Prison

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According to a report by the Euro-Med Monitor for Human Rights, Tunisia counts 27 prisons with a total capacity of 16.000 prisoners. However, this year's number of inmates stands at around 25.000, which means an average prison occupancy level of about 150% (*Euromed Monitor*). According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, in Egypt there are 504 detention centres, of which 43 are prisons and 461 "police stations, centres, or departments, as well as the Criminal Investigation Administrations and their sections". Military prisons used for civilians and secret prisons are not included in this estimate (ANRHI). The number of detainees in Egypt, by mid-August, is estimated at around 106.000, of whom 60.000 are believed to be political prisoners. It is not possible to determine more precisely these rates due to the lack of reliable official data and the large number of arrests which are not framed within the law [[↗Disappearances](#)]. A high proportion of prisoners are still awaiting trial, yet they are held in prison and not in appropriate facilities, as prescribed by the law. In Tunisia, pre-trial detention is also common, there it concerns up to 60% of prisoners (*Kapitalis*). This policy results in a steady increase in prisoners' numbers, which makes overcrowding a major issue in both Egypt and Tunisia. Prison cells hold more prisoners than they were designed to hold and inmates are sometimes forced to share beds. The limited space available leads to unhealthy living conditions that cause not only diseases, but also tensions and violence, as well as psychological suffering. In Tunisia, 53% of prisoners are drug users (*Euromed Monitor*). Drug consumption is equally widespread in Egyptian jails [[↗Hashish](#)].

There are substantial internal differences among the various prison facilities in Egypt. The most notorious institutions are the Tora Maximum Security Prison—colloquially known as al-ʿAqrab ('Scorpion') to differentiate it from the other 6 prisons that together form the vast Tora prison complex South-East of Cairo—and Burj al-ʿArab prison in the desert west of Alexandria. Constructed in the 1990s to house political prisoners and those connected to political violence, both al-ʿAqrab and Burj al-ʿArab are known for particularly harsh treatment of inmates. As a former warden puts, al-ʿAqrab was built as a prison where there is no exit except death, and where "neither sun nor air enter, with air barely enough to breathe" (EIPR). Currently both of these prisons hold the bulk of Muslim Brotherhood members as well as suspected ISIS combatants. On the other end of this carceral geography are 'soft' prisons, such as Tora Farm (Mazraʿa Tora), also part of the Tora complex, where the novelist Aḥmad Nāji is held [[↗Court Trials](#)]. Here it is not uncommon for inmates to have access to refrigerators and to be able to cook their own food. Given the current overpopulation of prisons, detainees are held in various locations such as the notorious *Kilo 10,5* ("10,5 kilometre"), a compound of the Police Academy partially turned into a carceral facility. A large part of the 'Islands case' detainees are held here [[↗Red Sea Islands](#)]. Detainees in pre-trial detention are generally held in police stations, though sometimes—especially in major political cases that drag on for years, like those of the Muslim Brotherhood after the mass

arrests of 2013-14—they spend their time waiting in actual prisons in the company of convicts. Police stations—which often hold substantial numbers of detainees, either in pre-trial detention or awaiting release—are transitional zones, often ruled by their own internal hierarchy on top of which are senior criminal convicts, who assume the role of bosses; they can make one’s life easy or hell, all for a price. Moreover, prisoners (especially those in pre-trial detention) are frequently moved from one place to another apparently at whim. This is largely part of an overall strategy of psychological torment through the dehumanisation of prisoners and their families whereby the frequent moves disrupt whatever sense of normalcy and importantly, of community, one may have been able to construct inside, and whatever kind of routine families were able to establish in terms of visits and the flow of supplies. Not to mention the angst and strain thrown on families, who are typically not informed about the move in advance and, upon finding out that their loved one has been transferred, have to spend time locating them anew across prisons and detention centres far and wide. Another form of punishment deployed especially towards secular or leftist detainees consists of putting them in cells with ISIS members. These are known for their rigid demeanour and are universally feared. For a secular detainee this means being subjected to further pressure and discipline, being forced to pray regularly and often forbidden to read books. In such a situation, one also lives under constant threat of being beaten up or even killed if he becomes perceived as a *kāfir*, such as, if they learn that he engaged in drinking, free relationships, or lax religious habits or beliefs [**↗In Islam, ...**].

The state spends next to nothing on the actual care of inmates. Their maintenance (in Arabic known as *i’āsha*), including food, clothing and, if needed, medicine, is outsourced to their families and social networks [**↗“The System” vs. “The People”**]. How regularly or smoothly this happens depends largely on where the inmate is held and on his or her overall status in the complicated web of incarceration. According to the law, pre-trial detainees are entitled to one visit a week, and those serving a sentence to one every fortnight; this, however, rarely happens (EIPR). The life of whole families and friends then becomes paced through weekly visits to their loved ones inside in order to deliver basic necessities. This weekly visit (*ziyāra*) does not mean that they actually get to meet the detainee; more often, these visits are merely about the delivery of basic necessities (a delivery visit is known as *ṭabliyya*), which pass through several hands of guards and gatekeepers before they reach their destination, the cell. This process of delivery is itself very costly, as each of these ‘hands’ takes its cut along the way. The more fortunate ones, those whose families can afford both the cost of goods and the proportionate cost of delivery, can have books, games and even **↗Mobile Phones** smuggled into their cells. Minutes on the mobile can then be traded with others in exchange for cigarettes, which work as a prison currency. The burden of maintenance gets significantly worse with the floating of the pound and its consequent inflation [**↗Dollar Crisis**]. This system is a way of keeping a much larger pool of people—families and networks of friends and dedicated volunteers—symbolically incarcerated and in a constant state of deprivation, as their lives turn around providing for the ever more expensive basic necessities of their incarcerated relatives [**↗Hope = Hell (Dystopia)**; **↗Normality = Heroism (Surviving)**].

Food provided free of charge—as per the law—is insufficient and often unfit for human consumption. Living conditions in the infamous *Scorpion* prison (also dubbed ‘the Tombs of Scorpion’) get so bad this year that three dozens of prisoners go on hunger strike to protest

inhuman living conditions, lack of food and medicine, and the flat-out ban on visits; in some cases including physical assault not just on inmates but also on visiting family members (EIPR; *AJE*). Last year, 6 prisoners died here; their deaths have been attributed to the inhuman living conditions and lack of medical care. In March, the already irregular and humiliating process of visits becomes markedly worse in Scorpion when the authorities limit daily visits first to 50, and then to 15 visits per day—in a prison housing 1000–1,500 prisoners (HRW). Families cope with such restrictions by feeding a whole cell from a single detainee's visit; but these deliveries are often sabotaged when guards refuse to allow food into the cells, change the rules of what is allowed and what not at a whim, or force families to queue outside for long hours, during which time the food spoils. Sometimes food that is allowed in, or that is purchased at the prison cafeteria is confiscated in raids (known as *tajrīda* or 'stripping'). In April, families of detainees stage a small protest in front of the Journalists Syndicate in Downtown Cairo [[↗Downtown/Centre-ville](#)] to protest these conditions. Others present complaints to the High Administrative Court who rules in their favour regarding their visit rights, but this court ruling has no effect on the ground. Instead, a new 'reservation system' is introduced in Scorpion, whereby families are only allowed visits after having made a 'reservation' in person two weeks in advance (EIPR). Family members often have to camp outside the prison over night in order to be let in for a visit the next morning. It is not unusual to be refused a visit at the last minute, after a family has waited for hours and undergone extensive security checks. To further torment both detainees and their kin, the authorities are in the process of installing glass windows in spaces dedicated to visits, thus preventing even the simple act of touching or hugging (EIPR) [[↗Security = Fear \(Police State\)](#)].

Not only does the state outsource to families the provision of basic necessities that it is required by law to provide, but there is also a significant move towards actual profit-making through prisoners. The extent of these practices varies from one facility to another, but the principle remains the same. Prison cafeterias or canteens sell foodstuffs and other necessities (underwear or sanitary items for example) to inmates for exploitative prices, typically between twice to four times their cost outside of prison [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#)]. This new, official market system operates parallel to the older informal system of prison economy in which prisoners exchange their provisions among themselves, using cigarettes as prison currency. The already inflated canteen prices are subject to a further jump following the floating of the pound [[↗Dollar Crisis](#)]. In order to enforce this form of exchange, prison authorities prohibit families from bringing items now available for purchase in the cafeteria or canteen during visits or as part of the regular *i'āsha*. A new system of canteen coupons is instituted whereby families provide their detainees with coupons, which the latter use to purchase their necessities from the prison cafeteria. The products available, including pasta or a local version of Coke, are mostly those produced in military factories. Families are also forced to rely on coupons when their loved one is located in a faraway prison. The coupon system is new and not yet fully operational. This means that while money is traditionally strictly prohibited inside prison walls, it is currently tolerated in some facilities in order to make sure that inmates purchase goods from the cafeteria. The new regime of 'canteen credit' also shifts the flow of profit away from the guards (who may then have fewer incentives to treat detainees decently) and directly to the coffers of the carceral state, or more likely, one military subcontractor or another.

Seen from inside, prison is a place of torture and impunity. A letter written by an Egyptian detainee, and smuggled out from Scorpion, describes its chief guard as the “chief tormentor” [↗**The Policeman Criminal**]. It reports his awareness of enjoying unlimited power over “his” detainees, which leads the man to call himself “immortal” (*New Arab*). The letter goes on emphasising the systematic humiliation of prisoners’ religious sentiments. The “chief tormentor” apparently constantly insults the Quran, replaces Islamic formulas with vows to pagan gods and also names himself “Hasan al-Bannā,” the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. The anti-Muslim Brotherhood discourse and policies of the government emerge in the prison environment with particular brutality. Abuse and torture especially hit prisoners with Islamist leanings, which reminds of the abuses suffered by Islamist detainees under the former Ben Ali regime in Tunisia. Five years after the Tunisian revolution, these abuses come to public attention during the hearings before the *Hay’at al-ḥaqīqa wa’l-karāma / Instance vérité et dignité*. The independent tribunal opens the way to coming to terms with the past and allowing victims of the Ben Ali regime to be rehabilitated and rendered justice (BOBIN) [↗**Public Hearings**; ↗**Past vs. Present**]. In Egypt, torture is regularly practised not only against political prisoners, particularly those accused of terrorism, but also against people jailed on charges of “offending public morals” or even common offenders. In fact, it seems to be a “normal” practice behind bars:

There are two types of abuse in prison in Egypt: mental and physical. Verbal abuse doesn’t even count (...) It’s normal to be cursed, stripped naked, beaten with a bar, or put in solitary confinement or the “tank” (a pitch-black 3.5m x 5.5m cell). They might also torture another prisoner in front of you. Of course you never forget. Ever. (HALAWA)

Egyptian prison slang clearly reveals the routine character of such abuses. For instance, prisoners call the “beating session” that is performed by security forces when receiving new inmates “the welcome party” (*al-tashrīf*) (KHALĀF). This highly ritualised and age-old practice includes name-calling (“dog,” “pig” etc.) and stripping the prisoner naked, in an act intended to humiliate the inmate by stripping him of his human attributes, ushering him into a de-individuated and dehumanised state of limbo. No wonder the prison experience, with its routine humiliation and varied forms of torture, is also colloquially known as [a place, an existence] “behind the sun” (*warā’ al-shams*).

Seen from outside, the prison is a spectre, around which fears and concerns materialize. This often comes out in private conversations. Of course, it is a highly politicized matter. “There is no alternative to Sisi in Egypt,” a foreigner claims, emphasising the necessity of political stability to fight terrorism. “The alternative is in jail! (*il-badīl fī ’l-sign*),” yells an Egyptian in response, referring to the incarceration of the youth who participated in the 2011 revolution [↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**]. “They finally jailed them, all of them,” says an Egyptian who supports the government, pointing to the imprisonment of prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood, “I felt so unsafe in 2013 and now we’ve got stability” (CHITI) [↗**Security vs. Fear**]. Both the proportion of jailed people and the renown of some of them make the prison a reality that cannot be neglected. Unlike his Tunisian counterpart, who found refuge in Saudi Arabia, former president Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt for thirty years, is sentenced to prison (‘ABD AL-RĀZIQ & NAṢR). The images of him behind bars,

during the trial, or in the Maadi military hospital, where he is confined, periodically leak to the public and are well familiar to Egyptians (*Reuters*; *Bayān*). They suggest that Mubarak benefits from good treatment and constant medical care, in a single room which looks wide and clean, and can receive visits. Muḥammad Mursī, Egypt's first elected president, is also in jail, but his detention is much harsher. His relatives lament that they had to wait for three years, before being allowed to visit him. Whereas Morsi does not face a death sentence anymore, he continues to serve long-term imprisonment. His face striped with bars appears in the media, in front of everyone's eyes. A considerable number of his supporters, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, are also in jail. They are predominantly housed in the faraway Burj al-ʿArab prison, which shares a very bad reputation with Scorpion. Most of them are detained more or less indefinitely, with no trial in sight. Pre-trial detention, which the Egyptian constitution limits to two years, may last up to five in their cases. Mubarak's and Morsi's supporters follow the developments of their leaders' trials as parallel, yet dissimilar cases as the two factions are diametrically opposed and seemingly irreconcilable [↗[Clash](#)].

The omnipresence of prison in the political and media realm affects cultural life. One of the "best books of the year," according to *al-Ahram Weekly*, is *Al-Thaqāfa ka-siyāsa* ("Culture as Politics") by Syrian former political prisoner Yāsīn al-Ḥājj Šālīḥ, which describes the abuses endured in Syrian prisons under the rule of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad (SAAD). However, the mention of similar abuses occurred in Egyptian prisons remains uneasy, especially if it is linked to actual cases and not to fictional representations. The prison may be widely present in mainstream cultural productions, yet its image is often softened up. The successful TV series *Fawqa mustawā 'l-shubuhāt* ("Beyond Reproach"), starring renowned actress and singer Yusra, offers several scenes of the prison. Some of its female characters are jailed at different times and the camera follows them in captivity. The setting consists of a room shared by several women, yet its huge size fails to give the impression of overcrowding. The few graffiti orderly displayed on the walls convey an artificial cleanness and clarity of the space. The female characters, still made up and in good shape after weeks of detention, complete the picture. The ensemble results in a sort of caricature of the prison that, paradoxically enough, evokes the "golden imprisonment" in the rich compounds where the characters used to live as free women [↗[Gated Communities / Compounds](#)]. The TV series *Suqūṭ ḥurr* ("Freefall") conveys a deeper sense of constriction, but it stems from the plot rather than the setting itself. Charged with the murder of her own husband yet incapable of discernment, the protagonist, played by popular actress Nelly Karim, is jailed at Abbasiyya psychiatric hospital. Since the first scenes, the audience feels that her life space is becoming narrower. During the police interrogation, the woman pees on herself. When she enters the hospital, still beautifully dressed, she does not manage to stand upright on her high heels and almost dislocates her ankles. With every step, she seems to lose more of her freedom, dignity and femininity [↗[Beautiful vs. Ugly](#)]. In the following episodes, she appears to be nothing but an empty doll in the hands of doctors [↗[Psychiatrists](#)]. The prison is also present in the realm of literature. In the novel *Fī mamarr al-fi'rān* ("In the mice corridor"), by prominent Egyptian writer Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq, the prison is both a reality and a metaphor. It is physically present, with its lack of fresh air and daylight, its narrowness and darkness, its smells, and its harsh monotony that drives humans into madness. At the same time, as the author emphasises in the foreword, it is a representation of present-day Middle East, where

authoritarian regimes seem to be more stable than ever and freedoms more and more limited. Narrowness and darkness are seen as characteristics of societies that constrain human expression and free will, whether by physical bars or social restrictions [[↗Freedom vs. Constraint](#)].

While Tunisians enjoy unprecedented political freedom, political expression is threatened by a politicized and repressive security and justice system inherited from the Ben Ali era. Moreover, many of the public morality and order-based laws of the pre-revolutionary period remain in force. Thus, “morally reprehensible” acts such as “cohabitation outside marriage,” “indecent exposure” or “adultery” are still treated as criminal offenses and, more often than not, punished with harsh prison sentences. Hence, social pressure continues to be a major challenge in Tunisia as well, in particular for the youth of whom many denounce the “moral control imposed by the state” (CHENNAOUI) and police forces who act as “morality police” (BOUKHAYATIA). Particularly sharp criticism is levelled at Law 52, which punishes the consumption or possession of drugs, including cannabis, with at least one year of prison. As a result, about 5200 people are in jail on charges of using or possessing cannabis [[↗Hashish](#)]. A mother of a convicted young cannabis user testifies before the camera: “I went to see him last Thursday, he told me he’d been put with convicted murderers. When he was in another prison, he was put with Salafists. What’s wrong with our prisons? How can they put minor offenders with people convicted of murder and Salafists?” (*Observers*).

Activists lament that, in jail, drug users become drug dealers and petty lawbreakers embrace illegal activities as a permanent source of income. Indeed, the chances of reoffending are very high, especially for prisoners “with a history of drug use and trafficking, prostitution and debt related offenses” (*Life Foundation*). In Tunisia, 45% of prisoners who are released are later jailed again (*EuroMed Monitor*). The belief that the state deliberately seeks to turn people into criminals and drug victims is quite common among the youth, especially in marginalized areas [[↗“The System” vs. “The People”](#), [↗Security = Fear \(Police State\)](#)]. It is revealed, for example, in the Tunisian song *Zinzāna* (“Prison cell”) by rapper El Général, posted on YouTube:

In our country, we do not have any value / we are thrown in a prison cell / the district is very angry / everyday, there is a sad event / pigeons [*secret police or informants*] are around / go find where to spend the night / wherever you look, you see those faces / what a bad situation, what a frightening situation / fill, fill, to prison! / they don’t know: his head [*of a young man*] is like a stone with despair / he spent his entire life bending his head / his anger grows more and more because they have always walked on him / the law is twisted / what can you do? / accept and live below / they want you to betray, mug and steal / we live in a prison cell, thanks for the invitation (EL GÉNÉRAL).

In both Tunisia and Egypt, young and underprivileged men are particularly worried of the authorities’ seeming power to arrest and imprison at will. This is why Tunisian blogger ‘Azīz ‘Amāmī provocatively suggests Tunisians to “directly go to prison out of our own free will. This way, at least, we can stop worrying whether we will or we will not be unfairly arrested” [[↗Inferiority = Superiority \(Satire\)](#)]. This sentiment is shared in Egypt and sometimes publicly voiced:

I came to fear the whole country. Its airports, streets and squares, its men and women. A momentary disagreement or a misunderstanding with the wrong person at a checkpoint, at a bus stop, from within the car, in a discussion with your neighbour and this is how you may end up behind the bars. Then, you will find someone who says you were carrying drug pills in the back seat, and a scale weighing heroin powder in your glass of wine, and while listening to a recording invoking Sayyeda Aisha and calling for communion you will be redirected to an obscene website promoting atheism. (...) I am scared. Scared because I do not understand why Aḥmad Nājī was jailed, or Shawkān. And Hishām Ja‘far, Āya Hījāzī, Maḥmūd Muḥammad and many others. Young and old, women and children. I am scared, scared, scared (al-SUKKARĪ) [↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**].

Both Tunisians and Egyptians may describe their country as “an open-air prison,” condensing in this expression the fear of being unfairly arrested, but also the social pressure they face and the feeling of suffocation it provokes. “I can’t stay in Egypt anymore,” a young man says, “I feel I die inside everyday”. “I only speak Arabic, but I want my children to learn a foreign language,” explains another, “so they won’t be trapped here”. People are ready to pay high fees, and huge bribes, to send their children to a foreign school in the hope they will one day live elsewhere (CHITI; RYZOVA) [↗**Migration**]. Prominent cartoonist Islām Jāwīsh visually represents this sentiment in his best-selling comics book *Al-Waraqā 2* (“The paper 2”). One of its cartoons represents a courtroom at the moment when the verdict is pronounced and the defendant is “sentenced to Egypt”. The poor man cries out in tears, begging the judge to execute him instead, but the judge is not moved: evidently, an “Egypt sentence” is considered harsher than a death sentence [↗**Court Trials**].

Indeed, life proves particularly harsh for ordinary citizens who are suffering under inflation, low wages and high unemployment [↗**Dollar Crisis**], aggravated by the decline of the tourism sector [↗**Tourist Resorts**]. However, in both Egypt and Tunisia it is the security sector that receives the lion’s share of the national budget. In Tunisia, about 20% of the budget is devoted to security, twice as much as in 2011 (*Crisis Group*). In Egypt, the increase of the number of prisons since 2011 is spectacular. It has risen from 43 to 62, not including the 442 detention facilities. Nineteen new prisons have been built in the years following the 2011 revolution, while this year alone more than ten new prisons are constructed in different governorates (ANHRI, *Egypt Independent*). Egyptians sometimes make fun of the bitter contradiction between the reality of the country and the state propaganda: “This is how the government solved the problem of housing: building more prisons!,” comments someone. Social media users parody the initiatives organised in the framework of the «Year of the Youth» and widely advertised through official media. A Twitter campaign protesting the incarceration and enforced disappearance of many young Egyptians provocatively asks: “Where is the youth?” (*il-shabāb fēn?*) [↗**Young vs. Settled**]. Cartoons are posted which represent scenes of detention under the hashtag “Youth inclusion” (*iḥtiwā al-shabāb*). One of them is drawn by cartoonist Islām Gāwīsh, who is arrested himself and held in police custody for one day on charges of using unlicensed web tools (MARZIBĀN). The cartoon “Youth,” by Muḥammad Anwar, depicts a fat state official addressing young inmates through the bars of a prison cell: “We want to give you a message: you are the hope... you are the future. And thank you” (ANWAR). Meanwhile, in a poor Tunis suburb, a young “*hittiste*”—

an idle person “standing by the wall” (originally derived from the Algerian word for “wall,” *ḥīl*)—claims that instead of providing new jobs the state rather builds more prisons. He concludes that the only hope for him is leaving his country (ROELLIN):

What kind of shit life is this? You have to work your ass off for every dinar and then you go to prison for a joint. Barely out of prison, they arrest you again. Some quarrel, some fight, some small mistake. Prison, hood, prison, hood, prison, hood. I swear, there is nothing else here. This is why I want to get to Europe. [↗**Migration**]

Related Entries

ARRAYS – Clash ♦ Court Trials ♦ Disappearances ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Gated Communities / Compounds ♦ Hashish ♦ In Islam, ... ♦ Migration ♦ Mobile Phones ♦ The Policeman Criminal ♦ Psychiatrists ♦ Public Hearings ♦ Red Sea Islands ♦ Tourist Resorts

CODES – Beautiful vs. Ugly ♦ Freedom vs. Constraint ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ Young vs. Settled

CODES COLLAPSED – Hope = Hell (Dystopia) ♦ Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Normality = Heroism (Surviving) ♦ Security = Fear (Police State)

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