# ECHOES OF "SEDNAYA": LIBERATION AND REPRESSION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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### Abstract

The multifaceted mechanisms of repression in the Arab world are analysed through both visible and invisible dimensions rooted in Arabism and authoritarian governance. Sednaya Prison exemplifies the persistence of fear as a tool of control, reflecting the broader failures of Arab political-republican systems. Arabism, initially conceived as a unifying ideology grounded in shared linguistic and cultural heritage, has evolved into a repressive construct. Its colonial legacy reveals how it perpetuates systemic poverty, alienation, and a 'prison culture', undermining efforts toward pluralistic governance. While republican regimes in the region promised progress and unity, they often devolved into patrimonialism and stagnation, contrasting sharply with the relative stability of monarchies that have avoided the ideological excesses of nationalist fervour. The enduring interchange of these mechanisms continues to constrain prospects for liberation and societal progress across the Arab world.

***Key words:*** repression, Sednaya, institutionalized fear, arabism, authoritarianism, liberation.

## Introduction

This article critically examines the mechanisms of repression that permeate the Arab world. It argues that visible structures of repression, rooted in ideological and institutional frameworks, are deeply entrenched in Arabism. The invisible dimensions of repression, conceptualized as institutionalized fear, operate within the subconscious realms of the Arab collective psyche. Sednaya Prison serves as a stark example, where the persistence of fear exemplifies the subtle yet enduring features of Arab political-republican systems. Although heralded as a symbol of resistance following its liberation, Sednaya paradoxically, as this article is set to explain, represents defeat and stagnation of fear and loath in Arab politics.

Arabism, rooted in shared linguistic, cultural, and historical bonds, embodies a pan-nationalist aspiration to unify the Arab world by transcending colonial legacies. The Arab League was ostensibly founded as a vehicle to unite Arab "states" in their visions and efforts for "Arab liberation" – any liberation, as long as the Arab nations prevails. The organization's early failure was marked by Arab defeats – in their wars with Israel. Egypt's Jamal Abdul Nasser epitomized both the absurdity of lofty Arabism, and the defeat of Arabism. A failure compounded by Egypt's abandonment of Arabist ideals with its 1979 peace treaty with Israel, despite, to date, having the Arab League headquarters in Cairo. What remains of the Arab League are institutions entrenched in futility, perpetuating oppressive "Arab-republican ideals" that have inflicted profound suffering on their own people and condemned the region to relentless turmoil.

Moreover, the advent of the so-called Arab-republic systems, initially heralded as vehicles of progress and unity, devolved into mechanisms of repression, fostering patrimonialism, stagnation, and a stark departure from the emancipatory promises of true republican ideals. In

contrast, the relative stability of monarchic regimes in the region can be attributed to their more restrained embrace of Arabism, allowing them to avoid the destabilizing fervour and ideological pitfalls that plagued republican regimes. This paradox of aspiration and failure has rendered Arabism a poignant testament to the unrealized potential of collective agency in the Arab world.

"Echoes of Sednaya" represents a microcosm of the Dasein within the Arab world under oppressive regimes. The al-Assad regime, from 2011 to its fall in December 2024, devastated Syria, resulting in one of the largest humanitarian crises in modern history. Approximately 500,000 lives were lost, with 7.6 million people displaced internally and over 5 million forced to flee as refugees. Urban centres like Aleppo and Raqqa were nearly obliterated, reflecting the physical and psychological toll of sustained violence and systemic repression (Washington Post).

Visible structures of oppression, such as colonial legacies, authoritarian regimes, and systemic inequality, continue to hinder liberation. In post-colonial contexts, these systems often persisted under authoritarian governance. Hisham Sharabi (1988) critiqued neo-patriarchal structures in Arab societies, observing that centralized authority and patron-client relations perpetuate control and hinder progress. Arabism, in practice, often fails to reflect the cultural, political, and social unity it claims to champion. Instead, it manifests as an ideology that perpetuates systemic misery, poverty, and alienation. The "dark side" of Arabism lies in its invisible structures of repression, linking colonial legacies to modern governance frameworks (Bendebka, 2021, pp. 38–40; 43–44). This convergence sustains oppressive practices such as the entrenched "prison culture," which persists despite regime changes or leadership shifts.

This article is structured into three interrelated sections. The first examines the visible mechanisms of oppression in the Arab world, while the second explores its subtle, invisible manifestations. The third section, serving as an extended conclusion, uses Sednaya as an example to illustrate the inherent constraints on revolt and liberation in the Arab context. The central argument posits that Arabism, under the objectives of unity and security, has systematically eroded human rights, silencing dissent and perpetuating cycles of oppression (Haddad, 2012). Ultimately, this neglect of human 'voice' undermines both individual freedoms and human dignity.

## *Data and methods*

### Visible Structures of Oppression

It is a dominant idea in the Arab world that colonialism has far reaching impact on the Arab world. The colonial legacy has profoundly shaped the Arab world, leaving enduring socio-political and cultural imprints. Colonialism dismantled indigenous features of governance, imposed new borders, and exploited resources, creating dependencies that persist today (Alzubairi, 2022; Sluglett, 2014). It also fuelled nationalist movements and shaped the postcolonial discourse (Hawa, 2017). Educational and legal systems introduced during colonial rule remain influential, with mixed consequences on modernization (Mir, 2019). Moreover, neo-colonial practices, such as anti-terrorism frameworks, perpetuate historical inequities (Alzubairi, 2022). This legacy demonstrates the deep and lasting effects of colonialism on Arab societies.

Yet, the legacy of colonialism reverberates globally, shaping not only the Arab world but also numerous other regions, where it has led to similar patterns of exploitation and societal transformations. British colonial rule in South Asia deindustrialized local economies, restructured agriculture, and culminated in the Partition of India, leaving deep communal tensions (Hai, 2024; Roy, 2016). In Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese colonization entrenched systems of labour exploitation, such as *encomiendas*, which perpetuated economic inequality and hindered long-term development.

Similarly, in Southeast Asia, colonial powers transformed agrarian societies by introducing Western legal and educational systems, which resulted in complex legacies of modernization and

socio-political reorganization (Hirsch, 2020; Atutubo; 2019). These experiences mirror a broader global trend in which colonialism profoundly reshaped societies, dismantling indigenous systems and imposing structures that served colonial interests. Nevertheless, many of these societies have transcended colonial rule, building governance, economic, and social frameworks rooted in the unique strengths and characteristics of their local contexts.

The Arab world presents a distinct case wherein Arab nationalism is deeply intertwined with the colonial legacy, with Arabism emerging as a central force in shaping the political and cultural landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Ramzi Bendebka (2020, pp. 4-6) delves into the historical evolution of Arabism within intellectual discourse, tracing its foundations to the writings and ideas of Sati' al-Husri, widely regarded as one of the seminal architects of Arab nationalist thought. Rooted in shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties, Arabism has profoundly influenced political discourse and collective identity, positioning itself as both an ideological framework and a governance tool. Institutions grounded in Arabist ideology reinforced this vision, embedding a collective Arab identity within cultural, educational, and political systems as the cornerstone for liberation. Yet, this paradigm, intended as a unifying ideology, has constrained the concept of freedom, reducing it to the narrow pursuit of Pan-Arab unity and limiting alternative pathways to emancipation and pluralistic governance.

One major text that illustrated this is Nazih Ayubi's voluminous book *Over-stating the Arab State*. Ayubi argues that all Arab regimes rested upon some degree of hegemony resulting from the combination of three devices: 1) intimidation by repressive force; 2) active support from special constituencies linked to the ruling group by various types of *asabiyya*, i.e., through the cultivation of clan-based, tribal, sectarian, regionalist, and/or ethno-nationalist bonds; and 3) passive consent obtained from a varying proportion of the population (cited in Achcar, G. 2021, pp. 61-62).

Achcar therefore argues that this passive consent contributed to the support of a corrupt social base loyal to the regimes (Achcar, G. 2021, p. 61). Operating in fear and systematic repression, this social base, in many Arab societies, evolved into an all-encompassing framework in which dissent and opposition were effectively suppressed. Mechanisms designed to fabricate consent—ranging from blatant electoral fraud, often portraying overwhelming public support for the regime, to the proliferation of state-controlled "organs of public opinion," such as newspapers and television networks—were employed to reinforce this control. These media outlets functioned as instruments of regime glorification, extolling the virtues of the head of state and his inner circle, thereby entrenching the hegemonic narrative (Ayubi, cited in Achcar, pp. 62–63).[1]

The confluence of fear, repression, electoral fraud, and systemic corruption, combined with the exclusive privileging of Arab nationalist ideals, led the institutions of Arabism to suppress alternative expressions of individual and regional autonomy. This deliberate marginalization and erasure of diverse political identities under the banner of Arabism exemplify a form of intellectual and cultural hegemony that stifles pluralism and dissent (Hawa, 2017). Furthermore, Arab nationalism's emphasis on Pan-Arab unity has often side-lined alternative interpretations of freedom, limiting its potential to foster pluralistic and inclusive governance. By establishing a singular narrative of liberation tied to Arabism, it prioritized collective aspirations at the expense of individual autonomy (Aksikas, 2009). While Arabism promised economic development and liberation, as Addi (2018) notes, it often failed to deliver on these promises, leading to disillusionment.

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[1]  See the discussion of the leader's cult in Syria in Lisa Wedeen (2015) Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).This second edition of Wedeen's book, originally published in 1999, includes a new preface by theauthor, revisiting the issue in the light of the political changes following the death of Hafez al-Assadand the accession to power of his less politically astute son, whose policies were a primary factorleading to the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war. (Achcar, *Hegemony, Domination, Corruption and Fraud*, Footnote, p. 61).

Many parts of the world saw their age of repression and terror(s). The Cold War fostered methods of repression in Eastern Europe driven by superpower rivalry and ideological dominance. The Age of Terror in Eastern Europe (1945–1989), was marked by visible oppression through systematic surveillance, political repression, and strict censorship. Secret police forces, such as the *Stasi* in East Germany, monitored citizens extensively, embedding informants into everyday life to maintain state control (Fulbrook, 1995, pp. 87-98). Political dissidents were silenced through imprisonment, forced exile, or show trials. Simultaneously, heavy censorship restricted media, literature, and artistic expression, ensuring conformity to state ideologies. The militarization of borders, symbolized by the Berlin Wall, physically and ideologically divided communities, epitomizing the era's repressive environment (Applebaum, 2012).

Europe, however, successfully revolted against its authoritarian regimes, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. Movements like the "Polish Solidarity Movement," the "Hungarian Revolution," the "Prague Spring," and Ukraine's persistent resistance, culminating in its Declaration of Independence in 1991, laid the groundwork for this transformation (Applebaum, 2012; Fulbrook, 1995). Ukraine's independence marked a significant moment in the broader collapse of Soviet control, as decades of cultural, political, and armed resistance converged with the waning influence of Soviet authoritarianism.

In contrast, the Arab world continues to grapple with authoritarianism and systemic repression, exacerbated by ongoing conflicts, weak institutions, and external interventions (Carey, 2010). The Arab Spring of 2011, while initially promising, largely failed to dismantle entrenched authoritarian structures (Alzubairi, 2022; Al Quntar, 2017). Unlike Eastern Europe, where cohesive civic movements and unified goals facilitated transitions to democracy, the Arab world's challenges remain deeply rooted in fragmented governance, pervasive political rivalries, and geopolitical instability.

The difference, as this paper argues, is that Arabism has generated an entire body of complex deficit in the Arab national consciousness—nihilism. Adib-Moghaddam Arshin's analysis on Psycho Arab-Nationalism illustrates that "psycho-nationalism intoxicates the masses by manipulating collective emotions and constructing a shared identity that fosters loyalty to the nation-state" (Arshin, 2020, pp. 53-59). This process exploits psychological and cultural vulnerabilities, channeling individual and group aspirations into a singular narrative of nationalism. Adib-Moghaddam emphasizes that this form of nationalism leverages fear, pride, and historical grievances to create an emotional bond with the nation, often at the expense of rational discourse and pluralistic governance.

By presenting the nation as a sacred entity, psycho-nationalism demands unwavering allegiance, framing dissent as betrayal. This emotional and psychological manipulation is amplified through state propaganda, education, and cultural institutions that embed nationalist ideals into the public consciousness. This process is a form of "mass intoxication", where individuals internalize the state's ideological constructs, limiting their ability to question or resist authoritarian practices. Through this lens, psycho-nationalism becomes a powerful tool for social and political control, reinforcing conformity and suppressing dissent (Adib-Moghaddam, 2020).

A significant contributor to the Arab world's struggle with these challenges was Jamal Abdul Nasser, who championed Arabism as a unifying ideology. While initially inspiring Pan-Arab solidarity, Nasser's pursuit of Arabism ultimately undermined the region's political stability. His policies, which emphasized centralizing power and erasing individual national identities in favor of a collective Arab identity, alienated many Arab states and suppressed political pluralism. Nasser's disastrous interventions, such as the union with Syria in the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958–1961), showcased his inability to manage the complexities of regional diversity, while his heavy-handed dominance led to the UAR's collapse, leaving a legacy of distrust among Arab nations. Domestically, Nasser's authoritarian governance perpetuated systemic repression, curtailed freedoms, and weakened institutional development, leaving Egypt unprepared to accommodate civic governance to-

date. Instead of fostering unity and progress, Nasser's Arabism entrenched divisions, deepened regional instability, and propagated autocratic practices that would haunt the Arab world for decades.

Amid these challenges, Arab monarchies have presented a contrasting paradigm of governance, characterized by a relative degree of stability. This resilience can be attributed, in large part, to a singular, defining factor: their more tempered engagement with the fervent ideological currents of Arabism—Arab nationalism. In other words, they were less passionate about Arabism and its devastating nationalism. In countries like Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf States, monarchies have offered frameworks for long-term stability by ensuring continuity of governance, fostering national identity, and maintaining socio-political cohesion. The centralized authority of monarchies allowed these states to navigate periods of regional turmoil more effectively than many of their republican counterparts, which often struggled with internal fragmentation and leadership crises. While monarchies are not immune to criticism regarding political freedoms, their ability to deliver stability and gradual reforms has made them a distinctive and comparatively successful model within the broader context of Arab governance.

By fostering a patronage system driven by fear, regimes consolidate power and prevent defection. Fear ensures the complicity of political actors, making elite cooperation essential for regime survival (Fattah, 2012). Global examples include Stalin's purges and the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, Hitler's Gestapo-led purges in Nazi Germany, Pinochet's repression in Chile, and Marcos's patronage system and state-sponsored violence in the Philippines. The Arab world reflects similar patterns: Anwar Sadat consolidated power in Egypt by co-opting military elites and suppressing opposition after the 1977 "bread riots"; Muammar Gaddafi maintained elite cohesion in Libya through patronage, violence, and the 1996 "Abu Salim" massacre; and Hafez al-Assad ensured loyalty in Syria by consolidating power through the 1982 Hama massacre and a pervasive security state.

The collective affiliation of Arab states within the Arab League can be interpreted as a construct shaped by underlying currents of fear and the imperatives for political legitimacy. Until quite recently, membership in the League functions as a mechanism to safeguard "Arab legitimacy", ensuring that no state risks isolation or the erosion of its identity within the broader Arab framework. This dynamic illustrates how affiliation serves as both a marker of inclusion and a deterrent against deviation from collective norms. A compelling example is Anwar al-Sadat's 1979 peace agreement with Israel, which provoked Egypt's suspension from the Arab League. The unprecedented peace-deal with Israel disrupted the collective Arab position on the Palestinian cause, momentarily casting Egypt as a political pariah within the Arab sphere. Nevertheless, Egypt's reintegration into the League, precipitated by the geopolitical exigencies of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, reflects the pragmatic recalibrations that underpin the League's approach to regime security.

Fear for regime's security plays a central role in driving Arab states to act collectively, shaping their unified stance on critical issues such as peace with Israel. Historically, the Arab League adopted a unified position of rejecting normalization with Israel, rooted in the fear of political isolation and the loss of legitimacy within the Arab world. This collective rejection ensured that no individual state deviated from the shared stance, as doing so would risk alienation and being labelled an anti-Arab, or more, Anti-Palestinian outcast. However, the shift from the Camp David Accords (1978), when Egypt was suspended from the Arab League, to further normalisation with Israel – the Abraham Accords (2020), demonstrates how the same underlying fear continues to influence collective behaviour. Once normalization became an acceptable and legitimized strategy, Arab states aligned with this new framework, fearing exclusion from the economic, security, and geopolitical benefits associated with peace agreements.

The War on Terror enabled Arab regimes to consolidate power by aligning with global security agendas. Arab regimes have used counterterrorism narratives to suppress internal dissent

while forging closer ties with Western governments. These regimes exemplify how authoritarianism and counterterrorism have become intertwined, reinforcing existing power structures and justifying human rights abuses (Cook, 2024; Harbord, 2024).

The conclusion of this section argues that dissolving the Arab League – thereby shedding the burdensome legacy of the 1960s and 1970s – could enable Arab states to transition more effectively into a nation-state-centric Middle Eastern system. This transformation would encourage Arab nations to redefine their inter-Arab relationships, viewing themselves and their Arab counterparts through the lens of sovereign, independent states rather than through the restrictive and often misleading ideological constructs of Arabism, which have historically obstructed pragmatic regional progress. The Arab League, founded on Egypt's historical prominence and leadership within the Arab world, now faces an era where contemporary Egypt grapples with a fragile authoritarian regime, severe economic difficulties, entrenched autocracy, and a notably diminished capacity to fulfil its once-critical role as a regional mediator.

### Invisible Structures of Repression

When fear permeates the fabric of existence, it transcends mere presence, metamorphosing into a force that immobilizes the human spirit, leaving individuals dependent upon its very presence for orientation. This habituation to fear corrodes the autonomy intrinsic to the human condition, reducing individuals to reactive entities governed by survival instincts. The institutionalization of fear within societal frameworks in the Arab world has annihilated the essence of freedom and agency, stripping the Arab individual of its capacity for self-determination and authentic existence.

The impact of fear transforms it from a transient emotional response into a pervasive ontological condition that fundamentally reconfigures human subjectivity. Brian Massumi's concept of the "political ontology of threat" reveals how fear, embedded in social structures, operates as an omnipresent force, shaping human perceptions. (Massumi, (2010, pp. 52-69). Historically tied to survival, fear therefore manifests as existential dread linked to modern uncertainties, eroding individual agency (Nussbaum, 2019). Michel Foucault's *biopolitics* illustrates how states institutionalize fear to regulate populations, replacing freedom with docility (Foucault, 1976). This aligns with Douglass's analysis of fear as an ontological affect that conditions behaviour and legitimizes systemic repression (Braun 2007).

The "Arab" in the "Arab nation" is an embodiment of such *biopolitics*. Arabism manufactured fear in a way that challenges us to consider the broader implications of a society dominated by fear. It is not merely the presence of fear that is destructive but its normalization as a state of being, undermining the very foundation of human freedom and dignity. The South Korean people, for example, had their experience with 'Fear'. In December 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, citing the need to address "anti-state activities" and alleged collaborations with "North Korean communists" within the National Assembly. Korean people's historical memory with martial law, notably during the 1980 *Gwangju* Uprising, symbolizes its struggle against authoritarianism. Therefore, the Korean Parliament moved swiftly to impeach Yoon Suk Yeol.

Frantz Fanon's in the (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) writes that colonialism is able to systematically dehumanize and reshape the identity of the colonized through mechanisms of power, control, and domination. The enduring system of Arab States is, to some degree, no difference from that of the colonial system. The Arab system guarantees the cycle of production and re-production of these mechanisms.

### *The Absurdity of Fear*

The irony and paradox of fear and survival lies in the profound public mourning that often accompanies the deaths of Arab leaders, despite their repressive rule. The passing, for example, of Hafez al-Assad (2000), and King Hassan II of Morocco (1999) prompted widespread grief, where people flooding down the street weeping, reflecting a deeper psychological reality: the emotional

ties between Arab populations and their long-ruling leaders are often forged through fear rather than affection (For theoretical analysis: (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). Decades of rule render these figures synonymous with stability, intertwining public misery and survival within their reigns. This dynamic mirrors the endurance of colonial rule in the region – Algeria under France for 132 years, Egypt 74, Tunisia 75. Leaders like King Hassan ruled for (38 years), Mubarak (30 years), and Saleh (33 years) mirror such longevity.

Historical examples, explained by theoretical nuance, are abundant. The phenomenon of public mourning for despotic leaders, even those responsible for repression, can be understood through several philosophical frameworks. Psychoanalytic insights suggest that individuals internalize authority figures, forming ambivalent emotional attachments (Wilke, 2018). Their death disrupts this internalized relationship, evoking grief rooted in personal and societal instability (J.A. Sabatini, 2022). From an existential perspective, mourning despotic leaders can be linked to the forced confrontation of individual responsibility within an oppressive system. Grief may act as a mechanism for deflecting guilt or complicity in the perpetuation of authoritarian rule (de Wijze, 2020).

The death of a leader reactivates underlying psychological mechanisms tied to fear and uncertainty. Having adapted to specific structures of fear— fear regulates life, individuals face renewed *Skepsis*, prompting a psychological re-evaluation of loyalties and identities. This moment of ambiguity disrupts established "fear dynamics", triggering a search for new anchors to mitigate the unease of the unknown. Thus, the perpetuation of misery within the context of Arab politics becomes a self-reinforcing cycle, where systemic dysfunction and adversity continually regenerate and sustain one another.

### *Revolutions*

Invisible structures of oppression in the Arab world are manifested in the lack of successful enduring revolutions, or to be bolder— in the very absence of the idea of revolutions. Revolutions globally have triumphed by addressing pervasive societal grievances, which are often rooted in ideological and aspirational disparities. The success of such revolutions lies in their ability to galvanize both dominant and marginalized groups around a shared vision, uniting them in the pursuit of transformative change. Consequently, it is the revolutionary vision itself that catalyses and sustains the momentum of revolt.

Despite the entrenched despotism in the Arab world, genuine 'revolutions' are rare, and when they do occur, I call them so arbitrarily—such as during the Arab Spring—they often fail to achieve lasting reforms. Instead, uprisings frequently result in outcomes that reinforce or worsen authoritarian rule. Egypt exemplifies this. The 2011 revolution, which overthrew Hosni Mubarak's three-decade autocratic regime, initially held the promise of democratization. Yet, the subsequent rise of Mohammed Morsi's government was marred by polarizing policies, leading to his ousting by a military coup in 2013 (Khalil, 2018). This coup installed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, whose leadership has been widely criticized as even more authoritarian than Mubarak's.

The recurrent failure of 'revolutions' (or uprisings) in the Arab world can be attributed to a confluence of factors. Notably, they are frequently linked to the immediate catalysts of rising food prices and the escalating cost of living, which, while significant, do not provide the broader ideological or structural foundations necessary for sustained revolutionary change (Aldalala'a, 2011c). Therefore, once the prices of 'bread', for example, are brought down, the 'protests' cease to be essential. Libya's uprising took place in response to disparities between east and west Libya (Aldalala'a, 2011a). Major reasons for the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia were widespread economic hardships. High unemployment, rising food prices, and growing poverty.

Therefore, the "Arab Spring's," loss of momentum resulted from the recurrent failure of protest and uprising(s) in the Arab world. The conflation of fear, marginalization, and lack of human dignified rights, deeply ensconce authoritarian structures, therefore, there is no such entrenched

processing of revolutionary ideas or even ideals. External influences, also, such as geopolitical interests and foreign support for authoritarian regimes, undermine revolutionary momentum. Furthermore, internal divisions among 'revolutionaries', where they exist, weaken the sustainability of democratic transitions (Gerges, 2015).

Fear is a pervasive structure in the Arab world, sustaining despotic regimes by functioning as both a tool of direct repression and a means of fostering internalized compliance. *Sednaya* symbolises this dual role, embedding fear into daily life and ensuring societal submission. Arab regimes cultivate a "political culture of fear" through violence, surveillance, and punishment, suppressing dissent and promoting self-regulation (Obeid, D. 2022). Michel Foucault (1975) argues that regimes not only control through overt coercion but also create "docile bodies" that internalize repression, reducing the likelihood of resistance. Even post-uprising, as seen in Egypt's 2011 revolution, fear continues to fragment opposition and undermine revolutionary movements (Schielke, 2015). This systemic integration of fear prolongs autocratic systems, embedding visible and invisible structures of repression into all societal spheres.

### Echoes of "Sednaya"

Notorious prisons in the Arab world, such as Egypt's Tora Prison, Syria's *Sednaya*, Libya's Abu Salim Prison, and Iraq's Abu Ghraib, have long been symbols of political repression, torture, and human rights violations, where detainees, often political prisoners, are subjected to inhumane conditions and abuse (Lynch, 2016, p. 145; Amnesty International, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). "Abu Ghraib" became infamous for its systematic use of torture and abuse by U.S. military personnel against detainees, with photographs and reports exposing severe human rights violations that sparked global outrage and condemnation (Michaels, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2005).

The analysis of *Sednaya* is complicated by the recent emergence of images depicting the atrocities within its walls. Analytical inquiry represents a more advanced stage than mere description, requiring an interdisciplinary approach that integrates ethics, psychology, cultural studies, law, and literature. While the images from *Sednaya* should not be considered shocking, given the extensive documentation of regime brutality in Syria, they nevertheless raise critical question: Despite the well-established and thorough coverage of such human rights violations, the prolonged existence of *Sednaya* as a site of torture and repression prompts a deeper inquiry: why did this institution continue to function unchallenged for so long?

Writings from various disciplines on the prison system in the Arab world offer critical insights into its socio-political, cultural, and psychological implications. Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Smell of It* (1996) is a seminal work in Arabic prison literature, conveying the profound alienation of a political prisoner in Egypt. Abderrahman Munif's *East of the Mediterranean* (1989) explores the broader political ramifications of imprisonment, highlighting its impact on activists and their relationships. Khaled Khalifa's *in Praise of Hatred* (2010) examines the psychological toll of state repression in Syria, focusing on the long-term effects of imprisonment on individuals and society.

Non-fiction writings also provide critical examinations from various disciplines, including human rights, sociology, and political science.  "The Prison State: A History of the Syrian Detention System" by Joshua Landis (2017) provides a historical and political analysis of Syria's prison system, focusing on its role in consolidating authoritarian power. Tobias Kelly (2014) "Torture: The Role of Ideology in the Arab World", delves into the ideological and structural factors that sustain practices of torture in the Middle East, particularly in the context of state authority and its relationship to power. Sami Zubaida (2009), "The Struggle for Democracy in the Arab World" examines the intersection of authoritarian regimes and prison systems in the Arab world, focusing on how repression is a central strategy for maintaining political stability. "Human Rights in the Arab World" edited by Anthony Chase (2010) offers a comprehensive overview of human rights violations across the region, including extensive discussions of torture and prison conditions. Geula Elimelekh,

"Arabic Prison Literature: Resistance, Torture, Alienation, and Freedom", introduces prison literature through the prism of works written by Arab authors in the second half of the twentieth century. Geula Elimelekh's approach eschews the socio-political-historical review of this subgenre of Arabic political literature.

These works explain the normalization of such practices within established socio-political frameworks. The prevailing discourse articulates the discursive evolution of materiality, subjectivity, and historical events through a predominantly linguistic lens. Collectively, this constitutes an enduring emblem of the "Arab" people as it is reconfigured within the paradigms of the "Arab-republic".

### Liberation (Tahrir)

These literary and scholarly examinations show that "prisons and torture", enhanced by "above ground" visible structures—military checkpoints and surveillance – conflate to become the signifier of the state. Yet, prison and punishment become more effective because of their unlimited and unmarked territories within the society. Suspicion, informants, control of speech become synonym of prison influencing social behaviour, family dynamics, and even personal identity. The intersection of these visible and invisible forms of fear creates a deeply entrenched system of control that reproduces itself through the interaction between the idea of *a* prison and *the* prison itself. Fear in the Arab world thus becomes both a psychological state – mental system, and a political tool, constantly reinforced through both public and private means.

The persistence of *Sednaya* is rooted in the complexity of Arab regime-systems where political power is a power of "everything". Power of or in everything is established "Arab-memory", which historically, is associated with liberation. Liberation in Arab peoples' memory is symbolised by historical sites and events. Across the Arab world, symbols like "Liberation Street," "Liberation Square," are at the heart of major and minor cities in the Arab world. This "liberation" indicates to a completed process, or, so to say, a result that reflect the deep historical and ideological significance of liberation movements. These spaces often commemorate key moments of resistance against colonial powers or foreign occupation. For example, Tahrir Square in Cairo became a global symbol of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, where millions gathered to demand the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, invoking "liberation" as a rallying cry for freedom (Jabar, 2019; Aldalala'a, 2011b). Similarly, Martyrs' Square in Beirut commemorates Lebanon's struggle against foreign intervention during the 1975-1990 Civil War, and Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis symbolizes the country's independence movement, particularly highlighted during the 2011 revolution against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Sahat al-Tahrir (Liberation Square) in Baghdad stands as a symbol of political resistance and the ongoing struggle for freedom in Iraq. The square became iconic during the 2019 Iraqi protests, when demonstrators gathered to demand political reform, an end to corruption, and improved economic conditions. The name "Liberation" evokes a long history of resistance and the pursuit of sovereignty, particularly stemming from Iraq's 1958 revolution that overthrew the monarchy and established the republic. A starker example is Martyrs' Square in Tripoli, Libya, originally named Piazza Italia during Italian colonial rule, became Independence Square during the monarchy and was later renamed Green Square under Gaddafi. It is currently known as Martyrs' Square.

Rami Rayess asserts that "the Arab League is in its death throes. The announcement hasn't happened yet, but it's inevitable." Rayess attributes this to the League's internal failures. However, considering the Arab League's original mission – primarily the liberation of Palestine within the framework of "political and ideological factors" as highlighted by Bendebka (2021, pp. 38–49). Ironically, it is precisely the League's failure that has contributed to its prolonged existence.

However, if the Arab League, as an institution, were to adopt any meaningful reform policies, it would indeed collapse. A comparable example can be found in the Soviet Union, which imposed

Communist governments in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. Nonetheless, among the factors that contributed to its collapse were Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms. There were though, already existing dissent movements, such as the Solidarity movement in Poland, led by Lech Wałęsa, which gained momentum in the 1980s and successfully negotiated with the government for political reforms.

An absurdity resides in the notion that symbols of liberation, which were originally intended to represent freedom, continue to serve as a focal point of the ongoing struggle for freedom. This dichotomy stresses the notion that liberation, as an ideal, remains an unfulfilled and continuous process, one that increasingly diluted its original principles. This dynamic is analogous to the prison system in the Arab world, where the relentless presence of images of torture and brutality perpetuates a cycle of violence. Yet, these atrocities are obscured by the dominant discourse of "liberation".

The unveiling of *Sednaya* ought to serve as a catalyst for an incisive examination of the nation's collective defeat and the structural deficiencies that perpetuate such atrocities, rather than merely marking the cessation of a brutal regime and, to some extent, triumphalist rhetoric.

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