Nawãr (Savages): Transformation of Individual and Collective Consciousness in Totalitarian Regimes in Syrian Society

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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To Salma and Alia, the apples of my eyes.

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PROLOGUE

Bringing one's work to life in a different language requires more than mere translation, especially for such a book. When I wrote it in my native tongue, Arabic, I addressed peers and comrades sharing the same struggle. In the English version, I am speaking to a different audience, my examiners. The English version of the book attempts to give an inside perspective on the struggle and dynamics of a particular group under an unusual regime of totalitarianism at a highly exceptional moment in its history. I considered localizing some parts of the content to make it relevant to the Western reader and was tempted to address them directly. Instead, I thought I would just give them the space to unrestrictedly hear our internal conversation about our shared experience for the last several decades, how it occurred, and where it has led us.

I have been working on this text for ten long years. From 2014 to 2021, the Arabic version took seven arduous years. During that time, I found myself pondering the course of events in the Syrian scene in particular and the Arab states in general amidst the repercussions of the Arab Spring. Like many of my generation, I was in a state of disappointment and confusion as we were witnessing for the first time a real people's revolution erupting simultaneously in more than seven Arab states in what came to be called the Arab Spring of 2011. In less than three years of its spark, some of these states fell into chaos and war, whereas others experienced a stronger return to old dictatorships. The results were so shocking that they affected our belief in the justice of the causes behind the Arab Spring and made us question our inner perception of ourselves as Arab nations and peoples. This shock did not only annihilate any opportunity to change similar to that of any other Arab state but also collaborated in killing any political, economic, or intellectual reformation in such states.

The events of the Arab Spring came as no surprise to many observers with knowledge and experience. The authoritarian repression, economic hardship, and significant disparities, along with no salvation looming on the horizon, provided a suitable environment for the escalation of the popular protests. Nevertheless, the origin and timing of events posed hard questions and a point of contention among various parties. Were these events a result of exceptional courage on the part of a youth-driven popular movement or some foreign-schemed conspiracy? Despite our convictions and strong beliefs in our just cause and the dismay of the disastrous outcomes these popular uprisings ended in, nothing and none could change the opinion of either side. Still, regardless of our view of the spark, these popular movements succeeded in massing hundreds of thousands of people in the squares, facing death with high heads, only to demand freedom and dignity—a fact that is hard to dispute. Heedless of poverty, hunger, or the systematic looting of their riches, the persistent base of their struggle was to acquire high values, bringing pride to whoever participated in this movement.

Despite the slowing of military and political events on the Syrian and regional scene, the humanitarian catastrophes and social calamities resulting from this war still bring something new almost daily. Especially after the eruption of the Syrian estrangement, unforeseen by many, and the reaching of the Syrian individual to the outskirts of this earth as a refugee or a migrant.

The largest challenge I encountered while writing this book was my concern that, in writing such a challenging book, my words would fall short of my intended meaning, especially because its title might offend many Syrians. The word Nawãri in our society is an insult and an offense, met with counter-swearing at times and beating at some others. In our collective consciousness, the Nawãri has an extremely negative image, charged with all traits counter to all that might be ascribed to us: the "respectable "people.

Not once did I hear the Nawãri word positively describing anything that would please us to be attributed. Far from it, an image of a dark, slim, barefooted, and disheveled individual jumps into our minds, gazing with yellow eyes, sneering with crooked and worn-out teeth, sulking, and

speaking only profanity. In our mind's eyes, the "Nawãri" is nameless, featureless, voiceless, and lacks everything denoting a human form. That "Nawãri" is the opposite of which, meaning the non-Nawãri should distance themselves from anything similar to them. Nawrãna (savagery) is the deplorable outcome that all fear. It is the root cause of why one pushes their children to go to school every morning if they do not follow instructions for being well dressed or keeping their shoes clean. They would be chided, saying, "Don't be a savage! It is of low caste and less of a human! Even a total lack of it! There is no place for "Nawãr" amongst us, the civilized society! All forms of Nawrãna must be fought.

I find myself obliged to assert that this book is not about the tribes or ethnic groups referred to in this description. Any projections I make are not intended for them as individuals or groups. I apologize to all such groups for centuries of oppression and belittling practiced unjustly towards them. All I do is borrow this unfair stereotype projected on them in a generalizing and unjust manner and project it back to us as individuals of the Syrian community. Henceforward, every "Nawãri" word can be exchanged with the clause "the Syrian living under authoritarian and totalitarian oppression for the past sixty years." This community has found in its understanding matters that it tried to evade by blaming the other and to rid itself of it by adhering to a group against which it would be easier to distinguish. Thus, the "Nawãr" description in our community is an easier choice of word to describe the other, whom we can outstrip and try our best not to be. All of this is done without us getting to know one Nawãr well enough to objectively examine their life from a different perspective and without conceit.

This understanding—that of differentiation from the other—carries within its layers one of the biggest issues of the collective consciousness in Syrian society, with all its different categories and backgrounds. On the other hand, such loose, pre-made, and existing forms of projecting probably facilitated Syrian society's plummeting into the quicksand of disintegration after the break of the Arab Spring in 2011. The total disintegration was demonstrated all through the lines of differentiation of age, class, education, economy, region, race, and sect. With the variations of disintegration lines that rapidly emerged and the divergence in the Syrian community, the individuals

ceaselessly distanced themselves from the other. Arabic has no word to denote the concept I am trying to outline here. Even other languages resort to using the verb form of the word "other," as in "otherization" and "othering." Thus, keeping the other as being othered with total and complete differentiation. It is a mechanism to create a barrier to isolate the targeted individual from the public. This chapter starts with the purpose of creating two groups. It is no longer just "we" and "them," but the "all" and the "adversary," for the "all" to be protected from the vicious "adversary" and confront their evils.

With time, the exclusive circle of that "all" grew narrower and more homogenous. The communities in Syria fell into degeneracy, taking them back to the circles of narrow alleys and from there on to the community of big families and the nucleus family. Subsequently, many familial connections were lost, even among siblings. This degeneracy does not only represent a moral failure but also an indication of the lack of perspective for the existence of a mutual identity among the individuals of Syrian society. As time goes by, the "Nawãri" expand their definition of the other—the enemy—facilitating dissociation from that other and taking a defensive position.

This process of differentiation starts in our minds—between what is acceptable and unacceptable. It is projected on our reality to identify who those are that are "not us." And this accompanies our almost total lack of understanding of what "us" means. We find ourselves falling into social disintegration. It does not only destroy the existing social foundations but also hinders the building of any substitute or alternative ones. This disintegration that makes us Nawãr in each other's eyes is the state desired by the authoritative regimes oppressing us. Totalitarian regimes are the very ones that strenuously strive to keep individuals entirely disconnected from their communities.

The Nawãr utilizes any grievance, whether personal or part of its focus circle, which might sometimes broaden. All of this is unacknowledged by the Nawãri to justify their detachment from their community, neighborhood, reality, and even responsibilities. In Syrian society, everyone is isolated and entrenched in a mold they hand-shaped to be distinguished from and avoid

the "adversary." This mold, with a mission to build a homogenous and bonded human grouping, grew into a barrel to be worn by an individual, and whoever is outside is the "other," threatening their very existence. No wonder bumper stickers reading "People's betrayal made me love traveling" and "Always in tears" became viral for decades in Syria. Besides, volumes of radio songs lament betrayal and disloyalty. And saying, "The walls have ears" is a hollow excuse for not being candid, even among siblings and cousins, and fearing nothing but that the next blow would be dealt at the hands of your own flesh and blood. It is society's utter failure, embodied in the withering of an individual behind imagined walls, isolating them from the world. Behind these walls, everyone is equal in their animosity, insignificance, and inhumanity. The more we consider ourselves Nawãr, the more convinced we get of our Nawrãna. But wait! I am not a Nawãr. It is they who are the Nawãr. They are the cause of our misery, backwardness, and downfall. Consequently, I do my part carefully, reminding myself persistently of the dangers of Nawrãna and incessantly abhorring it.

However, that individual is abruptly taken over by the strong waves of Nawrãna, leaving them powerless to escape, despite their best efforts. Millions of individuals, who are diligent in their Nawrãna, eagerly struggle to keep afloat on the surface of defeat or surrender and delve deep into the predestined role of Nawrãna. No matter how disintegrated communities can be, they remain whole and affected by each other. At the moment of truth, we have to live together in our "Nawrãna." The more we consider ourselves "Nawãr," the more convinced we are of it." Then we have to play the role, though we hate it. The authoritarian winds have taken over, threshing all fresh heads.

Coping with the Nawrãna state requires rationalizing it, accepting it as a reality, setting excuses, and re-accepting it. Then it becomes a praiseworthy collective identity. Shortly, we integrate it into the historical and civilizational identity that differentiates us from the rest of the world and our eternal bond. It becomes a dream and a part of a glorious history where we once were but no longer are and we most strenuously pursue. Magically, the life of Nawrãna remains a constant nostalgia in the minds of the Nawãr, where everyone is longing for a beautiful time that is utterly irrelevant to their reality. Their homes are warm and safe, where simple people live, going

about their business peacefully. A hard-working and honest set of people, welcoming to strangers, and having a warm set of customs and traditions. However, the life of the Nawãr was part of a historical pathway drifting into the abyss, unbeknownst to us.

It is incumbent upon us to fathom how the Syrians have lost their way and, above all, how the streets of exiles have turned into their homeland. And how they turned from "an educated and amalgamated civilization" and descendants of "the glorious history" to the Nawãr caught in a whirlwind. How did they shift from a virtuous society to a suppressed one? How does the Nawãr allow the continuation of this oppression and torture? We ended up being peacefully handed from one dictator to another without the least show of opposition. Even though the revolution was a historic opportunity for change, why did the Nawãr create another historic opportunity to change their reality, for which they paid its price in dear blood and ended up wasting it as previously?

The Syrian revolution unveiled another facet of our reality. Syria has witnessed a transformation of crime, from the tyranny of a single despot to a succession of atrocities with anonymous murderers. The civil movement for the revolution failed due to the corruption of some of the active groups and their connection to institutions of interest in erasing that very movement. It reached the point where those activists cooperated with the regime and managed to blackmail and then recruit them. Afterward, the civil movement transmuted into an armed one, with army defectors among their lines who refused to kill protestors. This transformation, rather than a push forward for the toppling of the regime, led to nothing but more violence and bloodshed. The armed Islamic factions spearheaded the fighting fronts, paving the way for the rise of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). All of this is occurring against a backdrop of widespread corruption spreading across the political opposition and several civil society organizations. Consequently, discussing who is responsible for these successive setbacks was postponed.

The fundamental struggle and the core issues were lost. Discussions turned to the purpose, with successive accusations exchanged between all parties about who was responsible for the destruction and devastation. We reached

a point where it was essential to examine whether the removal of Bashar al-Assad was the means to solving the struggle. Or the struggle has reached a much deeper and more intricate stage than simply removing the cancerous authoritarian and recovering the patient. We can no longer consider matters in such simple terms after witnessing how the Syrians championed "the Method brothers" (a jihadi Salafist slogan) against brothers of blood, land, and citizenship that collaborated in the establishment of the ISIS state. We have become stuck in a struggle with hazy images of ourselves. Our struggle is no longer as clear-cut as we once thought. The story of the murderer and the victim is lost amidst the ongoing whirlwind of violence. We have allowed the first murderer to get away with his crime. We even participated in creating new killers that walked down the same road and thus deserved to be included with the primary killer on the enemy list. We have become at war with something that is a part of who we are. We are among the masses of the Nawãr and oppressed. Try as we might to repent and return to our purity and imagined utopianism, at the end of the day, we look in the mirror at something that somehow resembles an unwanted image. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not, it is ours.

I do not equate the victim with the perpetrator. On the contrary, I strive to end the repetitive loop of the Karpman drama triangle, or the executioner/rescuer/victim syndrome. We have to dig deep into that tunnel connecting our oppression and betrayal. We must rebuild the foundation of the common ground that binds us together. Then, we must learn how to respect the common ground of "us" and what makes "us" as a collective. Only then will we exterminate the primary executioner and whoever followed him. Only then would we commemorate those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for "us."

I hope that by the end of the book, I can present a deeper perspective on some of our ideological and moral crises. In addition to that, what I consider factors into the impediments standing in the way between what we want and what we are. What we want can be either salvation from persecution or catching up with the developed nations and being among the leading civilizations. It might be beneficial to refer to the fact that this book does not aim to outline the differentiations between the Syrians who participated in the revolt against al-Assad's rule and those who decided to rally around

him. The book aims to draw on the intellectual traits of the Syrian generations that came to the age of majority before 2011. We are the offspring of the movements of the "Pioneers," the "Revolutionary Youth Union," the one party, and the "Father Commander" (all names of organizations with the one and only leading ruling party in Syria). We share much more than we think as we glare at each other through the crack separating us post-2011. This does not mean that the conclusive moral stand that we took in 2011 is equal at the two ends of the schism. The attitude towards the Syrian revolution is a bigger crack than can be evaluated at the moment.

This book is more of an individual effort to analyze complex political, intellectual, and social problems than a work of satire. This analysis might facilitate portraying a road map and reaching several agenda items that might be crucial to solving problems in our daily reality and our civilizational and existential crises. Moreover, this book is not an attempt at self-flagellation; nevertheless, reading and writing are both painful experiences. This book is an attempt at delving beyond what is beneath the shallow surfaces. It is more like taking up the scalpel to make an incision in the chest. Though it does not reveal the secrets of the mind, it gives us more insight and more details. I do not seek to be another masochistic state due to my Arab cultural experience. My book does not also aim at creating or framing any stereotypes of some societies. There is not one human being on the face of this earth who has all the traits of a Nawãri that are enumerated in the book. Therefore, it is utterly unfair to say that there is a whole group of people who have all of these traits. Especially those who are accused of being "non-civilized" and savage are getting into new phases of their unique journey toward liberation and progress.

This is my first book. I hope more will follow, giving me ample room to build upon the criticism and overview I introduce here, which is to be considered by many as negative, bleak, and heeding nothing but dim surroundings. What this book strives to monitor is several intellectual phenomena and characteristics first detected by the author in himself, his immediate environment, and the community. These characteristics are present in every ancient and modern human community. Nonetheless, such characteristics are considerably and predominantly recurrent in the

"Nawãri" community. That recurrence drove the author to propose a theory about an interrelationship between the prevalence of these characteristics among the individuals of a society and its deterioration. This theory does not venture to foresee whether this interrelation between these two phenomena is causal. And it does not imply the possibility that one is an outcome of the other's existence or exacerbation. This detection and all the accusations made in this book aim at nothing more than describing these phenomena and exploring some of their causes and outcomes as thoroughly as possible. My efforts would not seek to propose any solution for these phenomena, attempt to reconstruct society or impose its intellectual approach.

My choice of the word" probing" reflects a confession on my part about my experience as an individual. This experience is more like a needle biopsy[1], which cannot necessarily outline the complete features, form, or shape of the biopsied organ. It rather reflects the hierarchy and diversity of the layers and foundations composing that body. I do not consider my perspective an external one performed on a sample; I observe through the glass from afar. Rather, I see myself as one of the Nawãr, and I have many of their traits and practices.

No one can deny their origin, which is as permanent as the color of one's skin, despite their best efforts. This is similar to exposed flaws, such as warts on eyelids. Contrarily, the origin and belonging of an individual are not associated with their flaws unless they insist on confirming this association through their beliefs and behavior.

When writing a book, one stands with their bare thoughts under the scrutiny of millions of eyes and history. It is a horrifying stance for me and many in my place. My fear of airing my thoughts to the public eye might have contributed to the delay in completing this book for years. Every time I read an old excerpt of what I wrote, I find myself mocking my own thoughts and

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[1] When doctors encounter a suspicious lump, they extract a needle biopsy to help them observe and study the tissues that make up that lump and learn more about the disease and its severity. My attempt to understand the soil that yielded our historical events and the intellectual transformations that contributed to outlining this path raised this example in my mind.

their naivety as being unequal to the intricacy of the cause at hand. To enrich my work, I sometimes elaborate on what I seek to convey through academic language, studies, and references. At times, they are successful elaborations, and on others, I write as if my book was in my hands when I was a fifteen-year-old boy. I find myself burdened with foreign terms. I will proceed to explain what I mean in a more comprehensive manner. Or, I would add synonyms to terms I list in both Arabic and English to facilitate further research.

From the very beginning, I tried to keep my book up with the pace of Syrian reality, making it relevant to our problems, the Syrians 'problems. The more delayed I get in finishing it, the more I feel liberated from the prison of the temporal context. For the book to be more closely related to absolute human thoughts and the general masses with no exclusions or limitations, nowadays, the Nawãri can be American, Italian, modern, or futuristic.

Undoubtedly, any expatriate writing about the Syrian reality, especially post-2011, feels as if they are in an out-of-body state. Our engagement in the ideological and political work related to Syrian issues is an inescapable matter and is unaffected by distance. We have grown up under the rule of a totalitarian regime that has forced us to be deeply involved with all issues in all fields. We, the offspring of totalitarian regimes and their survivors, will always be captivated by this universal experience, bearing at its heart the dream of being liberated from it in all contexts: politics, economy, religion, and society.

Authoritarianism is the sort of regime where the ruler demands the people go home and mind their own business while he runs the country. There is nothing political under the rule of autocracy, but rather everything is private, and politics itself vanishes. This is the rule of authoritarianism. Whereas, under the rule of a totalitarian regime, the opposite is true. A totalitarian ruler demands the people be constantly in the public squares, demonstrating their support and satisfaction with his decisions. Under the rule of totalitarianism, there is nothing private, and everything is political. What is private is the only domain that disappears.

This book comprises four chapters. The first chapter starts by discussing what civilization is and what it is not, uncivilization, and what lies between the two concepts. It further elaborates on attempting to explain the lost meaning of civilization, its characteristics, components, and how it can be "supplied." From discussing civilization to leadership. Both are broad concepts that include all of humanity. The second chapter moves on to discuss the starting point of the second level of analysis and how to identify a point or a center for precise inspection of the phenomenon of backwardness and the effects of authoritarianism. Naturally, I chose the starting point to be within the Syrian context and connected to the modern history of Syria, its modern reality, and its interaction in creating our current identity. From external rule to modern occupation, transitioning to internal authoritarian rule, and then totalitarian rule Instead of only discussing the ostensible traits and external conditions, I steered the discussion towards a perspective on the internal sides and the intellectual structure and its traits under the authoritative rule. I focused on further probing how we conceptualize our idea of the "other" that we regard as the "adversary" and later the enemy. Why do the traits of that other remain blurred and unnoticeable? We gradually created an ambiguous image of the other, "the enemy," from which it is possible to project it onto any individual. Hence, we created a nucleus for the self-disintegration of the community, which follows the methodical work the repressive regimes adopted to destroy all social structures in the communities aching from repression.

Afterward, I turned to analyzing the psychological phenomena among the repressed peoples, the Nawãr, and examining how such intellectual principles were built and evolved. In chapter three, I demonstrated five intellectual aspects that distinguish the Nawãr people from the others. In chapter four, I sought to detect the most significant behavioral aspects common among the Nawãr people without being exclusive to them. Yet, the degree of prevalence and acceptance of aspects are crucial in connecting them to the Nawãr people more than any other. In conclusion, I had to make several confessions from the Nawãri I have best known.

Lastly, when I wrote the Arabic version of this book, I tried my best to ensure that the Syrian experience and the Syrian narrative were the principal themes. I did not want to project the narrative of Syrians under the

totalitarian regime on other regional and international experiences. I have always had regard for the uniqueness of other narratives and their context, and I did not speak about other experiences that I had not seen for myself. Having said that, the ongoing genocide taking place in Gaza at the time of writing these lines against the native Palestinians at the hands of the Zionist state and the unwavering support it is receiving from the Western states reminded me how much the post-colonial states share. They are united not only in the bloody struggle under brutal colonial occupation but also in the continual dehumanization by the Western world and the persistence of their ineligibility to be treated as equal humans and as rational beings capable of determining their own destinies. While our modern struggles vary, we, the Nawãr, are united in our perceived savagery and determined worthlessness in the eyes of many. This demands that work such as mine cut deep into the factors that allow such prejudiced and dehumanizing views to flourish even while daily massacres are broadcast live on our smartphones and TV screens. It also reveals the composition of the racist ideology that many groups project against others, which is manifested again and again in the European/western prejudice against all non-white and non-Europeans and the roots of their presumed superiority. I appreciate how the so called "Western world" is a highly heterogeneous group of countries, each with its uniqueness and character, but this term is broadly used when referring to cultural identity and includes Western Europe and those influenced by its culture. This comprises countries such as the United States, Australia, and North America. Despite constituting a minor fraction of the global population, they control all major institutions and have accumulated the greatest wealth. In the past 500 years, they happen to have been the colonizers of the great bulk of the globe. They dubbed themselves the developed world, leaving all nations to undergo an extremely arduous "developing" journey. They persist in imposing ever-higher levels of hardships and obstacles on these former colonies for them to endure. For us to break the vicious cycle of injustice, patriarchalism in the "developed world," and gaslighting, we must embark on analyzing what makes us prone to this sort of tyrannical abuse and addressing stereotypes forced on us while respecting each developing nation's uniqueness.

My aim for this book is to provide a starting point for a more focused discussion about the repressed communities that are subjected to oppressive regimes and systems. Firstly, for the sake of taking a self-critical view and, secondly, that of the surrounding reality, instead of just disregarding or overlooking it. Also, do not consider that this is an emotional and masochistic book about an unsuccessful individual experience. Nawãr is the first of a trilogy about the intellectual structures of repressed communities. It concludes with a view of how they should be instead of what they are. This duty requires that we have a shared identity and a primary connection that may expand and deepen our understanding of reality and improve our prospects of constructing a better future. And, if our endeavors bear no fruit, they might bring about daydreams of a better future in the minds of those who can build it someday.

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Chicago, United States of America
March 4, 2024

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CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF SAVAGERY:
"THE CONTEXT"

In the beginning, I want to share a word of cautionary advice: this is the trickiest chapter of the book in terms of complexity. It highlights and elaborates on the concept of civilization, its effects, and distinctive features and discusses colonization, its impacts, and how it opened the door for modern dictatorships. The language used is generally that of a theoretical argument, making it closer to an academic editorial that might not be an easy read.

That being said, the book delves straight into detecting the causes and results of the intellectual and behavioral aspects displayed throughout the book. My main focus is to connect their origin to a historical dimension that is necessary to recognize. If the reader chooses, they can read the other chapters and then return to this one. In "The Context", I set the stage for discussing the following chapters entitled: The Caravan, the Roadmap, Belongings, and Litter. This is the structure and the rationale for starting the book this way.

In The Context, I discuss our attempt to break out of the swamps of failure into which we, the Syrian masses, have been deeply sunk for centuries. We have arguably plunged even more profoundly during the last century. I aim to outline the features necessary to escape this doom. They refer to a hazy but coveted and sought-after concept: civilization. To get away from these swamps, we must cross several landmarks to reach the horizons of civilization. There must be a social structure that connects this group's components to have the power needed to cross over and collectively survive.

Escaping failure

For studying any phenomenon, its subject has to be distinctly identified. Usually, we start by measuring what is measurable to have a quantitative description. The measurements are part and parcel of assessing the impacts and results. For instance, an assumed amount of polluted gas has led to a definite amount of global warming during a specified span of the study. Such studies, even when complex a convoluted, can still be measurable and calculable. Simulation and modeling are possible tools to use in such fields. Studying a social phenomenon, on the other hand, is a very different challenge. Such a phenomenon could not be accurately measured or described would be more challenging, and sometimes unattainable. This applies to most humanities studies because the qualitative aspects exceed the quantitative aspects. A numerical relation can be established between the number of books sold in a country and the degree of its scientific progress. On the other hand, the difference in the number of books does not accurately result in scientific or cultural fruition. The task is more overwhelming if the topic of study is civilization. Even if scores of civilizational aspects can be identified and measured, such measurements do not necessarily lead to an ordinal list of civilized states. These civilizational aspects are not credible proof, as will be made clear later.

Given the lack of a mechanism to study civilization accurately and quantitatively, we are bound to rely on qualitative descriptions indicating whether any state is civilized. To further complicate the matter, it is hard to come up with a definition for civilization and identify who the civilized are. Conversely, failure is identifiable, as are the regimes and societies that have failed to create a civilization or a positive temporal mark on the current world stage. While this approach would cause discord, a degree of consent would be more unanimous to states far from being labeled civilized. For instance, there would be barely any consensus on Afghanistan being an impressive state worth emulating. Hence, it is unanimously described as an uncivilized or failed state.

For a nation striving to escape poverty and underdevelopment entrapment, addressing its social structure—through examining intellectual and ethical aspects—might be the optimal start when discussing civilization and its

opposite state, i.e., underdevelopment. To remain motivated toward achieving leadership and acquiring a developed civilizational state or excellence, the starting point has to be getting out of that opposite state. In similar discussions, we occasionally study the opposite, or counter-state, to comprehend what might be an intervention from getting into it. Subsequently, studying failure might be a means of such escape. Yet, there is another junction to be feared. There is a false assumption that to escape the list of failed states implies being a civilized or supreme one.

Civilization and failure are two polar extremes. They fall on a broad spectrum between what is not a total failure and what is not at the height of civilization. Therefore, it may be more feasible to study the clearer and more common case: the vast space between these two polar extremes. For instance, in examining students' performance, instead of studying excellence or failure, which are exceptional statuses, it might be more feasible to examine their thriving and ability to proceed acceptably in the learning process. We will call this status "thriving," given that in any school or university, excellent students are only a few in any group. The reasons for their excellence vary between internal factors such as cleverness and persistence and external ones such as the standard of living, level of education in the parents, having additional help in the house, etc. However, scoring high grades is not guaranteed just by attaining these factors. It is not hard to find clever students from wealthy families who do not excel in school.

Along this space of not achieving excellence, thriving and failure are identified. The majority of students fall within the scope of thriving. But once again, the numerous, varied aspects of thriving or success make it difficult to pinpoint them. Let alone examine them and their effects separately. In the same sense, the elements of failure are comparable to those of thriving or the result of having none or even some of them. Still, failure is detectable, as are its traits on different levels.

 Back to the example of students' performance in school: excellence is an exceptional individual case, and thriving, which is not that of excellence, is the general case. In education, failure is the opposite of excellence and is individual as well. Failure has its own set of root causes, similar to the ones

leading to excellence; however, addressing these causes does not guarantee to move to the other extreme and achieving excellence. Against that backdrop, addressing these causes undoubtedly offers a way of salvation from this entrapment. Such exerted efforts translate into thriving, which is the neutral and general case, instead of moving from one extreme to the opposite one on the spectrum. The study of individual excellence is not a priority as it has different characteristics and bases. The right course for such a study is to observe the general causes of failure and the means to avoid them.

This spectrum, therefore, comprises three existential states: failure, thriving (success), and excellence. To take a direct leap from failure to instantaneous excellence is beyond achievable, whether regarding a student's educational level or a nation's civilizational status. All nations that achieved world leadership and global hegemony crossed a hierarchical continuum. And on that continuum, either upward or downward changes occur for any nation.

The fact that "thriving" nations are not devoid of conflicts, flaws, or issues is vitally critical to note. And this category includes countries that do not look alike in various ways. For example, Brazil and Turkey are countries that, in my definition, fall under thriving nations. While this is not precisely the word that comes to mind when the names of those nations appear on the news, it is significant to remind ourselves that both have a bare minimum of institutional structures that keep the state running and economies that can continue to run the markets and grow GDPs.

It would be difficult to differentiate between the phenomena causing a specific case—whether excellence or failure—and their results or related phenomena. Hence, no magical plan can ever lead its followers to excellence. Adopting an approach to analyzing and remediating these phenomena, be their excellence or failure, aids in escaping the trap of civilizational failure and joining the procession of thriving/success. Such an approach might set the course for perceiving success factors and failure causes. Whether these phenomena are causal or just characteristics relevant to failure, they are still responsible for adverse outcomes that are not to be ignored.

Upon observing the nations that enjoy "civilizational leadership"[2], regardless of the absence of an accurate definition, all they established was the outcome of accumulating knowledge and civilization of steadily occupying the thriving – the "non-failure" category—and enjoying the privileges of success. Henceforward, any nation that aspires to leadership must exert all efforts to protect itself from falling into the failed states' abyss. Then, it can commit to building a civilizational momentum that allows for a chance to join the leading nations. Without taking such steps, a country or state aiming for a civilizational ascent would be exposing itself to failing miserably. There is more to come on this point later in the book.

My primary concern throughout this section is to describe the civilizational failure and its traits in terms of the psychological, intellectual, and moral standards of the community of which I am a member. The study of failure characteristics, causal or not, is a rectifying approach. This book could be a contribution to my people's salvation from this vicious circle and herald it into the non-failed or thriving category. Yet, I am fully aware that it requires more than such efforts to guide a country to the heights of prosperous civilizations. Looking at the history of the world's superpowers, none acquired their positions without an intellectual revolution. Even if partially or selectively, it transformed their intellectual characteristics towards acceptance, openness, and cooperation among their members.

Progress is unequivocally a journey of several stages, with phases, conditions to be fulfilled, and impediments to be overcome. Aside from that, several factors must be accumulated, sustained, and extended to escape failure entrapment. The tides of change are bound to happen; life cannot be held captive to the status quo. Time and again, change is the sole constant in human life. Its direction is the point with which one is to be involved.

Another clarification about change, it is persistent. Regardless of its consequences, there might be a generic interrelation between the prevalence of these intellectual, moral, and psychological characteristics and the state

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[2] Civilizational leadership is the ability to exert influence on the rest of the world, with means that are not related to economic or military might. Countries such as South Korea are a good example.

of deterioration experienced in our societies. Addressing failure-related symptoms opens the possibility of advancement for us. No matter how much I wish this theory would be true, I firmly believe it is necessary regardless of whether it bears fruit. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to address them, apart from the outcomes that might or might not be rendered. This conviction is based on a personal philosophy that is methodological, practical, and process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented. Moral gains do not necessarily lead to materialistic gains; hence, the criterion should be that moral actions must not be fulfilled in exchange for material rewards. Accordingly, the focus should be on acquiring these ethical goals, regardless of their expected positive effects. On the contrary, they must be sought even if they bring about adverse materialistic outcomes or are of no tangible benefit. There is no harm in relinquishing worldly resources to acquire intellectual and moral gains or promote an ethical practice or humane stance. By taking this action, a moral reformation would be initiated, and the faults in utilitarian philosophy and morality produced by the Enlightenment movement in Europe two centuries ago would be overcome.

The mind, conscience, and morals are not solid organs with which we are born and die. They are intellectual faculties developed through action. So are civilization, modernity, justice, and equality. They do not have designated establishments in developed states; they are not assigned ministerial headquarters or constitutional articles. We cannot quote or cite them from a written text. These concepts are the spirit of action. They do not haphazardly emerge in these states. They are also neither eternal nor taken for granted. This spirit is lost if a state ceases to rationalize, self-examine, and pursue lifting injustice from all.

Equally examined in the book, internal and external variables contribute to formulating these aspects. At the outset, I must shed light on some of what we aspire to and what we overlook. I must look into the features of each of these cases, and in the following section, civilization is the main focus. Similar to excellence and failure, there is a polarity between civilization and its opposite. By investigating its formulation and where we fit within its spectrum, we can find a more promising future within our grasp.

Civilization

Before diving deeper into this section, it is essential to produce a clear-cut definition of civilization. Linguistically, it is derived from the Latin origin (civis), which refers to urban dwellers (as opposed to countryside dwellers).

The term civilization in the new sense is relatively new. It might have resulted from the association of the concept with the place where people gather, as in villages and cities. It is also a reference to the people present at those gatherings. The Arabic term for civilization "ḥaḍāra" comes from the root [Hadar], meaning presence. Combining the Latin and Arabic origins, the reference is primarily to individuals who inhabit human settlements, whether a village or a city, and urbanization is one of its pillars. Therefore, nomadic life, which was an earlier stage of human development, is the opposite of civilization. The Arabic equivalent of nomadic is [Badou], derived from [Bada'], meaning the first thing to appear in a matter. Nomadic, in Arabic, means living in the desert[3], which involves mainly moving around and having no permanent home. Thus, civilization can be prominently surmised to mean human gathering and stability.

Within its context, the term civilization radically shifted from the reference to individuals to the outcome of their behavior. Its meaning was expanded to include the physical manifestation of that human congregation, be it the buildings or material products of that settlement, or the other non-material marks this congregation induces. Civilization became a derivative of human achievements and their impact, uniqueness, and grandeur. There are two schools of thought regarding the concept of civilization. One considers the material aspect a measurement of civilization, and another believes that intellectual output is a measure and proof of the achievement and genius of

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[3] One major misconception about Arabs in general and Bedouins specifically stems from the utilization of the word desert in referring to the place where they live. The confusion stems from its lack of differentiation (in English) between two distinct words: Badia and Sahraa' are both translated to Desert. However, the Arabic word "Badia" where the Bedouins (Badou) live is an area with scanty rainfall and scant green coverage, suitable for grazing cattle. Sahraa' on the other hand is the arid land that is not suitable for human life. Such confusion becomes obvious each time a visual rendering of the Arabs' existence makes it to television and Cinema.

civilization. These human accomplishments undeniably and highly indicate the reality of these communities because their presence at that time proved their significance and excellence. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that when discussing civilization or comparing two civilizations, there is an unbreakable correlation between the premise, humans, and the manifests and outcomes of the activity and presence of distinguished human beings.

Regardless of the vague scale on which civilizations can be measured and ranked, it is worth noting that civilization has a perceptible long-term effect. It is usually interconnected with an administrative governing structure. For instance, the Roman civilization is connected to the Roman Empire and the Pharaonic civilization is connected to the dynasties of Pharaonic rule in Egypt. Nonetheless, these civilizations' effects extended beyond the direct governing area of these administrative structures, for example, the impact of Roman civilization in the Near East and elsewhere. It is fair to say that genuine civilization influences more than its subjects. This view differs from Karl Marx[4]'s two references to the term cultural hegemony and its description by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci[5]. It highlights the effect of the ruling class on society, whether voluntarily or coercively. However, the impact of civilization spreading outside its direct borders, regardless of assigning it that term, is interconnected with the voluntary integration of people ungoverned by the entity associated with that civilization. This is exemplified by the Islamic influence on worldwide architecture during their golden era between the ninth and twelfth centuries. There could be more than one burgeoning civilization coinciding in the same era, with a booming civilizational effect going beyond their geographical and temporal borders.

Consequently, civilization is defined by its presence and the continuation of its impact outside of its borders and long after it ceases to exist. This long-

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[4] Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. His name is associated with communist theory, and the eponym Marxism denotes the practices based on his thought.

[5] Antonio Gramsci is an Italian Marxist philosopher and activist. The Gramscian school of thought is the philosophy of Praxis (practical and critical activity—human and concrete practice).

term influential presence has to have other less influential or non-influential presences by which the rise of civilization can be distinguished, differentiated against, and attested to at that time. Subsequently, the substantiated, leading presence marks the outlines of a leading civilization and its disparities from peers, whether neighboring, distant, contemporary, preceding, or succeeding. The existence of differentiation as a unique influence is a primary and definitive condition of civilization.

The different civilizational levels are a fixed fact exhibited throughout human history. The world has never witnessed a united civilizational level at any recorded time; this fact alone sums up what the presence of civilization means in its temporal and geographic context. The world has constantly been divided into developed and underdeveloped nations and others in between. In a world dominated by a frantic race to the top of the global order, ancient countries, and civilizations experienced cycles of development and underdevelopment.

In a race that mostly involved all guns blazing and full military force, the imperial and military might collide in the history of civilizations. They also had to sustain themselves on resources secured by army invasions and occupations of weaker, resource-rich territories. Through this association, there were outlines of temporal (the era of that civilization's dominance) and spatial traits (the map of that civilization or empire). Military power and substantial wealth are two factors that help identify the characteristics of civilization. Waging wars and having the power to seize riches are fundamental aspects of establishing empires that garnered their presence due to what they captured. So far, the discussion has highlighted that civilization is closely associated with military force and material possessions. In addition, ancient and modern civilizations exist in a context that encompasses the strong association between its hegemony and long-lasting impact and administrative structure it builds. All hegemonic civilizations had to develop powerful and well-functioning bureaucratic bodies. This point is not frequently discussed as part of the emergence of civilizations. The human factor, in general, is not visualized as central to establishing civilization. When the human factor is discussed, it typically focuses on a powerful ruler who is the driving force behind armies who can

solely vanquish enemies and control their destinies; only thus is the establishment of a civilization determined.

Yet, some ancient empires especially invested in the human factor that affected their civilizational role. The ancient Greek civilization in Athens, for instance, and the Umayyad state in Andalusia, demonstrated such a unique focus. Generally speaking, a minimum level of technological progress and financial capacity was a prerequisite for the states that achieved military supremacy. These are solely attained by having unique human skills that are nurtured by the central authorities and promoted as part of that civilization's strength. And the byproduct of such focus enabled them to embark on quests for expansion and impose hegemony through military power, but also through casting a form of soft power, be that via arts, sciences, or commerce.

Almost all ancient nations that achieved hegemony relied on military conquests in order to increase their financial gains and in return their military power. Through these conquests, we see their way of life and trends were, thus, imposed outside their direct borders. Venturing into foreign seas and crossing plains and mountains were the core elements of reaching the peak of global order for civilizations such as the Phoenicians, the Romans, and many Islamic civilizations. Even if such expansionist movements were economically motivated, they still were pivotal in disseminating and imposing the imprints of that conquering hegemonic civilization within that temporal and geographical context. Nevertheless, military expansion and hegemony do not obligate a civilizational impact on the conquered territories that would cross the boundaries of time. Neither the Mongol invasion of the Near East nor the sequential Crusades from the West left any material or intellectual marks that count as a civilizational presence within their controlled territories. Instead, the Mongols relied on the technology and sciences of the Muslims and the Chinese to complement their empirical quest without adopting, developing, or disseminating them. There is no historical monument of a Mongol civilization worthy of mentioning or visiting today, despite their establishing the largest empire in human history at their age.