movement relate to others, women who are aiming for devoutness are often wary of social power. Lessons warn against the temptation of pride and other

attitudes that could focus the heart of the believer on pleasing the self rather than God, as the following rebuke from Rajab Deeb illustrates:

Don't say: I have understanding, I am wise. Pride is the characteristic of the devil.  
So don't be proud of your good works, especially not of your *da'wa*. May God forgive us all!<sup>492</sup>

From this point of view, female empowerment as such is assessed as of doubtful value because it potentially fosters an attitude that contradicts the attitude of devoutness, which is based on submission to God. Striving for devoutness in practice and attitude, against the tendencies of pride and the will to self-determination, is seen as difficult. Therefore the objective of 'religious empowerment' is an important factor of attraction that needs to be appreciated to gain a fuller understanding of my participants' developments and choices as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

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<sup>492</sup> Rajab Deeb during the Thursday lesson at ANC, Damascus, 25.06.2009.

## 7 RELIGIOUS EMPOWERMENT ON THE JOURNEY TO DEVOUTNESS

Scholarly discussion in the West focuses on the empowerment of women in the social and political context, although Mahmood (2005) observed that the women in her research did not intentionally undermine patriarchal concepts and practices.<sup>493</sup> In my observation, the issues of choice and ability were discussed among my participants in different contexts. They talked about making choices such as returning to school or choosing careers, attending lessons or changing their clothing with or without the support of their families, yet the main use of the terms *quwa* (power, strength) or *qudra* (power, ability) in my interviews and participant observations were in the context of their struggle against their own weakness or inability to live according to their religious convictions or ideals. From this viewpoint, the importance of personal empowerment is not so much related to the question of freedom of choice over the restrictions of their society as to the empowerment to change their own lives and remodel it according to the ideal of a pious Muslim woman.

### 7.1 Religious empowerment and freedom of choice

Mahmood (2005) argues that the liberal feminist concept of agency, based on freedom as an autonomous choice either to submit or to subvert norms, has limited the understanding of pious Muslim women because of the specific way in which they relate to norms through

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<sup>493</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*: 15.

embodying norms with the goal of shaping their desires to accord with those norms.<sup>494</sup> In this context, it is noticeable how my participants discussed the concepts of freedom and obedience. The following examples show how they acknowledged their human desire to choose autonomously yet reflected on this desire in the light of sinful pride as opposed to obedience.

During one of her public lessons Sawda assessed freedom in the sense of an independent choice in terminology that left no doubt of its ‘un-Islamic’ character: ‘It is a sign of *jāhiliya* to do what we want and not to do as Muhammad asked us to do.’<sup>495</sup> With the term *jāhiliya*, Sawda defined any choice independent from the religious norm as ignorant unbelief. In Islamist discourse, *jāhiliya* is the very opposite of faith.<sup>496</sup> In her lesson, she went on to explain that such choices were based on a prideful and wilful ignorance of the human position before God, in contrast to the true lack of knowledge that should induce the believer to humility and submission to God’s will. To describe ignorance in the sense of something that simply cannot be known, Sawda used forms of *mā ‘arafa*, ‘[to] not know’, to distinguish between sinful ignorance - *jāhiliya* - and non-sinful ignorance. The distinction between both kinds of ignorance hinges on the question of pride: Sawda compared choices based on sinful ignorance to a young girl’s decision to spend time with ‘bad friends’ against her mother’s demands thus losing her moral footing through their influence: the girl chose out of pride, which hindered her from acknowledging her inability to assess the situation correctly because of her lack of knowledge. According to Sawda, choices against God’s command are ignorant choices based on pride because the person

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>495</sup> Lesson by Sawda at ANC, Damascus, 06.04.2009.

<sup>496</sup> Rippin, *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices*: 226.

fails to assess their limited ability to make correct choices independently. This understanding of the limitations of human nature explains why the freedom to choose was not valued highly among my research participants.

In a similar way, looking at the question of freedom of choice, Manar, a post-graduate student of sharia at ANC, explained to me how she understood the fundamental difference in the understanding of 'freedom' between 'Western' humanism and her own worldview:

I went through many stages in which I wanted to live as I wanted to live. But I found that if I live as I want to live, for example, if I want to go and steal from someone, that is not freedom. A person is free, but at the same time bound. Of course, I later believed that this bondage is the bondage that God gives, not the law. The humanists say: your freedom stops when it puts the freedoms of others into danger. No, your freedom stops when it goes against God's commands. For example, I don't harm anyone else when I drink alcohol. [...] or if I watch a bad film with immoral scenes. [...] But this breaks the commands of God who commanded me to avert my gaze. God has given me two beautiful eyes, and praise God my eyesight is ten out of ten so that I can use them in what pleases God. I can look, but I look at what is permitted not at what is prohibited. Now, if I use my eyes for things that are displeasing to God, I violate the freedom, which God gave me. Then I would be 'outside' freedom, above this freedom. That is not freedom at all.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> Interview with Manar at ANC, Damascus, 10.06.2010.

Manar distinguishes the concept of freedom as formulated during the Enlightenment from a theocentric concept of freedom. Freedom is seen a gift from God, the ability to use the faculties with which God has endowed human kind in the way that he prescribed.

According to this understanding, to step outside these limits means a loss of freedom. In a different conversation, Manar explained to me how her experiences with making choices against God's commands left her feeling 'empty' and disillusioned with her own 'power to choose'. She felt that she had stepped outside the protection of God's order. Returning to an 'Islamic lifestyle' restored her sense of purpose and self-respect.<sup>498</sup>

A view like Manar's, which associates freedom only with making right choices in obedience to God, has implications concerning religious freedom. Most of my participants rejected the freedom to leave Islam. Landis (2003) showed that Syrian school books promoted a similar idea because they taught that religious freedom was limited by revelations, arguing that beliefs other than the Abrahamic faiths 'contradict the principle of freedom of belief.'<sup>499</sup>

The identification of disobedience with ignorance and obedience with 'true' freedom informs the way in which women like Sawda and Manar understand empowerment as related to the question of obedience rather than free choice. This different concept of individual power seems to be sidelined in Western discussion of Muslim women's religious lives. Many of my research participants have talked about the difficulties they find in following their religious ideals. For example, during a group interview with Manar and three of her female colleagues in their twenties who were working together at a

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<sup>498</sup> Conversation with Manar at ANC, 12.03.2009.

<sup>499</sup> As quoted in Landis, "Islamic education in Syria: Undoing secularism" 21.

medical laboratory they discussed why, for three of them, there had been a number of years between coming to the conviction that the hijab was obligatory and taking the practical step of wearing it.<sup>500</sup> Their reasons were mainly related to social prejudice, associating the hijab with old age and datedness. They said that it offended their vanity and that they were particularly afraid that it would lower their marriage prospects. In the face of these obstacles, they said that it needed inner strength to obey. In a similar way, Aisha's sister had made an announcement of her change in dress some time before she actually donned Islamic clothing, waiting to have enough 'strength' to do so against her inclination towards modern fashion.<sup>501</sup>

In the following sections I therefore look at empowerment in my participants' quest for the power to live authentic religious lives as devout Muslim women.

## 7.2 The emulation of Muhammad

The emulation of Muhammad has been part of Islamic teaching and practice since the development of the concept of the *sunna* of Muhammad as the basis for the sharia through the medieval scholar al-Shafi'i (d.820).<sup>502</sup> Mahmood (2005) writes that her participants emulated religious models to acquire their moral characters.<sup>503</sup> In this section I will show how this notion was instrumental in my participants' development because the

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<sup>500</sup> Group interview with Manar, Nasrin, 'Ula and Razan, Damascus, 30.05.2009.

<sup>501</sup> Comp. the case study in Chapter 5.3.2.

<sup>502</sup> Rippin, *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices*: 84.

<sup>503</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*: 146-48.

understanding of devout practice as the emulation of Muhammad enabled them emotionally.

### 7.2.1 A behaviour-centred approach to changing the heart

When I asked *dā'iyāt* about how they called women outside the movement to devoutness, the basic answer could be summed up as the appeal to make certain initial changes in their everyday lives, mainly to pray regularly, to wear correct hijab and to come to lessons. In a similar vein, asked for the meaning of piety, my respondents usually gave me the description of a woman who follows these and further religious practices. At the same time, they distinguished piety as a quality of the heart that is only known to God from religious acts as signs of piety. Notwithstanding the hidden nature of piety, Islamic practice was seen as an identity marker of the pious person and a result of the believer's devoutness, as Dr. Halima, a *dā'iya* at ANC, explained:

To be pious, one should be a constant observer (*murāqib*) of God. If you sense (*idha sha'arti*) that God is with you at all times, this is piety. Whether you are here and you are sitting with me, or alone in your bedroom: God is with you. [...] If I sense this, then: God does not want me to sin, God does not want me to lie, he does not want me to steal, God does not want me to commit adultery. And when she is

disciplined she becomes more pious.<sup>504</sup>

At first, a behaviour-centered approach seems to be at odds with my findings that women like Zaynab and Ruba diagnosed that their change to be driven by gaining meaning and understanding lacking in the traditional religiosity in which they were brought up.<sup>505</sup> Yet both approaches to change are connected in the call to emulate Muhammad because, for my participants, a practice gained its meaning from following his example. As such, the emulation of Muhammad answers not only the question of what should change or why it should change but also the question of how to change. Many of my interviewees experienced the emulation of Muhammad as enabling because the more they were confronted by his exemplary life, the more they were motivated by love. They also talked about different qualities of love for Muhammad and how a woman would grow from a more abstract admiration to a more heart-felt love with the practical changes she made. Thus the imitation of Muhammad placed them in a ‘virtuous cycle’ of love, that motivated behavioural changes, and behaviours, that intensified their emotional connection with him.

Muhammad embodies the ideal model for Muslims in general because Islamic dogma teaches that he was exempt from sin (*ma’sūm min al-khaṭā’*). On the basis of this belief, his practice, the *sunna*, has become the authoritative example of Islamic practice. This belief plays an important role for women who are seeking orientation concerning the correct way to live, as Ruba explained:

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<sup>504</sup> Interview with Halima, Damascus, 14.06.2011; similarly Rajab Deeb described being pious as *murāqīban li-llah*, being constantly observant of God. Interview with Rajab Deeb, Jdeida, 09.03.2009.

<sup>505</sup> Comp. pages 153-155 and 183-184.

Muhammad was exempt from sin because God wanted to send a message through him. Imagine if he had sinned. We would all sin like him. So he must not sin. [...] But we are ordinary people, so we will sin, for sure. We will never reach the level of Muhammad. But we always try to be close to the Prophet.<sup>506</sup>

During religious lessons, other prophets were also painted as role models. The rejection suffered by the earlier prophets, Muhammad, and the first Muslims at the hands of those who did not believe served to invest the experience of opposition felt by my participants (from wider Syrian society or in the global context) with meaning, and inspired them to persevere. Stories of the prophets' successes and divine protection were told to exhort the attendees to trust that God would grant them success and protection, if they, too, followed the prophets' example of faith and piety. Emulating Muhammad was particularly depicted as empowering a pious lifestyle, because God would reproduce Muhammad's victories in the believers' lives, both in the personal struggle for spiritual improvement and in the general universal struggle of Muslims against non-Muslims. The following quotation from one of Sawda's public lessons on Surah al-Fath illustrates this. The surah talks about victory in the context of Muhammad's failed attempt to enter Mecca to perform the pilgrimage and the treaty of Hudaibiyya in 628. Muhammad was able to enter a year later.<sup>507</sup> Sawda exhorted her listeners:

'God's practice' [*sunnat allah*, Sura al-Fath: 23] means to follow everything that Muhammad did, to reject unbelief, and to always accept what he accepted. Then

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<sup>506</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

<sup>507</sup> M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). 334.

God will surely give victory. For example we see the situation in Palestine today: Even if it does not look like it at the moment the believers will eventually always be victorious because the Jews fight against God. It was the same in the days of the prophet: When a Jew tried to kill Muhammad with a heavy rock, put in place ready to use where Muhammad used to pass by, Gabriel stopped him and made him take a different way. There is no difference in the way [God helps the believers] today. Just as the sun will rise each morning, no matter whether we can see it or not, so following Muhammad will always lead to final victory.

The hijab is part of the *sunna*. To take it off means to go against God. For example, when you go to a wedding party, and take your hijab off in the hall, wearing short and low cut dresses, that's to follow a bad practice (*sunna say'a*). That's how it is today: Half of the guests sit in hijab, half without. Don't follow this bad practice! I know a woman, even though she was the mother of the bridegroom, she went to the wedding in hijab, and she still looked festive. Tomorrow when I will be between God's hands I will say: I told them, I showed them how to do right, but they made the choice. Don't fear people! Don't worry what they say or think but follow God's practice (*sunnat allah*).<sup>508</sup>

In this quotation Sawda used the Qur'anic text to motivate her listeners to emulate Muhammad for the sake of victory over the opposition of society: She applied the postponed victory in Muhammad's life to the question as to whether it is possible to be socially acceptable and follow Muhammad without making exceptions concerning the hijab. She brought up the example of weddings because on these occasions Islamist

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<sup>508</sup> Public lesson by Sawda, ANC, 30.03.2009.

women may need to choose between two different loyalties: Their religious convictions about dress codes on one hand and loyalty towards their family reputation on the other. Interestingly, Sawda made her appeal to act independently of social pressures through two historic examples; one with a known final success, and one without: In the first, the treaty of Hudaibiyya resulted in the Muslim's pilgrimage and because of the resulting peace, many were won to Islam. In the second example, Sawda claimed a final future victory for the Palestinians in the face of opposition and failure today. As her movement from the Palestinian situation to the issue of Islamic dress shows, her interest at this point was not political Islam, but the question of failure and success for the believers when they imitate Muhammad. Her answer was not a simple equation between religious obedience and worldly success but an appeal for choosing something that may bring disadvantages, opposition and suffering in the short term because of the believer's trust in the final victory.

My participants tried to follow Muhammad in the general principles of faith, love and fear of God and as much as possible in the tiniest details of everyday life. They believed that God guided and corrected him in the totality of every expression of his life. In practice, this often confronted them with the choice between modern secular lifestyles and an alternative, which is claimed to be 'what Muhammad did', e.g. the choice to use a plastic toothbrush or a *miswāk*, a small twig used to clean the teeth, mentioned in some of the *aḥadīth*.<sup>509</sup> A number of my friends started using the *miswāk* during my field research. They preferred this 'Islamic toothbrush' because they said that even a small act like cleaning their teeth in the same way brought them closer to Muhammad. Additionally they

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<sup>509</sup> E.g. Saḥīḥ Muslim, *Taḥāra*, trad. 43; al-Bukhari, *Maghāzī*, *bāb* 83

claimed that the *miswāk* provided better hygiene than a plastic toothbrush. This example shows the extreme literalism with which the *ḥadīth* literature is often applied for the sake of shaping one's life after the example of Muhammad and also illustrates the additional tendency to legitimise such so-called Islamic practices through claims of non-religious benefits, in this case, better hygiene.<sup>510</sup>

Remarkably, this is equally true for the practice of both my participants with a general religious knowledge and with a higher religious education. When it came to the question of practice - their own or in practice-oriented preaching - they would often claim authority for specific practices even if they were aware of the diversity with which the *sunna* could be applied to a certain question. In my case studies, Farida's discussion of the *niqāb* illustrates this: She agreed that there are different scholarly opinions concerning the face veil and reflected on the 'moderating effect' that her in-depth studies had on her understanding of this diversity. However, when the question became practical she was adamant in her condemnation of any practice other than her own.<sup>511</sup> In another example, Ruba strongly rejected the practice of wiping the neck during ritual washing even though this practice is widespread in Syria and accepted practice in the Shafi'i *madhhab*.<sup>512</sup> In preaching and practice, the distinction between the authority of the revealed sources, the Qur'an and the *sunna*, and the derived authority of the interpretations of religious scholars seems to be blurred. Consequently, interpretations such as the classifications of all acts according to the *ahkām al-khamsa* are often applied without the appreciation of their historical context,

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<sup>510</sup> According to Shepard this kind of apologetic tendency is typically for Islamists. Shepard, "The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Towards a Typology," 70.

<sup>511</sup> Comp. 5.5.5, 212-213.

<sup>512</sup> Interview with Ruba, 23.04.2011.

distinctions such as those between strong and weak arguments, or ignoring discussions of opposing *aḥadīth* are for the sake of clear and unambiguous orientation.

For my research participants, the shift from imitating traditional religiosity to imitating Muhammad is a paradigm shift even if the resulting patterns of behaviour sometimes do not seem to be very different. The imitation of Muhammad and his *sunna* offers authenticity because the source of the validated behaviour is considered to be accessible through religious learning. This preference reveals a puritan stance. At the same time many behaviours that were typical for women in the *da'wa* movement followed the cultural and traditional paths. The question as to how far a conservative ideal was taken and then invested with Muhammad's *sunna*, chosen *aḥadīth* and interpretations, and of how far the leadership of the *da'wa* movement utilised Muhammad while they actually promoted traditional Islam was not really discussed, and in my observation my participants still often followed such a practice even if they categorised it as part of *taqālīd*. Yet the main difference was whether they felt free to follow it or not, depending on convenience and circumstances. If the emulation of Muhammad limited their freedom of choice to the question of obedience in many areas, it also opened up a new way of assessing cultural norms and offered to a certain degree, freedom of choice through differentiation between *taqālīd* and *sunna*. Zaynab, for example, condemned the practice of some mosques, where women were not given the space they needed or even excluded from using the mosque because historically, during Muhammad's time, men and women used to worship together. At the same time she preferred the traditional set-up to have segregated spaces most of the time so that women could interact with each other with more freedom and less harassment

from attending men.<sup>513</sup> She also argued that this arrangement allowed women to come to lessons even when ritual impurity would have excluded them from entering the main prayer hall.<sup>514</sup> This example illustrates how in this case, her preference was based on the moral realities of her society: she argued that the moral decline in later generations of Muslims was the main reason why separate facilities for women at mosques were better for them today, though not at the time of Muhammad. This example shows both the flexibility and the unwavering support with which the ideal of emulating Muhammad's practice interacts with concrete questions of behaviour in the particular circumstances of my participants' lives. The assessment that the Muslim community historically closest to Muhammad practiced the purest form of Islam is part of the notion that closeness to Muhammad and his practices empowers the believer to live a pious life. In contrast, according to this narrative, later communities lost some of the closeness and thus the power to change society. My research participants aspire to regain this power through the closest possible emulation of Muhammad.

Even though Islamic practices are at the center of many lessons and conversations, describing the aim of the *da'wa* movement as the morality of the individual and society would misrepresent the desire of my participants to shape their hearts through actions. The discussion above shows that while moral behaviours are at the surface of many discussions, the goal is to empower the believers to emulate Muhammad and gain an inner attitude of fear and love of God, which is visible in the moral behaviour of the believer. In the process of defining the moral goal of *da'wa*, different moral frameworks need to be dealt with: cultural moral frameworks, social moral frameworks and religious moral frameworks that

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<sup>513</sup> Comp. 4.3, page 110-112.

<sup>514</sup> Interview with Zaynab, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

partly overlap but offer different moral orientations. Cultural as well as social values that aim at respectability and appropriate behaviours are not necessarily connected with religiosity and the religious norms of what is lawful or unlawful. The terminology that my participants used shows that moral values and religious norms are seen as two different categories. My research participants used the Arabic term for morals - *akhlāq* - of non-Muslims or non-religious Muslims as well as of believers. For example, Tahani, a pharmacist in her late twenties, who had started to pray regularly and to attend the women's programme at Zaynab's local mosque six years ago, told me about her transition to greater religiosity, saying that she had always lived a 'moral life' but without being religious. Morality, according to her, meant that she lived according to the basic human values that she had been brought up with, mentioning e.g. abstinence from extramarital sex, refraining from murder and stealing, or showing respect to older people and suppressing one's anger. In her opinion, these moral values were the same in all religions.<sup>515</sup> Similarly, the *dā'iyāt* that I talked with often questioned me as to whether I, as a Christian, lived a moral life. Moderate Muslim friends would also often emphasise the communalities between Christianity and Islam, saying that the only thing that mattered were a person's morals. In addition to those moral values mentioned, honesty, generosity and caring for others were acts that were frequently discussed under the label of *akhlāq*. Obviously, there is an overlap between observing these moral values and religious observance. A second area of behaviours is described with the term *adāb*, 'etiquette', and often used in combination with 'tradition': To follow *adāb wa taqālīd* was mostly used with a negative connotation of adhering to cultural customs without thinking and assessing their legitimacy,

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<sup>515</sup> Interview with Tahani, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009.

such as Zaynab's rejection of the expectation that she should be home at a certain time.<sup>516</sup> Yet *adāb* was also used in the religious context for respectful and polite behaviour that should be imitated. Sawda would teach about *adāb* especially during her public lessons in which she focused more on practical application than with her private study group. She included behaviours such as eating manners, clothing issues that were not regulated as lawful or unlawful such as bare feet, not being late for lessons or the invocation of the name of God before certain actions in the category of *adāb*.

While *akhlāq* and *adāb* were to a great extent acquired through upbringing and other interactions within the cultural context, the evaluation of specific behaviours and their inclusion among endorsed religious practices depended on whether they were seen as rooted in the example of Muhammad or not.

Interestingly, practices that were mainly discussed as identifying someone's piety were not simply any religious practices, but particular issues were emphasised: clothes, fasting, relating to the other gender, partaking in communal religious activities like lessons and *dhikr*, private religious activities such as Qur'an recitation and *dhikr* and ritual prayer. Of the five pillars, only fasting and prayer seem to be seen as strong identifiers of piety while the creed, the pilgrimage and alms giving play a less prominent role. Even texts that deal with other topics covered in the original sources are often used as spring boards to focus on clothing, fasting, worship and cross gender issues, as the quotation from Sawda's lesson in 7.2.1. illustrates. The focus was on practices that were achievable for women and not too commonplace. Pilgrimage, for example, though highly desired, was not an achievable goal

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<sup>516</sup> Comp. 5.2.4, page 169-170.

for many Syrian women and so was talked about in the context of trusting God in the face of being unable to go. The creed, on the other hand, makes no distinction between a devout or a 'traditional' Muslim. Gender issues are not part of the five pillars yet they have become enormously important in lessons and conversation. Aside from the reasons of visibility and cultural reactions that I discussed in 6.1., practices related to gender relations are specifically in the power of women and relevant to their everyday lives. Any changes in this area have a great impact on her perception by others and her self-perception as a more or less pious person. Therefore they have a high potential to be experienced as religiously empowering. Other parts of the *sunna* are not experienced as religiously empowering women because they are not part of their normal practice, for example Muhammad's role as a political leader and decision maker. The focus on some areas and indifference towards others shows that the claim of a simple, direct following of Muhammad is an ideal, not the reality. Rather, some practices have gained importance in accordance with the attempt to distinguish the pious believer from those with general religious practice as well as the secular.

However, all my participants voiced that their love for Muhammad and God was the greatest motivation to change their lives.

### 7.2.2 Devout practice and love

Fatima Mernissi (1991) described how her early childhood bond with Muhammad motivated her to make sense of the image of Muhammad with which she was confronted in later years, and to research a number of *aḥadīth* that did not fit with her childhood image of Muhammad: having been taught that Muhammad was someone who cared for women, she describes how the claims that Muhammad had discriminated against women puzzled her and eventually led to her research of these claims.<sup>517</sup> Mernissi's early upbringing together with her other convictions estranged her from the Islamist image of Muhammad. My participants share with Mernissi the emotional bond with Muhammad that went back to their childhood, even if this led to choices that were in stark contrast with Mernissi's. Their preceding love for Muhammad was a strong motivator to desire change as adolescents or adults. Zaynab, for example, explained that as a child she was told about Muhammad's achievements as a prophet, to admire him, and to see him as the source of truth, all these being positive religious sentiments that she grew up with.<sup>518</sup>

While the image of Muhammad is contested between different parts of the Muslim community, each one claiming Muhammad for themselves, in parallel to their claim of living the 'true Islam' my participants such as Zaynab apparently did not question this claim. Rather, the image taught in the *da'wa* movement seems to resonate with many Syrian women, and therefore their childhood love for Muhammad was a gateway for them into the movement. The *dā'iyāt* use the prior attraction to Muhammad to motivate women

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<sup>517</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The veil and the male elite: a feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991). 64-65.

<sup>518</sup> Comp. page 155.

to desire to adhere to his teachings and stir up dissatisfaction at falling short, as Ruba said: ‘When I hear about Muhammad it makes me feel that I have fallen short and then I want to do better. He gives me strength.’<sup>519</sup>

During my interviews and conversations I was told again and again that to love Muhammad was a way to love God. For my participants, Muhammad had become the human mediator of love for a transcendent God.. Furthermore, for those of my participants who were involved with Sufism, the sheikh and the *dā‘iya* were mediators of love, not only Muhammad. Also, other believers could take this role of mediator: Farida started to love God through love for her father. Or even, as Hiyam, one of Sawda’s disciples, said: ‘We start to love God when we have friends who love God.’

Love as the emotional motivator that enables women to change their lives and their attitudes towards piety is understood first as the experience of relationships between tangible people. The closer one is to another person, the greater the possibility of love. The vast and detailed sources on Muhammad’s life facilitate the feeling of emotional closeness to him. Therefore, lessons and conversations are interspersed with stories that highlight Muhammad’s character and personality.

However, the inter-human love is only the ‘beginning to practise love’, as Zaynab explained:

Though my choice to love [romantically] was a mistake, I experienced love and because of that I know more about love. When we talk about the love of God, or

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<sup>519</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

God's prophet, to love the sheikh means that you are beginning to practice that love.

If you love a person you think about him night and day, and you feel as if he watches you every moment. But it is God who comforts you every minute.<sup>520</sup>

To love the sheikh is a way to love God, because if you love anyone, you also love what your beloved loves. Of course if you read a book about God, maybe you will also love him, but it is very different to receive this love from person to person, face to face.<sup>521</sup>

In these two quotations, love for a religious teacher and for Muhammad is basically identified as love for God, albeit an initial love that still needs the concrete object of love to be ignited.

In this sense, according to my research participants, Muhammad is not only the messenger who brought revelation of God's commands and as such facilitates religiously correct behaviour, but he is also the human mediator of the emotional bond that gives women the strength to live accordingly.

The claim that the *da'wa* practice among Syrian women aims at the emulation of Muhammad, facilitates Islamic revival among women on a number of levels: First of all, it builds on the emotional bond that most Syrian Muslims have formed with Muhammad since their childhood. The shift from emulating *taqālīd* to emulating Muhammad results in limited independence from societal pressures while it builds on the social and religious

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<sup>520</sup> Interview with Zaynab, 27.07.2009.

<sup>521</sup> Interview with Zaynab, 11.06.2011.

norm of reverence for Muhammad at the same time. Secondly, it gives structure to their change and clear orientation as every sermon tells women in very specific terms that there is a right way to live and that it is in their hands to do so and experience major changes. Part of the attraction of the *da'wa* movement is that nothing is left vague or subjective when it comes to practicing 'true Islam' but that it promises certainty and satisfaction through achievable goals. Doing this by following Muhammad's example is perceived as a guarantee of authenticity. Thirdly, following through with these practical changes allows women to experience a stronger emotional bond with Muhammad, which motivates a greater ability to obedience and realisation of their own ideal selves. As loving Muhammad mediates loving God, emulating Muhammad's practices is seen as the way to grow closer to God. Women who have struggled with an inability to follow through with desired religious practices on their journey to devoutness experience obedience as empowering.

The emphasis on love and the notion that love for a human being mediates divine love demonstrates the underlying Sufi influence on my participants. In contrast, Mahmood writes that the participants of the mosque movement in Egypt focused mainly on humility and fear of God as pious attitudes.<sup>522</sup> In both cases the attitude was seen as both the means and the end of closeness to God, a way to practice devoutness and an aspect of devoutness itself. Noticeably, Mahmood writes that her participants practised fear through listening to fear-inducing preaching and prayer.<sup>523</sup> In a complementary way my participants practised *dhikr* with the goal to love God more and often encouraged each other with reminders of God's great mercy:

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<sup>522</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*: 140-42.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

How do I think about the blessing that God has given me? If I want you to love me, I present to you a gift. Then you think about this gift and love me. So God, what has he granted me? He's given me a strong body, he's given me beautiful skin, he's given me beautiful eyes that I can see with. I think: The others don't see how much you love me, oh Lord. You have given me these eyes. He has given me beautiful hair. He has given me a good nose, healthy hands, feet, all these things, and so I love him and I meditate (*udhkur*) on him, and increasing the *dhikr* gives me love.<sup>524</sup>

This quotation illustrates how my participants intentionally reminded themselves of God's gifts to induce love in their own hearts. As love enables them to desire obedience, and obedience is aimed at fulfilling the obligatory, many of my participants incorporate practices that go far beyond *fard* in their desire for greater devoutness. In the next section I look at the role the concept of *aḥsan* plays in facilitating my participants' developments, because it explains why they chose more extreme forms of religious practice.

### 7.3 *Ḥasan wa aḥsan*: Reaching for perfection through doing 'better than good'

Describing Muhammad as a model that is possible to imitate, yet unattainable in his perfect trust, love and submission to God means that there is no limit to the degrees of piety that a woman can reach. There is a tension between the teaching of moderation as a characteristic of Islam and the painting of ideals that leave the listener unsatisfied with what is 'good'

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<sup>524</sup> Interview with Dr. Halima, Damascus, 14.06.2011.

and in constant desire of what is taught to be ‘better’. One of the outstanding characteristics of the *dā‘iyāt* in this study is the ardent radicalism with which they pursue excellence in their devoutness. The distinction between what is obligatory and what is additional helps them not to lose touch with other, less committed Muslims, but it is also used to legitimise their attempt to reach higher and higher degrees of devoutness, in hope of becoming closer to God. In the practice of *da‘wa*, the obligatory and the supererogatory are clearly distinguished in theory, yet when other Muslims are called to follow their example through persuasion or pressure this distinction loses some of its weight because practising the supererogatory is closely linked with image of the ideal pious woman: these practices are depicted as expressions of love of the true believer because they are not obligatory.

The idea of good acts beyond the obligatory is already present in the classical distinction of acts according to the *ahkām al-khamsa*, which classify acts roughly into *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* and distinguishes four different categories of *ḥalāl* acts: obligatory, recommended, neutral and disliked. The second category, which is called *mustaḥabb*, ‘recommended’, describes acts that are not commanded but rewarded by God. Even though my participants rarely used this terminology, the concept of *aḥsan* and the special reward for good acts beyond the obligatory came up regularly to promote an alternative ‘pious’ lifestyle while still pursuing the imitation of Muhammad.

The concept of *aḥsan* could be used very broadly. For example, women were told not to waste their time with meaningless socialising or media consumption but to use all time that was not filled with their duties as wives, mothers or employees with religious activities, to

improve themselves or promote Islam: They should go to lessons, read the Qur'an, do *dhikr* and other *nawāfil*, and use their time for *da'wa* if they are visiting. To motivate women to use their time in these ways they were taught that the smallest act for the sake of doing 'better' will bring them reward in the next world, as the following quote from Sawda illustrates:

It is better to go to lessons than to listen to TV programmes. There is more reward. For every step I take going to a lesson there is reward. Sheikh Ahmad even said to us, because someone asked, what about if we come to the lesson by car? He said: Even for every turn of the wheels there is reward.<sup>525</sup>

Another often discussed example was the *niqāb*, which the women in four of my case studies categorised as *aḥsan*, and one as *farḍ*. While there is very little debate among Syrian Muslims about which acts are *farḍ*, *aḥsan* is by definition a relative category and based on the judgements of different groups. Preaching against the waste of time, for instance, also shows an apologetic agenda as other Syrians often accuse religious women of squandering their time and going to lessons only to socialise,<sup>526</sup> while other behaviours and attitudes, such as extreme veiling, were often categorised as *tashaddud* or *taṭarruf* by Muslims outside the *da'wa* movement.

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<sup>525</sup> Interview with Sawda, Damascus, 08.06.2011.

<sup>526</sup> Shirine Dakouri, for example, made this accusation in my interview with her, Damascus, 12.12.2009.

### 7.3.1 Religious empowerment through supererogatory worship

The area that played the most important role was supererogatory worship because it was seen as instrumental in empowering women to devoutness. Acts of worship that go beyond the obligatory play a special role as methods to gain discipline in religious practice.

Observing the obligatory prayer was an area of struggle that my research participants discussed again and again. While the hijab was seen as especially difficult because of its public nature, prayer was perceived to be so for the opposite reason: its intimacy and lack of a communal aspect for women at most times. Specifically, the demand to wake up during the night to pray the early morning prayer before dawn was mentioned. In one of her lessons Sawda discussed this problem, admitting that she didn't know a single woman who did not sometimes miss this prayer, fell asleep whilst praying it, or made her prayers void through messing up the words in her sleepiness.<sup>527</sup> Besides practical advice such as going to bed earlier so that one felt more rested in the early morning hours, Sawda suggested extending the time of prayer with personal supplications, *dhikr* and Qur'an recitations. Similarly, as I have described in 5.5.2 Farida had discovered that extending the obligatory prayer to include the additional prayers had helped her to become committed.<sup>528</sup>

The forms of worship that are promoted fall mainly under the categories of *dhikr* or *nawāfil*. According to Wensinck the term *nāfila*, the singular of *nawāfil*, is used most commonly for prayers added to the obligatory prayers on top of the *sunna* prayers.<sup>529</sup>

While my participants called prayers *sunna* if they were part of the regular practice and

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<sup>527</sup> Sadwa, private lesson, 14.3.2009.

<sup>528</sup> Comp. page 203.

<sup>529</sup> A.J. Wensinck, "Nafila," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, et al. (Leiden-New York: Brill, 1993), 878.

were seen as specifically recommended, though not commanded, by Muhammad, *nawāfil* was often used in a less defined way. It could mean more added prayers and some of my participants very strongly supported the custom of praying the *ṣalāt al-tahajjud* (up to thirteen extra prayer units) between the last evening prayer and the early morning prayer. This custom is also backed up by a number of *aḥadīth* - for example Bukhari has a whole chapter on the *ṣalāt al-tahajjud*. Among my participants, *nawāfil* could also be used in a more general way for further added prayers. According to Ruba, the main difference was that *nawāfil* in the common use were prayers that could not be traced back to a specific recommendation of Muhammad though in a general sense they were based on his example of adding prayers.<sup>530</sup>

During interviews and participation in lessons women said that they got the power for stricter religious observation through practicing *dhikr* and *nawāfil*. At first sight it seems strange that expanding a task that was experienced as difficult resulted in greater observance. Yet spending more time in prayer and organising their everyday lives even more around extended prayer times can be understood like any other exercise that keeps the mind more focused on a desired target. Praying *nawāfil* also added the positive emotional expectation that they would gain reward for these prayers, and especially grow in closeness to God. These expectations are founded on Sura 17:79 and a well-known *ḥadīth qudsi* that says:

‘When My servant seeks to approach Me through supererogatory works, I finally love him. And when I love him I become the hearing through which he heareth, the

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<sup>530</sup> Interview with Ruba, Damascus, 23.04.2011.

sight through which he seeth, the hand with which he graspeth, the foot with which he walketh'.<sup>531</sup>

Zaynab explained to me that *dhikr* is an exercise to cleanse the heart and transform the believer to become closer to God. Practice results in effortless *dhikr* as a permanent inner attitude. In this sense, *dhikr* acts as a tool for religious empowerment because practices that are experienced as struggles eventually flow spontaneously from the heart of the pious person. Zaynab's own experience with reaching a state of involuntary *dhikr* illustrates this:<sup>532</sup> she repeatedly described her reaction of great joy when she realised with surprise that her years of consciously practising *dhikr* had finally caused her mind to focus on God without effort or conscious decision, because her years of discipline and exercises had changed her towards greater awareness of God.

Doing what is *aḥsan* is also seen as a natural expression of love. Huda Habash compared it to her love for her children:

Especially women are much more engaged in additional acts of worship. Maybe because they are more emotional [they] love those kinds of activities. [...] *Nāfila* means addition. But as to the meaning in the life of the believer, it is an act of love, and increases love. Everyone who loves will do more than what is necessary. I love my children. So will I just clothe them and feed them? No! I will sit with them, joke and play with them. [...]<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Riqāq*, *bāb* 38, as quoted in: Wensinck, "Nāfila."

<sup>532</sup> Comp. page 166-167.

<sup>533</sup> Interview with Huda Habash, 23.12.2009.

She went on to explain that expressing love for God through supererogatory worship will increase that love:

Sometimes a woman will ask me, how can I reach a higher level? How can I become a lover of God? Maybe I have been preaching about being a lover of God and longing for him. Of course every believer will be take an interest in this subject. She will be more zealous about loving God than anything else in her life. [...] The more she has learned and experienced quietness and meditated, the closer she has come to God, and the more she wants to learn and meditate.<sup>534</sup>

The concept of *ḥasan wa aḥsan* facilitates the women's *da'wa* movement at various levels. It motivates a desire in my participants for ongoing change towards a more drastic religious lifestyle because *aḥsan* is associated with special rewards in the afterlife. It facilitates religious observance especially as it relates to prayer. The example of constant *dhikr* and *nawāfil* show that it opens the door to a religious practice that multiplies the time that the believer spends in prayer and other forms of worship and intensifies her religious experience. The combined practices of increasing *nawāfil* and *dhikr* throughout their daily lives meant that, for my research participants, worship and worldly life became more and more interwoven as they practiced praying and meditating on God as much as possible.

Finally, the category of *aḥsan* is used to avoid the accusation of extremism because it allows for a degree of relativity and subjective preference. If *aḥsan* practices are explained as expressions of love, it can be used to validate behaviours that are otherwise not legitimised through the Qur'an and the *sunna*.

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

## 7.4 Empowerment and the religious self-perception

Having looked at various concepts concerning religious practices and how they shaped my participants' desires and experiences of becoming devout, I will now discuss how their self-perception as Muslims from the outset of their journeys has affected their experiences and the way they have interpreted them in retrospect.

### 7.4.1 The concept of *fiṭra*

Zaynab started the narrative of her journey with the words: '*fiṭrīyan* (by constitution) we were Muslims.' Like her, a number of my participants such as Sawda, Farida, Ruba and Manar mentioned the concept of *fiṭra* to describe the origin of their Islamic identity. The meaning of *fiṭra* is 'human constitution' or 'disposition'. The term is specifically connected with the belief that God created human spirits before he created the material world. Then he made a covenant with the spirits, who agreed to submit to him and worship him alone. Accordingly every person is born a Muslim because of his or her primordial covenant with God. For my participants, this concept played a role in giving them certainty about their beliefs. Some told me of childhood experiences like Zaynab who remembered the closeness she felt with God as a child.<sup>535</sup> Dunya also explained that she had an intrinsic early knowledge of the existence of God: 'It is impossible for me to ever doubt Islam. I always knew from my earliest childhood that there is one God, my Lord, who created

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<sup>535</sup> Comp. 5.2.2, 156-157.

everything.<sup>536</sup> While these early memories could alternatively be interpreted as results of early socialisation, the concept of *fiṭra* shaped them into markers of my participants' Muslim identity.

At the very beginning of *da'wa* stands the axiomatic conviction that the recipient of the *da'wa* knows that God the creator exists and that there is a common basis from which to start. When asked, Sawda said that she had not come across atheists in her work. Obviously this conviction that everyone is at least a believer in the existence of God does not fit all Syrians, but a broad majority. This assumption means that at the beginning of *da'wa* stands the acceptance of each woman as a believer: whatever may be wrong in her life from the *dā'iyā*'s point of view, she does not need to change her identity in a radical way but only to unfold who she already is. When my participants used metaphorical language like 'coming to life',<sup>537</sup> the image was about motivating and empowering a change towards the fulfilment of their nature. Khulud, one of the *dā'iyāt* who taught during Sawda's private lessons, explained the change like this:

We were dead, now we are alive! We were like a train wagon that was disconnected from the engine, there was no movement. Now we are connected! The teacher is our engine, our connection to God.<sup>538</sup>

This metaphor illustrates why for my participants, 'religious empowerment' through *da'wa* was important even if not identity changing: without the teacher they lacked the power for their journey, once connected, it was in their natures to 'move' and follow

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<sup>536</sup> Conversation with Dunya, Damascus, 15.03.2007.

<sup>537</sup> Comp. 1.1, page 3.

<sup>538</sup> Group interview, 22.11.2008.

her example of greater devoutness. This approach can be very attractive, even flattering. Of course, it can also be received as an assumption. In my personal experience I have felt both: a desire to concede the common ground that a *dā'iya* ascribed to me, as well as to reject the feeling of being patronised by assumptions about my innermost convictions.

Women who interpret their religious change within the framework that they have always been Muslims, stress continuity and development rather than discrepancy with their past. Because of this concept, becoming devout is experienced as satisfaction and a strengthening of their identity and the question of restricting and submitting themselves is not necessarily experienced as negative but as an appropriate means for religious excellence. Rajab Deeb compared the believer who lives according to God's commands for the sake of developing his inherent aptitude for a God-centred life with an athlete:

The West does not understand why you can live as Muslims, why you deny yourselves pleasures. For example the athlete when he trains for a competition denies himself everything that is against his success. He does everything he can for the sake of reaching the highest perfection of his physical form. The Muslim is like him. You train to get to the highest level of yourself.<sup>539</sup>

The concept of *fiṭra* facilitates the desire to become devout because of the unquestioned demand of submission to God that the research participants have grown up with. Experiences of dissatisfaction and failure are interpreted in the context of *fiṭra* and so the conclusion of seeing oneself lacking and at fault because of religious weaknesses is

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<sup>539</sup> Lesson at ANC, Damascus, 23.07.2009.

coherent. Accordingly, the experiences of changing, gaining religious strength and leading lives that adhere more closely to the ideal are often described as leading to inner fulfilment, peace and satisfaction.

The belief in *fitra* assigns responsibility to live up to the primordial covenant with the believer. At the same time, the idea that the agency for their development belongs to God is another important concept that gives religious meaning to my participants' experiences, as I will show in the next section.

#### 7.4.2 Divine intervention

One concept that my interviewees talked about again and again was the idea that the ultimate factors that made them change were events that God orchestrated. A first impression suggests a tension between this and their narratives, which describe many small and big choices from clothing to education to marriage. Yet this idea throws light on the role that choice and 'social empowerment' play from my participants' point of view, who, rather than focussing on the question of their choice focussed on the way they saw God intervene in their lives. They contemplated the question of choice mainly in the context of opposition: firstly, in the context of rejecting Western prejudices of the suppression of Muslim women, and secondly in the context of resistance to their religious practices from their families or society. In these contexts, they focussed on choice against the accusation that they lived how they did because of social or cultural pressures. One example is how

Farida recounted her reactions to the *niqāb* ban in 2010. She told me in detail about the process she went through to know how she should respond to it, thinking what it meant to her and discussing the issue with her husband before taking a stance against the government policy.<sup>540</sup> Talking about the notion of divine intervention and agency, then, did not mean for my participants that they did not also experience incidences when they needed to make a choice. Yet the interpretation of certain events, experiences and emotions as obvious divine acts seems to play a more important role in their religious self-perception.

For example, Farida interpreted her biological development as a special divine mercy because her late menarche prevented her from becoming responsible for her religious obligations before she was able to fulfil them. This example in particular shows how human choice and divine intervention were seen together in my participants' minds, as Farida recounted at the same time the process that she underwent to choose the hijab and learn commitment to prayer. In this case, seeing God's agency in the events of her life made her thankful and reinforced her commitment to God.

The case of Zaynab also underlines this notion. She recounted again and again how she was moved towards religiosity without her intention: She 'did not know' how it happened that she was emotionally drawn to Rajab Deeb; the connection she felt with him was like 'falling in love;' finally she even started her *da'wa* without intention, the teaching simply flowed from her heart. The fact that she became the religious leader of other women even though there was nothing in her upbringing that could have predicted it, filled her with an

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<sup>540</sup> Comp. page 212-213.

additional sense of wonder. All these experiences showed Zaynab that God intervened in her life and that his will was the ultimate reason for her journey to devoutness.

The belief in divine intervention as the vital reason for my participants' personal histories is coherent with their understanding of the question of empowerment. In a world where lives are divinely ordained, personal freedom of choice against other peoples' choice is not of primary importance. However, considering where one's life is situated in God's ordinance and whether experiences are seen signs of God's calling and mercy, is of utmost significance. Zaynab's case illustrates the significance of this thought when she told me of her great joy at discovering that her heart was full of *dhikr* without her intention. The lack of intentionality rather than her conscious choice was, for her, a sign of her love for God.

My participants ascertained their identity as pious Muslim women both via choices and involuntary experiences. Their choices, in so far as they led to religious practices, were seen as possible though ambiguous signs of the state of their hearts, as discussed in 7.2.1. Experiences, on the other hand, that were interpreted as divine intervention to move them towards devoutness were signs of God's mercy. Therefore, to understand their experiences as divinely orchestrated legitimised and authenticated their religiosity. The tension between choice and determination echoes the classical debate on free will and predestination, and as such is not surprising. However, in the lives of my participants both were part of their experience and played important roles in the way they made sense of their developments. The notion of divine intervention specifically reinforced the emotional desire for moving on as these experiences validated their religious identities.

### 7.4.3 The eschatological perspective

One of the strongest motivators for Muslim women to become religious is the conviction that there will be a Day of Judgement, and that God will either punish or reward them. However, as with other doctrines, it was important that this belief became the personal orientation towards which they lived in order to become a factor of change in their lives. Whereas the concepts I have discussed so far were mainly associated with positive emotions such as love and satisfaction, eschatological angst as well as hope was another motivator.

Syrians that distance themselves from the *da'wa* movement often give as one of their reasons the mixed approach of *targhīb wa tarhīb*.<sup>541</sup> But the method to draw women to piety through the apparent dichotomy of desire and fear is coherent with the understanding of final judgement. In the lessons and conversations that I witnessed *targhīb* (inducing desire) was by far the most readily applied method, which is not surprising: the ultimate goal of the message of *da'wa* is to cause the believer to love and trust God. However, concerning my participants motivation to change, fear of judgement was mentioned in different ways by most of them. Each had a different story of how the abstract knowledge that they grew up with started to shape their religious consciousness.

Rabi'a's recollections illustrate this:

I had a dream, and this dream really shook me. I saw the light of God, and I saw something like the day of resurrection. It was in my grandfather's house, which is

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<sup>541</sup> So e.g. in Dakouri, "dawr al-mar'a fi ta'sis al-wa'i al-dini" 6.

very large. And the time of my judgement had come. He said to me: ‘I gave you three days and now I will judge you.’ When I woke from my sleep I was very unsettled: ‘What?! What was this? Where am I deficient?’ I said, ‘I am missing the hijab’. So I became *mutahajjaba* at once. Just one week earlier [...] my friend had asked me: ‘When will you veil?’ I said to her: ‘Not for some time yet.’ [...] When I took the veil I didn't even have the right clothes to wear with it that were long or anything.<sup>542</sup>

Other women have also mentioned the emotional disturbance they experienced when the belief in the Day of Judgement became real to them. Farida for example remembered how her whole class of middle school girls would cry at the end of her religion classes when the teacher spoke about heaven and hell. Some *dā'iyāt* aim to bring a fear of Judgement Day in their preaching when they use the approach of *tarhīb*. There is whole genus of TV programmes that are popularly called *al-ḥijāb aw -l-nār*, ‘hijab or hell.’<sup>543</sup>

However, fear is not the predominant motivation. As discussed in 7.3, beyond the question of sin and punishment there is hope for rewards. Interestingly, Farida who was the most extreme in her religious practice among my participants, also talked a lot about the special rewards that she hoped for.

In heaven the greatest reward is to be closest to God. The material rewards like trees and streams, food and house and so on, that is only for those who have remained on the very basic levels. But those who loved God here will love God in heaven, as

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<sup>542</sup> Recorded interview with Rabi'a at her home, Damascus, 27.07.2010.

<sup>543</sup> Reuter made similar observations: Reuter, *Gelebte Religion: Religiöse Praxis junger Islamistinnen in Kairo*: 193.

much as they love him here. So for them, to be close and to love God with all their hearts will be the greatest happiness.<sup>544</sup>

For many of my participants, fear was seen as an initial stage, and the need to induce fear as a sign of the immaturity of the believer. For example, Zaynab remembered that her first steps to practising *dhikr* were based on her sadness over her sin and her conviction that she needed forgiveness. Yet years later she had moved from fear to the experience of great joy because her love had born fruit and she started to constantly remember God. In this vein, Roula, an architect who engaged in *da'wa* in her spare time, compared women at the beginning of their journey to devoutness to her children when they were young. She explained that at an early age threatening punishment could be appropriate, but that as children grew older they had to desire good for themselves in order to live moral lives. She continued:

Likewise, in a person's relationship with their Lord there are many different emotions. But the most important emotion with God is love, and it is this which stops you doing something that would anger God. Yes, the emotion of love is what makes you yearn for paradise because God will be pleased with you because you will be amongst the people of paradise. It is not paradise that is sought, but rather that God be pleased.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Conversation with Farida, Al-Nabak, 16.09.2009.

<sup>545</sup> Interview with Dr. Rula, Damascus, 15.06.2011.

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at how my participants made the Islamic doctrines of *fitra*, determination and divine judgement their own through associating them with their experiences and using them to give meaning to their choices.

My research participants intentionally discussed the question of religious enablement much more often than the question of social empowerment of women. The struggle for total religious observance and the desire to overcome the gap between the ideal and reality is reflected in these discussions. Consequently, the desire and experience of religious empowerment is an important factor in the success of the Islamic revival among Syrian women and to ignore it leads to an incomplete picture.

The choice to become religious and ‘submit’ to God’s commands is a choice, albeit a choice to have less open choices in a society in which other women are choosing different ways to live. To understand how Syrian religious Muslim women make this choice, it is important to notice that there is a difference in the way choice and freedom are evaluated between Western literature and my research participants: Zaynab, Sawda and other women increased the legitimacy of their choices through denying that they were their personal choices or emphasising divine intervention and determination as the driving power behind their life stories. This means more than simply an umbrella of divine determination under which women live and make their choices. It means in addition, that freedom of choice as it is understood in the West is not, in this milieu, seen as something necessarily worth striving for.

The question of power as female leadership and power as empowerment to religious practice are not without connection, as women who are looking for a leader are choosing the person who enables them in the best way. Even if among my participants female preachers were invested with positions in mosques through men, it is the attending women who will come or stay away and in this way also give social power to the *dā'īya*. The relationship between teacher and follower is not simply a one-sided power hierarchy, which can be illustrated by those women who choose to follow a 'harsh' *dā'īya* whose approach to preaching is more fear-inducing than the milder approach of another preacher: the authority of the preacher is dependent on the choice of women who voluntarily listen to her because they experience greater empowerment to change their lives. On the other hand, the example of Zaynab<sup>546</sup> shows a woman who followed a male leader rather than a female leader, preferring an ideal closeness to the centre of spiritual power at ANC to the concrete involvement of a female leader, which not only placed her outside the hierarchical structure of ANC but also meant that eventually her younger sister, rather than herself, became the official leader of the women's activities in her local mosque.

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<sup>546</sup> Comp. 5.2.3, page 162-166.

## 8 CONCLUSION

In my analysis I have tried to offer a nuanced understanding of the attractions of Islamism for many Syrian women. On my own journey to understand my participants, I have learned how necessary it is to question the Western assumptions of the universality of modern understanding and the primary value of freedom. Submission as a religious value cannot be grasped in terms of Western liberation theory: attempts to do so fall short because they do not give the whole picture. For women like those in my research focus group, value is found in religious fulfilment and satisfaction in shaping their lives according to their religious ideal. As I have argued, for my participants, divine commands and determination are more relevant categories than freedom and choice, because they offer meaning and purpose.

While my participants' accusation - that Western research misrepresents women - was directed primarily at the Orientalist image of oppressed Muslim women that has been largely left behind in recent research, research that tries to explain their motivations and desires through exclusively secular patterns similarly uses hypotheses foreign to my participants' understanding and presentations of themselves. Devoutness is seen as an inner quality for which women aim. For them, it is a goal in itself, for the sake of being close to God and rewarded in paradise. Interpreting devoutness as a means for other gains, such as social mobility and the participation in public space, is in their view a sceptical approach that misrepresents both themselves and Islam. That said, social implications have not been not discounted in my analysis, but they are seen as a means not an end. In many

areas, social changes and new opportunities for women preceded the development of female religious activism and acted as a precondition for it. The religious developments of my participants could only have taken place in the context of a society changing under the impact of modernity: without the end of female seclusion, the secular mass education and the development in new strategies of *da'wa*, which included a new place for women and specifically the new role of the female *dā'iya*, the women's *da'wa* movement would not have happened. These changes explain why Muslim women have been turning to an Islamist devoutness at this time.

I have argued that even though aspects of female empowerment play a role in facilitating the women's *da'wa* movement, these aspects are also present in the secular and moderately traditional sections of Syrian society and therefore cannot explain sufficiently why some Muslim women turn to Islamism. The *da'wa* movement as an educational movement has created new ways to include large numbers of Muslim women as teachers and activists as well as students. In this sense, it has adapted the role of women within the movement to modern Syrian society and thus caters for modern women who have grown up with the expectation of education and the hope of a purpose and influence in society. Despite this, my participants took on two apparently opposed roles; agents of change and propagators of submission. This is illustrated primarily in the way that women in the *da'wa* movement have gained authority and partially in the new ways they relate to men that challenge traditional patriarchal patterns: women use their new religious competence to oppose men outside of the movement, yet within the movement, the male role of supporter, initiator and legitimizer of female authority is not challenged. In the first case, female authority is a necessary means to propagate 'true Islam' in contemporary Syrian society,

yet the second case shows that female authority is not a goal in itself. For my participants, the question of submission or authority hinges on the question of orthodoxy.

However, even though my participants consider that female empowerment is irrelevant to the question of orthodoxy, this focus potentially opens up the development of future concepts of authority regardless of gender.

Furthermore, focussing on the biographical particularities of individuals like Sawda, Zaynab, Aisha, Ruba and Farida, I have aimed to understand Islamist women as persons rather than symbols of the polarisation between the West and the Muslim East. They share with other human beings the desire to make sense of their existence, as in their narratives each one remembered different experiences and interpreted them according to their personalities, preferences and development. Their common focus on devoutness and their desire to love, trust, and be mindful of God within an Islamist framework contests usual perceptions of Islamism. Upon analysis of my data, this study therefore challenges the common view of Islamism which tends to categorise Muslims into those with a spiritual interest, such as Sufis and Modernists and perhaps Traditionalists on one side, and those only driven by their political and social causes such as Islamists on the other. For my participants, there was no contradiction between an Islamist focus on 'true Islam' and a Sufi influenced spirituality.

While there were few changes in behaviours and practices for my participants compared with more traditional forms of Islam, the major changes my participants experienced were in intention and meaning, their perception of themselves and their identity. They saw themselves as women who were distinguished by the knowledge of why they were doing

certain religious acts and since these acts had gained meaning for them, they were becoming more diligent. They were free to go against traditional norms if they contradicted religious norms and refrained from 'normal ways of living' if they were obstacles to their religious developments. At the same time, other 'normal' acts were re-interpreted or re-claimed as religious acts. An area of special significance is the female emotionality that was claimed for Islam as love that empowered women to orthopraxis and activism. This combination bridges the dichotomy between an emphasis on orthopraxis on the one hand and emotional contemplation on the other and seemed to offer a religiosity that was able to integrate the different aspects of life in a way that my participants experienced as especially fulfilling.

## 9 APPENDICES

### 9.1 Glossary of Arabic terms

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>abāya</i>                        | floor length, loose black outer garment with long sleeves                          |
| <i>adāb</i>                         | customs  |
| <i>adhān</i>                        | call to prayer   |
| <i>aḥsan</i>                        | better   |
| <i>al-ḥamdu li-llah</i>             | praise be to God   |
| <i>allahu akbar</i>                 | God is great   |
| <i>ānisa</i>                        | title used for a female teacher  |
| <i>‘aqūba</i>                       | punishment   |
| <i>awqāf</i> (ministry of)          | religious endowments; (ministry of) religious affairs                              |
| <i>‘awra</i>                        | lit. ‘genitalia’, term for the part of the human body that needs to be covered     |
| <i>‘ayb</i>                         | shameful   |
| <i>dā‘i</i> , pl. <i>du‘āt</i>      | preacher   |
| <i>dā‘iya</i> , pl. <i>dā‘iyāt</i>  | female preacher  |
| <i>da‘wa</i>                        | lit. ‘invitation’; diverse activities propagating Islam and religious observation  |
| <i>dayn</i>                         | debt   |
| <i>dhikr</i>                        | act of remembering God through meditation and supplication                         |
| <i>dhimma</i>                       | protected communities under sharia law, usually adherents of monotheistic faiths   |
| <i>fajr</i>                         | first prayer before daybreak   |
| <i>fard</i>                         | religious obligation   |
| <i>fiqh</i>                         | Islamic jurisprudence  |
| <i>fātiha</i>                       | first Sura in the Qur’an   |
| <i>fiṭra</i> , adv. <i>fiṭriyan</i> | human constitution   |
| <i>galabiya</i>                     | long, loose dress with long sleeves, often worn as a house dress                   |
| <i>ḥadīth</i> , pl. <i>aḥadīth</i>  | tradition; an account of what Muhammad said or did                                 |
| <i>ḥalāl</i>                        | permissible; lawful (religious use)  |
| <i>ḥalaqāt</i>                      | religious study circles  |
| <i>ḥarām</i>                        | forbidden; unlawful (religious use)  |
| <i>ḥasan</i> , comp. <i>aḥsan</i>   | good   |
| <i>‘ishā’</i>                       | last prayer of the day at night time   |
| <i>jāhiliya</i>                     | lit. ignorance; a term used traditionally for the pre-Islamic period of polytheism |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>ijāza</i>                           | permission to teach a specific religious topic                                    |
| <i>ijtihād</i>                         | independent reasoning   |
| <i>ikhṭilāt</i>                        | (cross gender) mixing   |
| <i>iltizām</i>                         | commitment to fulfil one's religious obligations                                  |
| <i>khimār</i>                          | usually a black veil that covers the whole head including the eyes                |
| <i>kufāra</i>                          | compensation  |
| <i>madhhab,</i><br>pl. <i>madhāhib</i> | one of the orthodox law schools (e.g. Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali, Hanafi)           |
| <i>maghrib</i>                         | sunset; short for prayer after sunset   |
| <i>maḥram</i>                          | close male relative   |
| <i>makrūh</i>                          | hated; one of the <i>ahkam al-khamsa</i>  |
| <i>mandīl</i>                          | piece of cloth used as hijab and face veil  |
| <i>manteau</i>                         | floor length loose coat   |
| <i>mawlid,</i> pl. <i>mawālīd</i>      | religious holiday, esp. in celebration of Muhammad's birthday                     |
| <i>miswāk</i>                          | twig used to clean the teeth  |
| <i>mujāhada</i>                        | exercise  |
| <i>mujāhidūn</i>                       | fighter   |
| <i>multazima,</i> pl. <i>-āt</i>       | a woman who is religiously observant, comp. <i>iltizam</i>                        |
| <i>munaqqaba,</i> pl. <i>-āt</i>       | a woman who wears the <i>niqab</i>  |
| <i>mustahabb</i>                       | recommended   |
| <i>mutadayyina,</i> pl. <i>-āt</i>     | a religious woman   |
| <i>mutahajjaba,</i> pl. <i>-āt</i>     | a woman who wears the hijab   |
| <i>mutakhallifīn</i>                   | backward people   |
| <i>mutamassikīn</i>                    | people who hold strongly on to something  |
| <i>muttaqiyya,</i> pl. <i>-āt</i>      | a devout, pious woman   |
| <i>mutashaddida</i>                    | a strict woman  |
| <i>nafla,</i> pl. <i>nawāfil</i>       | supererogatory worship  |
| <i>niqāb</i>                           | face veil, usually of black colour, leaving the eyes unveiled                     |
| <i>qinā'a</i>                          | conviction  |
| <i>qudra</i>                           | strength; ability   |
| <i>quwa</i>                            | strength; power   |
| <i>rābiṭa</i>                          | spiritual connection  |
| <i>shahāda</i>                         | Muslim creed  |
| <i>subhan allah</i>                    | glory to God  |
| <i>sunna</i>                           | not obligatory, but often recommended, practice following the example of Muhammad |
| <i>ta'anīth</i>                        | concept of creating "women only" spaces   |
| <i>tadayyun</i>                        | becoming religious  |
| <i>tafsīr</i>                          | Qur'anic commentary   |
| <i>tahmīd</i>                          | saying 'al-ḥamdu li-llah'   |
| <i>tajwīd</i>                          | art of exact Qur'anic recitation  |
| <i>takbīr</i>                          | saying 'allahu akbar'   |

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <i>taqālīd</i>   | traditions                                    |
| <i>tāqiyya</i>   | a woman who is pious                          |
| <i>taqwa</i>     | piety; devoutness                             |
| <i>targhīb</i>   | making someone desire something               |
| <i>tarhīb</i>    | making someone fear something                 |
| <i>tasbīh</i>    | saying ‘ <i>subḥan allah</i> ’ (glory to God) |
| <i>tashaddud</i> | strictness                                    |
| <i>taṭarruf</i>  | extremism                                     |
| ‘ <i>ulamā</i> ’ | religious scholars                            |
| <i>umma</i>      | the community of all Muslims                  |
| ‘ <i>umra</i>    | minor pilgrimage                              |
| ‘ <i>urūba</i>   | Arabism                                       |
| <i>wājib</i>     | obligatory                                    |
| <i>wird</i>      | prayer  |

## 9.2. List of interviews and lessons attended

The interviews and lessons are listed in chronological order.

Names in italics are pseudonyms as used in my writing.

Abbreviated titles: A. for *anisa* (as used for a *da'iya*)

U. for *ustaz* (as used for a lecturer)

Sh. for Sheikh (as used for a religious leader)

Interviews:

*Joumana*, Damascus, 06.10.2006

*Aisha*, Afreen, 22.10.2006

*Um Ali*, Damascus, 25.11.2006

*Nahla*, Damascus, 15.03.2007

*Leila*, Damascus, 23.06.2007

*A. Amal*, Damascus, 27.06.2007

U. Muhammad, Damascus, 03.07.2007

*Miriam*, Damascus, 17.07.2007

*Jihan*, Damascus, 10.03.2008

*Maha*, Damascus, 18.11.2008

Group interview during *A. Sawda's* private lesson, Damascus, 22.11.2008

Group interview during *A. Sawda's* private lesson, Damascus, 29.11.2008

*Jihan*, Damascus, 26.03.2009

*A. Hiyam*, Damascus, 09.04.2009

Group interview with *A. Manar, Nasrin, 'Ula* and *Razan*, Damascus, 30.05.2009

*Bushra* and her mother, Damascus, 07.07.2009

*A. Zaynab*, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009

*Tahani*, Damascus countryside, 27.07.2009

Sh. Rajab Deeb, Jdeida, 09.03.2009

Sh. Rajab Deeb, Jdeida, 10.03.2009

*A. Sawda*, Damascus, 19.05.2009

Dr. Jamal Barout, Aleppo, 04.12.2009

*Bushra*, Damascus, 10.12.2009

Shirin Dakouri, Damascus, 12.12.2009

*Bushra*, Damascus, 14.12.2009

A. Huda Habash, Damascus, 23.12.2009

Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, London, 16.03.2010

*A. Manar*, Damascus, 10.06.2010

*Rabi'a*, Damascus, 27.07.2010

*A. Ibtisam* and her mother, Damascus, 23.11.2010

*Karim*, brother of *Rabi'a*, Damascus, 23.11.2010

*Ruba*, Damascus, 23.04.2011

*Ruba*, Damascus, 01.05.2011  
*A. Sawda*, Damascus, 08.06.2011  
*A. Ibtisam*, Damascus, 11.06.2011  
Huda Habash, Damascus, 13.06.2011  
*A. Halima*, Damascus, 14.06.2011  
*A. Roula*, Damascus, 15.06.2011  
*A. Farida*, Damascus, 16.06.2011  
A. Huda Habash, Damascus, 18.06.2011  
*A. Zaynab*, Damascus, 18.06.2011  
Dr. Muhammad Habash, Damascus, 19.06.2011  
*A. Sawda*, Damascus, 22.06.2011

Attendance at lessons and *mawalid*:

- Regular attendance at the Sharia Faculty of Damascus University, October 2005 – May 2006
- Irregular attendance of Huda Habash's Wednesday lessons at Zahra Mosque, Damascus, November 2005 – September 2007
- *Mawlid* of Shadhili order, Damascus, 08.03.2007
- *Mawlid* of Naqshbandiyya-Haqqaniya order, Damascus, 14.03.2007
- Attendance of two private *mawlid*s with Um Rami, Damascus, April 2008
- Regular attendance of Sawda's private lessons in her home, Damascus, July 2008 – June 2009
- *Mawlid* at Sawda's home, Damascus, 26.07.2008
- Irregular attendance of Ramadan Buti's Monday lessons at Iman Mosque, Damascus, October 2008 – November 2010
- Regular attendance of Sawda's public lessons at ANC, Damascus, March 2009 – July 2009
- Regular attendance of Rajab Deeb's Thursday lessons with Zaynab at ANC, Damascus, March 2009 – May 2010
- Lesson for women taught by Rajab Deeb, ANC, Damascus, 31.05.2009
- Irregular attendance of Friday lessons at ANC, Damascus, March 2009 – November 2009
- *Mawlid* at Kuwaiti Mosque, Damascus, 15.02.2011

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