Searching for Salvation
Yassin al-Haj Saleh and the Writing of Modern Syria

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A Thesis submitted to the
School of Social and Political Sciences
in total fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of
Masters by Research

School of Social and Political Sciences
The University of Melbourne
Australia

Produced on Archival Quality Paper

October 2015

Abstract

Name   : Firas Massouh

Title   : Searching for Salvation: Yassin al-Haj Saleh and the Writing of Modern Syria

Department   : School of Social and Political Sciences

This thesis introduces the English reader to Syrian dissident intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh (b. 1961). Saleh spent 16 years in prison between 1980 and 1996 and since 2000 has been an active agent in redefining the role of the public intellectual within the oppressive environment of contemporary Syria. He has been audacious in tackling the themes of civil society, political and religious reform, modernity, the relationship between state and religion, secularism, and revolution. Saleh upholds a humanistic ideal of critique as a form of agency and social responsibility, maintains that ideology is the principle obstacle to human liberation, and argues for active discursive intervention as a primary way to incite social change. A prolific writer on intellectual and political questions of the Arab world and Syria in particular, he showed unwavering support for the Arab Spring revolts, particularly the Syrian one. When Syrian protestors eager for change challenged the Assad dictatorship, Saleh promptly followed suit and became one of the protest movement's most astute participant-observers and critical chroniclers. By examining some of his major writings on the Assad dictatorship, the Syrian Revolution, and the subsequent war in Syria, this thesis positions his work as a product of his intellectual background and life experience. In its focus on Saleh, this thesis responds to the need for more academic studies of the Arab intellectual in revolutionary times. It tackles his experience in prison, in hiding, and in exile, and argues that his work on Syrian culture and society represents an important moment for both Syria studies and contemporary Arab critical thought. I demonstrate how, for Saleh, an autonomous, independent, and publicly purposive cultural field is a key organising component of democracy as a cohesive doctrine. In order to understand the importance of cultural production in Syria, we need to understand the wider political and social context of which it is a component.

Declaration

This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters by Research degree.

Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of bibliographies.

Firas Massouh

9 June 2015

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Acknowledgments

There are several people who have contributed to my intellectual development. Above all, I am indebted to Professor Ghassan Hage, my supervisor and teacher. His readiness to read my work over the years, to patiently listen to me, discuss points of interest, and to offer continuous encouragement and advice have made my intellectual journey a very rewarding experience. My interest in Yassin al-Haj Saleh's ideas was first aroused in 2011 after reading his essay on Syrian intellectual trends, which appears in the first issue of the critical Lebanese periodical *Kalamon* that Professor Hage lent me at the time. For that, I thank him again.

I take this opportunity to also thank my co-supervisor, Professor John Murphy, and my head of supervision committee, Associate Proffessor Monica Minnegal, both of whom have not only been supportive but also instrumental in softening the blow of university bureaucracy. Senior as well as promising, young academics in my university, especially John Rundell, Justin Clemens, Nadeem Maliki, Kristian Camilleri, James Oliver, Victoria Stead, Micaela Sahhar and Geoffrey Mead, have also been very supportive and have taught me much about Anthropology, Social Theory, and Philosophy, whether this was over coffee on campus or in the courses and seminars I took with them. There are also academics in other Australian universities I would like to thank: Jessica Whyte at the University of Western Sydney; Gillian Tan at Deakin University; and, Shannon Brincat at Griffith University who gave me my first publishing opportunity, a chapter on Syria and the crisis of the Left in his book *Communism in the 21st Century.*

I would like also to thank Yassin al-Haj Saleh himself, whom I have not yet met in person, but who nonetheless generously responded to my queries through online correspondence. I am grateful to him for a number of reasons: welcoming me to participate through writing and translation work in *Al-Jumhuriya,* an online magazine he co-founded in 2012; keeping me informed of recent relevant material; sending me drafts of his articles; and, inspiring me to write the present work. Above all, I thank him for setting an example as a stoic individual, who against all odds remains a courageous and honest intellectual.

There are many others who have supported me socially and emotionally during my research and travel around Europe and the Middle East. In 2012, I attended a stimulating and challenging summer workshop called "Spaces of Resistance" at the American University in Beirut where I had the opportunity to meet a group of gifted, up-and-coming Lebanese and North American intellectuals, journalists, and artists. This trip to Beirut was especially significant, however, because it is there that I met a number of Syrian activists who left an indelible mark on me. I will mention two of them: Mohammad al-Attar, a young, talented playwright whose play *A Chance Encounter* I would act in and coproduce with my fiancée Stella Gray in London a year later; and, Oussama al-Habaly, one of the most gentle souls I have met, a courageous young activist from my city of Homs who was arrested by Syrian State Security in August 2012 and who remains incarcerated to this day. This thesis is dedicated to him.

While living in London and travelling around Europe in 2013, I had the opportunity to make lasting friendships with a number of people; Laila Alodaat, Jalal Imran, Karim al-Afnan, Zoe Holman, Robin Yassin-Kassab, Fares Albahra, and Feras al-Jawabra. These individuals are equally invested in the Syrian question. They are writers, artists, or political activists who have imparted their knowledge and expertise to me, but above all, they supported me with advice and by being there for me.

I would never have reached this stage were it not for the encouragement and support of my family and friends. I am truly fortunate to have Yoni Molad and Stephen Pascoe, two brilliant young scholars, as my sounding boards; Julian Hammond, Mounir Kiwan, Virginie Rey, Sean O'Bearne, and May Maloney, as compassionate and constant friends; and, Andre Lobanov, a talented musician who always knows how to cheer me up. Writing my dissertation and juggling other events in my life put considerable pressure on me, but their support was ultimately a factor in my success. I would like also to thank my parents Moufeed and Nidal who have bestowed upon me their unconditional love and support; my beautiful sister Nora Massouh; my cousin Mazen Gharibah, an indefatigable activist in the Syrian cause; my uncles, Atiyah Massouh and Talib Gharibah, who excited me about Marxism since I was a young child; my late spiritual godfather Burhan Trama, who gave me

some of my most cherished books; Souad Massouh and Stepho Rusho, my aunt and uncle in Melbourne who have been second parents to me; and, Ian Gray and Suzanne Spunner, my parents-in-law to be, who are my new family.

Last but not least, to my life-partner, Stella Rose Gray, who is at once my rose and my rock: Thank you very much for everything.

<div align="right">

Firas Massouh

Hobart, Australia

June, 2015

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Note on Editions and Translations

Quotations are generally given only in English, except where a particular point is being made or when a reader who reads Arabic might benefit from having reference to the original. There is no standard edition of Yassin al-Haj Saleh in English. I have used a range of English translations of his works available in order to best represent the particular points being made. Unless otherwise specified, all other translations are my own.

Introduction

A. Introducing Yassin al-Haj Saleh[1]

> Today, we look to you as leaders of public opinion in your countries to pressure your governments to take a strong stand against the killer; a stand that supports overthrowing the regime of the Assad dynasty. This is the only humanitarian and progressive thing to do. There is nothing more reactionary and fascist in today's world than a regime that kills its own people, brings in mercenaries from its allies, and so effortlessly incites a sectarian war, which may be impossible to stop before it leads to the death of hundreds of thousands of people. We look forward to your support today. Tomorrow may be too late.
>
> <div align="center">Yassin al-Haj Saleh 2013</div>

> My role was that of an intellectual and writer, not of a politician or a political activist. In the coming years, I intend to work on the cultural dimensions of the Syrian revolution since I believe culture could be a strategic field for our struggle for freedom and against fascism, both the Assadist and Islamist versions.
>
> <div align="center">Yassin al-Haj Saleh</div>
> <div align="center">(quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014)</div>

The words above are written in tumultuous times, and refer to a hitherto adolescent and embattled concept – the 'culture' of the Syrian Revolution, and more broadly 'Syrian culture,' reviewed through the prism of a dispiriting civil war, with the realities of different yet equally nefarious forms of fascism compounded by the prospects of collective resignation to the death of Syria. These all point to intellectual paralysis, active abandonment even, never remote enough to be dismissed. Yet the gloom of the opening quote, extracted from a plea to intellectuals to act 'humanely' and 'progressively' – this 'tomorrow may be too late' – is redeemed by a gleam in the second quote, a hope that is renewed through the belief that speaking, writing, debating, and whatever else ethical cultural production entails can furnish us with the

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[1] Yassin al-Haj Saleh will be referred to as Saleh throughout this thesis, excising the first part of his last name for the sake of simplicity.

mechanisms by which we can be liberated. It is an open question here as to whether or not hope is the "realistic" action one has to take, or hope in culture is a virtue at all. Today's Syria is indeed a chaotic place in which to locate this question, but there is a preoccupation with it in Yassin al-Haj Saleh's search for salvation: how do we extract hope from pain? This search for salvation is not a teleological endeavour; there is no finality to salvation and Saleh is therefore not entirely free from the Heraclitan belief that constant strife and change are good things. It is no coincidence that this stoic and valiant figure underwent his first crucial epiphany as a young man in the brutalising conditions of Assad's prisons during the 1980s and 1990s; and his work was to kindle a spark in the Syrian youth and cultural class, helping to defy Assad's kingdom of silence. His second crucial epiphany occurred in 2011, when a mass uprising demanding freedom returned that spark back in his direction. He became known as the *hakim* ('sage') of the Syrian Revolution, and the conscience of Syria (Hashemi and Postel 2014). For him, the revolution ushered in new possibilities for society building, for cultural action, and for national belonging and liberation. If the young Marx had not written the words "the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality", they might have suited Saleh.

Born in 1961, Saleh emerged as a Syrian writer and thinker after Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father Hafez in 2000. Saleh spent 16 years in prison between 1980 and 1996 and since his release has been an active agent in redefining the role of the public intellectual within the oppressive environment of contemporary Syria. He has been audacious in tackling the themes of civil society, political and religious reform, modernity, the relationship between state and religion, secularism, and revolution. Saleh upholds a humanistic ideal of critique as a form of agency and social responsibility, maintains that ideology is the principle obstacle to human liberation, and argues for active discursive intervention as a primary way to incite social change. He has written extensively in Arab newspapers such as *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Quds al-Arabi.* A prolific writer on intellectual and political questions of the Arab world and Syria in particular, he showed unwavering support for the Arab Spring revolts, particularly the Syrian one. For Saleh, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions aimed at restoring public and individual dignity (Saleh 2011d). Then when Syrian protestors eager for change challenged the Assad dictatorship in order to restore their dignity, Saleh promptly followed suit and became one of the protest movement's most

astute participant-observers and critical chroniclers. But his life as an intellectual has been a constant struggle for the principles he espouses. He does not dilute his views in the hope of making them more palatable, and despite his occasional opaqueness this may be a clue to why he is significant. In 2012, while living in hiding in Damascus, he received the Prince Claus Award, which honours outstanding achievement in the field of culture and development. In that same year, he co-founded *Al-Jumhuriya* (*'The Republic'*), a volunteer-based Syrian online magazine. Since going into self-imposed exile in Turkey in late 2013, he has set up the Syrian Cultural House in Istanbul *'Hamisch'* (*'Margin'*), an independent space-in-exile for critical cultural debate. On December 9, 2013, Saleh's wife, prominent activist Samira al-Khalil, was abducted by Islamist militants operating in the Damascus countryside, along with three of her comrades. Her whereabouts remain unknown. "Like Syria, Samira is my cause, the cause of freedom" (Saleh 2014).

Saleh has been extensively concerned with Syrian issues from the late 1970s onwards, from his engagement as a member of a communist group (Saleh 2011), in the context of the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon, to the armed conflict between the Assad regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1980, Saleh was arrested and consequently incarcerated by the state for 16 years. The year 2000 saw his return to active political engagement and the beginnings of his output as a writer; the Damascus Spring, the events of 9/11, the US invasion of Iraq, the July War of 2006, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Arab Spring are some of the issues he tackles in his writing. Some of his major essays and articles from the last 15 years have been published in four compilations; the first, *Syria from the Shadows: Inside the Black Box* (2010) contains articles written between 2001 and 2005, which focus on Syrian internal affairs, and the nature, practices, structure, and ideology of the country's political system; likewise, his most recent book, *Walking on One Foot* (2012) is composed of articles written between 2006 and 2010 and centres on the circulation of authoritarian power in Syria during that period. Saleh says, "although more than one of this book's chapters appear to anticipate a nearing crisis, it must be said that none was written with the expectation of a revolution" (Saleh 2012: 6).

Saleh's most lauded and debated books are *Myths of the Latter Peoples: A Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of its Critique* (2011a)*,* and *Salvation, Oh Youths! 16 Years in Syria's Prisons* (2012a). The first deals with the myriad intellectual, political, and ethical issues in contemporary Islam; the second, often

regarded as Saleh's most candid biographical account, discusses incarceration in the prisons of "Assad's Syria" and aspects of life after prison. Saleh has also edited *Deliverance or Destruction? Syria at a Crossroads* (2014a), contributed chapters in books – notably "Sectarianism and Politics in Syria" (2009) in Hazem Saghieh's *Sunni-Shi'ite Conflicts in the Contemporary Islamic World* – not to mention numerous essays and newspaper articles, interviews, and political pamphlets and petitions relating to the Syrian Revolution, which since 2011, has become his major intellectual and political preoccupation.

There are also Saleh's essays in *Kalamon,* a critical Lebanese periodical that features social commentary, essays, studies, and poetry by contemporary Arab intellectuals, which perhaps most vividly draw the contours of his intellectual development and engagement over the last half decade. I will weave my survey of these pieces throughout the thesis in order to expound some of his most compelling ideas.

<center>**</center>

Saleh represents one of the major intellectual influences on Arabophone democracy thinkers and activists, and through them on contemporary Arab critical thought. He stands out as the Syrian "with a Leftist passion" (Al-Zoubi 2013: 31) who is most conspicuously involved in the cultural politics of the anti-Assad movement, both in terms of a developing preoccupation with resistance to the regime in his work and in his own personal political activism. He writes, "No Left, worthy of its name, will flourish unless it sides with the uprising and works on linking it to the values of equality and freedom" (Saleh 2011b). Yet he has long abandoned communism in its party-politics form and does not consider himself a Marxist, though he stresses the importance of the Marxist tradition to his historical analysis. He tells us,

> I am not prepared to repeat the common trope: the theory is true while the problem lies in praxis… Praxis is a relationship that theory has to history, and communism in the 20th century embodies the bad ways in which this relationship was articulated. What is more accurate is that praxis reveals the theory's contradictions and

limitations, and it is these contradictions and limitations that represent the engine for intellectual development.

Saleh, quoted in Al-Zoubi 2013: 32

It is worth pointing out at the outset that Saleh does not see himself as a 'political activist.' Saleh resisted the temptation to become involved in any of the myriad oppositional political formations that emerged since 2011, such as the Syrian National Council, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change. And, while he aligns himself with prominent human rights activist and lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, Saleh has consistently downplayed his role within the ranks of the Local Coordination Committees, an organisation in which Zaitouneh is a key figure. It is clear that Saleh is not interested in obscuring the power of his writing practice in the rhetoric of political activism. He plays the role of a "critical social scientist" – to use a typology proposed by Ghassan Hage – in that he is invested in carving "a space that is free from what the French call '*la politique politicienne',* the politics of those for whom politics is a vocation" (Hage 2015: 80). This, Hage tells us, "does not mean being non-political" (Hage 2015: 79); rather, it means refusing to be enslaved by the politics of politicians and their frameworks. As Sune Haugbolle (2015) argues, Saleh emerges not as "the embodiment of power or the face of a political leader, but [as] the essence of revolution" (Haugbolle 2015: 30). It is perhaps for these reasons that, as Haugbolle shows in interviews he conducted with Syrian activists, many Syrians, young and old, "have constructed Saleh as an iconic figure for their own struggle to construct a new political culture in Syria and in the wider Arab world" (Haugbolle 2015: 15). On the other hand, emerging Syrian writers, such as Odai Al-Zoubi, reject such iconisation. For Al-Zoubi, revolutionary action cannot be consumed with the search for "essences"; for him, Saleh simply embodies "one of the ways in which the revolution articulates itself" (Al-Zoubi 2014: 29) But Saleh takes up a Foucauldian line in that he does not have time for essences either. At a time when so many commentators mourn for Syria's political stability and civilisational legacy, pontificating endlessly at the expense of openness to change, Saleh has no recourse but to pose a very political question:

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> Are there any signs that a new kind of intellectual is about to emerge – one
> who resists the discrimination, oppression and marginalization occurring here
> and now – instead of the one who croons about nothingness and "beautiful
> ruin", the prophetic savant who is only concerned with eventualities and true
> essences?
>
> Saleh 2014b

To be sure, Saleh's writings are highly political. In his critique of intellectual poverty in Syria, Saleh stresses the responsibility of the intellectual to defy the rules, restrictions, and logics of the regime for the sake of a politics of "truth". He writes,

> The truth is always political and it is political everywhere, but it is twice as
> political in Syria given that the political system is premised on the negation
> of independent investigative efforts and an unfettered examination of the
> political apparatuses: their structure, their history, their acts and functions.
>
> Saleh 2014b

It must be borne in mind, however, that most important for Saleh is the task of drawing attention to the specific value of a politics of cultural production: the value of critique. Homi Bhabha's (1994) observations of how different forms of discourse *produce* rather than *reflect* their objects of reference are useful here. He tells us that "there are many forms of political writing whose different effects are obscured when they are divided between the 'theoretical' and the 'activist'." "The difference between them," Bhabha explains, "lies in their operational qualities." The 'theoretical' and the 'activist' therefore do not justify or precede one another; they exist side by side, "the one as an enabling part of the other" (Bhabha 1994: 32) In a similar spirit, Haugbolle shows how Saleh does not only "reflect struggle, but also [produces] ideological making and re-making of positions" (Haugbolle 2015: 29). This is evident in Saleh's work; his revolutionary project rests on locating "what kind of ideological re-making emerges from crisis, and what kind of action is animated by critique" (Haugbolle 2015: 29). Saleh's powerful example as an intellectual who is politically and culturally engaged at every level comes across in the combination of historical

critiques, theoretical analyses, and newspaper articles and "posts" on social media forums (mainly Facebook) written in the immediacy of the political moment.[2]

B. The Contribution of this Thesis to the Field: Situating Saleh in the Context of Contemporary Arab Critical Thought

In this thesis, I demonstrate how, for Saleh, an autonomous, independent, and publicly purposive cultural field is a key organising component of democracy as a cohesive doctrine. In order to understand the importance of cultural production in Syria, we need to understand the wider political and social context of which it is a component. In her *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (2010), Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab provides an exposition of the Arab intellectual debates in the second half of the twentieth century. The book begins with the period of modern Arab thought known as the *Nahda,* or renaissance, between the late 18th and mid 20th century – what Albert Hourani (1970) in his classic treatise on Arab thought called "the liberal age." Kassab places emphasis on 1967 as the year when the first *Nahda* ended. She views the Arab defeat in that year as the quintessential event that ushered in a shift towards religiosity and "cultural metaphysics," and is therefore the point of departure for the scholarly engagements that began in the 1970s. Kassab reviews the myriad intellectual responses to 1967, tracing the development and transformation of Arab self-critique after the defeat into the critique of Arab culture in Islamic theology and secular thought. Towards this end she investigates the formation of two concepts in post-1967 Arab thought: tradition (*turath*) and authenticity (*asala*). She is first and foremost concerned with the intellectual currents that sought to diagnose and remedy the ills of a civilisation in crisis. The crisis, and the way it manifests, in what is often thought of as a "malaise," "unhappiness," "wretchedness" (Kassir 2013), "retardation" (Laroui 1976) of the Arabs, or "poverty of our political philosophy" (Safouan 2007), is the social reality that compels Kassab to call for shifting priorities from "identity to democracy," from

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[2] Most of Saleh's writings are readily available online. *Al-Hewar al-Mutamaddin* ('*The Civilised Dialogue'*) by far contains the largest collection of his articles on one website; see http://www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=3. In early 2015 a website was launched containing English translations of some of his writings; see http://www.yassinhs.com. Saleh also writes periodically on Facebook and Twitter, though he is more active on Facebook and attracts a sizeable following. Both are open to public viewing; see http://www.facebook.com/yassinhsaleh and http://twitter.com/yassinhs respectively.

"essentialism to agency," and from "ideology to critical thinking" (Kassab 2010: 344-6).

Compared to the numerous works written on Islamic doctrines and ideologies, Kassab aptly notes, "very little has been written on the less noisy and less spectacular, but important growth of critique" (Kassab 2010: 2).[3] Today, our task is to add to her commendable effort, and that of others (Bardawil 2013) in devoting due attention to a hitherto neglected generation of critical Arab thinkers; that is, those who belong to the category of what Syrian thinker Michel Kilo calls *muthaqqaf al-taghyir* ('the intellectual of change') (Kassab 2014: 14). In the context of the Arab Spring, such thinkers stand out from state or traditional opposition intellectuals in that they do not constitute an intellectual elite. "Two transformations, notes Kilo, opened opposition intellectuals to a wider public. First, their turning away from rigid ideological doctrines and narrow party politics brought them closer to the persecuted and repressed society and enabled them instead to put their abilities at the disposal of individuals seeking freedom. The second transformation was the emergence of a civil society that is defined in terms of individuals who come together out of their own free will to achieve certain common goals" (Kassab 2014: 15). Today, one of the most crucial tasks for an intellectual of change, Kassab argues, is to work in alignment with others, on local and institutional levels, in order to "help society develop a culture that will ensure the qualitative leap embodied in the Arab Spring" (2014: 15).

The idea for this thesis arose out of the need to come to terms with the already considerable amount that Saleh has written on Syrian society in its historical specificity. My contribution here by no means offers an exhaustive analysis of Saleh's entire corpus of ideas but rather seeks to draw out their salient themes and offer an invitation for further research on this seminal Syrian intellectual. This work, which introduces the English reader to Saleh's major writings, positions his work as a product of his intellectual background and life experience. It argues that his work on Syrian culture and society represents an important moment for both Syria studies and contemporary Arab critical thought. While Arab critical thought customarily traces its intellectual and political origins through more recent theoretical developments back to such figures as Mahdi Amil, Abdallah Laroui, Sadeq Jalal al-Azm and Nasr Hamid

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[3] Incidentally, Saleh is mentioned once in Kassab's book. He is identified as a dissident writer, and is referred to in relation to the 1967 defeat, on which he provides an argument in line with Sadik Jalal al-Azm's call for *self-critique after defeat,* see Kassab 2010: 78.

Abu Zayd, the theoretical significance of Saleh's role and influence remains undervalued and unexamined.

<center>**</center>

In its focus on Saleh, this thesis responds to the need for more academic studies of the Arab intellectual in revolutionary times, especially since the events of the Arab Spring are seen by some commentators not to have yielded "any intellectual standard-bearers of the kind who shaped almost every revolution from 1776 onward" (Worth 2011). While it is generally accepted that the Arab revolutions have had a decentralised, leaderless quality, this thesis challenges the claim that they were lacking in intellectual vision or that the figure of the intellectual was absent from their events. In Syria, and for Syrians, March 2011 marked a radical break in the order of things. Precipitated by political repression, government corruption, high unemployment, and economic inflation, mass protests across the country heralded a new reality. A "Spring" came to follow a long winter. It had already been felt in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries, generating a culture of protest that not only called for changes in and to seemingly ineradicable authoritarian regimes, but also challenged long-established, yet equally historically specific, social systems of meaning. The revolts gave life to a process of articulating new horizons for what it means to be human, to be part of a free, autonomous, global citizenry.[4] Syrians joined this project and found themselves swept up by the most dramatic wave of political unrest in decades. They were truly in the throes of revolutionary social change. But whereas the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were supported globally, the revolution in Syria, for the most part, was seen in the following manner: while there were in fact certain factions visibly trying to change society, Syrian protestors, and later armed factions, were not rebelling against authoritarianism; they were making a misguided attempt, to emulate their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts. Kassab (2014) explains that for the celebrated Syrian poet Adonis, events in Tunisia and Egypt signalled a "breach of habit" in that "they were not an imitation of a set model… were not framed by an exclusionary ideology, religion or social class; and…

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[4] One of the most striking moments early in the revolution is of a villager named Mohammad stating on camera, "I am a human being, not an animal" ("ana insan mani hayawan"). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvXnSw5Az-4

were non-violent" (Kassab 2014: 20). By contrast, the uprising in Syria was met with Adonis's disapproval; he directed harsh criticisms against the burgeoning opposition movement. "Who is the opposition?' he asked: 'voices' of youth, intellectuals and artists, which have not presented a clear and united document, and 'actions' that are vengeful, sectarian and violent" (Kassab 2014: 21).

It is often acknowledged that the Assad regime had betrayed its progressive Ba'athist ideals – some commentators even agreed that the regime was brutal, criminal, and so on – but that the rebellion against it is not a legitimate social movement. Sceptics of the Syrian Revolution interpret the uprising and its likely outcome in similar terms to Zygmunt Bauman's (2011) analysis of the 2011 UK urban riots; Bauman explained the rioters' actions in terms of "because of," not "in order to" (Bauman 2011). As a result, even during its early stages, the rebellion in Syria was seen to signal the replacing of an authoritarian regime with another; a new political climate that one international leftist described as "Assad without Assad" (Rees 2012). Haugbolle tells us that because sceptics found the new generation of intellectuals and revolutionaries "inexperienced and unorganised [they] often refused to engage with them" (Haugbolle 2015: 29). It was argued that Syrian revolutionaries failed to articulate a clear and cohesive vision for an alternative future due to a lack of intellectual rigour. For his part, Adonis interpreted events in highly culturalist terms, attributing intellectual lack to religious *takhalluf* (backwardness), which he argued was rife in Arabic culture. He posited that, "unless the religious question was confronted in Arab societies, no real revolution could take place"; simply put, "he could not support a revolution that came out of mosques" (Kassab 2014: 21).

Saleh expresses utmost derision of this *mawqif* (position); he views Adonis as a member of a generation of writers whose defining characteristic is that "that they championed big causes, but rarely themselves took part in actual struggles" (Saleh 2014b). Elsewhere Saleh writes, "I am resentful of those who oppose the revolution because the protestors came out of mosques. These intellectuals are simply looking for an excuse, and if the protestors came out of universities, they would have found another excuse" (Saleh 2012b).[5] Saleh and like-minded intellectuals chose to embrace

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[5] Since 2011, the regime has conducted raids and has even used army tanks to bomb these mosques. Nonetheless, at least initially, protestors had the impression that mosques provided them safety. In a piece I wrote in 2012, an interviewee told me that "the mosques were strategic points for launching demonstrations and were regarded as

the path that the revolutionaries had set out for themselves, and to take part in the struggle. Haugbolle describes Saleh as an intellectual "who has grasped the need to not just think about the revolution but think *with* the revolution – think about societal change with the words and deeds of the revolutionary political culture that surrounded him" (Haugbolle 2015: 25). If the protests came out of mosques then this needs to be interrogated, not rejected point blank. It is because the Syrian tragedy is the embodiment of "the most extreme of human destinies in terms of torture, horror, death, diaspora, rupture, exile, anger, hatred and betrayal, the limitations of mankind and its greatness, crime and sacrifice" that the role of the intellectual must be to "reflect upon the fate of that entity called Syria and the fate of humanity in general" (Saleh 2014b).

C. Contextual Literature Review: Academic Studies of Syria

In reviewing the relevant literature for this thesis, I divide the material into two main categories: first, there is Saleh's body of work, which I have introduced above; and second, there is the material that makes reference to Saleh, either by explicitly discussing his life and work, or by relying on his testimony in the context of making arguments about Syrian politics and society. This material is predominantly journalistic, namely interviews conducted by international leftists with the Syrian intellectual, and is rarely of an academic nature. As far as I know, the first of these to appear in the English-speaking world was a 2005 interview in the American libertarian monthly magazine *Reason,* in which Saleh comments on the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the role of the intellectual in Syrian society, and alternative political frameworks for the Middle East region (Young 2005). In 2006 Syrian poet and filmmaker Hala Mohammad produced *Journey into Memory,* a film that documents the bus journey that takes Saleh and two of his friends, poet Faraj Bayrakdar and playwright Ghassan Jebai, back to Palmyra, the ancient city that hosts Syria's most notorious prison, where the three friends were once incarcerated. Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's 2007 five-part video *We Will Live to See These Things, or, Five Pictures of What May Come to Pass* included a testimony by Saleh. Sune Haugbolle (2010) also relied on testimonies given by Saleh in his work on former

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immune from the trespassing of security officers." See Massouh, F 2012, 'Syria: Uprising and Reactionism', *Arena Magazine,* no. 115, pp. 5-7.

political prisoners in Syria. After the Syrian Revolution erupted, interest in Saleh's ideas and iconic character increased considerably. Since 2011, Saleh's books, especially his work on the prison, gained wide attention in the Arabic-speaking world (Al-Hajj 2012; Wazen 2012), in early 2013 *Awraq Magazine* published a special issue on Saleh, and in 2015, a French translation of his *Salvation, Oh Youths!* was published.[6] In an interview with Saleh in *Le Monde Diplomatique,* Vicken Cheterian (2013) describes Saleh as "Syria's most well-known secular intellectual." As such, journalists and intellectuals saw Saleh as a reliable source, able to provide nuanced and sophisticated commentary on events in Syria. Today, Saleh is a dependable voice on such matters as the recalcitrance of the international Left in relation to the Syrian Revolution, the increased internationalisation of the conflict, the rise of such extremist groups as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the continued assault on the Syrian population by the Assad regime and its regional allies (Hashemi and Postel 2014; Postel 2014; Shalom 2015). Most recently, Haugbolle (2015) offered an excellent interrogation of the role of the revolutionary intellectual by analysing filmmakers Ali Atassi and Ziad Homsy's documentation of Saleh's arduous journey from Douma to Raqqa and then into exile in Turkey in the award-winning film *Baladna al-Rahib* ('Our Terrible Country'). To the best of my knowledge, this is the only piece of academic writing that studies Saleh's life and work at length.

It goes without saying that an analysis of Saleh's life and work should be carried out in the context of the body of literature that exists on Syria today. This literature, especially since the outbreak of the revolution, is part of renewed Western interest in the politics and society of Arab countries in general, both on scholarly and journalistic levels. It is appropriate, therefore, to posit Western scholarship, media, and foreign policy as realms of public knowledge production, inflected with their own predispositions towards the Arab revolutions, and the Syrian one in particular.

In order to understand the dynamics of Syria today we need to evaluate the literature on pre-revolutionary Syria alongside the new body of analysis that has emerged in the context of the revolution. For too long Syria had been viewed through the lens of blinkered realpolitik. Much of the pre-Arab Spring literature on the country has been hamstrung by a preoccupation with the Assads' leadership style, the "ambiguity" of their domination, as Lisa Wedeen (1999) aptly characterises it.

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[6] The French translation is titled *Recits d'Une Syrie Oubliee: Sortir la Memoire des Prisons* ('*Accounts of a Forgotten Syria: Bringing Memory out of the Prisons'*).

Against this, certain academic efforts have been made to "Demystify Syria" – this is the title of a collection of articles that deal with Syrian civil society, political economy, the dynamics of opposition groups, and so on (Lawson 2009). With the striking exception of Tareq and Jacqueline Ismail's (1998) comprehensive historical survey of Syria's communist movement; Lisa Wedeen's (1999) exploration of the culture of spectacle in Syria; Hanna Batatu's (2000) exhaustive analysis of Syria's rural society; and, Alan George's (2003) investigation into Syria's revivalist Civil Society Movement in the 2000s, few accounts of pre-Arab Spring Syria have offered detailed expositions of the country's state-society relations, and its political culture.

Interest in Syria has tended to look at the country through the prism of geopolitics. Hafez al–Assad was known as the "Sphinx of Damascus," an epithet he earned due to his regional machinations and obsession with foreign policy, and because he "puzzled observers in Syria and the region as to what his true goals were" (Byman 2005: 70). Israeli statesman Shimon Peres once called Assad senior "an enigma wrapped in a riddle" (Pipes 2000). The ostensible mysterious nature of the Assad regime is an important reason why Syria scholars have invested the bulk of their energy in trying to typologise it. For instance, according to Barry Rubin (2007), the Assad regime – especially under Bashar – carries forth the legacy of three types of twentieth century leadership styles: a Latin American "beribboned, corrupt generalissimo," a "gray and bureaucratic" communist, and a "proudly militaristic, boastingly aggressive" fascist. For Rubin, the Assad regime is an "innovative" one, "ruled by a corrupt dictator who ensures that a government-connected and enriched elite lives in luxury on the backs of the people, using left-wing rhetoric and the excuse of Third World sufferings to win over its own people through demagoguery and the West by manipulating its feelings of guilt" (Rubin 2007: ix). Similarly, Raymond Hinnebusch (2009) tells us that the Assad regime may best be understood as "a version of the dominant form of state in the Middle East." "This regime type," he continues, "may best be labelled 'populist authoritarianism'." He defines such regimes as embodying a post-decolonisation state-building strategy adopted by nationalist elites, which face simultaneous external threat and internal instability. This kind of regime further seeks to "consolidate independence through state led 'defensive modernisation' based on import substitute industrialisation in the virtual absence of an industrial bourgeoisie" (Hinnebusch 2009: 5).

While such studies may give us insight into the Assad regime's regional role in manipulating right/left and pro-West/anti-imperialist politics, they more often than not ignore or downplay some crucial sociological and anthropological questions about the relationship between authoritarian politics and the field of cultural production in Syria. I argue that reading Saleh today attempts to identify and redress gaps in this scholarship by making a nuanced study that problematises ideas about Syria that for too long have been taken for granted. It is worth noting, however, that a body of scholarly work has already started to emerge since the outbreak of the revolution, which helps fill this lacuna in our knowledge. This recent literature has paid greater attention to Syria's political economy (Haddad 2011), religious field (Pierret 2013; and, Khatib, Lefevre, and Qureshi 2012), and the question of foreign intervention (Hashemi and Postel 2013). In addition, a number of recent publications have focused on showcasing the output of a new generation of Syrian writers and artists (Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014; Sardar and Yassin-Kassab 2014). Only the first of these two contains a contribution by Saleh. However, in the second publication, British-Syrian novelist and co-editor of the volume Robin Yassin-Kassab acknowledges Saleh's significant role as political thinker and contributor to revolutionary culture (Sardar and Yassin-Kassab 2014: 24).

D. Saleh's Line of Inquiry

Saleh exemplifies the critical intellectual concerned with the new priorities that Kassab outlines: democracy, agency, and critical thinking (Kassab 2010: 344-6). For him these are not just words of rhetorical import, nor are they borrowed concepts; instead, they bring about a new dialogism. These terms have always undergone a process of redefinition, and in the context of today's Syria they can be once again redefined along the lines of the following logic: what we say will now simultaneously exist in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. Thus, for Saleh, these concepts are dynamic, interactive, historically and culturally specific, and therefore must be problematised.

Accordingly, he opposes what he calls the "intellectual of essence" and the "intellectual of grand narratives" for whom liberation and democracy are mere words, always mentioned with haste and generality. Saleh argues that both types of intellectual are essentialist, positivistic, and involved in identity politics without

participating in a much needed renewal of political discourse; both types refuse to address ethno-sectarian conflict because the former deems it "prosaic and [as belonging] to the inconsequential world of politics," while the latter sees it as one of the faces of a vanishing world" (Saleh 2014b). Collectively, Saleh calls these intellectuals "Prophets of Nothingness". He writes that such figures are, at best, intellectuals of beatitudes,

> And thus the natural mood of the intellectual is pessimism because his goal is so out of reach and the essence he cherishes will not materialise. And like the old prophets, today's prophets will not stop lambasting the public for its drowsiness and lack of awareness.
> Saleh 2014b

Such intellectual approaches are tantamount to perpetuating the intellectual crisis we are witnessing today, which is arguably a continuation of the crisis that followed the 1967 Arab defeat (Haugbolle 2015: 29). As Arab despotic regimes managed to paint the defeat as victory, the idea of "liberation" was emptied out of all meaning. Egyptian-French psychoanalyst Moustapha Safouan sums this up nicely,

> The word itself merely named a goal; that is freedom from colonialism and/or from the political pressure of the two great powers of that epoch. However, the word afforded no clue as to how that liberation was to be achieved, nor what to do with it if it was achieved.
> Safouan 2007: 1.

It is therefore incumbent on the intellectual to extract meaning from struggle and to inject that meaning into the word 'liberation', to live in the present, to advocate an ethical political position, and to write and think, not about or against his/her society, but *with* it. It is with that in mind that this thesis aims to identify the ways in which Saleh emerges as a revolutionary intellectual. I argue that his radical placing of the anti-Assad struggle at the centre of the Syrian political agenda is a testament to his commitment to the emancipation and democratisation of the field of cultural production. However, for him, to limit the horizon of the struggle to a purely anti-Assad politics is to remain blind to the entangled systems of domination that trap the

country – Islamist and imperialist (neo-colonial), in addition to authoritarian – and to neglect the imperative for a wholesale revolutionising of the cultural field. Saleh's intellectual project rests on the radicalisation of critique: a strategy for maintaining the struggle to keep open intellectual possibilities in danger of being irretrievably closed. He characterises Assadist authoritarianism, Islamist dogmatism, and Western imperialism as "three monsters" laying siege to Syria (Postel 2014). These monsters have very real material, discursive and ideological effects, which serve to limit the gamut of political possibilities that individuals are able to envision and realise. For Saleh, the field of 'culture' is where the abovementioned monsters can be tamed; this is "a struggle of mythical proportions; it is irrational and may be impossible" (Al-Hallaq 2015). In his remembrance of Samir Kassir, the celebrated Lebanese historian who many believe to have been assassinated by the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus in 2005, and whom Saleh regards as the first martyr of the Syrian cause, Saleh writes, "one can lose his life in this struggle. Samir Kassir did." Nonetheless, he continues, "I see the intellectual as a tamer of these monsters, and as a maker of human ideas" (Al-Hallaq 2015). For Saleh, this is the good fight.

E. Thesis Structure

Following Saleh, this thesis will posit the calamitous state of Syria today as the product of these three forces, and the fundamental problem with which Saleh is concerned. I therefore approach the history of modern Syria in terms of Saleh's "three monsters": the structure and operation of the authoritarian State; the impact of Political Islam; and the consequences of the Western imperialist agenda. I will undertake to illuminate this problem in Chapter 1 by exploring how we got to where we are now, outlining Saleh's analysis of the Syrian Revolution, its gradual militarisation and subsequent Islamicisation.

In Chapter 2 I turn to how Saleh arrived at his intellectual position on the present state of affairs in Syria by tracing the formation of his political and intellectual project in the context of his biography. The main objective in this chapter is to examine how the experience of incarceration helped shape his intellectual pursuits and his consideration of how a society imagines itself. The point here is to reveal the continuity of intention and the persistence of certain preoccupations in his writing, and to be attentive to the nuance, dynamism, and responsiveness in his thinking.

Chapter 3 provides insight into Saleh's life and work after his release from incarceration. I examine the Assads' project of stifling political life in Syria since the 1970s and demonstrate the concomitant processes of the deliberate breaking up of the Left and the construction of Political Islam as the main enemy of the state. I then explore some of Saleh's key contributions to the debates surrounding the Damascus Spring and the Movement for the Revival of Civil Society. By studying the geopolitical and sectarian logics, or imperatives of the regime, I then discuss the ways in which Saleh understands and explains the circulation of power under the Assads.

Chapter 4 offers a discussion on the relationship between Islam and modernity in Saleh's thinking. I look at what Saleh considers to be "mutations" of modernity and how these are contributing to the Syrian impasse today.

In Chapter 5 I put forth some questions pertaining to the definition of culture under authoritarian political conditions, and endeavour to situate Saleh within the context of some key definitions of the figure of the Arab intellectual. I will consider Saleh's response to the problem of Syria today, by focusing on his interrogation of the country's modern politics of cultural production, and ultimately suggesting that for Saleh, Syria's salvation lies in nothing short of the revolutionising of the politics of cultural production.

The conclusion summarises Saleh's main concepts and his contribution to contemporary Arab thought in general and revolutionary thought in Syria in particular. The contribution of this thesis in light of studies on contemporary Arab thought and on Syria may be seen from each of its chapters. This thesis examines recurring themes in Saleh's writings on authoritarianism and democracy, on modernity and tradition, on revolution and militancy, on intellectuals and civil activism. However, it goes beyond studying his ideas in isolation from the socio-political and historical context in which they were written, and demonstrates the extent to which his ideas can be understood in reaction to the authoritarian, religious, and imperialistic discourses surrounding him. The emphasis on Saleh's personal experience – incarceration, living in hiding, exile – and the ways in which he defends his project for radical renovation, show him to be, in the words of the Moroccan intellectual Abdalla Laroui, a "revolutionary intellectual" who "must lead an unhappy life, because his society is living in an infrahistorical rhythm" (Laroui 1976: 177). As a reader of Saleh, I carry out this research because, as Laroui says, "We often make our first real reading of an author, not when we would simply desire to do so, but

when conditions demand it" (Laroui 1976: 104-5). Because I am interested in determining what Foucault calls "the functional conditions of specific discursive practices" (Foucault 1977: 114), as a secondary writer, I take together Saleh's works and interpolate them in order to demonstrate the richness of his response to the complexity and convolutedness of the modern Syrian experience, and the insistence and urgency of the questions this experience generates. What Saleh seeks to achieve then, is an exchange between the most pertinent questions of radical thought and the vividly particular destiny of a nation going through political, social, and cultural crisis.

Facing Syria's Monsters: A Revolutionary Project

> Daesh: that sounds like a monster from those fairy tales we were told as kids.
>
> Yassin al-Haj Saleh
>
> (Quoted in Scheller 2014)

> Three monsters are treading on Syria's exhausted body.
>
> Yassin al-Haj Saleh
>
> (Quoted in Postel 2014)

Since the early 2000s Saleh has audaciously argued *for* civil society, and political and religious reform, and *against* authoritarianism, imperialism and theocracy - the three "monsters" of which he speaks. Today, the three monsters have combined to produce Daesh, or ISIS, as it is more commonly known.[7] Saleh's explicit commentary on the circulation of power under the Assads, his writings on Political Islam, and analysis of Western policies in relation to the Middle East inform the way in which he thinks about the political dynamics of the Syrian Revolution and the subsequent impasse. In this chapter, I will offer a discussion on the revolution, and what the revolutionary moment has meant to and for Saleh, emphasising the centrality of the regime's brutal warfare against its own population, and its ability to manipulate public sentiment to coax support, to Saleh's understanding of events. I then move on to a discussion of the way that Saleh interpreted the revolution's evolution from a non-religious, peaceful grassroots movement through to its militarisation and subsequent *Islamicisation* in order to demonstrate how tightly entangled the causes and effects of authoritarianism and theocratic resistance are in Syria.

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[7] Daesh is the Arabic acronym for ISIS, standing for *al-dawla al-'islamiyya fi al-'iraq wa al-sham.* This pejorative term is used predominantly by opponents of ISIS and is rejected by supporters of the Islamic State.

A. Saleh and The Revolutionary Moment

Saleh's writings on the prison in *Salvation, Oh Youths!* constitute an opportunity for him to confront his past. I will subject this idea to further analysis later in this thesis in order to show how, in the words of Michel Foucault, "the quibbling and confrontations that a writer generates between himself and his text cancel out the signs of his particular individuality" (Foucault 1977: 117). That is to say that for Saleh prison is a shared national experience. Nevertheless, the book has a highly personal and individual dimension. In it Saleh demarcates his prison years as his past life proper. This is crucial since if prison was his formative period, his "second childhood," as he says, then the revolution brought about his youth again. This second youth is where he can live in the endlessly rich, free world of his own intellect, leavened by his loves: the universe of books and ideas, the ever-expanding community of Syrian critical writers and thinkers, and the amorphous possibilities of a newfound Syrian politics, defined by upheavals, crises and ruptures. In the introduction to that book, he attempts to make a distinction between knowing and remembering, *between semantic and episodic memory*. Saleh's episodic memory recollection finds its expression in the way he situates his *self* in a *subjective sense of time*. This is key because at the time the introduction for the book was written – it is dated 29/10/2011 – it serves to elicit the retrieval of contextual information pertaining to what the he describes as the "Glorious Syrian Revolution" (Saleh 2012a: 10).

Inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, demonstrations in Syria began in late January 2011 after a man from the north-eastern city of Hasakah, poured gasoline on himself and set himself on fire, in the same way Tunisian Mohammad Bouazizi had in Tunisia in December 2010. Two days later, an evening demonstration was held in Raqqa, to protest the killing of two soldiers of Kurdish descent. On February 3rd, a "Day of Rage" was called for in Syria on social media websites. Protestors demanded governmental reform, but most protests took place outside of Syria, and were small. Hundreds marched in al-Hasakah, but Syrian security forces dispersed the protest and arrested dozens of demonstrators. In late February, a protest took place outside the Libyan Embassy in Damascus to demonstrate against the Muammar al-Gaddafi's crackdown on demonstrators in Libya, and was met with brutal beatings from Syrian police moving to disperse the demonstrations. In March, the city of Der'aa became the focal point for demonstrations and the uprising was in full swing. Demonstrators

there marched demanding political reforms, the reinstatement of civil rights and the lifting of the dreaded emergency law, which for decades has shielded the regime against all accountability. In Der'aa, the regime responded by putting the entire city under siege, cutting off electricity, food and water supplies, and killing hundreds of activists. Demonstrations erupted in other cities in solidarity with Der'aa, and as the Syrian regime's military campaign expanded, so did the demands of the protest movement. The demonstrators used the slogan "*al-sha'b yureed isqat al-nizam*" ("*the people want to overthrow the regime*"). By June we are faced with the most severe of the people's demands: "the execution of the president". Beneath this development in the demonstrators' rhetoric, reflecting the metamorphosis from a grass roots movement that demands reforms to a nation-wide uprising that harbours regicidal fantasies lies a whole series of competing forces – aesthetic, political, and cultural, which nonetheless share the conviction that all things come into being through strife necessarily. A Heraclitean flux of differing impulses threatened to pull "Assad's Syria" apart in a variety of different directions. This transformed the story of the people's struggle from one that accepted the regime's absolute domination, to something far more complex. The demonstrators seemed all too willing to die for their cause, to become icons of the struggle, and to adopt Kierkegaard's notion that "the tyrant dies and his rule is over; the martyr dies and his rule begins" (Kierkegaard [1959] 2003: 151).

For Saleh, the revolution meant that Syria had entered a new historical phase, with new challenges and new heroes. The experiences of older dissidents had to be told quickly enough, because the revolution, carried forth predominantly by young Syrians, had ushered in new tales of courage and socio-political struggle. A decade before the revolution, Saleh wrote that "the university students of today are the generation of *tala'e' al-ba'ath, shabibat al-thawra,* and *ittihad talabat suriya* (Ba'ath Party and regime-sponsored student unions); a generation without memory for whom history started in 1970" (Saleh 2010: 16). This "loss of an entire generation" explains the absence of a large portion of the population from political life, and is one of two reasons accounting for the weakness of oppositionary political parties in Syria, the other being the oppression these parties have endured. This has rendered anachronistic whatever values these parties uphold. "Syria consumes systems of meaning not produced by its current generation" (Saleh 2010: 18). Today's revolutionary

generation, Saleh argues, ushers in a new order, where it has access to the modes of production of new systems of meaning. He writes,

> The epoch of the Syrian and Arab revolutions is the last opportunity for these texts to be published in a book… Today's tyranny is the offspring of yesterday's, in terms of genealogy, structure, and meaning. But unlike the rebellious youth of yesteryear, it seems improbable that today's rebellious youth will wait 15 years before they publish their experiences; they document and publish those at once and without delay.
>
> Saleh 2012a: 10

This reminds us of Walter Benjamin's invocation of an aphorism by the French historian Andre Monglod: "The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly" (Benjamin1999: 482). There is, therefore, hope in the epoch of these revolutions, which cannot be more timely for Saleh to "rid", or relieve, himself of these texts; to bid farewell his "increasingly senescent experience" and "to make way for the new experiences of a new generation" (Saleh 2012a: 11). Because writing has been a significant, pleasurable, and redemptive way of making connections to the world, he now urges others to have the same excitement and passion that had been missing, or not allowed to be expressed, under authoritarian conditions. Here, Saleh is hopeful that the revolution offers a space where passion for ideas might be found, or recovered.

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It must be borne in mind that the abovementioned set of (revolutionary) emotions stands in opposition to the way many Syrians, including Saleh, felt before the revolution, when the sublimeness with which peaceful protestors confronted the regime was impossible to imagine. Things were status quo. But in 2010, he set out to address the cultural tensions between Arab secularists and Islamists, which he saw to be near boiling point. He published two important essays in the Lebanese critical journal *Kalamon* in that year; the first (2010b) was a critique of the conceptualisations

on the "Arab State" in the works of three major Syrian intellectuals: Burhan Ghalioun, Georges Tarabichi, and Aziz al-Azmeh. Saleh argues that Ghalioun reverts to a concept of society seen only through the prism of culture, identity, *umma* (Islamic community)*;* in other words, Islamic culture as a "natural" system of meanings, and an "Islamic self" that is undermined by the "unnatural" state. For Saleh, the problem with this approach, other than the way it abstractly essentialises both state and society (and by extension, the *self*) is the ease with which it can be reduced by proponents of "the rule of the majority" in order to support claims of democratic legitimacy.[8] The demand for majoritarian rule – which gained increasing currency in the rhetoric of Syrian Sunnis against what they saw as minoritarian Alawite regime – incited an alarmist trend among some Arab intellectuals, such as Tarabichi and Azmeh. For Saleh, Tarabichi is a political conservative who does not shy away from expressing scepticism towards change, often appearing to justify the continuation of the authoritarian state. Equally reactionary in Saleh's view is Azmeh's conceptualisation of the state as a cohesive, rationalistic, and modernising force, and of any political opposition necessarily as opposition to the state. Azmeh places primacy on abstract institutions at the expense of demystifying the actual practices of political regimes. As a response to these approaches, Saleh proposes an alternative concept that helps elucidate the relationship between state and society in Syria: *al-dawla al-sultaniyya al-muhaddatha,* or "modernised despotic state." It is worth noting here that even though Saleh views "modernist authoritarianism" as a general political trait in contemporary Arab societies, he argues that modern Syria represents this model like no other Arab state. He stresses that we cannot blame "our culture" and vehemently stands against any kind of cultural determinism. "Authoritarian culture," Saleh writes, "is not our natural temperament, as Azmeh argues… Rather, it is the result of various historical processes and constructions. Authoritarian politics is the mechanism that promotes and 'fixes' this culture through its reliance on an Islamic inventory of morals and commands" (Saleh 2010b).

The second contribution to *Kalamon* (2010c) provides a sketching out of three aspects of the Muhammadean character. The focus on the charismatic Muhammad – a use of Weber's concept of the ethical prophet reminiscent of Hamid Dabashi's (2009)

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[8] This was evident in Ghalioun's approach to politics in his role as president of the Syrian National Council in 2011-2012.

Weberian study on Islamic authority, its traditional, charismatic, and routinised forms – is the lynchpin from which Saleh explores the various ways by which the Prophet, and by extension, Islam, is interpreted and experienced in the Muslim imagination. While this essay can be read as a hermeneutic exercise, the attempt to understand the myriad ways that Muslims relate to their religion highlights Saleh's sociological line of inquiry on Syrian Muslims (and Islamists), their debates, and the way they live in the world.

These two essays give us an impression of Saleh's concerns on the eve of the revolution: Arab intellectual debates, and Political Islam. To be sure, Syria is Saleh's case study, but many of his findings on the country help paint a more vivid picture of the Arab world of the past and the present. Yet neither of these essays is explicit about fighting the authoritarian regime in Syria. The first essay is a polite, albeit honest and critical, piece which puts the onus on particular intellectuals. Readers are in some ways expected to understand the subtext behind Saleh's pretext; that part and parcel of the Arab cultural malaise is due to the folly of intellectuals who have given up on their own societies and sold their services to authoritarian regimes. The second essay puts equal blame on Islamists, whose political aspirations have led to the stripping away of Islam's more spiritual aspects as a global religion and the demonisation of Muslims around the world. Yet at the centre of Saleh's approach is a preoccupation with the Assad dictatorship. In 2009, nearly 2 years before the start of the Syrian Revolution, Saleh offered this prescient description of his country:

> The political regime is authoritarian, society is sectarian, the economy is liberal, and the dominant ideology is nationalist and exclusivist. But it is more appropriate to speak in terms of processes: the state is centralised around the regime's security apparatuses, society is sectarianised, the economy is liberalised (without the ethos of free market competition), and nationalist ideology becomes increasingly predicated on *mumana'a*.[9]
> Saleh 2009: 80

Saleh's characterisation at this time reveals the sleeping monsters that would soon awake from their slumber. Towards the close of the 2000s, the Assad regime's

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[9] The term *Mumana'a* is broadly defined as "rejectionism," a foreign policy predicated on anti-imperialist ideology. The term will be problematised further in a later chapter in this thesis.

stranglehold over people's political, economic, and social affairs created a minefield. This was a matter of grave concern for Saleh and many others who felt that a disaster was looming. This feeling is echoed by Syrian intellectual Sadik Jalal al-Azm (2014) who wrote, "By 2009-2010, it was impossible to go about the day without repeatedly hearing from working people expressions such as, 'All it needs is a match to ignite'." Already in the early 2000s, the regime had started to sense the "political aliveness" of civil society groups when, in March 2004, a public demonstration took place outside the "People's Council of Syria" (the Syrian Parliament) in Damascus. Saleh was among the protestors demanding reform on the day of the 41st anniversary of the Ba'ath Party's seizure of power. When the protestors unfurled their banners, plain-clothed security agents pounced, ignited some scuffles, and eventually started to make arrests. But the authorities were uncharacteristically calm in dealing with the activists. During his brief detention on that day, Saleh wrote, "Not a single drop of blood was shed. Nobody was humiliated… No one was physically harmed, and in any event, no real interrogation with us ever took place" (Saleh 2010: 72). Rather than feel elated, Saleh expressed concern over what he called "the oppressive void" (Saleh 2010: 76); that is, a sense of decline on the part of the authorities, and a noticeable and uncharacteristically passive way in which they dealt with the situation. For Saleh, this loosening of the state's grip could only be temporary; its main purpose is to lure activists into the open in order to legitimise physical force against them. "The authoritarian structure is such a closed-circuit from which no culture of emancipation can emerge… There can only be open confrontation, sudden and violent political awakening, civil conflicts, and convoluted political struggles" (Saleh 2010b).

The revolution then marked the unequivocal resurrection of a hitherto dead opposition. In response, the regime initially combined its strategy of symbolic violence with a security-oriented strategy that entailed anything from arbitrary arrest of street protestors to the assassination of local opposition leaders. It constructed an image of the protestors as Salafist extremists hell-bent on the destruction of the secular, progressive Syrian state. The regime engaged in a process of fabricating scenarios of looming *fitna* (sectarian civil conflict for which the Sunnis are implicitly blamed), and painted the revolution as an international conspiracy, a pretext for foreign invasion seeking to destabilise Syria. As a result any criticism of the regime by civil groups, and indeed any and all independent political action against it were presented as a combination of "Western-Zionist-Salafist" transgression on national

sovereignty (Muir 2013) and a "foreign-inspired," "terrorist," plot (Black 2012). The regime's logic of "sectarianisation," Saleh (2012e) argues, rests precisely on its ability to make sectarian discourse taboo, all the while sowing sectarian discord among citizens. "This much was clear before the revolution," he writes, "but it is even more visible today" (Saleh 2012e).

That said, Syrian Islamists had long felt like strangers in their own country. They had been alienated by what they saw as a minoritarian Alawite regime with its various atheistic and heretical practices, a feeling that became more pronounced following the eruption of the revolution. Saleh tells us that "for Sunnis, opposition to the regime seems a natural undertaking; they appear to be anti-regime by their very nature" (Saleh 2012f). It is, nonetheless, worth noting that, contrary to the regime's narrative and much like the other uprisings of the Arab Spring, it was not the Islamists who launched the revolution in Syria. While some Sunni religious leaders participated in anti-regime protests early in 2011, they only constituted a small part of a broader national protest movement. Saleh (2012g) aptly points out that the first stage of the revolution – March to August 2011 – was marked by nation-wide, peaceful mass protests. The revolution's main spokespeople were human rights activists, former political prisoners, celebrities and artists, and young men and women, from Syria's cities and countryside, who quickly learned how to organise demonstrations, mobilise protestors, and use new media in order to bring together not only different people but apparently disparate discursive frameworks as a way of reimagining categories of citizenship and belonging in Syria. The demonstrators aimed to construct a new framework of belonging in which Syria's disaffected and marginalised are brought together; a framework that combines an emergent sense of the imperative to speak out with other, more regional, and global forms of inclusion. In doing so, the demonstrators were reclaiming the meanings and possibilities of Syrian identity. Accordingly, Saleh's (2011c) first essay in *Kalamon* following the outbreak of the revolution responds to this new lived experience; he is somewhat hopeful that the revolution may usher in the end of the Assad dynasty and the beginning of a "third Syrian republic," a multiculturalist, pluralistic democracy with a healthy civil society and a free and active cultural field.

B. The Militarisation and Islamicisation of the Revolution

The revolutionary movement began to militarise as a result of the regime's shift from a predominantly security-based response to protestors (a hallmark of the first stage) to a more military dependant strategy. In July 2011 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed under the command of Riad al-Asaad, a defected colonel in the Syrian Air Force. The FSA became the umbrella group under which defectors from the regular army operated. Gradually, civilian groups whose local areas had been targeted by the regime began to mobilise and join the FSA. Saleh informs us that,

> Many in these groups may have already harboured ill feelings towards the regime, arising from past experiences of persecution, particularly Islamists from families in Hama, Idlib, and other cities that suffered great losses during the events of the early 1980s.
>
> Saleh 2012g

In early August 2011 – the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan – the regime entered Hama with its tanks.[10] It did the same in Homs, Idlib, areas of Damascus, and Der'aa. Rousing the ghosts of the 1980s, these occupations marked the next stage, and were accompanied by unprecedented levels of detainment, torture, and killing under torture of civilians. Saleh (2012f) recognises that the revolution "signalled an unprecedented rise in Sunni communal consciousness." In February 2012, the regime instituted a scorched earth policy against predominantly Sunni localities. Political money from Arab Gulf states started to reach armed rebel formations which were starting to take on a much more explicit Islamic character. With the sense that the international community had abandoned them, Syrians began to tolerate the rise and gradual takeover of Jihadist elements of the revolution.

During this time Saleh starts to write somewhat programmatically; he publishes two essays in *Kalamon* that deal explicitly with Assadist governmentality – the way the regime's rationalities and techniques govern the political, economic, and cultural domains in Syrian society. The first essay (2012c) focusses on the history of the *shabiha* (regime-sponsored thugs), their important role in maintaining regime

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[10] Earlier, on July 7, 2011, which was a Friday and therefore a day of mass demonstrations, both the American and French ambassadors visited Hama, and this may have provided the city with relative protection from the regime.

power since the 1970s, and their transformation into a full-fledged paramilitary force against the protestors since 2011. The second essay (2012d) deals with the social and cultural roots of fascism in Syria, the regime's construction of new economic and cultural elites, and the dominant intellectual currents represented by individuals who present themselves as opposing the regime "while in reality they are closer to the regime than the opposition" (Saleh 2012d). Taken together, these essays present Saleh's rereading of Syria's modern history in the context of the revolution, its militarisation, and its increasingly Islamic face. In his attempt to offer political directives, Saleh strategically tethers the past to the present by locating repetitions and differences between pre-revolutionary and revolutionary times. He tells us, "Fascism is not exclusive to the Assad regime or the notion of Alawite privilege. Fascism can take place in a theocratic context and is likely to re-emerge in a Sunni, and specifically Salafist, context" (Saleh 2012d). Inasmuch as Saleh aims to expose the Assad regime's mentalities and practices, he warns that if the revolution cannot break with these mentalities and practices it risks reproducing despotism, oppression, and violence.

In mid-2013 Saleh left Damascus and moved to Ghouta, the once lush agricultural belt that surrounds the Syrian capital, where he witnessed firsthand the domination of Islamic symbols over the "liberated" public sphere. While in Ghouta, he wrote the following:

> In the summer of 2012 the use of Islamic banners became more noticeable in demonstrations. These are a variety of designs of what is broadly referred to as the "black standard," or the "black flag of jihad," and represent groups with Salafist and/or Jihadist tendencies… Today, in areas no longer under regime control, some of which I had the opportunity to visit, one can see these flags flying in abundance and adorning the tinted windows of vehicles used by rebels. In Douma, for example, the black banners now eclipse the "green" flags of the revolution, which represent civil opposition groups as well as the FSA.
> Saleh 2013a

Militarisation, though necessary for self-defence, led to the loss of regime control and therefore to the lack of a centralised authority in the newly liberated areas. When the

revolution broke out, Saleh lived in hiding, periodically moving about with his wife Samira not only for fear of arrest by the regime, but also because staying in Damascus was like "living in a bubble," he tells us. "I was almost outside the country but without the advantage of being safe" (Saleh 2013b). Saleh stopped writing during this period because,

> My ability to give an overview of the increasingly complicated Syrian situation was decreased, and so was my satisfaction with what I was writing. Over the course of the revolution, it became harder to keep a routine. There was the personal suffering because I was living in hiding, there was an increasingly narrow space for experiments in Damascus, and there was a mental and psychological exhaustion because of the death of so many people and the destruction of so many lives. Writing should be renewed to respond to the challenge of all this blood and drama. I also have to be renewed.
> Saleh 2013b

In April 2013, Saleh moved to Douma in the Ghouta region of the Damascus countryside, a major flashpoint in the armed clashes between the FSA and the Syrian Army and Security forces. His wife Samira followed him there and both stayed in a civil defence centre with some of their comrades, including Razan Zaitouneh who was involved in documenting human rights violations for the LCC. Douma had been under rebel control since October 2012, and this at least gave civil activists a semblance of freedom and safety. In this environment, Saleh returned to writing, conducting a number of interviews, or "portraits" as he calls them, with rebel fighters who assumed different roles in different revolutionary brigades. However, the rise of *Jaysh al-Islam*, a new Salafist military formation under the leadership of Zahran Alloush that gradually controlled more territory in the Damascus countryside, and the eventual integration of many FSA battalions and brigades under this organisation meant that the impression of freedom and safety that civil activists had in Douma was soon shattered. Much like the case of other parts of the once lush Ghouta and indeed most other regions in Syria – the population of Douma had been forced to flee the carnage that reduced their city to rubble. In Haugbolle's (2015) analysis of *Baladna al-Rahib,* a film that documents Saleh's escape from Douma to Raqqa and then into exile, we are reminded of a scene where Saleh points to a torn poster of Assad. In the film Saleh

states, "there is nothing that more eloquently expresses the transformation afflicting Syria than this image" (Haugbolle 2015: 14). Haugbolle goes further to add another dimension to this transformation: the image of an iconic intellectual in a so-called liberated, albeit barren landscape. "The absence of the people – the very agents of change – and the scenery of destruction undercut the regime's claim that the people as a whole 'love' the president, but also make the revolution an absent presence" (Haugbolle 2015: 14) "Militant Islamists," says Saleh, "take advantage of a society in ruin" (Wannous 2014.). Today, the dominance of Salafist currents "signifies the expression of a reclaimed religious freedom, which directly challenges the Assad regime's long legacy in suppressing any form of public religiosity" (Saleh 2013a). However, the increasingly felt religious fervour of anti-regime fighters has contributed to the shifting of the narrative about the revolution: from a popular, peaceful uprising to a sectarian civil war.

This points equally to the way in which Islamists have taken advantage of the prevalent political void in Syria, though on the oppositionary political level they have preferred to remain behind the scenes. Shadi Hamid (2014) tells us that Islamists have tended to assume a shadowy role, "the less attention, the better." He explains that "in revolutionary contexts, Islamist groups generally prefer to stay on the sidelines, letting others, usually secular figures and parties, lead the way in order to secure international legitimacy" (Hamid 2014: 143). "In Syria," he adds, "although the Muslim Brotherhood was the single most influential party in the Syrian National Council, the body would be headed first by Paris-based secular academic Burhan Ghalioun and then George Sabra, a Christian. Later, the same could be said of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, formally led by centrist and secular figures like Moaz al-Khatib and Suhair al-Atassi" (Hamid 2014: 143). Key figures in the Syrian opposition, who have ties with various regional and international governments that fund and support Islamist rebel formations, have been accused of paying lip service to a democratic, secular revolution while turning a blind eye to the way that Islamists have risen in the ranks of revolutionary power. Furthermore, media focus shifted from talking about Assad's brutal assault on Syrian cities to the emergence of terrorist rebel groups, such as *Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham*. In revolutionary Syria, the brutality of Assad's war machine, and the overwhelming sense that Syrians developed of having been abandoned by the international community, signalled a grave transformation. The idea that the rebellion in Syria was decentralised and leaderless was put to rest

with the appearance of the slogan *"qa'idna lil-'abad, sayidna Muhammad,"* (*"Our Leader Forever, Our Prophet Muhammad"*). This slogan re-appropriates the notion of Assadist "eternity," which for long has been exemplified in the regime's campaign *"ilal-'abad, ilal-'abad yā Hafez al–Assad,"* (*"Forever, oh Hafez al–Assad"*), and places the Prophet Muhammad as "our" leader for eternity. Similarly, *"al-sha'b yureed isqat al-nizam"* (*"the people want to overthrow the regime"*), the slogan that so vividly captured the Arab protestors' desire for democratic change, was replaced with *"al-sha'b yureed al-dawla al-islamiyya"* (*"the people want the Islamic State"*). Coupled with the alarming rise of hardline Islamist forces, which is expressed most dangerously in the emergence of ISIS, this development in revolutionary sloganeering meant that the Assad "monster," to use Saleh's term, starts to appear as the "lesser evil." On this basis, the regime makes efforts to paint itself as an indispensable partner in the fight against terrorism.

<p style="text-align:center">**</p>

I return to the quotes in the beginning of this chapter. By likening ISIS to a fairy tale monster, Saleh alludes to a deep-seated and widespread fear of the 'Islamic threat' in Syrian society – a fear cynically stoked by the Assad regime throughout its four-decade rule – but critically, for Saleh, ISIS is not simply an Islamic creation. Rather, it is the "terrible outcome of our monstrous regimes and the West's role in the region for decades, as much as it is the result of grave illnesses within Islam" (Saleh, quoted in Postel 2014). Therefore, ISIS, its jihad and its recently established "state" are only the most visible consequences of the power struggle that has played out in the region for the past century – between quasi-secular authoritarian politics, Western imperialist domination, and theocratic ideologies – symptoms of a resulting deep malaise in the Arab/Muslim world, which, alarming though it may seem, has not come out of nowhere, but rather has deep roots. If we want to have any hope of tackling the Syrian situation, we need to step back from the hysterical and sensational rhetoric that continues to dominate the discussion and instead re-examine the modern history of the Middle East as Saleh insists on doing.

To be sure, there is a dire need for critique in the face of multiple forms of oppression. However, while we need to address the deep malaise in contemporary Islam, as well as problematise the limitations and dangers of essentialist views about

the Islamic/Arab world through rigorous interrogation of Western policies, perceptions, and misconceptions, we must begin by confronting the first monster – the authoritarian state. In the next chapter I take up this task in order to show Saleh's analysis of "Assad's Syria" in the form of its superlative instrument, the prison. This paves the path for a discussion of Saleh's investment in exposing the mechanisms by which the regime has maintained its domination.

From Raqqa to Tadmur: The Young Marxist and the Prison

Prison is a beast with which a person cannot live unless it was tamed and put under control.

<div align="center">Yassin al-Haj Saleh 2012a: 31</div>

It's not always easy
to face the animal
even if it looks at you
without fear or hate
it does so fixedly
and seems to disdain
the subtle secret it carries

It seems better to feel
the obviousness of the world
that noisily day and night
drills and damages
the silence of the soul.

<div align="center">Jean Follain</div>

This chapter examines Saleh's formative period, which extends from his early life until the late 1990s. The long span of this period is due to the fact that this was when Saleh's intellect was initially formed, with inevitable consequences for his later work. We may divide this period into two phases: from his birth and upbringing in Raqqa until 1980 in which year he was arrested by state security in Aleppo; from 1980 to 1996, during which period he spent a gruelling 16 years and 14 days in three state penitentiaries. Firstly, I discuss Saleh's childhood and youth by drawing on

correspondence with Saleh over the course of 2014-2015. I sketch out his involvement with the Syrian Communist Party-Political Bureau (SCP-PB) and show him to be one of the victims of the regime's crackdown on independent activism. Then, in the second part of the chapter, I outline aspects of Saleh's prison experience and address a set of interrelated questions pertaining to his notion of the prison as the culture *par excellence* in Syria. I substantiate this by drawing extensively on his writing on the prison experience, exploring the main themes in his 2012 book, *Salvation, Oh Youths! 16 Years in Syria's Prisons,* a compilation of essays written between 2003 and 2011.

A. Childhood and Young Adulthood

Saleh was born on February 1, 1961 in Al-Jurn al-Aswad, a small Sunni village near Raqqa, Syria, whose seventy inhabitants lived in a peasant economy, based on cotton plantations and sheep herding. The village was also known as Jurn al-Haj Saleh, so called after al-Haj (the pilgrim) Saleh, Saleh's great grandfather. Abdallah, the pilgrim's son and Saleh's paternal grandfather, was the *'alim* (scholar) of the village because he knew how to read and write and possessed great religious knowledge. Saleh's father, Ibrahim al-Haj Saleh, born in 1928, attended a *kuttab,*[11] used to read and write, and was somewhat knowledgeable in religious and worldly affairs. He married Saleh's mother, Ujaja, and together they had eight sons and one daughter. Saleh dedicated *Salvation, Oh Youths!* to his mother who died in 1990, unable to say goodbye to him and two other sons who remained in prison.

In 1965, an elementary school was built in Al-Jurn and Saleh started attending classes there, unlike his three older siblings who had to ride their bicycles to schools in neighbouring villages. Family tales speak of Saleh's high intelligence. His father often boasted to visitors of his son's talents; from a young age, Saleh knew the names of major capital cities, the names of Arab political leaders, and exhibited impressive mathematical skills. He attended a *kuttab* one summer and also learned a little bit on

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[11] A *kuttab* is a type of voluntary school, usually located in a single room within the precincts of a village or neighbourhood mosque, designed to furnish Muslim children with basic education in religious matters. The curriculum taught at a *kuttab* typically revolves around the memorisation of the Qur'an, but is often supplemented by practical instruction in religious duties, reading, writing, arithmetic, and history.

religion from his older brother, Muhammad.[12] Like the other children of his village, however, he mostly enjoyed shepherding sheep that his family owned and imagined that he would one day become a shepherd.

Saleh moved to Raqqa in 1971 to live with his three older brothers and to attend secondary school.[13] He had a desire to learn and excel. As an autodidact, Saleh spent many hours during this period reading whatever he could get his hands on: from the stories of Sinbad the Sailor, and the cartoons of Mumtaz Albahra in the children's magazine *Usamah* (whose editor at the time was the notable Zakaria Tamir),[14] to the detective novels of Maurice Leblanc, and modern Arab short stories. Saleh would retell these stories to his mother and siblings, but by his own admission, he was no raconteur. After reading all the books in his brothers' small library, he began to visit the Cultural Centre in Raqqa to peruse the cultural section in newspapers, especially *al-Thawra,* and *al-Mawqif al-Adabi.* For Saleh, culture was synonymous with literature: the story, and the novel in particular. At the age of 12, he procured a library card, began to borrow books on a regular basis, and read the works of Naguib Mahfouz, as well as works from the Russian and French literary traditions. He and his brothers were also avid followers of the Lebanese periodical *Al-Balagh.*

In 1973 a group of communists defected from the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) and formed the SCP-Political Bureau, under the leadership of Riad al-Turk. With its fusion of internationalist and Arab nationalist politics, the new group was popular among the younger party cadre and new recruits, such as Saleh older brothers. Saleh attended SCP-PB meetings and seminars, as well as those organised by the Union of Democratic Youth; both parties were becoming increasingly anti-Assadist, though the latter group disbanded in 1975. Saleh aligned himself with the more "heretical," critical communists and exhibited a readiness to confront the "dogmatists." The debates of his brothers had a major influence on him in this regard;

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[12] Saleh told me "During that period, I only memorised a handful of Qur'anic verses, the only ones I still remember to this day" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February).

[13] The four brothers lived in a rented room. "It was a difficult experience," Saleh recalls, "being away from my mother and my home. This was the first separation of many separations to follow" Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February).

[14] *Usamah* is published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture since 1969. Zakaria Tamir, its first editor-in-chief is an influential master of the Arabic short story and one of the founders of the Syrian Writers Union in 1968. He was also the editor-in-chief of *Al-Mawqif al-Adabi* and *Al-Ma'rifah* periodicals. In 1980, he was dismissed from his role in *Al-Ma'rifah* after he included excerpts from Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi's treatise *Taba'i' al-'istibdad* ("*The Characteristics of Despotism*") in one of its issues. He left Syria soon after and has lived in the UK in self-imposed exile since 1981. See Tamir. Zakaria (2008) *Mu'jam al-qaswah wa al-ru'b* [*The Dictionary of Brutality and Terror*] Arab Writers' Union.

"in a heated discussion with Mustafa, I remember Muhammad saying: Marxism is not theology! This helped shape my understanding of myself and of Marxism: I am Marxist, but Marxism is not divine" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February). Typically, he was often reminded by his peers of the importance of reading classical Marxist texts, many of which had been translated into Arabic by the Moscow-based publishing house *Dar al-Taqaddum*. Saleh found these texts difficult and alienating at the time and was far more intrigued by the existentialist writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Colin Wilson. He was motivated to write existentialist short stories and poems himself, and on one occasion he submitted one such piece, a poem titled "fi jawf al-zaman al-mayyet" (In the Abyss of Dead Time), to *Al-Thawra* newspaper; it was rejected. "Nevertheless, they wrote back to me saying that the poem was creative and sophisticated," Saleh recounts, "perhaps because they did not understand a single thing from it. I cannot say I understood anything from it either; it was more of a violent linguistic exercise than a poem" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February).

The increasingly dominant system of preferential treatment, one that favoured some students over others, helped sharpen Saleh sense of justice and desire to become an active agent of change. Despite Saleh being the top student in his French class, it was a well-connected classmate who was granted a scholarship to study in France one summer. This was Saleh's first encounter with ideology at its purest, because it was in this moment that he, in a kind of epiphany, came to understand what power is. But this only spurred him on in his studies. He graduated from high school with first class honours, the highest in all of Raqqa for that year. "People wondered," Saleh says, "how a communist of humble, Bedouin extraction can top his class" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February). He enrolled in the faculty of medicine at Aleppo University, though he would have preferred to study mathematics; "studying medicine was the 'natural' choice for exceptional students" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February). It was around this time that his intellectual trajectory was further shaped through reading critical Arab thinkers such as Laroui, Yassin al-Hafez, and Burhan Ghalioun. On the level of activism, he became more involved with the SCP-PB in Aleppo and was always present at the few political demonstrations that the party managed to organise – whether on campus or in front of the Ministry of Justice – especially in response to

the full-scale urban war between the Assad regime and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.[15]

The fifth congress of the SCP-PB, held in 1979, left an indelible mark on Saleh's politics. Among other things, the congress criticised the Assad regime's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, its expansion of networks of privilege and *wasta*,[16] as well as the increasingly felt presence of *mukhabarat* agents in everyday life.[17] Syria's increasing militarism, as well as Assad's nepotism and oppressive measures against his political opponents were grave concerns for the SCP-PB. In 1976 it was vocal in condemning Assad's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War on the side of right-wing Maronite militias against leftist Lebanese and Palestinian rebel groups. But it was especially critical of Assad's policies back home. In appointing ever more members of his family and Alawite sect to positions in the military and intelligence services, Hafez was able to consolidate power. Indeed, the capricious powers of the *mukhabarat* intelligence and the favouritism enjoyed by Alawites in official appointments aggravated the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group deprived of all legitimate outlets for political activity and which regarded the Alawites as socially inferior heretics (George 2003: 15). This was criticised by opponents of Assad as a dangerous manoeuvre that was bound to alienate the Sunni majority and elicit popular hostility against the Alawites. In 1980, during his brief time out of prison, Turk and his supporters participated in the formation of the National Democratic Gathering (NDG), a coalition created in response to the conflict between Assad's forces and Islamist militants (mainly members of the Muslim Brotherhood) who since 1976 had been carrying out a "campaign of assassinations of senior Alawi and regime figures and bombing of regime symbols" (George 2003: 15). The NDG consisted of the SCP-PB with four other banned parties: the Democratic Arab Socialist Union, a faction headed by Jamal al-Atassi which broke away from the

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[15] This particular episode in Syria's history should be read in the context of Islamic political activity in the region in the late 1970s and early 1980s; there was the rise of Jihadism in Afghanistan, which was re-enforced by the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979; the Islamic Revolution in Iran; the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamists, who held it for two weeks before the Saudi military regained control; the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al Sadat by members of the Muslim Brotherhood; as well as various other rebellions in North Africa.

[16] *Wasta* refers to a form of cronyism, a social contract between a political authority and a beneficiary. It connotes partiality to certain individuals, especially by appointing them to positions of authority or by circumventing bureaucratic regulations in order to enable them to quickly achieve results.

[17] In Syria, *mukhabarat* is used as a generic term to refer to any one of the many state intelligence directorates.

Arab Socialist Union (ASU); the Movement of Arab Socialists; and, two parties previously associated with the Ba'ath itself: the Arab Revolutionary Workers' Party, a Marxist offshoot of the Ba'ath from the 1960s, and the Democratic Socialist Arab Ba'ath Party, a remnant of Salah Jadid's[18] leftist faction of the Ba'ath (George 2003: 94). While the NDG was critical of the Islamist insurgency, its staunch criticism was directed more towards the regime's brutal response to the Muslim Brotherhood. Saleh says that he regards the party's progressive, democratic principles as having "reinforced [his] already passionate dislike for dogmatic politics" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February). These democratic principles, however, proved costly for the SCP-PB whose members were arrested, along with members of the NDG and the Muslim Brotherhood, by the thousands.

B. 1980-1996: Time in Prison

The story of Saleh's incarceration—between 1980 and 1996—is confided in full in his *Salvation, Oh Youths! 16 Years in Syria's Prisons,* a book organised around three connected motifs: incarceration in the prisons of 'Assad's Syria'; prison as a 'recollected experience'; and, aspects of life after prison. State Security arrested Saleh from his home in Aleppo at dawn on 7 December 1980. He was 'moderately' tortured for one day with the '*doulāb*' ('tire') and '*bisāt al-rīħ*' ('magic carpet') methods. A week later, he was transferred with other comrades to the Aleppo Central Prison in Musallamiya, north of Aleppo. Not until the summer of 1982 were books allowed in the prison. From the spring of 1983, prisoners were allowed to go out to the prison yard and exercise. In 1985, they were provided with gas stoves for cooking and making tea. A year later, they were allowed to have a TV set, and 1986 saw the prisoners gain a new relative freedom, with the doors to the separate prison wings being left unlocked between two o'clock in the afternoon and nine or ten o'clock at

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[18] General Major Salah Jadid was the central figure in what Palestinian-American historian Hanna Batatu refers to as the 'Transitional Ba'ath of 1963-1970'. A military officer, Jadid, along with Hafez al–Assad, represented the "activist wing" of the Ba'ath which sought to challenge the conservative traditional party leaders, such as the founders Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Bitar in the mid-1960s. Aided by Assad, Jadid staged a military coup against Aflaq and Bitar on 23 February 1966. Assad's defence portfolio was ensured in the process. After Syria's devastating defeat in the Six-Day War in 1967, aspirations for sheer power in the party were at play, and Jadid and Assad were at odds. Jadid endeavoured to alienate Assad but he was unable to beat him in the race to power. On the night of 12 November 1970, Assad's men arrested Jadid and his closest associates, marking the so-called 'Corrective Movement' which finally propelled him to the top (George 2003: 69-70).

night. In 1988, following an eight-day hunger strike, the prisoners were finally granted writing implements. In late 1991, they were down to sixteen prisoners after many of the Political Bureau detainees were released from Musallamiya. Then, on 14 April 1992, the sixteen prisoners were transferred to Adra prison, northeast of Damascus. A few weeks later, they were sent to the State Security High Court in Damascus, where their trial would commence. Almost two years later, in the spring of 1994, Saleh received his official sentence of fifteen years, which meant that he was supposed to be released on 7 December 1995, but he was not. On the morning of 3 January 1996, Saleh and twenty-nine other prisoners, from three different political parties, were transferred to the notorious Tadmur Prison in the heart of the Syrian Desert. Saleh remained there until 19 December 1996, when he was taken back to Damascus and released two days later (Saleh 2012a: 13-14).

The book oscillates between autobiography, prison memoir, ethnography, sociological study, political inquiry and legal document without fitting comfortably into any of these categories. Saleh explains that the act of writing offered him a way out of the need to "run away" from his bitter experience (Saleh 2012a: 15-16). He steers away from the lexicon of personal pain, suffering and loss, and he explicitly warns his readers at the outset that the book should not be considered "prison literature", not least because "more than half of its chapters deal with themes other than incarceration" but also because even those sections that discuss his time in prison do not simply present it as a "tale or story" (Saleh 2012a: 10). Saleh rediscovers his childhood in prison, living a "second childhood" that would see his metamorphosis into an intellectual and political writer (Saleh 2012a: 125). He finds it incumbent upon himself to problematise the prison, and to present it as a philosophical concept and a lived experience. His aim is to provide an exegesis of prison culture as the culture *par excellence* of the modern Syrian state. The point, for Saleh, is "to demystify" prison and to subvert the myths associated with it ((Saleh 2012a: 10).

Fully aware of the horrors to which "thousands before him bore witness", Saleh risks appearing as a "whinger" as he vividly describes the horrific cruelty, torture, humiliation, anxiety and emotional distress he endured in prison. However, he avoids succumbing fully to the autobiographical, choosing instead, as Mohammad al-Hajj (2012) writes, to deconstruct the triangular relationship between the prison, the prisoner and the jailer with a socio-analytical and historical eye. Saleh talks about time in prison—the way it stands still, and what it takes for the prisoner to jolt it back

into motion—and life after prison and the psychological and emotional turmoil that a former prisoner experiences, including feelings of nostalgia for prison itself. Speaking from his position as a Marxist prisoner, he also frequently alludes to the bitter experience of those who were members of other political organisations, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood.

I. Time Remembered, Time Forgotten

Prison has a metonymic relationship with the authoritarian culture of modern Syria. Central to Saleh's diagnosis of the prison experience is his focus on *remembering* and *forgetting,* and his recollections on his own time in prison, his last year in particular, which he spent in Tadmur penitentiary. He argues that neither society nor the state aids the prisoner in his rehabilitation; the state, especially, seeks to induce the right balance between *remembering* and *forgetting* in the prisoner's consciousness after his release. It induces enough remembering to keep him in a permanent state of terror, but also enough forgetting to sterilise his senses, so that he can never hold it to account (Saleh 2012a: 16). Every year, when the twelfth month—the month of his arrest—looms, Saleh gets the urge to recollect more fragments of his story: "I do this not to 'inherit the land of words and possess their precious meaning', as Mahmoud Darwish put it, but to stop running away, to relieve myself from the burden of telling" (Saleh 2012a: 15-16). He invokes the memory of "[his] own Tadmur" as a way to recalibrate himself, to abstract himself from that experience, and to remember and forget at will (Saleh 2012a: 17).

For Saleh, taking the Tadmur path was his own mistake; it was the result of his "hardheadedness" (Saleh 2012a: 19). As is customary, after an appropriate time had passed, the security apparatus would "bargain" with prisoners by imposing the penultimate condition for their release; this was veiled as a choice, an opportunity to cooperate with the state as a sign of "good faith" (Saleh 2012a: 18). The prisoner will either act as an informant or at the very least pledge to keep away from "political action" upon release. Towards the date of Saleh's official release in December 1995, he was given such a choice and chose Tadmur:

> For 15 years the only 'law' was that there is always something far worse than our worst fears: administrative detention which could last for up to eleven and a half years; a bargaining predicated on the philosophy of 'all for the state, nought for the prisoner'; prior to that was the artfulness in torturing us; depriving us from visitation rights; the refusal to deal with us as political groups and individuals; and the ordeal of facing State Security Court…So why cannot Tadmur be a possibility?
>
> Saleh 2012a: 20

While family visits helped punctuate the open-endedness of incarceration—"they brought in fresh time… and brought in news from the outside world which gave us a sense of freedom"—the challenge was to always control one's ill feelings towards time, to stop seeing it as the adversary (Saleh 2012a: 34). Those who were able to see their families regularly, or "rhythmically," were better off than those who received sporadic visits from their relatives: "The surprise of the visit shakes the prisoner to his core; it may even kill him" (Saleh 2012a: 33). But nothing compares to what Islamist prisoners endured. Many of them lived through their prison sentence without being allowed a single visit from their relatives, while the families themselves were left in the dark about the whereabouts and well-being of their loved ones and rarely, if ever, heard any news about them. Saleh highlights the plight of the Islamist prisoner in Syria, stating, "I know not of a crime more grave than this one" (Saleh 2012a: 34). Every political prisoner in Syria is the victim of *'urfi,* or administrative detention, deprived of a "countdown" to freedom (Saleh 2012a: 42). But while a communist, for example, was eventually tried in the State Security Court and more often than not had to serve between a few months and three years of added time after his or her official date of release, an Islamist, on the other hand, was almost always court-martialled, and in most cases had his or her sentence extended indefinitely. For Islamists who are not executed point blank in Assad's gulags, this is the "norm" (Saleh 2012a: 35). Saleh adds, "for us prisoners of conscience", Tadmur is the destination, "either long after arrest, or as punishment for an act of defiance committed in the original place of detention, say a hunger strike. But for Islamists, Tadmur is the natural habitat" (Saleh 2012a: 21).

II. Taming the Beast of Prison

"Can incarceration be a way of life?" asks Saleh. Certainly, the brutality of political prison as an unlawful space of incarceration, of the state as an all-encompassing prison that violently constrains its citizens, and of mistrust itself as a prison of vengeful ideas that decimate the nation, are at the heart of contemporary Syrian society and its recent and current history of conflict. These are what make prison a shared "national experience" (Saleh 2012a: 30), or in another of Saleh's phrases: prison *as* culture. If, as Saleh writes, "prison is a beast with which a person cannot live unless it was tamed and put under control" (Saleh 2012a: 31), then his life in prison was nothing if not a consistent and continuous attempt to subdue the prison beast and to forget that he was a prisoner. This is what Saleh calls *istiḥbās*, or embracing prison, a recurrent theme in his writing. While some prisoners become interested in "killing time", others, like Saleh, realise that making the best out of living with the "beast" entails confronting the agonising passage of time: "Most of us, in fact, did both: we killed time and owned it" (Saleh 2012a: 31). Nowhere is the Arabic proverb "a book is the greatest companion" more true than in prison. More importantly, reading makes time itself "a good companion"; it prolongs life, gives the prisoner "a life outside of his own", and creates for him "a record of existence, a new perception and an additional memory" (Saleh 2012a: 33). Despite at times facing a great deal of difficulty acquiring books or reading them attentively, Saleh learned how to become a patient reader, devoting long hours to weighty texts, from Hegel and Freud to Edward Said, Abdallah Laroui and Samir Amin, to name a few (Saleh 2012a: 54).

Is the idea of *incarceration as a way of life* conducive to the prisoner's feelings of independence and freedom? For Saleh, there is no other way for the prisoner to emancipate himself than to "turn physical prison into an avenue for liberation from far more ruthless prisons" (Saleh 2012a: 38); that is, the prisons of ideology, the political party and the state. This explains why Saleh looks back, almost longingly, at his years in Musallamiya; there he was joined by his brothers Mustafa and Khaled, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, and states that he generally remembers more about his early years of incarceration than his later years in Adra and Tadmur (Saleh 2012a: 63-4). A certain kind of primitive communality developed during the early years. In Musallamiya, the inmates even developed a good rapport with some of

the jailers, exchanging lively banter and playing cards with them (Saleh 2012a: 59-63; 69). Gradually, the prisoners became more autonomous in the way they ran their economic affairs and organised their meals and activities. Among the communists, there were two main strands: the orthodoxy and those regarded as "heretics" (Saleh 2012a: 55). This division found expression in the way the inmates managed their "treasury"; the heretics instituted a polemically named "trust fund", whereas the more devout communists favoured a more orthodox "Comecon" (Saleh 2012a: 55-7). Both systems had their flaws but equally satisfied some of the prisoners' needs, from food to cigarettes, coffee and maté.

Despite this camaraderie and collective consciousness, "the prison of ideology" would occasionally seep back into this new "free" world, disrupting the supposed solidarity of the inmates and making incarceration even more intolerable. Conflict among the inmates was common and was often quickly resolved, but feuds were at times exacerbated by personal egoism and ideological schisms. At one point outright animosity was exchanged between Political Bureau communists and those from the Communist Action Party, so much so that it became something close to a civil war. "This saw the beginning of my feelings of repulsion towards party politics" (Saleh 2012a: 59). Moreover, the material conditions of incarceration occasionally brought out the worst in the prisoners. At times when they were deprived of visitation rights for long periods, and therefore of money and foodstuffs that family members usually brought them, miserliness and feelings of resentment became rife in the cells. Saleh professes his shame as he reflects on this dynamic but jokes, in true Marxist form, that "the 'economic' base determines the 'ethical' superstructure" (Saleh 2012a: 76). As he was transferred first to Adra, then to Tadmur, the *base* deteriorated gradually and accordingly. In Adra, the political and ideological cleavages between the inmates became even more visible. Saleh attributes this to the very architecture of the place, which provided no "public space"; "the wings of the prison were larger and the cells contained bunk-beds, not floor mats as was the case in Musallamiya…cells are further away from each other…[and] each wing had its own television set" (Saleh 2012a: 78-9). This dictated a kind of a hierarchy, diminished shared space, and produced smaller cliques. In Tadmur, on the other hand, interaction among the prisoners is very limited; their subjectivity is muted, and they are forced to look down at all times. "It is a space of total dehumanisation" (Saleh 2012a: 84).

III. Nostalgia, Rage. Prison As Culture

The Arabic word for culture, *thaqāfah*, denotes a social framework where the chief stake is the production and cultivation of knowledge. Variants of the Arabic word, *thaqafa, thaqifa* and *thaqqafa,* mean to renew, to comprehend, and to calibrate, respectively. Much like today's English usage of the term, 'culture' has come to denote an educating, disciplining or civilising process. There is a tension in the Arabic *thaqāfah* between connotations of civility and refinement, and knowledge and enlightenment. This tension can be illuminated with reference to the German twin concepts of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation. Kultur,* Stephen Mennell tells us in his reading of Norbert Elias's seminal text *The Civilizing Process*, expressed the German intellectuals' "pride, achievement, and identity, and it came to be associated, in contrast to the *Zivilisation* of the court—the superficiality, ceremony and polite conversation—with inwardness, depth of feeling, immersion in books, development of the individual personality, with all that was natural, real and genuine" (Mennell 1998: 35). For Saleh, a purposive, autonomous cultural field, one of the chief goals of his endeavours, is precisely one where the imperative to accumulate knowledge, debate ideas openly, and translate thinking into action takes precedence over "superficiality, ceremony and polite conversation", which in the Syrian context has for too long meant censorship and self-censorship, lack of critical vision and, most dangerously, the long tradition of co-opting intellectuals as mouthpieces for the Assad dictatorship—"court jesters", as Miriam Cooke calls them (Cooke 2007: 72). These are intellectuals whose work is not only circumscribed by the unwritten rules of the Assad dictatorship; they also help "produce the public spectacles [that] maintain Assad's cult" (Wedeen 1999: 3).

To what extent, then, is incarceration viewed as a "civilising process", to borrow the phrase from Elias? That is to say, how does prison cultivate and reconstitute the individual? Finally, how did Saleh emerge as an intellectual from his prison experience—as someone who is moulded into an introspective, reflective and analytical individual? We are told that the prisoner may read literature and philosophy, write memoirs, novels or poetry, and learn a foreign language. But for Saleh, it did far more than that; prison was the location of his "rejuvenation or rebirth" (Saleh 2012a: 121). Nostalgia, in Saleh's formulation, is the hankering to escape the

prison of the *outside,* to return to the site of rejuvenation, of rebirth. And it could be that what induces nostalgia is the desire to escape the space in which grand illusions prevail: what Wedeen (1999) calls *the politics of as if*; that is, the oppressive and manipulative conduct and rhetoric of the Assad regime, which operate upon not only what people think but also how they act. But nostalgia amounts to more than viewing the past through rose-coloured glasses. Rather, it is a longing for a better present, expressed with a simple utterance that recalls collective prison dinners, and has become Saleh's refrain: "Salvation, oh youths!" (Saleh 2012a: 50)

Salvation from the folly of youth, perhaps. When Saleh was arrested in 1980, he was a young man with a scattered mind, and ambitions but no means. He reflects that he could barely lick his own "narcissistic wounds", that he had no control whatsoever over his life, and was prone to self-destruction (Saleh 2012a: 122-23). "Prison was a solution"; incarceration was the sacrificial ritual and Saleh was its lamb. Such was this baptism by fire that Saleh was able to shed his first self to make way for a new one: "One of us had to die, so that the other can live" (Saleh 2012a: 123). Nostalgia does not therefore stem from a desire to be "incarcerated once again" (Saleh 2012a: 126) but from a rupture that has created a new old man out of the old young man, because of an ontological, rather than a merely epistemological, process that absolutely demarcates freedom from incarceration. With one hand the past moves us forward; with the other it holds us back. This is a vacillatory dynamic that Saleh experiences: never totally free nor totally locked up, and always invested in these two contradictory states of being.

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If vacillation—"a state of being in itself"—is a byproduct of "the ethnographic navigation between the analytical and the participatory" (Hage 2015: 118), then Saleh succeeds in *ethnographic vacillation.* This is evidenced in his writings on the impact of imprisonment on the lives of prisoners after they are released. He tells us that former prisoners face all kinds of social, medical and psychological difficulties, without receiving the necessary support from society or the state (Saleh 2012a: 134). Further, he projects his own experience, as if "the experience of all former prisoners is a replica of his own" (Saleh 2012a: 135). This projection of one's own experience as the origin of *the* experience is a problem that he admits he is no position to resolve.

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Not only is there a scarcity of testimonies that deal with the post-prison condition, Saleh's own capacity to extract new testimonies from others remains limited. His position within the field of communist former prisoners makes it especially challenging for him to obtain any significant information from Islamists, due mainly to their insularity and secrecy. Saleh tells us that he fears that he is only able to convey a "distorted image" about life after prison (Saleh 2012a: 135). However, this admission pertains to a Bourdieuan reflexive sociology (Saleh 2012a: 201). Embedded in an intellectual field with its own instruments of rationality, Saleh's epistemological approach pays meticulous attention to the behavioural traits that characterise the communist former political prisoner (Saleh 2012a: 196-97). He does not simply oscillate between participation and observation; he is, first and foremost, invested in a kind of a therapeutic sociological project based on reflection and introspection. Instead of thinking of his work as a "distorted image", it would be more appropriate to say that he is one of the contributors—and this applies to today's Syria more than ever before—to the challenging project of putting the pieces of the Syrian puzzle back into place.

On the other hand, this vacillatory condition is predicated on a continuous process of reasoning that governs the affects in Saleh's pursuit of virtue, allowing him to distinguish the passions that truly aid virtue from those that are ultimately harmful; to overcome anger, to strive for joy and to engage in self-preservation. As Spinoza put it in his *Ethics*, "if the anger that is wont to arise from grievous wrongs be not easily overcome, it will nevertheless be overcome, though not without vacillation, in a far shorter space of time than if we had not previously reflected on these things…" (Spinoza [1677] 1982: 210). Nostalgia is what Spinoza proposes as the meditative practice, a courageous and necessary act along the lines of Jean Follain's *facing of the animal*, and in Saleh's language, *the taming of the beast of the memory of prison*.

3

Demystifying the State

The late 1990s was a pivotal time both for Saleh and for Syrian politics in general. Saleh was released from prison in 1996 and spent the last years of that decade completing his medical degree, which was interrupted by his incarceration. He had no real desire to practise medicine, however, and aspired instead to "work in the field of culture" (Saleh 2015, pers. comm., February). He had set his sights on writing but wrote very little during the first few years of his newfound freedom. He translated some key works into Arabic, however, such as Noam Chomsky's *Power and Prospects: Reflections on human nature and the social order* in 1998.[19] Meanwhile, the country was in a transitional phase both domestically and internationally. On the international level, the regime was finding itself increasingly bereft of the foreign policy tools it enjoyed through its alliance with the Soviet Union. In 2000, Bashar al–Assad became president, which cemented the dynastic control of the Assads over the country. Nevertheless, Bashar was, at least initially, seen as a kind of an enlightened dictator. It is no coincidence that Saleh started to publish articles in 2000, mere months after the son inherited power from his father. He suggests that this makes him the best suited among Syrian activists, writers, and intellectuals to comment on the Bashar era, not only because he emerged as a writer when Bashar took office, but also because he continued to live in Syria during this period; Saleh was barred from leaving Syria. He admits that he benefited from a certain kind of social openness during Bashar's first months, and that like other former political prisoners possessed a sense of entitlement to write with integrity and honesty. These factors encouraged him to see himself as a contributor to post-Hafez Syria. Saleh stresses that his writing in turn is a political act interested in political change, and that it reflects his position as a *munadel,* a struggler (Saleh 2010: 7-10).

In this chapter, I explore Saleh's writings on the Assad regime, its policies and logics, and how, despite numerous regional and international crises and changes, it

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[19] Other translations by Saleh include Australian Marxist philosopher Andy Blunden's article "Why Marx was not an Atheist," and Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder's novel *Maya.*

has been able to exploit tensions and polarities in internal as well as regional politics in order to survive. I describe certain internal, regional and global changes that the regime was forced to confront since the 1970s, and link these to internal changes that coincided with Bashar's inheritance of power from his father. I begin by showing how the fragmentation of leftist politics in Syria has had a two-prong effect; it led to the dismantling of civil and cultural resistance to the Ba'ath Party, as well as to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as the regime's primary nemesis. I then focus on the rise and fall of the Civil Society Movement in Syria in the early 2000s, and also examine what I think are two key sets of strategies that the regime used in order to maintain its national and regional interests; I call these the *geopolitical* and *sectarian* imperatives.

A. Leftist Politics and Political Islam Under Hafez Al-Assad

In many ways, Hafez al–Assad's rise to power in 1970 marked the end of the First Syrian Republic, which was well on the path to disintegration ever since the Ba'ath Party's takeover in 1963. 1970 also saw the "end of the Ba'ath Party as an autonomous force, and even as a forum for serious debate" (George 2003: 70). The key to Hafez's decisive ascent to power was the swiftness with which he neutered and co-opted his rivals on the Left: "Political competition was abolished, subsumed by the cult of worship around the president, not to mention swallowed up by the prisons and the ruling Progressive [National] Front let by the Ba'ath Party" (Saleh 2011c). In May 1972 the Ba'ath Party formed the so-called Progressive National Front (PNF), a coalition of political parties over which it presided. The PNF was initially formed of four parties: the SCP under the leadership of Khaled Bakdash; the ASU, which was originally the Syrian branch of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser's party of the same name; and two parties that had defected from the Ba'ath Party in the early 1960s: the Movement of Socialist Unionists (MSU), and the Arab Socialist Party. The League of Communist Action whose small membership worked covertly towards undermining the Ba'ath by publishing and circulating explicitly anti-regime pamphlets rejected the new coalition. The parties in the coalition, however, enjoyed a limited level of participation under the umbrella of the PNF but were also subject to a variety of restrictions. The coalition ensured the Ba'ath Party's oppressive control and meticulous monitoring of its rivals on the left, who soon began to splinter.

The promulgation of a new constitution in 1973 saw Syria's transformation from Ba'ath State to "Assad's Syria". While the new constitution guaranteed the leading role of the Ba'ath Party in both state and society, it granted Hafez ultimate power in all domains. The Ba'ath was moulded into a "powerful institution of political control that at the same time could confer an appearance of legitimacy upon his presidency" (George 2003: 70). Its ideals were on their way to being reduced to the thin veneer that has barely covered the Assads' familial domination over Syria's affairs for the last four decades. This exacerbated the divides in Syrian politics; for example, in 1974 a faction split from the MSU and formed the Democratic Socialist Unionist Party but remained in the PNF (George 2003: 87). However, the most significant of these fractures was the defection of a sizeable group of communists from the SCP who refused to join the PNF. In 1973 the group renamed itself the SCP-Political Bureau, and in January 1974 elected Riad al-Turk as its secretary-general (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 196). It was initially reasonably effective in its opposition to the government and was popular among "the younger party cadre and new recruits who had expected some changes in the original Syrian Communist Party in both leadership style and substantive ideological positioning, particularly after its isolation following the breakup of the United Arab Republic in 1961 and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 196). Such aspirations for structural and ideological change within the SCP caused concern both for the Ba'ath Party and for Khaled Bakdash, the SCP's secretary-general. Bakdash accused Turk of "leading a deviationist, adventurist clique" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 184), and as evidence of his standing with Ba'ath officials was successful in rallying the government to conduct a campaign of oppression against the SCP-PB. Turk was "imprisoned in 1974, freed in 1975 when he went underground, and was recaptured in 1978. Shortly after being released in 1980, he was imprisoned again and was not released until 31 May 1998" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 197).

While many aspects of the regime's leadership changed by the time Bashar inherited power in 2000, the son ensured that his father's political relationships with key parties in the PNF, most notably the communists, remained intact. At this stage, the communists were split into two factions: the main communist party under Wisal Farha Bakdash, Khalid Bakdash's widow who inherited her departed husband's position; and its offshoot, the party of Yousef Faisal which in 1986 broke away from the SCP over differing attitudes to Soviet perestroika, but which remained a member

in the PNF. Both parties, having experienced political stagnation even by PNF standards, had much to benefit from Bashar coming to power; the privileges that the communists procured decades earlier under his father's reign were not only going to be preserved, but potentially expanded under the patronage of the new president, so long as they remained within the confines of the "reactivated" PNF. The Ba'ath resolved that the parties of the PNF should be allowed not only to privately distribute their newspapers, as was the case up until Bashar's inheritance of power, but to place them on the news-stands. In early 2001 SCP-Bakdash's *Sawt al-Sha'b* (*Voice of the People*) and SCP-Faisal's *Al-Nour* (*The Light*) were launched. While both factions of the SCP may have had a historic opportunity to shake things up from within the PNF, both continued to assume the subordinate role given to them in the Ba'ath's political establishment. Certainly, neither was ready to cross the red lines of Syrian journalism, sticking to the beaten path; the safe subjects: the Palestinian struggle; abstract ramblings about class-struggle, the unity of the Arab people, and anti-imperialism; criticisms of other parties in the PNF; and, articles that celebrated the benevolence of the Assad family. In November 2001, a cable was sent by Lady Bakdash, which "extended to the president most sincere greetings of appreciation for the great role he plays in enhancing the country's position in the Arab and international arenas" (George 2003: 128). It was thanks to this kind of publicity that Bashar gained a reputation as not only anti-Israel, anti-West, pro-Iran and pro-Hezbollah – read pro-resistance – but also as the last true caretaker of Arab sovereignty, his foreign policy tinged with leftist ideals. In contrast, in *Al-Nour*, one could occasionally read exposés on the government's economic misconduct and the rife poverty of Syrian neighbourhoods. But faced with the Bakdash party's brokering of Ba'athist interests, Faisal's group was uninfluential and ineffective. Furthermore, the former accused the latter of departing from "Marxism as the basis of organisation," disrespecting "democratic centralism," and not adhering to "proletarian [principles] and Marxist theory" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 226). The Bakdash faction maintained a firm grip on Faisal's party in order to further its political ambitions and ensured that any internal efforts to restore the role of communism in Syria as a vanguard of the working class were crushed. If the outcome of Riad al-Turk's long struggle is any indication, it is evident "that there was no room for any ideological challenge either to the Syrian regime or Bakdash's position vis-à-vis the regime" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 197).

The breakup of the Left in "Assad's Syria" contributed to the construction of Political Islam as the quintessential nemesis of the state. Islamists garnered overwhelming public empathy as they were seen as the most aggressive and antagonistic opponents of the regime's economic, social and diplomatic failures, as well as its draconian policies that worked to strengthen elite circles based on familial and sectarian ties.[20] In their bid to de-legitimise other political movements and currents opposed to the regime, the Islamists pitted themselves against Assad as the archetypal enemy. But they were also the regime's primary victims. The year 1980 saw the introduction of a wave of repressive changes: collective punishment, arbitrary arrest, and unconstitutional laws; Law 49, for instance, stipulates membership of the Muslim Brotherhood as a capital offence (Lefevre 2012: 9). This new phase in Assad's Syria also saw the dissolution of unions and their reorganisation at the hands of regime loyalists. Corruption became part of a "broad framework predicated on the unequal relationship between state and civil society" (Saleh 2010: 39). At certain stages in the campaign against the Brotherhood, the Defence Platoons, under the command of Hafez's now exiled younger brother Rif'at, "took to the streets and initiated a harassment of veiled women in an attempt to identify Brotherhood members" (Ismail and Ismail 1998: 205). The climax of Assad's reprisal against the Brotherhood was a three-week standoff in the city of Hama in 1982, when the Assad army fought armed Islamists, flattened much of the city's historic centre over the heads of its residents, and then combed the rubble, killing surviving rebels. The outbreak of the revolution in 2011 marked an opportunity for Syrians to reflect on this bloody and repressed chapter in the country's history, which saw the deaths of 30,000 people, according to some sources (Refworld 1989). Until that point, the Hama massacre was treated as a public secret in Syria, shrouded in a conspiracy of silence and fear. Its impact was unspoken but unequivocal.

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[20] This did not mean that others were not critical of the regime; even the SCP was banned in the early 1980s and was only restored to favour in 1986 as a concession to the Soviet Union.

B. The Assad Regime at the Turn of the 21st Century

While it benefited from the Cold War hostilities, the regime had to deal with the new reality brought on with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and had to assume a stronger regional role. This led to its participation in the US-led coalition to expel the Iraqi army from Kuwait in 1990 and to increased meddling in Lebanon's affairs. The regime became precariously suspended in the ever-widening cleavage between Ba'athist party politics and Hafez al–Assad's desire to secure power for his family and clan long after his death. Hafez had entertained the idea of passing power on to a member of his family, and even named his younger brother Rif'at a likely candidate, as early as 1980.[21] However, Rif'at's coup attempt in early 1984 lost him the privileges of being the second most powerful man in Syria. Rif'at was banished from Syria and remained in exile until 1992, during which time Hafez had been preparing his eldest, Basel, to succeed him to the dismay of many high-profile figures in the regime. Basel's death in a car crash in 1994 did not dissuade Hafez from his plan and he started looking to his second son, Bashar, to succeed him. Bashar was summoned to return to Syria from his studies in London; he enrolled in the Homs Military Academy where he was quickly promoted up the military ranks, and gradually made inroads into the Ba'ath Party where he took over the Lebanon portfolio from Abdul Halim Khaddam. Members of the Ba'ath cadre did not unanimously support dynastic succession and Hafez's decision kindled jealousy in the regime. According to Khaddam, Hafez's "love for the family was even stronger than his duty as president" and stood in "total contradiction to all laws and regulations in Syria" (Blandford 2006: 55). Such sentiments among some of the "old guard" Ba'athists did not go unnoticed; many prominent figures were "retired" and replaced or simply eliminated in the lead up to, and during Bashar's reign. While Hafez was still around to make decisions, moreover, Rif'at's was exiled once again in September 1999. Clearly, Hafez was not willing to take any risks and was absolutely committed to removing all obstacles to the transfer of power to Bashar.

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[21] Hafez maintained his apparent legitimacy through ostensibly progressive politics packaged by a charismatic leadership style. See Wedeen (1999: 33-4) for argument on how this cult of personality was invented in the 1980s as a way to deflect attention from anxieties relating to the poor state of the economy, the violent confrontation between the armed forces and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which threatened Hafez's self-appointed role as a leader in the region, and the challenge to power that his younger brother Rif'at posed.

In 2000, Bashar took the office of the presidency and immediately set about making the impression that he would be a moderniser. Already in the late months of Hafez's life, the political climate in Syria had loosened to some extent and the economy, which was experiencing its first stages of liberalisation at the time, was being subject to open debate. During that period, Bashar, then chairman of the Syrian Computer Society, spearheaded an anti-corruption campaign, which sought to counter public cynicism by allowing wider debate, albeit clearly circumscribed. "The Damascus Spring" – sometimes referred to as "The Syrian Spring" – was a social and cultural collective, which was borne out of this environment (Saleh 2010: 15). While the fundamentals of the system "were still taboo, aspects of how it functioned – for example the inefficiencies of the bureaucracy – became permitted areas of discussion in the media and elsewhere" (George 2003: 31). Bashar brought into his administration younger and more dynamic personnel, and called for the reinvigoration of the PNF. But as exiled Marxist writer Subhi Hadidi argues, this was indicative of how the new president "conveniently ignored what every adult Syrian knows: that this Front was a dead body when it was first set up and has continued to decompose with an unbearable stench ever since" (Hadidi, quoted in George 2003: 32). Terms like "modernisation," "development," "constructive criticism," and "creative thinking" became hallmarks of Bashar's newspeak, eliminating the vocabulary of freedom, democracy, civil liberties, and so forth. Bashar thereby made it clear that he was no liberal democrat but that under the auspices of the "reactivated" PNF, "Syria was entering a period of reforms and openings in all fields" (George 2003: 36).

C. A New Dawn?

While dismissive of the PNF, some of Syria's leading intellectuals were sanguine about what they could potentially achieve in this new climate. Saleh, along with other eminent thinkers, businessmen, and former leftist political prisoners such as Michel Kilo, Riad Seif, Antoun al-Maqdisi, Sadik Jalal al-Azm, Jamal al-Atassi, Burhan Ghalyoun, and Riad al-Turk, assumed a crucial role in establishing forums interested in reviving the "cultural and democratic movement in Syria" (George 2003: 33). Initially, informal forums were set up in private Damascene homes for the discussion of political and social matters; the most famous of these were the Riad Seif

Forum and the Jamal al-Atassi National Dialogue Forum. This movement called itself the "Damascus Spring," and was responsible for issuing demands – namely the Statement of 99 and the Statement of 1000 – which stressed the need for the new government to end the State of Emergency Law; issue a public pardon to all political detainees; ensure freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression; and, allow for the participation of citizens in all aspects of public life.[22] Subsequently, these salons formally established themselves as the *Committees for the Revival of Civil Society in Syria*, and within six months of Bashar taking office hundreds of salons appeared, mainly in Damascus, but also in other Syrian cities.

For Saleh, the Damascus Spring was an opportunity seized swiftly by a small group of intellectuals who sought to respond to the "absence of public debate, independent forums, and politics *tout court*" (Saleh 2010: 15). During this period, he was somewhat hopeful that the seeds of "new frameworks for public discourse – on both official and civil levels" had already been planted in the new Syria (Saleh 2010: 12). These new frameworks were "suggestions" that the Civil Society Movement made with the hope that they would be adopted and implemented by the ruling class. Inasmuch as Saleh saw hope in this new intellectual initiative, he stressed that "change needs to be transformed into a solid social institution" (Saleh 2010: 14), a demand that the authorities did not meet. As the activities of civil society forums intensified – Seif, for example, went as far as to announce his plans for an independent political party – so did the regime's campaign to de-legitimise the Civil Society Movement as "a collection of spies, fools or both, serving the malevolent interests of foreign states – read Israel and America" (George 2003: 49). The Damascus Spring was crushed and the regime proceeded to ban discussion forums and to vilify the Civil Society Movement in its media. Furthermore, the line of official argument did all it could to portray intellectuals as representative of an insignificant minority that was detached from the real wants and needs of Syrians. In contrast to the Civil Society Movement, what Bashar offered was an "economy first" argument and as such advocated for a "China-style" economic liberalisation (George 2003: 55). Sadik Jalal al-Azm maintains that this was simply a ruse; a cunning attempt to deceive the population that economic reforms are possible without political ones. He argues,

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[22] For copies of both statements, see George 2003: 178-188.

It's not true that the Chinese are simply making changes in the economy and not making changes at a lot of other level. The entire ruling équipe has changed in China, while in Syria it's still the same. The "old guard" is there. Secondly, in China you can delay the political changes and concentrate on the economy because there is a very high rate of economic growth... This doesn't apply to Syria at all. There is no flourishing economy that will bribe people into keeping quiet about the needed political, social and judicial reforms.

Al-Azm, quoted in George 2003: 55-6

In the early 2000s the Ba'ath Party implemented a set of cosmetic policies under the guise of limiting its intervention in state institutions (Saleh 2010: 30). However, these measures had no bearing whatsoever on the status quo. Saleh (2010: 32-3) writes, "The [party's] policy lacks any reference to how these measures will be executed". Moreover, "there is nothing other than already *Ba'athified* state institutions… and the policy does not address the role of the Ba'ath Party itself". These measures did not introduce new judiciary frameworks, and were silent on matters of accountability and transparency. Their effect was to cement and perpetuate state monopoly over modernisation and development projects while giving free rein over the economy and new industries to a new generation of private investors and entrepreneurs – those close to the regime, even members of its inner circle, albeit not necessarily Ba'athists themselves. While official rhetoric was predicated on ideas of loosened state control over economic development with the promise of prosperity, the "reality", according to Saleh, was that the gross personal income of a Syrian citizen "is less than a fourth of that of a Lebanese citizen, close to two thirds of that of an Egyptian's, and a little more than half of a Jordanian's income" (Saleh 2010: 36). For Saleh, so-called economic liberalisation is the result of state policies that only serve a new elite. Like al-Azm, he realised that short of political liberalisation and the building of a new political life on the foundations of a representative and pluralist order, economic liberalisation is meaningless. For the new policies to be taken seriously by Syrian intellectuals, the regime had to demonstrate some signs of goodwill. For Saleh, this begins with "the abolishment the 8th article of the Syrian constitution – which entrenched the power of the Ba'ath Party over state and society; the dissolution of the Popular National Front and the emancipation of its political parties; and, the

dissolution of "popular organisations" that have long stood in the way of the rights of society" (Saleh 2010: 35).

It is clear that while Saleh underlines the importance of the role of intellectuals in being at the forefront of independent activism in the name of democracy and genuine political plurality, he also puts the onus on the state to reform itself. For him, any real reform rests first on the Ba'ath Party's transformation of itself from "the Party" ('al-hizb') to "a party" (hizb); that is, from a party in authority into a political party that participates *in* a civil society framework (Saleh 2010: 68). He stresses that the other option, maintaining the status quo and therefore "gambling" with the movement of history, will be costly. As if predicting what would start to take place in Syria a decade later, Saleh warns that this would risk the coming of a "vengeful revolution, one that prioritises the annihilation of the old to the building of the new" (Saleh 2010: 12).

While Bashar instigated certain cosmetic alterations to the face of the intelligence apparatus to make it more palatable – he presented himself as a president with "an everyman quality, frequenting restaurants and driving his own car" (Shadid 2011) – he maintained an imperial sense of power through continued nepotism, corruption, and repression of political freedoms and censorship of independent journalism. In August 2001 Bashar's tolerance for the Damascus Spring had run out and he launched a crackdown on the Civil Society Movement, alleging it aimed to "change the constitution by illegal means" (Human Rights Watch 2007). Seif, Turk, and eight other activists received prison sentences between two and ten years.

The crackdown on the Damascus Spring signalled a missed opportunity for the new regime to rejuvenate political culture in Syria and further cemented the regime's hostility to democratic ideas. Finding itself in a new, turbulent regional and global climate, riddled with new antagonisms and threats, the regime was clearly wary of opening up internal political culture for fear that this may jeopardise its standing and interests in the region. It upheld the idea that national sovereignty can only be protected through the regime's survival. Further, the political status quo had always been predicated on the idea of Syria's confrontation with Israel. The enforcement of decades-long "exceptional" laws, such as the State of Emergency Law, was justified in the name of a perpetual war with Israel. Therefore, any political objection to the regime was deemed as undermining sovereignty, as a breach of the law, and as serving the Israeli enemy's interest. For Saleh, this is at the heart of the regime's self-

enclosure, exclusivity, and myopia, and is the primary reason for the political, social, and cultural deadlock that has crippled Syria for decades.

Throughout the 2000s, Bashar was able to withstand successive efforts to relaunch the Civil Society Movement and to instigate regime-change. This was largely due to the ideological disagreements and petty personal conflicts that took place among dissidents. In 2005, Riad al-Turk's NDG, the Muslim Brotherhood, Kurdish and Assyrian parties, and members from the Damascus Spring, such as Michel Kilo and Riad Seif, issued a statement called the Damascus Declaration, which sought to unite the fractured Syrian opposition. However, almost from the outset, the initiative was beset with conflicts between some secularists and the Islamists. This was exacerbated when the Muslim Brotherhood joined the National Salvation Front of Bashar's former vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had defected in 2006 (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012). Significantly, these feuds and rifts are seen today to contribute to the lack of a "genuine revolutionary leadership with a clear economic, social, and political programme" (Ladqani 2012). These factors serve to undermine confidence in the relevance and efficacy of the Syrian opposition and have been further exploited by the West in order to avoid committing to one political faction more than the other.

D. The Modernised Despotic State

In this section, I continue to explore Saleh's intellectual project of demystifying the relationship between state and society in Syria, embodied in his characterisation of *al-dawla al-sultaniyya al-muhaddatha,* or the "modernised despotic state," [23] a centralised political entity, built on a cult of personality, which governs by its own will and caprice. The story of this political environment in Syria starts with the Ba'athist intellectuals of the 1960s who were inspired by the siren call for a single Arab nation, by Leninist approaches to economic progress, and by fascism's "worship of the people" (Wedeen 1999: 8). At least in rhetoric, Syrian sovereignty was defined along these ideological lines ever since the Ba'ath Party ascended to power in 1963. When Hafez rose to power through a bloodless coup in 1970, the Ba'ath Party gained a monopoly over political and social life in Syria. However, contrary to what

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[23] The word *sultaniyya* connotes dynastic absolutism. Since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, Saleh began to use the terms *mamlaka* and *imbratoriyya,* meaning kingdom, monarchy, or empire, to refer to the rule of the Assads.

Ba'athists claim, their rise to power was not the expression of emancipatory politics. Rather, it occurred in the face of a political instability that haunted the country since its independence; against a political environment marked by numerous coup d'états. The new regime advanced a sense of stability through the expansion of its control over political and civil institutions, blurring the lines between state and society. "Stability," Saleh tells us, "is not something without value in itself, yet it is principally distinct from freedom and has practically stood in opposition to it" (Saleh 2010: 54). It is a stability predicated on security apparatuses, not state institutions, and relies on naked power, not the law.

According to the logic of the regime, stability is only maintained through the "state of emergency," justified by the ever-present threat of Western-Zionist hegemony over the Arab world. What is more dangerous, as far as the regime is concerned, is that this threat can have internal manifestations. The regime came to recognise its social and political vulnerabilities – namely, the fact that Hafez and others at the centre of power came from the minority Alawite sect, a heterodox Muslim group associated with Shi'ite Islam that accounts for 11 percent of Syria's population. In 1979, following a series of assassinations of senior Alawite and regime figures, the regime was swift in pointing the finger at jihadists from the Muslim Brotherhood, and in drawing a direct link between the assassinations and foreign opposition to Syria's rejection of the idea of a partial agreement with Israel (Van Dam 2012: 91). In 1980, as the violence was escalating between the armed forces and the Islamists, the regime proceeded to "double the state of emergency," as Saleh writes, thus extending the single-party state authority in all aspects of Syrian social life (Saleh 2010: 40).

The authoritarian state thrives on blurring the lines between state and society. State and society are not separate autonomous fields – where one either dominates or mirrors the other; rather, they constitute one whole: the field of power. The result is more or less one and the same in Kantian terms; what is induced is "self-imposed immaturity" that causes one to accept hegemony. When the Ba'ath Party nominated itself as leader over state and society, it essentially occupied the central position in this field. But the party served simply as the veneer beneath which Hafez maintained his power. As the state became synonymous with the party, and the party metonymic of Hafez – whose omnipresence and omniscience in the Syrian symbolic universe was becoming evermore pervasive – the president gradually came to embody the state. But

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he was also "one of the people" – this image of the leader endured under Bashar, despite instances of the regime loosening its symbolic grip. Symbolic violence became a powerful weapon in the regime's arsenal of control. This kind of leadership rested on petitioning, patron-client networks, the ubiquity of other kinds of personalistic ties like *wasta,* or informal agreements, exchanges of services, connections, Party contacts, or black market deals, in order to achieve results, the mystification of power and its projection through the domination of the regime's iconography over public space, and so on. Under authoritarianism "good faith politics" exists and operates to conceal the political logic of domination. Most dangerous of the regime's strategies was the proliferation of the culture of *kitabat al-taqarir,* or "writing of reports," that is, the practice of slander and denunciation, which the regime encourages and rewards to this day, and which helps inculcate fear and distrust among citizens (Saleh 2010: 40). The cultivation of the personality cult induced an "authoritarian habitus"[24] (Fatton 2004) in the Syrian population over the decades. There also exists what Wedeen (1999) calls a politics of "as if," through which citizens reproduce Ba'athist symbology and regurgitate its rhetoric *ad verbatim* but in a way that is steeped in irony. Nonetheless, in his aspiration to become a patriot, the Syrian citizen takes pains to parrot the message of the regime in front of others, to influence his neighbours and friends to do the same. There is an explicit expectation of participation in the cult of personality, and a symbolic currency is thus established. The interest at stake in the conduct of patriotism is one for which politics has no name, and which has to be called symbolic, although it is such as to inspire actions that are very directly political. And so sacrifice, devotion to the leader, denouncing Israel, upholding the *mumana'a* values of anti-imperialism, resistance, anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments, and so on, are placed above self-determination.

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[24] Habitus is a concept central to Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach. It can be defined as a property of social agents. A habitus is structured by one's past and present conditions and circumstances. It is structuring insofar as it helps to shape the individual's present and future practices and attitudes. It is a structure in that it is an organised system, not an unpatterned, formless entity. Agents exist in a field, whose rules and logic must be grasped in order for the agents who constitute it to maximise their profit. On "authoritarian habitus" see Fatton's (2004) work on Haiti.

E. The Geopolitical Imperative

Mumana'a is sometimes translated as "rejectionism" (Saleh 2011b) but this translation is imprecise as an indicator of Syria's place in contemporary politics, and is inadequate to account for its meaning in relation to Syrian official policy.[25] Lebanese academic Fawwaz Traboulsi (Shokr and Kamat 2011) describes *mumana'a* as "a very useful term in Arabic that means you want something and you don't want it at the same time. It is used to characterise the relationship between Syria and the United States." As for Saleh, *mumana'a* is "national belonging defined only as resting on one's political position vis-à-vis 'foreign' power… it is *the* intellectual framework and is the culmination of authoritarianism, economic liberalism, and sectarianism" (Saleh 2009). These two definitions of *mumana'a* point to the Assad regime's (especially under Bashar) multifaceted geopolitical logic, one that rests on grand notions of pan-Arab anti-imperialism, beneath which a whole range of strategies of domination manifest. According to Saleh, consolidation of power and the control of material resources are the regime's main priority; "national aspirations and 'ideals' only serve as a legitimising ideology" (Saleh 2009). Therefore, on the level of the economy, Bashar's so-called economic liberalisation meant the monopoly of a cabal of new elites over modernisation and development projects.[26] As I showed above, Saleh argues that since this did not coincide with or occur as a result of political liberalisation, economic liberalisation simply served the interests of a new generation of private investors. Despite the regime allowing some flexibility in its position on market-driven economy, its security concerns, both regionally and locally, did not shift.

Under Hafez, one can already see how a proto-*mumana'a* operated; the regime purported to uphold the Palestinian cause at heart. However, in 1976 Assad intervened in Lebanon against the Palestine Liberation Organization. This represented Syria's participation in regional power games and was nothing short of a total abandonment of Arabist values of unity and liberty. The regime consistently decried the imperialism and colonialism of the West, but had no quarrels in joining a US-led coalition against

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[25] The Assad regime cannot be said to be more "rejectionist" of the West than Muammar al-Qaddafi, for example. However, in June 2011 and in one rejectionist swoop, Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Al Moualem, dismissed European sanctions targeting regime figures by saying that "we will forget Europe is on the map."

[26] Incidentally, the Syrian constitution continues to speak of the country as a "socialist" republic. See www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html for an English version of the Syrian constitution.

Iraq in 1991 in what proved to be a blatant betrayal of Ba'athist ideology. The regime represents itself as "the beating heart of Arabism," yet it positions itself as the lynchpin in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah "Axis of Resistance," a coalition feared by Sunni Arab monarchies and pejoratively referred to as the "Shi'ite Crescent" (Black 2007).[27] In the 1990s the regime pulled out another trick; its opposition to the Oslo Accords came hand in hand with its avowed support for foreign Islamist forces. This not only included Shi'ite militant groups like Hezbollah, but also extended to Sunni forces, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (Pierret 2013: 86). After Bashar inherited power from his father, the regime adopted even more pragmatic and asymmetric means to survive in a changing geopolitical landscape. In the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad in 2003, Damascus juggled between co-operating with the US regarding intelligence on al-Qaeda (Lesch 2005: 119) and funnelling jihadists and arms, from within and without, across the Syrian-Iraqi border in a bid to sabotage the US occupation in Iraq (Salloukh 2009). In 2006 it came to the aid of Hezbollah in the July War, and in 2008 it gained even more political capital as it sided with Hamas.

Assad's authoritarian state has always invested in contradictory politics. Thus, for the regime, *mumana'a* is a contradiction in terms, a state of vacillation that is the result of navigating between two modes: how the regime should be perceived and what it needs to actually do to survive. Such shrewd geopolitical manoeuvring accounts for much of the regime's ability to maintain its political legitimacy and to overcome a number of significant crises in the 2000s, such as the Iraq War in 2003, the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, and the July War in 2006. In today's Syria, the regime has played left/right politics and was able to coax support from leftist ideologues and right-wing ultranationalist alike.[28] Moreover, the Iranian paramilitary al-Quds force, Hezbollah, not to mention Russian and Chinese diplomatic and logistical support, have kept Assad in power. Today, nearly four years after a mass revolution challenged the regime, it uses asymmetric strategies of

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[27] The term "Shi'ite Crescent" was coined by King Abdullah of Jordan who warned against the advancement of Shi'ite/Iranian interests in the region "from Damascus to Tehran, passing through Baghdad".

[28] For example, Leftist ideologue and British MP George Galloway, and Nick Griffin, the leader of the British National Party have a shared vision when it comes to the Syrian situation. They see the crisis in Syria in terms of Western/Turkish/Gulf-states-backed Sunni Islamists waging a Jihad against a secular regime.

warfare, propaganda, and diplomacy, combined with classical ones, in order to survive.

F. The Sectarian Imperative

Is the Assad regime sectarian? According to Saleh (2009), this is a contentious question that until a few years ago not many Syrians dared to pose. Ostensibly "secular," "modern," and "progressive," "the protector of minorities," "the last beacon of Arabism," and as the "fortress of steadfastness," the Assad regime successfully conceals its logic of sectarianism. Official rhetoric in Assad's Syria rejects the view that sectarian, regional, and tribal loyalties have anything to do with political leadership, and even in Alawite circles close to the centre of power, a mere mention of the crucial role of Alawites in the regime is deemed unacceptable and is punishable by the state (Van Dam 2012: 130).[29] However, insofar as the Assad regime was invested purely in maintaining power, it proved necessary for Hafez, "Syria's first ruler of peasant extraction" as Hanna Batatu (2000) observes, to rely on his relatives and clansmen, but also on trustworthy Ba'athists, irrespective of their religious denomination, in order to cement his authority. This class aspect of early Ba'athis politics is useful in clarifying the dynamics of the politics to come. Batatu links growing peasant consciousness with the general rise of what he terms the "lesser rural nobility" within the Syrian military and the Ba'ath Party itself. While the Ba'ath was not in the beginning a movement with significant peasant membership, many of its early activists were of peasant extraction and once it assumed power in 1963, the officer corps, state bureaucracy, and the party itself, became increasingly dominated by rural elements, particularly descendants of the lesser rural nobility and middle peasantry. Hafez's peasant origins are not only significant, "because [they] served as a springboard for his attainment of power" (Batatu 2000: 198) but also for the style and substance of his leadership. Taking after Engels, Palestinian-Syrian Marxist thinker Salameh Kaileh writes that

> A peasant believes that his village is the world, the whole world. This
> isolation breeds fear of the outside world and strengthens the importance of

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[29] In 1994, Alawite General Ali Haydar was placed under temporary arrest for his violation of this taboo on sectarianism.

regional links. Wherever the peasant goes, it is only his neighbours, or those
connected to his village that he considers trustworthy and dependable.

Kaileh and Shams 2014

It may be argued that Assad's dependence on a core of Alawite officers was based more on regional links than on sectarian ones. Nonetheless, as many top-ranking Ba'athists in the 1960s were Alawites, there was a clear convergence of interests for Hafez. In that light, Saleh suggests that it is more appropriate to view sectarian politics in Syria as a set of evolving political practices, rather than to define the regime as deterministically sectarian (Saleh 2009). What is of interest to him is under what conditions and to what ends the regime participates in sectarian politics. Such an inquiry entails a reappraisal of Syria's modern history and leads Saleh to unravel the regime's relationship with Syria's Sunni majority.

To be sure, the Assad regime has manipulated and exploited social divides in Syrian society to bolster both the ranks of government and their popular support base, and institutionalised ties of personal allegiance and a culture of political privilege along sectarian lines (Saleh 2009). On the other hand, the main struggle inside the Ba'ath Party in the late 1960s was an ideological one between Hafez al–Assad and Salah Jadid, another Alawite. In fact, Hafez forged strong alliances with the Sunni bourgeoisie and maintained good relations with his Ba'athist comrades (some of whom were members of the majority Sunni sect) by giving them ministerial positions in his cabinet.[30] It is also true that the minority Alawite sect was aligned less theologically than politically with Shi'ism.[31] However, after Hafez's ascent to the presidency, Syrian Sunnis increasingly felt that the Alawites were marginalising them from the centres of power as they gradually controlled more of Syria's most

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[30] Hafez's relationship with his Sunni comrades survived his confrontation with the MB. When he fell seriously ill in 1983 he formed a six-man committee (all of them Sunni) whose task it was to run the day-to-day affairs of the state in his absence. These were foreign minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, minister of Defence Mustafa Tlass, chief of staff Hikmat al-Shihabi, prime minister Abd al-Ra'uf al-Kasm, assistant secretary-general of the Ba'ath Party National Command Abdullah al-Ahmar, and assistant secretary-general of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command Zuhayr Mashariqah. See Van Dam 2012: 119.

[31] In his work on the process of "Shi'ification" in Syria, Thomas Pierret (2012) traces the course of rapprochement between Shi'ite authorities and Syrian Alawites back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Lebanese and Iraqi religious networks identified the Alawite Mountains as a "mission field" as early as the 1940s. Then when Hafez al–Assad came to power in 1970 rapprochement with the Shi'ites was encouraged in order to stress the Alawites' belonging to Islam. Three years later, Iranian-Lebanese Shi'ite leader Musa al-Sadr officially recognised the Alawites as Shi'ites, and after 1979, Assad's strategic partnership with revolutionary Iran earned him the support of the new centre of gravity for Shi'ite Islam.

significant security and politico-economic institutions. The Ba'ath was deemed "godless" by its Islamist opponents (Lefevre 2012: 5); the promulgation of a new constitution in 1973, which granted Hafez ultimate power in all domains and saw Syria's transformation from Ba'ath state to Assad's Syria, angered many Sunnis. Already in the 1950s and 1960s the rise of Alawite officers to prominence inside the armed forces and the ranks of the Ba'ath Party had elicited fears of an "Alawite plot" (Lefevre 2012: 6).

It is worth mentioning that in the early 1970s, however, Syrian Islamists, represented in the main by the Muslim Brotherhood, were pragmatic in their approach to local and regional changes. They were still reading books of the Iranian thinker Ali Shari'ati, and welcomed with enthusiasm the overthrow of the Persian Shah as an "Islamic" rather than a "Shi'ite" revolution. It was politics, Thomas Pierret (2012) asserts, not doctrinal divergences that eventually spoiled Sunni-Shi'ite relations in Syria. And it was Tehran's "treason," (siding with Assad during the early 1980s) which led many Sunni scholars to denounce Shi'ite doctrines and Iranian expansionist ambitions. This was related to a struggle over power within the MB in which a younger, more radical band of activists won against the moderate pragmatists. By the mid-1970s, fighting the "Alawite enemy" and "the infidel Nusayri"[32] (Van Dam 2012: 90) became the raison d'être of a new MB leadership. In 1980, hard-liners from Hama openly called for Jihad against the Assad regime (Lefevre 2012: 7). Following a series of massacres perpetrated against senior Alawite officers by the "Fighting Vanguard" of the MB, Political Islam *tout court* became the quintessential nemesis of the state.

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Earlier in this thesis, I cited Saleh's description of the way that Islamists were consistently singled out for the very worst treatment, and how the Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, was consistent in its attempts to bolster its image as the regime's archetypal enemy. I also showed how since its early days in power, the regime played the two oppositional forces, the Left and the Islamists, against one another, causing the Balkanisation and ultimate collapse of the Left and effecting an intense power struggle with the Islamists. Coupled with the absence of state

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[32] Today, these barbs are hallmarks in the discourse of some anti-regime circles, especially by Jaysh al-Islam, al-Qaeda sister organisation Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS.

institutions in Assad's Syria, selective oppression of Islamists contributed to the rampant political poverty in Syria and the increasing way in which people have turned to their religious subjectivities for answers. In this chapter, I drew on Saleh's understanding of the way authoritarianism functions by arguing that the dependency of the regime on a geopolitical logic is mobilised as a source of political legitimation and regional power, while the sectarian logic is concealed precisely in order to mystify power.

In the next chapter I shift the discussion from the authoritarian "monster" on to the other two "monsters" in Saleh's schema: Political Islam and Western imperialism. I will highlight the way in which each is imagined by the other in order to demonstrate how tightly entangled the causes and effects of Western modernity and Islamic identity are in Syria, and how the authoritarian monster exploits the tension between the two in order to survive.

Western Civilisationalism and the Islamic Malaise

In addition to the demystification of relations of authoritarian domination in Syria, Saleh's project is the outcome of a confrontation with the limitations and dangers of essentialist views about the Arab world and Islam. It is a reminder of the need for critique in the face of multiple forms of oppression and is thus two-fold: to interpret the impasse through making both a clear and honest appraisal of history, and a rigorous interrogation of Western policies, perceptions, and misconceptions, which he argues are contributing to the impasse. In taking up these twin challenges, the analysis in this chapter continues along the trajectory of Saleh's "three monsters". I begin the discussion with some of Saleh's most important writings on contemporary Islam. The objective here is to examine how Saleh views Islam and the West to exist in each other's imagination. This then enables us to better appreciate Saleh's conceptualisation of modernity, and in turn helps broaden our examination of the historical interplay between the forces of authoritarianism, imperialism, and theocracy and related state/society, religious, and sectarian dynamics that have given rise to the Syrian Impasse.

A. Islam and the Pervasiveness of Modernity

At the heart of Saleh's intellectual project lies an investment in addressing Islam and its "self-inquiry", as well as the various processes through which Islam produces – and reproduces – itself. Saleh is concerned with "the Islamic Question," that is, the myriad intellectual, political, and ethical issues in contemporary Islam (Saleh 2011a: 11). He introduces the "three contemporary faces of Islam" as a way to typologise and interpret Islam through coherent and consistent categories: as the cultural, genealogical, and linguistic heritage of the Arabic peoples, as a religion and a religious identity, and as political ideology. It is the social contexts in which Islam wavers between its various manifestations as cultural lineage, religious praxis, and political ideology that are crucial to Saleh's interpretation of Islam and its relationship to modernity. Saleh puts forth a seemingly simple notion: "Islam cannot defend itself

against modernity's pervasiveness, for the latter is the former's pathway to the world" (Saleh 2011a: 77). This idea is stated resoundingly in the title of his book on contemporary Islam (2011a). *Myths of the Latter Peoples* is an inversion of a Qur'anic phrase *Asateer al-'awwaleen,* or "myths of the former peoples". This Qur'anic phrase is found in many verses, two of which share the idea that Muslims would, and should, always respond to accusations that they are simply regurgitating what had been said by the former peoples – Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and so on.[33] Saleh's inversion here represents a provocative gesture towards Islamists: Islam is modern, and so are Muslims. They exist within modernity, not without, and just like other modern subjects, Muslims borrow from the myths of the rest of the modern world in order to continue to write their own.

Yet, for Saleh, Islamists merely superimpose modern concepts in order to describe Islam. They use modern concepts to prove at once that Islam is modern but also that modernity is superfluous: "The Qur'an is the political constitution; *Fiqh* is the law, Allah is the ruler, *Shura* is democracy, and therefore Islam is the solution" (Saleh 2011a: 14; 101). This is a readily available answer to very modern questions, which for Saleh reflects the rigidity and dogmatism of the Islamists. The Qur'an cannot be thought of as a modern political constitution simply because it is unchangeable, Islamic law is merely the outer face of faith, not its inner substance, and more importantly, Islam cannot be the solution unless it dissolves our societies into mere religious communities. More dangerously is that Qutbists, Maududists, salafists, jihadists, and their followers think of modernity as "an other religion" (Saleh 2011a: 245), one that has gone astray and needs to be combatted.

Equally, a recalcitrant Arab secularism stands in the way of "Islam opening up to the world" (Saleh 2011a: 13). Saleh unequivocally opposes the thesis of "Islam is the problem" as advocated by a strong "Arab-Culturalist" trend that inextricably links "our political and civilisational problems to religious culture; or religion's position within our culture – namely Islam, and specifically to Sunni Islam" (Saleh 2011a: 13). It must be said that in the Syrian context, the Assad regime does not conduct its practices and policies toward Sunnis – or other social groups in a colonial way; in other words, it is not as if the regime insists that Sunni Islam is "the problem". On the contrary, the regime draws much of its legitimacy on the Arabic/Islamic historical

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[33] See Qur'an 4:5 and 8:31.

legacy in Syria (Pierret 2013). Nonetheless, there were and are clear policies of denigration of Syrian Sunnis; there is in fact an "othering" of Sunnis (FM 2014) so much so that during the course of the last four decades there was palpable cultural retreat among Sunnis in Syria, insofar as some Sunni traditions that had even the slightest tinge of political identification were practised covertly. Edward Said's *Orientalism* thesis rings true here. The Assad regime, while appearing as a decolonising force, maintained a colonial legacy by creating its own version of Arab Sunni culture which it imposed upon Syrians and then denigrated, thereby justifying its own domination of Syrian society as an essentially civilising mission. However, there are clear moments of Sunni contention to this process; the late 1970s signal the moment where Sunni "retreat" comes to an emphatic end; the Muslim Brotherhood's rebellion against the Assad regime represents an assertive stance in which the putative stigma of cultural inferiority is transformed into an emblem of its superiority. This takes place once again after the revolution of 2011.

However regrettable or misguided it may appear to us when the Sunni says, "I lose my manhood if I cannot carry my Qur'an, and have Islamic shari'ah as my political constitution," this may be a protestation not of unwarranted machismo, but of the integrity of cultural personhood. Yet the notion that this is a problem hinders our capacity to understand the affective dimensions in Islamic societies, as is evident in the ongoing debate about Political Islam today. Instead, Saleh proposes that we transform "Islam from a *problem* – a confused, convoluted, and formless status – into a *problematic*, one that has form, and is outlined by unambiguous parameters, questions, and concepts" (Saleh 2011a: 12). It is because Saleh sees Islam as a contested resource within the cultural field that he aims to challenge what he calls "the *illusion* of particularity"; cultural and intellectual poverty reinforce this *illusion*. On the one hand, Islamists propagate Islam's privileged position, whereas those who oppose them end up demonising Islam. This is manifest in the emergence of two concomitant essentialising currents; the first is Islamism, in its various shades, and the second is a militant secularism that has "harnessed all its energies in its violent confrontation with Islamists, while in the face of other injustices it remains silent (*sakitan 'an kul shai' aakhar*)" (Saleh 2011a: 12). Saleh's notion of "al-marad bi-l Islam" (*Islamic malaise*) helps him diagnose a chronic obsessiveness with Islam, both in Islamist and secular Arab-intellectual (and Western) circles; this is a fixation on Islam's exceptionality or particularity.

B. Islam in the Western Imagination

In the aftermath of September 11, the West became more engaged in the process of constructing a standard, public-sphere image of Islam, Muslims, and Arabs, recycling and reproducing much of this ever-present reservoir of stereotypes of the Middle Eastern, Muslim, or Arab 'other'. "September 11 sealed the position of the Muslim as the unquestionable other" (Hage 2014: 296). The general perception is that "Muslims are moved by a single essence… Whenever one of them does something bad, he or she is proof that all of them are bound to do it sooner or later" (Hage 2014: 296). In mainstream Western discourse, the values of modernity are seen as most contested amongst the populations of the Middle East and the world of Islam, and the West's new "other," Islam, is seen to stand in absolute opposition to these values. That Islam is by definition antithetical to modernity may seem a very problematic claim, least of all because "Islam" is that reverberating word for so many things at once. However, the survival of teleological and Eurocentric narratives, even in the most critical analyses of the postmodern – postmodernity itself an undetachable feature of modernity – seems to give credence to the following idea: Islam and whatever peoples, societies, or ideas associated with it are mere marionettes in a historical process not of their devising. They remain in their usual spot: at the bottom of the modern social evolutionary ladder. They are also perceived to be altogether outside of history – this denial of historical consciousness to Islam in the Western imagination is rooted in a long association of the Oriental with unreflexivity, one which finds its most spectacular expression in Hegel: the Oriental's indifference to history culminating in history's indifference to the Oriental (Almond 2010: 15). Since Hegel's time, the social sciences in the West have amassed a great deal of knowledge about the Middle East and its diverse peoples. However, "that knowledge tends not to be reflected in the stereotypical images of the region current in the West. Each major political development in the Middle East is confidently analysed by self-proclaimed experts as demonstrating the existence of a supposedly perennial 'Muslim fanaticism,' or the unchanging nature of the 'Arab mind'" (Burke III 1993: 7). In this "colonial vulgate" Middle Easterners are represented as "congenitally fatalistic, fanatical, cowardly, treacherous, despotic, sexually repressed, and patriarchal" (Burke III 1993: 7).

If Arabs/Muslims are tarnished by stereotypes and assumptions of societies mired in age-old and intractable conflicts, and therefore give a false impression of a backward, monolithic, and violent people, then what are the implications of this on the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring? Two main ideas follow from this classic Orientalist trope: first, that the corrupt, repressive, authoritarian regimes that govern these populations are the inevitable products of already backward societies; and second, that in the event of a popular uprising against an authoritarian regime, authoritarian social structures will endure, albeit reproduced in a new guise. It may be argued that in Western media and political discourse these specifically post-September 11 perceptions were temporarily challenged, at least during the early stages of the Arab revolutions when we saw a short-lived celebration of the self-determination and thirst for freedom that the "Arab people" exhibited. "By holding up an historical archetype of positive progress, against which the current Arab Revolution is measured, it is as through the Arabs are being applauded for making a belated entry into history and finally arriving at some decisive moment in modernity" (Pascoe 2011: 37). Some greeted the revolutions as the end of the post-colonialist paradigm (Dabashi 2012), and there was indeed a temporary shift in the way Arabs and Muslims were seen in the West. But much of this was a reaction caught up in the excitement of a momentous series of events. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek was so caught up in the heat and excitement of the *Tahrir Square* moment that he wrote the following:

> … insofar as we tend to oppose East and West in terms of fate and freedom, Islam stands for a third position that undermines this binary opposition – neither subordination to blind fate nor freedom to do what one wants... The events of 2011 in the Middle East amply demonstrate that this legacy is alive and well: to find a "good" Islam, we do not have to go back to the tenth century; we have it right here, unfolding in front of our eyes.
> Zizek 2012: 67

Zizek knows that a "good" Islam is hard to come by. However, the notion of Islam as an alternative to an otherwise tiresome tension between fate and freedom is what makes its emancipatory potential a reality. Here we need to direct a question to Saleh: How can Islam become an avenue for liberation? For Saleh, the gap between fate and

freedom can only be bridged through a new "culture", which ushers in a shift from Islam having "a jurisprudential positioning" toward a "discursive one". Saleh stresses that discursiveness is Islam's *sin qua non* condition (Saleh 2011a: 77). This "discursive positioning" entails a revival of Islamic rationalist intellectual traditions, as well as the Sufi tradition of mysticism (Saleh 2011a: 225). There is a need "to open up the framework of belief to a shared mindset, that being modernity", because "modernity today is that which bears no outside" (Saleh 2011a: 76).

C. "Mutations" of Modernity

For Saleh, both Islamists and secularists are struggling *over* Islam, for or against it. Instead, he wants us to struggle *about* it. Equally, for him, the struggle in Islam must be not for or against but *about* modernity. However, at the crux of the problem is the dominance of Western civilisationalism, the Oriental tendency to "lump together" Muslims and Arab peoples, which can occur even among critical intellectuals. For Saleh, these sets of assumptions and representations not only dictate a moral and "civilizational" superiority, they also help justify the most "monstrous" acts of domination over the "inferior" other. Before the Arab Spring and ISIS, when the Arabs' most tangible tragedy was Palestine, Saleh had in mind the systemic dehumanisation of Palestinians, and the elevation of Israel, by contrast, to the point of "divinity," as the quintessence of the West's monstrosity, both in its imagination and politics. According to the logic of Western modernity, Israel, as the supposed *only democracy in the Middle East*, is modern by its very definition, while the rest of the region requires modernisation and liberation from the "outside." He states that it is not only the West's capacity – the United States in particular – to use "the most hellish kind of violence against imagined enemies" that makes it a monster; "There is also a 'spiritual' and value-laden element to this violence: in a word, modernity" (Saleh 2010a). Elsewhere, Saleh writes that global modernity

> shook our societies to their core. True, it placed them in new globalised contexts, disrupted their inherited rhythms, and seemed to weaken the role and influence of long-established traditions, but it also provoked reactions predicated exclusively on cultural and religious traditions.
> Saleh 2010b

The result, according to Saleh, is what he considers the failings, or "mutations", of Western modernity, Islam, and the Arab state. The mystifying entanglement of the mutant imperialistic, theocratic, and authoritarian manifestations of these three respectively, is a primary reason behind the inability of Arab intellectuals to counter hegemonic narratives. He tells us that:

> the West increasingly appears as a Huntingtonian "civilisation," not as an open horizon for a humanity that aspires towards "liberty, equality, fraternity" for all; meanwhile, religion is becoming more politicised, gradually forfeiting its role as faith and as social connecter; and the state is merely an apparatus for political elites, not a nation-state for the commons.
> Saleh 2010a

Furthermore, in the context of the Syrian Revolution, there is a tension that exists between what Saleh praises as the "peaceful" culture of resistance of the Syrian revolutionaries during the early stages of the revolution, and their necessary and gradual militarisation in the face of the Assad regime's war machine. On the one hand, "peaceful" democracy is routinely opposed to violent terror. To be sure, Saleh and likeminded Syrian intellectuals recognise that the history of modern democracy is present as the ascent of progressive liberalisation and the fulfillment of the impetus to civic peace. Yet, the Jeffersonian pillar for democracy and liberty is a tree "refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants" (Jefferson, Letter to William Stevens Smith, 1787, quoted in Rapoport and Weinberg 2012). A key idea in Saleh's revolutionary writings is that the over-valorisation of "non-violence" in the Western discourse as a method to incite social change needs to be challenged. This is because, although Syrian secular intellectuals did not favour militarisation, self-defense against the Assad regime was necessary. It is not only that non-violent, democratic, and secular aspects of the Syrian Revolution seem to have eluded many ostensibly critical, leftist Western observers; it is also that focusing solely on the violence of anti-Assad Islamists is to succumb to mainstream media representations of the Arab countries as societies riddled with illiberal violence alone. Let us take the example of Zizek. In an interview on *Al Jazeera* in 2011, Zizek uses his provocative characterisation of Ghandi as being more violent than Hitler in order to present the idea that pacifism is

symbolically much more violent than the naked violence of states. He further expresses his admiration for the *Tahrir Square* protestors who in their non-violence actually sought to violently disrupt the whole system from functioning. Two years later, in an article in *The Guardian,* Zizek calls the struggle in Syria a "false one, lacking the kind of radical-emancipatory opposition clearly perceptible in Egypt." He goes on to describe it as "an obscure conflict… [with] no clear political stakes, no signs of a broad emancipatory-democratic coalition, just a complex network of religious and ethnic alliances over-determined by the influence of superpowers" (Zizek 2013).

In seeing an emancipatory potential in *Tahrir Square,* and not in Syria, Zizek's views point to a key idea: to Western eyes, there is something, liberal, noble, even lofty, about pacifist activism; courageous civil individuals and groups formulate a shared cause and make demands in the face of a brutal authoritarian regime. But in Saleh's view, Zizek's comments on Syria indicate that the efforts of civil, critical intellectuals and activists have escaped the Slovenian philosopher's analysis altogether. Saleh responds,

> …the stance of Zizek and others like him does not help secular Syrians who are struggling against the regime. In fact this position serves to weaken us, and to make both the regime and the Islamists stronger. Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014

Saleh is especially critical of what he describes as Zizek's "irresponsible and insensitive" approach to the Syrian tragedy. He adds, "The problem is not that such writers ignore something important about Syria, it is that they are ignorant of nearly everything about the miserable country" (Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014). "No distinction is made between a rationalist Arab and a non-rationalist, a moderate and an extremist, a fighter and a pacifist, a secularist and an Islamist. Variances amongst Arabs are presented as non-existent" (Saleh 2010a). Yet the most dangerous effect of the Western "civilizational" discourse is the way it can seeps into the Arab intellectual field. This is Saleh's main concern. Western tropes help reproduce an Arab Modernist current that is susceptible to reducing modern epistemological and moral imperatives for the purpose of waging war against Islam and Islamists (Saleh

2011a: 25; 49; 127). Further, it is elitist, socially and politically rightist, sceptical of democracy yet Western-oriented, and apologetic for those in power (Saleh 2011a: 13).

D. The Syrian Impasse

Much of what appeared in the media at the time of the fall of the Iraqi city of Mosul into the hands of ISIS sensationalises the swiftness with which the group captured new territory. It is, on the one hand, as if ISIS had come out of thin air, and that the more than decade-long turmoil in Iraq bears no relation to its existence. According to Saleh, there is a clear conspiratorial dimension to this argument. "A popular belief is that ISIS is a recipe for disaster, concocted in Iranian or American laboratories, or by the Assad regime itself" (Saleh 2014e). The other side of the coin concerning this debate adopts a vulgar civilisational approach, which conflates Islam and Muslims with ISIS. In any case, both the idea that "Islamic terror" can appear out of nowhere and the notion that contemporary forms of Islamic jihad are a mirror image of a 1400-year-old static Islam point to the fact that, as ever in the construction of meaning about Islam, the commentary is varied, often driven by emotion, and obscured by ideology. Saleh counters this by dismantling commonly held assumptions about Islam and the terrain it allegedly covers. He rejects the characterisation of any Islamic politics as necessarily "violent," "radical," or "extreme," because, for him, this approach justifies and sustains the grip of both imperialistic and authoritarian dominance over the societies and peoples of the Middle East.

The socio-political conditions around the emergence of ISIS have been the stuff of much debate and analysis, but only now, "when more and more [western] interests were threatened, when the identity of the victim began to change, and when ISIS rolled into cities in Iraq" (Haddad and Zeno 2014). But the association of Western foreign policy – in particular the West's impassioned concern for religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East – with concepts such as ethno-nationalist self-determination as the highest form of international good has to be constantly re-evaluated in light of Western perceptions of Islam. The hysteria around "radical Arab Sunnis," offers us a sobering corrective to the more ambitious claim made for the West's humanitarianism, irrespective of how remarkable Western concern for Kurds, Yezidis, Shi'ites, or Christians of the Middle East may seem. This is a reminder of the

persistent mentality of Empire and the significance of exactly *when* and *how* the West responds to events, and which populations are elevated above the others.

June 2014 saw the beginning of an international campaign against ISIS. The legacy of Western intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq has shown that there is a readiness to go to war under the pretense of proselytising democratic values, while accepting countless deaths as inevitable collateral damage. The democratic club of nations has an enduring relationship to violence, which is routinely rationalised according to the logic of the "lesser evil." This logic emerges as a "pragmatic compromise, a 'tolerated sin'," (Weizman 2011: 8) and is used to defend various forms of political and military intervention by Western powers, not to mention the diplomatic theatrics of another logic: the narrow friend/enemy logic. Since intervention in Syria and Iraq was framed in terms of the doctrine of The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a key question presented itself: why did the West trigger an R2P intervention for the atrocities of ISIS when they failed to come to the rescue of the victims of the Assad regime? For Saleh, the answer is clear. The campaign sends a message that "this intervention is not about seeking justice for heinous crimes, but is rather an attack against those who challenged Western powers… Western powers could have avoided this had they helped the Syrian resistance in its battle against the fascist Assad regime" (Saleh, quoted in Postel 2014). This last statement from Saleh vividly captures the condition of the Syrian Impasse.

5

Politics of Cultural Production in Syria

> We would rather be ruined than changed/We
> would rather die in our dread/Than climb the cross
> of the moment/And let our illusions die.
>> W. H. Auden
>> (*The Age of Anxiety:*
>> *A Baroque Eclogue*)

How does an intellectual of change emerge from within a society, which "would rather be ruined than changed"? How is the critical intellectual able to maneuver within an authoritarian social milieu, riddled with anti-intellectualism, where critique is delegitimised? Through its focus on Saleh and his emphasis on a politics of cultural production, this thesis has shed some light on the relationship between the intellectual/cultural and political fields in Syria. I have relied extensively on Saleh's interpretation of history and society and showed how in Syria the combination of official policy and the domination of the Assad regime over the symbolic universe has been directly responsible for a process of de-politicisation and a hollowing out of intellectual and cultural spaces. Moreover, leftist politics were crippled by ideological Balkanisation, organisational hopelessness and feebleness, and political de-classing; much of the Syrian Left's leadership had been marred by the morass of personal egotism, power-mongering and political opportunism. The series of successive crises that befell the Left in Syria led to the depletion of the intellectual class, especially during the 1980s and 1990s when many leftists were silenced and excluded by the oppressive state, forced into hiding or locked up in Assad's prisons. I argued that it was the prison experience that would forge a new breed of intellectuals who emerged in the 2000s, chief among whom is Saleh. In this chapter it will be worthwhile to reflect further on the questions posed above.

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The Arabic word *thaqafah* refers simultaneously to cultural *and* intellectual frameworks and pursuits. A *muthaqqaf,* therefore, is a cultured individual, an intellectual; that is to say, a social agent who engages in intellectual and cultural labour and therefore occupies a position within the field of cultural production. The "autonomization" of this field is dependent on "the constitution of a socially distinguishable category of professional artists or intellectuals who are less inclined to recognize rules other than the specifically intellectual or artistic traditions handed down by their predecessors" (Bourdieu 1993: 112). In Syria, the *muthaqqaf* has been a socially recognised and distinguishable category, typically a Leftist and former prisoner of conscience with a clearly defined political orientation and intellectual genealogy, and a limited measure of social prestige. In Saleh's sociological approach, the prison experience converges with his intellectual work on democracy and civil rights. The *muthaqqaf* is the product not of the university, but of the "formative" experience of political incarceration. Saleh tells us that the Syrian intellectual "graduates" from prison, and that it is through being incarcerated that one's intellectual development is shaped. The correlation between the prison experience and the imperative for democratization in the works of Syrian intellectuals saw its most visible manifestation during the Damascus Spring period of 2000-2001. During that time, political prison narratives became "a *cause celebre* for Syrian intellectuals" (Haugbolle 2010: 223). How, then, does the prison experience converge with the democratic project of the critical intellectual? And, how does the regime respond to the challenges posed against it by these intellectuals? I will begin by outlining the position of the critical intellectual in the field of cultural production, and the process by which the regime delegitimises critique.

Committed intellectuals who defy the regime's advances are either accused of treason, or of being beholden to foreign, abstract principles: social justice, democracy, and so on. They are totally marginalised in any case. This posturing anti-intellectualism is deeply rooted in the contemporary political history of Syria and performs a strategic ideological function: to protect the *status quo* from systematic political critique. Intellectuals are not only derided and slandered in official media, or sucked into "the vicissitudes of bureaucracies, power structures, popular divisions and polarisations" (Kassab 2014: 12), they are also subject to intimidation and harassment

by State Security even after their release from incarceration. Such coercive measures are coupled with a politics of containment of the field in which intellectuals operate. On one level, the regime employs what Miriam Cooke calls "commissioned criticism," a tactic that makes use of regime-sanctioned intellectuals in order to showcase the regime's tolerance toward its critics (Cooke 2007: 72). "Individual poets, university professors, artists, and playwrights are periodically called upon to help produce the public spectacles and to maintain Asad's cult" (Wedeen 1999: 3). In return for their services, these cultural agents are given accolades and made into national icons, further marginalising critical intellectuals. On another level, in its official rhetoric the regime actively engages in cynically re-appropriating the very concepts that inform the thinking of critical intellectuals. For example, in his defense of the Progressive National Front against the criticism of civil society advocates, Bashar al-Assad described the organization as "a democratic model developed through *our* own experience" (George 2003: 32 – italicisation my own). Such a statement exemplifies a political conservatism akin to Edmund Burke's political philosophy; what is essentially being said is, there is never democracy as such, only a specific democracy embodied in "our" constitutional order and within "our" particular cultural tradition. Similarly, when the revolution in Syria broke out in 2011, the same logic was applied to the protest movement's political slogans. *Hurriyyah* ('freedom'), for example, was reformulated by regime-loyalists in a way that delegitimizes the demands of protestors; "is this the freedom you want?" became a popular taunt, used against anyone who needed reminding of the inevitable chaos that would accompany the fall of the regime. This worked in tandem with far more explicit chants and slogans produced by the *shabbiha* (regime-sponsored paramilitary groups), such as *Al-Assad aw la ahad* ('Assad or nobody') and *Al-Assad aw nahriq al-balad* ('Assad, or we burn the country'). Saleh writes,

> The slogan "Assad or Nobody" – or its twin, "Assad or we burn the country" – is arguably one of the most successful political slogans in Syria's contemporary history. Born in the hope of subverting the aspirations of the uprising against Assad, the slogan's vulgarity and extremism express the level at which the Assad regime operates, both "theoretically" and in practice.
> Saleh 2012h

The process of delegitimising critique begins with the colonisation and saturation of the space of the political by oligarchic economic practices, and policies predicated a punitive approach to the maintenance of internal stability and geopolitical interests. Studies on Syria have often focused on this "materialist" aspect of the Assad regime's domination. However, as Wedeen has pointed out,

> This literature thereby overlooks the ways in which official rhetoric and images operate as forms of power in their own right, helping to enforce obedience and sustain the conditions under which regimes rule.
>
> Wedeen 1999: 5

Of equal importance for us, then, is how this process is extended to the spaces of the social and cultural, which are sutured "by an instituted police order" (Swyngedouw 2008: 6). This policing, this administration of economic, social and cultural domains by the authoritarian assemblage signifies an investment in a process of de-politicisation: that is to say, a process of blurring the lines between the political and the cultural; between the private and the public; between state and society. When it nominated itself as leader over state and society, the Ba'ath party – read the Assad regime – practically cemented its cultural hegemony; it is under the auspices of the regime that culture and society function. Syrians are expected to participate in this cultural project; the project of effectuating, reproducing and ensuring the survival of a "regime of signs" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Haugbolle writes,

> In the fifty or sixty key sentences that have been repeated endlessly since the 1970s, individual suffering is by definition heroic and heroically offered in sacrifice for the greater good of the nation – resisting Zionism and imperialism, regaining the Golan Heights and uniting the Syrian people and the Arab nation – while obedience and compliance are constructed as natural givens for Syrians as acts that confer their membership of the national family.
>
> Haugbolle 2010: 232.

In this way, it is the regime's discursive and symbolic dimensions that render policies and economic practices totalising, natural, and exempt from public contestation. For

Saleh, the regime's hegemony over the symbolic universe is part and parcel of its authoritarian makeup. Commenting on the regime's symbology, Saleh writes,

> In Assad's Syria, the official flag was rarely displayed and it was not long after Hafez al-Assad ascended to power that his image effectively became the chief symbol of the country… However, the official flag was not factored out completely and was used during times of crisis as a way of broadening public identification with the regime.
>
> Saleh 2013a

This points to the way that the regime's cult is "a strategy of domination based on compliance rather than legitimacy" (Wedeen 1999: 6). The disciplining of a population through the conflation of signs generates a culture in which the leader is synonymous with the nation. Saleh writes,

> No sooner had the man taken office that there were 'patriotic anthems' praising him and 'spontaneous popular marches' waving the picture of this 'devoted son of the people.' At the same time the intelligence services began to make their presence felt in public life, and with them the military and paramilitary forces responsible for the regime's security. Propaganda and security have remained cornerstones of the regime to this day. The agency responsible for propaganda is closer to being a slightly chaotic priesthood: its only religion, indeed its only skill, being the sanctification of the president and maintaining his absolute exclusivity. The security branch is made up of a number of agencies whose task is to keep control over terrorism: to build high walls of fear around, or perhaps inside, the regime's subjects.
>
> Saleh 2011c

"The existence of a 'Master of the Nation' in the form of the president," argues Saleh, "abolishes the republic in one fell swoop, and with it, all equality between its inhabitants. It institutionalises ties of personal allegiance and a culture of political appointments and privilege and divides society along sectarian lines" (2011c). Anthony Shadid (2011) noted that when Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, he

put an end to a volatile chapter in Syria's history not through "the modernisation of infrastructure and education," nor through "his service to the poor and rural," but by inculcating "a suffocating cult of personality, buttressed by fear, often the most visceral sort." Assad understood that every section of society would have to come under his control in order to ensure real security for his avowedly pan-Arabist, secular regime, and thus began to invade the public sphere. Furthermore, official rhetoric engenders the notion that compliance with the regime is for the greater good of the nation, and by extension the individual.

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Since going into exile in late 2013, Saleh's contributions to *Kalamon* have signalled a return to more critical sociological themes. His contributions in this publication demonstrate the continuity and cohesion in his intellectual pursuits. He starts before the revolution in some way anticipating the rupture that would bring about our confronting encounter with the unresolved problems and unanswered questions of the post-1967 Arab world about culture, language, and identity. He then moves on to address the rupture itself while maintaining his investment in getting to the root of sectarianism, fascism, and conservative thinking in Syria. The zenith of this intellectual trajectory comes across in the last three essays in *Kalamon.* The first is a discussion on "lifestyles" and life struggles in Syria (2014c). This highly reflective piece is based on Saleh's experience in the town of Douma in the Damascus countryside during the summer of 2013. Here he sheds light on the construction of privilege and a prevalent polarity in the Syrian imagination: between the urban and the rural; the urbane and the derelict; the modern and the "Islamic". He then moves on to a discussion on the Arabic language (2014d). Here another dichotomy is examined, between *fusha,* written classical Arabic, and *'ammiyya,* spoken demotic Arabic. Saleh's analysis of the symbolic currency that *fusha* has over *'ammiyya* is key: the façade of Arab unity that *fusha* engenders is constructed through symbolic violence against the diversity of Arabic vernaculars. This is a successful strategy for Arabist ideologues; the Assad regime, for example, presents itself as "the beating heart of Arabism", as the protector of Arab *asalah*, or authenticity. Similarly, Islamists claim moral legitimacy because Islam is, first and foremost, an Arabic religion – Arabic is Allah's language and his way of communicating with us (not simply the other way

around). Most important for Saleh is that Assadists and Islamists occupy different positions within the same field of production of Arab ideology. This point directs us to Saleh's most recent essay (2015) in which he offers a critique of one of his intellectual heroes, the Moroccan Abdallah Laroui. For Saleh, Laroui is a key figure in the project of constructing an "*Arab* Intellectual," a new social animal in whom Western modernity can be realised. Here again, there is a perilous duality: Western/Arab. Saleh rejects Laroui's conception that an "Arab reality is temporally retarded" (2015). For him, Laroui's attempt to locate and celebrate an "inner West" in the Arab intellectual is predicated on thinking Arab culture in terms of an "Arab mindedness". Most alarming for Saleh is that if Laroui wants to *take the Arab out of the Arab intellectual*, so to speak, the Arab intellectual can no longer have a place in the field of Arabic culture (Saleh 2015).

Once again, what is at play here are competing forces, each aiming to inscribe the field of culture with its own set of discursive, symbolic, and material rules in a bid to dominate others. Saleh identifies culture as a field of struggles, at once receptive and resistant to change. He is interested in exploring the interplay between rigid social structures, values and norms, and the cultural dynamism in the context of the revolution. The elements of culture (symbols, language, values, beliefs, and norms) require relentless theoretical interrogation in new contexts.

Accordingly, he adapts his examination of authoritarian culture, and extends his problematisation of *thaqafah* to the contexts of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Syria. Since 2011, he has become interested in the ways that a new revolutionary culture has usurped the culture of the Assad regime. As an intellectual of change, Saleh recognises that he has a responsibility to be responsive to the way the cultural field, which is colonised, sutured, and impregnated with reactionary ideas about modernity, Islam, language, identity, and so on. He is also aware of the need to cement a new position in the cultural field and to introduce a new set of discursive and symbolic instruments. For Saleh, this is the meaning of struggle. In an interview in 2014, Saleh admits he is concerned about the cultural trajectory the revolution had taken. He fears that anti-Assad politics may become just as dogmatic as its predecessor, and stifle new forms of independent cultural production: "I think it's entirely possible that culture could be used again in the name of the revolution, in the name of Islam or in the name of both together" (Saleh 2014f).

How does the cultural field gain autonomy when, in the words of W. H. Auden, "we would rather be ruined than changed" is the maxim that rules the day – when revolutionary culture, increasingly dominated by Jihadism, threatens to replace the old regime with an equally authoritarian one? Faced with what is often referred to as a culture of "violence," "anxiety," "fear," "political poverty," and the legacy of what celebrated Marxist activist Riad al-Turk calls a "kingdom of silence" (al-Atassi 2011), how do we find avenues for constructing spaces of hope, a culture of dialogue, of emancipation? Saleh asserts that the regime has managed to empty out all substance from an autonomous field of cultural production. This was possible not only through a set of political policies and practices, but also through the production of discursive and symbolic tropes for imagining and conceptualising the world in particular ways. He fears that new revolutionary powers will repeat this process under the guise of resistance and renewal, although he maintains the hope that "new culture will take shape around the experience of resistance to the Assads' tyranny, but also around experiences of resistance to emerging forms of domination" (Saleh 2014f).

The revolution is marked by public contestation of dominant tropes, and signalled the desire of a population to dismantle the regime's symbol-producing machine. Indeed, in the revolution's early, peaceful stages, the most visible effects of public contestation were the burning and destruction of posters and statues of regime figureheads, coupled with increasingly daring popular phrases such as '*yil'an ruhak ya Hafez*' ('curse your soul, oh Hafez'). As revolutionaries celebrated the liberation of culture from the shackles of state control, such acts of *damnatio memoriae* were predictably deemed by the regime to be "degrading the *haybah* ('prestige') of the state." The regime retaliated accordingly through the most heinous acts of violence aimed at humiliating and making an example out of anyone who spoke against it.[34]

But for Saleh, the Syrian experience has been, for the most part, expressed monologically, especially by activists who have participated in forming the various oppositionary groups and coalitions that emerged in exile since 2011. Instead of translating the struggle into a dynamic and relational language, constantly engaged in a process of dialogue with the world, the Syrian opposition "has failed in translating Syria's dreadful suffering into universal meaning"; Saleh attributes this failure to the

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[34] On July 4, 2011, Ibrahim al-Qashoush, an amateur poet from Hama who composed the popular revolutionary anthem '*Yalla irhal ya Bashar*' ('Go Away, Bashar'), was found dead, his body dumped in the Orontes River, his throat cut and his vocal cords ripped out (Shadid 2011a).

fact that Syrians "have really lived for half a century in solitude" (Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014). Coupled with the escalation of violence on the ground, the opposition, both in its pacifist and militant articulations, became more fragmented, and to a great extent *Islamicised.* Saleh sees this as especially dangerous to the process of emancipating the field of cultural production. Nonetheless, he remains hopeful that "an increasing number of Syrians have begun to think that their cause, the Syrian cause, is a global one that requires them to think in global terms, to be interpreted in the same context of the liberatory struggles of the peoples of Eastern Europe or of South Africa" (Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014).

It is evident that Saleh is invested in extracting meaning from the Syrian experience, precisely in order to communicate this meaning to the world in such a way that makes us feel the struggle, allowing us to be touched on a profound level by stories of human suffering; his open letters to Western intellectuals and world leaders, as well as his recent piece (2015a) on our obligation to not turn away our gaze from images of Syrian suffering, "of our macerated bodies", demonstrate how his writing oscillates between penetrating analysis and emotive language, in a bid to illuminate and clarify the situation in all of its complexity. "As a writer, my task is to contribute to the culture of the Syrian condition; I cannot do this without paying attention to the extremes of this condition, without looking death right in the eye" (2015a).

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Despite the attempts of critical intellectuals such as Saleh, the regime has been successful at constructing what Hage calls a "dominant reality" (2015). Saleh stresses,

> It should be clear by now that the regime is happy with the appearance of [Islamist] groups because they enable it to sell the narrative of "war against terrorism" to those who are ready to buy it in the West and elsewhere. Some prominent figures in Western intelligence and diplomatic circles are now calling for coordination with the Assad regime against terrorism. Having such a marketable commodity ["the war on terror"] enables engagement with influential international superpowers, something the regime constantly depends on to refresh its international legitimacy and renew its mandate for

ruling the country. Staying in power "forever" is the highest aim of the Assad dynasty.

<div align="center">Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014</div>

Today, the focus on ISIS in mainstream media, as well as in the politics around Syria in general, is a testament to the regime's ability to enforce its version of reality. The "war," "conflict," "crisis," or however else what is taking place is described – what I call the Syrian Impasse, this suffocating deadlock that has impelled some to call the revolution an "orphaned" one (Majed 2014), or to even announce its death – is what puts Syria in what Hage (2015) with reference to Gaza calls a "permanent state of criminality." As Israel is to Palestine, the Assad regime is to Syria. Just as it would be a mistake "to think there was and will be a non-criminal and ethical reality before and after the invasion [of Gaza]" (Hage 2015: 149), it is also a mistake to imagine that there was and could be a non-criminal and ethical reality under Assad before or after the revolution. While the regime's retaliation against the rebellious factions of the Syrian population has been nothing short of criminal, it cannot be ignored that its strategies and policies of coercion and control before the revolution were no less criminal. We should not be surprised by the current state of affairs and the length to which the Assad regime would go in order to ensure its survival. It must be acknowledged that the violence of local military opposition, while it cannot be compared to the regime's brutality, has doubtless contributed to this state of criminality. Saleh invokes the truism that "extremism nurtures extremism," in order to explain the persistence of a state of criminality "during the whole nightmarish Assadist decades" (Saleh, quoted in Hashemi and Postel 2014). Moreover, various forms of international intervention, whether active, through military operations (the participation of Iran and Hezbollah in the conflict; the influx of foreign Sunni jihadists; or, the international campaign against ISIS), or passive, namely through what one commentator called a U.S. strategy of "seducing and abandoning" (Ignatius 2013) the Syrian opposition, have combined to reinforce the permanency of criminality in Syria today.

Conclusion

> I still find it difficult to reconcile myself to the word exile. I used to observe it with the eyes of a prisoner, then with the eyes of a 'citizen' living in Syria… exile was better than prison, and often less cruel than living within the country itself.
>
> Saleh 2015b

> And that is why the future victory will bloom from this 'defeat'.
>
> Rosa Luxemburg

In the introduction to *Awraq Magazine's* special issue on Saleh, Sadik Jalal al-Azm (2013) writes, "[Saleh's] story is about resistance, defiance, subjugation, persecution, arbitrary detention, torture, in addition to aggressively imposed solitude… it is also a story of self-reflection, self-examination, and trial; a story of transcendence and sublimation, of examining consciousness and conscience" (9). The special issue, which contains more than thirty contributions by various Arab intellectuals and academics, attests to the bearing that this prominent writer's life and work have on the domains of critical Arab thought and Arabic culture today. The fact that Saleh's relevance as a public intellectual coincides with a particularly tumultuous period in Syrian history, and that his writing is shaped by the socio-political happenings he witnesses is expressed in the introduction in earnest. Al-Azm argues that the popular uprising in Syria saw Saleh's transformation into the most distinguished popular and cultural thinker "to dive beneath the earth and to disseminate his analyses from the underground" (10). However, Saleh, as Al-Azm notes, is unlike Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" or Dostoevsky's "underground man". This is because he is neither an unreliable narrator, nor is he intoxicated with spite, and "Unlike Camus' Sisyphus, Saleh is not a solitary hero facing the absurdity of life writ large, but an outstanding intellectual traveling with comrades on a journey. He bears the hardship, but not

alone" (Haugbolle 2015: 20). In other words, he is never fully underground; rather, he is a "public underground man" (al-Azm 2013) in that he emerges from the cracks every time the monsters of darkness tighten their grip on the world.

Saleh is an energetic and amiable writer, invested in illuminating the dynamics of the Syrian struggle, the psychology of Syrian sectarianism, and the more obscure corners of the Assad regime. But what truly distinguishes him from others around him is his capacity to have a critical approach to history. Whereas other intellectuals around him, whether on the right or the left of politics, assume the role of antiquarian or monumental intellectuals, either by obsessing with one particular historical period and living in permanent exile from the present, or by retrieving from the past heroes, martyrs, foundational myths to embolden the present, Saleh chooses to be a critical intellectual (Nietzsche [1874] 1980). He moves with great agility across space and time, uncovering forgotten histories in order to better evaluate his own time; the history of modern Syria passes through his writing, often turned on its head. He never loses track of his narrative's main thread: the emancipation of culture. 'Culture' though as broad and arguably as unattainable as freedom, is rousing in the same way, insofar as it means, "to belong somehow… to a common symbolic" (Rieff 1972: 90-91). The "symbolic" is "a pattern of moral demands, a range of standard self-expectations about what we may and may not do, in the face of infinite possibilities" (99). Saleh wants to dwell in culture; he wants to belong to it.

Saleh does his work out of a commitment to work for enfranchising marginalised people into broadly democratic processes at the political, intellectual, and cultural levels. While he performs a journalistic role, he has little interest in simply documenting the conditions confronting the battered Syrian population. And while he implores the support of intellectuals and policymakers, he finds no satisfaction with an illusion that some benevolent and powerful individuals will be so moved or enlightened by his work that they will "do the right thing". How, then, can his work begin to overcome some of the obstacles to human emancipation? How does he propose to combat the permanent state of criminality that is the result of the interplay between three dominant forms of oppression – Assadist, Islamist, and Imperialist? What Saleh advocates is first and foremost an autonomous intellectual field in which the potential political and cultural implications coming out of discursive frames are taken seriously. This intellectual field must account for the multifaceted effects of authoritarianism and oppression. Before the breakout of the

revolution this seemed an impossible task as the regime aimed to hollow out the cultural field of any independent cultural work or, indeed, of all collective efforts. The coming of the revolution, however, gave Saleh and others the ability to rediscover the power of writing. While in hiding, Saleh did this by bringing around him new Syrian voices; this is embodied in the volunteer-based online magazine, *Al-Jumhuriya,* that Saleh co-founded with a young generation of Syrians in 2012, and in which the present author is an occasional contributor. Since going into exile, Saleh further expanded the network for active discursive and cultural production through *Hamisch,* the independent space-in-exile in Istanbul for Syrian, Arab, Turkish, as well as international intellectual, literary, and artistic individuals to engage in creative intellectual exchanges.

In short, what Saleh proposes is a dialogical cultural encounter with a focus on denaturalising assumptions about both authoritarianism and sectarianism in an effort to expand the parameters of both what is imaginable and what is doable in response to the Syrian Impasse. To accomplish this, Saleh believes that it is essential for intellectuals to both develop close, collaborative relationships with the people with whom independent, civil society oriented work is to be done, and to engage in critical dialogues with those same people about the dangers of the socio-political status quo. Günter Grass once said, 'The job of a citizen is to keep his mouth open'. For Syria, this imperative to speak out is a hallmark of a burgeoning, autonomous and quintessentially modern cultural field. In their rejection of subservient modes of existence, many Syrians have reclaimed aspects of their citizenry, though not without paying a hefty price. Today, the suffocating deadlock of war, destruction, humanitarian catastrophe, and exile has become increasingly metonymic of a specifically post-revolutionary Syrian modernity. A new generation of Syrian writers in exile has produced some of the most vivid commentary on the revolutionary condition, capturing the ruptures that acutely highlight the transition from a Syria in prison to a Syria in exile.

Much like Fanon's "new humanity" is conceptualised through "a very particular affective and ambivalent mode of reacting to the colonial and/or racist dimensions of European modernity" (Hage 2015: 122-3), so too is Saleh's understanding of critique, culture, and language. Aspiration for the universal is a driving force in his work; his "three monsters" approach can make him appear reactive against the particularities of Western modernity, Political Islam, and Syrian

national consciousness. Yet he maintains a safe distance from viewing them as particularities, as "essences"; instead, he sees them as "mutations" which all take place *in* modernity. He is far more invested in understanding and explaining how the interplay between these mutations leads to processes of relationality and individuation. Just as authoritarian, theocratic, and imperialist structures affect groups of people materially and discursively, so must an autonomous intellectualism operate. Intellectual engagement that simply documents the structural impacts of policies and practices is not in and of itself sufficient for crafting methods that challenge systemic injustices. Rather, to both understand and to work against "monsters", it is imperative to also engage with others in exploring the effects of dominant discourses and to unmask how such discourses produce particular ways of thinking about and acting in the world that seem natural, inevitable, and beyond the power of human action. To do this is to participate in an anthropological project where one "is forced to include himself and his own way of life in his subject matter" (Wagner 1975: 12). Beneath, or even against the primacy of observing and demystifying power relations, and unmasking monsters and beasts, lies an investment in writing with oneself rather than writing about oneself; "writing with people rather than writing about people" (Hage 2015: 87). Saleh wants to write with himself and with others in order to respond to the complexity of the modern Syrian experience. His writing on dictatorship, prison, revolution, war, and exile should not be read simply as a personal account; it is an invitation for Syrians to write with one another, to rewrite their history collectively, and to reclaim what it means to be part of a global, modern citizenry.

Lastly there is a triangular frame in which one can begin their search for salvation; the triangular relationship between pain, hope, and culture. Saleh (2015c) aptly notes that in Arabic an anagramic relationship exists between the word *alam,* meaning pain, and the word *amal,* meaning hope. This points us in the direction of Adorno's famous aphorism: "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass" (2005: 50). The splinter represents a fragment of an otherwise perfectly good instrument for seeing the world. But the magnifying glass only enables us to seek details of the human experience with comfort, and at our own leisure. The splinter, on the other hand, represents pain; yet it also invokes hope; hope for social redemption through social commitment, through intimate knowledge of human suffering. Saleh urges us to extract meaning and hope from pain; this is what makes up a culture of hope to usurp the culture of fear, prison, and exile. And while the 'defeats', the harsh
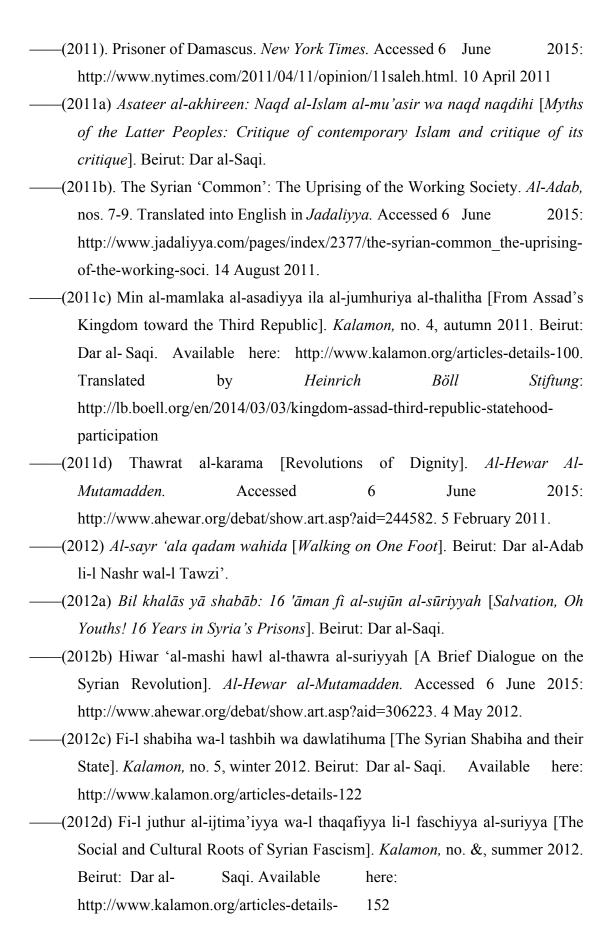
and bitter experiences that taunt him may recede into history, the manner in which Saleh writes about them will remain as a historical example of its own.

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