The Policeman Criminal

By ELENA CHITI and JONAS ROELLIN

In a cartoon entitled “Contemporary Police,” two police officers contemplate the street before them, which displays the reconstruction of a crime scene (MOHAB). Sketched in white chalk on the dark asphalt, the scene ironically represents police brutality. Clearly recognizable by their caps, the white profiles of the two officers, drawn on the ground, hold the blackjacks they used against a harmless man. Some red stains point to bloodshed, suggesting they beat him to death. Contemplating the crime scene they actually produced, the two officers are perfectly calm. “You seem to be influenced by Keith Haring,” one says to the other, as if appraising a work of art [↗**Beautiful vs. Ugly**]. The calm emerging from the cartoon sarcastically points to a bitter reality: police brutality is not an exception in Egypt, but a trivial routine. Another cartoon, drawn by an Italian, closely parallels this view. Following the abduction and murder in Cairo of Italian researcher Giulio Regeni [↗**The Suspect Foreigner**], it portrays a huge stack of young men who have died under torture. In front of it, a high officer of the Egyptian police faces a dilemma: how will he distinguish the Italian body from all the Egyptians who suffered the same treatment? (NATANGELO). Widely shared on social media in Egypt, this cartoon is used to oppose the propaganda depicting Regeni as a spy [↗**True = False (Life in Limbo)**]. According to an anonymous Egyptian source, the chief of Giza Police section, previously accused of having tortured suspects, is behind both the order to abduct Regeni and the narrative portraying him as a threat to Egyptian security (*madāMasr* [b]).

Police brutality makes the headlines in connection with the anniversary of the 2011 revolutions in both Egypt and Tunisia, when the comparison between the present and the past emerges with particular strength [↗**Past vs. Present**, ↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. In Tunisia, the beginning of the new year witnesses the largest wave of social unrest since 2011. While the protests reveal the depth of Tunisia’s unresolved socio-economic crisis characterized by widespread unemployment and deepening social inequality [↗**Dollar Crisis**, ↗**Tourist Resorts**, ↗**Affluence vs. Destitution**], the police’s harsh response to it exposes “just how little has changed for the better in the relationship between the police and the general public since the 2011 uprising,” as the newspaper *al-Ḥayāt* comments (ŞĀYIGH). Within nine days, more than 1000 people and dozens of activists are arrested, most of whom are accused of having participated in acts of looting, vandalism or even violence against the police. Activists lament the “repression of social movements,” recalling “the old tendencies of a police state,” and even accuse a union of the National Guard of “diffusing fabricated images portraying violent protests” (CHENNAOUI [a]) [↗**Prison**, ↗**True vs. False**, ↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**].

Meanwhile, in Cairo, cultural centers are shut down and private flats are systematically searched [↗**Downtown/Centre-ville**], as the Egyptian authorities seek to prevent the opposition from marking the anniversary of the 2011 revolution on January 25. Arrests keep increasing in number, targeting well-known activists alongside youth who are not politically engaged, but whose activity on social media or gatherings in public places, in a climate of

paranoia, arouse suspicion. People are taken from their houses or from cafes and they literally “vanish” (ISMAIL & WALSH) [↗**Disappearances**]. During a speech at a police college, Egyptian president ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī advises the Tunisians to protect their country and “not let it go to ruin.” Sīsī’s speech is welcomed by a spokesperson for the Tunisian government who says it has “moved the country’s leaders and people.” However, Tunisian activists on Twitter draw parallels between Sīsī’s comments and those of his predecessor Ḥusnī Mubārak who in 2011 similarly dismissed the unrest in Tunisia that would eventually spread to Egypt and lead to his own demise (*Middle East Eye*) [↗**Past vs. Present**].

On the other hand, at least in Tunisia, since the ouster of strongman Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Bin ‘Alī, there are noticeable improvements in police conduct. Rallies and demonstrations without police intervention are a daily scene in the cities, overt police violence in the streets and the use of torture in custody are less frequent (*ACAT*). Since Bin ‘Alī’s surveillance and censorship apparatus has largely dissipated, activists enjoy an unprecedented level of freedom of expression. However, old habits die hard and torture, although less visible and frequent, is still used in police stations as a tool of interrogation, intimidation or punishment. In July, journalist and activist Hinda al-Shinnāwī publishes a report on several victims of police torture within only a few weeks. In one case, the police confiscated the goods of an unemployed teacher and father of three who maintained a small tobacco stand to support his family [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**]. After the police had refused to return his goods and then abused and humiliated him at the police station, the man immolated himself in front of his perpetrators (CHENNAOUI [c]). The case is, of course, reminiscent of the iconic “martyr” Muḥammad al-Bū‘azīzī, the young street vendor from Sidi Bouzid who in 2010 sparked the Arab Spring when he set himself on fire after the police seized his goods and humiliated him in public [↗**Present = Past (Stuck)**]. It shows that five years after the revolution, the struggle for a police service that respects human rights has still not produced the desired results. Certainly, important advances have been made on the legal front. Already in 2013, a law was passed that subjects police stations to inspections by human rights monitors. In February, a new law is approved that guarantees the presence of a lawyer during police interrogation and reduces the duration of police custody to 48 hours (CHENNAOUI [b]).

However, according to activists, the Tunisian pre-revolutionary penal code has been amended only gradually and in a piecemeal fashion (ROELLIN, *Notes*). Consequently, journalists and activists who are critical of the political system and, especially, the still powerful security sector, continue to be subjected to intimidation and prosecution. The arrest of 17-year-old high-school student and activist of ↗**Manīsh msāmīḥ**, ‘Afrā Bin ‘Azzā, is a case in point. In late December 2015, she is charged with defaming police officers in her Facebook posts and, despite being a minor, spends one night in a police station where she is subjected to abusive verbal treatment and sexual harassment (BEN TARJEM). After weeks of public outrage at the judiciary and the police’s inadequate handling of the case, a children’s judge finally dismisses the charge (*Tuniscope*). The police also use other provisions of the penal code as mere pretexts to harass and imprison critics. In the case of young activists and artists, they often invoke provisions related to violating “public morals” (drunkenness in public, not observing the fast during the month of Ramadan, etc.) and, especially, the uncompromising Law 52 which punishes the consumption of cannabis, locally known as *zaṭla* [↗**Hashish**], with one year in prison and a fine of a thousand dinars. ‘Afrā Bin ‘Azzā,

who had already been arrested twice before the above incident, says that when she became engaged in another social movement dubbed *Hāsibhum* (“Hold them accountable”) against police violence and impunity, she already knew she was targeted by the police and “expected to be arrested again” (BEN TARJEM).

In the same way, Egyptian authorities do not lack legal tools to pressure young activists and artists. The so-called Blasphemy Law, which punishes offenses against religion, and Article 178 of the Criminal Code, which punishes “violations of public morals” (*munāfiyat al-ādāb al-‘amma*), are vague enough to be applied in a vast range of situations. This gives the authorities room to maneuver against their targets, as the famous case against novelist Aḥmad Nājī, accused of “offending public morals,” incisively illustrates [↗[Court Trials](#)]. Nevertheless, the most striking aspect is the frequency of arrests that are not framed within the law, in which no charges are exhibited, and no mention is made of the duration of detention. These arrests, which may also involve teenagers, contribute to blurring the boundaries between police and criminals. In one instance, at least fifteen students whose ages range from 15 to 20 are abducted from their houses in the governorate of Alexandria, some of them along with their younger brothers. The police do not notify any charge, nor give any information on where to find them. In the face of the insistence of the parents, the reply is “you will recover your children in the morgue” (*madāMaṣr* [a]) [↗[Disappearances](#)].

Arrests do not only target artists, political opponents or people perceived as such. They can hit anyone, generating fear among citizens who fail to understand the logic behind them. The constant feeling of being under surveillance, followed, and suspect even though one has not committed any crime can also lead to a state of exhaustion and suffocation. The everyday harassments and humiliations practiced by the police in public, especially against young people from marginalized areas, also remain an issue of concern. When young men from the poorer neighborhoods of Tunis or Cairo come to visit the downtown areas of the cities, they are often stopped at certain junctions [↗[Kamīn](#); ↗[Downtown/Centre-ville](#); ↗[Center vs. Periphery](#)]. The police target them on account of their physical appearance, clothing, and dialect, as well as the direction from which they are coming. After rounding up the young men and checking their IDs, which reveal their place of residence and family background, the police decide whether they let them “move along” or proceed to further control measures, often related to alleged drugs or alcohol consumption. Another common scenario for residents of modest or poor neighborhoods is described in a blog published in *Nawaat*:

You may be sitting in peace, sipping coffee, playing cards with some friends or following a sports event. [Suddenly] three or four police cars surround the scene and a group of policemen is determined to harass everyone because of their need to check IDs and search for an amount [of money]. In the vast majority of times [...] it ends with slapping indiscriminately whoever does not appreciate disgruntled agents [↗[Inferiority vs. Superiority](#)].

The blogger proceeds citing Egyptian writer Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq: “Who invented the slap? The genius who knew that the center of dignity is anatomically located under the cheek?” (GUESMI) [↗[Inferiority = Superiority \(Satire\)](#)]. In marginalized neighborhoods [↗[‘Ashwā’iyyāt](#)] where unemployment and poverty are high, petty crimes and misdemeanors often result in abuse and humiliation of the persons involved. Typically, smoking a joint or

drinking alcohol in public gets young men in trouble. Sometimes, an alleged case of theft, a violent argument between neighbors or the incapability or refusal of a street peddler to give a bribe to the police leads to a conflict with the latter. The ubiquity of seemingly all-powerful policemen—in uniform or without, in cars, on motorcycles or on foot, whether in a coffee shop, in a park or at the stadium—takes a heavy toll on young people who already live under intense economic and social pressure [↗**Young vs. Settled**; ↗**Affluence vs. Destitution**; ↗**Apartment Wanted**]. Sometimes, the policeman is described as a cruel elder brother who does not protect his siblings, but rather constantly follows, controls and terrorizes them. This is why, in Tunisian youth slang, the policeman is called *al-hākim*, which also means “the ruler” or “the authority” as well as, specifically, “the judge” (ROELLIN, *Notes*). Similarly, Egyptians refer to every manifestation of security forces in their daily life as *al-hukūma*, which literally means “the government.” Thus, when the police come to search an apartment, the neighbors may say that *al-hukūma* came by (CHITI, *Notes*) [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**].

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But not only ordinary citizens live in constant fear of the police. Even ↗**Celebrities** can become victims of police brutality. Actress and singer Mīrīhān Ḥusayn, arrested for drunk-driving in Cairo, accuses the police of having sexually assaulted her (al-QUMĀSH). “I was going home after a long working day,” she recalls, “and was surprised by six men who tried to stop me by force late at night. I thought they were thieves (*ḥaramiyya*)” (ḤUSAYN) [↗**Male vs. Female**]. The pictures she posts on her Facebook page show signs of beating on her face, lips and legs. Some Twitter users comment the incident with the slogan *al-dākhiliyya balṭagiyya*, widely spread during the 2011 protests to accuse the police, under the orders of the Ministry of Interior (*al-dākhiliyya*), of being nothing but thugs (*balṭagiyya*), common criminals acting on behalf of corrupt institutions (al-QĀDĪ) [↗**Present = Past (Stuck)**]. “Please tag my pictures and share them,” Mīrīhān Ḥusayn writes, “so the truth will come out.” In this way, she treats Facebook users as the ultimate protectors of justice, which the police jeopardized through both the physical violence of the assault and the moral violence of its denial [↗**Social Media**; ↗**Voice vs. Silence**; ↗**True vs. False**]. The everyday abuses people are subjected to or that they witness are sometimes recorded with their ↗**Mobile Phones**. The images or videos are then usually posted on Facebook in the hope of generating mobilization and prompting the authorities to react (*Observateurs* [b]). One such video shows the violent arrest of a man who apparently has had an altercation with a female car driver over a traffic violation in a Tunis suburb. In the video, the woman punches the man and spits on him while plainclothes policemen prevent the man from defending himself instead of stopping her (*Ḥāsibhum*). Another Facebook video shows a traffic police officer who extorts a bribe from a man and his mother in a car near Gabès (*Asslema FM*). We notice that the mother secretly films the scene while she complains: “Why pay forty dinars? That’s too much!” The policeman does not want to negotiate and insists, “Forty dinars, not a cent less, it’s not you who decides.” While the content of the video does not reveal why the car driver was stopped, it is evident that the forty dinars are a bribe since they are demanded immediately, whereas traffic tickets can be paid with a delay. In Tunisia, such widely shared videos revealing police abuse often prompt the Interior Ministry to open an investigation and sometimes even to suspend the perpetrators, as in the latter case (*Observateurs* [a]).

In Egypt, more serious cases of police misconduct come to public attention and create controversy. In late 2015, the police enter a pharmacy in Ismailia and beat up doctor Ḥasan

‘Afifi, who subsequently dies of his wounds. The pharmacy camera records the beginning of the aggression and the case attracts broad attention, leading to local street demonstrations. A TV troupe interviews a crowd of angry citizens from the victim’s neighborhood. “The law states that nobody can search a pharmacy except the Ministry of Health!” a man protests, “This is common knowledge!” One after the other, men and women repeat that the pharmacist was a respectable man, whom they have known as such for many years. “If something like that happened to him,” a man yells, “it means that it could happen to anyone of us!” (*Dream TV*) [**Security = Fear (Police State)**]. Later on, the court of first instance condemns the responsible police officer to eight years in jail (GHĀNIM), yet similar incidents follow. In the Cairo popular neighborhood of Darb al-Aḥmar, a police officer shoots dead a 24-year-old driver who was transporting furniture for him. According to eyewitnesses, the officer refused to pay the fare he agreed upon and this led to an argument, which he terminated with his gun. A video and several photos document the killing, prompting the authorities to take a stand. On a TV show, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Karīm says “the officer fired a warning shot in the air, which unfortunately hit the driver leading to his death” (YT “Stūdiyū al-nuwwāb”). Minister of Interior Magdī ‘Abd al-Ghaffār receives the father of the young driver to express his condolences. The picture of the encounter is published on the Ministry’s official Facebook page and disseminated by several media (*MoI-EG on FB*). It portrays the mourning father slightly bowing to the Minister, who holds his head and kisses it in a paternal gesture. Acting as the father of the victim’s father, the Minister reaffirms his role of father of all citizens [**Father Figures**]. As such, he releases an official statement ensuring that “he and all those in the police force condemn this disgraceful act and the irresponsible behavior of one policeman, which does not reflect the true nature of the patriotic work that policemen do” (*Egyptian Streets; MoI-EG on FB*). The Cairo Criminal Court sentences the police officer to 25 years in prison (RAMADĀN). However, the exemplary punishment does not seem to put an end to such “disgraceful acts”, as the authorities call them. Some weeks later, in a Cairo suburb, a number of eyewitnesses report that “an individual wearing a police uniform shot dead a civilian and when other civilians tried to seize him, he started shooting at random and injured two more people” (ḤASAN & al-DĪN). The video of the scene is posted on Twitter, and it is proved that the “individual in uniform” is effectively a police officer. President al-Sīsī also reacts on Twitter, taking the side of the civilians to reassure them that police brutality is nothing but a marginal phenomenon. Yet news outlets seem to take it almost for granted, as if it were a banal trend, concluding that “recent incidents among low ranking policemen, who do not have to undergo the same training and study as police officers, have included sexual harassment, beating of a doctor in a hospital, and the assault of a woman at a Cairo metro” (*Rehab City*).

In a highly polarized society [**Commemoration / Memorial Days**], where the state presents itself as the entity that holds the only truth, people may turn to social media to contest the police’s version of the facts, condemning their manipulation of the reality. The same condemnation appears in some novels that are visible in the public space, whether in the bestsellers’ section of bookstores or on the publishers’ stands at the Cairo Book Fair. Set in 2020, *Mithla Ikārūs* (“Like Icarus”) by Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq is the story of an Egyptian man labelled as mad because gifted with the power of foreseeing the future [**Hope = Hell (Dystopia)**]. “The state holds him as a strategic treasure” (TAWFĪQ) and even shares him with

American experts working for the Pentagon. Both Egypt and the United States are interested in exploiting his skill but fail to understand his predictions that come in an obscure, metaphoric language. “The man who knows more than he ought to” is heavily tortured to deliver a truth that nobody is capable of understanding. Another major novel, *Uṭārid*, seems to offer a positive vision of the police, yet in a paradoxical way. In 2023, Egypt is invaded by the Knights of Malta, becoming a portion of their Republic. While the vast majority of Egyptians adjust to the foreign occupation, some police officers join the resistance. They decide to put their expertise with weapons and combat in the service of the Egyptian nation but have to quit the Egyptian police to achieve this goal. From national agents collaborating with a foreign power, they turn into outlaws serving their homeland, a twist that makes the reader question the image of the police as a force protecting the country [**Security = Fear (Police State)**]. A similar pattern is at the core of a successful TV series, *al-Khurūg* (“The Exit”), shot in Egypt and starring renowned Tunisian actors such as Zāfir al-Ābidīn and Durra. The former plays the role of a police officer who eventually leaves the police to be able to pursue a criminal, while the same criminal claims to punish the official police for having betrayed its mission and no longer being the “sword of justice” (*sayf al-‘adāla*) (*Khurūg*).

A writer, in his thirties, thinks the image of the good cop has taken a battering from both ordinary people and cultural productions:

When I was a child, heroism (*al-buṭūla*) was connected with the state (*al-dawla*). The hero was the Egyptian spy working for the secret services (*al-mukhābarāt*) against Israel [**Security vs. Fear**; **Normality = Heroism (Surviving)**]. Even in literature and movies. You can easily find it in the best-sellers for teenagers we used to read, as the ones written by Nabīl Fārūq around the figure of the “man of the impossible” (*rajul al-mustahīl*), the brave agent who defies any risk and thwarts any attack with the help of state technology. This figure had a huge impact on our generation. These were my dreams as a child! Now it’s the opposite: the criminal (*al-mugrim*) is connected with the state and the hero is against it [**Security = Fear (Police State)**]. I think it’s a change resulting from the 2011 revolution. Even popular literature and movies follow the path because it sells (*huwa tugārī*). (CHITL, *Notes*)

Indeed, the audience seems to prefer realism to fantasy these days and, in reality, the distinction between security intervention and arbitrary oppression is far from being clear. Crackdowns on protest movements, collective identity controls and police raids in public places, torture in custody, arrests of journalists and activists—such police actions are still widespread in Egypt and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia. But however brutal or unjust they may seem, the authorities often legitimate them with heightened security concerns and with the struggle against terrorism [**Security vs. Fear**]. In both Tunisia and Egypt, a state of emergency is in place that gives the police exceptional powers, allowing them, for instance, to suspend strikes or demonstrations likely to provoke “disorder,” to place under house arrest anyone whose activities they deem a “danger for security” or to place control on media output. “Fighting terrorism and respecting human rights are two sides of the same coin,” forty-six national and international human rights organizations say in an open letter addressed to all Tunisians and entitled “No to Terrorism, Yes to Human Rights.” The letter

acknowledges the need to prosecute perpetrators and instigators of terrorist acts while at the same time stressing that abusing human rights will not defeat terrorism but nurture it (*Nawaat*). This view is affirmed in a social awareness video in which five Tunisian ⤵ **Celebrities**, including a well-known filmmaker, a rapper and an Olympic champion, alternately speak to the public, arguing,

yes, policemen are our brothers, but they shouldn't beat or abuse people. No one should be tortured, even in the name of fighting terrorism. This type of abuse is dangerous for everyone [...]. Many say police can do whatever they want, as long as they crush terrorism. What does that mean, 'Whatever they want?' Does it mean humiliating you, breaking into your house? Policemen deal with citizens directly. They should respect us. Otherwise, let's just bring back Ben Ali and the police state, if that's what they want. Injustice is an awful thing, whether it comes from terrorists or from the police. A policeman who commits abuses in the name of fighting terrorism must be held accountable. In short, no to terrorism, yes to human rights.

Related Entries

ARRAYS – Apartment Wanted ♦ *'Ashwā'īyyāt* ♦ Celebrities ♦ Clash ♦ Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Court Trials ♦ Disappearances ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Father Figures ♦ Hashish ♦ Kamīn ♦ *Manīsh msāmīh* ♦ Mobile Phones ♦ Prison ♦ Social Media ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ Tourist Resorts

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Center vs. Periphery ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Normality vs. Heroism ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ True vs. False ♦ Voice vs. Silence ♦ Young vs. Settled

CODES COLLAPSED – Hope = Hell (Dystopia) ♦ Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Present = Past (Stuck) ♦ Security = Fear (Police State) ♦ True = False (Life in Limbo)

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◀ elena.chiti@su.se ▶

◀ jonas.roellin@islam.unibe.ch ▶