

## Syria's Experience with Post-Totalitarianism: The Need for Havelian Pre-Political Thinking

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*Syria's experience with the Assad regime sets an unfortunate precedent in authoritarian regimes' ability to survive through violence and repression. However, understanding the regime's survival requires us to search for explanations grounded in the regime's techniques to polarise Syrians and limit their ability to dissent civilly and peacefully. One way to explain the regime's attitude towards dissent is through Havel's theory on post-totalitarianism. The theory sets forth economic, political and philosophical tools through which post-totalitarian regimes control the functions of society. Havel necessitates the establishment of "pre-political thinking" in order for civil dissent to successfully free the country from post-totalitarianism, a type of thinking which, this paper argues, was doomed to fail in Syria. The regime embodies post-totalitarian elements of consumerism, automatism, ideology, and deference to legal facades to gain legitimacy. However, it differs from post-totalitarianism by defining regime elements around the leader's personality cult, the crony capitalists, and a powerful security apparatus, elements that polarise and divide Syrians. This polarisation prevents Syrians from grounding their dissent in a shared experience of repression, which is the basis of pre-political thinking that Havel deems so necessary for confronting post-totalitarianism. This lacunae in pre-political thinking forces Syrians into violence, polarises some of them into extreme nihilist thinking, and prevents them from developing a civil and peaceful dissent, grounded in a shared human experience.*

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### Introduction

In *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel, the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first President of the Czech Republic, coined the term 'post-totalitarian' to describe the systems of the communist Eastern Bloc. The prefix 'post' signifies the system's fundamental difference from the totalitarianism of 'classical dictatorships'. Post-totalitarianism was developed in a major power bloc controlled by the Soviet Union while classical dictatorships are produced locally within geographical constraints.<sup>1</sup> Havel was politically and intellectually active through the communist rule of Czechoslovakia, especially during the invasion of the Warsaw Pact and the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. His essay, *The Power of The Powerless*, is known for criticising the influence of communism on the individual, who is forced to live "within a lie".<sup>2</sup> Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries in Russia's sphere of influence, like Syria, since the opening of the Soviet naval military base in Tartus in 1971, continued to live in a post-totalitarian state long after. The regime's survival in Syria after the revolution of 2011, at the cost of the survival of the Syrian people motivates this paper to examine factors that contributed to this outcome. Havel's description of the differences between totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism serves as the basis to understand the survival of

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<sup>1</sup> Havel, Václav. "The Power of the Powerless." *East European Politics and Societies* 32, no. 2 (May 2018): 356.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 361

one of the most securitised regimes in the world.

The first section of this essay analyses the following features of the post-totalitarian system: (1) the foundation of the system on the encounter between dictatorship and consumerism; (2) its dependency on a notion of automatism that sustains the system; (3) ideology that serves as a method of internal communication as well as a way for the people to relate to the outside world; (4) the role of law as an excusatory façade that legitimises the system and regulates people's behaviour, and finally (5) the Havelian notion of dissent to the post-totalitarian system through a) the “pre-political” encounter consisting of the genuine political thought of dissenters of all professions and backgrounds; b) an appeal to the law for civil disobedience and finally c) the creation of “parallel structures” through which genuine human connections based on shared experiences sets forth a notion of “post-democracy” that gradually replaces post-totalitarianism.

The second section recounts a brief historical outline of Bashar Al-Assad's regime until the Syrian revolution of 2011. The section analyses (1) the economic liberalisation under the Assad regime, framed in the logic of the “social market economy”; (2) the Arab nationalist ideology of the regime; (3) the nature of dissent during the era of Bashar Al-Assad and its failures and finally (4) a brief account on the Syrian Revolution of 2011.

The third section applies the Havelian theory of post-totalitarianism to the brief historical account of the Assad regime. By doing so, the section reveals striking similarities between theory and practice, particularly in the following areas: (1) The role of economic liberalisation in constructing an encounter between Syrian society and a consumerist culture (2) the role of ideology in drawing the Syrian people to the regime's sphere of power and in constructing Syrian identity, reasoning, and conscience and (3) in the deference to law as a tool for civil dissent. After highlighting these similarities, this essay argues that Havel's post-totalitarian system sheds light on the reasons for the outbreak of violence in Syria. Nationalist ideology in Syria, centered on the personality cult of Bashar Al-Assad and his family, establishes clearer lines of conflict between the ruler and the ruled than what is proposed in the post-totalitarian system. These lines of conflict polarise Syrians between opposition, pro-regime, and what's known as the ‘silent majority.’ Given the historical repression of peaceful dissent, Syrian revolutionary actors cannot develop methods for the “pre-political” thinking that Havel deems so necessary for confronting the regime. They are unable to develop Václav Benda's “parallel structures” to confront the post-totalitarian system. Because of these lacunae in dissent, the section concludes with proposing a conception of ‘perpendicular structure’ through the rise of ‘nihilism’ which intersects with the Syrian regime's original structures in its demand for terroristic discipline and conformity. Therefore, the regime's nihilistic oppression of dissent denies the Syrian people the ability to perform the Havelian pre-political thinking that grounds them in a shared experience and rejects the regime's total control of society.

### **Section 1 - Havel's Notion of Totalitarianism**

The post-totalitarian system, Havel argues, was built on foundations established by the “historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society”.<sup>3</sup> This encounter produced a reordering of values that had existed in the Eastern Bloc according to the hierarchy of values present in the consumerist world. As Havel argues:

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 367.

Is it not true that the far-reaching adaptability to living a lie and the effortless spread of social auto-totality have some connection with the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity? With their willingness to surrender higher values when faced with the trivializing temptations of modern civilization?<sup>4</sup>

Havel's rhetorical questions affirm that "material certainties"<sup>5</sup> in post-totalitarian communist systems – such as consumer goods, jobs and health care – produce an unwillingness to object to the system's infringement on people's moral and spiritual integrity. Citizens' exposure to services that augment their consumerist behavior allow them to prioritise the "temptations of modern civilisation" over their higher integral and moral values. This exposure allows for the transformation from a classical dictatorship to a post-totalitarian system where people "live a lie" and contribute to an "auto-totality" to survive.

The post-totalitarian system maintains itself through demanding acts of automated discipline and conformity from the people. Every undisciplined act could be construed as a denial of the system. Havel defines the essential characteristic of the system to be "introversion, a movement toward being ever more completely and unreservedly itself [the system], which means that the radius of its influence is continually widening as well".<sup>6</sup> Havel gives the example of the greengrocer who displays the sign of "Workers of the World, Unite!" without attending to its meaning. The greengrocer uses the sign to announce his loyalty to the system. By doing so, he becomes an agent of the process that makes the system more *itself*, that is, more post-totalitarian. Since the greengrocer succumbs to the system, he is part of the self-preservation process. Any action that distracts from the goal of self-preservation is a denial of the system. This self-preservation process is subordinated to a higher power of the post-totalitarian system, the power of automatism. The system preserves itself through the totality of actions that the entire population commits every day without conviction. The slogan is part of a "panorama" that creates a general norm for the behavior of individuals.<sup>7</sup> Any deviance from the collective behavior of citizens is considered abnormal.

In this system, people's contribution to automatism measures their level of involvement. The more significant their actions are, the more involved they are in the system. The position of individuals in the hierarchy of power matters only insofar as to define their involvement in the system. As Havel explains, both the lowest individual and the highest individual in the hierarchy are "unfree" and "enslaved".<sup>8</sup> This means that the end goal of the post-totalitarian system is never to preserve power in the hands of one leader or a group of people but rather to generate a "blind automatism" that drives and maintains the regime. This blurs the line of confrontation between the ruler and the ruled and makes everyone responsible for automatism.

Havel defines ideology as a "specious way of relating to the world. It offers

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 366.

human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them”<sup>9</sup> The slogan of the greengrocer explains this phenomenon. This new picture that he displays to the world gives the illusion that he has dignity, morality and an identity. However, embracing the system’s ideology through an unthinking display of the slogan strips him of those very values. Havel clarifies that in an era when human beings constantly face existential uncertainties, ideology offers clean-cut answers about the phenomena that they observe. By accepting ideology, however, humans deprive themselves of the ability to rely on their reason and conscience, and assume responsibility for their actions. This is because ideology is characterised by “the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority”.<sup>10</sup> Abandoning one’s ability to reason places one in a new reality and life that ideology constructs. This is precisely why Havel characterises accepting ideology and hence the status quo it supports, as equivalent to living within a lie.<sup>11</sup>

Havel highlights the function of legality that the post-totalitarian system plays in (1) producing a complex system of norms, statutes and policies that regulate human life and (2), alongside ideology, manipulating the society and the world by giving the impression that justice is taking place. In his analysis of the role of positive law, Havel argues that:

The entire role of ritual, facades, and excuses appears... in the section [of the legal code] declaring what he [a citizen] may do and what his or her rights are. Here there is truly nothing but “words, words, words.” Yet even that part of the code is of immense importance to the system, for it is here that the system establishes its legitimacy as a whole, before its own citizens, before schoolchildren, before the international public, and before history<sup>12</sup>

Havel contends that the legal code in the system operates similarly to ideology. The law provides an excuse for the manipulation of the people as well as a function to establish the legitimacy of the regime. Moreover, the positive legal code, establishing citizens’ rights and responsibilities in the constitution and conventions, is an excuse in front of citizens, civil society and the international community. It depicts the regime as a legitimate enforcer of citizens’ rights. The *de facto* legal code however, operates differently. The regime, in fact, limits the ability of lawyers to defend their clients, allows security forces to act arbitrarily and disregards the positive legal statutes that enforce citizens’ rights.<sup>13</sup>

What Havel calls “dissident movements”<sup>14</sup> operate on two interconnected principles: (1) a “pre-political confrontation” of each person with their own reasoning and (2) an appeal to legality to establish civil disobedience. In post-totalitarianism, the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 391-392.

<sup>14</sup> Havel expresses concern regarding the term ‘dissident’. He argues that the label ‘dissidents’, when constrained to politicians, defies the inclusive nature of dissent that should include nonpoliticians like mathematicians, philosophers, physicians, workers and so on. The genuine political thought of those is invaluable to the organized political movements that regulate the later political confrontation with the regime (Havel 1985, 51).

space for independent political thought is limited, prosecuted and considered detached from individuals' everyday concerns. However, as Havel explains, there is still room for "genuine political impulse:"

If some genuine political impulse emerges from this or that "pre-political" confrontation... then this is frequently due to these isolated generals without an army who, because they have maintained continuity of political thought in the face of difficulties, can at the right moment enrich the new impulse with the fruits of their own political thinking.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the people who succumb to the system's ideology, the people who can live within the truth are those who maintain the practice of independent political thought. Instead of consigning their reasoning to the automatism of the system, they reason their political reality through processes that precede political confrontation. These processes take many conscious forms, according to Havel, such as developing spiritual and intellectual interests, or an understanding of the basic social needs of an individual or a group of people and their demands to live with dignity.<sup>16</sup> What happens pre-politically informs and enriches the political encounter with the regime. This is because, in a post-totalitarian system, every human act of thinking, expressing, understanding, is a threat to the system. The basis for all the activities of the "new impulse", is the act of living within the truth of pre-politics. At the right time the realities that allows for automatism, such as consumerism and absence of consciousness of one's dignity and basic social demands confront life's real demands. This confrontation occurs only after developing adequate consciousness of one's needs from the system of governance under which one lives. This confrontation generates political movements that base their dissent on legality.<sup>17</sup>

The dissent movements that Havel highlights, such as Charter 77<sup>18</sup>, establish dissent based on an appeal to the civil and human rights that the post-totalitarian system pretends to establish. Havel explains that "because the system cannot do without the law... it is compelled to react in some way to such appeals. Demanding that the laws be upheld is thus an act of living within the truth".<sup>19</sup> To resist the post-totalitarian system, one must dissent within the legal code that provides for positive rights. This is Havel's version of civil disobedience.<sup>20</sup> Since the system preserves the rights of citizens in the legal code, demanding that positive law be applied is an act of peaceful dissent: an act of living within the truth, as opposed to living with the lie of ideology. Havel, therefore, contends that violent revolt is inappropriate in the context of post-totalitarianism. This is mainly because, unlike classical dictatorships where the conflict is clearly established between the ruler and the ruled, the lines of conflict in the post-totalitarian system occur

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 373

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>18</sup> An initiative that published a declaration signed by Czechoslovak intellectuals and public figures, urging the government of Czechoslovakia to abide by the human rights principles it signed on in the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>20</sup> As opposed to Henry David Thoreau's version of civil disobedience based on the refusal to comply with the law.

within each person participating in the automatism of the system.<sup>21</sup> Any violent revolt would fail to gain popularity because it is a confrontation with society itself. In the case of peaceful dissent, activists gain support because they demand that the law be upheld.

Dissent reaches a point of utmost maturity once it is denied access to existing social structures and once it seeks to establish “parallel structures”.<sup>22</sup> While inseparable from the notion of dissent, those structures establish parallel means through the arts, social sciences and publications to reach their audiences. They develop a parallel information network, such as “private universities, parallel trade unions, parallel foreign contacts” and a “parallel economy”.<sup>23</sup> Those become the rudiment of a “parallel polis”, an alternative state. Those structures are a home for the individual self-management, self-discipline and self-control that replace the post-totalitarian state’s management, discipline, and control over its subjects.<sup>24</sup> The new polis is the “rudimentary prefiguration” of a “post-democratic” society where workers genuinely participate in the economic decision-making, relationships are established based on common experiences and the act of living within the truth becomes a basis of moral reconstitution.<sup>25</sup>

## Section 2 – Bashar Al-Assad’s Syria (2000-2010)

The current Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad is rooted in the tight relationship between the state and the Ba’ath Party, established during the era of his father Hafez Al-Assad. The government’s failure to provide employment for the growing population generated a consensus that privatisation would solve Syria’s dilemma. This was especially true during the mid-1980s after the decline of the oil prices, which forced the regime to approach the private sector, carefully liberalising the economy, and establishing stronger patronage and clientelism with a tight group of business owners.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the reforms attracted a cross-class social base consisting of people dependent on subsidies and a section of the urban bourgeoisie that took advantage of the new investment laws.<sup>27</sup> Of particular importance was the new alliance between Hafez Al-Assad’s regime and the Damascene and the Aleppine bourgeoisie.<sup>28</sup> The economic failures of the 1980s, largely due to the statist control over the economy, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, paved the way for a change in the ideological opposition to liberalisation among the elites. The regime welcomed private investors, privatised larger shares of foreign trade, and set up private-public companies. In addition, investment law no.10 of 1991 waived some import duties and taxes and opened the country for the importation of foreign currency outside state channels.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>22</sup> Term coined by Václav Benda, a Czech mathematician, in his essay “The Parallel Polis.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>26</sup> Haddad, The Formation and Development of Economic Networks in Syria: Implications for Economic and Fiscal Reforms, 1986–2000, In *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York:Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 37-76

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl, *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Political Economy and International Relations*. (Syracuse University press, 2014), 286.

<sup>28</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond A. “The political economy of economic liberalization in Syria.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 3 (1995): 314..

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 318.

In the 2000s, Bashar inherited both his father's rule and economic policies. However, Bashar's inaugural speech, emphasizing the need for continued economic reform, marked a transition for the regime's social base. While Hafez's dictatorship aimed at expanding the regime's support among both farmers and business elites, Bashar's reforms narrowed the regime's base. Bashar's emphasis on capital accumulation and development favoured the business elite and neglected the peasantry who relied on redistribution measures. An example is the increase of tax deductions for the rich by cutting subsidies for basic goods.

In 2005, Parliament approved Bashar's plan to transition to a social market economy where the government provides social welfare while the private sector invests in development. Bashar's policies however, led to crony capitalism<sup>30</sup> where the president's family relatives, such as his cousin Rami Makhlof,<sup>31</sup> enjoyed the graces of privatisation while the less connected urban elite and the lower classes were excluded.<sup>32</sup> The Assad-Makhlof alliance coincided with a swift removal of the party's old guard and their replacement with Bashar's new clientelist networks. This concentrated patronage, corruption, and opportunities in the hands of the family, rather than the wider party.<sup>33</sup> The heavy involvement of the government in the business sector made the country rank 175 on the International Finance Corporation "Doing Business" survey, with over 60% of businesses reporting corruption as a major constraint.<sup>34</sup> The program vaguely defined the balance between the reduction in central planning and privatization. The domestic private sector, faced with high unemployment rates and inflation, failed to provide sufficient wages for the high living costs.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, the government pursued trade liberalization plans and enhanced market competition through integrating Syria into the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (Gafta) and signing trade agreements with Syria's neighbors like Iran and Turkey.<sup>36</sup> Abdullah Al-Dardari, deputy prime minister for economic affairs, emphasized in an interview in 2009 that free economic activities enhance people's ability "to take care of themselves," away from state intervention.<sup>37</sup> Damascus University economist, Elias Najmeh, defended those policies as liberalizing consumer and producer choices and at the same time guaranteeing social and worker rights.<sup>38</sup>

Besides packaging economic reforms with an emphasis on the "social" and the "market", the regime advanced a historical Arab nationalist and socialist agenda. The regime framed economic reforms as being in "continuity" with the socialist policies

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<sup>30</sup> Crony capitalism is an economic system based on the close relationship between the government officials and business leaders.

<sup>31</sup> Rami Makhlof is the owner of the telecommunication private company Syriatel.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Hinnebusch, R. Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading to revolution?. *International Affairs*, 88(1), 2012, 99.

<sup>34</sup> Diwan, I., Malik, A., & Atiyas, I. *Crony Capitalism in the Middle East: Business and Politics from Liberalization to the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Seifan, Samir. "The Social Consequences of Economic Policies in Syria." Lecture at Syrian Economic Society. Feb 9, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Samer Abboud, "Locating the Social in the Social Market Economy," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed R Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Q&A with Abdullah Al-Dardari cited by *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Elias Nejme, "Al-Siyaasat Al-Maleeah Fi Suryeeah" [Finance Policy in Syria]. Lecture at Syrian Economic Society, Damascus, Syria, 23 Oct 2003.

endorsed during Hafez's era.<sup>39</sup> Historically, ideology in Syria was based on the tactic of blurring the lines between the party, the state, and the people, united against the historical enemy, Israel. This became a pillar for building Arab nationalism in Syria as well as the state-society pact. Moreover, the regime prided itself for preserving religious and ethnic communities' coexistence, especially when compared to overtly sectarian neighboring regimes in Lebanon and Iraq. The regime consistently framed itself as a secular minority protector regime, guarding religious minorities, especially Christians, from Islamist violence. This served as a legitimization tool for the regime in front of the Syrian people and the international community.<sup>40</sup> Thus, any criticism of the regime was depicted as an infringement on Arab nationalism, on resistance against Israel, Syrian national unity, and the very essence of Syrian identity.<sup>41</sup> Until the 2011 uprising, Syrian nationalism emphasised Bashar's role in preserving Syria's stability in the war-torn Middle East.<sup>42</sup> The combination of nationalist and reformist frameworks through which Bashar's regime depicted itself to the people carry "implicit norms and commitments that shape the Syrian state-society relationship in such a way as to draw non-state actors into the *spheres of power* [italics introduced]".<sup>43</sup> The third section addresses the notion of those spheres.

The nature of dissent before the 2011 uprising can be split into two waves: the Damascus Spring (2000 – 2001) and the second wave which featured the signing of the "Damascus Declaration" by various opposition elements and the establishment of the National Salvation Front of exiled former vice president Khaddam, the Muslim Brotherhood, communist, liberal and leftist parties (2003 – 2007).<sup>44</sup> When Bashar spoke about reforms in his inaugural speech, activists started demanding an expansion of civil society, release of political prisoners and freedom of expression.<sup>45</sup> The government ended the Damascus Spring in 2001 when they arrested Member of Parliament, Maamoun Al-Homsi, for demanding "the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the curtailment of the Mukhabarat [security forces], and the formation of human rights committee in the parliament".<sup>46</sup> In 2004, secular groups joined the Muslim Brotherhood's platform "Political Project for Syria's Future" demanding a "contractual state that respects international conventions for human rights and institutionalize[s] the separation of powers".<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54

<sup>40</sup> Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Sottimano, Auroroa. "Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Asad: Reading the "Legitimacy" of the Syrian Regime." *Syria from Reform to Revolt 1* (2015): 70-71.

<sup>42</sup> The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent sectarian conflict became representative of the undesirable clash between democracy and Ba'athism. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the victory of Hezbollah, backed by Syrian troops in Lebanon, rallied some Syrians behind Bashar as the only Arab leader who preserved the fight against Israel. Finally, Bashar took advantage of the Gaza war in 2009 to differentiate himself from Arab leaders in a speech in the Doha Summit on Gaza where he described a genocide against Palestinians (Ibid., 74 - 75).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>44</sup> Najib Ghadbian, "Contesting Authoritarianism. Opposition Activism Under Bashar al-Assad, 2000–2010," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed R Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 91.

<sup>45</sup> They formed the "Friends of Civil Society" and produced the Manifesto of the 99 to advance their agendas.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 95.

The failures of dissent in Syria can be attributed to two reasons: the repression by the regime apparatus and the nature of opposition groups. The regime controlled the licensing of civil society fora and human rights organisations. Moreover, security forces penetrated oppositional assemblies, banned certain activists from traveling, and allowed others.<sup>48</sup> The Assad regime used the legal system of show trials of dissidents where charges included “weakening national morale” and “conveying false news that could debilitate the morale of the nation.”<sup>49</sup> Additionally, despite the well-developed cross-sectarian nature of the Syrian dissent movements, the opposition suffered a lack of resources<sup>50</sup> and the necessary cohesion undermined by mistrust, regional interests, and sectarian splits).<sup>51</sup>

The uprising of 2011 stemmed from demonstrations expressing the popular frustration with the regime’s despotism, the infringement on civil and political liberties, and the increasing alienation of large strata of the Syrian population.<sup>52</sup> It quickly escalated into a complex civil war with regional and international actors, claiming the lives of more than half a million Syrians, and displacing 11 million people. The regime depicted the peaceful protests as a sabotage to Syria’s moral foundations and the Syrian identity,<sup>53</sup> and portrayed protestors as terrorists motivated by the West in a conspiracy to undermine the integrity and independence of Syria.<sup>54</sup> After Syrian tanks entered dissent strongholds to suppress demonstrations violently, the Free Syrian Army was established in July 2011 to overthrow the regime.<sup>55</sup> Although most Syrians were aware of the harm that the regime was inflicting upon the country, some were unprepared to support an armed revolution. Sottimano reinvestigates the term “the Silent Majority” to signify the uncertainty that Syrians experienced when faced with the choice to imagine a political alternative. The rise of “Militant Nihilism,” to borrow Yassin Al-Haj Saleh’s term, of movements like Daesh<sup>56</sup> and Jabhat Al-Nusra produced a withdrawal from the values of the Syrian revolution and raised fears of foreign encroachment and conspiracies.<sup>57</sup> Sottimano argues that fear of uncertainty colonises Syrian society through the “ingrained habits” and “unspoken norms and authoritarian practice,”

<sup>48</sup> This tactic created a culture of distrust between activists because it gave the impression that some were collaborating with the regime.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>50</sup> The Syrian opposition lacked access to media outlets to support its causes. Besides having its media outlet jammed by the regime, the channels sponsored by the Syrian opposition lacked monetary resources to operate.

<sup>51</sup> Ellen Lust-Okar. “Divided they Rule: The Management and Manipulation of Political Opposition.” *Comparative Politics* (2004): 159-179.

<sup>52</sup> Aurora Sottimano, “Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Assad: Reading the “Legitimacy” of the Syrian Regime,” in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed R Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 68.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Holliday, *Syria’s Armed Opposition*. Institute for the Study of War, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> The defamatory Arabic name for the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.”

<sup>57</sup> “Militant Nihilism” is a term coined by the Syrian political thinker and oppositionist, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, in his book *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. He argues that the rise of extreme violence, strict religiosity, and the withdrawal of trust in the world produced a nihilist tendency to reject reality and take shelter in a “reformed” version of Islam to turn to the base (Qaeda in Arabic) of religion through the pursuit of mass executions, torture, massacre, rape and burning people and property (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, 121 – 122).

demanding passive compliance and conformity.<sup>58</sup> Due to the Assadist legal code that had incarcerated Syrians, fear, cynicism and depoliticization of authoritarian practices became part of some Syrians' reason through their new reality.<sup>59</sup>

### **Section 3: Post-totalitarianism in Syria**

The narrative of the importance of enhancing Syria's "integration in the global economy" and adopting "culture of consumption" reinforces Havel's notion of the encounter between society and consumerism in the post-totalitarian system. Reducing trade barriers exposed Syrians to Havel's conception of "material certainties." The abundance of material goods in post-2000 Syria introduced the Syrian people to the value of encountering consumerism. Some marked this transition as "post-populist," alluding to the absence of the welfare programs traditionally associated with populist authoritarianism.<sup>60</sup> The reform, therefore, marked a transition into a new system where society's encounter with consumerism caused people to reevaluate their priorities. The system prioritised modernisation over democratisation, and replaced dignity and rights with the material goods from the outside world. Moreover, through its public image promoted through the "social market economy" analyzed above, the system convinced the people that the promotion of consumption was necessary to catch up with the increasingly globalised world economy. This promotion of consumption lies at the foundation of Havel's post-totalitarianism.

As mentioned in the second section, a blurring of the lines between the party, the people and state institutions helped construct a unified vision of a nationalist Arab Syria. The historical emphasis on Arab nationalism with socialist elements<sup>61</sup> replaces the Syrian people's ability to determine their own reality and identity through which they relate to the world. This is parallel to Havel's notion of ideology explained in the first section. Syrian morality is framed within the displayed identity of the regime: the preservation of "religious and ethnic coexistence" as well as leading the front of Arab resistance against Israel and the West. By rallying behind the regime, Syrians are given an illusion of an Arab nationalist identity that replaces their ability to politically imagine an identity of their own. Moreover, Because of the usage of the penal code to incarcerate and brutalise Syrians during the Assad regime, Syrians become trapped in a political reality full of fear and hesitation. Their ability to reason is hindered by the lack of advanced and inclusive methods of reasoning about one's political surroundings such as laws, constitutions, political and legal institutions, and civil society activities. Those methods are suppressed by a brutalist regime. Instead, Syrians revert to unimaginative methods of relating to the world, like fear and cynicism. Al-Haj Saleh coined the term "the unreason" to refer to those alternative methods of thinking under authoritarianism.<sup>62</sup> Syrians are forced to conform to the discipline the regime imposes. They take shelter in the regime's ability to

<sup>58</sup> Aurora Sottimano, "Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Assad: Reading the "Legitimacy" of the Syrian Regime," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed R Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 87.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>60</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique." *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 374.

<sup>61</sup> To this day, school children in Syria chant "Wihda, Hurriyah, Ishtirakiyah" – "Unity, Freedom, Socialism" every morning when asked by the chant leaders to identify the goals of the Syrian people.

<sup>62</sup> Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 193.

draw them into its sphere of power, producing a Syrian auto-totality, much like the post-totalitarian auto-totality that preserves the system of dictatorship through the social and political acquiescence of every person in the system. Under post-totalitarianism, Syrians become unable to produce new and imaginative political solutions for their reality. They are forced to release this right to develop national consciousness in front of the regime's auto-totality. Instead, they become forced to relate to the world around them through the Arab nationalist ideology that the regime forced upon them.

Despite the failure to attract "the Silent Majority", the dissent movements before the 2011 Syrian revolution displayed elements of Havel's notion of dissent, namely the deference to legality. Notwithstanding intensified regime repression between 2000 and 2010, movements across ideological and sectarian lines, especially the Muslim Brotherhood's "The Political Project for the Future Syria," emphasised the importance of domestic means to advance the equal treatment of citizens under the law and the implementation of ratified human rights conventions. Instead of succumbing to the regime's usage of the law as a repression tool, Syrian dissident movements used the law of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant for Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, both ratified by Syria in 1969. Furthermore, dissent movements requested a repeal of the emergency law that denied Syrian detainees the right to due process. Similarly, the *political* dissent in Czechoslovakia (as opposed to the pre-political discussed below), namely Charter 77, appealed to positive human and civil rights as a tool for civil disobedience.

Despite the similarities between the post-totalitarian system and the regime, a close analysis of Havel's post-totalitarianism reveals a few reasons that could explain Syrians' appeal to violence. First, unlike post-totalitarianism, the Syrian regime is produced locally and its ideology surrounds the cult of the leader. Second, the Syrian dissident movements encountered the absence of two phases of Havel's dissent: the pre-political confrontation and the development of "parallel structures."

As shown in the second section, Bashar Al-Assad's regime ruled Syria between 2000 and 2010 despite narrowing its social base to himself and his close relatives. This means that by 2011, the lines of confrontation between the ruler and the ruled became clearly defined. This reality contrasts Havel's notion of the inappropriateness of violent revolt in post-totalitarianism, where the lines of conflict "run through each person." However, Bashar's personality cult, the power of "crony capitalists," and the superiority of the security apparatus are identifiable features of the ruler. The question is whether Syrians collectively were prepared to confront the reality of the needed struggle against this regime.

Havel's emphasis on the importance of the pre-political confrontation reveals a weakness in Syrian dissent movements: the inability to accumulate genuinely independent political thought, grounded in people's determination to collectively live within truth through thinking about their basic social and spiritual needs, to develop an understanding of how this regime hinders their ability to live freely, and then use this thinking to confront the regime politically later. As highlighted above, Syrian dissent movements lacked the necessary resources and capacity to reach the constituency of the regime among the elites and the masses. This disconnect was largely due to the inability of Syrian dissent to voice a unified agenda when the Syrian uprising was peaceful. This means that the Syrian Revolution lacked the unified and coherent political thought coming from politicians and non-politicians, like artists, social scientists, lawyers and

workers whose role is indispensable for the Havelian political encounter. These elements of dissent were polarised by the regime's repression, ideology, and automatism. The pre-political thought was feared, oppressed after 40 years of totalitarianism. The lack of this pre-political thinking aborted the revolution and produced what I call "the perpendicular structures."

Due to the lack of unified political imagination in the methods of dissent, and through confronting the brutality of the regime's repression, Syrians were unable to produce Benda's "parallel structures," such as parallel publishing houses, magazines, public fora, economy and finally a parallel polis. For Havel, this is an indispensable step to reestablish a genuine human connection between people based on shared experiences. Therefore, the lacuna in political thinking produced deference to alternative, nihilist, and militant structures. The producer of this desperation to non-institutional or legal structures is the regime, channelling people into sectarianism and violent nihilism. Those structures heightened people's desperation to cling to groups, polarised into extremist, violent and already-established institutions like Dae'sh and the Assadist militias, also known as Shabiha. Those structures defer to unimaginable crimes and violations of human rights. However, this "militant nihilism" is familiar to the regime and is *perpendicular* to its structure. The Assadist original structure intersects with those nihilist elements at one point: they both demand conformity from those whom they rule by acts of terror. They both demand discipline through which human conscience is released to a higher, terroristic authority that regulates life's real aims. This unfortunate development in the Syrian uprising deprived Syrians of expressing their national and human consciousness through a shared experience under authoritarianism. It deprived them of their inherent right to dissent civilly and peacefully.

## **Conclusion**

Havelian post-totalitarianism, when applied to the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad, reveals similarities between the theory and practice. First, Bashar's economic liberalization describes a Havelian notion of encounter between society and consumerism. Second, parallel to the post-totalitarian ideology, Arab nationalism functions as a façade replacing Syrian identity, reason, and conscience with the Syrian regime's identity. Third, the nature of dissent during the Bashar Al-Assad era and the post-totalitarian system was based on an appeal to legality to establish human and civil rights. The application of the Havelian theory to Assad's Syria reveals two caveats that limit Syrian dissent. Since ideology in Syria is based on the personality cult of the leader, the lines of conflict between the ruled and the ruler are clearer than in the post-totalitarian system where those lines run through each person who contributes to the post-totalitarian automatism.

Moreover, the inability of Syrian dissent elements to perform the pre-political thinking due to the regime's brutality and suppression and the disconnect between the people and the opposition reveal an inherent flaw in the nature of the political confrontation with the regime. Unfortunately, instead of producing 'parallel structures,' Syria witnessed the development of structures foreign to the values that demonstrators sacrificed their lives for. Although Syria's conflict is far from being captured by domestic factors, the Havelian theory inspires a framework for Syrians to reimagine new ways of civil disobedience through the pre-political thinking based on shared human experiences, and a shared struggle to live in Truth and abandon the regime's automatism.

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