

# In 2016

How it felt to live in the Arab World  
five years after the «Arab Spring»

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## True = False (Life in Limbo)

By STEPHAN GUTH

The name of the Tunisian *Hay'at al-ḥaqīqa wa'l-karāma* / Institution Vérité et Dignité (“Committee for Truth and Dignity”) that starts the first ↗**Public Hearings** of the victims of Ben Ali’s dictatorship in November, makes clear: access to the truth about injustice and crimes committed by the pre-revolutionary régime and its entourage against the people, and the possibility to talk openly about it and get it recognized as truth, is a matter of human dignity. To achieve this had been one of the major incentives and goals of the uprisings five years ago, and the successful removal of the former oppressors had brought the freedom—for some time, at least—to restore that dignity; moreover, it had consolidated “truth” as an essential principle, indispensable for the future. Five years into the post-revolutionary period, the pride to have dethroned the dictators and to have secured for oneself the right to know the truth, and the freedom to tell it in public, and with all that a fundamental aspect of one’s dignity, is still there, inside, has taken seat in the minds and given people a new self-confidence. As a consequence, the desire to know the truth from the lie and the sensibility for attempts, by whomsoever, to conceal the truth, are still virulent [↗**True vs. False**].

Yet, five years into the period of post-revolutionary efforts to rebuild society have also shown that access to the truth is a matter of power and that truth not only can liberate and restore dignity but also do harm and be very painful and that it therefore is as desired as it is highly contested. In Egypt, it has become a major battleground in the confrontation between the new—again dictatorial—Sisi régime and the opposition. In Tunisia, although there are many institutional remnants of the Ben Ali era, especially among the police and state security, it is probably more a fragmented and highly vulnerable society than the political régime that is responsible for the obscuration of facts and the subsequent concealment and/or extinction of the truth.

Unprecedented freedom, especially on the Internet, and continuing or newly emerged tensions between political, social, and religious groups have produced an almost impenetrable jungle of evidently or seemingly contradictory data and opinions and made reality, again, inscrutable to a very large degree. Gossip and online chatting disseminate myriad shreds of information or elements of what might be true or false; they come as rumours about what “probably” or “supposedly,” “certainly” or “allegedly,” “perhaps” or “without any doubt” has happened or is the case but what one, actually, never can be sure about; sometimes, the scattered bits and pieces are put together to narratives that claim logical plausibility and coherence and take the form of conspiracy theories. But, as they are built on non-verifiable data and assumptions, they always compete with other, conflicting, contradictory versions, originating from other camps, each maintaining to represent the truth; at the end of the day, all remain undecidable, uncertain, arguable, precarious. The thousands of people who have disappeared: were they kidnapped/abducted? If so, by whom? And why? Or have they simply left the country, clandestinely, to flee from persecution, or the economic malaise? Or gone into hiding, for which reason

whatsoever? Or defected to the Islamic State? [↗**Disappearances**, ↗**Migration**]. And what about the many reported cases of conversion, from Islam to Christendom, and vice versa: Are these reports genuine and authentic, or are they fake news? If the latter, who fabricated them, and why, to which end? If the former, did conversion happen voluntarily or under pressure? If forced, by whom, and when and where and how? [↗**Conversions**]. Similarly, should one believe those who maintain that the economic crisis is the result of foreign sabotage, or rather those who have strong arguments for that it is due to the régime's mismanagement? [↗**Dollar Crisis**]. Should one go for the official explanation of the shortage of ↗**Baby Milk** or rather trust in those who are convinced that the crisis was produced on purpose? Was the 'Ataba fire a mere accident, due to an electrical short (as official statements have it) or, rather, the work of—perhaps even state-hired—arsonists (version discussed by critics who think there is good reason to remain sceptical about the evidence put forward in state-controlled media)? [↗**Disasters**, ↗**Downtown/Centre-ville**, ↗**The Voice from Above**]... And so on, and so on—hundreds of incidents shrouded in mystery that give ample room for discussion and speculation, especially on the Internet. In none of these cases one can decide with certainty whose version of the story is true and whose explanation is wrong and/or fabricated. So what is the truth that one should build on? What kind of world is it we are living in?

Paradoxically, the suspense of truth is enhanced by ↗**Social Media**, that is, the tool that, on the one hand, is most powerful in questioning doubtful information and countering suspected official narratives and/or commonly accepted readings of reality [↗**True vs. False**]. On the other hand, counter-narratives lanced with the intention to put right what seems false contribute to enlarging the labyrinth of conflicting data. As Egyptian writer Aḥmad Nāḡī puts it: the Internet, and with it social media, is a virtual space that has been turned into a huge shopping mall (NAJĪ/NAĠĪ). Others would call it a jungle, an almost impenetrable thicket of rumours, competing conspiracy theories, and propaganda. How to decide whether a source can be trusted and may be truly enlightening, or whether it seeks to keep users “mentally retarded,” as Aḥmad al-Musulmānī, a former information consultant, diagnosed it (quoted by *Al-JAZĪRA Mubāshir*), busy with gossip and trivialities, or whether it forms part of a giant masterplan, elaborated by a network of professional or semi-professional agents of “social media brigades” working to create bubbles of fake news and to influence public opinion in one direction or another?

Where everyday life is permeated by so many rumours, doubts, and conspiracy theories; where it is so difficult to penetrate the thicket of contradictory narratives; and where a majority, for reasons of poverty, simply does not have the time and means to scrutinize the episodes offered to them [↗**Affluence vs. Destitution**] and to speculate about their degree of authenticity and plausibility or falseness; in such a situation, reality remains, to a large extent, suspended in a limbo, and with it life in such an ambiguous reality. A follow-up to Egyptian writer Basma 'Abd al-'Azīz's scary vision, unfolded three years ago in a Kafkaesque novel, of the people waiting in a queue to be let in into the fortress-like giant “Portal,” al-Bawwāba, the seat of state power (*al-Ṭābūr*, “The Queue”), is now film director Muḥammad Diyāb's metaphor, or rather metonymy, of representatives of various social groups caught in an armoured police van, i.e., “the people” caught in the police state of

contemporary Egypt, with almost no possibility to know what is happening outside the world of their nutshell prison (*Ishibāk*, “Clash”).

Many of those locked up in the police van still try to catch a glimpse of reality outside the narrow world they are confined to—with the help of a phone that somebody managed to smuggle in [↗**Mobile Phones**], or by observing what is visible through the bars of the tiny windows, or by asking questions to some of the policemen when the door is opened for some seconds to add yet another captive. But the tiny bits of information that make it into the cage they are caught in cannot change significantly the general state of suspended truth and the overall atmosphere of frightening uncertainty, not-knowing, inscrutability, the feeling of being trapped and kept in ignorance. Even among the inmates themselves, who, in principle, all are in the same situation, interaction is characterized by mutual suspicion and mistrust, favouring violent “clash”, as they belong to different social strata and religious groups and are of different political orientation [↗**Clash**].

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The situation inside Diyāb’s van or ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s queue, meant as representations of the state of affairs in Egypt, is similar to that described in *Condamné à l’espoir* for Tunisian parents whose sons (and daughters) have disappeared and who are ignorant of the latter’s whereabouts. The children seem to have left for Syria to join the Islamic State. The bereaved parents are “doomed to hope” (as the title of the documentary translates)—a rather desperate hope, though [↗**Hope vs. Hell**], because there is little they can build their hope on. As the end titles of the documentary tell us, Tunisia scores highest among all Arab countries in the number of citizens—ca. 3000 until now—who left the country to become members of the IS. This fact seems to be too embarrassing for the new government to confirm and to assist the relatives in their attempts to gather intelligence and deal with the situation. So, being “doomed to hope” also means, to a large degree, being doomed to passivity, to paralysis, to accepting that rumours about the destiny of the sons may be true, or may not be true—if there are rumours at all... And normal life is suspended, due to the lack of certainty. Prisoners in Egypt, especially those in pre-trial detention, are exposed to a similarly dehumanising torment when the security forces let them wait in their detention camps without further explanation, then suddenly move them from one place to another without informing them about their transfer in advance, and holding back corresponding information also from the relatives [↗**Prison**].

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Not receiving any information, or living in constant doubt about whether an information can be trusted or should rather not be relied on, gives rise to a variety of reactions—and attitudes and ways of life. Indignation and angry protest are one. Intensifying one’s efforts to obtain the truth, or at least bits of it, against all odds, is another. However, confusion due to lack of knowledge or contradictory evidence may also result in a more general, *existential* uncertainty and angst, stemming from a *fundamental* doubt in the (onto)logical status of major anchors, or points of orientation, in one’s life (if this should still be called ‘life’ at all). What and whom can you trust in? Who is your friend, who your enemy? Your friend, your relative, your neighbour, the *bawwāb* in your building [↗**The Honourable Citizen**], or the president in whom you had trusted and put your hope—are they telling you the truth, or are they lying to you? You have been told too many lies in the past and are still seeing, with your own eyes, too much that contradicts the many stories you’ve heard and are still exposed to, as to *not* be suspicious. No wonder then that, in a climate of overall suspicion and mistrust, and resulting angst, people readily accept severe security measures

[↗**Security vs. Fear**], even though this turns the state into a police state that regularly suppresses the truth, tragically-ironically perpetuating the uncertainty and the suspense of truth and using fake data to legitimize violence, even death sentences [↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**], ↗**The Policeman Criminal**, ↗**Court Trials**].

Yet another reaction to the flood of competing narratives, and/or the impossibility of obtaining reliable knowledge due to its systematic and purposeful erasure from the records, is accepting this as a fact that one cannot do anything about. You will have to live with the fact that the truth cannot be known and is undistinguishable from the lie. Giving in to a feeling of paralysis and resigning oneself to passivity may be one way of dealing with this fact. It comes in addition to a general feeling of powerlessness [↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**] from which many, especially young people, seek refuge by taking drugs [↗**Hashish**]. Tunisian rapper Kafon, for instance, says that, although he knows that he is lying to himself when getting high, he is sure that “tomorrow, I will roll [a joint] again” (KAFON). Also in Egypt, the consumption of drugs is so widespread that novelist Muḥammad Rabīʿ, in his dystopian vision *‘Uḡārid* (“Mercury”), imagines, for the year 2021, i.e., only five years from now, a third of the population of Egypt using “*karbūn*”, a new drug made from cockroaches, to enter the “darkness,” “nothingness” or “night” of forgetting, and in this way escape from reality, not bothering any longer whether you are told the truth or kept in constant ignorance. Other forms of ‘drugs’, likewise ‘turning off’ the truth of present reality (and with it its ambiguity) and instead luring oneself into a fake (but less ambiguous) world, are romance and horror fiction, both very popular genres also this year. With romance, readers can indulge, for some time at least, in an ideal better world; in horror fiction, you enter a cruel other world in order to find your own world better than the fictional one. Muḥammad Rabīʿ also criticizes as “dreamy romance” the “endless nostalgia” with which many activists look back to the days of the Revolution, in the hope that something like it may become possible again or that its spirit might stay alive; in his view, romantic glorification of the Revolution is understandable, as sweet collective memories are the only “weapon” left, the only anchor in a world that is rapidly spinning out of control. Nevertheless, he thinks, nostalgia and hope are diseases, they are “blind” because they “obscure the facts” [↗**Past vs. Present**]. A very similar view is expressed in the Tunisian movie *Shbābik al-janna / Les frontières du ciel* (“Borders of Heaven”). It describes how a young couple tries to come to terms with the traumatic loss of their 5-year-old daughter, Yasmīn (= the “Jasmine” Revolution). As long as the phantom of the dead daughter keeps appearing to the male protagonist as if she were real and still alive, he is paralyzed, falls into apathy, starts drinking, and is unable to go on with life.

Of course, luring yourself into a false reality is something else than being lied to. And ignoring that one is being lied to, in full awareness of this being the case, is again different, in principle, from taking the world around you as an unquestionably true given, including the official versions of it, with all their propaganda, whitewashing, gaps, and faked news—which, perhaps, is the most common attitude of all. Taken together, however, all adds up to an absurd *routine* of suspended truth, where false is or may be true and true is or may be false, both merging into a whole of inseparable, or no longer distinguished and distinguishable, components.

Those who still think there *is* a ‘true’ truth and that they are lied to and/or left in the dark on purpose, often feel “tricked by the system” and conclude with deriving from this the right, and the need, to trick the system themselves [↗**Tricking the System / Tricked by the System**], i.e., to slip into a false identity and present it as truth to their environment [↗**Dual Identities / Masking**]. Hiding behind a mask has become so ‘normal’ and widespread that the routine of everyday mimicry adds to the disturbing overall blurring of true and false and the corresponding existential confusion. Muḥammad RABĪ’s price-winning novel *‘Uṭārid* develops this confusion into the dystopic vision of a world in which almost everybody is wearing a mask and people with strange anatomic traits appear: they begin to lose their hair, ears, eyes, noses and mouths, leaving behind disabled—still human?—beings, bodies of flesh covered with skin, lacking any individual characteristics; they are still alive, yes—but should that still be called life?

Of course, lying is a strategy of survival here, as masking usually helps to protect oneself against attacks from outside and the normativity of social constraints [↗**Freedom vs. Constraint**]. But it also creates, or adds to, the vicious circle of arranging oneself with existential confusion and fear, in this way contributing to the normality of the false, making the falseness of reality even more complex and systematic, and keeping truth pending and authentic life ‘hanging in the air’.

### Related Entries

**ARRAYS** – Baby Milk ♦ Clash ♦ Conversions ♦ Court Trials ♦ Disappearances ♦ Disasters ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Dual Identities / Masking ♦ Hashish ♦ The Honourable Citizen ♦ Migration ♦ Mobile Phones ♦ The Policeman Criminal ♦ Prison ♦ Public Hearings ♦ Social Media ♦ Tricking the System / Tricked by the System ♦ The Voice from Above

**CODES** – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Freedom vs. Constraint ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ True vs. False

**CODES COLLAPSED** – Security = Fear (Police State)

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\* Produced in 2014 or 2015 but shown in 2016 on national and international film festivals as still representative of the current situation and attitudes towards life.