CHAPTER 2

Accessing Things of Conflicts

"The K14 sniper rifle slipped from his lap and fell on the floor when he reached for the teacup. He smiled at the rifle, ignoring me. He pointed his finger at the rifle in warning “don't misbehave”, then he affectionately said: “Just look at him, it feels like a gun, she acts with the grace of a lady, but he shoots with the clarity of a thinking man. No one would take it as a Korean.” (Fieldnotes 2018)

1 Introduction

I never chased things of conflicts, but they would stand in my face and announce themselves. I would ask about violence, blood, mayhem, cats and dogs, chaos, God, fear, corpses, and all things ‘fun’ in the battle fronts. However, combatants and things of conflict responded differently by reappearing in conversations and during ethnographic encounters to shape my analysis. Things of conflict are not only guns, mortars, bullets, and every other weaponry. There are other, lesser named partners such as dog tags, uniforms, domesticated animals, food, identification cards, images, sounds, electrical wires, and rubbles who contribute to the theatres of war and combats. The contributions and partnerships of objects/things/stuff/abiotic entities and animals for humans could take studies of conflicts and religiously shaped political violence to a different ground where conflicts are not only understood

1 I refrain from entering the debates on what term is suitable for abiotic elements and material expressions of social life. Such debates will not take material culture, materiality and material religion studies any further therefore, I use objects/things/stuff/abiotic entities interchangeably.
as ideological clashes and wars of ideas but also as individuated engagements with acts of killing.

Objects are methodological partners to unpack acts of killing which should not merely be described through the filter of signification and the symbolic pronouncement of worldviews. Tracing objects or things of conflict are my methodological assistants into understanding militant subjectivities, processes of socialization in violence and acts of killing in combat. Here, I argue that exploring material expressions of conflicts (read: things of conflict) demands answering questions of what the object is in itself, where the object-in-itself is located and how objects become simultaneously sticky and alluring. I especially critique anthropological approaches such as Victor Turner’s and his epigones that reduce objects to sets of meanings, functions, and attributes, either located in-between matter and reality or in some liminal realm. I avoid the incessant attention to meanings, meaning making and representations because they reduce objects to boundaries presumed by humans rather than finding out how they make larger realities of conflicts and of religious experiences. Hence, I step forward to find a fresh location for the so-called in-between that upends dualities and dichotomies without compromising on how human and nonhuman relate, how they co-constitute realities and become religious through meanings and representations.

I develop my argument through speculative realism and Graham Harman’s brand of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) (2011, see also Ellen 1988) to explain what I call an anthropology of access. My anthropology of access is inspired by speculative realism and its associated thoughts that pursue the emergence of reality without prioritizing human perceptions and meaning-making systems over everything else. Furthermore, thinking along the lines of speculative realism dismisses the social construction of reality within the relationship between thinking and being. It encourages to critique anthropological approaches that propose in-betweenness and liminality as sufficient analytical modes to upset dualities, taxonomies, and categories. However, I don't advocate a return to dualities or categorizations. Instead, I suggest that current anthropological debates misidentify where to locate this in-betweenness as they saturate it in representation and symbolic referentiality. I will highlight nuances of in-betweenness by way of emphasizing material expressions of life. The things of conflict are my methodological entries to demonstrate

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2. An anthropology of access explains how infrastructures of social life are accessed by moving beyond the means that provide access to the infrastructures. Instead, it questions the modes of access and traces conditions that emerge from entangled asymmetric network through bodies, objects and performative subjectivities.
that things are not only mediative, mediants, or relational (see Morgan 2008; Meyer 2011; Appadurai 2015). My anthropology of access traces the autonomy of things and their independence from the human mind by asking what modes of accessing things are, instead of only exploring means of accessing things and reducing things to ideas that materialize. This shift from means of access to modes of access de-thrones the human perspective and contributes to a better understanding of what sustains the interests of nonstate armed actors in militancy. Additionally, this shift in our analytical perspective guides us to think differently about the obsessive attention of the anthropology of religion and religious studies for meaning-making practices and representations crafted by humans (see Lambek 2008; Assmann 2008; Bauman 2015). This article pays attention to religion without centering religiosity, religious practices, and religion. Instead, I follow how things gather around religion without becoming religious. In other words, I follow how things of conflict relate to religion, shape religiosity, and collaborate with believers. This is an intentional academic choice, namely, to talk about religion without engaging with religion explicitly. It allows me to highlight nonhuman partners in religiously framed political violent conflicts without subduing nonhumans to doctrinal interpretations imposed by humans.

I organize my arguments in three sections. In the first section I discuss conflict cosmologies, the allure and stickiness of things of conflict in the context of West Asia and translocal Shia militant networks. I highlight conflict cosmologies as relational attempts by which combatants craft to classify, to make sense of and lose the grip of structurally prescribed imposed meanings. For example, how commanders and field manuals describe what a weapon is or what it means to fight in the name of God. Conflict cosmologies transgress structures and doctrines and show how individual combatants find different perspectives on their compliance with religious ideas in combat. Thus, I explain how in-betweenness and subject-object relationships operate in combat zones. The first section shares fieldwork stories, object-subject relationships, and the emergence of conflict cosmologies through objects. In the second section I explore the limits of in-betweenness and liminality in anthropology and its neighboring disciplines as well as how according to OOO the real object is always in-between. I describe a cycle that consists of a four-fold trajectory that shapes conflict cosmologies and demonstrates collaborations of things of conflict and combatants. Based on this multi-fold trajectory, I will arrive at the question of the object in-itself and contrast it with the representation of objects to highlight the limits of anthropological approaches to in-between and liminality. I stress that many anthropologists have always found in-betweenness and liminality from a location saturated in representa-
tions, correlations, and relations (see Turner 1987; Ingold 1986; Zerubavel 2003; Scott 2009; Stoller 2007) and therefore, objects of anthropologists (things such as books, guns, statues, totems, cars, etc. and concepts such as cultures, languages, memory, society, God, etc.) are subdued to the human access. Third, I elaborate further on the in-betweenness of objects without subduing it to the social construction/becoming of things, mediation, and humans. These three sections build an anthropology of access to reveal how social actors access God, life, ideologies, and how all that configures their religious worldviews.

2 Conflict Cosmologies and Militant Subjectivities

West Asia, particularly Iraq, and Central Asia, especially Afghanistan, have been the scene of incessant conflicts. American forces and their European allies engaged intensively in Iraq since 2003 and Afghanistan since 2001. The conflict and fall of Saddam Hussain in Iraq since 2003 and the partial defeat and ongoing activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2001 have caused sectarian riots, armed conflicts, and mobilization of militias from across the region. The armed militias usually belong either to the Sunni faction of Islam or to Shia groups and ethnic minorities that are aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the recent conflicts in Iraq and Syria, Iran-supported militias especially stress that their goal is to protect the holy sites and Shia shrines against ISIS which has threatened to destroy them. I have conducted research among the Shia nonstate armed combatants since 2007 and I especially focus on nonideological/nonreligious elements of conflict such as the materiality of combat, material expressions of violence, and pain and pleasure despite the explicit ideological rhetoric. These nonideological/nonreligious elements are linked to combat experiences that exceed motivations of combatants, but they sustain combatants’ commitments to political Islam and armed actions. My focus on materiality and material expressions demonstrates combatants’ modes of access to their crafted militant subjectivities and I investigate how objects intervene into the access-process, how they “erupt into enjoyment” (Harman 2009) and influence human actors during conflicts.

My stories of things of conflict and their workings are based on participant observation in combat zones between 2015 to 2018 among Shia combatants engaged in Iraq and Syria against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). My ethnography of acts of killing is part of my larger project that follows translocal networks of Shia militancy with support of the Einstein Foundation,
Germany. I have developed an academic relationship with militants who have become my long-term interlocutors since my doctoral studies (see Saramifar 2018). Unfortunately, these academic relationships would fall short due to the fall or martyrdom of the combatants who I spoke. But the stream of volunteers or recruits never stopped since conflicts never rest in the Middle East and Central Asia. I focus on volunteer combatants who enlisted for deployment without any expectation for financial compensation, spoils of war, or other possible benefits. The rise of ISIS, fall of Mosul in Iraq in June 2014, and the occupation of some strategic areas in Syria by ISIS brought about a wave of mobilization of able-bodied Shia men who joined the fight. Most Shia fighters responded to the call of Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shia authority in Iraq (Saramifar 2019). They were a mixture of different nationalities organized under the banner of Hashd al Sha'bi in Iraq or Defa’ ul Vatani in Syria. These volunteers came from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They were trained mostly by personnel of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or by representatives of the Hezbollah resistance movement in Iraq or Iran. The volunteer combatants usually function at the level of foot soldier, gunnery sergeant, transport and logistic personnel, and sometimes reconnaissance forces due to their familiarity with topographies and local terrains. The training was not the first encounter of these volunteers with weapons. The stories about their lives were good examples of socialization in violence. Consequently, things of conflict were familiar objects of their lives and there were instances in which the volunteers joined combat with their own weapons.

The volunteers received some initial fast-tracked trainings in order to fight most effectively in battlefields. Their training was combined with ideological courses that would explain the ongoing conflicts through a religious lens. These courses were beyond the usual propaganda rhetoric that encouraged the Muslim populous to see the war against ISIS as the battle to protect the holy shrines located in Iraq and Syria. The combatants learned about the fundamentals of being a Muslim man and accepting social responsibilities such as sacrifice, armed resistance, constructing their respective countries.

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3 My fieldwork techniques and combat zone ethnography comprise direct participant observation which means I travel along combatants to various conflict areas or I spend considerable time in training camps. I access these areas due to my Shia Iranian background and growing up in neighborhoods where most young men were absorbed into the revolutionary guard. My years of research and maintaining friendships have allowed me to enter into these areas for research if I accept to hand over my telecommunication and any other electronic devices.
and contributing to the Islamic community as prescribed by the Shia religious leadership. The ideological training focused on mystical and metaphysical interpretations of political Islam and encouraged combatants to see their political struggles and religiosity through an individually shaped communion with the sacred. The trainings that were infused by sacrality provided a language, an articulation, and a set of terminologies for Shia combatants to speak about their religious worldviews. They were encouraged to write letters, diaries and short notes to themselves, their families and notable religious leadership during the training. This was an exercise in articulating thoughts and emotions and not defying the existing telecommunication technologies while contacting families and others as none of the combatants to my knowledge posted their handwritten letters. But almost all of them preserved the writings which became a conversation-opener for me whenever I would see the combatants scribbling after the enemy’s fire or when the commanders’ shouting subsided for a day. Sometimes the combatants shared their poetry and prose with me, and we discussed their ideas and daily experiences during the trainings and battlefields. I refer to these writings and their subsequent conducts in trainings and combat operations to explain how things of conflict shape conflict cosmologies.

3 Where and What Is a Thing of Conflict? In-itself or in-between?

When is a gun just a gun? Is a dog-tag only just a piece of metal to identify fallen combatants and when does it indicate different realities of combat? Where are things of conflict in a warring ecology? Are they just relating to other things of conflict and to humans in a network? Are they nothing beyond their relationships? Where is the location of an object in the fourfold trajectory that builds conflict cosmologies? Is it the object in-itself or it is the representation of objects that combatants are engaged with? The object in-itself, for me and ooo, is not only the debate of inaccessible and seducing entities that never reveal themselves to humans. I rather argue that objects hold an autonomous reality and agentive assertion regardless of the human mind. The objects are not only mediative (see Meyer 2011), medians (see Appadurai 2015) or relational (see Morgan 2008) but they also maintain an autonomy that remains independent of human minds and socialities. Quentin Meillassoux (2010), another pioneer of Speculative Realism, believes that thinking and being cannot be considered apart from each other when objects are approached. Therefore, every existence is subdued to human thought processes and postulations. In other words, weapons hold an object-
ness that is integral to conflict cosmologies but the objectness remains also real and existing regardless of the weapon-user who establishes a relationship with it. Therefore, understanding objects/things/stuff/abiotic entities should not start from their socially produced representation but from their objectness. By doing so, objects are not subdued to how humans access them but rather objects are acknowledged for how they shape attempts to access realities according to their possibilities and accidental features. Graham Harman and his brand of OOO entertain the discussion of the object in-itself by asking from which possible points relationships with objects begin, where the real object is precisely located and why the relationship flows from subject to object and not the other way around. Harman (2012) gives the example of Sir Arthur Edington, the British astrophysicist known for his observations of a solar eclipse in 1919. Harman quotes Edington’s reflections about a table: “I have settled down to the task of writing (...) and have drawn up my chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes, there are duplicates of every object about me – two tables, two chairs, two pens”. Harman explains further: “the two tables in question are the familiar table of everyday life and [then the second one which is, vs] the same table as described by physics” (5) and he asserts the “real table is in fact lying between these two others (...) the third table cannot be reduced to downward the scientific one (...) but simply that the table has an enormous reality over and above its causal components” (7, emphasis in original). Harman does not deny the physio-chemical existence of the table to push for the table as an everyday object that is socially constructed, but he stresses that “just as we cannot reduce the table downward to electric charges rushing through empty space, we also cannot reduce it upward to its theoretical, practical, or causal effects on humans or anything else” (10). Harman strives to locate the real table between the two extremes that reduce an object either to its objectness or to its social constructed materiality. It is this in-betweenness that matters to my argument because anthropology has often mistaken the location of the in-between by assuming that correlations or relations between the two extremes are the in-between.

The in-between and constructed reality in anthropology, regardless of the niche and domain, have always been the place where perceived qualities, moods, representations, and the socially constructed objects meet (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Searle 1997). Both the conceptual and existential reality of the in-between are subdued to how they are accessed by humans. Even design anthropology which includes the formal qualities of an object or a craft more than other niches and domains prioritizes human access. From the side of design anthropology, Yoko Akama (2015) suggests borrowing from Ma, a Japanese philosophy that focuses on co-creation, becoming-with and
in-between, to trace how immersion in betweenness provides the possibility of ‘becoming together’. She shares her ethnographic anecdote from the testing of a newly designed meeting enclosure. The people in her story are sitting and lingering for 20 minutes in the enclosure. Then they would write about re-imaging the space of the enclosure. In other words, how the enclosure made them feel, experience, and imagine. She writes that “the meeting enclosure emanates its own atmosphere, (...) Here, we see the participants carry ‘anticipatory affects’ with them to this place, already primed by their experiences of the past” (270). Akama proposes to see the designed enclosure in-between the subject-object encounter because her in-between starts from representations and imaginaries. Therefore, the object in-itself is overlooked. The users’ experiences of the past, ideas, feelings, desires, and needs meet the meeting enclosure as a bundle of qualities appearing to users. The users access the meeting enclosure in the form of a totality that evokes certain anticipatory affects that happen in-between. The object has no details, withholds qualities and possibilities of objectness in Akama’s observation because the object is nothing except its representations. This is because the in-between according to Akama begins with an incorrect address that displays “a merging of distinctions – a grayness in-between black and white – and implies a relational sensitivity” (263). Her address of in-between points to where unicorns go to pasture, and humans remain the king of everything to perpetuate the fairytale of modernity. Akama’s merging distinctions offer no emergence but rather it remains a transitional period, a lingering state that repeats representations and socially constructed notions in a loop of poetic appropriation. The social actor takes, mystifies, consumes, and discards in the in-between designed for her. The loop constantly repeats itself, but at least with some poetic gentility.

Mislocating the in-between and limiting it to some form of transitional process and action goes back at least to Victor Turner who highlighted liminality, betwixt and in-between since his *The Ritual Processes* (1969, see also 1987). He explains:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony. As such, their ambiguous and intermediate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (94)

The in-between, accordingly, becomes the hazy location where there are far lesser fixities and the body of law, customs, and assigned definitions loosen
up because social actors experience rites of passage. Turner explains liminality and in-betweenness as an anthropological location where a transition occurs. For instance, the neophyte has a liminal experience due to adulthood rites of passage. The neophyte already exists socially prior to the rites of passage but he is yet to be recognized materially and corporeally. Whatever is happening in the liminal location, proposed by Turner, happens due to representational qualities. Bodies, flesh, and things that are symbolic, meaning-emanating, and transitional. There is no in-itself, no objectness or corporeality in such a realm that contributes to the in-between or to the eventual outcome of the transition. Bjørn Thomassen (2009) expands Turner’s work and elaborates on “dimensions of liminality” (16) which relate to “subjects, temporality and spatiality” (16). The material dimension is overlooked by Thomassen who emphasizes a revitalization of Turner’s classical contributions to anthropology.

I apply the liminality theory on the training period of combatants to show its limitations for understanding conflict cosmologies. Volunteer combatants experience a liminal period, rites of passage, during their trainings to be prepared for the battle fronts. Of course, the training imposes the disciplining of their bodies and the ‘hardening’ processes resemble rituals. Additionally, if I agree with Turner, in “the liminal phases of rituals, one often finds a simplification, even elimination, of social structure” (1969, 167), which applies to the training camps or the battle fronts where inflicting violence is legitimized. However, there is still no possibility to account for how things of conflict such as weaponry or uniforms shape the rites of passage beyond self-fashioning (Greenblatt 2012) and symbolic meaning-making. Objects are suffocated partners of this in-between because every aspect and corner of the in-betweenness and liminal existence begins from human-centered representations, adulterated utilitarian perceptions and human consumption.

Paul Stoller (2004) and Robert Pelton (1989), both oddly white European ethnographers and anthropologists of Africa, apply Turner’s liminality and in-betweenness to discuss life and death. Stoller (2004) discusses a cancer patient’s remission and Pelton reflects on tricksters in West Africa to describe how social complexities reveal the inadequacy of the life and death duality. However, the liminality, in transition and somewhere in-between, does not take them far enough from the life and death duality because their description of things, sociality and social actors, remains attached to either life or death without showing how they are integrated into one another. Pelton celebrates the trickster because he carves out from death and adds to life, but Pelton does not notice that the trickster does not see anything called death but simply finds living as a continuum that expands. Returning to the things of conflict, they can highlight how death and life are entangled. Siawoush, a
volunteer combatant who I met in Syria, was an explicit example of a dead-man-walking who integrated death/afterlife into life. During his deployment in Syria for the liberation of Aleppo in 2016, he was assigned to logistics and transport based on his personal request, love of long drives, KRAZ (Ukrainian military transport vehicle) and Winston cigarettes. Drivers often could break the rules and smoke on duty while carrying explosives. Smoking while carrying loads of explosives has a high risk of explosion but some drivers smoke to exhibit valor, machoism, and risk-taking skills. I became familiar with him. The unit commander recorded on his mobile how Siawoush ignored the intensive fire and bombardment that was going on while he was transporting ammunition between two lines of levees. He would load the vehicle, fire a cigarette and drive through. Siawoush stood out because at that moment he was not obliged to transport the ammunition. Every other driver was commanded to stand down because of the intense enemy fire. The ‘top-brass’ had already given up on those fighting on the levees. Siawoush reflected: “I could not wait for the mayhem to end and then transporting dead bodies. I knew I am dead every time I sat in the car. I would see that my life would depart my body as I drove. I would deliver ammunitions and I could see my rebirth. I was reborn 12 times that day”. Siawoush lives now happily with his family on a farm away from the chaotic cities and always recalls his combat experience with smiles. The last time when I interviewed him, he said: “we have got it wrong because life is not defined against death. There is nothing except life before and after and even in-between” (Fieldnotes 2019).

Death/after life/abiotic existence is integral to the organic life in conflict cosmologies and there is no liminality or in-betweenness. I am challenging the base of betwixt, in-betweenness, and liminality from its classic formulation in anthropology to highlight how speculative realism can contribute to anthropology by questioning not means of access but modes of access. The current assumptions of in-betweenness and liminality look at the means of access by focusing on meanings, symbols, and rituals rather than modes of access along nonhuman elements and entities. The in-betweenness is not accessed by humans or embodied through merging with objects, events, or concepts, but it is the realm where abiotic existence seduces and takes away humans/subjects to the shadowy dark side. The in-betweenness is the location of nonrepresentation where a thing in-itself, based on its features, capacities, qualities, and regardless of its relationships, produces emergent entities and representations. Anthropology has taken this emergent product as the in-between rather than the actual in-between which precedes it. Therefore, I critique anthropological approaches that mislocate the in-betweenness.
4 Conflict What? What of Conflicts?

I define conflict cosmology as an attempt by individuals and social actors engaged with combat to classify, to make sense of, and lose the grip of structurally prescribed imposed meanings. Conflict cosmologies are structurally transgressive and portray how individuals craft different perspectives about their compliance with religious notions and theological inspirations that intensively subsume them in combats. Jawad, a volunteer combatant who was killed in Syria, was one of the first combatants who opened this cosmology to me. He was a 32-year-old mathematician from a middle-class family in Iran and was employed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He was rejected for the official deployment because of the non-military profile of his job within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He requested his unpaid leave and enlisted for deployment as a volunteer. During his training, he became aware of my interest in Shia combatants’ writings and handed me what he called a del-neveshte (a text written from heart). His sentences were telling:

I salute you my weapon who has become a partner in serving justice; salutation at the weapon’s barrel that suffered the heat of gun powder and still resisted with strength; (...) salutation to my weapon’s fixed stock that its hardness taught me how to step into the righteous path and don’t see my goals hazy and opaque; (...) salutation to the weapon that I learned from it the gravity of being-human whenever I held the weapon’s grip with my left hand and aligned it 30 degrees to my body. (Fieldnotes, 2017)

He crafted ways of seeing the world by way of his weapon. He explains how ways of weapon-handling teach him how to see the world religiously. Every corner and curve of his weapon instructs his religiosity and the ‘righteous path’ where he becomes closer to God, serves justice, and possibly becomes a martyr. He explained later that a “weapon is not a tool, but he could be your teacher. You must allow him otherwise he will deny you”. To put it differently, the martyr of my example crafted his conflict cosmology through his weapon, a nonhuman partner. His weapon, “the teacher”, does not operate as a symbol that signifies a set of meanings, but the weapon collaborates with its user to postulate notions that resemble meanings in the warring ecology which emerges from the entangled representations, historically situated imaginaries, culturally operated meanings, geopolitical necessities, and the warmongering of political actors that shape the everyday of combatants. The weapon becomes the guiding principle, and the user complies with its object-
ness and ergonomics to access an ultimate militant subjectivity. For instance, Jawad salutes the weapon's fixed stock (the weapon's wooden handle that buttresses over the user's shoulder) because most lesser trained and inexperienced combatants intensely push the fixed stock to their clavicle. The pain from the pressure causes more adrenaline discharge, combatants remain vigilant, sharp, and see more clearly through the weapon's optic-mount while looking at the target with one eye shut. It is the ergonomics of the weapon, its shape, its material composition or, in other words, its objectness that the user complies with, which creates an opportunity to perform better. The user's compliance to the weapon's objectness is experienced via pain and the sensation of operating the thing because the compliance makes accuracy in acts of killing possible. However, the user takes the language of sacrality by seeing himself in the righteous path and masks brutality with poetry to articulate his relationship with the weapon and tilt the direction of his conflict cosmology towards Makkah.

I noticed Jawad had added in smaller handwritings at the bottom of the page “but, it is the ayneeey vujūd (the mirror of existence) which is the true instructor who bestows kindness and vibrancy to this mohit (ecology)” (Fieldnotes 2017). He completes his letter to the weapon by hinting at the larger vibrance and shimmering presence that shapes the ecology of life. He borrows the idea of vujūd from Farsi poetry and Iranian mysticism to imply all in all how the weapon expands his ontic existence but also that there is a larger element that allows him to be subsumed, comply, and collaborate with the weapon. The combatant enacts his agentive capacity in compliance and not necessarily compliance to God but compliance to a matter-reality existence and sensation that dominate the conflict cosmology that becomes manifest in the object-subject relationship. Therefore, I stress that the lethal object/thing of conflict is in this case not a signifier that empowers the combatant, but something that collaborates to make sense of life in the midst of blood and mayhem (see also Warnier 2001).

The conflict cosmologies and emergence from militant subjectivities are shaped by weapon-combatant relationships. They facilitate the allure and speculative reality of a weapon. A weapon, like any other object, becomes alluring as it is turned into a ghostly power exceeding any of its lists of properties. The allure of a weapon is its withdrawal from symbolic interactions and representations, and operates as an “independent reality while somehow communicating through proximity” (Harman 2009, 30). This allure and emergence of a weapon's speculative reality comes in a four-fold trajectory: (1) authenticity and authentication, (2) rituals and performance, (3) self-actualization, and (4) compliance and embrace of unreason. I return to my fieldnotes to explain this four-fold trajectory.
Every combatant interacts with things of conflict to establish, justify, identify, and sense himself as a militant. Simply put, combatants attempt to authenticate themselves as militants in the eyes of God, themselves, and the militias. This allows them to access the very subjectivity that they imagine or desire to perform. Naser, a 25-year-old Afghan-Iraqi volunteer, laughed at his friends who are revolutionary social media activists, who were posting politically charged content on Instagram and Twitter. He was born in an impoverished neighborhood in Damascus and hailed from a refugee family. His mother was an Afghan Hazara refugee and his father an Iraqi refugee who ran to Syria, away from Saddam’s Shia persecution. Naser often got comments about how to be a revolutionary while he was hooked to Instagram:

One cannot be a fighter by just wanting and wishing it. People need to come, pick up the gun, get sweaty, get heat rashes and burned skins on their thighs, their testes become swollen from running in heat, hate the saggy uniform, get angry at the food and many other things to become a combatant. (Fieldnotes 2017)

Naser listed things of conflicts including the heat and climate to authenticate his militant subjectivity. The authentication was not limited to the weaponry and lethal objects; the imagery was also involved in the configuration of militant subjectivities. The volunteer combatants would often visit photography studios and request three-quarter portraits of themselves. They would frame their portraits and leave it with their families or friends as keepsake before their deployment. The framed portrait was the implicit indication that the combatant would like this portrait to be installed above his burial ground in case of martyrdom.

During the 1980s, the three-quarter portrait was the formal style for photographs required during the bureaucratic enlistment procedures for joining Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Almost all volunteers who enlisted used such portraits in their administrative files. The IRGC preferred this style to distinguish itself in manner of visual representation from the Defense Forces that were seen as a pre-revolution legacy of the last king. Iranian Defense Forces would require a passport style portrait with no smile, beard, and glasses. The three-quarter portraits were later used on the coffins and burial grounds of martyred volunteers

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4 1979 witnessed a large-scale Islamic revolution in Iran and consequently the last monarch was deposed. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last coronated king, committed immense resources to modernize Iranian defense forces which was institutionalized by his father. These forces were accused of loyalty to the king and impiety after the revolution.
since the government handled burial procedures of martyrs. Families had very little say in how the burial ceremony was conducted. A simple bureaucratic step inadvertently shaped how martyrs and Iranian martyrs-yet-to-come were imagined and represented. The three-quarter portrait became known as the martyr portrait and combatants until today continue to leave their three-quarter portraits behind to appear like all the martyrs before them. The economy (read: circulation) of a specific object, the framed image, which is posed for, purchased, prepared, and left behind by the combatants, then preserved by families while the combatants are still alive and fighting at the fronts, authenticates militant subjectivities for none except for the combatants themselves. The framed image turns the fighter into a possible martyr, a holy warrior, a sacred persona and a dead-man-walking. But it does not confirm his militancy to others, only to himself. It shows how he chooses to see himself. He proves his performance to himself through the objects he leaves behind. The representational/symbolic qualities of the image prove to others that the man in the photo is a militant. However, the process of taking the photo, framing it, and leaving it behind authenticates the militancy of a militant to himself. He announces nothing representational to others except the news that ‘by the way, I may die and please put this on my grave. See you on the other side’.

The framed three-quarter portrait becomes a thing of conflict which collaborates in militant formations beyond the fighter’s training and disciplines enforced by the military structure. The objective/material components of conflict cosmologies that are postulated by combatants, facilitate militant subjectivities, and smoothen the warring ecology. Therefore, conflict cosmologies contain the speculative realities of things, and they operate as an arena for the emergence of object-subject collaboration and militant subjectivities. The material culture approaches cannot account for this collaboration because these remain limited to the representational qualities of objects and to what objects mean to human users without asking how objects lend hands to this representation (e.g., see Sillar 1996; Burbick 2006; Miller 2009; Vivienne and Burgess 2013). The human-centered and anthropocentric approach to matter and materiality neglects to ask where the representation of an object flows from.

Beyond authentication, the process of forming familiarity, intimacy, collaboration, and attaining an object happens for combatants in forms of rituals and performances. These rituals and performances are accounts of what Harman articulates as “somehow communicating through proximity” (Harman 2009, 30). At the second fold of the trajectory referred to above, the allure emerges from processes by which an object and a subject make contact. These processes become rituals for subjects (humans) as if the object-subject
union can create something anew out of them. For instance, Navid Rahmani, a 23-year-old volunteer combatant from a very wealthy family in the Eastern region of Iran, cried for days when I handed him his graphically manipulated three-quarter portrait. He put the image in front of him after his prayers and repented by chanting *la ellah ella ant sobhanak eeni kont u men al zalemin* (there is no God except the God, praise upon you, the God, as I have been an oppressor [to myself]). He had specially asked me to turn his photo into a painting via software manipulation, so I felt guilty every time I saw him in tears. Day by day he became quieter and kept his teary rituals. Finally, he spoke to me again the day before his martyrdom:

I trespassed God’s limit when I asked you for the photo. I have always been told that I look like my martyred father and I had nothing except his painted three-quarter portrait. I saw myself in him when you worked on my photo. It was like I could see my own ghost and my own funeral. It felt as if I forced God’s hand to make me a martyr, so I repent to become a worthy one.

He saw his father in the manipulated image, but he sensed his own martyred self in the photo as well. There was an immense resemblance between the son and his father. However, he did not cry for his father nor feared his own death. He accessed the reality which the image emanated and crafted a ritual. This reality depended on the independent reality that was evoked by the image with special features and material qualities. The image became affective and imposing when it appeared like a painting via software manipulation and a photoshop filter that reworks photos to be like paintings with brush strokes. It did rewind the time for him, back to the days of the Iran-Iraq war when martyrs’ paintings were ornamented around the cities and children of martyrs could often see their father’s face on the wall. But they were not only their fathers anymore, but martyrs of the nation.

The third fold that configures the speculative realities within conflict cosmologies is self-actualization. Abraham Maslow (1943) suggested that the highest aim of life is to fulfill one’s unique potential and he named this fulfillment process “self-actualization” (see also Krem, Kenrick, and Neel 2017). Self-actualization in conflict cosmologies is the definitive step towards death, sacrifice, and it embodies dead-man-walking. The combatants see/imagine/foresee/predict/dream/fabulate their martyrdom. The objects are partners of their vision of death and dying. Brigadier Nazarnejad who had passed away a few years after the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq (1988) narrated in his memoir the story of his friend who did not want to be recognized as a martyr. His
friend, Asghar, yearned for martyrdom but he feared that all the fuss and recognition that he may get after his death could pollute the purity of his intention. Asghar was worried that how he could be treated after his death could affect his intentions while he was alive. Therefore, Asghar threw away his identification dog tag before the start of a military operation so that his corpse could not be identified and he would remain anonymous, declared missing in action, and never be labeled a martyr. Asghar believed that true martyrdom is the dissolution in the love of Allah and anonymity in sacrifice. Therefore, he refused the future recognition by the society. Asghar self-actualized through absence of an object, his dog-tag, denying its material proximity and the ritual of disposing it before the operation allowed him to become fully what he desired to be.

Finally, the fourth fold that completes the formation of conflict cosmologies is compliance and the embrace of unreason. This fold fully depends on the other three and it proceeds from previous folds. Their entanglement produces the “embrace of unreason” (van de Port 1998). The combatant complies with violence, with the demands of things of conflict, God, commanders, and everything else which accordingly brings about the embrace of unreason. The compliance is not a mode of docility and submission by force but rather an agentive mode that one accepts to comply with. There is an active decision-making process to comply with the religious/Islamic framework that shapes political violence, to comply with the command to fight in the name of God and things of conflict that take part in combatants’ decision-making. The fourth fold is based on combatants’ immersion in a mode of reality that cannot be accounted for by anything except serendipity, spontaneity, and acts that are nothing except nonrepresentational performances. For instance, sound and sonic elements are other objects in conflict cosmologies that exemplify the fourth fold. I met a number of combatants who remained indifferent toward the swirling, whooshing sounds of bullets or whistles of shooting mortars, RPGs and other flying explosives. I would hear a mortar and jump on the ground to cover myself and get up dusty every time. Then, I would see how they have continued to walk serenely ahead. They were sometimes right to walk ahead since they could calculate the distance between themselves and the source of the sound due to their experience. However, they wouldn’t take cover because they believed they would not hear the sound of the bullets, rockets or mortars that were destined for them. I noticed this when Reza, a 53-year-old volunteer died. He was a grocer who had volunteered and enlisted to fight in the Iran-Iraq war where he became familiar with armed battles. He returned to his shop after the war and again enlisted to fight against ISIS in Iraq. He was positioned as the gunnery sergeant of a crew-served weapons unit. He was responsible for shooting rockets, but that day he could not con-
continue because an enemy mortar targeted his rocket launcher. He explained passionately “I heard it, pedar-sag mortar (the mortar who is fathered by a dog) was coming and falling on my head, so I just took my life and ran”. Everyone laughed at his animated storytelling but then he added “it was not my bullet otherwise I would never hear it”. The sharp seasoned veteran could recognize the weapons from their discharge sound and his skill helped him to survive through a decade of high intensity combat. However, his bullet came a few days later. He decided to carry water to various trenches and distribute snacks to other combatants while waiting for a new rocket launcher. He carried water from trench to trench while there was an intensive fire over the units. He constantly declared “don’t worry, I can protect myself by listening”. He survived most of the day, but he was shot by a stray bullet and he said to the friend who carried his wounded body “I heard everything except the one intended for me”.

Reza submitted to the conditions of the battle fronts and complied with the conflict cosmology by putting aside his survival instincts. He was not suicidal, inexperienced, or in a rush to give up life. He embraced unreason, the fourth fold of the trajectory, and immersed in a reality that is neither life as civilians know it, nor death as those who don’t believe in the armed action may assume. The sonic atmosphere and sounds of bullets shaped his reality within the conflict cosmology of the battlefronts. There is no way to account for how combatants measure reality except by stepping in the speculative realm and investigate how things become speculative. What kind of human and nonhuman interactions produce the shadowy realm of speculative realities? This is why Graham Harman stresses on unknowability, infinite depth, and the “marvelous plurality of concrete objects” (Harman 2009, 156). He situates this speculative mode of existence/existing at the edges of unknowability and acknowledges the “withdrawal of objects into a shadowy subterranean realm that supports our conscious activity” (Harman 2011, 37). Harman campaigns to put objects at the equal footing with subjects. He defends the agentive existence of objects by defining the allure of objects based on their withdrawal, unknowability, and their inaccessibility to be fully experienced by humans. In other words, objects withhold their full existence from humans. This in turn presents an allure and slipperiness of objects in their relationships with humans. I broaden the allure and add to Harman’s suggestion an emphasis that the objects seduce and take away subjects along themselves into the shadowy world where a speculative reality becomes pervasive. In other words, the infinite depth of objects, crafting special intimacy and cosmologies through/along them are not manifestations of a speculative reality. Rather, everything becomes speculative when objects have sucked subjects to an “irreducible dark side” (Morton 2011,
This addition does not defy the object centered approaches of OOO by making objects dependent to human perspectives but rather it stresses object-qualities to take over subjects and make subjects depend on them regardless of how subjects perceive objects. The four-fold trajectory – authentication to rituals and performance to self-actualization, then immersion in compliance, and embrace of unreason – define the progress through which lives of objects become tensile (see Saramifar 2018), dark, seducing, protean and eventually speculative. It is from this point that I would like to return to the question of the object in-itself.

5 So Where Are Things Finally?

Overlooking the object in-itself and the speculative reality of things results in considering the socially constructed reality and representation of objects as the in-between. Consequently, the objectness of abiotic entities is lost, their contribution to social processes remains unacknowledged and everything is subdued to human access. This misstep removes matter from materiality and either undermines or overmines objects, to use Harman’s terms (2011). On the one hand, limiting objects to a bundle of qualities both in appearances and meanings overmines objects to a transcendental depth. Furthermore, overspreading objects to the sum of their relationships, as Actor Network Theory does, undermines them into a shallow depth. Therefore, objects are lost at two levels: first, their inaccessibility and unknowability remain neglected. The question of how subjects arrive at outer limits of objects’ inaccessibility and form sociality around the absentee objects remain underexplored. Second, the accidental features and ergonomic characteristics of objects that shape users’ cosmologies remain unnoticed. I share my last story here to highlight how tracing objectness of things of conflict exposes the configuration of militant subjectivities. Naser, who I mentioned earlier, was assigned to a surface-to-surface missile unit that fired wire guided missiles. He explained his task as flying kites:

I always could imagine myself as if flying a kite. I press the trigger, look at the guidance control screen and I see the missile flying like a paper-kite smoothly. But it seems as if I am floating, I can feel my weightlessness. I can sense the rush into the air when the missile is released. Sometimes, I even remember my sparrow. I used to have a sparrow to which I tied a string and then let it fly till far, but I could guide it by pulling the string, exactly the way I give a signal to the missile through the wire. (Fieldnotes 2017)
Naser’s description seems like the anticipatory affect discussed by Akama (2015, see above). However, there is more into his story than memories transposed into object-subject relationships. His memories aren’t triggered just because the rocket is wire-guided and resembled to him the line of a kite, or the rope tied to the sparrow’s foot. The missile causes a body to shake; it moves the air around the shooter, blocking the shooter’s ears and temporarily slowing his breathing. The shooter is highly focused on guiding the missile and filled with adrenaline during combat. He ignores the temporary discomfort and continues his task. The air shift and impact of missile-discharge, which blocks air in his ears and the oxygen in his body due to shallow breathing, bring about the sensation of weightlessness while the air in his blocked ears feels like wind blowing. The objectness of the weapon facilitates and shapes the anticipatory affect, and not its symbolic potency and memories. I don’t deny the symbolic potency, but I emphasize that it proceeds from objectness. Naser did not know any of these technical details and the impact on his body. He accessed the weapon from the edge of its inaccessibility and unknowability. He would probably craft a different articulation if he would be aware of details, like Jawad who articulated his relationship with the weapon according to its objectness and ergonomic details.

These stories are not fascinating tales. They are not explored to entertain or merely theorize about objects. However, analyzing them through OOO and speculative realism allows for a better insight into socialization in violence and its workings without overestimating ideologies and religions. The act of killing includes objects. Recognizing their roles would assist in finding solutions to widen the gap between lethal objects and human users. These stories and theorizing attempts suggest that prohibiting guns or restrict regulations on accessing firearms are not sufficient solutions. Rather, the process of socialization in violence where relationships with lethal objects solidify, even their absence, needs to be broken. Additionally, socialization in violence and armed resistance does not recognize faith, ideologies, or religions. There are other dimensions such as material expressions that sustain motivations and interests in combat, militancy, and the act of killing.

References


